

Sandoz Headquarters

Office Complex Novartis, Rueil-Malmaison, 1962-1968

by Martin Burckhardt and
Bernard-Henri Zehrffuss



Agnès Cailliau, Chair of **docomomo** France alerted **docomomo** International that the original Headquarters and Laboratories of Sandoz were going to be completely demolished. After writing letters to the Mayor of Rueil-Malmaison and to Novartis's President, the pharmaceutical company answered that their previous Basel intervention was an example of their care for heritage, that the structure of the building in Rueil-Malmaison had not aged well and did not live up to the company's standards and that the project of architect Patrick Berger was in line with their heritage policy.

The campaign continues with the support of many people such as Francis Rambert, Pierre-Antoine Gatier, Rudy Riciotti, or Dominique Perrault.

Upon the decision to build the new French headquarters of Sandoz, the company expected a tertiary architecture at the forefront of Modernity to echo the image of a prestigious company on a protected landscape site. The Sandoz family believed that Modern architecture would serve the project after Jean Tschumi (1904-1962) had designed the

Sandoz laboratories in Orleans (1949-1953) and Martin Burckhardt had made the Basel headquarters.

The project had to respond to a request for 12,000 m² of offices, laboratories, meeting rooms, a restaurant and a cafeteria. The selected site was the former estate of the Richelieu Park and, in order to respect height constraints and preserve the harmony of the wooded area, a rather low building (4 floors) was proposed and built upon a two level basement. It is in perfect harmony that Burckhardt and Zehrffuss worked together between 1965 and 1968 to meet the constraints of the site punctuated by ponds, to set up a composition of low buildings leaving the park open by following the access boulevard. The main pond dictated the fragmentation of the program into three entities. In a game of transparencies and reflections, the main building articulated the axis towards the restaurant landscape and a functional axis towards the laboratories. We must now admit that these very constraints due to the location of the project in a rare site are at the origin of the remarkable series we admire today. Bernard Zehrffuss pointed out "the whole point of the proj-

ect was to maintain the spirit of the park and build around the lake, knowing that the Swiss are wonderful people who have such a respect for nature",

While Burckhardt said "In Rueil, we found nothing but positive opportunities, a wonderful park with its ponds and old trees, a customer who wanted a neat group of buildings, a high-class Parisian colleague, Zehrffuss, Premier Grand Prix de Rome."

In the fall of 2010, the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs (DRAC) Ile de France sought advice from Christine Desmoulin—a historian and author of a thesis and a book on the work of the architect Zehrffuss because the main building overlooking the boulevard de Richelieu was highly threatened. The principle of demolition seemed to have already been accepted by the municipality late 2010, although the DRAC was then consulted. A review of the PLU was then announced in order to densify the site. This decision seems unrealistic when one considers the Richelieu domain fortunately protected by its historical monument status.

The owner cunningly chose a famous, undisputed architect, Patrick Berger, to build the new building, a formidable technique to modify or remove buildings of high quality while not being blamed for that.

