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ARCHITECTURE, ART, HISTORY. THREE BUILDINGS, THREE EXHIBITIONS, THREE STORIES

ARCHITEKTURA, SZTUKA, HISTORIA. TRZY BUDYNKI, TRZY EKSPOZYCJE, TRZY HISTORIE

Abstract

François Pinault, France's wealthiest man, has created three extraordinary art galleries in historic buildings. Two are located in Venice and one in Paris. The transformations were designed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando. The galleries showcase contemporary art, and their creators are among the most prominent contemporary artists.

Keywords: Pinault Collection, Tadao Ando, architecture, galleries, museums

Streszczenie

François Pinault, najbogatszy francuz, stworzył trzy niezwykle galerie sztuki w starych zabytkowych budynkach. Dwie znajdują się w Wenecji, jedna w Paryżu. Projekty przekształceń przygotował japoński architekt Tadao Ando. W galeriach prezentowana jest sztuka współczesna, a ich twórcy to najwybitniejsi współcześni artyści.

Słowa kluczowe: Pinault Collection, Tadao Ando, architektura, galerie, muzea

INTRODUCTION

The François Pinault Collection, one of the world's largest private collections, has been amassed over half a century. It comprises contemporary art by the most distinguished artists from every continent and spanning several generations. François Pinault inaugurated his permanent exhibitions in 2006, opening an exhibition space at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. Three years later, he revitalized the historic walls of Punta della Dogana with a new function. In 2021, he opened a unique gallery in Paris in a historic grain warehouse. These objects share more than just the fact that they belong to François Pinault, are exceptional monuments, or even that they present contemporary art. What is crucial is that their adaptation and transformation were designed by Tadao Ando. Each of these objects, beyond their unique history and architecture, now possesses a distinctive interior character, a testament to the architect's creative approach. Moreover, their structures incorporate forms that distinguish them from one another. Teatrino (2013), built on the site of the garden at Palazzo Grassi, is characterized

by its interior dynamic forms and curvilinear walls. In the interior of Punta della Dogana, the architect inserted a large concrete cube, which is the hallmark of this space. In Paris's Bourse de Commerce, a massive concrete rotunda follows the structure of the entire building and lingers in the memory of visitors. Inside and around these new structures, a constant spectacle of outstanding contemporary art artifacts unfolds. Each building in the Pinault Collection is a kind of *moveable feast*, a term attributed by Ernest Hemingway to his beloved city. In each, history, architecture, and art, form a unity, revealing their countless facets arising from their interrelationships.

FRANÇOIS PINAULT

François Pinault, one of the richest men in the world, is the owner of Christie's auction house, the founder of Kering, which manages major fashion houses such as Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent, Alexander McQueen, and Stella McCartney. He owns the Printemps department stores and the Fnac bookstore and music chain, and is a collector of contemporary art. After achieving financial success, he turned his attention to art. His first purchase was a painting by Paul Sérusier from the École Pont-Avon, belonging to the group of artists associated with Paul Gauguin. However, his first major purchase, in 1990, was Piet Mondrian's *Tableau II: Lozenge* from 1925. Since then, he has become the largest private collector in France, purchasing Christie's for \$700 million eight years later. He currently has over ten thousand works by contemporary artists in his collection. François Pinault is in constant competition with Bernard Arnault, founder of the LVMH consortium; both are competing for the luxury goods market while simultaneously competing for the art market. Bernard Arnault, who met Frank Gehry in Bilbao in 2001, several years later entrusted him with the design of the Louis Vuitton Foundation in the Bois de Boulogne. In 2006, he signed an agreement under which the Foundation received a 55-year lease on a one-hectare plot of land for a building housing the collection. In 2014, the building opened. According to Frank Gehry, "To reflect our constantly changing world, we wanted to create a building that would evolve according to the time and the light in order to give the impression of something ephemeral and continually changing."¹ The building has become a new icon of Paris. For François Pinault, this was a huge blow. After his first failed attempt to build a museum of contemporary art in Paris at the beginning of the 21st century, he returned to the idea of creating a gallery in the French capital. In 2021, he opened a unique exhibition space in the former Bourse de Commerce.

