

# A Square for Paris, a National Symbol, and a Learning Factory

## Dominique Perrault's Bibliothèque Nationale de France

As 1998 drew to a close, Patrice Cahart, chairman of the board of the Bibliothèque Nationale, and Michel Melot, head of the Center Pompidou's library of public information, submitted at the request of the prime minister a proposal for a Grande Bibliothèque. This Bibliothèque Nationale de France was to replace the Bibliothèque Nationale of the Rue de Richelieu. An invitation for submissions to the design competition was issued in February of 1989. That invitation provided only a basic outline of the project; a detailed program was to be established at a later time in coordination with the chosen architect. Such ambiguity allowed for a variety of interpretations from the 105 French and 139 foreign architects who submitted proposals (Bédaria; Read). The jury—consisting of nine architects, including chairman Ieoh Ming Pei; and eight librarians, artists and scholars—advanced twenty to twenty-five of the 244 proposals; among the semi-finalists were Ricardo Bofill, Mario Botta, Richard Meier, James Stirling, Alvaro Siza, Bernard Tschumi, and Arquitectonica. Those 20+ then became four: James Stirling, Future Systems, Chaix & Morrell, and Dominique Perrault, an up-and-coming French architect whose only major commission to date was the engineering school at Marne-la-Vallée (Read). The ultimate decision rested in the hands of François Mitterrand, President of France from 1981 to 1995. On August 21, 1989, Mitterrand announced his choice: Perrault.

Perrault's solution to the design problem distinguished his proposal from the others. Because the library was to be surrounded by a new city quarter, says James Read, the architects had two options: "Either they could remain within the volumetry of the surrounding city and create a 'remarkable' object, or accept a more banal object, which would be rendered 'remarkable' by contrasting with the context" (30). Only Perrault chose the latter option. Peter Buchanan describes Perrault's design as "much more Classical, belonging more to the French Beaux-Arts tradition which gives as much attention to the space between buildings as to the buildings themselves" ("Interview" 42). The design "had a beautiful geometric simplicity"; it featured four towers sitting on a rectangular plinth containing a courtyard (Buchanan "Interview" 42). Doriana Mandrelli praises its "Cartesian...simplicity" and comprehensibility, while Marc Bédaria commends Perrault's "interweaving of minimalism and modern technology," while (Bédaria 32; Mandrelli "Une Place" 10).

### **PRESIDENTIAL PRIVILEGE: Mitterrand's Hand in the Project**

Mitterrand's political agenda, professional interests, and personal preferences played a major role in the selection process, too—just as they had in the design of his earlier *Grands Projets*, which included the Grand Louvre, the Bastille Opera, the arch at Le Défense, and the Cité de la Musique (Read 28; Bédaria

30). But the Bibliothèque Nationale was “*le plus grand*” of all of Mitterrand’s Grands Projets (Slessor 60). The three million-square-foot library was to be his most expensive (7.2 billion francs) project (Judd 4). It was “a major political and cultural constituent” of his second term in office. On Bastille Day 1988 Mitterrand announced his plans to create a “very large library of an entirely new type” (Slessor 60); this was to be “an immense library based on an absolutely new conception...that will embrace all the elements of knowledge in all the disciplines and above all that...communicate this knowledge to those who are seeking, who are studying, who need to learn” (Bédaria 30). The institution was to provide all the resources necessary to empower France to “consolidate its position in the concert of Western nations” (Bédaria). Furthermore, Mitterrand intended for the library to supply an “impetus to Paris’s eastward development”; located on the Seine’s left bank, it was to provide a balance to the development on the river’s west bank (discussed further in “Site: The Library’s Urban Function”).

