

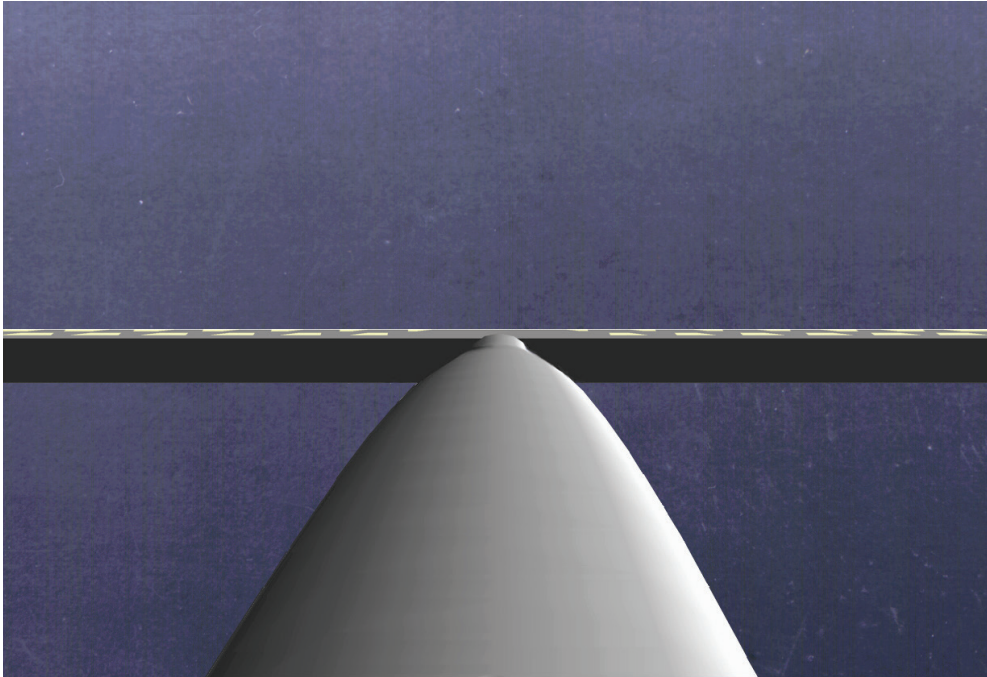
# BETTS PROJECT

## PRESS RELEASE

### JACQUES HONDELATTE

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**PREVIEW: SATURDAY 2 DECEMBER 4–7PM**



*Le Nichon (The Boob)—Millau Viaduct, 1994, computer drawing. Courtesy the estate of Jacques Hondelatte & Betts Project*

Betts Project is pleased to announce an exhibition of works by cult but unknown French architect Jacques Hondelatte. This will be the artist's first solo presentation since the critically acclaimed exhibition 'Jacques Hondelatte: Des gratte-ciel dans la tête' at Institut français d'architecture, Paris, France in 1998.

The exhibition will reveal previously unseen archive documents and unknown projects including images of the Jardin du Foot (1994), a garden in which the trees become football players, images of the Viaduc de Millau (1994), as well as images of the Dragons de Niort (1992).

The quality of the representations (plans, digital images, digital collages/photos, etc.) produced by the Hondelatte agency is astounding in several respects. Unlike contemporary productions, they avoid any resemblance with reality and powerfully impose their own graphic world with remarkable clarity. Hondelatte's hybrid collages still stand out today with their absolute relevancy and modernity.

#### **A Radical Wizard**

Jacques Hondelatte (1942-2002) is one of the French architects who made the greatest impact on his generation. Little known to the general public, mainly published in specialised journals, he nonetheless remains cult for his peers Jean Nouvel and Rudy Ricciotti, as well as for his more direct disciples including Lacaton-Vassal, the group Epinard Bleu with Frédéric Druot, and Duncan Lewis. At the Ecole d'Architecture of Bordeaux he was their professor, 'their guru without dogma' according to Druot.

He left a radical body of work in his wake that Jean Nouvel (a longtime friend and associate, with whom he notably designed, in 1984, a project for the high school in Pessac, near Bordeaux) defined as "an architecture based on abstraction and discussion and no longer derived from drawings".

“What was incredible about Jacques” recalls Mathieu Perez, his student in the 1990s at the school in Bordeaux, “is that he was capable of always finding in his students’ work, which sometimes struck us as rather mediocre, some awe-inspiring content. He had that ability to find in our projects the thing that could reenchant them without sacrificing the rigour required. To this day, that energy and poetry continue to keep me going.”

