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URBANISM/FRANCE

Bright future

All but destroyed in the Second World War, the town of Royan took inspiration from Brazil when it rebuilt, swapping drab postwar design for colourful modernism.

By *Annick Weber*
Photography *Alex Cretey Systemans*

(1) Spiral staircases are a common feature in Royan (2) An interior designed by Florence Deau (3) Église Notre-Dame, the town's only example of brutalism (4) Villa Mirabelle

The seaside streets of Royan, a coastal town north of Bordeaux, are quite a sight. Pops of pastel-hued accents and whimsically designed wrought-iron gates punctuate a white-walled modernist housing stock. Public buildings – such as an auditorium with a magnificent mosaic and a shell-shaped market hall – weave a sunny, maritime theme into a melange of mid-century buildings. Vaulted roofs conjure images of ocean waves and recall the work – far from these streets – of Oscar Niemeyer, Brazil's master of tropical modernism.

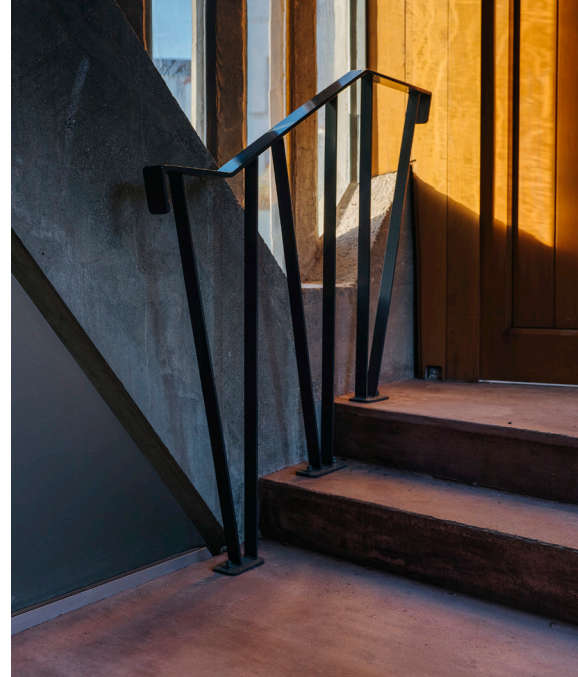
But parallels with modern Brazilian architecture are no coincidence: until the late 1930s Royan was popular with summer visitors for its sandy beaches, belle-époque villas and fresh sea air. Then the Second World War came and Allied bombing raids flattened the town. But Royan did not let itself sink into dereliction: shortly after the war, Claude Ferret, an architecture professor with a penchant for neoclassicism, was appointed to lead the town's resurrection. "The initial plans looked nothing like the end result 20

years later,” says Charlotte de Charette, an architecture historian at Royan Town Hall, while flicking through brochures with property pictures from the 1950s and 1960s. “Ferret first wanted to reconstruct Royan in the prewar style but then he discovered the contemporary architecture of Brazil in a magazine and completely shifted his direction.” Mesmerised by the visionary nature of Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa’s developments, Ferret decided to transform Royan into a Brazilian-inspired playground for modern urban planning and design. Nods to Ferret’s South American influences are plentiful here: flowing concrete canopies that sit atop slender columns shade spiral staircases, bus stops and the town’s Protestant church on the backstreets that lead to Boulevard Aristide Briand, a wide central thoroughfare.

Cheery and colourful, the clever detailing and optimistic design here masks the fact that this new incarnation of the town was born during a time of postwar frugality. Other war-damaged French towns, such as Le Havre, opted for grey concrete blocks but Royan showed that it was possible to be *avant garde* on a budget. “Residents liked that it looked like no other town in France,” says Liang Minh, a local architect who has recently returned to his hometown after stints in Bordeaux and Paris.

Working with funds donated by the French Ministry for Reconstruction and Urbanism, Ferret chanced upon support from a class of young architecture students that included Yves Salier and Pierre Marmouget. These ambitious designers were willing to take part in the project for little pay and, like Ferret, they were curious about new architecture, and keen to help model Royan on the movements emerging across the Atlantic. The playful nature and youthful energy behind the reconstruction quickly won over residents and helped the war-ravaged town return to its feet.

Royan’s current crop of young architects draw upon the same influences as their predecessors did. Minh recently teamed up with Florence Deau, a Royan-born and based interior designer, to turn the ground floor of the city’s former civil engineering office into Cave 1950, a wine



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bar. It’s housed within one of the purest examples of Royannais modernism: a building shielded by a gently rounded 1952 structure designed by Ferret’s student Salier. “I didn’t wait for the movement to come back into fashion,” says Deau. “It’s something that I’ve always appreciated by growing up in a place where this style is so prominent.”

Thankfully Royan’s town hall recognises the uniqueness of its buildings. Entire zones of the city are protected and key architectural elements – including the Salier structure – are listed as heritage sites. This attitude contrasts starkly with that of the 1970s and 1980s, when the use of concrete had gone out of fashion and many of Royan’s buildings were neglected. Authorities and landlords failed to maintain the structures and there were many demolitions, including Ferret’s magnificent Casino-Rotonde, which was heavily influenced by Niemeyer’s striking circular buildings. “During this period Royan lost its charm,” says De Charette. “Many owners painted their multicoloured houses white, which meant that the unique details could no longer stand out from the rest of the façades.”

Royan’s return to postwar roots came in the 2000s when residents raised concerns about the crumbling state of its mid-century infrastructure. After years of fighting for increased conservation, Royan was designated a *ville d’art et d’histoire* by the French Ministry of Culture in 2011; since then it has received financial support for work to maintain historically significant buildings.

MONOCLE meets Veronique Willmann, the president of Artichem, an architecture



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(1) Handrail inside Eglise Notre-Dame (2) The living room in mid-century style at Villa Mirabelle (3) Royan’s market hall is shaped like a seashell (4) Formica chairs at Veronique Willman’s

preservation association, and owner of holiday-rental properties, at her home a couple of blocks west from the recently renovated glass-and-concrete Palais des Congrès. The leader of the people’s movement to preserve Royan’s mid-century architecture lives – as one might expect – in an immaculately kept white-and-blue villa that was built in 1958. “The architecture of Royan plays with the sun, the wind and the sea,” she says.

Willman has adapted the space, which was once the naval headquarters, for contemporary living: the boat garage is now a kitchen and the mariners’ quarters are a bedroom and office. Original features, such as checked floor tiles, curved sinks and pivot windows, were restored and today sit alongside Formica tables, Swedish sideboards and other



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more contemporary design pieces. The airy open-plan interior is dotted with colour and references the tropical inclination of Royan’s reconstruction – but it’s outside where these references resound most strongly. Willman has adorned a home that was whitewashed in the 1980s with the pops of colour that were so prevalent in Royan’s postwar reconstruction. Neighbours have followed suit, as is evident from the fresh licks of brightly coloured paint across their fine old houses. *Vive la différence.* — (M)