MAJA'S MASTERPIECE

A decade in the making, Luma Arles—Maja Hoffmann's cultural complex in Provence, France—has helped transform the city she loves. As the project nears completion, she opens up about the region's star attraction.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK HENDERSON

IN THE WEE HOURS of a sticky spring morning, Luma Arles, a vast new art and culture complex in a former rail yard in the southern French city of Arles, is swarming with models, fresh off the runway for Gucci's new cruise collection. La Grande Halle, a warehouse-turned–exhibition space there, has been converted for the night into an after-hours dance club. Rap star A$AP Rocky and actress Saoirse Ronan float by. Fashion editor Carine Roitfeld snaps a photo on the dance floor of Gucci's star designer, Alessandro Michele. Chauffeured cars idle outside, beneath a half-finished tower—architect Frank Gehry's centerpiece to this 25-acre campus—its steel-cubed facade shimmering in the moonlight.

It's a few weeks before the high-tourist season begins in this Provençal city best known for its summer photography festival and nearly 2,000-year-old Roman arena, and 400 or so fashion and art insiders have flown in for Gucci's blowout presentation. Yet no one seems to notice the real reason they're here: the host for the night, 62-year-old Swiss art patron Maja Hoffmann, Luma's benefactor, huddling under La Grande Halle's steel beams chatting with hotelier André Balazs. Though fashion isn't Hoffmann's usual milieu, she's happy to support anything that brings the spotlight to Arles. "At Luma we speak a lot about going outside the boundaries of contemporary art, of photography, of intellectual pursuits," she says.

This stealth power player is an heir to her family's pharmaceutical fortune. Hoffmann-La Roche, one of the world's largest drug makers, was started by her great-grandfather in 1896. And Hoffmann has spent decades working behind the scenes in the art world at the highest level. She's chairwoman of the Swiss Institute in New York and on the board of the New Museum, and she has previously served on the boards of the Tate Modern and Palais de Tokyo, among other institutions. Her Luma Foundation, founded in 2004 "to support the activities of independent artists and pioneers," operates an art complex in Zurich and a winter biennial in Gstaad, Switzerland, along with managing her big project taking shape here in Arles.

Hoffmann grew up just outside the city, spending her childhood on her family's compound in the heart of the Camargue—the marshy wetland, teeming with wild horses and flamingos, that her father, conservation pioneer Luc Hoffmann (who helped launch the World Wildlife Fund in 1961), devoted much of his adult life to protecting. Though Maja is a private person, she's also deeply committed to making the region she loves a year-round destination.

She's spent more than $100 million so far, and the better part of a decade, creating Luma Arles, a cultural magnet and a new type of arts institution focused on the production of large-scale works and on new interdisciplinary forms of curatorial expression rather than on the long-term display of a permanent collection. Though Hoffmann's personal holdings are impressive—masterworks by Matisse, Cy Twombly, Willem de Kooning and others scattered through homes in Zurich, Gstaad, Arles, London, Mustique and New York—they're not what this place is about. "I am not a collector building my own museum," she says. "I never had this vanity."

Two years before breaking ground on the Gehry tower, she introduced the public to her idea with Luma Arles's inaugural show, *To the Moon Via the Beach*, a mix of art and performance that for four days in the summer of 2012 took over the city's Roman arena. Works by 20 artists (including Pierre Huyghe, Daniel Buren and Fischli & Weiss) filled the site, along with a mountain of sand that was gradually transformed by a team of sculptors from beachscape to moonscape. Afterward they planned to turn the relocated sand into the foundation for Gehry's 10-story building, which began going up in 2014. "Maja always said she wanted a place of production, a place where things can be built," says French conceptual artist Philippe Parreno, a longtime adviser on the project.

The craggy contours of Gehry's 184-foot tower where new art projects will eventually take shape—currently known as the Arts Resource Building—mirror the Alpilles mountains behind it, with microstressed, stainless-steel blocks catching the light as the architect intended, their reflected hues morphing with the season and time of day. "The building changes in an extraordinary range in response to natural light," says Gehry, "so it looks like a painting."

