

# An Art-Filled Swiss Idyll in Lausanne and the Joux Valley

Breathtaking modern architecture, museums dedicated to watch-making, and bucolic views from a train window await visitors willing to venture beyond Switzerland's major cities.

By Christopher Solomon

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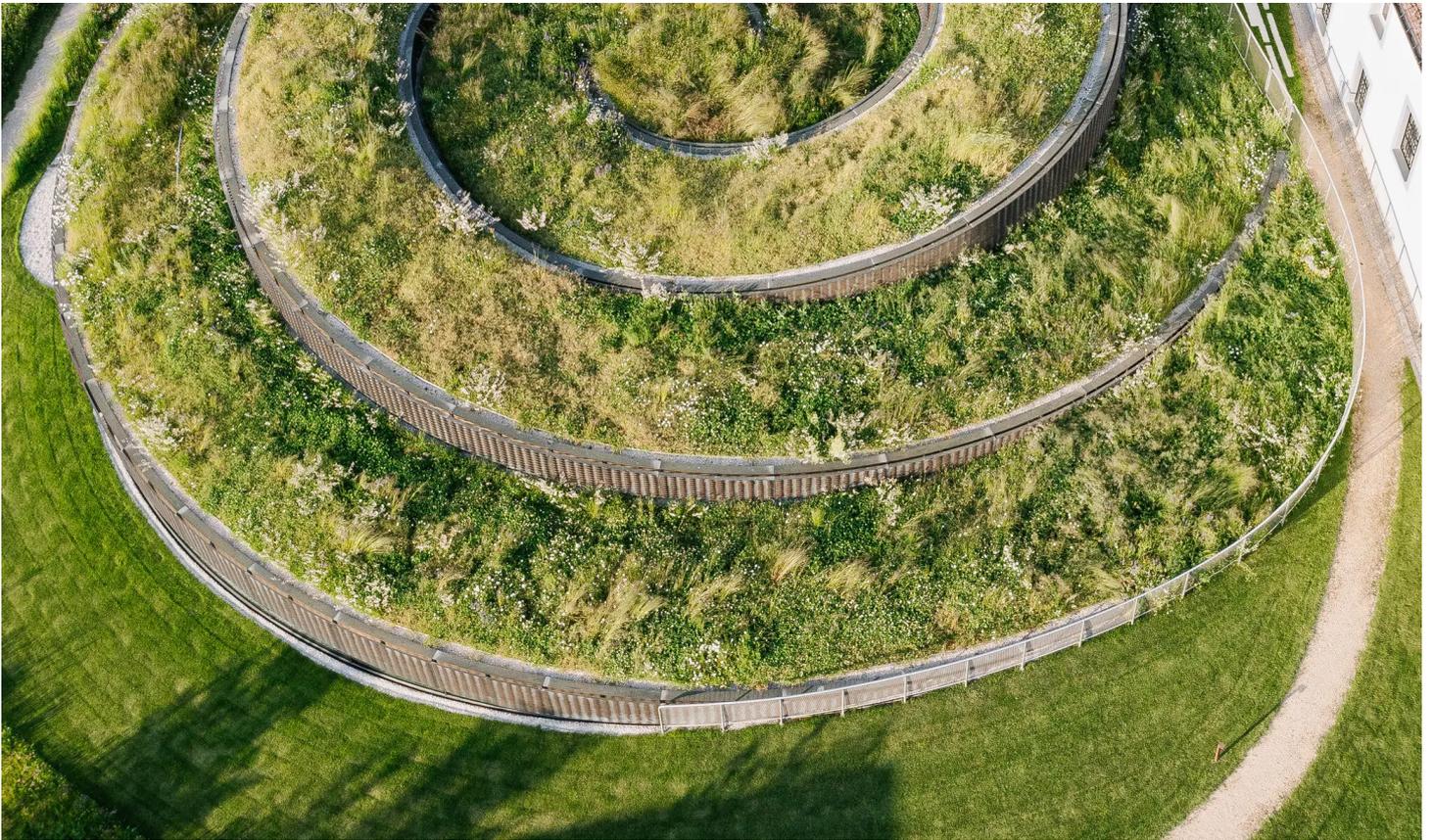
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One morning in late August, I headed north from Lausanne, the Swiss lakeside city about 40 miles east of Geneva, on a nearly empty local train. Within minutes, buildings fell away and the train pushed through a green, working country of farm fields and tractors. The train stopped at a dozen villages that aren't on the usual tourist map: Arnex, Le Day, Les Charbonnières. Lakes appeared, and forest. This was another Switzerland, beyond worldly Geneva, Zürich and Basel, where awe softened to something on a more human scale.



