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Books Under Glass:
the Bibliothèque Nationale de France

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As we left the Paris metro station in the 13th arrondissement, we looked around excitedly for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). We had heard that France's new national library was an incredible sight—graceful towers of glass surrounding a sunken garden. We had also heard that aesthetics and symbolism, rather than strict adherence to traditional library design, dominated the structure. This seemed a very typical French approach to creating a grand monument, and admiring as we do the French aesthetic sense, we were prepared to be amazed.

The site of the BNF had been chosen to revitalize the area of the Seine Rive Gauche (Downey, 1995), and this was clear to us as we slowly found our way to the library. Without the help of directional signs to guide us, we followed the only path to the BNF—a narrow sidewalk along a busy street that took us over rows of train tracks and past towering construction cranes, old warehouses, long-abandoned factories, and empty buildings covered in graffiti.

As we approached the library our first sight was a tall bank of gray wooden stairs that surrounded the site. Symbolically considered the "podium" of the site, this is the raised platform from which the glass towers soar. Reaching the top of the stairs, we had our first full view of the complex. The podium was a vast and empty plain, covered in weathered wooden planks, and anchored on four corners by L-shaped towers. These glass towers, meant to resemble open books, were designed to hold the valuable 500-year-old collection of French literature. In this way, the written word would symbolically rise above the people.

Our first challenge in this tour was to find the entrance to the library. After discovering a small silver tower with directional signs, we followed the arrows we hoped would lead us to the main entrance, near the beautiful river Seine. However, after trekking across the slick wooden planks of the windswept complex, we found this entrance to be mysteriously closed. So, we doubled back and followed the arrows in the opposite direction. Here we came upon an escalator entrance adjacent to the lush sunken garden we had heard so much about. Glad to see the police barricades around it were meant to guide foot traffic, rather than to deter it, we began our descent to the main entrance. Once inside, we found ourselves in a long hall, covered in red carpet and surrounded by mysterious doors and pathways. With no one to guide us, we looked for directional signs, but eventually simply followed other library users as we acquainted ourselves with the library's layout.

We soon learned the vast 21-story library was built around a 600 meter garden of a transplanted Normandy forest. This forest is a garden courtyard, sunk 6 stories into the ground, and surrounded on all sides by the massive rectangle of the library itself. The "haute de jardin" on the entrance level is open to the general public, while the lower "res-de jardin" is strictly reserved for researchers. The four glass towers divide the collection into subject areas of: (1) philosophy, history, social sciences; (2) law, economy, political science; (3) science and technologies; and (4) literature and art. A complex system of trolleys on 400 kilometers of conveyor belts (Shaw, 2000), connects the towers and is used to transport the books from one location to another.

We soon learned that the BNF was quite different than the libraries we had visited during our previous travels.

The Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF).

For example, as we started to quietly take pictures of the interior design, we were quickly approached by security guards who sternly prohibited us from using our cameras. Although there was no sign to indicate that photography was "interdit," we apologized and continued on our tour. We soon learned that the majority of the library was not open for our visit, the glass towers were closed to users, and a fee was required to use most other areas. We hoped at least to find our way to the garden, but quickly realized this "jardin sacre" was designed to be sacred, symbolic of the fragility of a rare book. It was not open to people of any rank, but meant to be regarded and contemplated from afar, through the shining glass of the courtyard windows.

Although we had different expectations for our tour of this library, we also understood that as tourists, our experience was likely to be more confusing than that of usual patrons. We greatly admired what had been accomplished in this library, and we understood it was a different type of library with a different purpose. We assumed the differences we noted must fit more the French sensibility of a library. We decided to learn more about the French view of this library, its form, and its functionality. Shortly after returning home, we researched the literature on the BNF and found that our experience was not unusual. For it seems the BNF has been widely criticized in the press for a multitude of problems, primarily associated with attention to form over function.

We noted that many of the problems cited in the press seem to stem from the valuing of architectural form over the practicalities of library function. The most prominent example of this is putting areas for people below ground, and storing precious intellectual artifacts in towers of glass where they are subject to the damaging rays of the sun, excessive heat in summer and moisture in winter. Large wooden panels were eventually installed behind the glass, destroying the transparent effect sought by architect Dominique Perrault (Downey, 1995). Other basic design problems included dividing the closed stacks collection into four narrow towers separated by inconvenient, 300 meter long corridors (Sancton, 1998). Soon after opening, other problems arose—water leaking into the basement, the automated shelves crushing precious books, and the complex trolley system for retrieving materials damaging larger, non-standard sized books (Lottman, 1991).

Another problem seems to be a lack of consideration of the needs of library users as well as library staff. Often noted are the slippery wooden planks that cover the barren complex, the lack of wheelchair access, and obscure directional signs (Fenster, 1998). And once library users make their way to the library, they are faced with further obstacles. Many have had to wait long hours to receive the items they were assured would take only 20 minutes to retrieve (Sancton, 1998). On other occasions, users were not allowed to leave the library because the computer system mistakenly noted that they had not returned items (Masters, 1998). Other staff complaints focus on

working conditions, including cramped and windowless work areas with harsh fluorescent lighting and bare concrete walls. In addition there are no staff lounges, places to put one's belongings or areas for staff to simply meet (Laushway, 1999). Staff are also prohibited from putting up pictures of their children in their work areas in order to maintain the austere visual impact of the interior (Fenster, 1998).

