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Marvelous MARSEILLE :: Cool PROVENCE :: The new TRAM TOWNS

Cool Hunting

in PROVENCE

When you fall in love with a place, you don't want it to change. And yet when it does, there are sometimes wonderful surprises. Whatever alchemy originally made it so special often lends itself to a new configuration, resulting in something delightfully different yet comfortingly familiar.

Provence is one of those places. While not all change here (or anywhere,

for that matter) is good, exciting islands of creativity are popping up throughout the region. This sunny swath of southern France has long been a crossroads, and today as always outsiders—other French as well as foreigners—are behind many of these initiatives. These “newcomers” (many have lived here for years) are often as enamored and protective of this land and lifestyle as the locals themselves, and their work invariably has a Provençal soul.

On the following pages is a selection of exciting contemporary creations we found scattered from Arles to Aubagne—surely only the tip of a very cool iceberg.

By Karen Taylor

Known for its magnificent Roman ruins, the ancient city of Arles is about to get an exciting infusion of 21st-century architecture. As luck would have it, there is a 27-acre site available for new construction not five minutes from the coliseum. Formerly home to the city's rail repair yards, it has been vacant since 1984.

The architectural firm of Moatti et Rivière has made the first move, dramatically transforming La Grande Halle, a cavernous hangar that once housed the boiler works. On the western façade, a magnificent

rusted-steel “veil” seems to float down from the roof, belying the fact that it weighs some 52 tons. “The abstract network pattern and the material itself are an homage to the railroads and the city's industrial past,” explains Henri Rivière. The northern façade was conceived as a tribute to Arles's role as a center of photography, with a 400-foot-long diode screen—the largest in Europe—set into its sloping roof. And in a nod to environmental concerns, the southern façade is studded with photovoltaic cells—enough to supply power not only to this building but to a good part of the city as well.

Still only a shell, La Grande Halle is expected one day to house exhibition spaces, movie theaters, a concert hall, restaurants and shops. Meanwhile, Arles has received another stroke of luck: Maja Hoffmann, heiress to the Roche pharmaceutical fortune, grew up here and has pledged to endow the city with an expansive cultural center designed by Frank Gehry. Devoted to every kind of imagery—photography, film, video and so on—it too will be located in the old rail yards. The presentation of Gehry's model of the building will be a highlight of this year's Rencontres d'Arles (July 8 to September 14).

STARCHITECTURE IN ARLES

LEFT: In Arles, a hangar in a former rail yard now has a dramatic iron façade that looks like lace and a roof inset with the largest diode screen in Europe.

