





Renzo Piano & Richard Rogers in conversation with Enrique Walker

The two conversations that follow took place in the autumn of 2014, first in the Paris branch of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop on rue des Archives and then, a week later, in the riverside offices in Hammersmith of what is now Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners. The project, instigated by an invitation to interview 'anyone, anywhere', entailed using the interview format to trace the story of a building: the Pompidou Centre. The plan was to hold separate conversations with Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers; both sessions would follow a common script, but take their own trajectory.—*Enrique Walker*

Renzo Piano

EW How did your collaboration with Richard Rogers begin?

RP Oh, I can tell you exactly how it happened. I was living in London in 1969 and I'd met a man called Dr Franklin, who at one point suggested that I go along with him to see one of his patients – a fellow architect he thought I'd like, who spoke fluent Italian but was laid up with a bout of chickenpox. 'Oh my God, what is chickenpox?' I said. 'Will I catch this pox if I meet him?' 'No, no, if you come with me you'll be fine', the doctor reassured me. So I went, and we met, and Richard and I immediately became great friends. Nine months later we set up Piano and Rogers. You know, we were just two young people who shared a kind of chemical rapport. In Italian we'd say *affinità elettiva* – an elective affinity. We had different stories but we shared a similar background, and had similar obsessions and desires. We also looked similar – I mean in those days everyone looked like a Beatle, with long hair and flared trousers. And of course Richard is Italian, even if he is also English, so we could communicate with each other very easily.

EW Always in Italian?

RP Of course! Never anything but Italian. Richard and I have always loved talking. And

Previous: aerial view of the front facade of the Pompidou Centre, 2012

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Right: Robert Le Ricolais, cable study model, c 1960
Robert Le Ricolais Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania

we still speak all the time, on the phone, or we see each other in London, Paris or Genoa, or go sailing together in our summer holidays.

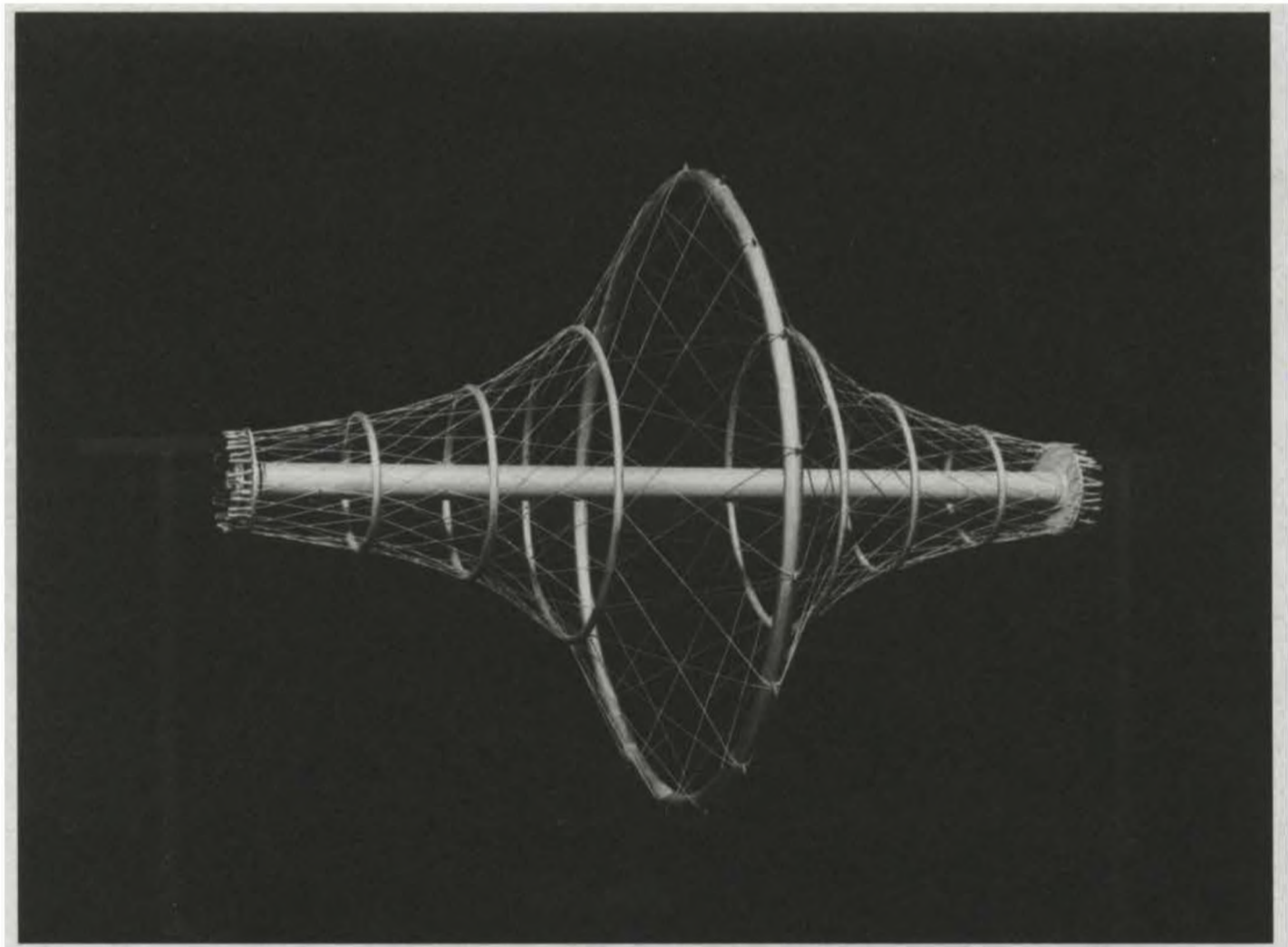
EW Why had you moved to London?

