

le PLAZA

PRESS KIT

OPENING OF THE BUILDING SITE





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1. A MASTERPIECE OF POST-WAR MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE IN GENEVA

Designed by architect Marc J. Saugey between 1951 and 1953, the Mont-Blanc Centre and Le Plaza cinema form a unique urban complex. Thanks to the support of a group of passionate people and after some hard-fought battles, Le Plaza escaped demolition. The centre, with its curtain walls, and the cinema are now listed buildings, following their purchase by the Hans Wilsdorf Foundation, and are both recognised as exceptional pieces of Geneva's heritage.

Inspired by the urban shopping centres he discovered on a trip to the United States, Saugey placed Le Plaza at the heart of the Mont-Blanc Centre, in an ecosystem of shopping arcades that make up the entire ground floor of the building.

One of the unique features of the cinema hall, both technically and aesthetically, is its structure. The auditorium is topped by six large aluminium trusses, each twenty-five metres long, which overhang and form the visible framework of the hall, giving it the appearance of a shell. These load-bearing structures, deliberately left exposed, form a strong aesthetic element, emphasised by neon lighting, which highlights a pioneering technical feat of the time in Switzerland and across Europe.

The cinema hall features a large balcony and a gallery/foyer, known as “Le Promenoir”, which overlooks the auditorium at the rear and is accessed by two imposing staircases leading from the entrance to the cinema. Le Promenoir is a technical feat – created by Saugey with the help of engineer Pierre Froidevaux – with a span of thirty metres. This “gallery” rests solely on two lateral concrete supports on either side of the auditorium. The result is a large, visually unobstructed volume that, at the time of its creation, was used as a smoking room and a place to take a stroll.

“The composition as a whole offers great fluidity [...]. The sequence that takes the audience from the pavement on Rue du Cendrier to the interior passageway, then to the cinema's open ‘lobby’ with its ice-cream parlour, cash desks and foyer, then on to the cinema hall and down to the foot of the screen – all on the same level and limited only by a double row of glass doors and a red velvet curtain – is remarkable.”

Le Plaza's lobby is a miniature urban crossroads, squeezed between the shop windows, that plays on functional synergies. The various architectural designs blur the boundary between private (commercial) and public (collective),” wrote Catherine Dumont d'Ayot in her 2014 thesis on Saugey's work.



2. RENOVATION, RESTORATION AND NEW ELEMENTS

The aim of the Plaza revival project is to create a unique cultural centre in downtown Geneva, enhancing the complex designed by Saugey in 1952, which is now a listed building.

Following the renovation of the façades and eight floors of the Mont-Blanc Centre, the time has now come to renovate the cultural centre and historic cinema.

Architectural firm FdMP, which was chosen following a competition organised by the Plaza Foundation, has focused on two main areas. The first is the *restoration* of the historic core, comprising the cinema, its balcony and unique two-storey foyer, and the ice cream parlour. The second offers a *transformation* that targets the new exhibition spaces, the brasserie and its terrace, the library/bookshop and the immersive hall. The FdMP project sets out new access routes between the various areas. In this way, it helps establish new internal connections in order to restore and even emphasise the fluidity and dynamics of the various functions, as intended by Saugey.



The project by FdMP architectes was chosen following a demanding competition, which was unveiled to the public in October 2021. The jury, made up of architects, heritage specialists and key figures from the world of cinema and culture, considered that FdMP had responded brilliantly and intelligently to the project for a new cultural centre dedicated to cinema in all its forms, while respecting the spirit of its creator.

The Spirit of Saugey

The project, entitled “American Night”, is based on the desire to uncover and restore the substance of the original building through in-depth research into the Saugey archives.

The new elements lie solely in the new connections between the various spaces and components of the future cultural centre. The intention is to offer direct access between the public space and each part of the programme (the cinema hall, the immersive hall, the exhibition spaces, the brasserie and the ice cream parlour), while at the same time creating new internal connections. In doing so, FdMP demonstrated its in-depth knowledge of Saugey’s work and his demand for fluidity and dynamics in both function and form.

