

PLP co-founder Karen Cook exits to set up new practice Spice

13 OCTOBER 2022 *BY RICHARD WAITE



1/22 Karen Cook and Jean Le Lay
Source: Jan Bunge

Architects' Journal

Karen Cook, who co-founded AJ100 big hitter PLP Architecture in 2009, has left to set up her own practice

The architect [famously led](#) the PLP team on the design and construction of the City of London's tallest tower, 22 Bishopsgate, which is also the home for her new studio Spice.

She is joined by long-time collaborator and former Renzo Piano Building Workshop designer Jean Le Lay.

Cook, 60, a graduate of Rice University and Harvard University Graduate School moved to London to work for KPF (Kohn Pedersen Fox) in 1990. Nine years later, she controversially left alongside Lee Polisano David Leventhal, Fred Pilbrow, and Ron Bakker to found PLP in a [headline-grabbing fracture](#).

During her 13 years there, she helped the original [KPF 'breakaway five'](#) evolve PLP into a 140-strong, £18 million turnover company.

So why did Cook want to move on from heading one of the UK's leading architectural players to effectively begin over again?

The AJ caught up with Cook and Le Lay to discuss the challenges of starting the new outfit at 'an exciting time of change' and their ambitions to 'create a pre-fab, post-carb, humanist society'.



22 Bishopsgate reception “library.” Leather work by Bill Amberg Studio. Sculptural walnut pieces by Pierre Renart. Design led by Karen Cook while a founding partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM.

Source: Michel Denancé

Where are you based?

22 Bishopsgate, City of London

Where have you come from?

Karen Together with my long-time collaborator Jean Le Lay, we've founded the new practice called Spice. I've sold my shares and exited PLP Architecture which I started as a founding partner after leaving KPF London.

I've enjoyed a varied and interesting career working in London, Paris, Berlin and Prague for renowned developers such as Canary Wharf, Altarea Cogedim and Hines. The continental approach to sustainability in architectural design was initially ahead of the UK.

At PLP, I led the design of 22 Bishopsgate in the City of London, a remarkable experience with Lipton Rogers Developments and AXA IM. I've led the design of smaller workplaces, too, like the Qatar Airways London Headquarters, a small Portland stone building in Mayfair; and 4 Cannon Street, a red sandstone contextual building with a new pocket park for Pembroke on behalf of Fidelity, opposite St Paul's Cathedral.

I had the good fortune to work with experienced developers Stuart Lipton and Peter Rogers to reinvent the office building. 22 Bishopsgate was conceived on the site of the Pinnacle, whose design I had led at KPF until it stalled due to the global financial crisis. Then as now, lives were disrupted, and typologies of the built environment questioned. Will people ever want to come back to work in office buildings? How can we achieve better quality environments within realistic cost parameters?

Lipton Rogers met those challenges by consulting a surprising array of viewpoints. We worked from the outset with specialist consultants and sub-contractors, including Gartner (Permasteelisa), to learn how the latest technology could achieve cost-effective, high-performance design. Significantly, out of that research evolved a vertical village for people to meet outside the office, with amenities much as a hotel or village green, to have fun, to support health and wellness. Amenities include a 1,700-space cycle park, restaurants and food stalls open all day, a gym, relaxation and wellness facilities, and a co-working space with a portion of places available at discounted rates to qualifying start-ups. 22 will offer free public access daily to London's highest viewing gallery.

Now we want to move on to meet the challenges of a very different world. Collectively, we are experiencing epochal global crises: a health crisis, an energy crisis, an inequality crisis, a climate change crisis – all requiring practical solutions. We need to take architecture back to its origins, to provide shelter and to create flexible frameworks that strengthen societies while creating climate-resilient cities.

Jean My formative years were with the Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Paris, where I was one of the disciples who benefited from a role in a small architectural practice – at that time, we were only 12 in what Renzo named L'Atelier de Paris – doing major work, such as the extension of the IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique Musicque) for the Pompidou Centre, and the Kansai Airport, which led me to work in Genoa and then Osaka.

Renzo Piano introduced me to his collaborator Peter Rice, structural engineer of the Sydney Opera House, Pompidou Centre and Lloyd's of London, whose boutique practice RFR I joined

and became one of the directors in Paris and Abu Dhabi. Working with Renzo Piano and Peter Rice, discovering the magic they created, I learned the value of an iterative design process born of a dialogue between architect and engineer. Peter Rice's RFR team comprised engineers and architects, most with dual-disciplinary education; we approached design with both sensibilities.