Mitterrand’s library served both *functional* and *symbolic* functions; it was to be a “temple de l’esprit” (a temple of the mind), a “monument to French culture” (Judd 4; Buchanan “Towers”67). And Mitterrand’s personal preferences determined which architectural symbols he deemed the most appropriate symbols of French culture. According to Bédaria, “he has vanquished the opacity of solid walls; only dematerialized volumes and great prisms of glass meet with his favor” (30). For Mitterrand, modernist transparency represented the identity of present and future France. Yet architect Michael Graves mocks this fascination with modernism:

We (Americans) wonder at the reasons for this infatuation of the French with anything that is a symbol of modernity and high technology. For us Americans...this problem does not exist. After all we have walked on the moon! What we lack instead is exactly what you possess: a solid cultural base, which you seem to want to get rid of: perhaps to demonstrate your capacity to be modern? (qtd. in Bédaria 30).

Perrault, however, understands Mitterrand’s modernist leanings differently. According to Perrault, the president’s preferences bespeak a commitment to openness, intimacy, and consecration; such loftiness of vision, says Perrault, elevates his architectural projects to art (Fillion 56).

### **JUSTIFICATION: Why Perrault?**

Mitterrand’s aesthetic tastes may partly explain his preference for Perrault’s design. Most of the president’s *grands projets* celebrated “pure geometric forms,” e.g. the sphere of the Géode, the pyramid of the Louvre, the curve of the arch at La Défense, and, now, the rectangles of library (Read 30; Buchanan “Place” 28). Furthermore, Perrault’s design seemed to have come at the right time. Following the widespread disappointment over the Bastille Opera, Perrault’s “direct, no-nonsense approach” was a welcome change (Read 30). And as I mentioned earlier, Perrault’s design, “a classic *geste architectural*,” seemed to fit in with the “spirit of Paris” (Buchanan “Interview 42). According to Buchanan, “It has a monumental scale suited to the city, and the French seem to respond to the cool rationality of

this sort of scheme” (42). In addition, the adaptability of Perrault’s scheme was undoubtedly attractive to the project coordinators and developers (will be discussed in “Perrault’s Proposal”).

### **FUNCTIONALITY: The Library’s Program and Purpose**

Perrault’s selection was also contingent on his adherence to the program, or his ability to embody and actualize in architecture all of the functions that the Bibliothèque Nationale was to perform. Perrault recognized architecture’s “overdetermined” nature: in an interview with Odile Fillion, he says, “architecture is part of a network of interaction between the environment, technical considerations, economics, haute couture, politics, design and the cognitive sciences...[A]rchitecture is the seismograph of the era, which bears witness to our culture” (54). The Bibliothèque Nationale (BN), in particular, must incorporate in a single physical structure a wide range of functions and purposes. Daniel Renoult identifies several: the library functions not only a “major architectural project,” but also a symbol of and conduit to “encyclopedic and universal knowledge”; a representative of and facilitator for “democratic access and shared knowledge”; a concentration of “new technologies and networked information”; and a physical symbol of “continuity between the new project and the ancient Bibliothèque Royale” (“BNF” 232).

It is important to consider the increased demand for library resources in Paris. Growth in the number of university students and the propagation of French research institutions have drawn a larger, more scholarly public to the library. But, as Jacques Toubon argues, the BN must provide access to a “much broader cross-section of the public than is constituted by researchers alone.” Émile Biasini agrees: “Its purpose was to make books accessible to all, to break the elitist, privileged tradition surrounding the reading of books, and to invite ordinary citizens to take fuller advantage of their written cultural heritage” (36). In a letter written in January of 1995, Mitterrand acknowledges the need to provide researchers with the “conditions their work deserved” and to accommodate a “huge public,” making even newcomers “feel at home in an establishment fully subsidized by the French nation” (Letter). The “Mission” section of the library’s General Program states that the library can open itself up to new publics by organizing colloquiums and exhibitions that will contribute to “the glamour of the library.” This library will dazzle its public to draw them in.