An Urban Crossroads

The architects sought to update the original entrance to the cinema from Rue de Chantepoulet and offered a faithful recreation of the neon signs, in keeping with Saugey’s urban yet organic style, perfectly suited to the topography of one of the city centre’s major crossroads.

The project offers to open up the cultural centre to the neighbourhood through the judicious layout of the spaces, which are freely accessible from both Rue Chantepoulet and Rue du Cendrier.

A Cinema and Much More

The stage door occupies a complete arcade and now has its own address on Rue du Cendrier, a place with its own identity – the Saugey window – connected directly to the stage. Next to it lies a large exhibition area – the Plaza exhibition hall – which opens onto the street. In the area dedicated to “New Formats”, the main stairwell gives access from the street to the administrative offices of the cultural centre, as well as to the basement and the immersive hall.

Lastly, the creation of a library/bookshop and the reopening of the brasserie with its terrace and ice-cream parlour will provide an attractive addition to the cultural centre and raise its profile in the city.

The hotel-cinema is the latest addition to the centre’s project. It too will be fully connected to the complex, with the access ramp creating a dialogue with the Mont-Blanc Centre and the Brasserie.

3. THE SPACES

A. THE HISTORIC CINEMA HALL

An exceptional piece of architecture, the cinema hall will be restored to its original colour scheme. The plan is to distribute the seats along a central aisle, in the spirit of Saugey, who was always keen to make the transition from outside to inside, from the street to the screen, as smooth as possible. The auditorium will have a seating capacity of 500.

The gold frame that originally surrounded the screen will be retained but modified slightly to allow the installation of a much larger screen in line with current expectations.

The remarkable concrete stage will remain intact but will be extended by a retractable proscenium adapted to its curvature. This will allow greater flexibility of use for live performances and lectures.



The balcony will be refurbished with a series of benches and modular, convenient shelves to serve drinks and light snacks, a service made possible by the new direct connection between the cinema hall and the brasserie. It will seat 100 people.

The layout of the lobby will follow the original configuration, highlighting the two monumental

staircases and the columns that are characteristic of Saugey's architecture, with the reinstallation of movable curtains and indirect lighting.

The intermediate level, the self-supporting footbridge that Saugey named Le Promenoir, will provide access to a new foyer linking the cinema, the brasserie and the new areas of the cultural centre.

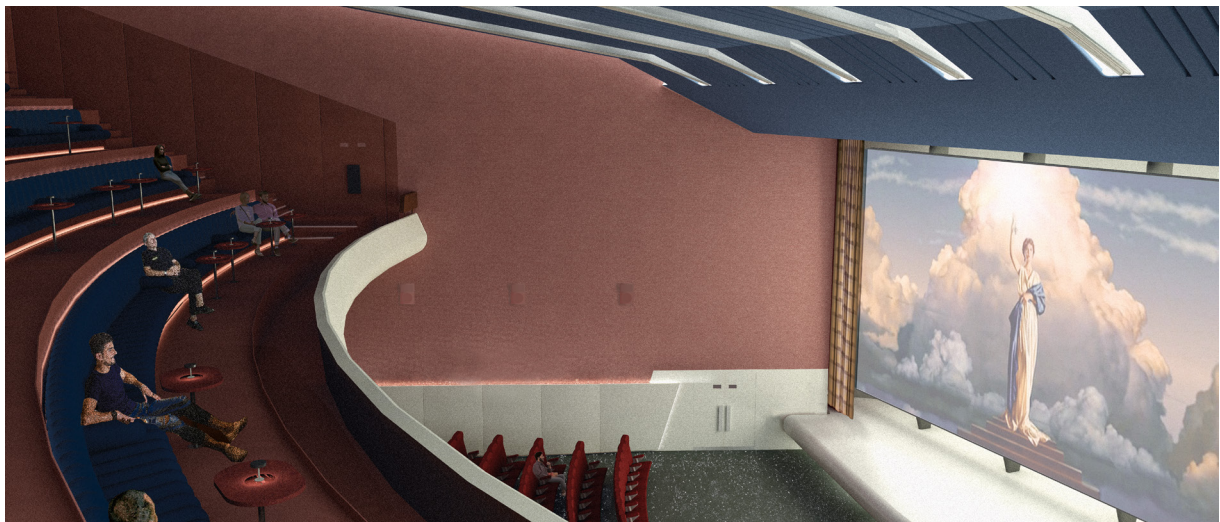
B. THE IMMERSIVE HALL

A basement will be created beneath the cinema to allow the construction of a circular immersive hall, accessible via a neon-lit ramp. This facility will be dedicated to new and experimental forms of cinematic expression.



