

Dominique Perrault Updates Versailles

How do you add a reception center to a French landmark? Very diplomatically.

By [JOSEPH GIOVANNINI](#)



Pavillon Dufour at Versailles

When Daniel Burnham admonished architects to “make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood,” maybe he was thinking of Versailles. Louis XIV, the Sun King, had by 1682 done everything with his palace outside Paris that the Chicago planner advised in 1907: “Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency.”

Indeed, Louis XIV basically thought like Burnham, extending a core idea to its logical conclusion. From the inventive Baroque interiors to landscape design and city planning, he presided over a project of great scope and seamless scale transitions, a project that was utopian in the sense that it projected and literally mapped the governmental model of the Sun King’s absolute power on the land.

On the grounds behind the palace, where the king lived with his court, he built gardens within parks organized around vast reflecting basins that stretched to the horizon; out front, he organized a trident of avenues originating at the cour d'honneur and triangulating into the distance, commanding territory through a geometry of spreading control and radiance. It was through this geometry and radiance that the king controlled the country. As he said, he was the state itself. But he was also Versailles.



Christian Milet

The new reception hall

Building on the Work of Others

From the beginning, Versailles was a composite design, a product of orchestrated collaboration over time. The architect Louis Le Vau famously wrapped the late-Renaissance hunting château of Louis XIV’s father in a vast Baroque envelope, the core building at the center of four wings. The landscape architect André Le Nôtre invented a garden at the scale of the landscape. The painter Charles Le Brun devised a complex program of interior design, creating a gesamtkunstwerk from furniture to frescos, culminating in the Hall of Mirrors, the palace’s living room where the court socialized under cascading crystal chandeliers and a fresco that rivaled any in Rome.

Built as a total work of art, architecture, and planning, Versailles was nonetheless never considered untouchably complete. Some cultures, like the Moors in North Africa, demolished palaces with changes in dynasty. At the Louvre, successive kings just extended the palace they inherited, adding wings of their own, building on the work of their predecessors, retaining a sense of the whole. At Versailles, that tradition continued during the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, who both added to the inherited architecture. The palace grew without losing a sense of the whole, the additions always in agreement with the existing structure even if the classical language of the Baroque shifted to Rococo and Neoclassicism.

But Versailles was built as a palace for royalty, the aristocracy and functionaries of the state, not as a museum for 7.5 million yearly visitors, each a potential terrorist to be checked. In recent years, temporary structures set up to screen and process visitors occupied the Royal Courtyard, between the front wings. The welcome was hardly regal. What was needed was a proper yet unobtrusive welcoming center. Few substantial changes had been made to Versailles since Louis XVI's additions—and certainly nothing modernist. Versailles needed a Pyramid, as at the Louvre, only without the pyramid.