RP I moved because I was fed up. If you grow up in a city like Genoa there will always come a time when you have to leave, if only for a brief period. I had been working with my father's building firm, which was not doing very well. My father had retired a few years earlier and my older brother Ermanno had taken over the company. My brother was fantastic, extremely generous and loving, but not a great businessman, and so there was very little work. I tried to relieve the pressure a little by experimenting, working on my own on lightweight structures, but in Italy in the late 1960s there was very little scope for experimental architecture. I've got rebellion in my blood. In that sense I'm really quite a primitive person. Remember, I studied at the Politecnico di Milano under Giuseppe Ciribini during the period of its student occupation in 1963–64. At that time I led a kind of double life, working in the office of Franco Albini during the day, and at night returning to the university to occupy the space

with the other students. I was not especially active intellectually – I wasn't developing new theories of architecture or anything like that – but I was very interested in the technicalities of building, in how to put different pieces together. In Albini's office, which was my real pleasure, I learned how to make things. But by the time I went back to the university to protest late at night I was just so tired, and therefore had to say *buonanotte* to all the theories and politics because I was only thinking of my bed.

EW But before London, you first went to the US.

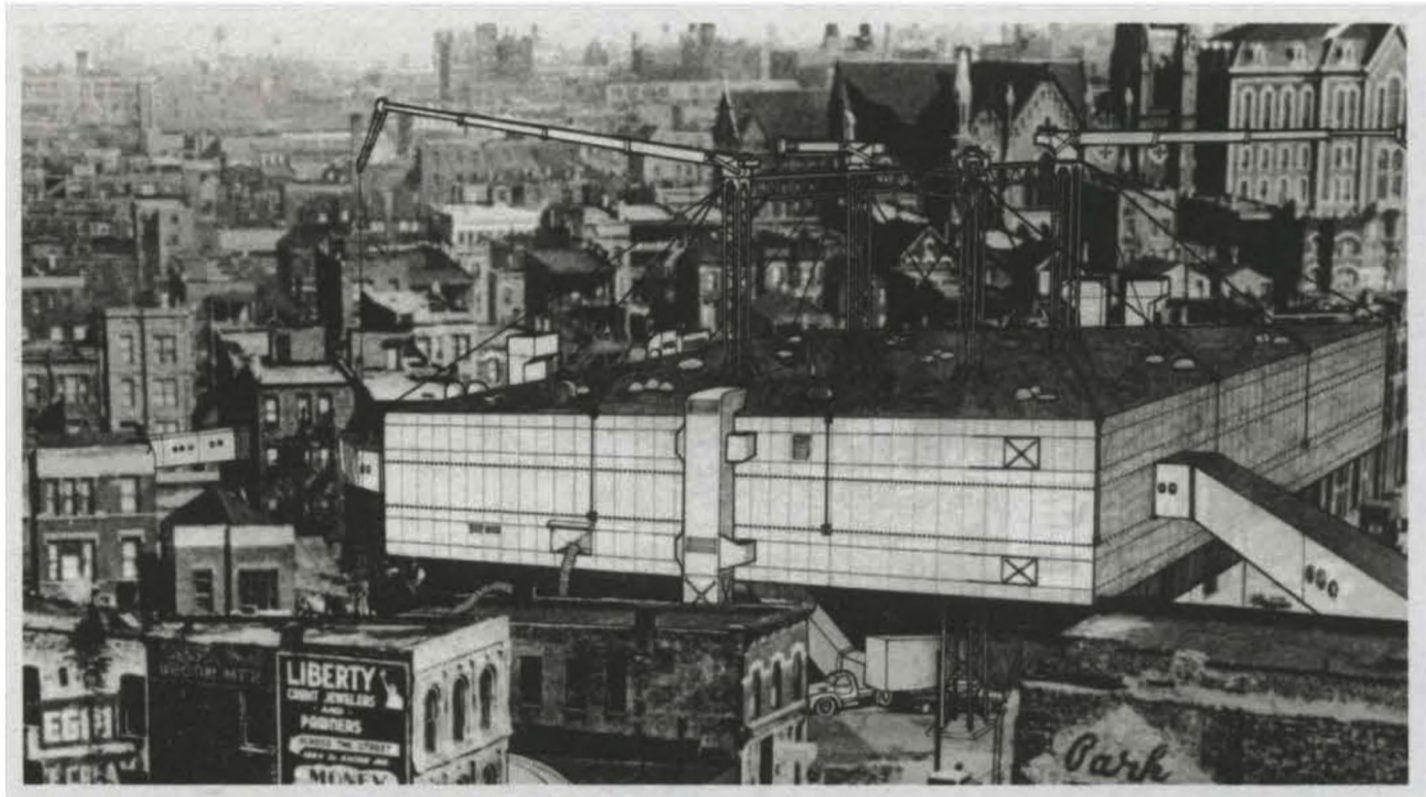
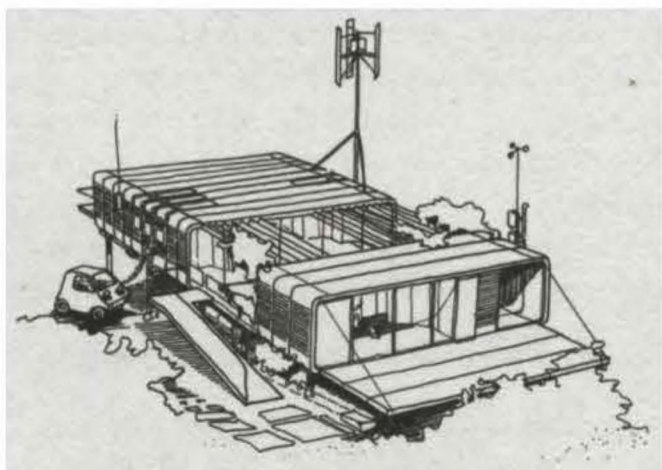
