Upon the Abandoned Beach

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An abandoned surfing spot in the heart of the French agglomeration Bayonne-Anglet-Biarritz has been redeveloped into a promenade. The conurbation, limited by rocky outcrops and a steep change in grade, has had some difficulty in stretching itself all the way to the ocean side in the past. Now, a sensible and ecologically sound design ties the beach site to the town.
This project embodies the meeting of the Pyrénées and the beaches of the Landes, of the mountain and of the sand, of the earth and of the sea" explains Martin Duplantier. At Anglet, in the Basque Country, Debarre Duplantier Associés has created a new urban and landscape development project for the Chambre d'Amour and the Promenade des Sources. The site is an exceptional one. To the left, the Lighthouse of Biarritz, proud and soaring, while to the right the impressive cliffs create a panorama that stretches from neighboring Spain to the Arcachon Bay. The area is known for its beauty and its landscape, but also for the presence of an incongruous pyramid-shaped hotel dating from the golden age of mass-tourism.

At the heart of the Bayonne-Anglet-Biarritz agglomeration (or simply BAB, for short), the site offers a true breath of fresh air. The conurbation, limited by rocky outcrops and a steep change in grade, has had some difficulty in stretching itself all the way to the ocean side in the past. Hence, the location only achieved popularity amongst the surfer community. After riding the waves all afternoon, they would often welcome the coming nightfall with picnics in the back of their Volkswagen campers. With a general disregard for the traces they left on the beach, the area gradually accumulated litter, damaging the fragile seaside ecosystem.

The Town of Anglet therefore launched a vast redevelopment project. "During the design competition we proposed the development of a resilient concept that accepts the tricky nature of the coastline. We have imagined a design response that channels the flow of people while limiting development and maximising natural space," explains Martin Duplantier. Photos of the site before the transformation attest to a miserable situation where asphalt was so all-engulfing that not even the slightest of weeds could grow. Given this situation, it was crucial to imagine the creation of a master-planned landscape. In other words, the trick was to put in place a means of controlling the impact of humans on the site while maintaining its accessibility.

"There's nothing like using the car to stop car culture," the architect says, smiling. The design created by the firm aspires to organise parking more efficiently while dissuading visitors from bringing their cars to the

Debarre Duplantier Associés has connected the beach and the town of Anglet and created a new promenade at the coastline. At top of the slope a water table has been installed at the new esplanade's belvedere.
site in the first place. "We have succeeded in offering the same number of parking spaces in the project while reducing the total amount of roadways and paved surfaces" he indicates. Simply put, the solution provides order and nature in a project that embodies, with subtility, the tensions between "the organic and the orthogonal, between straight line and curved, between rock and concrete".

We have constantly worked to frame that which is nature" states the architect. In fact, this delicate intervention calls for both contemplation and the awareness of the fragility of this natural zone. Because of their unregulated use over the previous decades, the cliffs have fallen victim to serious erosion. The proposed developments will prevent any risk of future damage. In the upper portion of the site we have created a belvedere, in the middle of which we have placed a ‘water table’. Symbolically, this fountain marks the origin of a stream which snakes along the promenade until it reaches the beach. We imagined a pedestrian path marked by the sound of running water. We have punctuated this route with concrete troughs that are fed by the springs that emerge here and there. All of the water produced by the cliffs has been channelled in this manner to avoid any further erosion" Martin Duplantier points out. More than just a development project, the firm has delivered a sensible, ecologically sound design approach to the site.

"This project was especially complex, as the area of intervention is subject to specialised laws regarding the coastline. We consequently needed a series of important impact studies" states the architect. The zone is fragile and therefore calls for no improvisation. The sanctuary is such that no materials could be taken from the site. "Not a single rock was torn from the cliffs, and we haven’t removed even the smallest of stones. We have sourced everything from within a radius of fifty kilometres. We have gone as far as even reusing the former roadway in the foundations of the new construction" he notes.

What remained to be dealt with were the site’s existing structures: near the top, an unheavily sparkling lot, while below, the imposing pyramid. "This was an architectural absurdity whose radical nature slowly
grows on you" says Martin Duplanter. Between the two, there once existed a road and a few parking spaces. "Our scope of work had a clearly defined perimeter, but the benefits of the completed work have spilled over into the surroundings. We have therefore worked on the interstitial space as well, and managed the ensemble of the cliffs. We have included, in particular, a series of pathways within our project that tie the town to the shore" the architect notes.

"We have created exceptional topography" he adds. On the highest point, the firm imagined a belvedere in place of an esplanade entirely devoted to the automobile. "This terrace gives the impression that we are on the ground, yet the poor quality of the substrate required that we create a cantilever, which limits its size" the architect explains. In any case, the view is magnificent and numerous Basques come to take advantage of the panoramas while eating their tapas. "We quickly came up with the idea of incorporating large ledges into the guard rails, which can be used as tables" he states.

"The environment here is quite mineral and tinted with grey, evoking images of the Pyrenees. A few trees have been planted in direct continuation of the existing pine forest, which was divided into small plots many decades ago. Below, in contrast, the colours highlight the beach. It was necessary to ensure the robustness of the project's materials, as they would have to withstand the often capricious ocean. Every element that was put in place needed to withstand even the worst of storms.

Concerning the choice made, the architect states that he had, "At this place, the desire to soften the presence of this imposing pyramid through the creation of several intermediary zones". In front of the building, a long pergola of wood and Corten steel was designed to create a covered walkway. Along the sides, large rocks extracted from quarries in the region punctuate the paths while serving as a testament to the monumental presence of the cliffs. Further along, an undulating, playful boardwalk serves as a gentle call to the area's surf culture. Once used by skaters, it now serves as a solarium. The wooden waves - rendered impractical to the use of a skateboard - now serve as a foundation for those looking to sunbathe and lounge.

Tables, benches, light posts, guard rails ... everything in this project is tailor-made. It is this quality that ensures the balance and harmony of each of the project's interventions. "In addition, we have succeeded in drawing materials solely from regional sources, while working alongside local businesses" Martin Duplanter claims. This project thus embodies a certain voluntarism, including its politics. Facing the Atlantic, this is where the Pyrenees meet the beaches of the Landes.