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Five-Alarm Firehouse *pix*

No blaze can defeat the mighty fortress that Ibos-Vitart Architectures built outside Paris

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Resin gives a wet look to the concrete floor of a ground-level corridor in the fire station that Ibos-Vitart Architectures built in Nanterre, a Paris suburb.



The emergency-exit stairwell's painted steps.

Unlike a fire department in the U.S., the Brigade des Sapeurs-Pompiers de Paris is a military outfit, a special division of the French army that's passionately revered by Parisians. (It's the pompiers who are called first in almost every emergency, even medical cases and auto accidents.) So the city's fire stations are in fact small military bases with all the pertinent rules, regulations, and security measures attached. As at fire stations all over the world, however, the one essential operational element is speed: From the first sound of an alarm, firefighters are allotted 45 seconds to get into an engine and out the door.

The need for efficiency was likewise dominant at a fire station built by Ibos-Vitart Architectures in the Paris suburb of Nanterre—right on the edge of a major highway interchange that resembles a "big plate of noodles," says principal Jean-Marc Ibos. And the form dictated by that function is relatively simple: a U-shape contemporary version of a medieval fortress, with the two-story fire station proper clad in shining stainless steel. "It's a noble material, durable, luxurious, and practically maintenance-free. And it very rarely gets graffitied," says principal Myrto Vitart. Copper-tinted aluminum clads the apartment block that rises another five stories over the central part of the building.

The 144,000-square-foot complex uses its 860-foot-square plot to the limit. On the ground level, the engines and rescue vans are parked, each facing its own double door to the street. There's also a command center, offices, supply rooms, a laundry, a kitchen, separate mess halls for regular firefighters and officers, a skylit double-height gym, and elevator lobbies for the apartment block. A dormitory occupies one wing on the second level. In the wide, bare dormitory corridor, the only color comes from fire-engine red bands painted on the concrete walls and floor—the latter coated with clear resin to look symbolically wet. Stainless-steel doors open to Spartan rooms with single beds, night tables, and desks in matching blond pine. In the central section of the second level, a recreation room offers a bar, set beneath an improbable white canvas market umbrella; nearby, firefighters can unwind over games of pool or "baby foot" foosball.

Above, the apartment block's 30 units of one, two, and three bedrooms house officers and others with families. The spacious, comfortable apartments have parquet flooring, eat-in kitchens, black-and-white tiled bathrooms, and even private balconies. Tall windows open to the southern sun, filtered through colored film embedded in the glass. In the bedrooms, the windows also have interior wooden shutters much like those in old French châteaux, since firefighters must be able to shut out the light and sleep at all hours.

"Like a military camp, the building needed to be completely self-sufficient," Ibos



Fire hoses hanging against the painted concrete wall of the training tower.

says. "It had to accommodate daily life—cooking, cleaning, doing laundry—in addition to the firefighting and the rescue training for recruits."

The training tower stands in the center of the courtyard—where the keep of an old castle would have been. This three-story black shell of a building has a narrow staircase and several types of balconies, allowing recruits to practice their firefighting and rescue techniques by using real hook-and-ladder trucks, real hoses, and a lot of real water. (With a nice French touch, one balcony blooms with a window box of pink geraniums.) Next to the tower, a galvanized-steel manhole cover 3 feet in diameter conceals a cylindrical tank used for underwater training.

Except for the training sessions that center on the tower, the courtyard is designed strictly for one-way traffic: trucks returning via the side gate to the repair shop or their alarm-ready parking places. Not all is utilitarian, though. As elsewhere in this austere but efficient complex, the residents have added a few personal touches. They include an old-fashioned covered terrace in the courtyard just outside the mess hall and, next to the training tower, a small square garden with the requisite gravel plot for playing pétanque.



A corridor leading to the dormitory.



Steel grating that serves as walls and floor in the apartment block's mail room.



A fluorescent fixture above the door to a first-aid room. The recreation room's foosball table.



The celebrated helmet of the Brigade des Sapeurs-Pompiers de Paris.



The two-story station, clad in stainless steel, supports the apartment block, clad in copper-tinted aluminum.



One of five trucks stands alarm-ready, facing doors to the street.



One of two first-aid rooms on the station's ground level is furnished with the brigade's standard-issue beds and tables.



The fire station's traditional pole.



In the recreation room, the architects matched their own stainless-steel table to off-the-shelf stools with beech seats.



A painted letter identifies an elevator bank for the apartments.

PROJECT TEAM: MARIE-ALIX BEAUGIER; STPHANE BARA. CUSTOM DOORS (CORRIDORS): ETABLISSEMENTS DENOST. FLUORESCENT FIXTURES: SAMMODE. WALL, FLOOR GRATE (MAIL ROOM), CEILING GRATE (RECREATION ROOM), PANELS (STATION EXTERIOR): TOLMEGA. FLUORESCENT FIXTURES (FIRST AID, ELEVATOR LOBBY): SYLVANIA LIGHTING INTERNATIONAL. PANELS (APARTMENT EXTERIOR): ALUFORM SYSTEM. CUSTOM WINDOWS (APARTMENTS): SCHCO. CUSTOM WINDOWS (STATION): HARTMANN. CUSTOM TABLE (RECREATION ROOM): DEVOS. PAINT: SPR. SAFETY CONSULTANT: GROUPE CASSO. STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: KHEPHREN INGNIERIE. CIVIL ENGINEER, MEP: ALTO INGNIERIE. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: HERVE.