Patrick Tourneboeuf

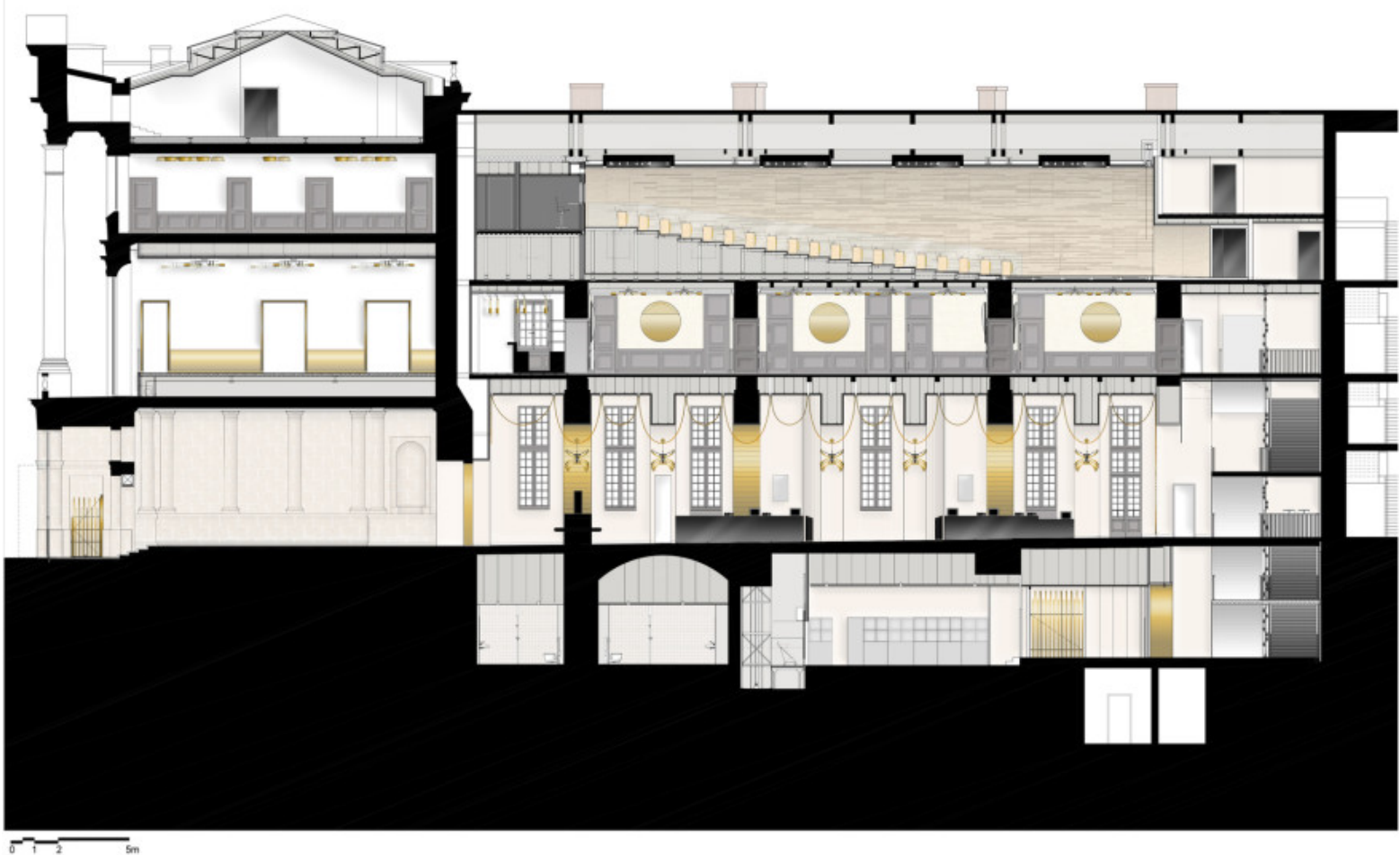
The new museum shop

Preserving the Patrimonial Substance

In 2011, Parisian architect Dominique Perrault, Hon. FAIA, won a closed competition to reconfigure administrative offices in the Neoclassical Pavillon Dufour and the attached Old Wing into a reception center. Perrault proceeded both cautiously and aggressively. “Culturally and scientifically, we talk about the ‘patrimonial substance’—the envelope, the façade, the fabric of the historical building,” says Perrault. “I wanted to introduce the present inside, while leaving the patrimonial substance outside intact.”

For Perrault, the principal issue of the project was refashioning the entrance and the exit, and then adapting the upper two floors into a restaurant and café complex. The architect spent four years “designing and redesigning,” he said, in what proved an intricately complex, excruciatingly detailed commission where every square centimeter counted.

Perrault is a minimalist, and he has often reduced the apparent footprint of a design by going underground, as he did in the early 1990s with the “sacred garden” he planted at the underground entrance level of the National Library in Paris along the Seine, the building that established his reputation.



Dominique Perrault Architecture

Section of the project

Indeed, at Versailles, his masterstroke was to extend the basement of the Pavillon and the Old Wing into an underground space excavated beneath the adjacent Princes' Courtyard. Visitors enter the triumphal portico of the Pavillon, with four majestic limestone columns, under an entablature that reads "To the Glories of France," before making a circuit of the château that ends in the expanded 3,000-square-foot basement, programmed with the coatroom, bathrooms, and museum shop. Perrault built a simple, split-level loop, a classic, efficient configuration—though on two floors—for moving visitors through a museum without dead ends and backtracking.

With a relatively minor adjustment within the scheme of the whole palace, he made the flow fluid, and the visit cogent. Visitors can peruse the museum shop offerings before grabbing their backpacks and exiting up a sweeping flight of marble stairs, now called the Perrault Staircase, in honor of its architect, to the Princes' Courtyard. They then proceed to the gardens behind the palace, or back out to the street. The architect essentially reconfigured the palace tactically, by a simple, surgical act of infrastructure.