While a director at RFR, I was fortunate to be involved with Pritzker Prize-winning architects on major cultural works, such as the Seine Musicale, Paris, with my friend Shigeru Ban. I've been involved with the popular leisure sector around the world, for example in the renovation of the BurJuman Centre, Dubai; the Galleria Al Maryah Island, Abu Dhabi; and the Big O, Yeosu Expo, a performance stage with Mark Fisher.

In parallel I teach in Paris at Penninghen School of Art Direction and Interior Design, collaborating on cross-disciplinary courses with the Ecole Polytechnique and the Ecole des Ponts Paris Tech.

Karen + Jean We've collaborated together on significant workplace projects over the last two decades, via our respective former practices. We radically transformed a 1972 concrete frame tower in La Défense, Paris, for AXA and Altea Cogedim into the Tour First, it being the first tower in Paris to apply for a sustainability rating. The client needed to bring the obsolete tower to current market and regulatory standards. We found ways to pay for this through design by increasing its rentable area, while improving public realm integration, winning MIPIM's Best Office Refurbishment.

Another meaningful collaboration occurred on two office buildings in Prague, Danube House and Nile House, part of a permeable masterplan on a brownfield site, where highly skilled local hand craftsmen contributed custom detailing to create a unique and singular identity. So, it is a natural fit to continue working together, in this new vehicle we call Spice.

What work do you have, and what kind of projects are you looking for?

Karen + Jean We are fortunate to have friends among our former clients with whom we enjoy working, from micro-projects to workplace to urban design. We are grateful to have been commissioned to refurbish an office building, which we call 'reimagining'. This commission is a good basis for our new start, allowing us to engage with the client team in questioning, post-pandemic, what is the future workplace? How do we improve environmental performance and save carbon, while creating value for the occupiers and owner?

How can an obsolete office building be reconfigured to repair scarred urban fabric?

At PLP, we were one of seven teams selected from 700 applicants in an international design competition to 'reimagine' the Tour Montparnasse, Paris. We worked for a year with the client team and the city authorities to explore an evolving brief and technical challenges. How can an obsolete office building be reconfigured to repair scarred urban fabric, and help to sustain affordable urban eco-systems?

Karen There are postwar buildings in London that would similarly benefit from 'reimagining'. In London, an absence of prescriptive zoning invites more discourse and lateral creativity. For clients, we are leveraging our expertise to explore complex and challenging sites in London. Half of those sites, where the existing building stock is of robust qualities, are at the outset considered as refurbishment. To be worth keeping, a building ideally has a strong structural frame and provides human comfort while using little energy.

Jean We seek clients with projects that allow us to examine a proper use of natural resources, while putting people's wellbeing at the centre. We are excited by an experimental sustainability project we are co-ordinating in conjunction with Polytechnique post-doctoral researchers and Penninghen design students. Prestigious private investors are backing this environmental endeavour, sequestering CO₂ from water using solar energy, which will be built in 2023. Cross-disciplinary research is a great way to accelerate finding out-of-the-box solutions that address climate change.

On a smaller, more particular scale, we are collaborating with Maison Bonnet, creators of the legendary eyeglasses for le Corbusier, IM Pei and Yves Saint Laurent, to develop a prototype for monocoque eyeglasses. We value the exchange of learning from expert hand craftsmen, in this case on a utilitarian object that forms part of a person's identity.

What are your ambitions?

Karen + Jean Spice is born as a small, agile unit with experienced, humanist methods. We will collaborate with smart, talented people whose expertise fits a client's particular project. We or the client can draw in additional team members to focus on specific challenges. In future, architects will continue to lead teams but those team members will include wider cross-disciplinary expertise.

At the centre of our work and of our practice are people: the client, the occupant, the neighbour, the community. So, the environment, nature, heritage and craft are all important. In this time of social and relational breakdown, people yearn to be part of a community, and they want to understand the bigger purpose of the company where they choose to work.

Spice is born as a small, agile unit with experienced, humanist methods

Spice is a platform for people to thrive and fulfill their potential, while working on meaningful projects for clients who care about people, too. We will continue to combine our global expertise with local knowledge. Post-pandemic, we want to repair an ingredient that has been broken – we believe in the creative spark that arises from in-person brainstorming and debate, based not on opposition but on a culture of synergy and experience.

