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In the last ten years, the library field has been characterized by a notable number of constructions of new national library buildings. This paper describes the designing and building process of two such projects, the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Research for this paper involved the evaluation of recent writings by librarians, architects, journalists, and scholars concerned with both libraries. The main focus was to examine the major concerns, obstacles, librarian involvement, and common mistakes associated with planning and building a national library.

Headings:

Library architecture

Library buildings

Architecture and building--national libraries

Architecture and building--program and planning

National libraries—Britain

National libraries—France

BUILDING NATIONAL LIBRARIES  
THE BRITISH LIBRARY AND THE BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

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## INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PROJECT

A trip to England in the summer of 2001 for the SILS Oxford Seminar, *Libraries: Past, Present, and Future*, played an important role in stimulating my interest in library architecture. Michael Crump, the knowledgeable Director of Reader Services at the British Library, entertained our group as he spoke about the building process of the new British Library and the controversy that surrounded the whole project. My curiosity was piqued even further with a tour of the library in London. I was fascinated by its physical presence, design scheme, and turbulent building history.

It seems that the historically competitive French also had plans to build a new national library in the 1990's, a happy circumstance that provided me with a wealth of literature on the topic of national library architecture. Critics of both countries had been predicting the demise of library buildings for some time. After all, technology would soon be so efficient and ubiquitous that it would make the cumbersome storage of books unnecessary. As it turns out, this is not to be the case, and both British and French politicians and citizens felt a national library was of enough importance to warrant spending millions of pounds and francs to construct.

The physical impossibility of digitizing every published word, the widespread dislike of reading long text on a computer screen, and the public's need for assistance in finding and disseminating information, assure that libraries not only flourish in today's world, but that their buildings are vital to civilization. A national library is a powerful symbol in terms of its vast record of culture and

intellectual heritage for its nation. Marc Bédarida, an architect put it: “A national library cherishes the past of a nation, gives expression to its memory, and embodies its wealth.”<sup>1</sup>

This national symbolism was the main reason both the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France came under such inspection, debate, and criticism from the media and the public: everyone wanted their country’s library building to reflect national power, pride, and a quest for knowledge. Colin St. John Wilson and Dominique Perrault, the two architects of the libraries, underwent a harrowing onslaught from politicians, media, scholars, and the public--all determined to share their opinions on the buildings’ design. Wilson and Perrault would probably agree with Edmund Burke, the 18<sup>th</sup> century British Statesman who said:

Those who would carry on great public schemes must be proof against the most fatiguing delays, the most mortifying disappointments, the most shocking insults, and worst of all, the presumptuous judgment of the ignorant upon their designs.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is an analysis of the building projects of the British Library and Bibliothèque Nationale de France. In examining the strengths and weaknesses of the projects, I hope to explore the lessons we can learn for future library building projects.

## IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

While much has been written about the building of the British and French national libraries, there exists only a small amount of literature on the general

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Bédarida, “The Upside-Down Library,” *Lotus International* no. 70 (1991): 32.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, *Design*, 41.

topic of national library design. This research is sorely needed and will benefit the entire library community by highlighting the major concerns, obstacles, and common mistakes associated with planning not only national, but also large civic library buildings. Librarians, library board members, architects, and government officials involved in planning library buildings need to have a basic knowledge of how the design process works and what their role will be. By looking at the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, this research elucidates valuable information that could transform a multimillion-dollar library building project from an adequate library to a spectacular building that architecturally inspires awe while functioning in the most efficient manner for both librarian and user.

This research process has been of assistance to me in furthering my own understanding of library architecture and design. It is highly likely that my career will provide me with the opportunity to work on library building projects and gain even more experience and understanding. Eventually, I would like to use this knowledge to become a library buildings consultant.

## METHODOLOGY

The research process began with a review of books and journal articles that concern the general planning of library facilities. Search terms “library architecture”, “library buildings”, “library design”, and “library planning” were used in the databases *Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA)*, *Library Literature (Library Lit)*, and the *UNC-CH Library Online Catalog*. I was looking for

an introduction into the building process of a new library and the general role of those key people/groups involved: the architect, project management team, library director, library board, and librarians. A particularly good source was *Building Libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by T.D. Webb. It features thirteen recent library building projects, each a separate chapter written by a librarian deeply involved with the process. It covers a wide range of topics that are of interest to this paper: design, building concerns, planning, philosophy, construction, architecture, budget, and administrative issues.

To gather more introductory information, I also looked at literature in the architecture field by using the database, *Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals*. In continuing my search for books and journal articles, I used the search terms “architecture and building--national libraries “, and “architecture and building--program and planning”.

The writings from the architects involved in the two libraries were useful in furthering my understanding of the philosophy behind library literature. Colin St. John Wilson, architect of the British Library, is the author of *Architectural Reflections*, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: the Uncompleted Project*, and *Design and Construction of the British Library*. Dominique Perrault, architect of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, is author of *Une place pour Paris*, *Une Bibliothèque pour la France*.

Once I attained an overall understanding of national library building projects, I moved on to studying literature dealing with the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. These national libraries were a natural choice

for comparison because both were built in the last ten years, contain over ten million volumes, cost over eight hundred million dollars, and were vehemently debated in the media. Furthermore, they make an interesting contrast because they represent different philosophical approaches to the building process.

The analysis phase of the research involved the evaluation of recent writings by librarians, architects, journalists, and scholars concerned with both libraries. The earlier mentioned databases and search terms were used with the addition of: “national libraries—Britain”, “national libraries—France”. For all searches, the language was limited to English and the date range 1962-2001 for the British Library and 1988-2001 for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

The final stage of research was the latent content analysis. With all the information I gathered, I developed a list of questions I asked myself about both case studies: How did the building projects turn out? Were the public and media happy with the results? Were the librarians’ recommendations, opinions, and input given any weight and/or merit? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the projects?

## NATIONAL LIBRARIES

### National Libraries—Current Building Projects

In the last ten years, the library field has been characterized by a notable number of constructions of new national library buildings, or at least extensive renovations and additions of existing ones. Germany, France, Britain, and Denmark all opened new library buildings in the 1990s. The U.S. finished an \$81.5 million dollar renovation of the Library of Congress Jefferson Building in

1995. Numerous countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, and South America are currently in the design phase for new national library buildings.<sup>3</sup> An exciting project in Egypt is currently in its finishing stage: UNESCO and the Egyptian Government have been working together to build a new hybrid national and academic library, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, near the site of the ancient library that burned in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

Why is there such a wealth of building projects? In the past fifty years many countries have acquired statehood and are looking to develop national buildings. But a more important reason is that the changes occurring in the role of the national library make it necessary to modify the library building structure.

#### National Libraries—Definition

National libraries are difficult to define, with great variety in size, character and function. Two characteristics common to most, if not all national libraries are:

1. They are maintained primarily at public cost.
2. They are part of the national government--subject to the policy and control of an official governmental board.

Besides that, national libraries come in all shapes and sizes. David C. Mearns eloquently wrote that:

National libraries are in ferment; they are wondrously complicated organisms; most are conspicuously differentiated one from another; they defy or elude simple categorization; they have come to possess separable personalities and bear proud markings of dissimilarity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Vilenka Jakac-Bizjack, "Construction of New National Libraries," *IFLA Journal* vol. 25 no. 2 (1999): 121.

<sup>4</sup> David C. Mearns, "Current Trends in National Libraries," *National Libraries*, ed. Maurice B. Line (London: Aslib, 1979) 9.

## National Libraries—Brief History

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the national libraries of the world had a very specific function: they were the national printed archive--a library that acquired, managed, and cataloged the nation's publications. Maurice Line, the Director General of the British Library Lending Division wrote:

Until the [20<sup>th</sup> century] the typical national library was, or aimed to be, to books what the national museum was to artifacts—the finest collection of books in the country, the national book archive, and a source of national pride. Any discussion of its role and function would have seemed strange and unnecessary.<sup>5</sup>

However with the collections growing exponentially in size, national libraries began to look at their services and functions in a different light. National bibliographies needed to be published, accessibility for those who could not get to the library had to be acknowledged and addressed, and collection areas of science, technology and medicine were sorely lacking. By mid-century, national libraries began to realize a change in their missions was necessary. The 1955 issue of *Library Trends* devoted to national library planning spawned a new area of library literature and ideas. UNESCO established a series of conferences on the subject while the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) established a new division on national libraries. A new set of ideas began to emerge; national libraries in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began providing new services and exploiting new technologies. Today, the major problem that national libraries are now struggling with is how to reconcile collection and conservation with service and access.

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<sup>5</sup> Maurine B. Line, ed. *National Libraries* (London: Aslib, 1979) 1.