Dominique Perrault Architecture

The Perrault Staircase, which leads up to the Princes' Courtyard

Only an expanded wall of glass, acting as a skylight to the basement, is visible above ground, in the Princes' Courtyard. The rectangular box reads like a minimalist work of art, simply a long transparent bar of glass with a glow emitted by the gold anodized-aluminum mullions. The bar resembles a shimmering art installation in glass by American minimalist Dan Graham. The exterior of the Pavillon and the Old Wing were meticulously restored under the direction of Frédéric Didier, chief architect of historical monuments of the palace.

With his big move tucked away in the basement, Perrault concentrated his modernist invention in the interior of the Pavillon and the Old Wing. The fabric of the original had already been compromised by a 1920s reconstruction of the failing building, done in reinforced concrete. On the second and third floors, where some of the original paneling survived, he pursued a period restoration, outfitting the spaces for a restaurant complex to be run by Alain Ducasse. On the back part of the third floor, he fashioned a 150-seat theater within a wood-slatted shell shaped like an inverted hull.



Dominique Perrault Architecture

Modernizing the Decoration

Perrault was diplomatic about his interventions, confining them inside, within a zone where the original fabric had already been compromised. He was also adroit in echoing Versailles' own

traditions. Decoration became the unlikely vehicle for his intervention because Versailles itself had already established an unequivocal precedent, and inspiration, for the architecturalization of decoration. His strategy was to reincarnate Versailles' decorative program in a modernist equivalent.

After visitors proceed through checkpoints and ticketing, they enter the château through two meticulously restored, classically detailed vestibules built of limestone. They are very much a distillation of the exterior by the 18th-century Neoclassical architect Ange-Jacques Gabriel: Perrault is conditioning visitors ceremonially to the spirit of the palace, as though they were guests. Visitors then step into a long reception hall that the architect carved from the original structure, where he removed the transverse bearing walls. Wide brass lines inlaid in a bronze floor outline the footprint of the former walls; the bronze floor itself reiterates the famous Versailles parquet pattern, a basketweave of wood inset within a diagonal grid.



André Morin

Perrault has stripped the new hall down to the shell, revealing its perimeter structure. The fenestration on the two lateral walls is symmetrical, long French windows on each side mirroring those opposite, foreshadowing the Hall of Mirrors in the palace beyond. With doubly loaded, symmetrically placed windows, he needed no mirrors to give a sense that the room was a pavilion in the garden: He stripped down the room to its essentials to give the space a clarity that

opens the room to the flanking courtyards. “The idea was to introduce an absence of architecture, just a transparent open space between the two courtyards,” says the architect.

After the subtraction, Perrault added. The Sun King was captivated by parabolic reflectors—he owned a highly calibrated, scientific example, its concave mirrors reflecting and intensifying the sun. Perrault’s art director and frequent collaborator Gaëlle Lauriot-Prévost reinterpreted the reflectors as “solar” sconces in shiny gold anodized aluminum, slicing the parabolic dishes into segmented arches that reflect light, much as the crystal chandeliers in the Hall of Mirrors refract light.

Perhaps recalling the palace’s ceiling frescoes while also alluding to the parabolic reflector, Lauriot-Prévost draped gold-anodized aluminum wire mesh down the length of the ceiling, which swoops in parabolic contours of varying depth. Their shapely movement abstracts the Baroque gestures of the palace, and the gold tints the light, sustaining Louis’ Sun King metaphor in today’s materials. “We calibrated the tonality by introducing warm metals: bronze, copper, and the gold anodized aluminum,” says Perrault. “I wanted to introduce industrial materials and bring a modern sensibility to this historical context. They act as hyphens across time, from the contemporary to the historic, establishing a dialogue between the new and the old.”

