

# A Library in the Grands Moulins de Paris: challenging Reality

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2006, the University of Paris 7 and its new Main Library will move to Paris Rive Gauche, a recently developed neighbourhood on the left bank of the Seine. The library will occupy most of the city's former industrial mills, the Grands Moulins de Paris. As part of the project, the library developed a very detailed functional program. The facilities are expected to comprise 1,800 workstations (half of which will be computerized), and upon completion will have a capacity of 300,000 freely accessible documents and 350,000 documents in store over a total surface area of some 12,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

The architect Rudy Ricciotti won the international competition to design the library held in 2001. Perfectly suited to its function, the industrial building in which the library is housed dates from the 1920s. It presents both advantages (vast surfaces, sufficient load-bearing capacity, natural light, etc.) and obstacles (restrictions on free circulation, forests of columns in certain areas, interrupted spaces, etc.) to being transformed into a library that is functional and adapted to its purposes.

The building's structure and the constraints it imposed profoundly influenced the program which had to be adjusted, and also affected other aspects, including the arrangement and features of the furnishings as well as the building's system of signs. In agreement with the university, the library worked in close collaboration with the architect from the earliest sketches onwards. As a result, his initial plan also evolved considerably. The installation of the library in the Grands Moulins offers us a chance to observe the nature and effects of the interactions between the transformation of a building and the evolution of a program.

## **ORIGIN AND SUPERVISION OF THE PROJECT**

In 1996, the University of Paris 7 - Denis Diderot began the process of moving and re-establishing itself in the new, rapidly developing neighbourhood of Paris Rive Gauche.

## **Grands Moulins (library) on the left**



The project arose as a result of the constraints imposed by the asbestos removal on the Jussieu campus and the unfavourable layout of the spaces Paris 7 occupied there. From the moment studies for the new library began, the university hoped to make it a gathering point symbolic of the new university, and the decision was made to relocate to the city's former industrial mills, the Grands Moulins de Paris. In 2001, Rudy Ricciotti won the architecture competition to redesign the Grands Moulins as a whole. From 2002 to 2004, the various project phases were carried out, from the original sketch to the choice of collaborating firms. Work began in 2004. The first occupants will move into the spaces in the fall of 2006, and the library is scheduled to open its doors at the beginning of 2007.

### **PROGRAM AIMS**

The director of the library and the project manager worked in close collaboration to draw up the functional program, which was preceded by a brief stating the principal aims of the new facilities.

The underlying goal was to establish the university's central, multidisciplinary library in a way that integrates information technologies, and to organize it according to the principle of free access to the collections and electronic resources, open 70 hours per week. The main specifications were as follows:

#### **Users**

- University of Paris 7: 25,000 students, professors, researchers, staff.
- Students from Paris and the surrounding departments (Île-de-France).
- Local public.
- Disabled people access to the spaces and resources.

#### **Work stations**

- 1,800, including 900 computerized and multimedia stations.

- Ports for personal laptop computers.
- Numerous rooms for group work.

### **Documents**

- All academic and research cycles in language and literature, the humanities and social sciences.
- Education level, through the first-year master, in exact sciences
- Expected capacity upon completion: 350,000 freely accessible documents and 350,000 documents in dense storage (compactor system).

### **Organization of documents**

By documentary poles: three in language and literature, the humanities and the social sciences, and one in the sciences. In addition, there is the “Denis Diderot” reference room and a periodical and newspaper reading room.

### **Access to information**

A large online electronic database, on-site and distance information and self-training resources will be available thanks to a documentary information system integrated into the university’s information system and its digital work environment.

### **Training**

Two training rooms will be available for user instruction. The library will offer documentary research training and will participate in teaching documentary methodologies.

### **Internal services and dense storage spaces**

These occupy an estimated 20% of the total surface area. The traffic of the library’s internal services must not intersect with that of the public spaces.

### **Surface areas and levels**

Estimated total surface area: 13,000 m<sup>2</sup>, ideally with no more than 4 levels of public spaces presenting a spatial continuity.

## **THE BUILDING AND ITS EVOLUTION**

Georges Wybo, architect of the Deauville casino (1912) and Printemps Hausmann (1920), built the Grands Moulins in 1923. They were in use until 1996, producing 1,800 tons of flour per day. Today, they remain an impressive example of early twentieth-century industrial architecture.

The Grands Moulins are composed of a concrete quadrilateral with a metal framework that is clad - on the side facing the Seine in particular - with a ‘noble’ almost ‘classic’ exterior including lancet windows, slate roofing and skylights.



## The building



## The building



The four buildings surround an inner courtyard. Originally, the floors of the various sections were not all at the same level and the buildings themselves were not interconnected on each floor.

The award-winning architect Rudy Ricciotti has referred to the entire structure of the Grands Moulins as a “concrete Quasimodo” - conveying to what extent it is at once hulking, unusual and yet not without a certain grandeur. Ricciotti respected both its outward appearance and external features.

### **The library’s spaces**

Initially 13,000 m<sup>2</sup>, today they cover just over 10,000 of the total 25,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

The architect’s structural intervention consisted primarily of the following:

- Levelling all floors in the various sections of the structure by creating intermediate floors.
- Reconstructing walkways from the second floor to allow for horizontal circulation.

### **New walkways**



- Piercing one of the façades to permit natural light to enter all the spaces.

## **Piercing one of the facades**



- Eliminating structures specifically designed for the mill's functions, such as the silos.
- Creating vertical circulation (elevators, stairs, stairs within the library itself) to ensure the smoothest possible traffic within the public spaces while also separating public traffic from that of the library's internal services.
- Creating floor openings on the library's third floor to re-establish a visual continuity between certain public spaces.