The landscape near the village of Le Sentier, in Switzerland. Clara Tuma for The New York Times





Designed by the Bjarke Ingels Group, the Musée Atelier Audemars Piguet in Le Brassus coils like the spring of a watch. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

After 90 minutes, the train pulled into the station at the village of Le Brassus — the end of the line. At first glance, I thought I had made an error. There was not much to see around the station, except the steeple of the little Protestant church. A small grocery. Road signs directing drivers to the mellow pleasures of Nordic skiing in Risoud Forest.

Then I noticed signs on nearby buildings: Swatch Group. Patek Philippe. Audemars Piguet. Since the early 18th century, the unassuming Vallée de Joux has been the center of the high-end Swiss watchmaking industry.

A brief walk from the train station leads to the Musée Atelier Audemars Piguet, which opened during the pandemic. The museum is the creation of the selfsame luxury watchmaker, which two watchmakers founded in a building next door in 1875. Designed by the Bjarke Ingels Group, the museum rises out of an adjacent pasture. The building coils like the spring of a watch, never appearing to stop, rather like time itself.



Inside Musée Atelier Audemars Piguet, hundreds of the company's luxury watches are on display. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

Inside lies a celebration of time-keeping, with 300 watches on display. The heart of the museum lies at the top of the coil, which is home to two ateliers. In one, craftspeople assemble the most complicated watches, which can take up to eight months and require 648 components, all assembled by one person. You can try some of the old techniques that are still used, such as satin brushing and circular graining. In a second atelier sit high-end jewelers and engravers.



Exhibits at the Audemars Piguet museum. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

The very center of the coil houses a “solar system” containing a few dozen spheres, each holding notable watches of all kinds. The sun in this system is Audemars Piguet’s Universelle. With 1,168 parts, it is the most complicated watch the company has ever created.

When new, the company’s watches can range from more than \$10,000 to well over \$100,000.

Visits are by appointment and only with a guide (20 Swiss francs, or about \$23). Spaces fill, so reserve (far) ahead. The museum also offers a master class, “Royal Oak’s Origins,” that blends the theory and practice of watchmaking. Under the guidance of an expert, participants get the opportunity to try elements of watchmaking themselves. The three-hour program is limited to four people, and costs 390 Swiss francs.