The BN supposedly accommodates all, but, as Mitterrand states clearly in his letter, “Researchers and the general public were not to be mixed up” (Letter). Each type of library visitor would have its own floor with its own book collections. How does this segregation represent France’s “cultural heritage?” What does the partitioning say about the “conditions” that different types of library work—some apparently more “legitimate” than others—“deserve?” In the same letter, Mitterrand writes that “France should make clear, in the form of an exemplary monument, both her sense of the value of her intellectual heritage and her confidence in the future of books and the act of reading.” Perrault also recognizes that

the library must supply “a whole new concept of our contribution to the civilization of the Third Millennium” (qtd. in Favier 14). What exactly does Perrault’s design for the Bibliothèque Nationale “say” about France’s valuation of its intellectual heritage, its confidence in the future of books? How does this library symbolize France’s contribution to the new millennium?

### **SITE: The Library’s Urban and Regional Functions**

First, the library helps to build the Paris of tomorrow. Located on a seven-hectare plot in an industrial zone along the eastern bank of the Seine, the BN “constitutes the starting point for the total restructuring of this part of the thirteenth arrondissement” (Bédaria 36); it is a “strategic location for the reestablishment of an equilibrium” between the east and the west of the metropolitan area (Bédaria 32; Favier; Slessor; Read). The construction of the monumental library complex was to “mirror the scale and scope” of Bercy on the west bank (Slessor 60). This west bank redevelopment includes the construction of Chemetov and Huidobro’s Finance Ministry, Gehry’s American Center, Bernard Huet’s Parc de Bercy, and housing designed by Jean-Pierre Buffi. There are also plans to build a footbridge between Bercy on the west and Tolbiac on the east. Catherine Slessor claims that such visual and physical links between the two banks “[extend] the eastern boundary of Paris both physically and psychologically,” animating formerly depressed areas of the city (62). However, the library functions as a hub not only within the city of Paris, but also for its surrounding regions. The BN is located near the universities at Censier and Jussieu and the Natural History Museum. The Bibliothèque Nationale also stands as a link between two stations of the Metro, and it is only a quarter-hour from all national and regional railheads connected to the Metro (Favier 12; Bédaria 39). Furthermore, the spatial organization of the library complex characterizes its relationship to its surroundings. In its role as a “generative” element in the urban landscape, the library, according to Bédaria, provides “an opportunity for working with empty space;...it proposes an immaterial, unpretentious approach to the history of France” (36). Its empty lot provides a clean slate on which France can re-imagine its cultural heritage.

The library’s spatial organization establishes a relationship with its immediate surroundings, its urban district, its city, its region, its country, its continent, and its world. Nicola di Battista acknowledges the need for the library-as-generative-element to function on multiple levels:

Whilst on the one hand, it has to create an inner organization capable of carrying out its task as a national Library, by working therefore on the large numbers which that theme entails, one the other, it must also have the capacity to relate both to its surroundings and to the city as a whole. To do this the architect composes his project as if it were two overlapping parts, a sort of lower city and an upper one (26).

I have addressed the library’s representative and generative roles within Paris. Now, how does Perrault’s design function as a national symbol? How does it represent the France of the Third Millennium.

## THE LIBRARY AND NATIONALISM

Something in Paris, claims di Battista, “responds primarily to a need for civilization...to represent the most prominent places of their collective living” (24). She cites four projects that “fully express [France’s] urge for civilization”: the Grande Arche, the Pyramide, Beaubourg, and the Bibliothèque Nationale. The Arche and the Pyramide function solely as architectural symbols, while Beaubourg and the library have *functional* functions—yet all represent the “collective” identity of Paris and France. Furthermore, of the four projects, only the library was commissioned by a French architect—a fact that, according to di Battista, could indicate “a national identity regained in the construction of cities today” (di Battista 24). Therefore, in the case of the library, we have a French architect designing a very powerful national symbol. As Étienne-Louis Boullée recognized, “a nation’s most precious monument is...that which is the repository of all the knowledge it has acquired” (qtd. in Lang 34). The library embodies its institution’s heritage and its nation’s history; it expresses the country’s memories and its hopes for future development. Mitterrand regards the library design as a means of strategically positioning France for future development: “It was my wish that an endeavor be launched to enable our country to recover lost ground and regain its leading role in Europe” (Mitterrand “Letter”). Therefore, the library will ideally serve all of France, symbolize its nation’s values, and provide a political tool for international relations.