A pioneer of digital architecture in France from the mid-1980s, Jacques Hondelatte’s work was gradually recognised by the profession. In 1998, he won the Grand Prix National for architecture and, the same year, the Institut Français d’Architecture devoted a solo exhibition to him, curated by critic Patrice Goulet, who had worked hard to communicate his work. The exhibition toured in Europe and, in 2002, Patrice Goulet wrote the excellent ‘Jacques Hondelatte: Des gratte-ciel dans la tête’, an exhaustive and critical monograph that still remains the sole reference book on the work of the architect from Bordeaux. In 2004, the Centre George Pompidou bought a series of plans and images from the architect’s projects, including those of the Tribunal de Grande Instance de Bordeaux (1988-1990), the “islandification” of the Mont Saint-Michel (1991), the Bibliothèque de Jussieu (1992), and the Viaduc de Millau (1994).

Patrice Goulet describes Jacques Hondelatte as a wizard with an excellent poker face: “Of course, he always looked innocent, casual, constantly curious, perpetually enamoured, with a sharp eye, ever on the lookout, enthusiastic, an eternal explorer, inventor, and discoverer. Yet his projects clearly indicate that he is radical in terms of the process of their development, uncompromising as to the pertinence of the concept, a total stickler for the rigorous precision of the drawings, meticulous as to the appropriateness of details, and passionate about the absolute cost-effectiveness of the project.”

Hondelatte’s work is also characterised by incredibly minimalist plans that illustrate texts of intense poetry, in service to myth-generating architecture or objects. Goulet dates the moment when mythology was integrated into the architect’s design tools to 1984, with the project for the Léognan town hall. “From then on, Hondelatte was elsewhere: that is, in an ideal world in which architecture would blossom freely. He did not however transition into utopia, but instead found the means that would enable him to insidiously slide his project into the meshes of a reality bogged down in rationality and materialism that rendered it drab and sad . . . The injection of the myth immediately emerged as a particularly effective means of metamorphosing the most difficult problems into a dazzling solution.” Les Dragons de Niort (1992) or the Jardin du Foot de Noisiel (1994), presented in the exhibition are two perfect examples of this.

### **Pioneer of Digital Architecture in France**

Hondelatte became interested in information technology very early on and equipped his agency in the mid-1980s. For him, “it’s much more than a perfected tool”, he was aware that the digital tool was capable of causing “a complete overhaul of design methods”. He also marvelled: “why did we not realise that architecture would be deeply transformed by it?” He had anticipated and even theo-rised the impact of information technology within design and right through to the construction phase. Les Dragons de Niort, well before the production by artist Xavier Veilhan, was the perfect production of a form designed by computer. Goulet beautifully explains in his book how computing and poetry have become complementary and powerful tools in the architect’s production.

### **The eight columns’ mystery**

*I have seen the Tower of Pisa, it exists; I have not seen the Taj Mahal, but it exists all the same. What about the Tower of Babel, which no one has seen: does that exist? (7)*

We enter a process of designing the architectural project in which the materiality of the construction is no longer the primary element. The essence of the project is found elsewhere. The work of Jacques Hondelatte is architecture of the invisible, which takes shape in reality. Consequently, the question of the medium becomes fundamental. A poem, a story, or an image is never the description of the project, or else it is simply a design tool. This is where the heart of the architectural project lies. In this way, Les Dragons de Niort scrupulously reproduces the imperfections of the virtual images. The plan is always drawn at the last moment, irrespective of whether or not the project is eventually built: it already exists.

This ambiguity has both put us in danger and guided our research throughout. As soon as we set to work on a

new project, we feel confronted by a puzzle. With the sense that behind each object that we discovered, another story was hidden, another mystery to elucidate. Undertaking to immerse oneself in the work of Jacques Hondelatte and confront his material is never easy. A very special energy emanates from it. We found ourselves confronted by something radically different. Everything is backwards. All the rules of the game have been thwarted with amazing precision.

The question of how to broach the history of the projects thus arises. However, our approach and perception of the archive is the opposite to that of a historian. While the historian defocuses the gaze and attempts to attain objectivity, for us, on the other hand, it was a matter of retracing the thread of the stories by immersing ourselves more deeply in the fictional aspect of the story. It was laborious work: digging down from the surface, or rather through an 18 cubic-metre volume of archives and delving deep enough to be able to capture or perceive the project's tipping point into fiction.

