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Impressions of Rouen

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUC BOEGLY

Inspired by the works of painter Claude Monet, the headquarters of Métropole Rouen Normandie helps create a cohesive identity for a burgeoning port district in the French city

On the left bank of the River Seine in Rouen is a dazzling new building inspired by impressionist painter Claude Monet's famous series depicting the city's cathedral. Designed by Paris-based practice Jacques Ferrier Architecture, the building is the new headquarters of the Métropole Rouen Normandie – an administrative organisation that manages urban planning for 71 municipalities in the Normandy region.

Covered with scale-like panels of subtly tinted glass, the building's dynamic, eye-catching horizontal profile provides a striking yet harmonious contrast to the many structures at the port site where it is located. The oblique angles of the headquarters mimic the silhouettes of cranes or the bows of ships, resulting in a visual language that complements the grand Pont Gustave-Flaubert and the urban waterfront of this part of the city.

"The client's brief was to pool the central services of Métropole – which were previously spread over four sites in the city of Rouen – into a singular energy-efficient building, which will stimulate the future growth of the Gustave Flaubert eco-district," says Ferrier, principal of his eponymous firm. "The main idea was to unite all the dynamism along various sites along the port."

Jacques Ferrier describes the terraces as "a sort of wonderful halfway space, somewhere between the building and its second envelope of coloured glass"



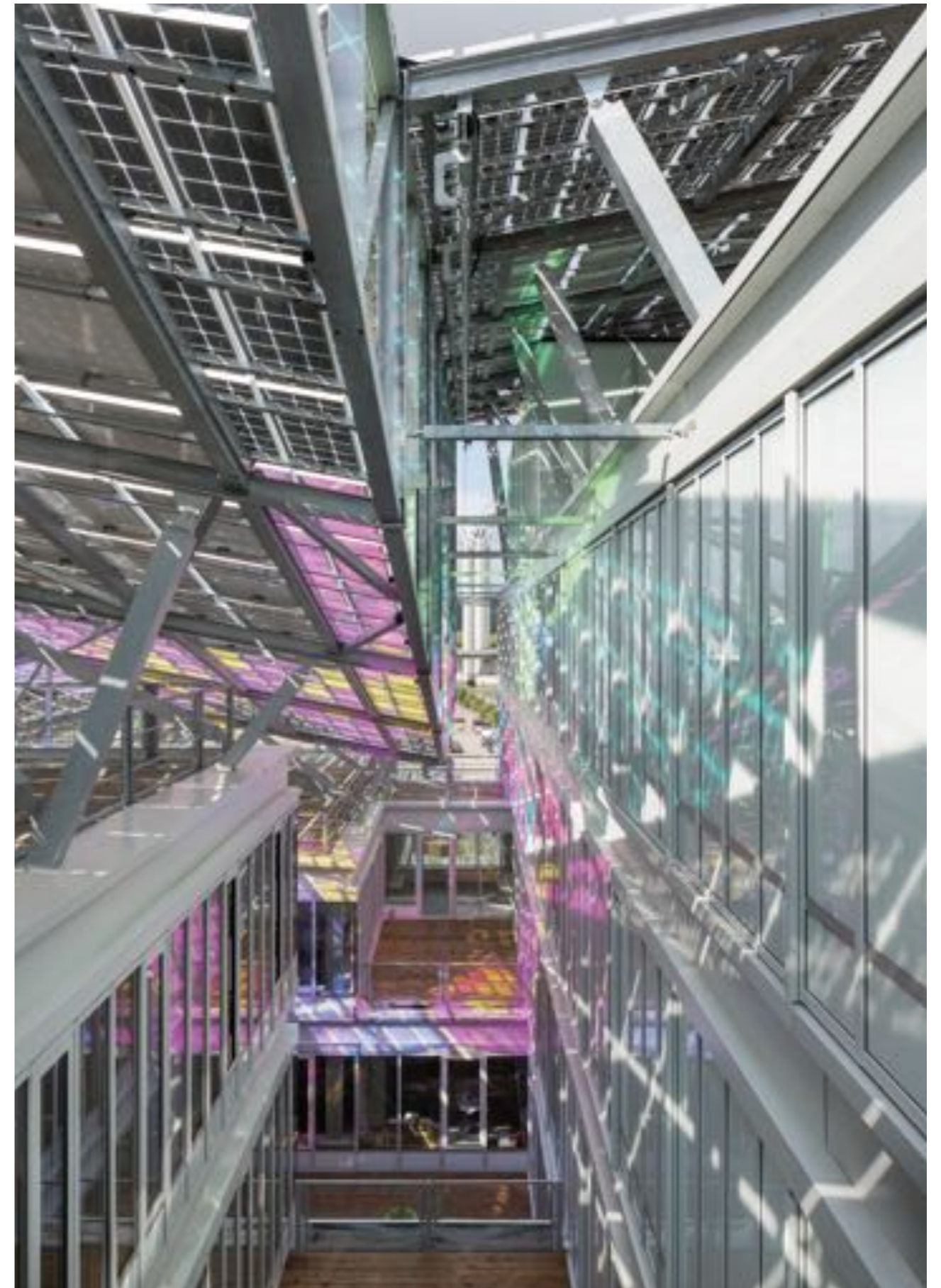
Reminiscent of the works of the French impressionists, in particular Claude Monet, the building's innovative skin reflects the light from the surface of the river below, and the changing Normandy sky