## PERRAULT’S PROMISES: Embodying Functions and Values in Design

In his proposal, Perrault addresses several of the abovementioned aspirations—but because he had been provided with a program that lacked specifications for the project, Perrault’s proposal was necessarily indistinct and open to interpretation. (1) In the proposal he promises “*a place and not a building*”; instead of embodying the city’s growth in monuments, he offers “space, and emptiness—in a word, a place that is open, free, and stirring” (“Competition Text” 74). He desires to subordinate the enormity of the building to the idea of an open public space (Fillion 46). Among his influences in this project, he claims, are Louis Kahn and Mies van der Rohe—in particular their “quasi-mystical exactingness” and their understanding of matter and emptiness and silence (Fillion 60). (2) Perrault promises “*a square for Paris*”—“part temple and part-supermarket” (“Competition Text” 74). (3) He also promises a library that serves as “*a symbolic place*”: “With its four corner towers resembling four open books all facing one another, and delimiting a symbolic place, the Bibliothèque de France—a mythical place—imposes its presence and identity on the scale of the city by the adjustment of its four corners” (75). In addition, Perrault claims that these towers will supply a “mnemotechnical means of identifying and locating the library within the city”—a function related to the library’s role as “a square for Paris” (Fillion 48). Furthermore, the gradual filling-up of the four towers with books will symbolize an on-going learning process, a continual “sedimentation” (75). The library’s siting will also represent a cloister, a “tranquil, unruffled space [that] will invite contemplation and a flowering of intellectual endeavor” (75).

Also connected to the library's "symbolic" function is its role as "*a magic place*," where the glass towers play with the sunlight, "multiply[ing] the reflections and highlights, and magnify[ing] the shadows" (75). (5) And in order to perform all of these functions, the library must also serve as "*an urban place*" capable of accommodating "diverse and varied architectural scripts" (75); the library will have to play all the roles that its city asks it to play. (6) In addition, Perrault promises "*a place for reading*"—a place structured to lead visitors to "protected and protective" areas for reading. The "initiatory itinerary" will lead visitors "away from hubbub towards hush, away from consumer information towards the data required for selecting books—a walk that plunges the reader into a journey of exploration into the knowledge and learning of humankind" ("Competition Text" 76). (7) Finally, Perrault promises "a place capable of growing"; his "supple, flexible" design and "variable geometry" allow for adaptability (76).

### **PERRAULT'S PRODUCTION: Turning Promises into Concrete Reality**

What type of a structure allows Perrault to make good on all of his promises, to incorporate Mitterrand's desires, to relate to both its urban and national contexts, and to serve its public? Other concurrent library projects faced similar challenges—but all relied on distinctive design solutions. Colin St. John Wilson's British Library, which opened in 1998 after 20+ years of planning and controversy, employs an "English Free School" design—a functionally-driven, "free gothic" form (Hardingham). The new Alexandria Library, in development since the early 1990s and scheduled to open in spring 2001, is a massive circular structure with sloping roof and etched earth-toned walls. The New York Public Library's Science, Industry and Business Library (1996), the San Francisco Public Library (1996), the Denver Public Library (1996), the San Antonio Public Library (1995), and the Vancouver Public Library (1995) were also completed within months of the BN, yet each represents a unique solution to specific design problems.

Read claims that Perrault's chosen design "has succeeded in negotiating a minefield of political, intellectual, technical and architectural hazards" (35). An article in Techniques et Architecture encapsulates Perrault's "deceptively simple" design: "four towers, a place, a base, a garden, fashioned according to an implacable geometry out of concrete, glass, wood and metal" ("Trois Lectures" 17). The library, which opened in 1996, features a mixture of classicism and innovation, architecture and urban planning. It is more of a "landscape" than a building—and, as a result, it lacks a main façade, an identifiable entrance, and a center ("Trois Lectures"). The structure, the Techniques editors claim, is a "machine devoted to knowledge, ordered, classified, controlled and efficient" ("Trois Lectures" 17). Learning at the BN is an efficient, mechanical process, not an exploration. Martin Pawley offers a similar assessment: "...it concentrated on enclosing the brilliantly conceived morphological function of a stronghold of the printed word, whose task was to provide democratic nurture for electronic information technology, its infant offspring" (31). The BN is simultaneously a factory, a fortress, and a nursery.

