

CENTRE GEORGES POMPIDOU

1970 - 1977; 1997- 2000 (renovation) Paris, France

The Beaubourg, later known as the Centre Georges Pompidou, has become one of the symbolic places of Paris, a cornerstone of the city's imagination. Yet its history was troubled, surrounded by controversy and complaints, as had happened a century before with another construction site on the banks of the Seine: the Eiffel Tower. Commissioned by the President of the Republic Georges Pompidou (1911-74) to tip the balance of the arts back in favor of Paris, which after the war had lost the scepter of the capital of creativity to New York, the “center of contemporary culture” was to be located in the heart of the city, at Le Marais, where it replaced a parking lot serving the central Halles food market moved to the suburbs.

The echoes of the French May of 1968 probably prompted the President's decision to hold a universal competition open to all architects “even young and without financial means”, a decision that remains equally astonishing forty years later. The competition involved the creation not of a museum, but an interdisciplinary cultural institution in which all modern and contemporary art, literature, design, music and cinema would be set beside a large public library. And if, out of the 681 projects submitted to the competition, the jury chaired by Jean Prouvé chose the one by the Piano & Rogers office, backed by Ove Arup & Partners, it was precisely because it embodied the spatial and functional flexibility required by the program.

The building is nothing but a large Meccano kit of prefabricated pieces, not selected from a catalogue, but each one carefully studied and manufactured, making up a structure six stories above ground, measuring 170 by 50 meters, completely free from internal supports, and therefore divisible indefinitely to meet contingent needs. To keep the internal space clear, the systems and access and distribution paths are relegated to the exterior of the building. The ducts of the systems design the façade on rue Réaumur, identified by vivid colors – blue for air, green for water, yellow for electricity and red for vertical circulation – while the famous escalators climb up the front towards the Plateau Beaubourg.

The technological charge of this building is often celebrated, being epitomized in the gerberettes, the famous brackets designed by Peter Rice to join the internal girders to the tie rods in the façade. However, the difference compared to the other competition projects was the creation of the piazza in front of it, termed the parvis. While the other projects occupied the whole site, Piano & Rogers condensed the building in the half towards Rue Réaumur and laid out the other half of the site as a public square. A large sloping space, reminiscent of Piazza del Campo in Siena, which almost naturally leads visitors to the entrance and blends harmoniously with the atrium of the cultural center.



To the success of the construction work, entrusted to the contractor Grands Travaux de Marseille and begun in 1972, Robert Bordaz (1908-96) made a decisive contribution. Set in charge of the construction work by Pompidou, he was an experienced public official who supported and managed Piano and Rogers's youthful impetuosity. When every part of the building was in place and fixed, on January 31, 1971, the new President of the Republic Valéry Giscard D'Estaing inaugurated the Centre Georges Pompidou. No one could imagine its incredible success or the number of visitors the institution would welcome in the years ahead.

During the first twenty years more than 20 million visitors came to the Plateau Beaubourg. In 1997 this resulted in the temporary closure of the cultural center as it was renovated for the reopening, fixed for January 1, 2000. The offices were moved to an adjacent building, so making it possible to expand the area of the exhibition galleries. The spaces of the library were also reorganized, giving it an independent entrance. The terraces of the building were redesigned, creating large pools of water on which artworks from the collection are exhibited. After forty years the "great spaceship landed in the center of Paris" still has all the freshness and youthful brio of the sixties and the architects who imagined it at the time.