We have always worked in an iterative collaborative design process between architect and engineer, and to solve today's problems that interwoven approach is more necessary than ever. We are experienced to support our clients in navigating a context of increasing cost, while achieving quality and reducing or capturing carbon. We are skilled at tackling complex sites and exploring options to find solutions together with our clients, delivering a clear outcome with additional value for owner and occupier.

What are the biggest challenges facing yourself as a start-up and the profession generally?

Karen + Jean Now seems a perfect time for us to start a new practice. The pandemic exposed collectively our deepest fears and challenges. Everything is different now. If we summon our courage, it's an exciting time of change. Post-pandemic, what will our cities look like in future, and how do we get there?

At the same time, the world population is growing and shifting to a more urban life for job opportunities. London is magnetic, an exciting world capital that attracts talented, multicultural people who in turn help our city thrive. Let's embrace increasing population

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density. The debate should be around, how can we design higher density, with ample open and green space, to improve our lives? Where are useful examples?

London's average population density is roughly one-quarter that of Paris. Walkable cities are not only more energy-saving; higher density means supporting shops and services, walking to school, work or healthcare, playing with friends in the local park, putting down roots in a community.



4 Cannon Street, City of London, steps away to reveal St. Nicholas Cole Abby. Design led by Karen Cook while a founding partner at PLP Architecture, for Pembroke on behalf of Fidelity. Source: Michel Denancé

Lessons can be learned from the post-Second World War period, which similarly faced urgent housing shortages and material shortages. Their solution was pre-fabrication but, despite the era's social ambitions, much of that construction had technical performance issues and resulted in failed utopias, supporting neither community nor individuality.

Our own experience with makers, in London and globally, mastering technology, art and design into an integrated process, shows that it is possible to achieve much higher quality with prefabrication than with traditional on-site construction. Prefabrication might be the only way to achieve high quality at reasonable cost and speed while reducing our carbon footprint.

Risk-averse insurance and finance industries have a stranglehold on the construction industry's agility to evolve and implement new ideas; and a parcel-by-parcel approach to planning sometimes hinders larger ambition.

If architects don't act more boldly our towns and cities will be built by others

Meanwhile, players outside our sector, such as the automotive industry, who finance their own research and manage their own risk, are entering the large-scale prefabrication market. Such developments are already being built, for example, Woven City by Toyota, which promises a solution. If we don't act more boldly, more confidently, we will be left behind while our towns and cities are built by others, risking less civic sensitivity. On the other hand, citizens can be empowered to have a more direct influence shaping their city.

We are optimistic that architects can continue to have an important hand in shaping a better future. Architects are trained to evaluate a wide range of stakeholder needs, raise provocative questions, rally people with diametrically opposing views to find shared goals.

Downturns are a risk to business, but are a stimulus for change to deliver what people want. We all face these epochal crises which we can only solve together. Business – and society – need to embrace change quickly and muster creative energy from diverse sources to work toward an environmentally and economically sustainable future. We aspire to help create a pre-fab, post-carb, humanist society.

Which scheme, completed in the last five years, has inspired you most?

Karen + Jean A marvellous scheme is [Aldgate Square](#), completed 2018, City of London. Gillespies completely redesigned a busy Aldgate gyratory into a traffic-free, pedestrian-friendly public realm. The focus of this urban regeneration project was to repair a piece of city scarred by vehicle dominance into a new public square with a large green and hard landscape, and newly expanded churchyard gardens. Popular with families and workers alike, Aldgate Square is a welcoming gateway strengthening the Aldgate community through informal encounters and organized events. An exemplary approach to replicate.

How are you marketing yourselves?

We welcome meeting old friends and making new friends.

Contact us at karen.cook@spice.design or jean.lelay@spice.design

Website: www.spice.design



Qatar Airways London Headquarters. Design led by Karen Cook while a founding partner at PLP Architecture, for Mace and Qatar Airways.

