

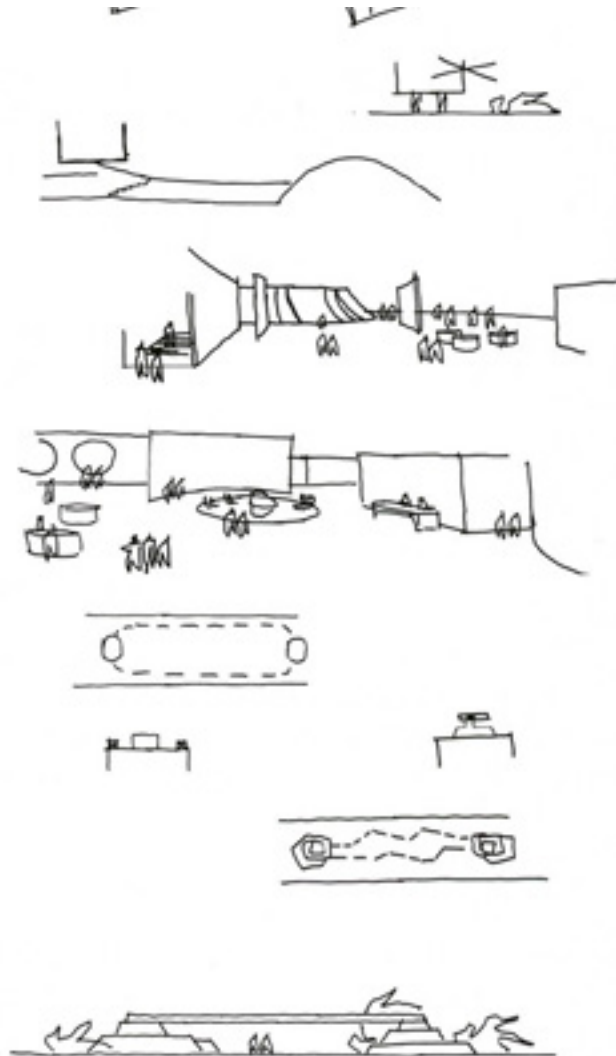
# FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY HEADQUARTERS



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In March 1972, an article in The Architectural Review proclaimed that this structure was “probably the best building in Paris since Le Corbusier’s Cité de Refuge for the Salvation Army.” The article was, of course, referring to Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer’s first project in Europe: the French Communist Party Headquarters in Paris, France, built between 1967 and 1980. Having worked with Le Corbusier on the 1952 United Nations Building in New York and recently finished the National Congress as well as additional





iconic government buildings in Brasilia, Niemeyer was no stranger to the intimate relationship between architecture and political power. During the summer of 1965, an exhibition centered on Niemeyer's projects in Brasilia at the Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Paris drew record breaking crowds as well as attention from French architects and politicians alike. The exhibition came at an opportune time as, only a year prior, the





Brazilian government had been overthrown by a right-wing military dictatorship. As a noted communist and outspoken political leftist, Niemeyer fled to France and established an office on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. He began work on a series of projects across Europe during this self-imposed exile as well as unrealized proposals for a tourist resort in Israel and a master plan for Pena Furada, Algarve in Portugal. Soon after, the French Communist Party (CPF) commissioned Niemeyer to design the party's new headquarters. "Our shared views and political struggle were far more important than architecture," Niemeyer wrote. "And we became good friends." Yet, his structure came at a critical time for the party and functioned largely as a material gesture of consolidation as the party faced significant losses in seats during the 1968 election. Facing Place du Colonel Fabien and flanked by Avenue Mathurin Moreau and Boulevard de la Villette on either side, the sloping





corner site chosen for the headquarters had been previously owned by a trade union. Niemeyer's guiding principle for the project was carefully considered balance between open space and architectural volume. Thus, through opening the ground plane, Niemeyer intended to avoid excessive occupation of the site and maximize green space for both the client and the city's residents. "During this phase, my fourth, the prevailing idea was to manifest not only the plastic freedom of my architecture but also the advancements in engineering in Brazil," said Niemeyer. "In the French Communist Party Headquarters, I demonstrated the importance of maintaining harmony between volumes and spaces on the exterior, which explains why the great workers' hall is located underground." Niemeyer's final design encompassed a vertical serpentine block of offices coupled with vertical service cores in two separate towers alongside a series of subterranean public spaces below grade to preserve the openness of the site. Rising above the ground plane, the



curving six-story structure is carefully supported on five pairs of columns that not only bear the weight of the cantilevered plates but incorporate crucial service ducts as well. Inside, the architect positioned a series of offices separated by demountable partitions with rich dark blue doors and olive green PVC tiles to conceal service ducts. A spiral staircase leads to the expansive main dining room on the sixth floor with views overlooking the city. As the site slopes up to meet the tower, the street pavement becomes a flowing ramp that guides visitors to the sunken entrance—deliberately emphasizing the moment the terrain and tower fall short of meeting. A white floating canopy projects from the sweeping block to frame this subterranean entrance. Only a portion of the irregularly shape dome





extends above ground providing the iconic white mound set off against the glass facade beyond. The futuristic airlock-esque doors along the perimeter of the auditorium open to reveal an 11 meter-high dome clad in thousands of light-diffusing anodized aluminum blades. The rich carpeting continues into the space and gradually transforms into the stage at the northernmost point. A large white concrete canopy—a sibling to the plane above the main entrance—folds up from the dome’s wall to frame and enclose the stage.

While architecture and decor have long been a symbol of state power in French history—from the Palace of Versailles to Pierre Paulin’s 1971 Presidential office interior—Niemeyer and his collaborators’ preoccupation with formal unity resulted in a work that seemingly transcended political divides. In the end, even the right-wing politician and former President Georges Pompidou had to admit that the building “was the only good thing those Commies had ever done.”

# CREDITS

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