



# Paul Andreu

www.archdaily.com - 7 March, 2017

For 40 years, Paul Andreu was among the world's foremost airport design experts. Reflecting on this before the turn of the millennium, he stated that architectural historians of the future might consider the 1990s as "the age of the air terminal." But shortly after this, he left the arena of airport design to focus on other large projects, many of them in China. In this interview, the latest of Vladimir Belogolovsky's "City of Ideas" series, Andreu explains why he made the switch and shares his thoughts on how good architecture is made—saying it often depends more on what you don't tell your client than what you do.

"Before we start, I must explain something. I am an architect and engineer. For a long time I was not an independent architect but worked at and then was the head of airport works at Aéroports de Paris Ingénierie or ADPI, a subsidiary of Aéroports de Paris (ADP). This public establishment is not only in charge of the planning, design, and operation of three Paris-region airports, but is also involved in airport

works all around the world, as well as other large-scale architectural projects. First, we did airports in France, then in the Middle East and Africa, then in China and all over Asia, and then we developed projects in other parts of the world. Most of the time we developed our projects from concept all the way through construction; although once we did just the concept for Kansai airport on a specially built island in the Bay of Osaka. As you know, it was designed by Renzo Piano and I consulted for him on function and circulation aspects".

**How big is ADPI, and when and why did you leave it to form your current practice?**

"I was there from 1964, the year when the design for Charles de Gaulle Airport started, until we did the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing in 2000. By that time, I had 400 people under me. Up until the 1980s it was a very exciting time because we constantly had to react to the new scale, bigger traffic, new demands, and so on. There were new ideas in the US and in Europe. Then I was getting a bit bored and felt that it was the right time to face new challenges

large public projects. Over the years, I designed at least 60 airport terminals and about 25 were built all over the world. But since 2000, I have not worked on airports at all. The reason I started my practice was also due to the fact that since we went to China so many opportunities opened up. Most of our work shifted there and we did all kinds of large public projects. It was a good opportunity to become an independent architect. I established my new office here in Paris with 20-25 people and we always had associate architects in China. Now I have a different business model; once I have a large project I bring in collaborators".

**Do you think it is important for architects to specialize in a particular type of architecture?**

"Yes and no ... The best architecture happens when you can reinvent a concept and not just work on packaging things. When I started, it was a great time for airports. Back then you could do that, we constantly experimented with new ideas, as airports were constantly growing and changing. So for me, being

a specialist opened possibilities to imagine new concepts. And being a specialist gave me the opportunity to do projects from the beginning to end, all the way to the last interior detail. I believe a building is a unity and I like to do everything".

**There was so much to learn about airports when you started in the mid-60s.**

"Because everything was so new. There was no past. The very first commercial airports started to appear in the



professionally, so at the age of 63 I left to start my own practice".

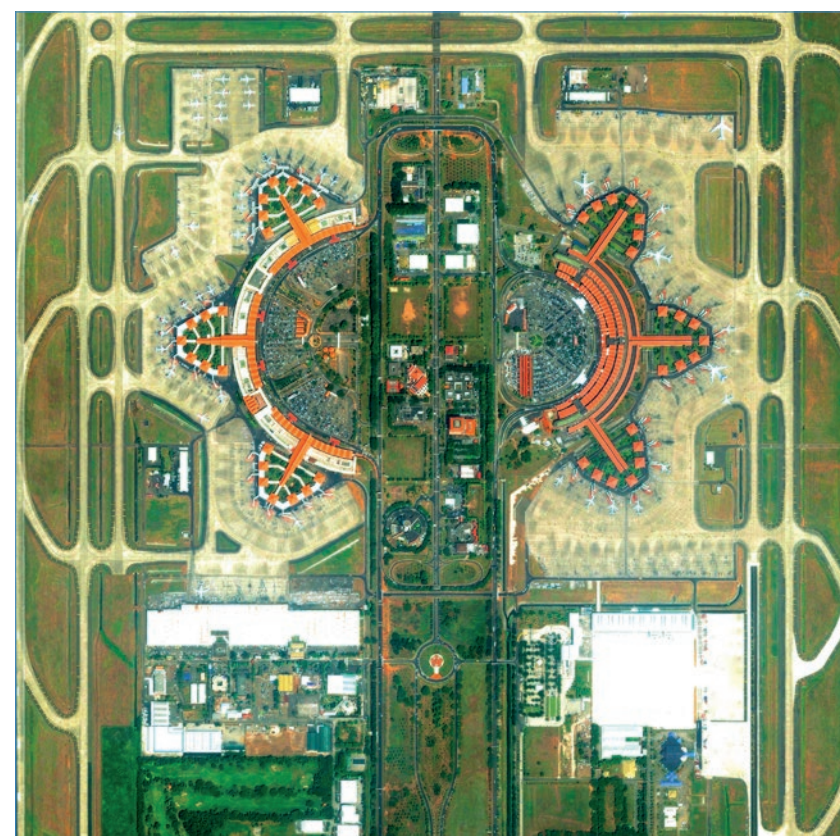
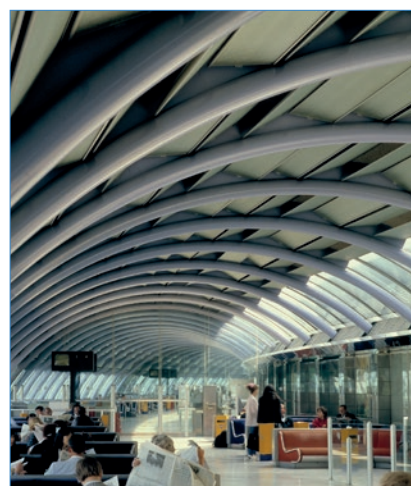
**Here in Paris, it is impossible to miss your work for those who come by air. As you mentioned, you designed all three major Parisian airports. How many airports have you designed over your career and what is the percentage of your airport work to other projects?**