PARIS FOR THE FIRST TIME ÎLE SEGUIN

François Pinault intended to build a museum of contemporary art to showcase his collection. While searching for a suitable location in 2000, he was drawn to an exceptionally attractive site on Île Seguin in Boulogne-Billancourt, part of the Paris metropolitan area. The fact that it contained a disused Renault factory was no obstacle. It simply had to be demolished. Technically,

¹ *The building* [in:] Fondation Louis Vuitton, <https://www.fondationlouisvuitton.fr/en/fondation/the-building> (access: 11.06.2025).

this was simple. Socially, unfortunately, it was not. Pinault's demolition of the factory was met with intense criticism in France. Pinault, a friend of then-Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, hoped that his positive attitude toward the project would secure him good press. He was gravely mistaken. He faced an avalanche of criticism. He failed to consider that Renault was a brand of pride for the French. A general strike began at this site when Jean-Paul Sartre delivered a lecture to workers occupying the factory in 1968. The impact of this strike was so profound that the saying *When Billancourt sneezes, France catches a cold* soon emerged. Pinault intended to create a facility that would rival the two most important contemporary art exhibition spaces – the Centre Pompidou and the Palais Tokyo. He believed it would rival the Guggenheim Foundation and its museum facilities. Pinault soon hired Jean-Jacques Aillagon, former director of the Centre Pompidou and future French Minister of Culture, to manage the new facility. In 2001, Tadao Ando won the competition for the Pinault Museum². The founder, in selecting the winner, recognized that Tadao Ando's design "weaves together the richness of our cultural diversity while drawing on a fundamental, personal cultural concept that speaks to us all."³ Before working in France for Pinault, Tadao Ando had worked for Luciano Benetton, Giorgio Armani, and Karl Lagerfeld, among others. Pinault planned to spend over €152 million on the investment. The opening was planned for 2008. However, the permitting procedures dragged on, and Pinault accused the Boulogne-Billancourt authorities of deliberate delays⁴. Due to numerous difficulties, in 2005, he decided to abandon the construction of the museum near Paris, despite spending over €26 million on architects' fees alone. He then set his sights on Venice, moving his collection of approximately 2,000 works of contemporary art to the 18th-century Palazzo Grassi, which he had previously purchased.

After Pinault withdrew from investing in Seguin Island, the Paris authorities continued to explore solutions for transforming it into a cultural center. In 2017, Shigeru Ban designed La Seine Musicale on the island, resembling a 340-meter-long concrete ship. It houses a 4,000-seat concert hall and a 1,150-seat oval auditorium for classical music. The auditorium's wood and glass structure is protected from the sun's rays by a large, movable sail that moves around the auditorium on special rails.

VENICE PALAZZO GRASSI

Palazzo Grassi was the last palace built in Venice by wealthy patricians before the fall of the Serenissima, overlooking the Grand Canal. Construction was commissioned by Giorgio Massari for the Grassi family, and took place between 1748 and 1772. After a volatile history, the palace was acquired in 1983 by Giovanni Agnelli, owner of the FIAT Group, who transformed it into a modern exhibition space. Pontus Hultén, previously the manager of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, was invited to manage the facility. He entrusted the building's transformation into a gallery to Gae Aulenti from Milan and the Venetian architect Antonio Foscari. The building underwent conservation, its walls were reinforced, and protection

² Competitors included: Steven Holl, Rem Koolhaas, Dominique Perrault, MVRDV, Alvaro Siza.

³ P. Jodidio, *Ando. Complete works 1975–2012*, Taschen GmbH, Köln 2012, p. 419.

⁴ G. Harris, *Pinault pulls the plug on planned Paris museum* [in:] The Art Newspaper, 31.05.2001, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2001/06/01/pinault-pulls-the-plug-on-planned-paris-museum> (access: 12.06.2025).

against high water levels was provided. Inside, the interiors were meticulously restored. To create the necessary exhibition space for hanging paintings, additional neutral walls were added along the existing walls, extending to the ceilings and cornices in the vaulted rooms. This created appropriate conditions for presentation, while also fostering a dialogue between the contemporary walls and the richly decorated upper sections of the rooms.