C. THE LIBRARY/BOOKSHOP/ DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Opening onto the covered passageway and Rue de Chantepoulet, the library/bookshop will act as a welcoming reception area and showcase for the entire cultural centre. The public will be able to buy or consult books on site or in the adjacent ice-cream parlour.



D. THE EXHIBITION SPACES

i. New Formats Space

Providing a direct connection between the auditorium and the balcony, the brasserie on the first floor and the immersive hall in the basement, the New Formats space is the Plaza's new vertical core. Thanks to its central position, this space, equipped with projectors and adjustable lighting, can host events of all types and is an attractive new showcase on Rue du Cendrier.

ii. Saugey Window

On Rue du Cendrier, the stage door provides discreet access to the dressing rooms and the cinema hall. This space, located on the street, will also be used for exhibitions.

iii. Plaza Exhibition Hall

The main exhibition hall extends along Rue du Cendrier as an extension of the New Formats Space. However, it will be able to function completely independently. Boasting a large window display, the 60 m² space will be able to host large exhibitions.

E. THE ICE-CREAM PARLOUR

The ice-cream parlour has been returned to its historic role as a space serving the cinema directly. Here, the furniture has been entirely restored to its original state, according to Saugey's historical drawings.

F. THE BRASSERIE

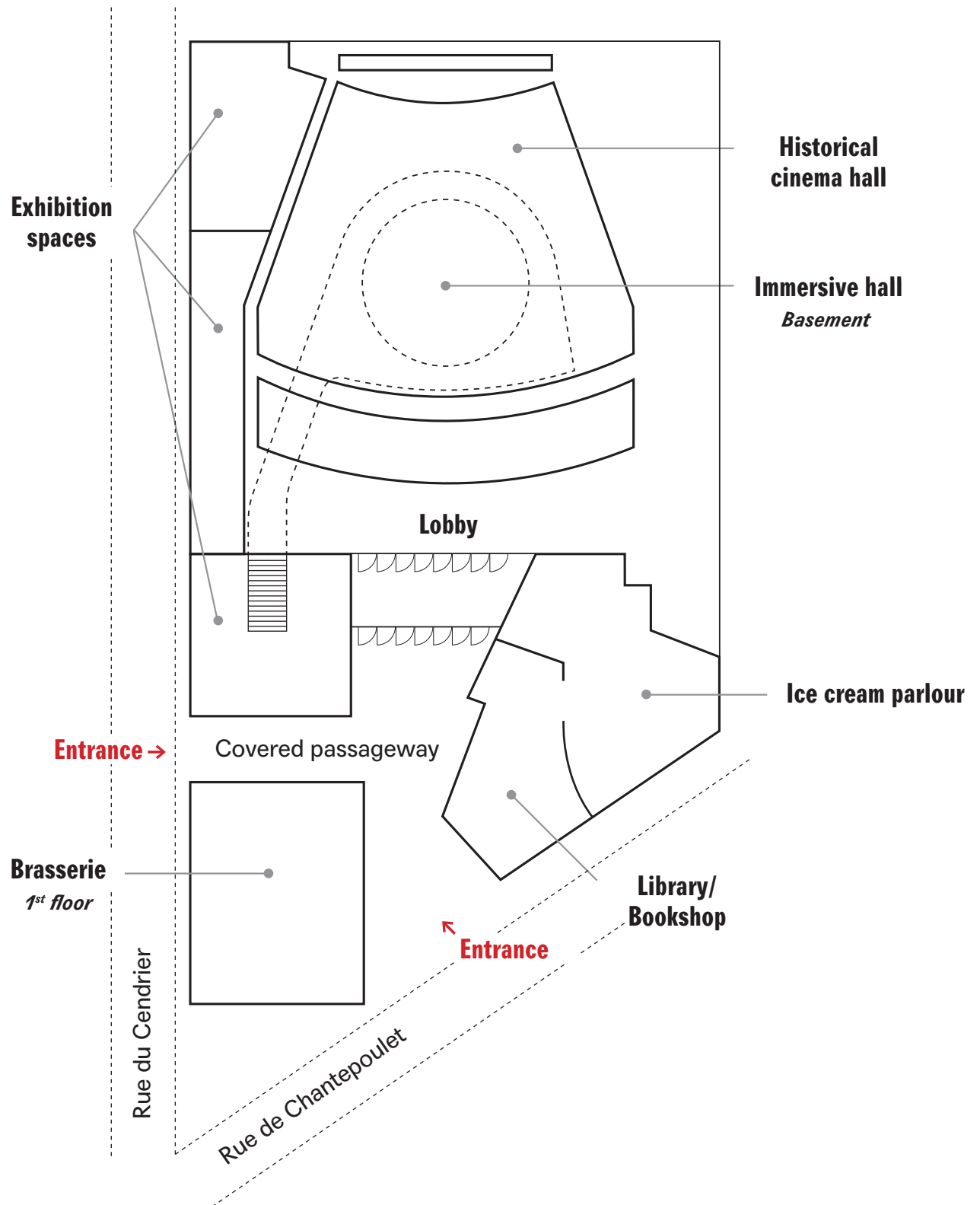
The Brasserie Europe on the first floor, designed by Saugey in 1952, will be restored while offering larger dimensions than in its original form. Now accessible from Rue du Cendrier via the New Formats Space, and no longer just via the Mont-Blanc entrance on Rue de Chantepoulet, it will be connected to the auditorium by a landing overlooking the Promenoir. The terrace overlooking Rue de Chantepoulet will also be converted.