Many complaints also seem to stem from the design of the computer system and the lack of training that the staff has received. This highly centralized computer system was designed by France's Cap Gemini for a cost of $90 million (Sancton 1998) and controls everything from electronic entry cards to air conditioning, from the online catalog to the flushing of toilets (Masters 1998). On October 13, 1998, the total system crashed only four days after the research section was opened. This crash sparked an 18 day strike by library workers, protesting the new library's lack of functionality as well as the lack of staff training and poor working conditions. As a result of the

strike settlement, nine committees have been created to examine the problems and propose improvements. (Sancton, 1998)

While staff went on strike to be heard, users organized petitions. A petition was presented to President Mitterand with the signatures of over 750 university professors and researches from many countries, outlining needed modifications. A committee was formed in response to this petition, but the modifications were reported to be minor (Wenzel, 1999). Ideally, the design process would have involved users and staff from the beginning of the process. Librarians and users certainly could have assisted architects by clearly articulating their operational and future needs. This seems essential, since architects are often unfamiliar with the operations of a library and the latest trends in library services. In a perfect world, of course, librarians would have this option, but in the case of the BNF, we see that politics greatly affected the process.

Considering the political context of this project seems to help explain why librarians were not included in the design of the library. President Francois Mitterand was dying of cancer when he ordered the project (Master, 1998) and had a great deal invested in the creation of a grand and innovative library. French presidents often build grand monuments in Paris to "leave a concrete mark on the capital city, and thus the nation," and this library was to be the last cultural "grand dessien" of Mitterand (Wenzel, 1999). This can be seen in Mitterand's letter to Michel Rocard, Premier Ministre: "I should like my second term

Cyril Oberlander and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

to see the development and completion of the project ... and to go a step further still, by creating a very large library, of an entirely new type ..." (Perrault, 1995) Accordingly, the BNF was to be a "glorious monument to mark the final phase of [Mitterand's] long reign." (Laushway, 1999).

This political context also created a discrepancy between those who would be planning the library and those who would be providing the funds. The Secretary of State for large projects was in charge of the building process, rather than the Ministry of Culture, who paid for it (Wenzel, 1999). Overall, the project cost about $2 billion to build, and a further $250 million a year to operate, which is about 15 percent of the Ministry of Culture's budget (Shaw, 2000). Also, there was great pressure from Mitterand to finish the project hastily. The ailing president insisted on dedicating the library himself before leaving office in May of 1995 (Sancton, 1998). Because the builders were on such a tight schedule to finish, there was little time for reflection, alterations, or course corrections once ideas were adopted. Understanding these political forces helps explain why librarians were not consulted in the design of the building, resulting in a library that focuses on the ideals of aesthetics and symbolism, rather than addressing the practicalities of library function.

Certainly any grand project will have its critics, and, despite the problems attributed to the new library, one must note that the BNF is an amazing accomplishment. It was completed in a mere 10 years, it accommodates 2,000 readers, and provides access to 11 million printed and media items as well as thousands of books and images online (Sancton, 1998). It has proved to be one of the world's premiere research libraries and, with the help of librarians and library users, will certainly overcome these initial glitches, proving it is worthy of the popular label, TGB—"Tres Grande Bibliothèque." As the architect Perrault explains, "Nothing is finished, but everything is described in the present state, thus inscribing the trace of the work in action." (Perrault, 1995). The process of post-construction fixing, then, is probably familiar to most every library building project, and we look forward to touring future iterations of the impressive BNF. ⬚

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operated by the Ayala Foundation, is currently working on the digitization of its library collection to be made available through the Internet and CD-ROMs. Ms. Almario, the library director, said the digitization of the collection is part of their "service to researchers." She referred to the collection as an electronic resource center that tries to appeal to the younger generation through information technology and telecommunications.

A random check of libraries in Metro Manila indicates that computerization of library system is in its infancy stage, as stated by some librarians interviewed by *Business World Online*. Many libraries are automated in the sense that they use electronic access tools like CD-ROM databases and the OPAC. In most Philippine libraries, however, researchers still need to go physically to the library to access their collections. Only a few have bibliographic databases accessible via the Internet.

Financial problems are shared by librarians nationwide, noted R. Tarlit, President of the Philippine Library Association, Inc. He told *Business World Online* that members are aware of the need to computerize but generally agree that funds are lacking to do so. Lack of expertise in automation likewise hinders the implementation of computerization. Librarians do not have a negative attitude but are concerned about the lack of a government policy to support the implementation of automation.

Can Philippine libraries keep themselves up-to-date? This is a question that everyone is asking. Only the future can tell. Filipino librarians are certainly trying. ❑

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