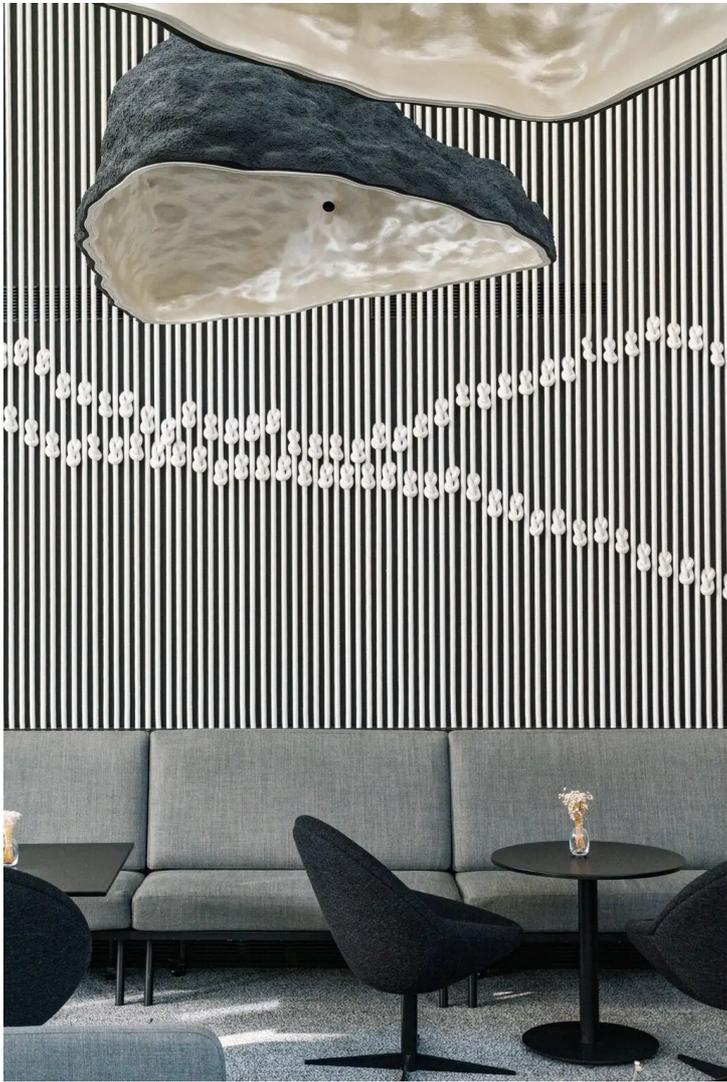
If you love watchmaking, be sure to augment your visit here with one to the Espace Horloger, a watch museum in nearby Le Sentier.



In Le Brassus, each zigzagging turn of the 50-room Hôtel des Horlogers, designed by Bjarke Ingels Group, is a new floor. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

Three doors down from that spiral, another dramatic building opened in June 2022: Hôtel des Horlogers, which was also designed by Bjarke Ingels Group. Where the museum curves, the hotel is all angles. It zigzags from street level down to that same pasture, the jutting gray concrete of each turn as raw as an exposed ridgeline. Each turn exposes a new floor, and gives each of the hotel's 50 rooms its own unobstructed view through floor-to-ceiling windows across the pasture to cows grazing and the Risoud Forest beyond. Audemars Piguet also owns the hotel.

Inside, forms grab the attention. Massive chunks of marble announce the brasserie, sleek on the sides but rough on top. In the hotel bar dangle a half-dozen "oysters": jumbo mollusk-shaped lampshades that are pearly within, the better to softly reflect their light. (Beneath them, I drank a nice, dry crémant with a few drops of a housemade local fir bud syrup from the forest.)



The bar in the Hôtel des Horlogers, left, in Le Brassus, features mollusk-shaped lampshades that are pearly within, the better to softly reflect their light. A dessert called Pavlova, right, is served in the hotel's restaurant. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

The kitchen here is under the guidance of Emmanuel Renaut, a three-Michelin-starred chef, the hotel says. While I would not call my meal (which was about 120 Swiss francs) at the brasserie one of my most memorable meals, weeks later I still find myself thinking about the Gruyère double crème tart, a dessert whose unctuousness was offset by the tartness of a berry sorbet.

Waking the next morning, I looked through my room's tall windows across the mist-filled pasture, where the sound of cowbells rang from unseen cows. And soon, sounds of construction: Down the road an arc of buildings is rising that will embrace Audemars Piguet's other workshops and create a much larger campus for the company. Clearly, times have been good for those who sell timepieces to the one percent.