G. THE HOTEL-CINEMA

The Hotel Plaza Cinema will be located on the first floor of the Mont-Blanc Centre. The entrance and reception will be on the driveway to the Centre, opposite the brasserie's terrace. Each room will be equipped with a projection system and a special cinema programme will be prepared for guests.

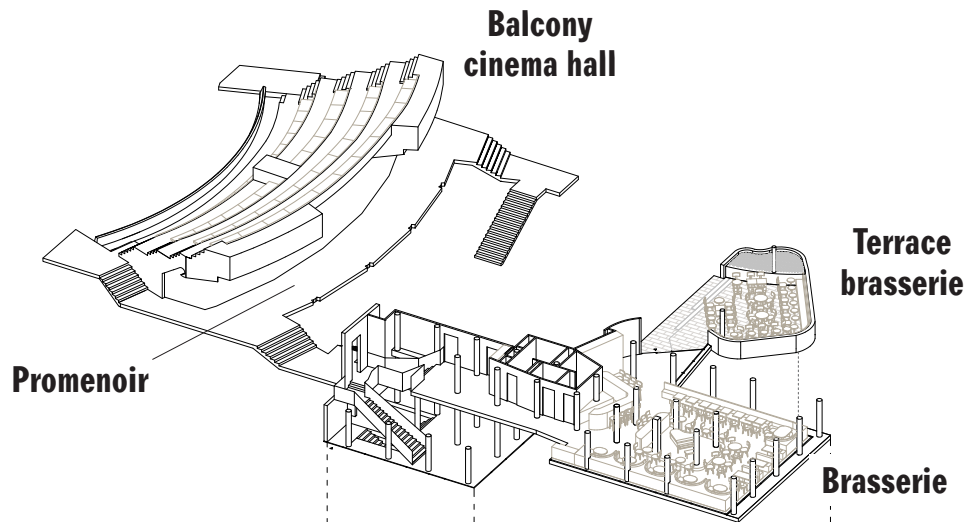