### National Libraries—Function

In 1966, K. W. Humphreys published a most influential paper entitled “National Library Functions”. This paper went on to become one of the most cited articles in library science in the last forty years. In it, he categorizes library functions at a national library under different headings, including “fundamental” and “desirable”. His research has never been seriously challenged and remains the premier guide for national libraries. Here is a brief summary of his findings.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Fundamental functions of a national library:*

- The outstanding and central collection of a nation’s literature
- Legal deposit of a nation’s publications
- Coverage of foreign literature
- Publication of the national bibliography
- National bibliography information center
- Publications of catalogs
- Exhibitions

#### *Desirable Functions of a national library:*

- Inter-library loan
- Large and comprehensive collection of manuscript material
- Focal point for research on library techniques and technology

### National Libraries—Symbolism

Libraries are part of a group of buildings over which hovers an almost reverent attitude--they are a powerful symbol for their nation as the treasure

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<sup>6</sup> K.W. Humphreys, “National Library Functions,” *National Libraries* ed. Maurine B. Line (London: Aslib, 1979) 64-75.

house of the nation's knowledge, culture, and intellectual heritage. T.D. Webb, editor of *Building Libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* has harkened this reverence to “a social position as close to that of an oracle as a modern institution can be.”<sup>7</sup>

Because national libraries are a matter of national pride, they come under close public scrutiny. In the two building projects, the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the public proved its passionate interest in the building projects with unabated media coverage and intense debates over design and function. As Colin Wilson, the British Library architect said, “A library is an institution that embodies and celebrates the collective memory of the nation”<sup>8</sup> and everyone wants to have a say in its design.

#### National Libraries—the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France

National libraries in Europe had an exciting 1990's with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France opening its doors in 1996 and the British Library following a year later. The two projects, similar in size and sophistication, invite comparison. An analogy of the two projects is the Aesop Fable “The Tortoise and the Hare”. The British Library plodded along slowly and cautiously, while the BNF rushed ahead hardly taking a breath. In the end, we have two very different libraries.

One reason is the dissimilar approaches of the two architects:

Colin St. John Wilson [architect of British Library], who is a subtle and complex architect, has designed his building from the inside out; Dominique Perrault [Bibliothèque Nationale de France] has done precisely the opposite. His building with its massive stripped down forms, expresses grandeur, monumentality, and presidential ambition.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> T.D. Webb, *Building Libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2000) 263.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Wilson, *The Design and Construction of the British Library* (London: British Library, 1998) 8.

<sup>9</sup> P. McGuire, “Tours de Force,” *Architectural Review* vol. 203 no. 1216 (June 1998): 78.

The two nations with a long history of cultural differences and competition could not help but take a few wisecracks at each other's projects. The French quipped that opening the British Library would be the first official duty of King William V. Colin Wilson remarked "the best investment a French scholar could make in years to come would be a season ticket on the Eurostar to St. Pancras (the location of the British Library)."<sup>10</sup> In the end both projects were completed amid much controversy and media coverage. The rest of this paper will look at the two projects individually, and then examine the lessons learned from both projects in building a national library.

## THE BRITISH LIBRARY

### British Library--Introduction

The thirty-six year building saga of the British Library reads like a good book—there are dramatic settings, intricate plots, money scandals, disreputable politics, and well-known characters. Never before in English history has a building created such a controversy or faced such public scrutiny. When the British Government gave its approval to build a National Library in 1972, the public eagerly looked forward to a new building. The dusty, archaic British Museum Library was bursting to its seams. A pristine, larger library where services and conditions would improve was needed badly. What started with such promise grew into a colossal nightmare filled with delays and never ending construction problems. It took 36 years to complete, cost five times its original estimate, and has space for only half the materials originally planned.

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Day, "Slow Train to St. Pancras," *Logos* vol. 8 no.1 (1997): 16.

Throughout its history the Library has been referred to variously as “an-out-of-town-shopping mall”, “a showpiece prison”, “the Great National Disaster”, and “vile and horrible”. Prince Charles famously dismissed it as “a dim collection of brick sheds groping for some symbolic significance.” The architect proved he could dish out as well as he could take it--calling the Heritage Minister, David Mellor, a “lager lout” and referring to Prince Charles’ architectural views as something the Nazis would appreciate. While the library’s opponents were certainly vocal about their opinions, it did have many allies as well. They praised the Library as “a building of beauty, civility and finesse”, “money well spent”, and “the perfect place to curl up with a book”.

What is the true story behind the public mud slinging and muckraking? Why was there such a controversy? Why did it take £511 million (\$843 million) to build? This section of the paper will attempt to answer these questions and provide a history of the building project.

### British Library--Background

To understand the Library, we must take a close look at the history behind its conception. In 1753 an Act of Parliament established the British Museum Library to house a national collection of published materials primarily made up of the Sloane, Cotton, and Harley collections. With the incorporation of the Royal Library in 1757 and King George III’s Library in 1823, the British Museum Library became one of the world’s finest collections of books and manuscripts.

In an effort to extend the prestige and space of the library, the Keeper of Printed Books, Antonio Panizzi, built a massive circular domed building to house

the expanding collection in 1857. This building was promptly dubbed the Round Reading Room and soon became a symbol for scholarship and universal knowledge. (See *Appendix A for picture of the Round Reading Room*)

A hundred years later it became apparent that the British Museum Library was beyond full. Due to lack of room, more than half the collection had to be kept at eighteen other sites scattered throughout Britain. There was such inadequate accommodation for books as well as staff that circulation became increasingly inefficient. Also, the Victorian-built Round Reading Room could not control the temperature, humidity, or pollution levels, thus adversely affecting preservation efforts. There was no choice but to expand the library. In 1962, Sir Leslie Martin and Colin (Sandy) St. John Wilson, two respected Cambridge architects, were asked to submit a plan to enlarge the library.

This plan was initially accepted in 1964 by the Conservative Government but rejected in 1967 by incoming Labour. The Labour Government did not want to make room for the library by demolishing several streets of historic Georgian houses and forcing 1,800 residents from their homes. While the architects spent the next few years redesigning their plans to fit a smaller scale, the idea of creating a true national library began to emerge. In 1971 a government commission recommended that the British Museum Library should merge with the National Central Library, the National Lending Library for Science and Technology, and the British National Bibliography. Parliament agreed, and in 1972 the British Library Act created a “national center for reference, study and bibliographical and other information services, in relation both to scientific and

technological matters and to the humanities.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, a true national library slowly and deliberately came into being.

#### British Library—Colin St. John Wilson

Sir Leslie Martin, one of the two architects, retired in the early 1970’s leaving Colin Wilson as the sole architect for the new library. Wilson, in his late forties, had already established himself as a preeminent architect, credited with many fine buildings. During the 1950’s, Wilson worked in the Housing Division of the London County Council Architect’s Department and built the Bentham Road flats in south London. As a professor at Cambridge University, Wilson designed a few university buildings including Harvey Court Residence Block, which has become one of the most influential buildings in England. In addition, in the early 1960’s Wilson planned three libraries for Oxford University.

Wilson subscribes to the English Free Architecture School that grew from a 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic movement. It was started by a group of English architects who believed that the popular classical style (used rather copiously by Victorian architects) left little room for expression or originality. They chose to look at and interpret the “free asymmetries found in nature.”<sup>12</sup> The English Free School did away with columns, facades, and porticos and embraced Gothic architecture. They believed it was a “free” form and could adequately express organic architecture. Wilson commends the English Free School as “the one

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<sup>11</sup> Jane Carr, “The British Library”, *Building Libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Shape of Information* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2000) 24.

<sup>12</sup> Colin St. John Wilson, *The Design and Construction of the British Library* (London: British Library, 1998) 15.

moment in British architectural history that made an original contribution to the course of architecture on an international scale.”<sup>13</sup>

### British Library—St. Pancras Site

Since it was impractical to build a large library near the British Museum, the government began to search for a new site. In 1976 the government found one in Somers Town, a 12-acre disused railroad good yards on Euston Road. It was the nearest available location large enough for the library and was acquired for £6 million (\$8.6 million). The site was conveniently located near three major railroad/subway stations and its neighbor, the Gothic train station at St. Pancras, was to be the future site of the Channel Tunnel Terminal. Wilson was pleased with the site because “the library will be the first building people will see when they arrive in London. It will be a threshold to Britain.”<sup>14</sup>

With already twelve years of the project under his belt, Wilson was asked to submit another design (his third). To understand the plan created by Wilson it is necessary to examine first the building’s neighbor, then the design constraints of the site, and finally explore how Wilson’s architectural beliefs fit into the overall scheme.

The Library’s most impressive neighbor is George Gilbert Scott’s St. Pancras Hotel (later turned into a train terminal), a Gothic Revival of many turrets, towers, and dormer windows. (*See Appendix A for a picture of St. Pancras*) The flamboyant St. Pancras is a perfect example of the English Free

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<sup>13</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, “A Thirty Years War: Left on the Shelf,” *The Observer* 2 November 1997: 3.

<sup>14</sup> David Redhead, “Buildings for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; The British Library” *Independent* 19 October 1997: 24.

School genre. Wilson chose to compliment this imposing building by using the brick from the same quarries that Scott had used. As one journalist noted:

The library speaks to the station most directly through its facades of beautiful handmade red brick. The match is impeccable and the lovely brick fairly glows. In its massing too, the library pays tribute to the station with a certain reminiscent spikiness.<sup>15</sup>

The constraints placed on Wilson's design mostly revolved around the St. Pancras building. Since St. Pancras is so imposing, a building of equivalent height and mass was needed as a balance. However, on the west side of the site, ground level flats on Ossulston Street could not have their daylight obscured by a building. To create a large building but not to eclipse light or views from its surroundings was a formidable challenge.