Gae Aulenti, who had previous experience in this field, including the transformation of a former railway station into the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, felt that:

it was extremely important to display works of art. Determine the space, its use, and the way of visiting it. It must be a little like a voyage in search of treasures. They are a marvel, a fantastic heritage, so they must have spaces that are very harmonious for the viewer's breathless confrontation.⁵

François Pinault commissioned Tadao Ando for another project, this time in Venice. In 2006, the Pinault Collection's exhibition space opened at Palazzo Grassi. This time, the architect faced no easy task. He had to contend with restrictive conservation conditions that prohibited any changes to the facade or alteration of the palace's historical details and interior décor. Ando constructed a sequence of rooms that engage with the historic surroundings, while also creating a new interior wall system with gaps that allow for glimpses of the original interior design.



Ill. 1. Palazzo Grassi, Venice, exhibition Tatiana Trouvé, 09.2025, photo by. M. Pabich

⁵ D. Saatchi, *Gae Aulenti and Antonio Foscari renovate Venice's Palazzo Grassi as a world center for modern art*, "House & Garden" 1986, no. 10, p. 269.

VENICE PUNTA DELLA DOGANA

In Venice, François Pinault was pursuing his next project. Two years after acquiring Palazzo Grassi, he began the renovation of Punta della Dogana, which had been the seat of Venice's customs office since 1682. The building was built between 1676 and 1682, according to a design by Giuseppe Benoni, who wrote about his project "I procured a frontal and regular shape, which together demonstrates strength and firmness. I have considered the distance and locations from all around to take in the view, and allowed the eye, in all the parts that surround it, to offer a variety of views to delight."⁶ The construction utilized the old foundations, built in 1313. The building underwent numerous renovations in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was strategically located in Venice, right on the Grand Canal, adjacent to the Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute. The building's trapezoidal shape was related to the plot on which it was built. In 2007, the city of Venice announced a tender for the revitalization of the monument. Conservation requirements mandated preserving the integrity of the historic building. The Guggenheim Foundation, which presented Zaha Hadid's concept, competed with Pinault and Ando. The tender was won by François Pinault, who presented



Ill. 2. Punta della Dogana, Venice, exhibition Thomas Schütte, 09.2025, photo: M. Pabich

⁶ Lazzari F., *Notizie di Giuseppe Benoni, architetto ed ingegnere della Veneta Repubblica*, Alvisopoli, Venezia 1840, pp. 24–25, https://books.google.pl/books?id=lvdXAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=pl&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (access: 12.06.2025).

a revitalization concept prepared by Tadao Ando, who explained his idea during the concept presentation in 2007: “This building has been floating on the water since the 15th century, and my intention is to see it float into the future; it is a very old building, and it was very difficult to study its history, so as to preserve its original structure and innovate toward the future. I will use a 20th-century material, reinforced concrete, to fit it into this historic structure.”⁷

“Just as with Palazzo Grassi, both the exterior and the interior, alterations other than a return to the original appearance are severely restricted under the laws concerning the preservation of historical structures. Within these constraints, we were again faced with the theme of creating a space possessing modernity while drawing out the latent power of the original building.”⁸

In this way, the architect demonstrated his search for a balance between the historic and the technological innovations introduced into the building. For the interior, he introduced a new material, his signature architectural concrete, which corresponds to a traditional Venetian building material – Istrian limestone (*giallo d’Istria*), exceptionally resistant to saltwater.



Ill. 3. Punta della Dogana, Venice, photo: M. Pabich

Ando not only prepared a conservation project for the building, but also created new value by reinterpreting the historic interiors of Punta della Dogana. Restoration work led to the

⁷ Tadao Ando, Pinault Museum Lithograph [in:] Ode to Art, <https://www.odetoart.com/?p=art-work&a=6228,Pinault%20Museum&artist=Tadao%20Ando> (access: 11.06.2025).