Though the tower is still under construction, its facade is already covered in nearly 12,000 steel blocks. The Luma complex has been opening to the public in stages for the past four years—experienced as a work in progress, rather than revealed all at once. "I'm not putting in this big building and saying to people, 'It's going to be overwhelming,' and one day it's open," Hoffmann says. "We're doing it little by little, really a different approach."

The skeletal remains of the old railroad workshops and warehouses surrounding the Gehry tower (all

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GOOD FORM
Les Forges, an exhibition space at Luma Arles designed by Selldorf Architects. “It’s not just renovating; it’s bigger than that,” says architect Annabelle Selldorf.

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out of commission since 1986) have been converted into white-walled, iron-columned art spaces by New York–based architect Annabelle Selldorf’s firm and put to use as exhibition, studio and performance venues the minute they’re done. “It was important that the buildings held a very fine balance between being repurposed and feeling completely fresh,” says Selldorf. “It’s not just renovating; it’s bigger than that.” La Formation, the third Selldorf building completed, with performance venues and bedrooms for artists in residence, debuted this past summer. (An on-site Selldorf-designed hotel is also in the works.)

Hoffmann, meanwhile, has been investing more broadly in Arles and its environs. She owns the Michelin-starred La Chassagnette, arguably the best restaurant in the area, which grows much of its own produce on its lush grounds near her home in the Camargue. Its chef, Armand Amal, is building a small culinary empire in Arles under Hoffmann’s patronage—with a casual canteen at Luma and restaurants at her two boutique hotels in town. Her latest, l’Arlatan, opening this fall, is an immersive work of art by Cuban-American Jorge Pardo, from the colorful tiles on the floors to the furniture in the rooms.

Hoffmann is also president of the Fondation Vincent van Gogh Arles, which operates its own world-class museum, launched by her father in 2014, two years before his death at the age of 93. In 1888, Van Gogh spent a wildly productive year in Arles, during which he completed over 200 paintings, including many of his most famous works. But there had never been an institution focused on his time there. “I think my father wanted to do that to impress me,” says Hoffmann, “to show he was not only [focused on] the environment.” And, continuing his crusading work in the Camargue, she’s built ecology into Luma Arles’s DNA. In 2016 she launched Atelier Luma, which supports design projects that make innovative use of the wetland’s resources, backing experiments with a 3-D-printable algae polymer and bricks made from compacted sea salt (tentatively scheduled to be installed along a wall in Gehry’s tower). “For Maja it’s important that there is this connection between the local and the global,” says Hans Ulrich Obrist, the director of the Serpentine Galleries in London, who is a member of her Arles inner circle. “She always wanted Luma Arles to be interdisciplinary and also connected to local questions and to local necessities.”

Hoffmann has tapped a team of advisers, a mix of artists and curators she has supported over the years, to help her define what Luma Arles will become—the “core group,” she calls them. Along with Parreno and Obrist, its five members include British artist Liam Gillick, German curator Beatrix Ruf (the former director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) and Scotsman Tom Eccles (head of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in upstate New York).

Luma is named for Hoffmann’s children with film producer Stanley Buchthal, Lucas, 22, and Marina, 19—students at Harvard and NYU. Hoffmann’s work there continues a family tradition of art-world philanthropy that goes back nearly a century.

In 1933, her grandmother Maja Hoffmann-Stehlin launched the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation in her late husband’s name (he’d died young in a car crash a year before). The foundation was formed to support the era’s most avant-garde artists. In 1980, starting with the foundation’s then-enormous collection—including works from Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Joseph Beuys and Bruce Nauman—Hoffmann-Stehlin opened the first museum of contemporary art in Basel, Switzerland. Fifteen years ago, a large part of the family’s holdings, which had grown to include more than 150 artists working in every medium, moved into the Herzog & de Meuron–designed Schaulager nearby (overseen by Hoffmann’s first cousin, also named Maja). Like her namesake, who often entertained great artists at home—Jean Tinguely, Fernand Léger and Georges Braque were all frequent guests—Hoffmann is happiest in creative company. Her exposure to the art world essentially started at birth. She still has the letter of congratulations Jean Cocteau sent her mother after she delivered Maja, the second of four children, in 1956. Hoffmann’s parents were settled in the Camargue by then, where her father, an ornithologist, had set up a biological research station named the Tour du Valat that doubled as a home for the family. It was, to hear Hoffmann and friends tell it, an idyllic bohemian upbringing. She attended a tiny school on the property set up by her mother. After classes, there was nature to explore, and there were always plenty of interesting people to meet. “The whole world came through that house at the Tour du Valat,” says longtime friend Anne Igou, owner of Arles’s Grand Hotel Nord-Pinus. “It was full of scientists, very international. There were no dinners where you didn’t have a mix of researchers and artists.”