#### British Library—Design

Wilson first chose to set the building far back from Euston Road, creating a plaza that would show off St. Pancras and act as a buffer from busy Euston Road. He also designed a series of pitched roofs (nine in total) on the western side broken up by shallow vertical 'steps' so that the building starts fairly low and rises up gradually to allow for the maximum amount of sunlight to filter through. Wilson's new scheme was to occupy 200,000 square meters with space for 3,500 readers and 25 million books. Jane Carr, the Director for Public Affairs at the British Library called the design:

A monumental conception which would have ensured that all the Library's vast collections, out-housed at some 18 locations around London, could be brought together under one roof, with space for future acquisition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the opportunity to provide much greater access for readers and for the general public.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sorkin, *Metropolis*: 97.

<sup>16</sup> Webb, *Building Libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 25.

Due to the shape of the land, the plan of the building resembled the letter A. At the southern entrance on Euston Road, the broad base of the A, the reader would cross an open plaza, complete with a sunken amphitheater, to enter a public exhibition hall. The hall houses the information desk, bookstore, and cafeteria. On the eastern block they would find open-access science reading rooms with lectures and seminar rooms, the patents library, and a conference hall. The western side housed a block of closed-access humanities and rare book rooms. A catalogue hall and restaurants were to occupy the crosspiece of the “A”.<sup>17</sup> (See Appendix A for a picture of the design drawing)

#### British Library—Politics and Funding

Shirley Williams, Secretary of State for Education, approved the project design in March of 1978. However, the Ministers were reluctant to commit funding for the entire project and decided to split up construction into three phases. The first phase, 108,000 square meters, was thought to be adequate for the crucial needs of the library until the end of the 1980's. The Government agreed to provide £74 million (\$106 million). Then to further defer expenditure, the Ministers decided to divide Phase 1 into three stages: 1A, 1B, and 1C. After each stage was completed, the government would review the construction and provide money for the next portion.

It seemed that Wilson had finally been given the go-ahead to break ground for Phase 1A. However in 1980, the Conservative Thatcher-led Government came to office and decided to review the financial plans once again.

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Kenny, “The British Library and the St. Pancras Building” *British Library*. <http://www.bl.uk/index.html>.

In November of 1980 it agreed with the project design but reduced the funding for stage 1A from £22.5 million (\$32 million) to £9.5 million (\$13.6 million). With 57% less money, Phase 1A could not be completed. It had to be once again split into 2 sub-stages, 1AA and 1AB. Stage 1AA would provide some basements, a few reading rooms, and the entrance hall. For many years Wilson was never sure where he stood. As he said, “The goal posts kept being changed.”<sup>18</sup> So in 1980, Wilson, once again, had to change his building plan. This was difficult because Phase 1AA made little sense architecturally or operationally.

#### British Library—Opposition to the Move

However in 1982 Prince Charles laid the first foundation stone and construction *finally* began. For over twenty years England had heard of their new national library without any physical structure appearing. Many began to get frustrated when the library quickly went over budget and fell behind schedule. With the British Museum prepared to reclaim the old Round Reading Room for its own use, those who bewailed its loss felt the time was ripe to speak out. The “Save the Round Reading Room Campaign” sent a report to the Arts Minister asking that the British Library should retain the Reading Room, transporting books to and from St. Pancras, and spending £1.5 million (\$2.1 million) on duplicating important reference works at both sites. In the report they suggested,

Readers could to a considerable extent be allowed to make their own choice between speed and surroundings. If their primary concern is the former they can go to one of the St. Pancras rooms. If the latter, they could give the additional notice required in the Round Reading Room.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> MacCarthy, *Observer*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> “The Future of the Round Reading Room,” *Times Literary Supplement* 3 August 1990: 822.

To this group the Round Reading Room was a temple of learning, tradition, and history that should continue through the ages. When that report did not assuage the government, a new group of six hundred members of researchers, writers, and academics decided to try a different approach. They formed the “Regular Reader’s Group” specifically to keep the 60,000 volume King’s Library at the British Museum. In 1991 they circulated a pamphlet in the Round Reading Room itself:

Due to the beauty of the library and the pleasure of working there, the RRG is urging the retention of the RRR as a reading room for pre-1850 books. It is the post-1850 books, with their crumbling acid paper, that are the most in need of the *supposedly* splendid conservation conditions of the new St. Pancras building. The current British Library/Museum building has good storage, much of it purpose-built for the pre-1850 books. The group urges you to write NOW to the Minister of Arts to add your voice to the proposal.<sup>20</sup>

This group created a storm of opposition and even sought legal help to further their case. Much to Wilson’s and the librarians’ chagrin, the financially strapped government considered this proposal. “This was the worst moment of all,” Wilson states, “because going off at half-cock would have been worse than doing nothing at all. It would have been deeply humiliating.”<sup>21</sup>

### British Library—Mismanagement

However the government realized that they had already invested a large sum of money into the new building and the RRG’s plan was neither practical nor economical. Or as one journalist wrote, “The Library is continuously beset by complex political decisions about its funding that boiled down to the library being

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<sup>20</sup> R1AMF@AKRONVM.BITNET. “5.0297 BM Reading Room; Future Libraries; Regulations.” 1 September 1991. Distribution List.

< [http://lists.village.virginia.edu/lists\\_archive/Humanist/v05/0296](http://lists.village.virginia.edu/lists_archive/Humanist/v05/0296) >

<sup>21</sup> Valley, *Independent*: 13.

too important not to build but not important enough to build it sensibly.”<sup>22</sup> In December of 1985 the Minister of the Arts authorized the continuation of construction with Phase 1AB that would provide space for the Science Reading Rooms, offices, an auditorium, and conservation studies. The target date for both Phase 1AA and Phase 1AB to open to the public was 1993. However, once again the Treasury lagged and did not give financial approval until April of 1987. Wilson speaks of his frustration: “It was stop-go for years. It was simply appalling. We never knew with each bit of funding whether we’d get the money for the next bit, and so on it went.”<sup>23</sup>

The *London Evening Standard* called the British Library “the biggest civil-service fiasco of modern times.”<sup>24</sup> The partially built library became the building the English loved to hate. Prince Charles asked, “How can you tell it is a library? It has no character to suggest it is a great public building.”<sup>25</sup>

To make matters worse, a review commissioned by the Ministers in 1986 discovered that the library construction management hardly existed. It was decided to completely revamp the existing management system. The government would go on to make a major shift in management *five times* during construction, each time hampering the building process. With this state of affairs it was impossible to keep up with government changes. Wilson and his design team fell far behind schedule. In a *Times* article, the journalist blasted the British Library, saying “the monstrous new British Library will remain unopened for the

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<sup>22</sup> Sudjic, *Scotsman*:14.

<sup>23</sup> Valley, *Independent*: 13.

<sup>24</sup> Redhead, *Independent*: 24.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Dorkin, “Dispute Over New British Library,” *Financial Times* 5 January 1989: 6.

foreseeable future. It was once a £170 million pet project beloved by the most powerful in the land; it is now left unloved and virtually on the shelf after an expenditure of £450 million.”<sup>26</sup>

In the late 1980's, the Government scrapped all plans for stages 2 and 3 of the original design. The new plan would increase the number of reading seats from those at the old British Museum Library by only 10% (about 90 chairs), and would no longer be able to house the entire collection. As one journalist put it,

When the government finally decided that it wasn't going to produce all the cash needed to build the library as planned, the design had to be modified so as to function as a coherent whole. That has meant dumping 1,000s of reading room seats, omitting the Oriental manuscripts, and the printed books reading room. It's a process not unlike that of turning a three-funnel ocean liner into a two-funnel model when you are already at sea.<sup>27</sup>

#### British Library--Criticisms

When construction finally commenced in 1982, the press began criticizing the long wait. For the most part, Colin Wilson was the recipient of the condemnation. Once while turning on the car radio Wilson overheard David Mellor, the Heritage Secretary state, “The only thing wrong with the British Library is the architect” and denounced Wilson as “bloody bad.”<sup>28</sup> The ritual humiliation of the architect continued unabated. As the exterior began to take shape, so began the barrage of criticism from the country's cultural aristocracy. In a 1988 BBC documentary, Prince Charles compared the library to “an assembly hall of an academy for secret police” while Labour MP Gerald Kaufman thought it was as “glamorous as a public lavatory”. The House Commons

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<sup>26</sup> “Production Spending,” *Times* 7 November 1992: 19.

<sup>27</sup> Deyan Sudjic, “Just a Little Overdue,” *Guardian* 9 December 1992: 2.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Valley, “Interview: Read all about it...architect finishes Great British Disaster,” *The Independent* 3 November 1997: 13.