⁸ *Tadao Ando* [in:] P. Jodidio, *op. cit.*, p. 549.

return of the building's original form. The rectangular volumes that comprise the entire structure were adapted into exhibition spaces, divided lengthwise by existing structural walls. The new interior element is a large concrete cube housing the exhibition hall, whose floor was paved with Masegni stone, characteristic of the streets and alleys of Venice. Masegni⁹ created a type of stone pavement in the city, which was used for this purpose only in Venice and Trieste in Italy. It was used in the first half of the 18th century and replaced the earlier herringbone-patterned terracotta brick surface. In other rooms, the floor was either cement or linoleum. Windows and doors were replaced, their details evoking Venetian craftsmanship. Weaker elements of the building were reinforced with steel rods, among other things, and the walls were renovated using the *cuci e scuci* technique, which refers to repairing a deteriorated brick wall by filling it with the same material. Due to the humid and salty air, Venice's walls are constantly degraded, causing plaster to fall off and saltwater from the canals to penetrate the bricks. This causes it to crumble due to salt crystallization. Care was also taken to protect the building from particularly disruptive floods. A retention reservoir was built, capable of absorbing enormous amounts of water and holding back pressures of over two meters (210 cm). This makes the building almost completely safe in emergency situations, especially during *acqua alta*. In the past century, during the period of regular surveys conducted since 1923, the highest water level rise recorded in 1996 was 194 centimeters, which means it did not reach the level considered critical for the Punta della Dogana by the gallery. A water rise in Venice above 200 cm would have completely flooded it. The last major flood in the city occurred in 2019, when the water level reached 194 cm above sea level.

RETURN TO PARIS BOURSE DE COMMERCE

The Bourse de Commerce, now housing the Parisian art collection, was built on the site of a palace built for Catherine de Médicis, designed by Jean Bullant near the Church of Saint-Eustache. Adjacent to the palace, he erected the Colonne de Médecis (1574), which served astronomer Cosimo Ruggieri for celestial observations. Its interior has 147 steps. The column was classified as a historical monument in 1862. The palace's next owner was Charles de Bourbon-Condé, Count of Soissons. The palace then took the name Hôtel de Soissons. The last owner was Victor Amadeus of Savoy. After his death in 1748, the palace was demolished to sell the land and pay off creditors. The surviving column was purchased by the city of Paris. The city authorities decided to build a building that would serve as a municipal wheat warehouse and a place for its sale. At that time, grain was the staple diet of the population. The construction of a grain warehouse stemmed not only from the need to provide basic sustenance but also from political considerations. A lack of food could have led to an uncontrolled rebellion in the city. The wheat exchange (*halle aux blés*) was designed by Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, a student of Antoine Babuty Desgodetz, a proponent of ancient Roman architecture. After his visit to Rome, Desgodetz published a book containing detailed drawings of the Eternal City's monuments, which became a source of inspiration for French artists and architects in the 18th century (*Les édifices antiques de Rome dessinés et mesurés très*

⁹ maurozucchetto, 60. *I masegni triangolari* [in:] Strabiliante Venezia, 21.01.2021, <https://strabiliante-venezia.com/2021/01/21/60-i-masegni-triangolari/> (access: 11.06.2025).

exactement, Paris 1682). The book included detailed drawings of the most popular circular structures among French architects, such as the Temple of Vesta in Tivoli and the Pantheon, which became models for Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières in designing the *Halle aux Blés*. On an irregular plot, he designed a circular rotunda with a central courtyard open to the sky, serving as a marketplace. Admiring the monuments of ancient Rome, Le Camus believed in the emotional expression of architecture, which, in his view, depended largely on the effects of the overall composition, on the appropriate juxtaposition of the building's key elements. For him, detail played a secondary role in relation to the impression created by the entire building. Le Camus was a child of his times. He embraced the trend of well-balanced and calculated architecture, moving toward simplicity, like most architects of his time, whose stance was in opposition to what was taking place in the Baroque period. Like Étienne-Louis Boullée, he was convinced that architecture was a divine gift to humankind, enabling people to create a home on earth. Architecture, intended to be a replica of the Creator's work, was to be equally perfect. Buildings should reflect the order of the world, and its diversity of forms, combined with monumental architecture, should constitute a beautiful whole. Hence the strong shift toward axial, central, and circular buildings. Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières was also a great lover of theater and music. His theoretical works explored the analogy that, in his view, existed between architecture and theater. He believed that architecture was a form of performance, much like theatrical art, and that the form of a building should create a kind of scenography for the life that would unfold within it. Like music, architecture was meant to express human feelings and foster sensitivity.

