

# On the slopes of utopia

Once mocked for resembling urban estates, two French resorts make ideal destinations for design-conscious skiers. By *Edwin Heathcote*

None goes to ski resorts for the architecture. They are almost inevitably characterised by a cosy, comforting blend of chalets and log cabins, faux rusticity and a permanent Christmas card pictur-esque that lasts way into February. There are icicles, fairy lights, mulled wine stalls and woody restaurants with big brick fireplaces. Occasionally, they are grimly contemporary (or tweely retro-modern), but even then there are always the mountains and the pine forests to distract you. The architecture of skiing is so generic as to become almost invisible.

It wasn't always going to be like this. In the 1960s skiing exemplified a modernist lifestyle: democratic access to fresh air and sport, purpose-built towns dedicated to a single activity and unpolluted by industry and other messy, uncontrollable aspects of real urban life. And one town in particular created a cityscape that remains one of the finest, most underrated modernist ensembles in Europe – Flaine.

This geometric concrete resort is unsung partly because its style of architecture has been deeply unfashionable for a long time (being more associated with failed housing estates and unloved municipal monstrosities) and partly because people would much rather look at mountains than buildings when they are skiing. But if you do take time to look, rather than just to ski, it is quite something.

Flaine, which opened in January 1969, was designed by Hungarian-born Marcel Breuer (1902-81), architect of the Whitney Museum in New York and the Unesco HQ in Paris and, probably most famously, designer of the tubular steel-and-leather Wassily chair (named after the artist Wassily Kandinsky for whom Breuer made

one of the early prototypes at the Bauhaus, where Breuer studied and subsequently taught).

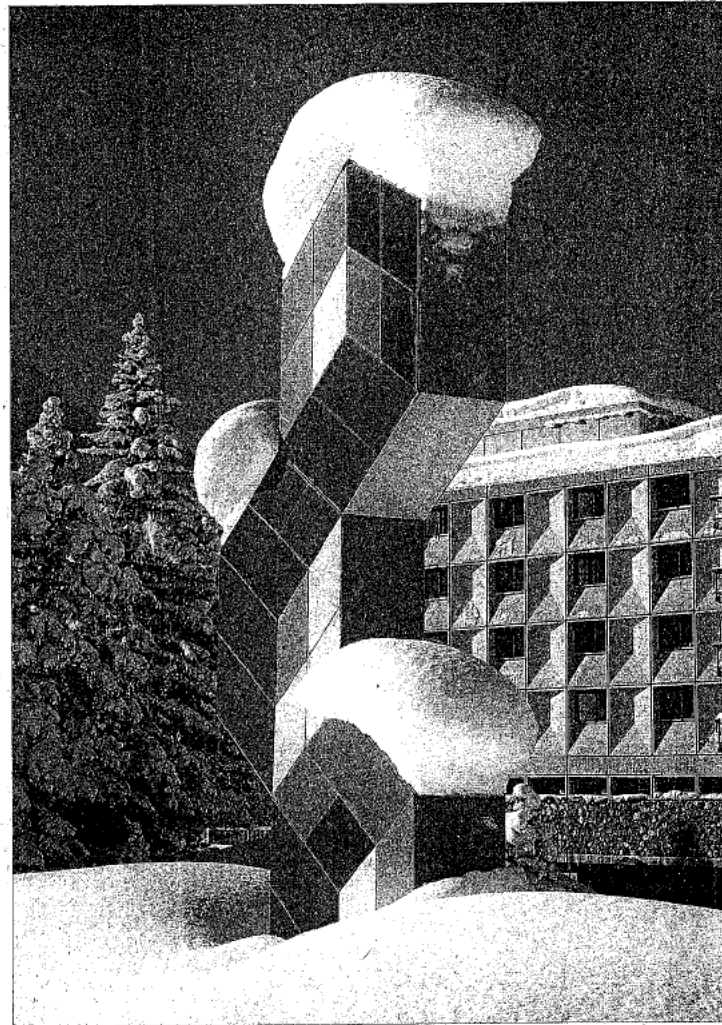
Flaine provided that rare thing, a chance to make a modernist city with no compunction to work around (or erase) the fabric of the past. It could be designed purely around skiing. It was one of the pioneering ski-in, ski-out resorts with the piste starting right at its heart.