National Heritage Committee felt the huge red brick building was “a Babylonian ziggurat seen through a funfair distorting mirror” and branded it as “one of the ugliest buildings in the world.”<sup>29</sup> In 1997 the architectural firm, Colin St. John Wilson and Partners went into liquidation due to lack of work. In Wilson’s words, “no one wants to hire the architect of the ‘Great National Disaster’.”<sup>30</sup>

### British Library—Interior Description

Even with all the setbacks and stalling, the British Library slowly began taking shape. Sandy Wilson believed that once people got a chance to see the interior and to understand what he was trying to accomplish, they would come around to appreciate the building. As he has said, he “designed the building from the inside out—in order to ask what is the task the feature has to perform. That way, you can discover the inherent poetry.”<sup>31</sup> Also he declared, “I liked the idea of a building that’s dumb on the outside and rich on the inside.”<sup>32</sup>

The British Library finally opened the Humanities Reading Room on November 24, 1997. The public proclaimed it a “space designed to foster a sense of community.”<sup>33</sup> Manuscripts followed in March of 1998. The public opening of the exhibition halls, restaurants, and bookstores was scheduled for April of 1998. Finally the library was fully operational with the inclusion of the Science Reading Rooms in the summer of 1999. The public agreed: “All in all, it

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<sup>29</sup> Valley, *Independent*: 13.

<sup>30</sup> MacCarthy, *Observer*: 3.

<sup>31</sup> Valley, *Independent*: 13.

<sup>32</sup> Redhead, *Independent*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Adam Smyth, “Reading in the New British Library,” *Contemporary Review* February 1999: 74.

looks like half a billion quid well spent.”<sup>34</sup> (*See Appendix A for pictures of the building*)

Richard MacCormac, a respected London architect, was the first to praise the interior architecture of the new library in 1995. His articles did much to sway the critical tide of opinion. He called the entrance hall:

...Sensational, not simply because it is unexpectedly big, but because the impact, like that of entering a cathedral, is visceral—surprising and unsettling at first, and only then profoundly calm. Volumetrically, it develops up and away from the entrance doors in a series of great waves which appear to float on reflected daylight.”<sup>35</sup>

The sheer space of the building is illuminated in the soaring lightness of the interior. It immediately draws the eye up to the light-filled ceilings and windows.

The inviting stairs (the architect affectionately refers to them as the his Spanish Steps) lead up to what is the real pièce de résistance: the King’s Library. Because the library switched to an online catalog, the immense planned catalogue hall was no longer needed. Wilson decided to replace it with the King’s Library collection. The 60,000 leather and vellum-bound collection is housed in a six-storied glass bookcase emerging from what appears to be the bowels of the library’s basement straight up into the heart of the building. It is a commanding and beautiful symbol for the library. Wilson refers to it as “magical, like the Kabba in Mecca.”<sup>36</sup> (*See Appendix A for picture of the King’s Library*)

To the immediate left of the foyer are the closed-access Humanities, and Rare Books, Music, and Manuscripts Reading Rooms. The largest, “Humanities 1”, is three floors high. It contains steeped L-shaped terraces that add to the

<sup>34</sup> John Lanchester, “Millions Well Spent,” *Daily Telegraph* 13 June 1998: 7.

<sup>35</sup> Richard MacCormac, “Don’t Knock It Till You’ve Seen It,” *Independent* 11 September, 1995: 8.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Powell, “The Library Man Answers Back,” *Daily Telegraph* 14 June 1993: 15.

dimension and feel of the room. In designing all eleven reading rooms, Wilson referred to a brief drawn up by the British Library Board that specified the purposes of each area and their interrelationships. Basically, the brief examined the way library users use the library. For example, it is understood that a visit to a humanities reading room is usually one of long duration. Readers can spend several days or weeks working on a small group of books or manuscripts. Therefore the rooms they inhabit are full of large-sized desks (all equipped with plugs for laptops) with ready reference materials on the outer edges. (See *Appendix A for pictures of the Humanities Reading Room*)

On the right hand side of the building is the Science, Technology and Patents Reading Rooms. Here—as opposed to the Humanities Rooms—the average visit is of short duration, with readers moving around more. Instead of plentiful seating, the centers of these rooms are filled with bookshelves of current periodicals and monographs. The desks take second stage and are along the walls. Speed and efficiency are the key components to designing these rooms.

Most newcomers to the library do not know that the twelve million volumes of books are kept in four levels of basements that contain 186 miles of shelving that go 75 feet deep into the ground. Having the books underground does simplify the temperature control; a computer system reinforces control of temperature, humidity and atmospheric pollutants. The temperature is kept between 65-77 degrees depending on the function of the room. The life expectancy of materials has increased three times than what it was at the British Museum Library due to these preservation tactics.

### British Library--Function

Simply put, the main function of a library is to provide an easy way to find materials and then to make it simple to get that material. This is where the old British Museum Library failed miserably and the new British Library proudly succeeds. The Museum Library housed 47% of the collection and took from two hours to three days to produce the material requested. The British Library now houses 82% of the collection and estimates that 4/5 of materials can be delivered in thirty minutes--a vast improvement in service.<sup>37</sup>

New or improved services have come into being as a result of additional space and purpose-built surroundings. For the first time the library has a 255-seat auditorium and conference center, allowing for better access and interpretation of its collections. (Also it can be rented for commercial use, a profitable fund-raising activity.) There are modern, well-run exhibition galleries that allow the public to mingle and see treasures of the library, something never allowed in the British Museum.

The new British Library has met the readers with order, efficiency, and books on demand. This system has even won over most of the die-hard Round Reading Room fans. Erica Wagner, the literary editor for the Times said,

I loved the old Reading Room: I was prepared to be sentimental and stropy when it closed. But sitting in the new library yesterday, writing, I could still smell leather and paper, I still felt enveloped by peace—and I knew I would not grow old waiting to read my [requested materials].<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kenny, <http://www.bl.uk/index.html>

<sup>38</sup> Erica Wagner, "Readers' Acclaim Speaks Volumes," *Times* 25 November 1997: Section Home News.

It is apparent that the chance of getting a book in a half an hour has dimmed the glamour of the Round Reading Room into nothing but a fading memory.

One author eloquently claims that reading at the British Library is different from reading anywhere else:

This efficiency has a profound effect on one's relationship with books. It means leads, hunches, even, can be chased up in the afternoon. It means tangents can be faced, head on. And it is a liberating process. Reading a book, then ordering its sources, then half-remembering a couple of titles by the same author and ordering them—it enables a kind of lateral thought to flourish where one can slide from subject to subject, drawing new connections, pulling on threads that would normally be dismissed as frivolous or disappear through apathy. Knowledge is so clearly out there, to be ordered and controlled. Tapping at computers, fetching texts, asking for more: these are the moments when the sense of being observed, controlled, is gone. When the individual is allowed a free rein.<sup>39</sup>

### British Library—Outcome

Contemporary critics are now falling hand-over-foot to praise the library and the architect. In November of 1999, for example, the “British Building of the Century Poll” nominated the British Library as one of the 50 most loved post-1900 buildings.<sup>40</sup> Colin Wilson, age 75, was finally vindicated when he was conferred with a knighthood in 1997.

So what are the lessons learned from this building saga? The cliché “don't judge a book by its cover” comes to mind. The British Library's reputation was seriously damaged during the construction because of the comments from celebrities such as Prince Charles, and high-ranking government officials. Critics chose to attack the British Library design without understanding it and out of fear.

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<sup>39</sup> Smyth, *Contemporary Review*: 74.

<sup>40</sup> Clare Garner, “Britians Are Now Found of Nation's 'Eyesores',” *Independent* 15 November 1999: 10.

Many people chose to critique an unusual structure without recognizing that Wilson was creating a library not just for the next century but the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> as well. Tradition and history, which is such a large part of the British psyche, added more difficulties to the project. The resistance to leave the British Museum Library came largely from scholars familiar with, and very concerned about protecting, the continuity of the library's long-standing practices and customs. It was difficult for them to realize that a new building did not mean an end to ancient traditions, but a new environment better suited to explore those traditions and histories.

## BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Introduction

In 1988, twenty-six years into the building of the British Library, when no one could hazard a guess when or if it would ever open, the French decided that they too needed a new national library. President François Mitterrand announced his vision for “a very big library of an entirely new type.”<sup>41</sup> The 120-year old Bibliothèque Nationale was outdated, full to the brim, and years behind the needs of modern technology. So with sheer presidential authority that harkened back to the absolutism of the French monarchs, the French Government embarked on turning Mitterrand's wish into reality. When the Bibliothèque Nationale de France/François Mitterrand [BNF] opened its doors in November 1995, the French proved to the island to the north that a national library could be built in

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel Renoult, “The Bibliothèque Nationale de France: A National Library for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Building Libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. T.D. Webb (North Carolina: McFarland, 2000) 232.

under a decade. Not only did they build a national library in an extraordinarily brief amount of time, they built a massive monument sprawling over 300,000 square meters containing 250 miles of book-stacks and seats for 3,600. This grandiose building with its mythic proportions was the most ambitious project the French embarked on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at it cost 7 billion francs (\$1.4 billion).

Yet this fast construction pace had repercussions; many felt the building was unsuited to house a library and that Dominique Perrault was more concerned with form than function. Perrault defended his design by saying the only fault of his building was that it was rather fresh and people needed time to adjust to it.<sup>42</sup> The controversy surrounding the Bibliothèque Nationale de France ran just as deep and strong as at the British Library. Known conversely as “François’s Folly” and “self-referential” to “enchanted” and “progressive,” the public criticized and commented on everything from the design to the site to its organization.