When we looked at the plan of the ground floor of the Dickson apartment (Bordeaux, 1990), we could read the drawing of eight columns, flung right in the middle of the pathway from the lounge to the kitchen, following the axis of a superimposed framework. However, when we visited the Dickson house, we observed that these columns did not exist. The next day, when the owners of the Darbon-Barrau house (Arès, 1984) showed us the plans of the first drafts of the project, these eight columns were still featured on one of them. They were arranged in exactly the same way, in the lounge. As we left the house, we noticed a colonnade of pine trees, planted on a flat, empty section. We discerned that there were eight of them. It so happens that the story of the creation of the Landes Forest features among those that Jacques Hondelatte really enjoyed telling.

The riddle is thus found on the ground floor of the exhibition hall. Eight monumental columns disrupt the circulation, following an offset line. On the basement level, we access a landscape plunged into darkness, lit only by the slides projected by an automatic machine. We hear the repetitive click-clack of the projector continuously projecting the virtual images, like the flow of a dream.

—Félix Beytout et Juan Perez-Amaya, 2017

(1)- The first book about him, *Jacques Hondelatte*, Gros plan 7, was published in 1991 under the plume of Philippe Trétiack, co-published by the Institut Français d'Architecture – Pandora.

(2)- Jacques Hondelatte and Jean Nouvel met in 1963 at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Bordeaux. Jean Nouvel tells the anecdote in the preface entitled "Monologue for Jacques" in the book by Patrice Goulet, *Jacques Hondelatte. Des gratte-ciel dans la tête* (Paris: Édition Norma, 2002).

(3)- Ibid. (4)- Ibid. , (5)- Ibid. , (6)- Ibid. .

(7)- Jacques Hondelatte. Patrice Goulet, *Jacques Hondelatte. Des gratte-ciel dans la tête* (Paris: Édition Norma, 2002)

## NOTE TO EDITORS

### About the curators

It was two years ago, in spring 2015. The scene takes place at the school of architecture on Quai Malaquais, Paris, unless it was in a nearby bar. No matter. Juan Perez-Amaya, a young Colombian artist who had come to study architecture in France to finally understand "what goes on inside and outside the walls" on which his productions were hung, met Félix Beytout there. They were in third year of architecture and above all curious about what they were not being taught at the school. Juan Perez-Amaya was very excited by the idea of sharing a discovery with his friend. "I read an incredible book about a fabulous architect. His name is Jacques Hondelatte. It's crazy no one's ever told us about him. Do you know him?"

Félix Beytout smiled. He didn't know Jacques Hondelatte very well. He was only 7 years old when he died. He was his grandfather and he had kept that a secret from the school, preferring to make his own way, under the anonymity of his surname. So he then confessed his family connection to Juan and, given the latter's enthusiasm, the project to explore the architect's archives was born – sent from Bordeaux to Paris for the cause. They spent two years going through everything with a fine-toothed comb and making an inventory. This exhibition represents the part of what they discovered that they've brought to light.

**Juan Perez-Amaya** (Colombia 1984) is a Paris-based artist, curator and founder of El Atelier, an interdisciplinary architectural design studio.

**Felix Beytout** (France 1992) is an architect and co-Founder of El Atelier. He works within architecture into experimental mediums as concept, sound and video. He is the grandson of Jacques Hondelatte.

**Address**

Betts Project  
100 Central Street  
London EC1V 8AJ

**Opening Hours**

Wednesday – Friday 11am-6pm  
Saturday 12-5pm  
or by appointment

**Press contact**

For further information and press enquiries, please contact:  
Marie Coulon +44 (0)20 7250 1512 or [hellobettsproject@gmail.com](mailto:hellobettsproject@gmail.com)

**About Betts Project**

Betts Project is a London-based contemporary art gallery specialising in architecture, founded in 2013 by Marie Coulon.

The concept behind Betts Project is to introduce both a specialist audience and wider public to new ways of discovering and thinking about architecture, through the exhibition and promotion of materials integral to architecture – largely drawings, but also models and other forms of representation. It aims to support and promote work by established and emerging international architects, as well as lesser known or overlooked practices still very much relevant to the contemporary discourse.

The gallery is also driven by the desire to introduce architectural objects as works of art. To do so, it organises high calibre exhibitions for new and established audiences and participate to art fairs, and thereby brings unique collectable works to the market at an affordable price.

Over the past years the exhibition programme has featured solo shows by established international figures such as Caruso St John, Alexander Brodsky, Lars Lerup, Tony Fretton, Fred Scott, Studio Mumbai, Richard Goodwin, Peter Märkli alongside artist Hans Josephsohn, Pier Vittorio Aureli, and OFFICEkgdvs with photographer Bas Princen.

**Next exhibition: Florian Beigel & Philip Christou**

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