PLAN

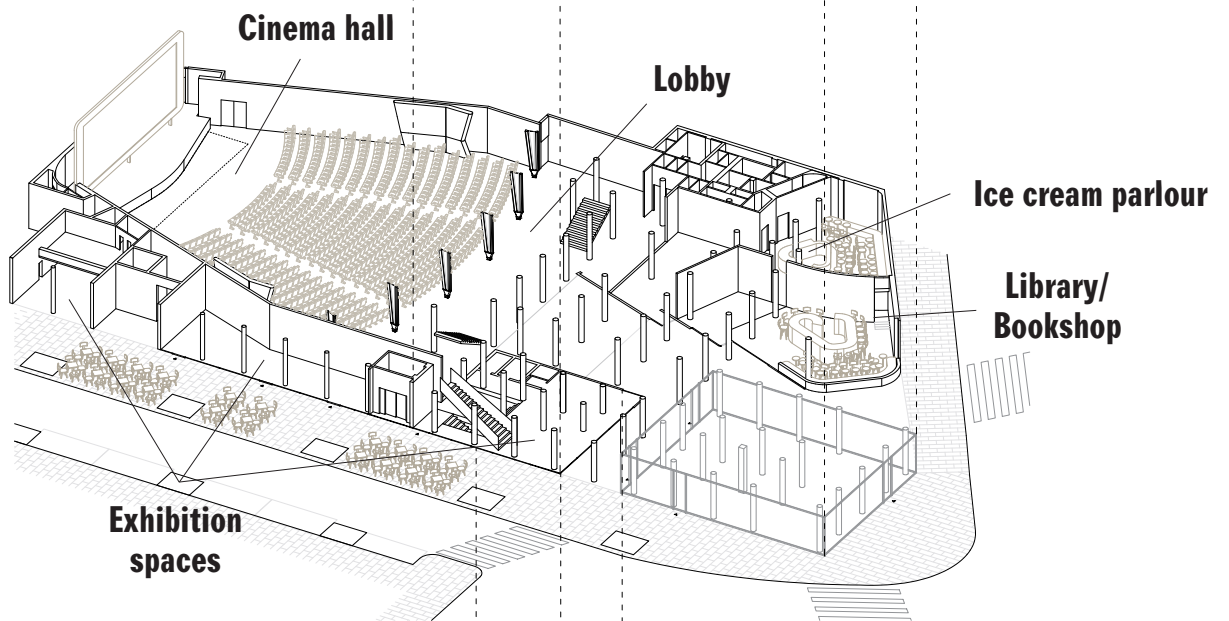


AXONOMETRY

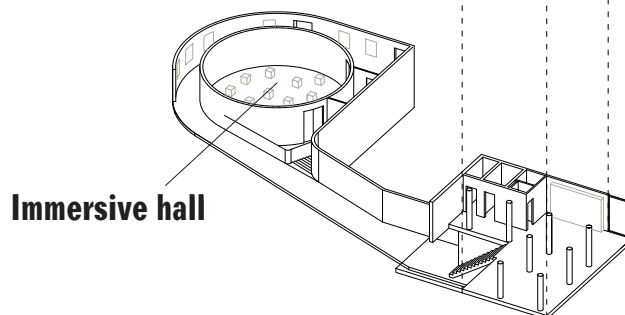
First floor



Ground floor



Basement



4. LES CHIFFRES-CLÉS

KEY FIGURES

Surface area of the historic cinema hall

485 m² + 260 m²

Number of seats in the cinema parterre:

500 seats (24 PRM seats)

Balcony:

100 seats (3 PRM seats)