The site's isolation allowed this new beginning but also made construction extraordinarily difficult, necessitating complex negotiations with local landowners and the building of access roads. Flaine took almost a decade to build, but the results are extraordinary. Breuer was intent on making this a place within the landscape, using the dramatic topography to inform the positioning of the buildings and the town's long, broad central civic space. The concrete accommodation blocks wend their way around the valley, with shops and bars at their base and complex façades made distinctive through subtle variations in the use of sculptural concrete panels and balconies.

Although at first glance there may be a hint of the Soviet bloc housing estates that were the unfortunate final destination for utopian modernism, the architecture here manages to catch itself before it falls into self-parody with moments of real invention, pleasure and drama. The Hotel Flaine Forum, in particular, is built with a radical cantilever out of the rocks and is one of the most memorable pieces of modernist structural acrobatics. But there is also a small chapel in which everything, from the cast metal altar furniture to the seats, was designed by Breuer's team in their recognisably rustic modernist idiom, and there are wonderful, sculptural ski-lift stations.

The generous social spaces around which the hotels and accommodation blocks revolve also have their flashes of retro-modern magic. They centre on big concrete hearths, each displaying an inventive formal experimentation with mass concrete that would look at home in a *Pink Panther* movie or a contemporary photo-shoot.

Beyond the architecture there is art. In true modernist style, this was to be a town in which buildings, public spaces and art were integrated into a unified vision, so Flaine also functions as a kind of urban sculpture park. The town's developer, Eric Bois-



'Trois Hexagones' (1973) by Victor Vasarely, in the French ski resort of Flaine. Below, the nearby resort of Avoriaz

Alamy

sonas, a geophysicist as well as a keen skier, was also an art collector and was keen to populate his landscape with works by the big names of contemporary art. So there is a huge sculpture by Jean Dubuffet, a bold totem pole by Picasso ('La tête de femme') and a geometric piece by Victor Vasarely. These sit purposefully against the backdrop of the snowy mountains in a setting more spectacular than any museum.

For a while Flaine fell out of favour. The quality of its skiing was never in doubt but its buildings had begun to look tired. Expectations of accommodation have changed over time, and when Flaine was built the rooms were spartan, functional, modernist cells –

albeit with good views and well-designed social spaces. The idea was that visitors would be either skiing or socialising and would retire to their rooms only to sleep. An upgrade is in progress but the small rooms remain rather distant from the idea of luxury we have today.

In 1991 the hotel and another block, the Bételgeuse (the first on the site to be completed), were listed as national monuments, the first ski resort buildings to win such recognition, and in recent years the resort has begun to be increasingly appreciated. If you want to see modernism as it was intended, you can't do much better than this curious Alpine time-capsule.

Very different-looking but similar in intent is nearby Avoriaz. Set high on the slopes above the town of Morzine, Avoriaz was another attempt to build a contemporary ski-city. But whereas in Flaine the architects went for concrete as an extension of the rocky landscape, in Avoriaz they chose a palette of timber shingles.

The effect is, in its way, even more striking. Visitors pull up in tinkling horse-drawn sleighs and alight into a landscape of timber-clad buildings that look like giant, mutant chalets. The architecture here echoes a later phase

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of modernism, a reaction against grids and concrete – an expressionist explosion inspired by eccentrics such as Antoni Gaudí and Rudolf Steiner.

The buildings are wonderful and zoomorphic, the snow sticking to their timbers and picking out the details of a thousand feathered edges. Most splendid of all is the Hotel des Dromonts, the first building finished at the resort in 1966, and the work of a young architect called Jacques Labro.

In the 1970s a film festival made Avoriaz a momentary movie mecca. Stars and directors stayed at the Dromonts, and an echo of that louche glamour can still be felt in its funky sunken bar. The irregular brick vaults, concrete conversation pits and porthole windows create an aesthetic cocktail that is half *2001*, half *Planet of the Apes*. It is as cool a piece of retro heaven as you'll ever see. Lacking the more serious urban intent of Flaine, Avoriaz is a touch freer, even more enjoyable. Together, the two make the kind of architectural pilgrimage it would be hard to imagine in more earthbound real cities where things are demolished and constantly updated, rather than being – like these two wonderful resorts – frozen in time.

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## Details

Edwin Heathcote was a guest of the Savoie Mont Blanc tourist board ([www.savoiemont-blanc.com](http://www.savoiemont-blanc.com)). For more details, see [www.flaine.com](http://www.flaine.com) and [www.avoriaz.com](http://www.avoriaz.com)