## Creating floor openings

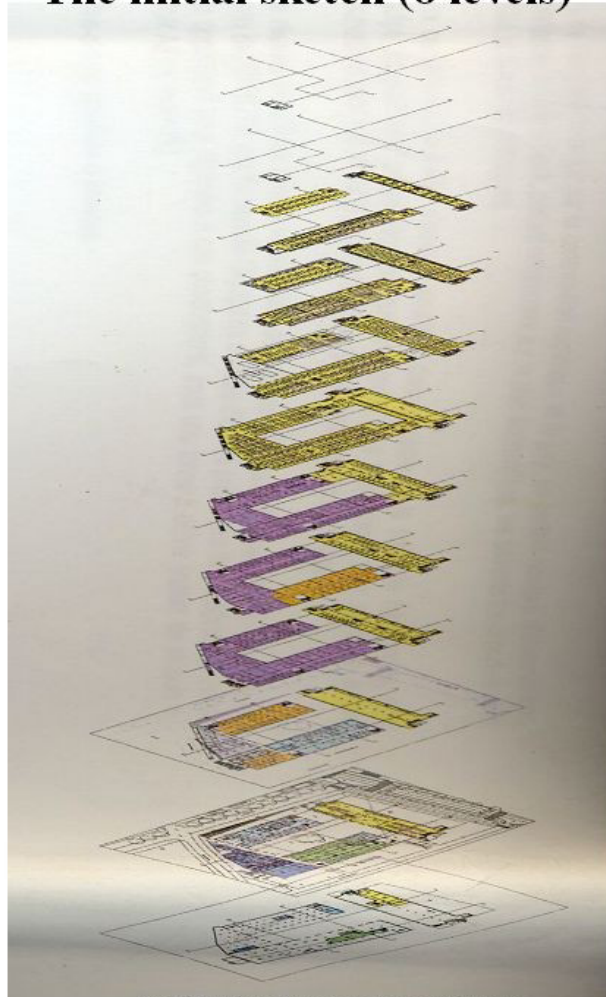


- Lining the basement beneath the central courtyard in order to install storage spaces there.

### THE MAIN INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE BUILDING AND PROGRAM

The architect's initial sketch only roughly corresponded to the functional program set forth by the library: for example, it had eight levels, some of which were not interconnected, sometimes making it necessary to cross through internal services to reach public spaces, or to exit and re-enter the library.

## **The initial sketch (8 levels)**



We established a very close dialogue with the architect in agreement with the university, which entrusted us to lead the discussions. We benefited from the project management's full attention.

Naturally, we could always refer back to the program and clarify our requests; nevertheless, we also had to 'take into account the building' and not ask for the impossible - such as a compact space, for example, since the mill is originally a linear building. While it was possible to reduce the eight public levels to five, there was no way to eliminate the cumbersome columns or to raise some of the ceilings.

The building presented a certain number of features that interacted either positively or negatively with the library's functional requirements:

- Vast surfaces with a wide constructive network (7 m) render the space legible and logical, however, the building's depth makes it necessary to furnish it in a rather uniform and repetitive manner.
- Load-bearing capacity is ensured throughout thanks to the building's original function.
- Natural yet moderate light ensures visual comfort and good document conservation.
- In some areas, forests of columns make furnishing difficult yet allow for the differentiation of spaces.
- Uneven ceiling heights (between 3 and 5 m) create a rather suffocating sensation in some areas, magnificent perspectives in others.

While the quadrilateral layout certainly makes using the library somewhat inconvenient in terms of the distances that users must cross and the vast spaces that must be monitored, the variety of visual prospects and approaches make up for these difficulties to some extent.



## Quadilateral lay out



By explaining the program's functions and engaging in discussions with the architect's team, it was possible to:

- find successful solutions for the flow of users, documents and internal services;
- assure the autonomy of the library's internal services, which are nonetheless also connected to the public spaces on each level;
- create continuity between the document-holding spaces, which was initially lacking.

No doubt the building's powerful personality inspired the architect to preserve 'traces' of its origins and history - for example, original columns and girders were simply cleaned and varnished, while ceilings were given an 'industrial' treatment with the cable-pathways exposed.



vue sur l'angle de l'esplanade des Grands Moulins et du quai Panhard-Levassor - état projeté

This architectural decision strongly determined the furnishings, whose materials, colour and style will be chosen to respect the monumental nature of the spaces and to highlight visual perspectives (continuous tables, for example). At the same time, an attempt was made to create rhythmic interruptions and more intimate spaces to encourage users to fully inhabit the library. In collaboration with the project management, the consulting interior architect thus worked hard to define inventive furnishings also in line with the fixed furniture such as the lending, reception and information desks designed by the architect team. Numerous exchanges ensure that the project's collaborators are all in contact with one another, and tours of the library and meetings with suppliers are helping to bring the aesthetic choices in line with the functional requirements - even as durability and cost-effectiveness are also always kept in mind. Considering the quality of the original building, the constraints it presents are viewed in a positive light - as a challenge.

## **CONCLUSION**

Naturally, it was not possible to satisfy all of the program's recommendations due to the characteristics of the building itself, which assure neither spatial compactness nor flexibility.

In order to function smoothly, the library will require considerable staff to monitor and assist its users.

On the other hand, it seems clear to me that the close collaboration with the architect was possible largely because the project involved refurbishing and altering an existing building rather than constructing a new one. The architect could listen to us with an open mind and frequently search for solutions guided by us on the one hand - and by the building on the other.

The building's physical presence also made it easier for us to visualize and appropriate the project. From the beginning, our approach to it was concrete, at once practical and sensitive - in short, extremely stimulating. While we cannot claim that this will be the ideal library (but then, who can even say what that is nowadays?), we do believe that it will be suited to its purpose, and we are certain that it will be unlike any other.