

# Public crossing

OMA's new bridge for Bordeaux offers space for public events, but little reason to linger on residents' daily commutes, writes *John Bingham-Hall*

- 1 park
- 2 car lane
- 3 bus lane
- 4 cycle lane
- 5 pedestrian lane
- 6 bench

0 20m







THIS SPREAD: ALBAN DEJONG FOR THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

**B**ordeaux's new bridge, named after French feminist politician Simone Veil, is described by its architects OMA as a 'linear public space'. Sending six lanes of traffic across the Garonne, and linking the southern edge of the city to the suburban commune of Floirac (which previously lacked any direct crossing to the city proper), it is perhaps more obviously a piece of road infrastructure. But it is one, according to the practice, that 'abandons any interest in style, form and structural expression in favour of a commitment to performance and an interest in potential use by the people of Bordeaux'.

Commissioned by Bordeaux Métropole, the bridge responds to the demands of the metropolitanisation playing out across France's big cities, which hopes to re-articulate disjointed patchworks of administrations into coherent urban areas. OMA was selected from an open competition for its 'anti-iconic' design, which includes a

wide pedestrian lane that, in theory at least, encourages residents to linger and enjoy the river views. The bridge 'is not itself the "event"', says Clément Blanchet, former director of OMA France, 'but a platform that can accommodate the city's events.'

To give a sense of its scale, the construction of this platform required 5,800 tonnes of steel, the equivalent of 75 per cent of the frame of the Eiffel Tower, according to the local news website *Actu Bordeaux*. It spans a significant 575 metres, including overshoots on either bank. The new banks, landscaped by Michel Desvigne Paysagiste, form green spaces that connect directly to the water, while its traffic intersections for motor vehicles are set back from the river. Its construction was not without complication, including structural difficulties leading to changes of contractor, a five-year delay and a budget that ended up at €151 million.

The view from below allows best for an appreciation of the structure's design and

engineering. There is a brutalist elegance to the low, muscular arc of the frame, revealing the economy of means and the relatively low concrete mass compared with the hulking underbelly of the nearby Saint-Jean Bridge. The pedestals recall the minimalist sculptures of Sol LeWitt and resonate with the geometric shapes of the public art in the adjoining parks.

Atop the bridge, however, the project changes character. Of its 45m width, around half the Simone Veil bridge is dedicated to an open surface split between walking and cycling, punctuated only by a 4m by 4m grid of cat's eyes, a row of utilitarian lampposts and three temporary-looking wooden seating arrangements. Recalling the failure of London's Garden Bridge concept, any planting has been eschewed due to challenges of maintenance in the absence of proper earth. But the viability of a stark, shadeless public space, in a city where summer



**OMA has designed a new bridge for Bordeaux, named after French politician Simone Veil. It connects the southern part of the city, which is seeing intense development (opposite) with the suburban commune of Floirac. The new bridge serves cars, buses, cyclists and pedestrians (above)**

temperatures can surpass 40°C, is questionable. A resident of one of the neighbourhoods being constructed alongside the bridge as part of the Euratlantique metropolitan development zone, told me that for him, walking across the bridge was 'like being on the moon, or maybe a barren windswept island'.

At night - illuminated by the floodlight-style lampposts, the cat's eyes and strip lighting along the balustrades and barriers - the bridge appears as a highly stylised light show, ideal for spectacular events, but seemingly out of sync with concerns of energy sobriety and biodiversity that are leading cities to dim their nocturnal lighting. Of the bridge's multiple corridors of movement, only the four lanes for cars are fully separated by barriers. Local commentators have questioned the lack of protection between the two-way cycle path and the bus lanes adjacent to them.