Surface area of the immersive hall

100 m²

Surface area of the ice cream parlour

135 m²

Number of seats in the ice cream parlour

80 seats

Library/Bookshop area

102 m²

Total surface area of exhibition halls

195 m²

Saugey Space

45 m²

Plaza exhibition hall

60 m²

New Formats Space

90 m²

HOTEL-CINEMA**Number of bedrooms**

20

BRASSERIE**Number of seats in the restaurant**

180 m² – 48 seats + bar

Number of seats on the terrace

60 m² – 46 seats

CHRONOLOGY

1952

Creation of the Mont-Blanc Centre and Le Plaza Cinema

2004

Closure of Le Plaza Cinema

2009

The Mont-Blanc Centre and the cinema are listed as heritage sites

2011

The cinema is downgraded

2011

Launch of the association for the preservation of Le Plaza

2015

Authorisation obtained from property developers to demolish the cinema

2019

Purchase by the Hans Wilsdorf Foundation and creation of the Plaza Foundation

2019

Le Plaza is once again listed as a historical monument

2022

Renovation of the façade and floors of the Mont-Blanc Centre

2023

Renovation of the cinema hall and work to create the cultural centre

2025

Inauguration of the Plaza – a new cultural centre in the heart of Geneva

5. FDMP RENOVATION ARCHITECTS

FdMP architectes is a Geneva-based architectural firm whose approach focuses on context, narrative, the local and living together. Oscar Frisk, François de Marignac and Christophe Pidoux joined forces and founded FdMP in 2014 after spending 14 years at the head of the group8 office, where they notably designed the ICRC's Humanitarian and logistics halls, the WTO's Centre William Rappard and the Palexpo Congress Centre. Since 2021, FdMP has also counted Emeline Debackere-Gutierrez among its associates, as well as Jill Duchosal-Pichon and Maxime Lécuyer as partners.

Three questions for François de Marignac, partner at FdMP

How did you approach a project with so many different elements making up the renovation programme?

We approached the project by repositioning the building from the outset as an essential intersection in the neighbourhood. We asked ourselves how we could update the various spaces of the Mont-Blanc Centre and the cinema, which initially were directly linked to the public space. We then laid out all the new elements of the Plaza programme that related to the public by also connecting them directly to the street: the Plaza exhibition hall, the area dedicated to New Formats, the foyer and the library/bookshop, the ice cream parlour, the brasserie and the hotel all have direct access to the street, to the building's access ramp or to the passageway cutting the corner of the street. We then looked at how these various areas could

be better connected and realised that we could build a new internal staircase linking all the spaces in the project. This new vertical connection also provides access to the immersive hall that has been created beneath the historic cinema.

What are the difficulties encountered in renovating a protected heritage project?

There are many complex issues involved in this type of project. In tackling a work of this importance, designed by architect Marc J. Saugey, we had to start by sorting out the difference between what we thought Saugey would've done today and what has been achieved. Saugey had clearly announced that his buildings would probably have a lifespan of around thirty years, after which they'd have to be demolished or converted. However, the quality of his work today means that we can't just get rid of it. One might say that the work has outlived the creator and must therefore be restored as close as possible to its original state. From that point onwards, the difficulty lay in defining a project methodology that was close to a scientific approach in order to specify the possible interventions on the original work.

This methodology is based on in-depth research into the existing state of the building, soundings, stratigraphy, studies of original photos and films, and working drawings. Based on these sources, we've tried to suggest the most appropriate interventions, defining the parts of the work that should be preserved, those that should be restored, and studying the parts that have been removed but might be restored according to the available sources.



Then there are parts of the building that need to be renovated or refurbished, using the latest materials and cutting-edge technology. This concerns not only the technical elements of the cinema or the seats, but also all the elements needed to bring the structure up to standard. And finally, there are new interventions, transformations, which bring new uses and which, through their new functionalities, will ensure the renovated cinema's long-term life.

What do you admire most about Saugey's architecture?

Saugey was a landmark architect of his time. His inventiveness and his spatial and aesthetic research were a major contribution to architecture in Geneva in the '50s and '60s.

What fascinated us most about the Mont-Blanc Centre and Plaza project was its contribution and innovations, which can be seen at every

level of the project. In urban terms, the complex defines a new relationship with the city through its massing, the way street corners are considered and the urban passages that are created within the project.

The combination of multiple programmes within the complex makes it one of the first multifunctional buildings in Geneva. Offices, shops, cinema, housing: all can work together to create an urban mix.

In addition to this innovative approach to urban planning and programming, Saugey created spaces and volumes that are incredibly beautiful and futuristic, with remarkable aesthetic coherence. The cinema hall is incredible! What's more, Saugey developed his approach right down to the smallest detail: door handles, furniture and seating designs, ashtrays and signage. This quality of design at every level is absolutely fascinating.

6. OPEN SITE, THE FILM

Film broadcast to the public 24 hours a day on screens installed on the site fence

Four questions to director Jimmy Roura

How are you going to immerse the public in the Plaza construction site?