This hybrid structure is actually composed of two complexes—the lower surrounding a central garden, and the upper consisting of four towers situated at the four corners of a platform, which sits atop the lower building. A monumental series of steps rises along the Quai Francois Mauriac to the plinth, from where, according to Slessor, “the prospect is frankly Orwellian” (62) (*see Figure 1*). Upon this plinth sit the four “seamless, sinister,” 20-story L-shaped towers that vaguely allude to open books (*see Figure 2*). Eleven of the 20 floors are dedicated to book storage, seven to offices, and two to physical plant. Originally, the transparent glass towers were to reveal the accumulation of books; as the library’s collection grew and the stacks on each floor reached capacity, viewers could witness the growth of France’s cultural knowledge. However, upon finding that the photosensitive glass needed for the towers was unavailable in the required dimensions in France, Perrault devised a compromise. Each floor now features wooden “*volets*,” movable panels installed to protect both books and human eyes from damaging sunlight (Judd 4) (*see Figure 3*).

Additional programmatic changes also altered Perrault’s original vision for the towers. Initially, the library was to house only post-1945 materials—a total of 7 million books. But Mitterrand and Emile Biasini, Secretary of State for the Grands Travaux, proposed that the two national library institutions—the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Bibliothèque de France—merge in order to provide the nation with access to all printed documents in one location (Mandrelli “Une Place” 10). This unforeseen development doubled the holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale; its collection, now including pre- *and* post-1945 books, jumped to 12 million volumes (Judd; Mandrelli “Une Place”). Its holdings of 37 million documents make it one of the five largest libraries in the world (Renoult). As a result of the merger, part of the storage area was relocated from the towers to areas around the reading rooms, and, as a consequence, only half of the towers’ volumes are now devoted to book storage. Furthermore, in response to demands for improved cost efficiency and security, Perrault reduced the towers’ height from 90 to 80 meters.

But there is another world below the towers. Once visitors ascend the exterior staircases they find escalators at each end of the plinth (*see Figure 4*). The escalators transport them, through “increasing [levels of] scholarly sanctity,” into the depths of the research areas. There they find two levels of public reading rooms overlooking an enclosed garden (Slessor 64). The arrangement around the garden’s perimeter creates a “cloister-like” effect,” according to Perrault (Slavid 21). But according to Mandrelli, the escalator ride is “perhaps the most evocative moment,...when the light shining down from above causes the metal-clad walls to vibrate” (“Une Place” 10). Woven steel mesh and tapestries cover air outlets, drape light fittings, “billow like sails hanging from the ceilings, form diaphanous screens along upper-level access hallways and hang like chainmail tapestries in the escalator halls” (Read 33-4). The

metal accents seem to Buchanan an “apt prelude to the cloisterlike ambulatory and monastic calm of the researchers’ reading rooms” (“Towers 69).

The first level is open to the general public; anyone 18 or older holding a baccalaureate degree can gain access for a daily fee of 20 francs (\$3.50) or an annual fee of 200 francs (\$35). This level contains entrance halls; six small meeting rooms; two auditoria holding 350 and 200 people; and nine reading rooms, each devoted to a different subject (Renoult). Planners intended for these public-meeting areas to facilitate encounters between scholars and scientists whose confrontations would “reinvigorate our [French] heritage” (Favier 14).