This section of the study will trace the development of the BNF project, highlighting the factors that influenced the planning strategy, describing the building from a design point of view, and looking closely at the many controversies that doggedly clipped at the project’s heels throughout the building process.

### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Background

In the President’s annual Bastille Day interview on July 14, 1988, President François Mitterrand made a startlingly declaration:

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Webster, “Bookworms live Dangerously in Mitterrand’s High-Tech Folly,” *Guardian Unlimited* 4 April 1999. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3848397,00.html>)

I want a library of a wholly new conception [...] a national library open to all which can cover all aspects of knowledge in all its disciplines and that will communicate this knowledge to those who research, study and those who need to learn [...] one of the largest and technically advanced libraries in the world which would be connected with all major universities and research libraries in Europe and grant access to everyone regardless of professional status or formal activities [...] We shall then possess an unequalled tool for work and research. This is my ambition and I will accomplish it.<sup>43</sup>

President Mitterrand realized that France was lagging behind other western nations in possessing a national library equipped with modern technology, conveniences, and preservation standards. Having instigated the Pyramids at the Louvre, the Grand Arche in the Défense, and the Cité de la Musique Opera House, Mitterrand was no stranger to grand architectural projects. The future BNF, the most expensive and greatest culturally significant project in France of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to complete Mitterrand's legacy of major architectural undertakings.

At this time the French did have a national library—the Bibliothèque Nationale, which traced its origins to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Charles V, “the Wise” had his personal library inventoried in 1368, showing a collection of nine hundred and seventeen manuscripts. The *Bibliothèque du Roi* (as it was then known) moved from palace to palace for three centuries. In 1537, King François I established the new principle of *Dépôt Légal* whereby all printers and booksellers were ordered to deposit copies of any printed book put on sale in the kingdom into his library. After the French Revolution, the collection found a permanent home in Paris on the Rue de Richelieu and was renamed the Bibliothèque Nationale.

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<sup>43</sup>(Translation by Sylvie C. Davies). Sylvie C. Davies. “The Mitterrand Library in Context: the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Library Provision in France.” *Libri* vol. 48 no 4 (Dec. 1998) : 187.

Expanded over the years by gifts and purchases, the library became even larger in 1793 when the government stipulated that it would enforce the medieval decree of François I that had fallen into disuse during the upheaval of the French Revolution. Now a copy of every book, newspaper, audio-visual material and other publication printed in France was to be deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale collection.<sup>44</sup>

To deal with space problems, the Bibliothèque Nationale at the Rue de Richelieu building expanded and renovated, with little-used books moved to three annexes at Versailles. And yet this was not enough; by the 1980's the Bibliothèque Nationale had reached full capacity. According to one librarian, "Shortly after the Bibliothèque Nationale opened in the morning, every seat (700 total) in Labrouste's elegant reading room was occupied, and the lines of those waiting for a place would stretch into the hall."<sup>45</sup> (*See Appendix A for picture of the Labrouste's reading room in the BN*)

The directors of the Bibliothèque Nationale were working on the possibility of opening a second building when President François Mitterrand made his announcement in 1988.

Why did Mitterrand want a new national library when there was one already in existence? The Bibliothèque Nationale was in terrible shape: the facilities were outdated, services were in need of drastic improvement, and in 1985 the Library Director was asked to resign over ineptitude. Further, the Bibliothèque Nationale did not possess the qualities the President sought: it did

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<sup>44</sup> Davies, 196.

<sup>45</sup> William Vernon Jackson. "The French National Library: A Special Report." *World Libraries* vol. 9 no. 1 (Spring 1999) : 4.

not cover all aspects of knowledge, it was not open to the public, it had no information network with other libraries, and it was technologically obsolete. The media, lacking a name for the future national library, began referring to it as the “Très Grande Bibliothèque” or “TGB” a play-on-initials of the TGV (the French high-speed train).

Shortly after Mitterrand’s speech, Prime Minister Michel Rocard commissioned a feasibility study on:

...The creation of an entirely new kind of library...covering all fields of study, and using the most advanced technologies of data transmission. A library which could be consulted from a distance and which could be connected to other European Libraries.<sup>46</sup>

Patrice Cahart, Director of the National Mint and Michel Melot, Director of the Bibliothèque Publique d’Information, headed the study and submitted their report in November of 1988. They analyzed the Bibliothèque Nationale’s collection and services, evaluated advanced information technologies, examined possible locations for a new library, and estimated the cost. Their recommendations included:

- A six-fold increase in shelf-space from the Bibliothèque Nationale
- A 2,000 seat reading room with public access to 500,000 volumes
- A separate 1,600 seat reading room for researchers
- To keep all pre-1945 published volumes at the Bibliothèque Nationale, while moving the three million post-1945 volumes to the new location
- Use the name Bibliothèque de France for the new library<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Jeanne Hilary. “Une Très Grande Bibliothèque (TGB).” *American Libraries* vol. 20 (May 1989) : 397.

<sup>47</sup> Davies, 190.

## Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Management

The French Government lost no time and immediately set to work in planning the next stage of the building process. President Mitterrand gave the Ministère des Travaux Publics overall responsibility for the project. In turn, the Ministère des Travaux Publics established the pre-planning group Association Pour la Bibliothèque Nationale de France (APBF) in early 1989. Journalist Dominique Jamet chaired this group, comprised of librarians, government officials, and architects. It was their job to come up with a brief that the future architect would use to design the building.

In the end, the thirty-seven-page brief was definitely *brief*. Instead of a long planning process of ideas, studies, feedback, and secondary briefs, all the APBF had time for was a collection of preliminary ideas outlining basic requirements in terms of the library's missions, environment, and functions. The reason for this rush was that the project had to be completed by a pre-determined time--April of 1995. The resulting lack of close collaboration between librarians and the architect would come back repeatedly to haunt the Bibliothèque de France.

In October of 1989 the APBF was granted public status and became a new independent agency, Etablissement Public de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France (EPBF). Its new role made it responsible for construction of the building, proposal of a budget, organizing the contents of the library in collaboration with the Bibliothèque Nationale, and implementing other aspects of Mitterrand's grand scheme. The EPBF operated until 1994 when Mitterrand lost his majority in the

Assemblée Nationale. In an effort to streamline finances, on January 4, 1994, the new Ministère de la Culture, Jacques Toubon, decided the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Bibliothèque de France should merge into the single establishment, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). They would share a single director and library board. The BNF's control was also extended to six other library sites in France: three sites devoted to restoration, conservation, and reproduction in Sablé, Provins, and Marné-la-Vallée, and three other state libraries: the Arsenal, the Opéra, and the Theater Arts Library in Avignon.<sup>48</sup>

#### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Tolbiac Site

The city of Paris donated seven hectares (18 acres) of land along the left bank of the river Seine near the Tolbiac bridge for the future home of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. This land was originally used by the railroads and was part of a wider area of abandoned factories and warehouses. In the 1980's it had been set-aside for the Universal Exhibition of 1989 that never occurred. Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac gave this land willingly because it was part of a planned renovation program to revitalize the run down area.

#### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Design Competition

In Paris there is a history of using design competitions to choose architects for large architectural projects and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France was to be no different. Under the direction of I.M. Pei, an international jury of 18 members comprised mainly of architects, a few experienced library directors and writers, a filmmaker, an artist, and a publicist invited architects in

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<sup>48</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale de France. "Extension and Modernization."  
[http://www.bnf.fr/site\\_bnf\\_eng/connaitrgb/indexgb.htm](http://www.bnf.fr/site_bnf_eng/connaitrgb/indexgb.htm)

February of 1989 to submit their design plans for the future Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Architects were given a mere outline of stipulations to work with besides the original brief. It was required that the building must:

- Be attractive to the public
- Emphasize appeal and hospitality
- Exhibit the nation's cultural heritage
- Convey library functions of conservation and preservation
- Not be intimidating<sup>49</sup>

Two hundred and forty-four architects took up the invitation to propose a design (139 from abroad, 105 from France). The Jury initially whittled that number down to twenty and then to four. President François Mitterrand made the final choice--a young French architect by the name of Dominique Perrault won the competition.

#### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Dominique Perrault

At 36 years old, Dominique Perrault was a rising architect within his own country, but unknown internationally. By the late 1980's, Perrault had accomplished an impressive portfolio of work--mainly industrial and institutional buildings that caused some to regard him as the "child prodigy of French architecture."<sup>50</sup> In 1980 at the age of 27, Perrault opened his own architecture firm in Paris and won his first competition, the Someloir Factory at Chateaudun. In 1984 he won a far more significant competition: the Ecole Supérieure d'Ingenieurs en Électronique at Marne-la-Vallee. Perrault's success owes much

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<sup>49</sup> Davies, 198.