And so, Hoffmann grew up with wide-ranging interests. She often traveled with her father on research trips to Spain, Mauritania, Mongolia. Thinking she might follow in his footsteps, she studied biology for a while in Montpellier, and then considered careers in architecture and photography. For a few summers she worked with Lucien Clergue, a founder of Les Rencontres d’Arles, the city’s photography festival that launched in 1970. Later she studied journalism in the Swiss Alps and film at the New School in New York.

She joined the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation’s board when she was 21 at her grandmother’s

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insistence. Her real initiation into the contemporary art world began shortly thereafter under the tutelage of a fellow board member, a giant of German language theater, Swiss director Werner Düggelin, nearly 30 years her senior, with whom she started a seven-year relationship in her early 20s. "It was a little disruptive for my mother and the rest of the family because he was so much older," she says. "But it was probably one of the best experiences of my life."

They shared apartments in Basel and Zurich. Hoffmann assisted him on stage productions, and they traveled together, meeting with artists along the way in Paris and in New York in the early '80s, when the downtown art scene was booming. She partied with Jean-Michel Basquiat and with Francesco Clemente. She turned down Andy Warhol's offer to paint her portrait, not wanting, she says, to join the procession of "heiresses" he'd done as commissions. Julian Schnabel, whom she met back then, recently finished shooting a biopic on Van Gogh in Arles, using Hoffmann's guesthouse near Luma as his home base.

Though her budget for acquiring work was modest in the '80s, pieces picked up in that era hang on the walls of her family's Camargue estate. Years ago, she renovated the once-crumbling 16th-century stone mansion. "This is a Clemente—I remember he spent one hour on the hand," she says, pointing out a portrait by the Italian artist during a tour of the property. "And a little drawing of Jean-Michel Basquiat—I got that for nothing."

After splitting with Düggelin, Hoffmann lived for a while between Paris and New York. Her resources grew considerably around that time, after she asked her father about the monthly allowance she noticed her siblings were getting (she has two sisters and a brother, who all have a piece of the pharmaceutical fortune). "My father was watching birds," she says, "so although he had lots of money, he was forgetting to give me monthly things because I never asked him."

She met Buchthal, who'd transitioned from banking to the film world after producing John Waters's 1988 film, *Hairspray*, at a friend's place on the Lower East Side in 1994. That year she bought a former schoolhouse on East 1st Street that became her New York *pied-à-terre*. Buchthal and Hoffmann had Lucas a few years later and eventually settled in London—still their primary residence. Over the years they've worked together producing documentary films on Basquiat, Lou Reed, Peggy Guggenheim and Marina Abramovic, among other subjects. Hoffmann, a hands-on producer, met Gehry while shooting *Sketches of Frank Gehry*, Sydney Pollack's portrait of the iconic architect, in 2004. "I was there on one shoot and a lot on the editing bench," she says. By then, considering her legacy, with her 50th birthday approaching and her children growing up, she'd begun eyeing Arles's long-abandoned rail yard, the Parc des Ateliers, for a potential cultural project.

Developers were proposing to potentially turn the complex into a shopping mall. Meanwhile, the city's thriving photography festival, which she'd supported for years, had been using some of its run-down warehouses as exhibition space. The 54,000-square-foot Grande Halle, one of the largest buildings and a former boiler house, was being overhauled by a pair of French architects (Parisian team Alain Moatti and Henri Rivière, hired by the regional government). But the other structures were still in dire need of revitalization. "I said, It's a pity the buildings are collapsing one after the other—one burned down, the other collapsed—so there is this emergency," recalls Hoffmann.

