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ICONS AND CATALYSERS

Last September, a team of young Parisian architects won the consultation for the rehabilitation of the Tour Montparnasse, right under the noses of their well-known elders OMA, Architecture Studio, Dominique Perrault, and the finalist Jeanne Gang. Applauded that day, the nouvelle AOM's project (a team composed of Chartier Dalix Architectes, Franklin Azzi Architecture and Hardel and Le Bihan Architectes offices) has since sparked anger, for the most part on social media, from people who had hoped for a symbol rather than a project designed, they say, to match the green enthusiasm of the client (Ensemble Immobilier Tour Maine-Montparnasse - EITMM) working with the City of Paris.

Actually, apart from the dark façades replaced by a double transparent skin, the salient features of the project are the winter gardens, agricultural greenhouse, solar panels, rainwater recovery system, natural ventilation, and a new mixed-use programme.

As for the design, the project by the nouvelle AOM is intended as a tribute to the unique contours of the Tour Montparnasse, but merely thickens the base and raises the top, acting as a counterpoint to some of the more expressive proposals - notably Dominique Perrault's double tower. In short, nouvelle AOM has designed a catalyser rather than an icon.

For all that, should it be reduced to a solution addressing the hypergreen desires of the City of Paris? If ever there were architects who believe in the potential of sustainable architecture, these ones, representatives of a "crisis generation" accustomed to calculating carbon footprints, fit the bill. And our cities need them, as much as they are hungry for icons, stories and visions. But did the ecological paradigm need to be to the detriment of its symbolic impact?

The unpopular tower also needed panache. So, despite the initial enthusiasm on seeing the efforts of 40-year-olds rewarded, it is regrettable, in the words of André Malraux when the first studies for a tower in Montparnasse were launched back in 1959, that we did not see "a grand and powerful gesture".