"I would say that for the first 20 years I did airports only. Then it was about 80 percent airports and 20 percent other



ph. GianAngelo Pistoia/A.P.





1920s. So by 2000, working on airports for almost 40 years, I was involved in designing this building type for half of its existence, and it really started to grow and change dramatically right at the time when I started. Airports no longer change; they just grow in size; there is no new concept. And, unfortunately, now many seemingly different building types converge around shopping experience. So many projects have become very commercial. There are airport versions of commercial malls, railway station versions, museum versions... Everything is a commercial center".

**In addition to many airports, you have also designed theaters, operas, hotels, and other grand complexes. Have you designed houses or other small projects or objects?**

"I think the smallest projects I've done are small airports in Africa. But I did do other small projects such as two houses—one for my father when I just finished my studies. He had more confidence in my contractor than in me. And the second house I did in the South of France for a friend. Recently, I did an apartment building, but there are so many rules and little freedom... Solving a problem is not the way to do architecture. I also did some shops. I did stage designs for ballet at the Opera Garnier, and very simple theater designs for Beckett plays. I also designed light fixtures and I do some abstract painting and writing, which are reflections on my work, and occasional novels".

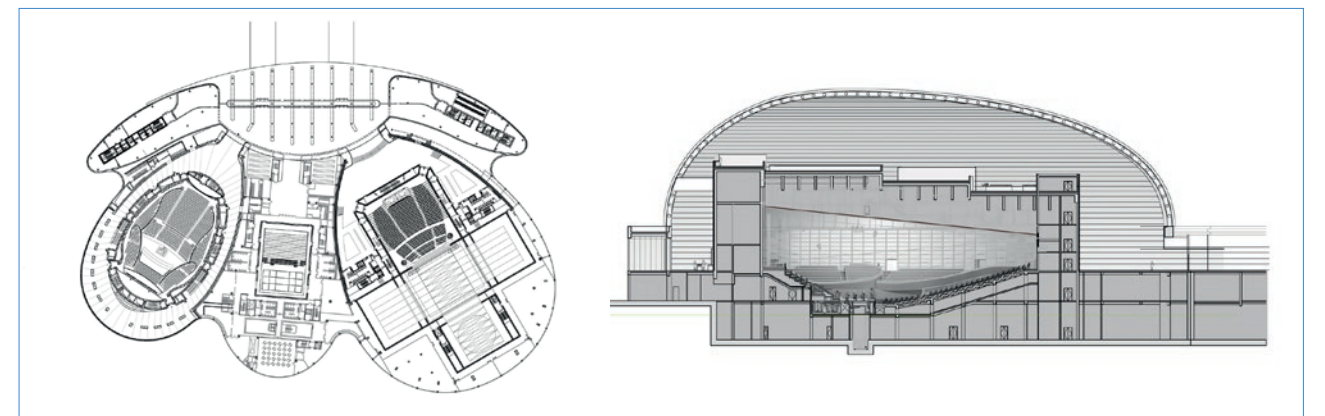
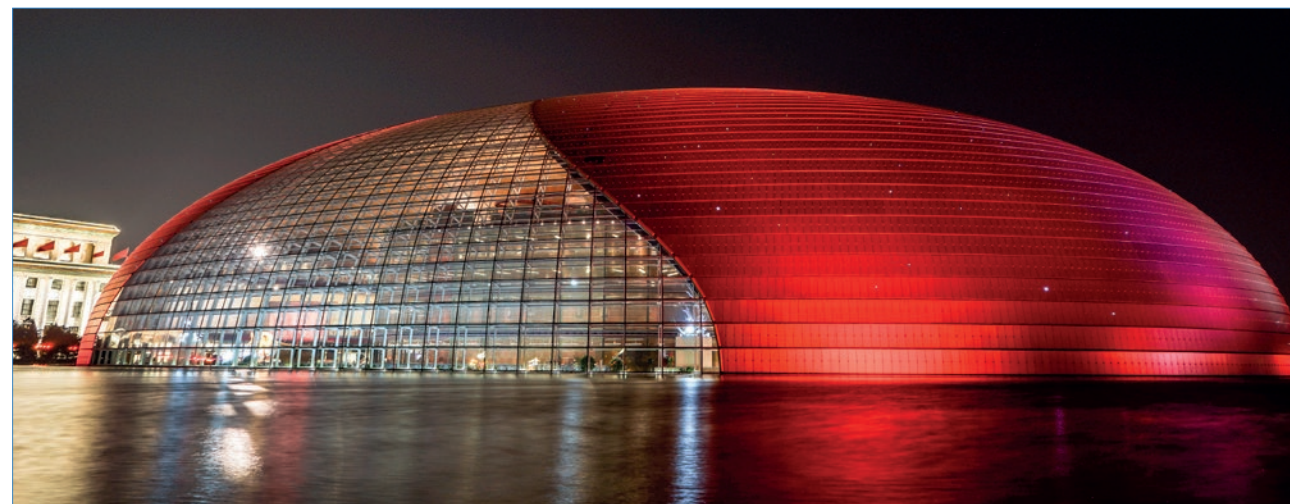
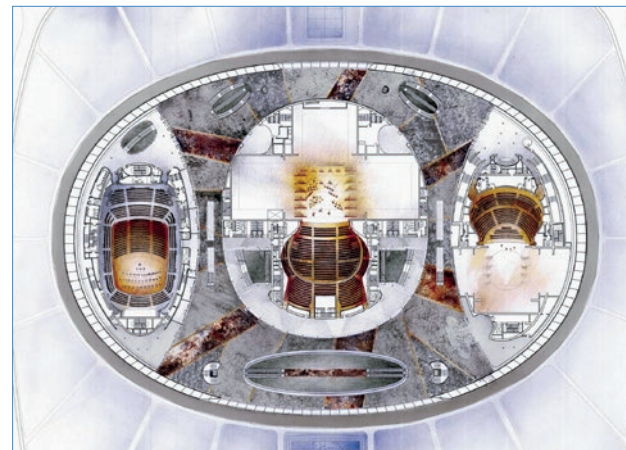
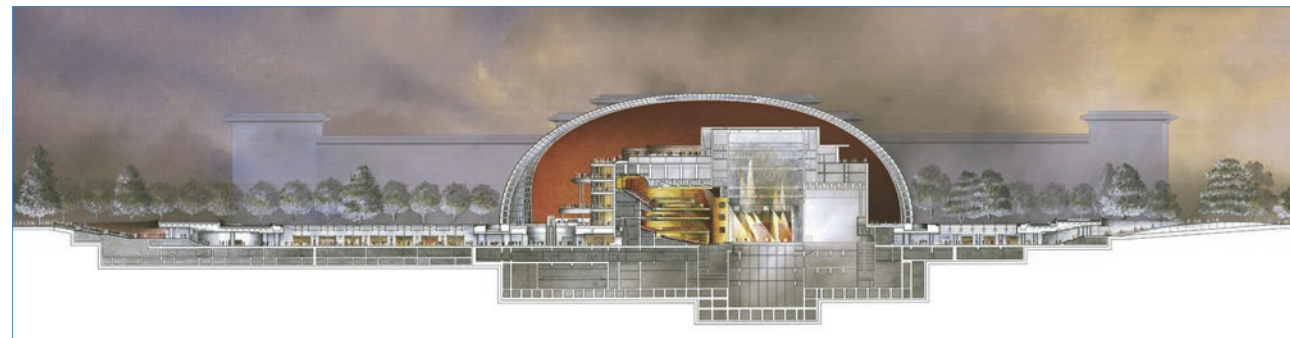
**Amazing. When do you have time for painting, theater design, and writing novels, when you are building half of China...?**

"Now I have plenty of time ... Well, all the people you see here are not mine. All these architects are from an independent office and only when I have work we collaborate... There was a major accident in May 2004 when a portion of the roof collapsed at the Terminal 2E at Charles de Gaulle Airport, killing four people. It was such a huge shock. I was not charged with any wrongdoing, as it was a structural failure, but my major project at the time, a large casino and hotel complex in Macao was put on hold and I had to let go of my entire staff, about 25 people. At that moment, I thought I would quit architecture completely, but finally, I decided to stay and reduced the scale of my operation. Anyway, there is less work now in China; I am 78... I am not leaving architecture, but architecture is taking a leave. That's why I am acting more now in the other sectors".