All of this, according to project architect

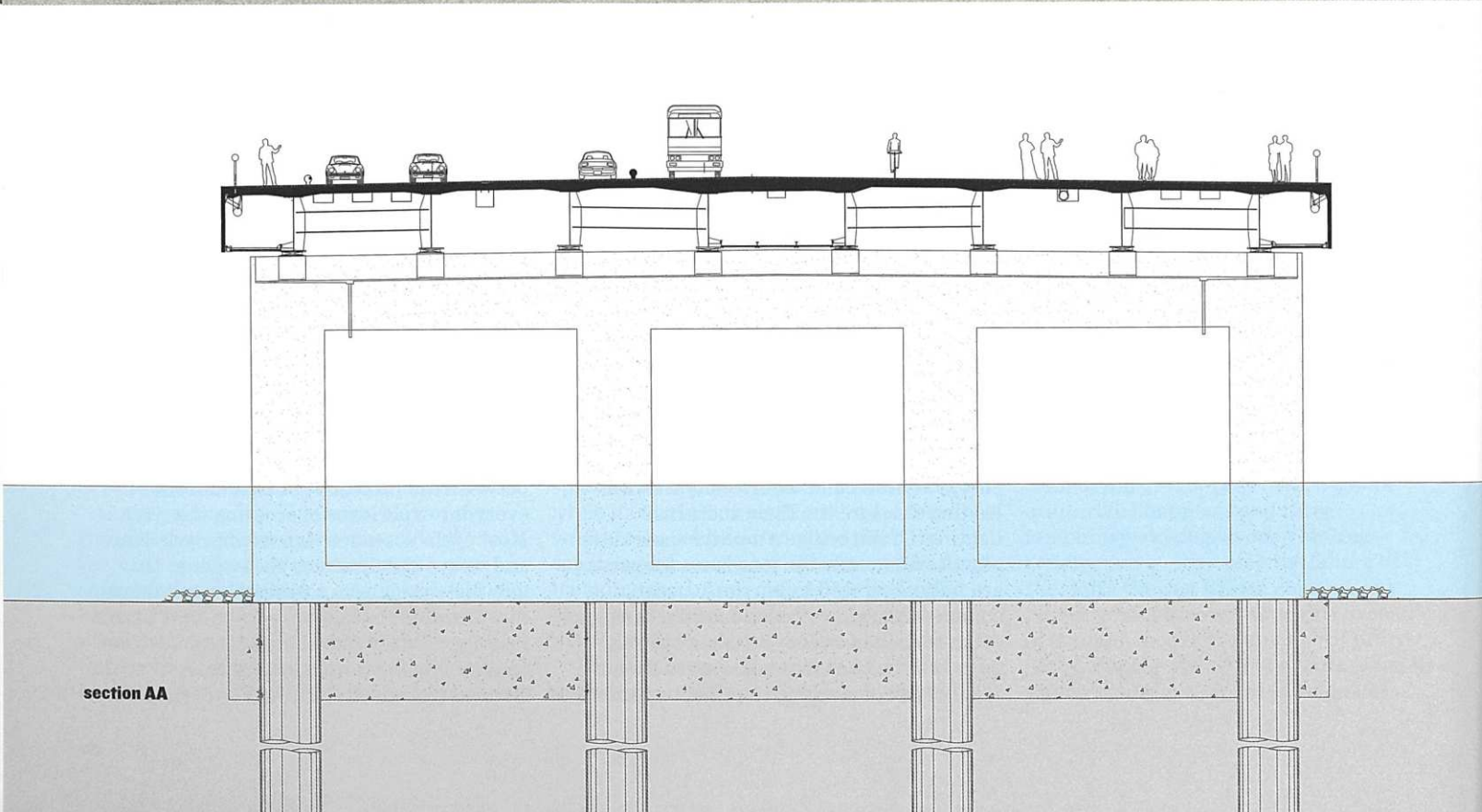
Gilles Guyot, is intentional. The somewhat radical featurelessness of the bridge, and the removability of all barriers and furniture, is intended to allow its use for large public events. There are invisible infrastructural details generously incorporated to facilitate these: integrated power and water points, for example, and a grid of hooks meaning that the lampposts can become supports for shady canopies. With the complications of mounting major events on a public space on the water, and spanning three municipalities, these might only happen 'once every two years'.

For most people, then, there is a rift between the project's concept and the everyday experience of crossing the river. Most cyclists seem to ignore the cycle lanes and weave slowly across the expanse that may feel desolate as a pedestrian but offers a rare freedom for those on a bike, and a safer ride for children. As wide as the pedestrian space might be, it remains a side-show to the six-lane motorised thoroughfare - four for





PHOTO BY CLEMENT GUILLAUME / COURTESY OMA



cars, two for buses – that dominates both spatially and acoustically. Whereas good urban squares contain voices and make them resonate, the wind here whips them away down the river, while the constant white noise of cars on asphalt is more reminiscent of a periurban motorway.

The idealised ancient Athenian agora, where the public exchanged goods and news, and its Pnyx, where they listened to political and theatrical speech, seem to retain a hold over the imaginations of many architects, leading them to believe that the provision of open spaces and stepped seating will magick the performance of public life into being. But without the micro-infrastructures that invite use – shade, ledges to sit on, the enclosure and acoustic resonance that make for a feeling of immersion – the Simone Veil bridge is an empty stage most of the time. Similarly, the parks' sculptural offerings are mostly abandoned, their role in the project hard to read.

The experiment is ongoing, though. To OMA's credit, they are continuing to work with Bordeaux Métropole to help it understand how to stage large-scale events. The design team is also responding to community concerns, testing safer demarcation for the cycle lanes and creating a handbook with the kinds of technical details any troupe needs to understand the workings of a theatre – like who holds the keys to the electrical cupboard.

For now, at least during my two days observing life on the bridge, three young people pulling wheelies back and forth were the closest thing to the kind of performance OMA is aiming for. Perhaps their presence points to the potential of the project, once it has been adapted and added to, by skaters and BMXers, for example, with makeshift infrastructures for their sports. If we accept that a bridge is unlikely to replace shady parks and vibrant squares as a place of everyday public gathering, it could be the

ideal place for modes of publicness based on movement and sport. Which raises the question, why not provide such infrastructure in the first place? 'Programming can be the enemy of programme,' Guyot responds. 'The project has to be boring enough so the lively aspect of public life can emerge. It needs time.'

What to do with the stage outside the performance? The more specified a space for performance is, the harder it is to welcome a multitude of other uses. But the bridge is not just a stage, it is also an infrastructure paid for by the public, whose mundane reality impacts on the lives of the thousands who will eventually walk, cycle and drive across it every day. The future of this experiment will depend on the creativity of the people of Bordeaux in imagining the role this new space might play in their lives. This does need time, but time may not be enough. The vision of grand public events might one day have to give way to more quotidian definitions of performance.





**The design team hope that the bridge will stage major public events, but the smaller infrastructures that would make it a viable public space are currently relatively sparse (previous spread). Though it features new green spaces on either bank (above), residents have yet to adopt the bridge as a place to linger and socialise**