In 2007, after she spoke with Gehry at the 10th-anniversary celebration of his Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain—and then invited him to Arles—he agreed to devise a master plan for a cultural complex on the abandoned rail yard. He was taken by Hoffmann as a client (he calls her "a special kind of patron") and by the project's locale, which he'd first visited in the early '60s at the start of his career.

In the summer of 2008, shortly after signing a working agreement with the mayor and regional government, Hoffmann presented Gehry's ideas to the public in Arles with sketches showing an enormous structure near La Grande Halle, its two wings connected by a glass atrium. There would be exhibition spaces for her Luma Foundation in one half and artist residences in the other, with the old warehouses around it altered into new homes for the photography festival, Arles's National School of Photography and the city's big independent publisher, Actes Sud. Reactions were mixed. The French architects who'd worked on the Grande Halle upgrade let the press know they weren't happy. One of the many proposals for the site in Hoffmann's plan involved cutting the building in half. "It became this big story," she says, "all about the billionaire, this big architect. They're saying, 'She wants to buy the town.'"

The project nonetheless continued to percolate. In 2010 Gehry and Hoffmann presented scale models of the updated plan featuring two connected towers at the Venice Architecture Biennale, hoping to kick off construction shortly thereafter. The following spring, a month before they were going to get the building permit, according to the construction project manager, Eric Perez, the National Commission for Historical Sites and Monuments in Paris put Gehry's proposal on hold, citing a threat to the city's archaeological heritage—being too close, it said, to Les Alyscamps, the popular shrouded Roman necropolis (a Unesco World Heritage site). Two years later he presented a new plan for a single tower on the other end of the site. The project finally broke ground in April 2014. "I don't remember ever thinking it wasn't going to work out. She was committed from the beginning," says Gehry of Hoffmann. "It's like anything else where it's in flux—things are changing, one could get frustrated about it. I didn't. I love the challenge. It was like, We're inventing something for her, with her."

The complex, by design, remains impossible to pigeonhole, reflecting Hoffmann's interests in art, education, hospitality, ecology, performance and film. "Maja thinks in connected ways, in clusters even," says Luma Arles's CEO, Mustapha Bouhayati.

Hoffmann calls Luma Arles an "archipelago"—referencing the writing of French-Caribbean thinker Edouard Glissant, who used island groups as metaphors for an interconnected approach to the world. "We have programs that are like islands, but they communicate among themselves," Hoffmann says, "so there is much more happening than what's happening on the island—in the transit between them."

Starting this past July, a Gilbert & George retrospective filled an open space on the compound, the old railcar-assembly building, La Mécanique Générale. Benjamin Millepied and his L.A. Dance Project took up residency in La Formation nearby, beginning their third year at Luma. "We're building an audience in Arles," says Millepied, "a generous, hungry, happy audience." In La Grande Halle, a few weeks after the Gucci crowd cleared out, Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist installed her *Pixel Forest* of 3,000 dangling LED lights.

Meanwhile, construction continues on Gehry's tower, which is expected to be completed late next year. Its glass-encased, wide circular base, a nod to the city's Roman arena, will soon house "living archives" dedicated, for starters, to collections from photographers Annie Leibovitz and Martin Parr and to the Swiss art journal *Parkett*, with research "chapels" where scholars and curators can work. A few portions of the building will be left unfinished for artists to experiment with, including Philippe Parreno, who is working on his own gallery space there. In another part, German scientist-turned-artist Carsten Höller will install his tubular fun-house slides, versions of which once snaked through the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall.

Hoffmann hopes to produce a book next year covering the ups and downs of getting Luma Arles off the ground and her discussions with the "core group," most of which were recorded. "I could say what I learned through the process," she says. In the meantime, even with the tower still going up, and Belgian landscape architect Bas Smets adding an artificial lake and 500 new trees to the project's surrounding gardens, Luma Arles will continue to be a thriving cultural site, open to visitors as the work goes on.

"Everybody wants to make an impact on the world," says Tom Eccles. "It's kind of amazing when you actually can do that, but you want to do that with other people. Maja has always been a great encourager of commonality. That's a kind of trademark." •

FORWARD THINKER
"At Luma we speak a lot about going outside the boundaries of contemporary art, of photography, of intellectual pursuits," says Hoffmann.