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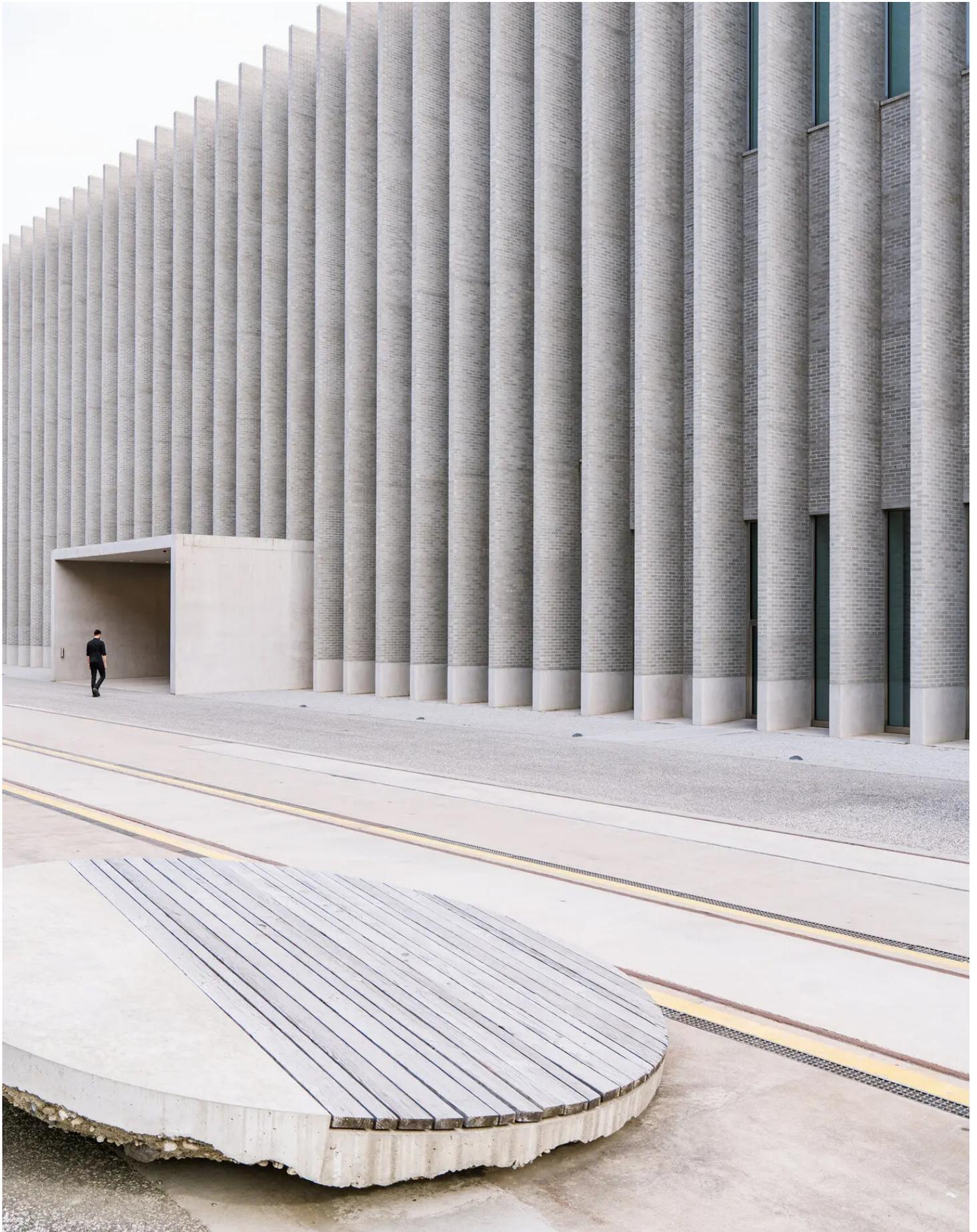
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## A new arts district in Lausanne





The Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, designed by the Barcelona-based firm Barozzi Veiga, in Lausanne. Clara Tuma for The New York Times



Two Lausanne museums — Mudac, a design museum, and Photo Elysée — are housed in a cubelike building designed by the Portuguese architects Francisco and Manuel Aires Mateus. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