RP Yes, in 1965 I went to Penn University to assist the French engineer Robert le Ricolais on a course he was running on cable structures. I then met Louis Kahn, who was the school's main professor of architecture, and I worked briefly with him on a few projects. At the same time I was still in love with the work of Jean Prouvé, especially his lightweight, flexible structures, and so when I was back in Genoa with the family firm I would contact all kinds of designers and engineers working in this *petit milieu*. Among them was Stéphane du Château in Paris and Z S Makowsky in London, who was teaching at the Battersea College of Technology,



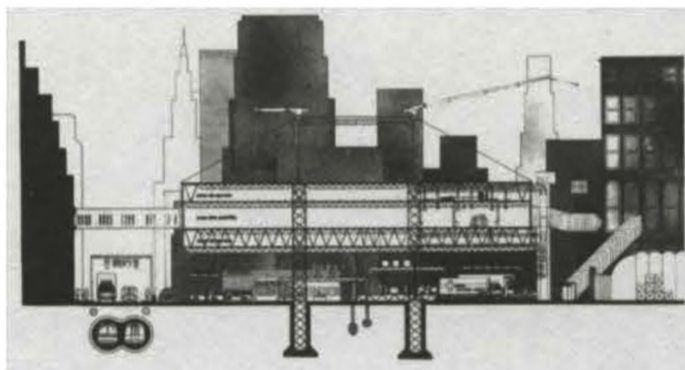
specialising in space frames. Like any self-educated person at the time I was fascinated with the idea of fighting against gravity, looking always for lightness, which of course is a close relative of the idea of transparency and in many ways also of beauty. I had done early experiments with these ideas in the lightweight roof system I developed for the Olivetti factory in Ivrea, and later the shell structure for my first office in Genoa and the Italian pavilion for the Osaka Expo. But following my discussions with Makowsky it was quite a natural decision to move to London. I was also making no money in Italy, and so it seemed logical to put four bags on the roof of my old car, pick up my wife and two children, and say 'let's go, we're off to London'. Two days later we arrived. We rented a little flat on the top floor of a house in Netherhall Gardens, a side street in Hampstead. Soon after arriving I got some additional teaching work at the Polytechnic of Central London and at the Architectural Association, where I would go in the mornings, leaving the afternoons largely free for my own projects. In many ways London saved me. In Italy I was perceived as a strange kind of guy who was only interested in researching peculiar things. I was not even seen as an architect – though frankly this didn't worry me too much. But in London I was immediately taken seriously.

