SEA AND SKY

Inspired by tradition, formed by modern technology, this centre celebrates and explains the Melanesian culture of the Kanaks. Responses to sea and sky have generated a heraldic dance reflected in the waves.

The return to tradition is a myth... No people has ever achieved that. The search for identity, for a model, I believe is less before us... Our identity is before us" Jean-Marie Tjibaou's vision informs the new cultural centre at Nouméa in New Caledonia. Tjibaou, sometime priest and doctoral student at the Sorbonne, was leader of the New Caledonian independence movement and, though he wanted his people to fully take part in the modern world, he was keenly aware of the need for his people to come to terms with their past and make a balance between traditional and world cultures. Although I can share with a non-Kanak what I possess of French culture, it is impossible for him to share the universal element within my culture." 1

Tjibaou died in 1989 but already it had been decided to build a centre for the Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak (ADCK), and an international competition was held in 1991. Renzo Piano won, and began to refine his design for the Centre Culturel Tjibaou with the help of local people including the leader's widow, Maria Claude. The site which was given to the ADCK by the municipality of Nouméa is a thin peninsula which sticks out south into the blue lagoon. (It was here that Tjibaou had held the Melanesia 2000 festival in 1975, one of the key moments in the struggle for cultural and political recognition by France.) Early on in the programme for the centre, the indigenous bush was supplemented with transplanted Norfolk Island pines, whose wonderful, stiff architectural trees which so gracefully articulate the sky-lines of the islands of the south-western Pacific. From the first, Piano was concerned to learn from local culture, buildings and nature, but he was determined not to end up with a tech-replication of Kanak haste. He took from them the ideas of the village cluster and the ribbed hut structure in which tall, curved timber members cluster together at the top and carry the cladding. In the original vernacular, the ribs are of palm saplings: in Piano's (much larger) reinterpretation of the forms, they are made of laminated veneer, structurally linked by horizontal tubes and diagonal rod ties of stainless steel. The happy and carefully crafted conjunction of stainless steel and laminated timber is reminiscent of the IBM pavilion which travelled Europe so