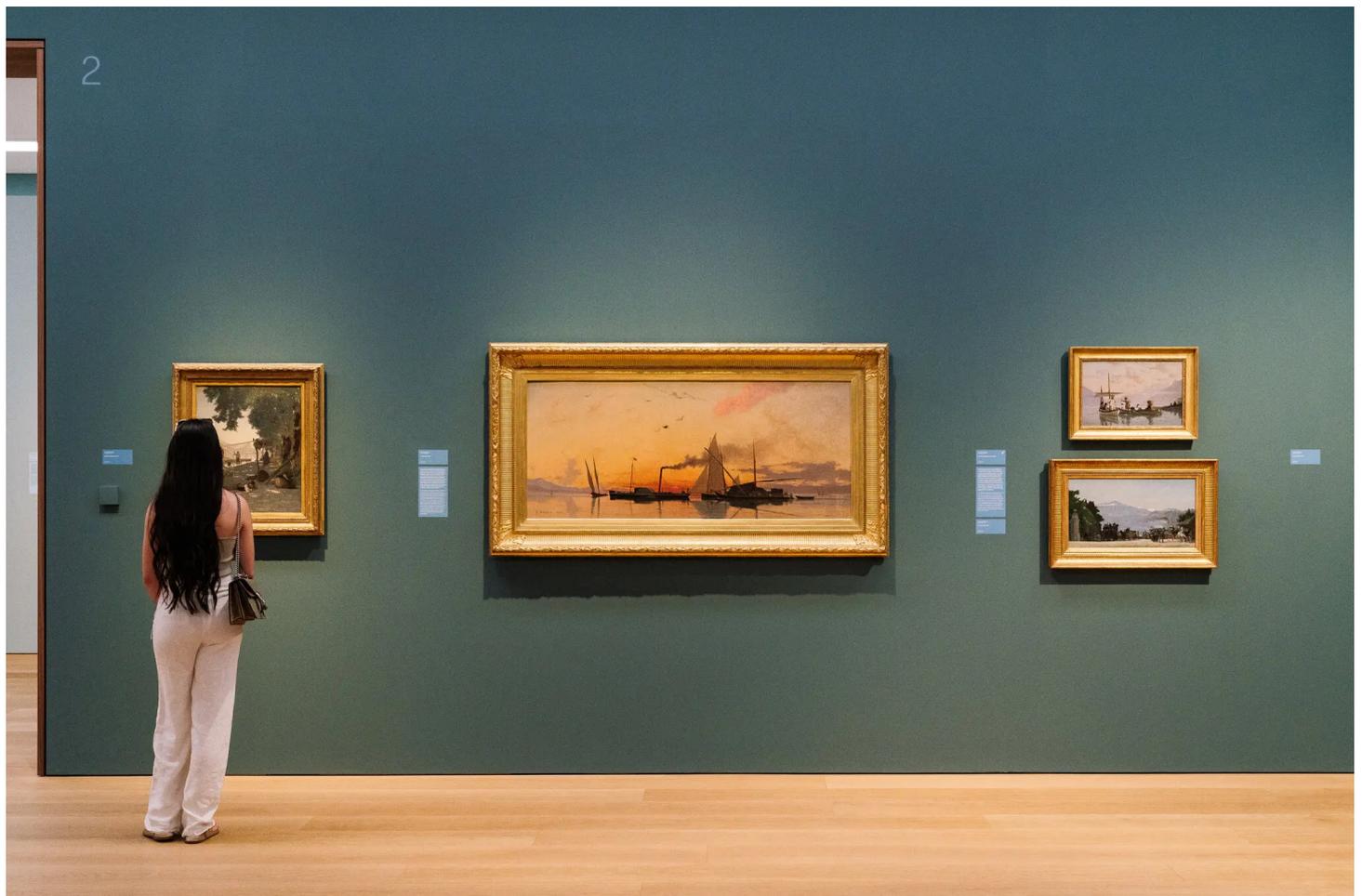
I'd always overlooked Lausanne in my many visits to Switzerland. Sure, this university city of 140,000 people has an enviable setting on Lake Geneva. But to me, it had always seemed a place in-between — a city you passed through on the way to the ski slopes. Now from the train window upon return, I saw the new development that would make me stop, and that should make you stop, too.

Plateforme 10 gathers in one place three museums that previously had been scattered around the city, to create what the city calls a new “quartiers des arts” that fosters an “ecosystem” of art. (Its name is a wink; Plateforme 10 is one more platform than the adjacent railway station next door has.)