The lower level, the garden level, is reserved for “the high priesthood of researchers” (Slessor 64). This floor features 12 reading rooms, study carrels on the mezzanine, and a monastic ambulatory around the garden’s perimeter. Unfortunately, however, with the relocation of book storage, the planned access to the riverside has been blocked. Visitors to this level pay a daily fee of 30 francs (\$5) or an annual fee of 300 francs (\$50) to gain access (Renoult).

Bédaria narrates the visitor’s spatial experience—from the arrival upon the plinth (*see Figure 5*) to the descent into the depths of knowledge:

Arriving from the station of the RER (Regional Express Network), visitors will converge on this unique reception point through the garden, passing over the catwalks amidst the trees. In direct contact with the quarter, the level of access and of activity is essential for the intensity of the Bibliothèque de France’s public life. This whole web is woven to lead the reader, whether novice or initiate, toward the heart of the building, toward sheltered and sheltering places. Initiation routes that lead from noise to silence, from the information of consumption to a more select kind, in a stroll that immerses the reader in a journey of exploration to the heart of humanity’s knowledge (36-7).

Perrault’s use of scales and materials also enhances this experience. He, like Kahn, plays with the contrasts between metal, wood, glass, and light, and between intimate and colossal volumes (Edelmann 22). As Perrault says in his interview with Fillion, the library is both monumental and intimate; “we did not work on the idea of monumentality at all, given that it was intrinsic to the concept. On the other hand, we did give a great deal of thought to the intimate, human aspects of what we needed to do” (Fillion 48). Perrault’s commitment to intimacy justifies his decision to include a wooden esplanade, wooden volets, and other materials that acquire a patina. The spatial orientation of particular areas also works to create appropriate moods; as Read says, the trees in the central garden give the public reading rooms “the impression of floating in a (remarkably comfortable) tree house” (34). Even the garden itself has a distinctive feel. Perrault chose to work with an agronomics engineer instead of a landscape artist; consequently, the plaza is reminiscent of Land Art rather than traditional landscaping (Mandrelli “One Place” 10). One has to wonder, however, what effect Perrault was trying to create with “terre d’Afrique

red” carpeting and the steel mesh features. Perhaps these details serve as a contrast to the intimate details—to reassert the highly public, highly official nature of this institution.

## **CONTROVERSIES AND CRITICISM**

Perrault’s project has its admirers. Favier praises the “feeling of relaxation” created by warmly tinted wood paneling and views of the garden. Toubon claims that the Perrault’s decision to use materials that acquire a patina helps to promote “comfort and hospitality.” Di Battista commends the towers’ symbolic significance as “sentries and disquieting guardians...as the symbol of an aspiration deeply felt by contemporary man,” she says (26). Several have acclaimed the project as an example of “confident and enlightened patronage” and speedy decision-making, in contrast to the British Library (Slessor 60; Buchanan “Interview”).

Yet several of these details have also drawn criticism. The garden, his use of woods from the Amazonian rainforest, his decision to store books above ground and humans below ground, and a host of other design choices have raised controversy. Edelmann asks, “why go and put books where the view and the light suggested rather a place for people, and why bury people in the place where, following the tradition of library architecture, books would be stacked in the unlit conditions necessary for their protection?” (20). Furthermore, some of the structural changes have compromised the complex’s aesthetic effect. The lowering and deepening of the towers, according to Judd, renders them “slightly stunted and awkward” (4). Similarly, the towers’ wooden shutters “blind and unbalance the building.... A desire to show France the amassing of its literary treasures has evolved into an occlusive glass and wooden strong-box in which the secret remains irredeemably hidden” (Judd 4). In addition, some critics have found the medieval references—the chainmail and cloisters—inappropriate for a modern library.