Source: Karen Cook



2/22 22 Bishopsgate on the City of London Skyline from Waterloo Bridge. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM.
Source: Michel Denancé



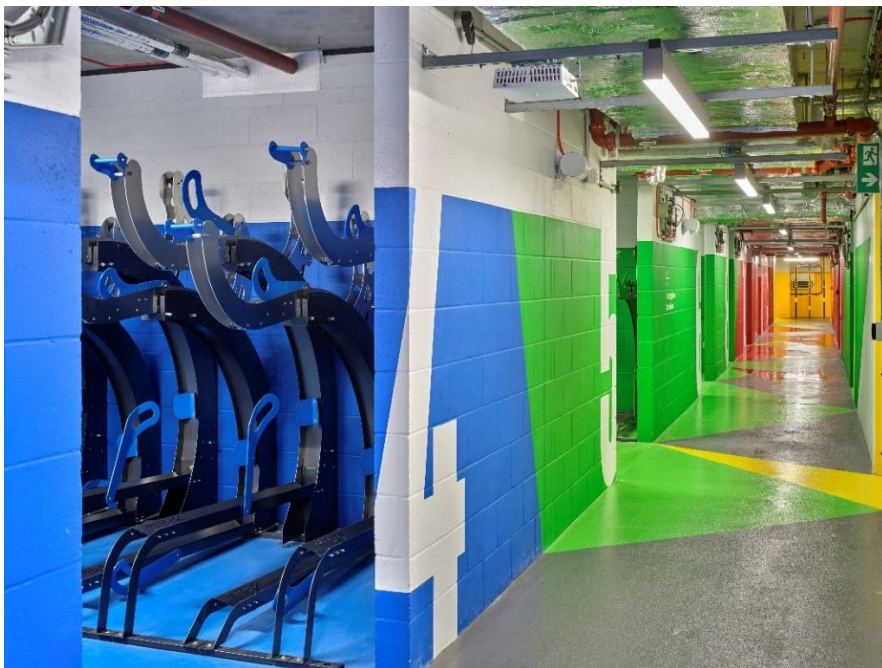
3/22 22 Bishopsgate from Threadneedle. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM. Jean Le Lay led the design concept of the canopy.
Source: Michel Denancé



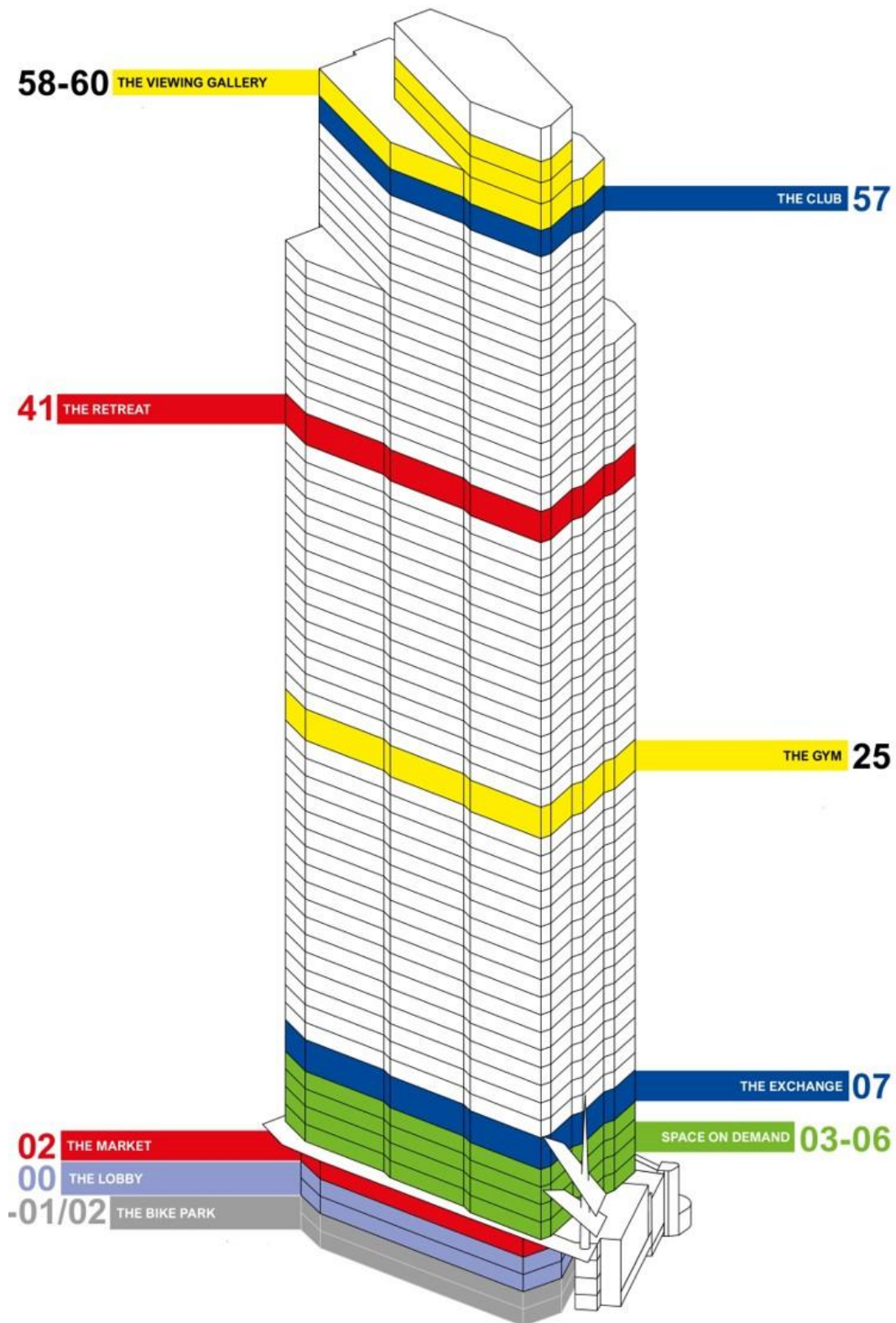
4/22 22 Bishopsgate north entrance. Canopy artwork by Alexander Beleschenko. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM. Source: Michel Denancé