The most captivating aspect of the project is no doubt its multi-faceted, transparent double-layered facade. Such schemes are a recurring theme for Ferrier, who often uses filters, porosity, layering and open envelopes in his cutting-edge, contemporary projects such as the headquarters of Champagne house Piper-Heidsieck, in Reims.

The scale-like panels on the facade of Métropole Rouen Normandie are coated with a layer of metal oxide, delivering a colourful, iridescent appearance. Reminiscent of the works of the French impressionist painters – in particular Claude Monet – the building's innovative skin reflects the light from the changing Normandy sky and the surface of the river below. From the inside however, the colours disappear,

leaving the light in work areas unaffected.

Ferrier says the facade's design was largely inspired by Monet's paintings of the portal of Rouen Cathedral. "In this series of paintings, all seen from the same angle, Monet shows how the same facade constantly changes colour depending on the day, the season, the time," he observes. "So, with the facade of the headquarters of the Métropole, I decided to reproduce this impression using a modern technique with iridescent dichroic solar panels to create the impressionist facade, which constantly changes its colours to blend in with the shifting shades of the sky and the River Seine. These changing colours are a contemporary interpretation of the chromatic variations in Monet's many paintings of Rouen Cathedral."



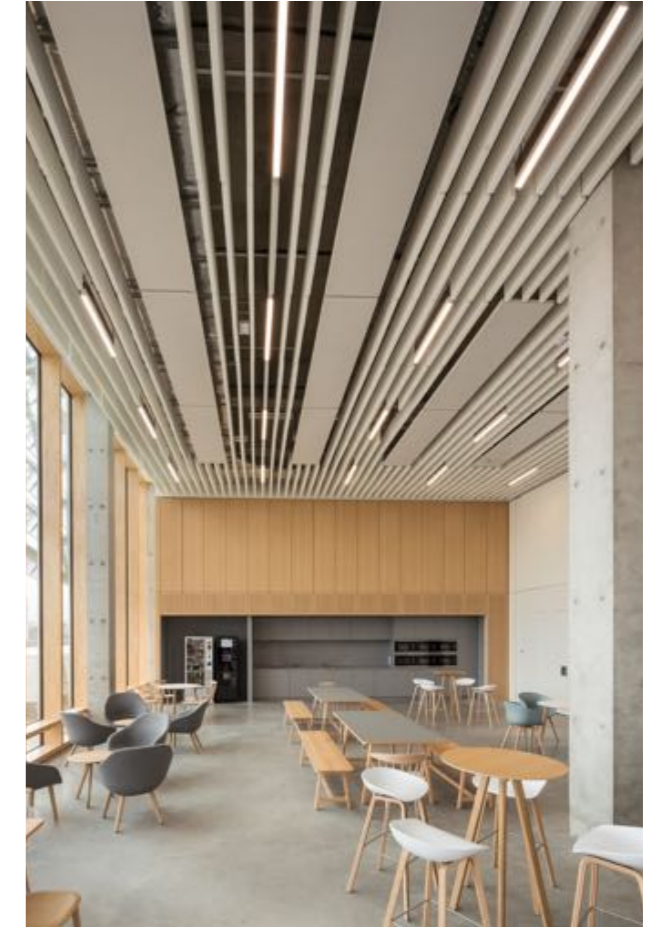
The atrium between the two volumes widens to form patios and terraces where employees can enjoy expansive views