<sup>50</sup> Luciana Miotto Muret, "Dominique Perrault," *Contemporary Architects* (New York: St. James Press, 1994) 748.

to his choice of looking at the inspirational in simple forms and by completing projects within time and budget. Mitterrand chose Perrault because “his style is within the French tradition being at once formal and monumental... and his design harmonized best with the grandeur and tradition of Paris.”<sup>51</sup>

### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Exterior Design

“A library, no matter how big, is not a complex building”, insists Perrault, and he affirms this stance by taking a straightforward approach to the BNF building design. The design is symmetrical and its spaces and functions are laid out with simplicity. (*See Appendix A for picture of Perrault’s design sketch.*)

It begins with an enormous two-floor subterranean rectangular base, surmounted by a plaza. Within the massive hollow center of the rectangle is a two and a half acre sunken garden, comprised of 12,000 square meters. Perrault is most proud of this open space, which he believes to be sorely needed in Paris. In his competition entry, Perrault wrote: “The greatest gift which it is possible to give to Paris today, would be an offer of space, of emptiness: in a word, an open place, free and moving.”<sup>52</sup> One hundred and twenty Normandy pines and oaks were imported to fill this forest oasis. (*See Appendix A for picture of the inner garden.*)

The rectangular block supports four 100-meter (25 stories) glass towers, one at each corner, shaped like an open book facing the garden. The four towers are designed to exhibit the treasures of French culture and serve as a

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Renault, “The Bibliothèque Nationale de France: A National Library for the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” *Building Libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. T.D. Webb (North Carolina: McFarland and Co, 2000) 235.

<sup>52</sup> Renault, 235.

prestigious landmark for the east of Paris. Perrault published a book in 1989 explaining the various symbolic elements of his building, *Une place pour Paris, Une Bibliothèque pour la France*. In it, he explained that the towers convey the significance of the material they contain and they inspire respect, while inviting the public to explore.<sup>53</sup> Perrault's building was designed to "achieve a balance between monumentality and humanity."<sup>54</sup> It remains an effective, clear project, without stylistic flourishes.

### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Interior Design

Like the British Library, most of the praise for the BNF revolves around the interior as opposed to the exterior of the building. One journalist commented, "The most successful aspect of the library is the deliberate contrast between the bleak exterior overlooking the industrial reaches of the Seine and the other-worldly tranquility inside."<sup>55</sup> To enter the BNF, one ascends from the Seine embankment onto the wood-floored esplanade that serves as a public terrace with a surface area of 60,000 square meters. With a view of the Seine, the reader re-descends down a sloping walkway with moving treads toward the reception hall three levels down. (See *Appendix A for picture of the BNF entrance*.)

As one enters the reception hall, they realize this "whole web is woven to lead the reader whether, novice or initiate, toward the heart of the building,

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<sup>53</sup> Dominique Perrault, *Une place pour Paris, Une Bibliothèque pour la France: Premiers Volumes* (Paris: Institut Français d'Architecture, 1989).

<sup>54</sup> Larry R. Oberg, "The Très Grande Bibliothèque and the library of the future," *College and Research Library News* no. 6 (June 1992) : 395.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Graham, "Library's troubles are an open book," *Irish Times* 26 November 1998: 54.

toward sheltered and sheltering places.”<sup>56</sup> All services and research halls are designed in concentric rectangles around the garden. These concentric spaces were deliberately designed for change. “One could,” wrote Dominique Perrault in the competition, “significantly increase the number of square meters proposed by adding peripheral spaces to the service plan, or reduce it by decreasing the use of the towers, or by closing one of the levels.”<sup>57</sup>

Perrault has designed a modern version of a medieval cloister with all reading facilities looking into the inner garden through glass walls. The outer corridor is a walkway for users and staff and leads to a network of various services. The next layer in contains the thematic libraries--Current Affairs and the Sound and Image Study, the two reading rooms--one on each floor, the exhibition rooms, auditoriums, restaurant, and bookshop. Another concentric rectangle is space designed for staff offices, conservation workshops, and book storage. The innermost space is taken up by mechanical and electronic equipment. Here the books will pass from storage to reader on mechanized belts, crisscrossing through the heart of the library. The four tall towers each contain book storage and administrative offices.

Early on in the project, it became generally clear that a “library open to all” was an unrealistic dream of Mitterrand’s, considering the great extent and unique collection housed in the BNF. Instead, it was decided to create two different libraries, one open to the public, the other for scholars. The upper garden level, along with the two exhibition halls, six small meeting rooms, and two large

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<sup>56</sup> Bédarida, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Renoult, 235.

auditoriums, houses the nine Public Reading Rooms seating 1,600, open to anyone over the age of eighteen. Instead of popular material, these reading rooms provide open access to a range of 5,000 periodicals and 370,000 reference works. These publications have been chosen because they are of interest to “intelligent laypersons” and university students. A daily fee of 20 francs (\$3.50) or annual fee of 200 francs (\$35) is charged for access to these reading rooms.

Those who demonstrate a scholarly need through an interview with a librarian can access the lower cloister level where there are twelve research reading rooms, seating 2,000 (1,600 of these can be reserved in advance). Besides open access to some 400,000 books, this is where a scholar can read any of the 11 million printed volumes, 350,000 periodicals, and 1 million sound recordings that the BNF owns. There are 300 computer search stations, 200 study carrels, and 45 viewing and listening stations. The fee here is 30 francs a day (\$5) or 300 francs a year (\$50). (*See Appendix A for picture of a reading room*)

#### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Controversy and Criticism

From the very beginning those involved in building the new library knew they were aiming to open the library in Spring 1995, giving them just eight years to complete the entire building project. This date “fortuitously” coincided with the end of President Mitterrand’s seven-year term. (*See Appendix A for picture of construction work of the BNF*) With this deadline constantly looming over the shoulder of the EBPF, it is no wonder they had the pre-planning stage and the

design competition completed a mere thirteen months after Mitterrand's announcement. The French press immediately accused the government of racing recklessly ahead:

Does it make sense," asked *Le Monde*, "to seal the fate of one of the greatest libraries in the world and the most important cultural institution in France in less than a year—and just in order to allow the current president to inaugurate this building before the end of his *septennat*?<sup>58</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the librarians had only a short time to work on a brief--like an incomplete outline--for Dominique Perrault to work with, rather than a thorough investigation of the library's needs. In consequence, Perrault designed a fine building but one not entirely suited to a library.

The first major objection to the design was the height and purpose of the four towers. As most people involved in working in a library know, glass towers do not offer the most suitable environment for books. The press referred to them as "a great big over-turned table", "solar ovens" and "Bradburian book burners".<sup>59</sup> The damage that the hot French sun would have on the fragile and already-yellowing books would be monstrous. Georges Le Rider, the former Administrateur Général of the BN, wrote a petition to President Mitterrand on August 20, 1991, protesting the tower storage plan. He wrote: "It is the duty of the architect to make a functional building beautiful, not to adopt exactly the reverse procedure."<sup>60</sup> This petition published in *Le Monde* gathered 754 prominent signatures. The intellectuals' attack brought about a counter-petition

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<sup>58</sup> Nancy Marmer, "An Architect's for Mitterrand's New Library," *Art in America* vol. 77 no. 10 (October 1989): 31.

<sup>59</sup> Renault, 246.

<sup>60</sup> Davies, 200.

from 300 architects defending Perrault and his design. But the government did respond to the mighty protest by removing some of the books from the towers to areas below ground and the lowering of the towers to 79 meters and 18 stories (from the original 100 meters, 25 stories). Perrault re-designed the inside of the library to accommodate the move of half the collection of books into the two subterranean levels. He was forced to reduce the area of conference and seminar rooms in the base. The towers now would house administrative offices on the first seven floors while the top eleven floors would be used for book storage with the glass windows shielded by closed wooden shutters. (See *Appendix A for picture of the wooden shutters*)

The second largest outcry over the design concerned the two reading rooms. No library user likes the idea of studying in a cavernous basement, no matter how much light filters in from the garden. In the end, President Mitterrand exercised his authority and reconfirmed his architectural choice. He stipulated that no more changes were to be made to accommodate the wishes of critics.

Nothing about the planned building, it seemed, was sacred. The French protested everything and anything dealing with the building, calling the project mammoth, expensive, and disruptive. Environmentalists and ecologists protested the use of protected hardwoods proposed for use in the wooden shades of the tower windows. The use of Ipe, a wood from the Amazon rain forest, to cover the wooden esplanade caused an outcry. Street protests on behalf of the Paris homeless have taken place at the Tolbiac site. This site was

previously a shantytown where squatters dwelt, and protesters demanded that the homeless be given a new home.

However, the most controversial aspect of the new building did not focus on the architecture, but on the plan to divide the collection of the BN between the Tolbiac and the Richelieu sites. Ideas were bandied about on how and where to divide the collection. At first it was thought that the division would revolve around subject classifications. However, the multidisciplinary nature of research would make it impossible for scholars to study at only one library. It was decided to make the division by date of publication. Failing to find anyone else who would name a date, President Mitterrand made the decision to cut the collection at 1945 -- all material before 1945 (three million volumes) would remain at the Richelieu site, while post-1945 materials (eight million volumes) would be moved to the new BNF.

The uproar from scholars, mainly historians, was immediate and intense. They staged mass meetings, wrote open letters, and went on interviews, speaking to anyone who would listen. On September 11, 1989 a meeting was held to discuss the debate. In attendance were the Ministère de la Culture, the project chiefs of the BNF, the Administrator of the BN, and every French librarian, historian, journalist, or other self-described intellectual who could get in. The result? The historians won the debate and Jack Lang, Ministère de la Culture, decided to abandon the chronological division and transfer the collection in its entirety to the new site. The old BN would retain the special collections, manuscripts, prints, maps, theater arts and cinema collections, and the music

department. The BNF was originally designed with room for seven million volumes, so Perrault was forced to rework the plans for the rectangular base to provide space for this greatly enlarged collection, thereby reducing the space allocated for staff purposes.