The centerpiece of this repurposed railway repair yard is a vast public plaza, larger than a soccer pitch, that opened last year. An arcade lines one side of the plaza, like warrens set into the hillside. These former rail yard workshops now house temporary exhibits, an interactive drawing space and a cafe. Public art, and places to sit, dot the plaza.

Lausanne is a city on a hill, and ramps and stairs connect the plaza and museums to the higher surrounding neighborhood. Late on a weekday morning, I watched as dozens of people passed through the area on foot, bike and scooters. The new arts district clearly was already taking root as part of the life of the city. When Plateforme 10 was inaugurated, outdoor movies, curated by Switzerland's Locarno Film Festival, were screened on the outer wall of a museum.

Two buildings anchor Plateforme 10. Across from the arcade rises the pale brick Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts Lausanne, the fine arts museum for the canton of Vaud. Its design, by Barcelona-based firm Barozzi Veiga, features a brick lamella facade that calls to mind an old radiator. It opened in late 2019.



The Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne features the works of François Boccion, who was born in Lausanne, and frequently painted working boatmen around Lake Geneva in the 19th century. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

The museum has a collection of more than 10,000 pieces, dating from 1816. Many are by Swiss artists, including the Giacomettis, father and son. When I visited, one floor featured a large, temporary exhibition of more than 100 paintings by the Swiss painter Gustave Buchet, an important figure in the avant-garde movements in early-20th-century Switzerland. I was captivated, though, by the more realist paintings of François Boccion, who frequently painted working boatmen along Lake Geneva in the 19th century. Boccion was obsessed with capturing the elusive beauty of light on water, and his obsession is our reward.

The museum isn't strictly parochial, though. It also owns and displays boldface names, too: Degas, Renoir, Cézanne and Rodin, and there is an exhibition by a pioneer of textile art, Magdalena Abakanowicz, through late September.

The newest addition to Plateforme 10 caps the far end of the plaza: an enormous white cube, its only windows appearing where the cube seems to fracture. The building was designed by the Portuguese architects Francisco and Manuel Aires Mateus and opened in June 2022, along with the plaza. The cube houses the quarter's two other museums, the Photo Elysée, the canton's museum dedicated to photography; and Mudac, its museum of design and contemporary applied arts.

Inside, the ground level of this enormous block manages both a solidity and a tent-like airiness. Downstairs, an interactive photography studio was the best of museum education: Visitors can dress up with props, take digital photos and then edit them on a light table — all to teach concepts of framing and composition.

The photo exhibitions were at their best in the Elysée’s contribution to a districtwide exhibition on trains in art, showing photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Nan Goldin and others. Many photos reminded how trains can represent escape and adventure, but also a Hail Mary for the desperate. Black-and-white shots of war refugees piling onto trains, taken 70 years ago, felt like they could have been taken last month.



Mudac, a museum of design and contemporary applied arts, is one of the creative spaces in Lausanne’s new Plateforme 10, which gathers in one place a collection of previously scattered museums to foster what the city calls a new “ecosystem” of art. Clara Tuma for The New York Times

Since my visit Plateforme 10’s exhibitions have left the station. Through early August, Mudac, which occupies the top floor, now features an exhibition on design in Lebanon, and a “dialogue between an octopus and a juicer,” a quirky exploration of the museum’s collection, through early February 2024.

The museums of Plateforme 10 are visible from the windows of many trains that enter and leave Lausanne. More than once I found myself grateful not to have been on one of those trains, looking out from one of those windows with curiosity as the train carried me elsewhere. By jumping off, and slowing down, I’d fallen a bit in love with Lausanne and the Joux Valley, and a lot more in love with Switzerland.

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**A correction was made on July 13, 2023: An earlier version of this article misstated the cost of entry to the Musée Atelier Audemars Piguet in Le Brassus, Switzerland. The cost is 20 Swiss francs, or about \$23, not 60 Swiss francs.**

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