5/22 22 Bishopsgate reception "library." Leather work by Bill Amberg Studio. Sculptural walnut pieces by Pierre Renart. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM.
Source: Michel Denancé



6/22 22 Bishopsgate "active commuter park." Graphic design by Cartlidge Levene. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM.
Source: Michel Denancé



7/22 22 Bishopsgate has a Vertical Village, spaces where people can collaborate, innovate and create. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM.

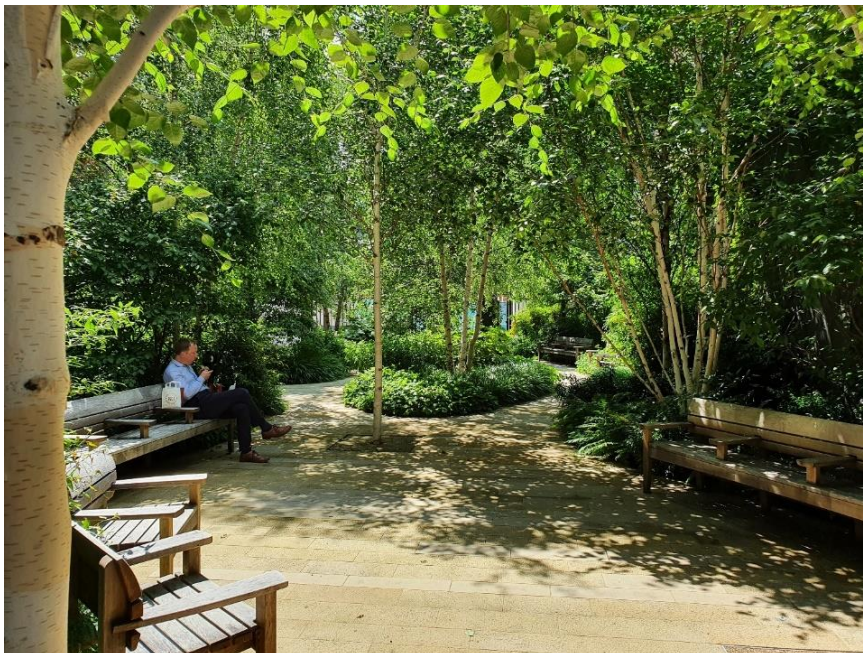
Source: Lipton Rogers Developments



8/22 22 Bishopsgate Viewing Gallery will have free public access daily. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Lipton Rogers and AXA IM.
Source: Michel Denancé



9/22 4 Cannon Street, southwest elevation, faced in Plimpton Red Lazonby. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Pembroke on behalf of Fidelity.
Source: Michel Denancé



10/22 4 Cannon Street, publicly accessible pocket park, landscape design by Tom Stuart-Smith. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Pembroke on behalf of Fidelity.
Source: Karen Cook



11/22 Qatar Airways London Headquarters, Conduit Street, Mayfair. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Mace and Qatar Airways.
Source: Karen Cook



12/22 Qatar Airways London Headquarters. Design led by Karen Cook while a Founding Partner at PLP Architecture, for Mace and Qatar Airways.
Source: Karen Cook



13/22 Hotel Peninsula, Paris. Design of steel and glass canopies led by Jean Le Lay while a Director at RFR Paris.
Source: Mitsu Edwards