The final controversy occurred in December 1996, days before the BNF was scheduled to open. It was decided by President Jacques Chirac that the official name of the library would be Bibliothèque Nationale de France/François Mitterrand. The French media again went up in arms:

It was decried a scandal; disparaged as the politicizing of the arts and letters; portrayed as a political grand gesture or out-right subterfuge on the part of Chirac; denounced as an assault against tradition since the Bibliothèque Nationale had never taken the name of any of the kings and statesmen who had a hand in its development over the centuries.<sup>61</sup>

However, it was done, and like some many other aspects of this project, those in charge disregarded the publics' outcry and continued pushing their ideas through to completion.

### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Opening

Through sheer will, the French kept to their deadline. The foundation work began in December 1990, just 18 months after the project started, and construction commenced on March 23, 1992. The exterior of the building was completed in time for President Mitterrand to officially christen the empty building on March 30, 1995. Successive openings occurred on December 17, 1996 when new President Jacques Chirac opened the upper level public library and then on

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<sup>61</sup> T.D. Webb, "Symbols and Emblems," *Building Libraries for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. T.D. Webb (North Carolina: McFarland, 2000): 192.

October 9, 1998 when the research library opened. (See *Appendix A for picture of the BNF*)

### Bibliothèque Nationale de France—Outcome

After opening in December of 1996, the BNF had to promptly close for two weeks to deal with many problems. These centered mainly on the conveyors moving books down from the towers malfunctioning repeatedly. They were designed in such a fashion as to make it impossible to handle emergencies manually.<sup>62</sup> The next setback was to come from the chief inspector of libraries, Albert Poirot. He called the library a “glacial draught trap where the staff had to deal with continuous breakdowns of equipment intended to deliver books on overhead rails but which sometimes ended up crushing them.”<sup>63</sup>

The organization of the library had also caused more than a few readers to become frustrated:

Once inside there are separate queues for every conceivable aspect of the process, immovably heavy doors, smart cards that aren't, books that often take two days to arrive but vanish after two hours if you're not there, long walks between rooms, and a delivery system that jams.<sup>64</sup>

Another problem mentioned in the media was the windy courtyard area reached by a fifty-foot climb without the aid of banisters. One patron described how she fell flat on her face due to the wood surface that “becomes dangerously slippery when it rains”.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Herbert R. Lottman, “Paris’s New Library A Disaster,” *Publisher’s Weekly* vol. 245 no. 47 (November 23, 1998): 15.

<sup>63</sup> Webster, *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3848397,00.html>

<sup>64</sup> Swaffield, 380.

<sup>65</sup> Laura Swaffield, “For a change, libraries with walls,” *Library Association Record* vol. 101 no. 6 (June 1999): 380.

But comments about the BNF have not been all complaints. One journalist said: "I went to Paris expecting to dislike the new BNF and came away enchanted by it."<sup>66</sup> The sheer size, magnitude, and bold design awes and attracts tourists and patrons alike. Approximately 12,000 people (7,500 readers, 4,500 tourists) walk through the entrance of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France every day. Further eloquent praise came from Dominique Jamet, President of the Association of the Library in France who said, "The library, clothed in light, is made of the stuff from which dreams are woven."<sup>67</sup> Jacques Toubon, Ministre de la Culture called the building "simply breathtaking".<sup>68</sup>

The ambitious goal of the program was to provide one of the largest libraries in the western world with completely adequate and modern facilities. To make such plans is a bold undertaking; to bring them to fruition in little more than a decade is indeed a spectacular accomplishment. The French now have a national library with five times as many seats for readers, with sufficient stack space for many years, and greatly expanded and improved accommodations for staff.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Politics—Management

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<sup>66</sup> Herbert Muschamp, "Where the Readers Are Inside the Books," *New York Times* 11 June 1995: Section 2; Page 36: Column 1

<sup>67</sup> Anthony Vilder, "Books in Space: Tradition and Transparency in the BF," *Future Libraries*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Carla Hesse (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 139.

<sup>68</sup> *Bibliothèque Nationale de France 1989-1995: Dominique Perrault, Architecte*, (Paris: Artemis : Arc en Reve centre d'architecture, 1995): 10.

It is obvious that the British Library Building Project was mismanaged from the beginning. There was no logical reason for the numerous building and site changes, financial barriers, cultural warfare, and government philistinism. It is necessary to begin such a massive project with a clear objective and management plan, as the French did with their EPBF planning agency. The British Library building had three organizations principally responsible for the project: the Office of Arts and Libraries (OAL); the Property Service Agency (PSA); and the British Library. In 1986 Parliament commissioned a review of these three agencies. They found that

The OAL had little authority and that the PSA had not provided adequate management information. Moreover, the Steering Committee, chaired by the PSA—which included senior management representatives from the British Library, OAL, the Treasury, and the consultant architects, and which was intended to meet twice a year to review progress and make decisions on major issues—had not in fact been convened since January 1983.<sup>69</sup>

To further complicate matters the OAL was subsumed into the Department of National Heritage (DNH) in 1992. The National Audit Office wrote that successful management of a major construction project “requires a clear definition of the project requirements and of the roles and responsibilities of the parties concerned, staff experienced in project sponsorship and management, and regular and reliable management information.”<sup>70</sup> It is unfortunate that the British government was unwilling or unable to take its own advice. The lesson is lack of foresight and commitment by management can cause continuous damage to the building project.

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<sup>69</sup> Alan Day, *The New British Library* (London: Library Association Publishing, 1994) 7.

<sup>70</sup> Day, 7.

### Politics--Time Frame

In contrast to the politics of management, this is the area where the French government made one of its largest mistakes. Setting a deadline for the project to correspond with President Mitterrand's last term continually harmed the project throughout its course. It was extremely difficult to work under such an imposing deadline -- decisions had to be made quickly without pause for thought or long discussion. The EBSF brief was pitifully inadequate, the architects in the design competition only had a grand concept to work with, criticisms of the design were ignored, and finally a building was built not entirely suited to house a library. The French over-reached themselves in trying to build the largest library in the world in less than eight years. Many of the fundamental design flaws could have been corrected had the library management team had more time to work out their specifications or if the French government paused long enough to listen to the public's criticism. The lesson? Plan a generous timeframe for all important elements of the building process: do not rush.

However, the British Library timetable is obviously not the better method. No one wants to build something that takes decades longer than it should-- particularly a building intended to contain the changing domain of information. The lesson is if it is necessary to set a deadline, it should be based on the construction process and not on exterior motives. In addition, it should not be a do-or-die deadline, but rather a more achievable and realistic goal.

### Politics—Funding

The British Treasury, with its “drip-feed” funding, caused the torturous building pace and gives cause for the British government to reevaluate the way it manages and pays for large building projects. A satisfactory initial cost estimate, a budget plan, and the full support of the Treasury would have saved much time, money, and stress.

One of the problems inherent with building a national library rather than a private, public, or school library is that the money comes directly from the government. This is a double-edged sword: as politics at the national level change, funding for government projects is threatened. During the building of the British Library, for example, eight different Prime Ministers presided over the government, and party control between Conservative and Labour changed six times. Each new government felt it needed to review the project and usually decided that less money was needed. Needless to say, this was catastrophic to the building of the British Library.

In France, the Socialists lost control in 1993 and were replaced by the Conservative Right. Even with their penchant for financial efficiency, the new government never seriously considered major budget cutbacks for the BNF building project. They understood that a new library was needed and that four million francs (\$530 million) had already been spent. They did reduce the budget of the Ministère de Culture by 5% (which would affect the BNF down the road) but this was done in an effort to qualify for the European Common currency project and not to diminish expenditure for the library.

At the 1998 International Conference in Latvia for New National Libraries, librarians gathered to discuss the financial aspects of constructing new national libraries. They stipulated that with “decision makers within the government constantly changing, it is necessary to ensure uninterrupted flow of finance, spanning over several years.”<sup>71</sup>

### Librarian Involvement

Both governments can be accused of not using their librarians enough in the building project. From no other source might they have gathered more expert information about how a library functions and specific information about their library’s special requirements. All library building literature emphasizes this point over and over: it is necessary that there be a close collaboration between librarians, architect, and politicians throughout the entire project.

The British Library design team began well by asking the librarians to design the library brief with the architect. In the end, the brief contained over 800 detailed specifications for the design. Wilson used this brief to build a highly efficient and functioning library that all librarians and patrons appreciated. However, during the construction process, the librarians’ input and worth became overlooked. It was not until very late into the program that the government realized how badly the management of the project was going, and librarians were once again included in project management. In October 1989 the British Library was allowed to appoint one of their own project managers to oversee the project and plan their future occupation of the building. How much of the controversy surrounding the building of the British Library could have been avoided had

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<sup>71</sup> Jakac-Bizjak, 122.

librarians played an active role in the planning will never be known. What is known is that the constant criticism heaped on the library considerably affected staff morale and dampened their pride in the new building.