To give the impression of being immersed in the heart of the construction work, you have to find a way of giving the audience the impression of watching this “operation” live. This means using a ploy that mimics the notion of “live”. The choice of images must be carefully selected, taking into account, for example, the intensity of the light to indicate the time of day (the cinema has no windows but opens almost directly onto the street or passageway). You also have to capture the flow of people by marking the key stages of their activities. Plus, you have to know how to film an empty room, in its deepest silence, and to be able to question the notion of perspective as much as possible... Consistency in the shooting plays a decisive role, in order to capture the gradual progress of the work and the transformation of the spaces, from one month to the next.

What motivates you most about this project?

It's a long-term project, meaning it enables you to build something, to try things out, to make mistakes, and to make adjustments to fit in as closely as possible with the original intention. I also like the idea that the project is linked to a place and that this place – even in an abstract way – is a player in its own right. I see Le Plaza, its architecture and its ecosystem as organic, living matter. It's really stimulating to film. It allows you to take a sensitive approach, even to the details that the rough world of the building site doesn't reveal at first glance.

How do you work with the workers?

You have to find the most sympathetic collaborators who are willing to be filmed at the heart of their work and to build a relationship of trust, as this is a long-term project. Some of them will be equipped with a GoPro camera to enhance the immersive feeling and offer their point of view to the audience who'll be watching through the eyelets cut into the façade.

How will you work on the editing?

I'm lucky enough to work with Douglas Edric Stanley, a new media specialist, artist and developer. We work via a programme created by Stanley, which draws on a database of photos and images that I've classified and worked on in advance. Each of these sources is updated remotely. The day is sequenced by hour and randomly selects images from among those in the relevant folders. The exact time of day is superimposed, along with the name of the camera being broadcast “live”.

Photography: Jimmy Roura

Installation: Douglas Edric Stanley

7. PLAZA'S CULTURAL PROJECT: QUESTIONS FOR JEAN-PIERRE GREFF, CHAIRMAN OF THE PLAZA FOUNDATION

What activities will Le Plaza host?

From the outset, we wanted to bring Le Plaza back to life by launching a programme of events in the historic cinema. As soon as it was announced that Le Plaza was saved, the idea was to raise public awareness of this exceptional architectural complex, and also to rekindle the memories of a large number of Geneva residents who've seen many films here. This programme is intended to reflect what we have in mind for the future, i.e. a programme that's demanding but open to all audiences.

Will Le Plaza be a "classic" cinema?

Le Plaza won't be a traditional cinema, but a place that'll focus on cinema events. It'll keep cinema at its heart, in every sense of the word, while exploring all its historical and contemporary "relatives", including architecture, the visual arts, digital creation, dance and literature.

What relationships do you envisage with Geneva's other cultural institutions?

We plan to build strong relationships with cultural institutions in Geneva, as well as other institutions in Switzerland and abroad.

We also want to build bridges with International Geneva. Starting this year, we'll be hosting three international film festivals in the Mont-Blanc Centre building: GIFF, FIFDH and Everybody's Perfect. They'll be able to host premieres and the centre's infrastructure will help them develop their ambitions. We'll also be entering into a strong partnership, based on complementarity, with Cinémas du Grütli.

What is Le Plaza's ambition?

Le Plaza has a lofty ambition, i.e. to help invent a new future for cinema and movie theatres in Geneva and for Geneva, based on the revival of an illustrious venue that is deeply rooted in Geneva's past. Its exceptional architecture, its history, its location at a key point in the city and, last but not least, its programme, will make it a lively home, capable of breathing new life into cinema at the heart of a broad ecosystem – comprising an immersive space, exhibition spaces, welcoming areas such as the ice-cream parlour, the brasserie and the library/bookshop – with which it will have constant interaction.





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Image credits

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Art installation by Christian Robert-Tissot
on the Plaza's neon sign, September 2022

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Evening with Isabelle Huppert, “Un week-end
de cinéma imaginé par Isabelle Huppert”,
conversation with Jean-Pierre Greff, President of
the Plaza Foundation, and Aude Py, screenwriter,
October 2022

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The Clock, audiovisual work by Christian Marclay,
in partnership with MAMCO, July 2021

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