14/22 Tour First, La Défense, Paris, after renovation of the CB31 Tower. Karen Cook, while a partner at KPF, led the winning competition design to renovate the CB31 tower, for Altarea Cogedim and AXA into the Tour First. Jean Le Lay, while a Director at RFR, led the façade design.
Source: Michel Denancé



15/22 Original CB31 tower completed ca. 1972, La Défense, Paris, prior to renovation into the Tour First.
Source : Bouygues



16/22 Big-O Show, Yeosu Expo, South Korea. Design of special structures led by Jean Le Lay while a Director at RFR Paris in collaboration with Mark Fisher (Stufish) and EC2A.
Source: EC2A



17/22 BurJuman Centre, renovation, Dubai. Aerial view. Design of steel and glass roof led by Jean Le Lay while a Director at RFR Paris in collaboration with Eric Kuhne CivicArts and KPF London.
Source: BurJuman



18/22 BurJuman Centre, renovation, Dubai. Interior view, South Village. Glass roof design led by Jean Le Lay while a Director at RFR Paris in collaboration with Eric Kuhne CivicArts and KPF London.
Source: CivicArts



19/22 The Extension to the IRCAM (Institut de Recherche Acoustic Musique), Place Stravinsky, Paris, architect Renzo Piano Building Workshop. Jean Le Lay was a team member and led site supervision while at RPBW Paris. Source: Michel Denancé

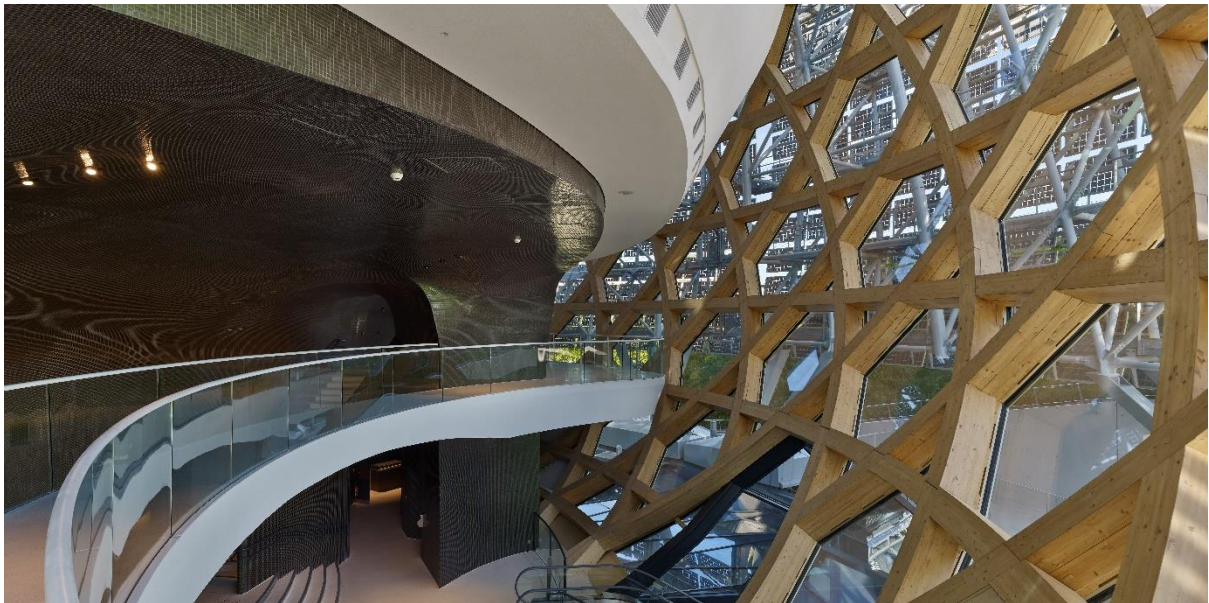


20/22 Kansai International Airport, Japan, architect Renzo Piano Building Workshop. Jean Le Lay was part of the winning design competition team while at RPBW Paris, moving to Genoa and then to Osaka to develop the design.

Source: Fondazione Renzo Piano



21/22 La Seine Musicale, Paris, architect Shigeru Ban. Design of special structures led by Jean Le Lay while a Director at RFR Paris.
Source: Didier Boy de la Tour



22/22 La Seine Musicale, Paris, architect Shigeru Ban. Design of special structures led by Jean Le Lay while a Director at RFR Paris.
Source: Didier Boy de la Tour