At the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the deadline once again interfered; this time affecting the librarian's involvement. There was hardly time for them to make any type of specifications or guidelines before the project was off and running. The French government believed this method avoided lengthy procedures and periods of indecision that would postpone the completion of the project. While part of this statement is true, having no consensus between architect and librarians adversely affected the design of the library building. The lesson is librarians are the most knowledgeable group on how libraries function and should be not only included in the building process, but also sought out for their expertise.

### Form versus Function

It was obvious from the start that Dominique Perrault did not subscribe to the mandate "form follows function" when he designed the BNF. In response to some of the criticism over the design, Dominique Perrault said:

The fundamental principle of the BNF is to be an urban development. [...] We wanted to plant the seed, if one may say so, from which the neighborhood might flourish. The intention is not to start building a bunker, a kind of mammoth. [...] We have two choices: either the library is conceived as an Egyptian mastaba where people and books are buried, or we aim for the sky and use height.<sup>72</sup>

The design emphasis was obviously placed on the building's aesthetics and urban role and not its function. President Mitterrand and the design competition

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<sup>72</sup> Davies, 200.

committee were more interested in building a symbolic monument as opposed to an efficient library. The planning management team was then left to find solutions on how to adapt the library functions to the architectural design. The end result is that librarians, scholars, and the public have had to adjust to the building being a triumph of design over functionality. Librarians are left with the difficulty of accessing books in four different towers, and with finding a way to get the exorbitant budget needed to cover operation costs in terms of equipment, ventilation, and necessary staff.

The lesson here is that it is possible to make any building functional, no matter how poorly it was designed originally, but at what cost? Library patrons do not demand a tourist-worthy monument to work in; they require easy access to information and an efficient document supply system. A building cannot live on form alone.

### Conclusion

Britain and France rose to the challenge and undertook building two of the world's largest libraries. Each had its own triumphs and defeats, and moments of agony and ecstasy. For those of us in the library profession, who are involved, or will be involved, in library building, the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France must be examined for the lessons learned.

Communication is fundamental. Librarians need to learn how to communicate their needs to architects. They can do this by understanding the design process and what the architect is trying to accomplish. In return,

librarians should provide the architect with as much pertinent information of the inter-workings of the library. Finally, it is the librarian's duty to respond critically to the design concepts and provide useful feedback.

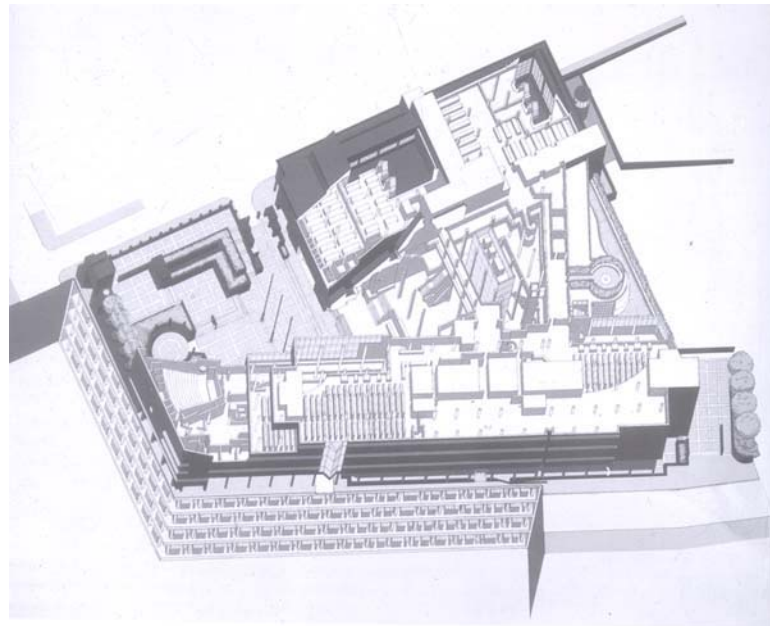
Commitment to the project throughout each phase is crucial. Librarians must become facility leaders, planners, and organizers if they expect to have libraries that accommodate their needs and wishes. With government officials, celebrities scholars, and architects involved, librarians tend to wait passively by to be asked to join sub-committees, meetings, or provide feedback. Roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined in the beginning of the project and adhered to throughout. With all parties committed to making the new library a success, the possibility of failure is dimmed.

There must exist a working relationship between those involved in the planning and those that carry out the work. Ultimately, cooperation from all group members is vital to create an efficient, aesthetically pleasing library where patrons and staff feel comfortable.

APPENDIX A: Pictures and Photographs



British Museum Library  
[www.r-alston.co.uk](http://www.r-alston.co.uk)



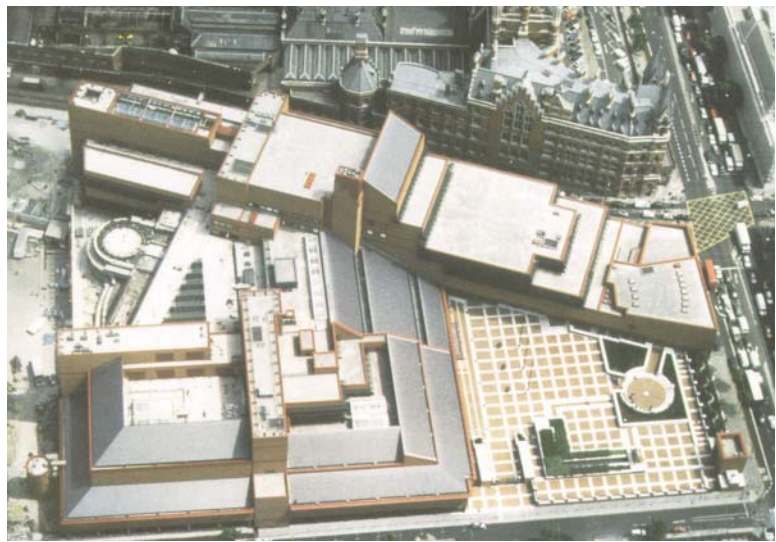
Design of the British Library  
*Design and Construction of the BL, 26*



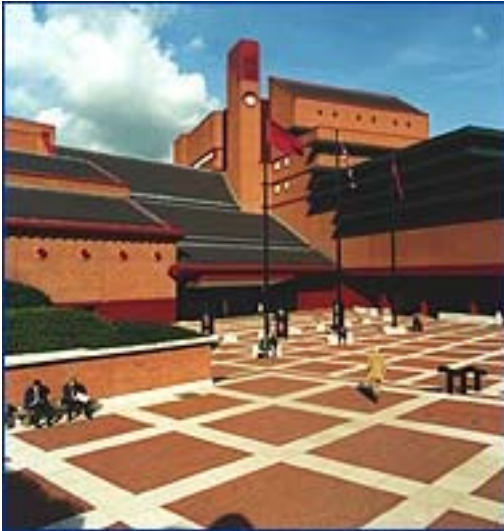
King's Library in the BL  
<http://www.bl.uk/news/pictures.html>



Humanities Reading Room  
<http://www.bl.uk/news/pictures.html>



Arial View of the  
British Library.  
<http://www.bl.uk/news/pictures.html>



British Library looking  
toward the entrance.  
[www.education.bl.uk/  
lib/about.htm](http://www.education.bl.uk/lib/about.htm)



St. Pancras,  
neighbor of BL  
Design, 35



Bibliotheque Nationale-  
the Richelieu Building  
[www.albany.edu/french/  
fhome.html](http://www.albany.edu/french/fhome.html)



Perrault's design sketch  
[www.goethe.de/ms/bud/biblio/koindex.htm](http://www.goethe.de/ms/bud/biblio/koindex.htm)

Construction begins at the BNF.  
*BNF: 1989-1995*, pg. 95

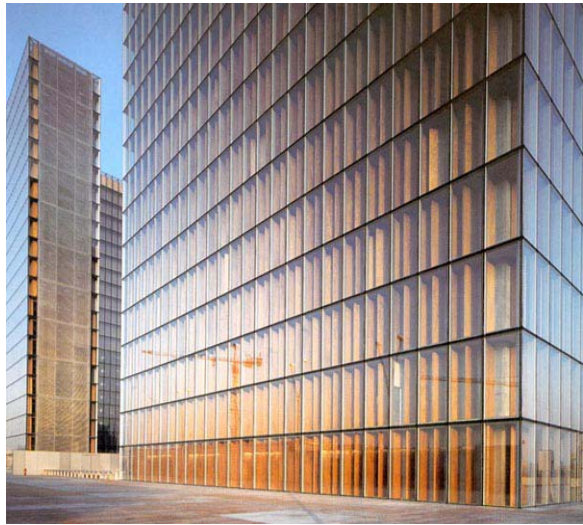


BNF from the Seine  
[www.paris-tourism.com/places/library/3.html](http://www.paris-tourism.com/places/library/3.html)



Entrance to the BNF  
*BNF 1989-1995*, pg. 173

Wood Shutters  
*BNF 1989-1995*, pg. 154.





BNF Reading Room  
*BNF 1989-1995, pp. 179*



BNF Inner Garden  
[www.kgi.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/  
archphot/hoefer/paris.htm](http://www.kgi.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/archphot/hoefer/paris.htm)

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