



THE JEAN-MARIE TJIBAOU CULTURAL CENTRE

1991 – 1998 Nouméa, New Caledonia

The Centre was named after Jean-Marie Tjibaou, a Kanak independence leader assassinated in 1989.

The Kanak people are widespread throughout the Pacific region, above all in New Caledonia where they account for nearly 41% of the island's entire population.

The island, whose capital is Nouméa, is a French territory that is on its way to gaining its autonomy. During the negotiations for the island's independence, the local authorities requested the French government to fund the construction of a large cultural centre that would be dedicated to Kanak culture. In 1990, within the sphere of President François Mitterrand's "grands travaux", an international invitation-only tender was established for the realization of the project. The centre was officially inaugurated by French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in 1998.

The site was located on the Tina peninsula, to the east of capital city Nouméa. This spectacular location, between the open sea and the protected lagoon, is set against the backdrop of the mountains and the promontories jutting out into Magenta bay.

The scope of the competition was quite broad: the project had to be designed to honour traditional Kanak culture, while at the same time providing a focal point for the inevitable development of its society.

The centre's activities include exhibits, special events, as well as performances involving music and dance: the objective was to ensure that, despite its adaptations, the Kanak culture would not lose touch with its historical roots.

The spirit of the Pacific is ephemeral: traditional Kanak buildings are born in unison with nature and make use of its perishable materials; for this reason, the village's continuity over time is not bound to the survival of each individual building, but rather to the preservation of a specific construction scheme.

Building upon this civilization's typical deep bond with nature, the project followed two main guidelines: on the one hand evoking Kanak construction capabilities, while on the other hand making use of modern materials, such as glass, aluminium, steel and advanced lightweight technologies, in addition to traditional materials, such as wood and stone.

The Centre is not contained within one building alone: it's a combination of "houses" and open spaces with trees, of various functions and pathways, of fills and voids.

While surrounded by the sea on three sides, the site is covered by thick vegetation and is traversed by a number of winding pedestrian paths that lead into the "villages": clusters of

buildings which are intrinsically bound to their surrounding environment and, with their semicircular layout, delineate open public spaces. The various parts of the complex are connected by a covered, slightly curved walkway, which runs along the ridge of the promontory.

The “houses” are curved structures, similar to huts, made out of wooden beams and arches: archaic-looking dwellings with interiors, furnished with all of the comforts that modern technology has to offer.

These ten large monothematic environments open up directly onto the Centre’s internal roadway, thus creating a transition from a compact space to an unexpectedly ample outdoor area.

The external boards are of different widths and are spaced unevenly: the slightly vibrating optical effect obtained in this manner enhances each building’s affinity with its surrounding vegetation.

Iroko wood was selected for these elements: a stable wood that’s resistant to termites and can even be used as a laminate. It also requires little maintenance, and the manner in which it has been used evokes the braided plant fibres of the local buildings.

Despite the uniformity of the basic model, the spaces created are endowed with rather different characters based on their intended purposes. Where required for the building’s function, the roof and walls are rendered transparent. The glass panels are shielded by wooden blinds.

Thanks to their structural similarity to the local vegetation and the traditional dwellings, the huts serve as the project’s unifying element. They are also its dominant element: with a total of ten, in three different sizes. The four smaller units are 8 metres in diameter and are 18 metres high. The three medium units are 11 m in diameter and are 22 m high. The three large units are 13.5 m in diameter and are 28 m high. These buildings express the harmonious relationship with the environment that characterizes the Kanak culture. This bond, however, is not merely aesthetic, but also functional: in fact, the huts have been equipped with an extremely efficient passive ventilation system that exploits the characteristics of the New Caledonia climate. Once again, the units have been furnished with a double roof: the air circulates freely between two covering layers made from wood laminate. The openings in the outer casing are oriented so as to exploit of the trade winds coming off the sea, or rather to induce the desired convection currents.

The air flows are regulated by glass louvers. When a light breeze is blowing, the louvers open up to improve ventilation; as the strength of the wind increases, they gradually close, starting



with those in the lowest positions. This solution was developed with the help of computer modelling and was tested in wind tunnels using scale models. These air circulation systems even give the huts their own “voice”. They collectively emit a particular sound, which is that of the Kanak villages.

The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Centre can be accessed via a footpath that winds along the coast, which marks a kind of dimensional change: from the car park, the pathway creeps into the dense vegetation and leads up to the staircase that straddles the promontory, ending with the courtyard at the Centre’s entrance. It is here that visitors will find the reception services.

The Centre is organized into three separate villages. The first is dedicated to exhibitions. In the hut adjacent to the entrance, visitors will find a permanent exhibit that offers an introduction to Kanak culture. The buildings that are dedicated to the history of the community and the island’s natural environment can be found farther down, and there’s even another area for temporary exhibits not far off. The village even houses a semi-interred auditorium with four hundred seats. An amphitheatre for outdoor performances can even be found at the rear of the auditorium itself.

The second village hosts a series of offices for the centre’s historians, researchers, exhibit curators and administrative employees. The huts opposite the offices contain a multimedia library.

The final village, which is slightly detached from the regular flow of the site’s tourism, is dedicated to creative activities. The huts contain studios for various activities, including dance, painting, sculpture and music. There’s even an adjacent schoolhouse where children can be introduced to the various forms of local art.

Between the edge of the lagoon and the top of the promontory, visitors will find a thematic walkway. Conceived with the help of anthropologist Alban Bensa, who also collaborated on this project, this walkway is known as the “history path”.

The Kanak representation of human evolution involves various metaphors from the world of nature: this walkway summarizes the great legends upon which Kanak culture is founded. It’s a story that’s told with the plants themselves, along with their various symbolic associations.