The circular hall building became Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières's architectural manifesto and his most important creative achievement. The freestanding building became a virtual monument expressing his views on architecture. Moreover, being unconnected to the neighboring buildings, it was less vulnerable to the fires that were common in the city at the time. The building's perimeter is 122 meters, and two concentric galleries with windows on the exterior façade and on the courtyard side provided the necessary lighting for the police department, offices, and the weighbridge. A double staircase built on an elliptical plan led to the upper floors. The staircase consisted of two independent flights that wind around the interior open space. Grain was stored on the first floor and attic levels, while grain, peas, and legumes were traded in the courtyard. At the turn of 1782 and 1783, the inner courtyard was covered with a wooden dome, which burned down in a fire in 1802. The decision was made to use an iron structure covered with copper sheeting for the new dome. The building soon became a Parisian landmark, being featured in tourist guides as a major tourist attraction. From the mid-19th century, due to the rapid development of transportation and changes in agriculture, there was a decreasing need for this type of warehouse in central Paris. The next important stage in the building's life was its conversion into the Bourse de Commerce and its reopening during the 1889 World's Fair. The building's reconstruction was designed by Henri Blondel. Of the original building, the architect retained only the interior façade, the metal structure of the dome, and one of the two spiral staircases. The following century saw the building's renewed splendor. However, changes in commerce, which entered the digital age, led to the closure of the Bourse de Commerce in 1998. The building then attracted the attention of François Pinault. He entered into an agreement with the City of Paris that, in exchange for a 50-year lease, he would restore the building, which stood near the site where the halls designed by Victor Baltard (construction began in 1863) had stood for over a century. Their demolition in 1971 sparked much controversy regarding the destruction

of France's material heritage. The revival of the Bourse de Commerce, albeit with a modified function, was considered a great success, also in the context of the history of the former halls and their later versions that were negatively received (1979 – architects Claude Vasconi and Georges Pencreach, 2018 – architects Patric Berger and Jacques Anziutti). Having worked with Tadao Ando, Pinault entrusted him with the renovation and adaptation of the Bourse de Commerce into an art gallery. Since the building was entered into the register of monuments in 1975 and classified as a historic monument in 1986, it had to undergo renovation under the strict supervision of conservators, and any elements that were planned to be added had to be removable without damaging the entire structure.

Tadao Ando believed that a cylindrical form, inserted into the interior of the building, would allow for the connection of the existing structure with the newly created, circular exhibition space. As in the Punta della Dogana in Venice, where the architect created a cubic exhibition center, in Paris a circular form took over its function. In 1995, Tadao



Ill. 4. Bourse de Commerce, Paris, exhibition Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, 07.2025, photo: M. Pabich

Ando had already erected a cylindrical structure in Paris. He designed a meditation space for the 50th anniversary of UNESCO, a place conducive to introspection in complete silence. Tadao Ando continually experimented with simple geometric forms in square and circular projections. In the Bourse de Commerce, the internal concrete cylinder not only encloses the exhibition space but also its exterior that defines a circulation route, which is bordered on the other side by a façade designed by Blondel. François Pinault invited

young Parisian architects from Niney et Marca Architects (NeM) to collaborate with Tadao Ando. They, like Ando, view architecture as “a search for formal minimalism, free from technical excess and achieved through the direct use of materials.”¹⁰ The architects believed that the essence of the building’s interior should be to generate movement, allowing not only movement but also triggering emotions in the perception of the works and the surrounding space, building relationships and connections. They wanted to follow the path set by the building’s creator, Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, who in his work *The Génie de l’architecture ou l’analogie de cet art avec nos sensations* (Paris, 1780) included the motto “It is not enough to please the eye, one must move the soul”¹¹, a thought taken from *Poème de la Peinture* (Paris, 1740), published by P. Marsy¹². Like de Mézières, Ando built a space of emotion, which is one of the most important characteristics of his work. Ando strove to create buildings that will endure forever, not in a material sense, but will remain forever in people’s hearts. The architect carried out the renovation with remarkable consistency, ensuring that in every space the harmony between the heritage of the past and the new character of the building’s interior was emphasized. This concern applies not only to the architecture and the arrangement of the existing space. It can also be found in the menu of the on-site restaurant, whose name refers to the building’s former function – *Halle aux Grains*, which offers sophisticated but also simple dishes based on natural ingredients such as grains, seeds, and legumes.