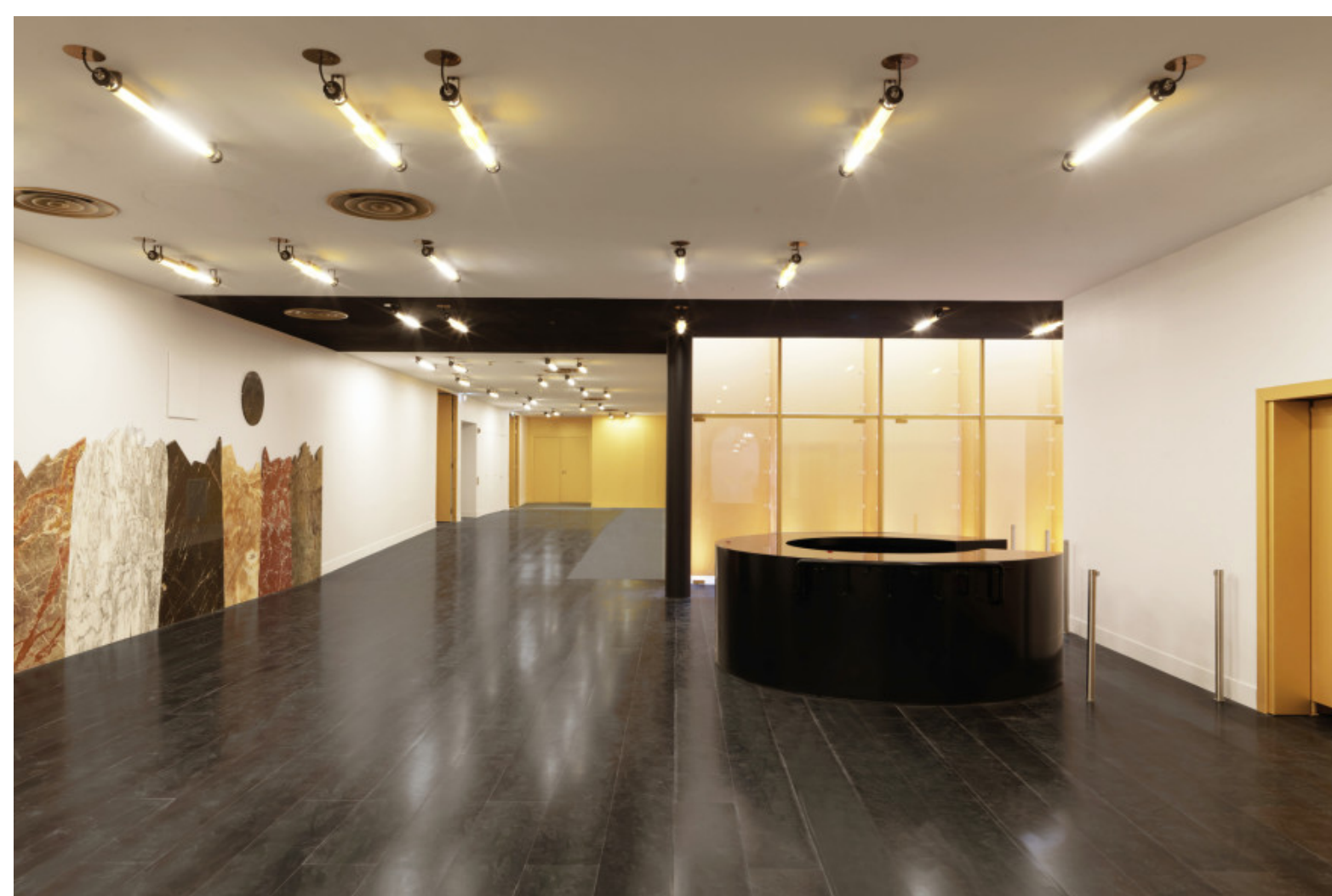


André Morin

A Sensitive Intervention

By the end of the ancien régime, there had already been many architects, the best of their time, who had altered Versailles and added to it—wings, annexes, garden pavilions. France is very protective of its historic monuments, and especially Versailles, which is sacred cultural territory.

Perrault minimized the risk both to the site and to his reputation when he went underground, and then encapsulated his alterations within the Old Wing. His intervention is basically confined to a program of light fixtures, inspired by Versailles' decoration but scaled and deployed architecturally. Regularly spaced in a symmetrical colonnade of light, the sconces are complemented by a draped ceiling that recasts the ceiling frescos of Versailles as an upside-down ocean of backlit metallic waves. The undulating gesture is Baroque in the historic sense, full of fluid movement and placed with a symmetry that affirms the equilibrated balance and calm of a palace in which each element, like each member of the court, knows its place.



André Morin

Perrault extends the sense of diplomatic ceremony and princely grandeur to the democratic heirs of the public who displaced the original occupants. His Pavillon Dufour now receives the many rather than the few with a grace and dignity worthy of the palace.