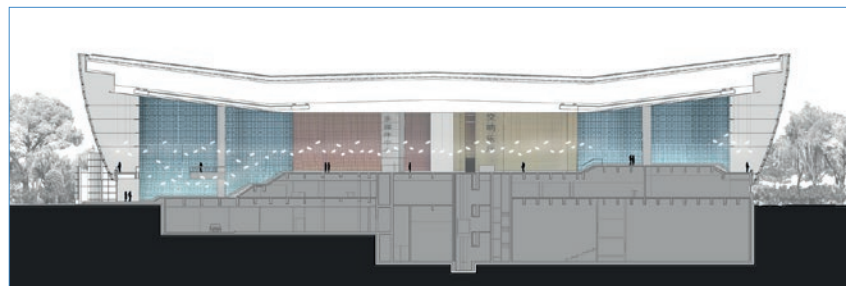
**What kind of project would you like to work on now?**

"I am less compromising now. I would only take on a project if the ideas were mine. Otherwise, I am not interested".









*And I am only wise about my own projects. If you ask for my opinion about other architects' projects, it would be hard for me to give advice. To know for sure I have to be involved from the very beginning and I have to go through the whole process myself because projects evolve slowly. I am of the opinion that you must act and then think, not think and then act. It is the opposite of what we are taught. How can you have an opinion on someone else's project? First, you have to have a problem, confront it, and then work on it from one idea to the next. If you don't do that, how do you know that your idea is better than mine? You have to be inside the problem, you have to be active about it. And to achieve something interesting you have to ask questions and not just solve a problem. Solutions have to be invented, not solved".*

**What's a good airport from the standpoint of a passenger?**

*"In a good airport, you get to your plane without being lost and exhausted. Also the airport should not be a disturbing experience. An airport is a place where you follow signs. But at the same time my goal is to give you freedom. I hate buildings that deliver a particular message. The only thing that should be conveyed is the possibility to grow. But this approach does not mean being neutral. A good airport is beyond a building; it is a landscape".*

**Is it unusual for an architect to also be a planner and engineer for airport projects? I understand that this gave you a lot of freedom to bring certain poetic ideas and explain them as necessary functionally and structurally. You said in one of your interviews that architecture was like a secret to you because you would avoid talking about it to your clients, is that right?**

*"Right. People are afraid when you talk about poetic ideas to them. I am talking about clients and decision makers. They also don't like doubts. But you have to have doubts. If you don't have any, you are stupid. Once I did Terminal 1 here and other projects I wanted to continue my experiments, so I remember talking to one client in the Middle East and I was expressing my doubts, saying 'We could do it this way or that way. But I am not completely sure...'. So next thing I knew my contract was canceled. You may have your doubts but perhaps it is wise to keep them to yourself. Your doubts should be your own secret. You should only talk when you come to a solution. In a way, when you explain your project you always lie ...".*



**In what way?**

*"Because you have to sound logical".*

**And the design process is not logical.**

*"Not always. Sometimes you are asked—why did you do this or that? Well, I did it this way and I don't know why or I don't have a rational reason for it. But I have to find a good convincing reason so that I can respond to the question. That's why I don't believe in producing a good design with a computer because computers don't make errors. But sometimes you do something that appears to be wrong and that happens to be the right thing. You can be honest and you may be applauded for making the decision 20 years later. But in the moment—no, no, no. You have to be careful. But there is nothing wrong with a process in which every line is a doubt. You search for your conviction. Once you have it, it is all about following through and convincing everyone else".*

**Solutions often come by chance.**

*"Yes, of course. You must leave space for chance. You have to push yourself in the corner. If you don't do that you just repeat yourself. You want to go far".*

**When you talk about architecture, you underline that it is more than mere construction; it is poetry, dreams, symbolism, etc. Do you ever rely on specific symbols when you work on your projects? Where do you derive your inspirations? For example, you mentioned your paintings. But there is no direct link between your paintings and architecture, right?**

*"I read books, read poetry, listen to music, paint ... I am fed by all of this; I look in every direction. That's part of the process. But there is no direct link just like there is no direct link between what we eat and what we think. There is this chemistry and mystery. But you get your energy and you can do anything. I should also say that every time there is a direct link between my inspiration and project, the result is wrong. There has to be a transformation inside of you. I can't tell you where the ideas come from. But what is essential is drawing. If I don't draw, I have no idea. The answer is in doing. There is a kind of loop between your brain, eye, thinking, drawing, hand; and it is very complex, never direct".*

**How do you imagine airports in the future?**

*"I don't".*

**Because they change all the time.**

*"Or they don't change enough".*

**Vladimir Belogolovsky**