The entire interior, combining historical forms and décor with contemporary solutions, creates a unique scenographic setting for the exhibition. At its heart is a vast rotunda, behind which lies a more meaningful scenography surrounding a circular tour route. By inserting an internal cylinder into the building’s interior, Tadao Ando created a new system for visitors to navigate the building. The line it leads through becomes a path, in the shaping of which he references Le Corbusier’s architectural promenade. It provides a sense of spatial continuity despite passing through diverse interior sequences. The concept of an architectural promenade first appeared in the Raoul La Roche villa in Paris, designed by Le Corbusier in 1923. The promenade was an architectural spectacle unfolding along the internal circulation space. It led along a defined path, opening up new perspectives every moment. In Le Corbusier’s later work, it became a ramp around which the architect organized the entire architecture. The ramp created a new way of viewing the surroundings. The observer’s ascent caused the horizon to rise simultaneously. In this way, the same environment was viewed from different perspectives. In the Bourse de Commerce, the considerable height of the floors prevented the use of ramps. However, Tadao Ando combined in his architectural promenade hanging walkways and passageways, new stairs following the shape of the internal rotunda, an enfilade layout of the upper floors’ rooms, and a two-flight historic staircase. This architectural promenade, understood in the Pinault Gallery, provides a unique avenue for users to perceive the diversity of architecture and its surroundings.

¹⁰ *Agence* [in:] NeM Architects, <https://www.nemarchitectes.com/agence> (access: 7.07.2025).

¹¹ Le Camus de Mézières N., *Le génie de l’architecture, ou L’analogie de cet art avec nos sensations*, Paris 1780, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k857133/f2.item> (access: 11.07.2025).

¹² Marsy F.-M. de, *La peinture*, Morel, Merigot, Prault, Paris 1740, <https://archive.org/details/lapeinturepoemet00mars/page/n15/mode/1up> (access: 17.05.2025).



Ill. 5. Bourse de Commerce, Paris, photo: M. Pabich

CONCLUSIONS

François Pinault's extraordinary determination in building the international corporation Kering Group and later his extensive art collection, while simultaneously engaging in motivating competition with Europe's richest man, billionaire Bernard Arnault, led to the creation of a suitable space for the collected works of art. The three Pinault Collection buildings discussed here are exceptional monuments. Completely different, built in different eras, serving different functions, and carrying the memory of history in their walls and décor. Their current adaptation is the result of the work of a single architect, Tadao Ando, known primarily for minimalism and solutions that combine geometry with nature. He also demonstrated this approach to architecture in the designs of Palazzo Grassi, Punta della Dogana, and the Bourse de Commerce. However, in the case of these buildings, the creative process took place within the context of historical architecture. And, of course, within the purpose they were intended to serve: the presentation of art. Thanks to him, contemporary art in places with established historical traditions coexists with architecture in a remarkable symbiosis. Galleries housed in old, rebuilt buildings, now fulfilling a new function, stimulate reflection on the past and present. What has passed has been at least partially retained, while the new creates a new phase of history. The spatial relationship between the historic building and what has been recently incorporated into it creates a new value – a value formed through the principles of historical

and spatial continuity, or through contrast. Tadao Ando created a contrast that reinforces the message of the historical fabric. He proceeded with such sensitivity that this juxtaposition seems entirely natural, creating a background dialogue with tradition by creating environments for exhibits. In the case of the Bourse de Commerce, he created the central exhibition space with a concrete wall not only out of a fascination with the aesthetics of concrete but also to create a space where visitors can relax and focus solely on the works of art. The dynamic life of the city required an enclosed space that provided a sense of isolation and security. A space where we simultaneously felt the intertwining pulse of history and architecture, enhanced by contact with art.

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