La Grande Arche
De La Defense

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“We’re going to show the Americans a French-designed skyscraper.”

- Bernard Zehrfuss
Between 1955 and 1956, it was decided that a new business district featuring a French-designed skyscraper would be built.

**Design Goals:**
- 250 meters tall
- An urban endpoint for the Grande Louve/Place de la Concorde/Champs-Elysees/Arc de Triomphe axis.
The Competition

Worldwide design competition for the site of La Defense required:

- a “monumental character”
- “a modern cathedral”
- “to mark the second centenary of the French Revolution just as the Eiffel Tower had marked the first”
- “social appropriateness favoring collective uses stemming from plural initiatives”
- “openness to the world”
The Winner- Johan Otto von Spreckelsen

His design consisted of a hollowed-out cube, creating an arch in white marble that was slightly offset constructing a closed object set on the axis but leaving a large absence that could be perceived through. Spreckelsen called the absence “a window opening on an unforeseeable future.”
Function of the Grande Arche

- Cultural icon for the upcoming century
- 158,000 sq. meters of space
- Communications center for the La Defense District
- Digital presentation auditoriums
- Communications infrastructure
- Office space for private parties.
The primary building components is made up of a standard of pre-stressed concrete based on a 21 meter grid.

Mirrored on the top and bottom are four pre-stressed concrete transversal rigid frames of columns attached to main beams of roof and base components.

Four additional secondary pre-stressed cross beams in the roof and base are used to stabilize the primary rigid frames.
The roof beams are 70 meters long, 9.5 meters tall, and weigh 2000 tons each.

Four gabled walls were created at 45 degrees, holding 6 horizontal mega-structures on either side.

A seven floor modular was utilized to create a substructure, repeating the modular five times and built simultaneously with the superstructure.

In the finished building, the cube’s dimensions were 117 meters wide, 112 meters deep and 111 meters tall.
Structural Composition

Base beams rest on foundation piles.
Structural Composition

Shear walls act as load-bearing columns.
Structural Composition

Roof beams complete the frames.
Structural Composition

Diagonal shear walls add stability.
Structural Composition

Mega-structure adds bracing to frames.
Structural Composition

Perpendicular beams stabilize roof and floor.
Structural Analysis 1

Loading diagram: The distributed load is the self-weight of the main beams. The point loads are self-weight of secondary beams running perpendicular to the distributed load.
Structural Analysis 1

Axial Reactions: The purple bars show that there are uniform axial compressive forces on both vertical elements.

Shear: The highest shear is located at the edges of the roof and floor.

Moment Distribution: Bending moments are highest in the center of the roof and floor.
Structural Analysis 1- Wind Load

Applied Wind Load (85mph)  Resulting Deformation
Deep Shear Members Resist Lateral Wind Forces
Structural Analysis 2

Loading diagram showing the loads caused by the self-weight of roof.

Deformation from roof loads.
Structural Analysis 2

Axial Reactions:
The purple bars show that there are uniform axial compressive forces on all four columns.

Shear:
The highest levels of shear are seen at the edges of the structure.

Moment Distribution:
Bending moments are highest near the roof and on the outer edges of the structure.
Foundation

Twelve foundation piles rest on a limestone shelf fourteen meters below the surface ground level.

The piles are eight meters in width at the base, and the use of elliptical bases required custom-made concrete formworks.

The piles flared to fifteen meters to meet the structure’s base.

The top of the capital holds replaceable neoprene supports to suffer the vibrations from underground circulation, thermal expansive contractions, and wind effects.

Settlement measurements required an optical leveling of the cube’s supports with markers at the capitals using a laser plumb line.

Also taken were deformation measurements of pile concrete using vibrating ropes sunk into the trunk of the pile.

Soundings were also administered for measurement into the deep layer settlement.
External panels were created of Carrara marble, weighing 800 kg each, and laminated glass, weighing 300 kg each. The outside facades required the marble panels, while the laminated glass was used for the interior facades. The dimensions of the panels were 2.8 meters square, creating 3 hectares of surfacing materials to complete the empty cube.
The Clouds

The “clouds” required a different structural basis. They were composed of a network of small truss rods, cables, and stretched fiberglass sheets. The clouds’ canvas is reinforced with truss rods and pre-stressed steel cables that multiply anchoring points and are able to distribute the strain over the structure fixed on the facades by a twin network of cables.
The panoramic lift towers piercing the clouds required twelve vertical pillars forming five lift wells, each at 2.8 meters square.

Only four of the towers are actually used, and they reach a height of 99 meters.

The columns of the lifts are pre-stressed stainless steel, and operate in pairs so that no counterweights are required for usage.

The piles and their components create a total height of thirty meters and have a bearing weight of 300,000 tons.
Bibliography

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