It seems that the BN’s critics outnumber the enthusiasts. Journalists have referred to the project as *très grande bibliothèque* (very big library), or TGB—but this acronym has taken on another significance: *très grande betise* (very big joke). One of the most frequent charges leveled against the library is that it lacks a sense of place. Edelmann criticizes it as “over-sized and overly ambitious” (18). Buchanan claims that it fails as a civic monument and public place in part because its towers are “too insubstantial to anchor themselves or their surroundings”; the gaps between the towers are so large that their connection into an integral whole is not always apparent (69). Slessor wonders if they have the “gravity to aggregate the city around them” (64). Critics also attack the inaccessibility of the garden. “That the court and its recreated forest are sealed off and out of touch, so that the trees can neither be smelt nor the soothing sound of their swaying heard, is all consistent with one of the very most striking features of the building, its extreme lack of any tactile or sensual aspect” (Buchanan “Place” 30). Despite Perrault’s attention to

materiality, the building, some claim, offers nothing ergonomic and fails to “reflect and seek empathetic relationship with human corporeality” (Buchanan “Place” 30).

Such criticism could be regarded as trifling. But, as Edelmann acknowledges, “these trifles, which are compounded until they leave no room for chance and the feverishness of intuition, subsequently raise questions not about the architecture any more, but about the image constructed by society of its researchers and scholars” (22).

### **LITERARY CRITICISM: What the Library Says About Literacy and Scholarship**

Jennifer and Ken Armstrong, architects for the Maison du Japon in Paris, argue that Perrault’s philosophy has left Paris with an “inappropriate iconography, dysfunctional internal planning and an abnormal relationship between reader and book” (qtd. in Judd 4). Book selection, collection, and consultation are segregated in the complex—as are research and congregation. The separation of general public and researchers—which Mitterrand had decreed—contradicts his simultaneous commitment to equal access. Similarly, the fees required for admission necessarily limit access to those with the required funds. Furthermore, the placement of the restricted access research level *beneath* the general public’s reading level seems to me contrary to the common association between research and learning with enlightenment and elevation. This “descent into knowledge” seems contrary to traditional European pedagogical philosophies, which regard education as “uplift.” However, Buchanan offers a different, and equally valid, interpretation: the route of passage through the library suggests that “gaining knowledge is a process of excavation in which scholars are privileged to dig deepest, both downwards and backwards in time, to reach the studious quiet of medieval monks” (“Towers” 69).

And what sense can we make of Perrault’s contrasting medieval and modern allusions and his allocations of space to various media and research activities? Buchanan suggests that the whole complex resembles a “mausoleum commemorating the passing of print’s hegemony” (“Towers” 69). It represents an uneasy marriage of print and post-print technologies. Jack Kessler argues that there is an “apparent contradiction between [the library’s] monumental form and the growing networking information ‘function’ which no longer needs it” (221). The book—an artifact made of wood products—is monumentalized in towers of glass and steel and isolated from electronic and digital technologies. Similarly, the separation of book storage and reading rooms reinforces outdated notions of “limits to access” and the “preciousness” of printed matter. The towers also impose an arbitrary organization on the library’s print collection. The Bibliothèque Nationale has divided its collection into four categories of books—but why four? Simply because there are four towers. Kessler writes:

‘Architectural determinism’ has replaced the ‘alphabetic determinism’ of an earlier age. To those who might think that is might not matter, the French themselves, at least, recently have considered the ‘structure’ of knowledge to be nearly as important as—and in some

cases determinative of—the content of knowledge itself: the decision to reclassify all knowledge because of an architect’s design caused a commotion in French educational and intellectual circles (207).

Perhaps the library is France’s temple of culture, its *temple de l’esprit*. But it is also in this space that two powerful national symbols—architecture and the book—struggle to reposition themselves in relation to new technologies. As Victor Hugo observed, the printed text supplanted architecture as the sovereign art capable of expressing a society’s values. Now, both print and architecture must face their impending displacement. The physical text and the physical space must deal with emerging digital technologies and virtual architectures; both face threats to their materiality and their cultural relevance. It is to be expected, then, that the library—the site in which this confrontation takes place—is a necessarily disordered/disorienting environment. Kessler writes: the library “might also be seen as a battlement: a defensive—and sometimes offensive—bastion against the forces loose in the outside world which might pose a threat to French culture, and to France”—and, I would add, to its architectural and literary legacies (221).

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