The scale-like panels on the facade of Métropole Rouen Normandie are coated with a layer of metal oxide, which gives them a colourful, iridescent appearance



Ergonomics, good circulation and plenty of natural light are crucial elements in the efficient floor plan



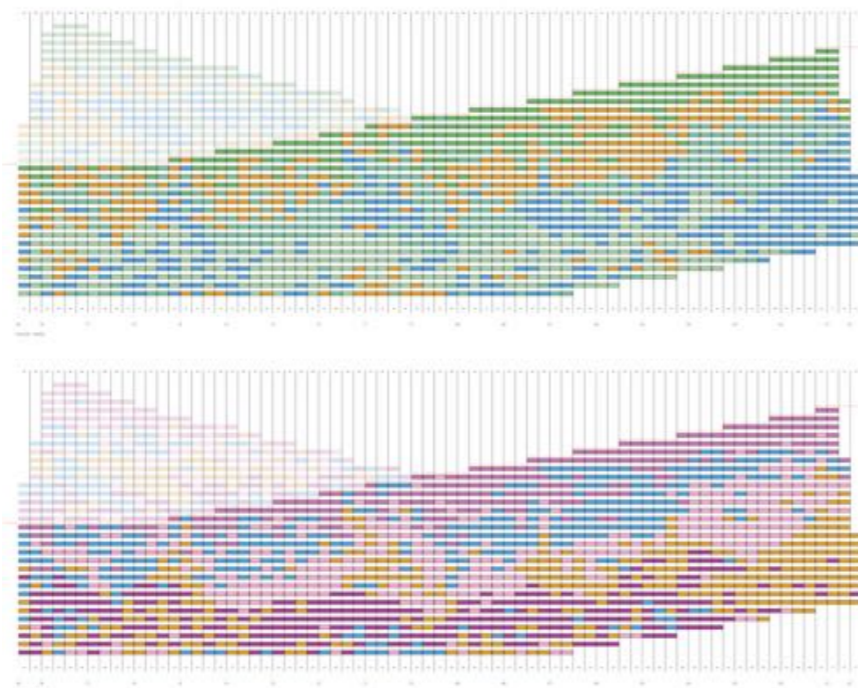
“NAVIGATING THROUGH THE BUILDING IS EASY AND INTUITIVE”

Energy efficiency is a major component of the headquarters’ DNA. Manufactured in Europe, the panels provide varied nuances of colour while also ensuring a high energy yield. The double-layered facade provides the building with passive thermal protection, while on the roof, solar panels help the building to produce its own energy.

“The transparency and depth of the double facade enhance the variations of light and prevent the building from appearing overbearing. The building’s appearance transforms throughout the day. With the light shining through, it appears to float on the quay,” says Ferrier.

The interior layout comprises two diagonal volumes that are raised in opposite directions to each other. Within these two volumes are car parking areas, offices, meeting spaces, reception and exhibition areas, as well as roof terraces that offer panoramic views of the city and river. On the quay level are meeting rooms and an entrance reception area that leads to the offices on the higher floors. The office spaces, which all enjoy plenty of natural light, are spread over the upper floors.

An atrium stretches from the top to the bottom of the building, separating the two volumes, while bringing plenty of natural light into the heart of the interiors. The atrium widens on certain levels to form patios and terraces where employees and visitors can enjoy fresh air, sunshine and views of the port.



Detailed drawings reveal the pixel-like effect of the building’s coloured scales



The building overlooks the River Seine, the old town and the cathedral

The headquarters is primarily a place for work, so ergonomics, good circulation and navigation are crucial elements in the efficient floor plan. “The idea of comfort is essential. In the heart of the building we have created a patio in the form of a blade that in turn creates many terraces on every level so you can go outside, but in a protected area,” says Ferrier.

“We also incorporated panoramic terraces on the roofs with views of the Seine, the cathedral and the old town, where you are in a sort of wonderful halfway space, somewhere between the building and its second envelope of coloured glass. The emphasis is placed both on the work

spaces and community areas, and navigating through the building is easy and intuitive.”

While the building embodies Ferrier’s architectural style – most notably the use of double facades to create zero-energy buildings – it also pays a tribute to impressionism – a movement that was a major part of Rouen’s cultural history. “In the headquarters of Métropole Rouen Normandie, cutting-edge technology and poetic emotion are brought together,” says Ferrier. “A building’s identity is not defined by itself, but rather in relation to what surrounds it and with those who live in it.” ■

jacques-ferrier.com