EW What did you teach at the AA?

RP Teaching is too grand a word for what I was doing. I basically worked with a handful of students, helping them build primitive shelters in the Bedford Square garden. I know that space inch by inch, centimetre by centimetre. Every morning at 10am precisely, when the gardens opened, I'd cross the street from the school with five or six students, a hammer, nails and some planks of wood. We'd then build a simple kind of pavilion. It would take us about two or three hours. And then later in the afternoon we'd have to dismantle everything before the gardens closed at exactly 5.30pm. It was really an incredible time. The school was full of the Archigram guys, and Cedric Price and the genius editor Monica Pidgeon from *Architectural Design* would always be passing through. Everyone was talking about flexibility, openness, accessibility, so we were naturally fuelled by rebellion. We were all the young bellhops of



that rebellion. Everything was so fertile. But in many ways it also related back to my experience working for my father, to basic ideas of construction, trying always to build something as light as possible, assembling different components. For me architecture has always been something done piece by piece. And so the shelters we were making in the garden were as much part of this as the conversations we were having about beauty, transparency, the fragility of lightness and dreams of flight. In the end, it wasn't just about being a good citizen or a good builder. It was more than that: it was about those things that make architecture magical



because ultimately, even if it troubles me a little to admit this, architecture is an art.

EW What common agenda did the new practice with Richard entail?

RP We were exactly the same, even if I used to call Richard the old man, because he is four years older than me, which when you are in your 60s or 70s is nothing, but when you are 30 it is quite a big age gap. But still, we shared so much. We'd be building and protesting, and in between listening to music, going out for meals, watching movies, sailing boats – all the things that are kind of architecture's third dimension. I knew the work he'd done with Team 4 and more recently his Zip-Up House, in which he

was already exploring the idea of flexibility and accessibility. And yet, as I discovered after we started working together out of our little office in Aybrook Street, at the same time he was very engaged with the civic value of architecture. For Richard these two things came together very easily. I think the first project we did was the ARAM Module, which was a kind of hospital that could be air-lifted into any given site. Of course, it was never built. With Richard, everything just came together. We never really divided our responsibilities – I was never in charge of this or that. In fact, in many ways, we learned to do what the other was expert at – so I learned to be a good protestor and Richard learned to be a good builder.

EW How did the decision to take part in the Pompidou Centre competition come about?

RP Beaubourg arrived not long after we set up together. I still call it Beaubourg by the way – for me the empty space in the ground we saw on our first site visit will always be Beaubourg. For the competition, I remember it was all discussed very democratically. Of course, it is not difficult to be democratic when there are so few of you. Later, we were joined by John Young, Marco Goldschmeid and a couple of secretaries, but in the beginning there were just three of us. We'd sit around a table and talk, although at that time we used to play a kind of game – whenever Richard said something, his wife Su and I would say the opposite. It was a typical 68 thing. Anyway, Ted Happold from Arup came round one day and said we should all enter the Beaubourg competition. Richard immediately said it was a very bad idea, because the French were just looking for a monumental public building that celebrated an official kind of culture. Reacting not on the grounds of reason, but only according to the rules of our little game, I then argued the opposite, saying we had to do it, and I listed all the reasons why. I think Su had yet another contrary interpretation. Shortly afterwards Richard wrote a beautiful little text

Above: Piano + Rogers, ARAM (Association for Rural Aid in Medicine) Module, 1971
Left: Richard and Su Rogers, Zip-Up House, 1968

explaining precisely why we should not do the competition – but of course we did do it. Maybe one of the reasons was that Arup offered to contribute £5,000, which in those days was a lot of money. Of course, in the end it was not about the money; it was about working with Ted, sketching out our design, and knowing that no one ever wins competitions like this. You just do it for the pleasure of it. Of course, another pleasure, after we'd won, was working with the great Irish engineer Peter Rice. But in those early days, I also remember lots of discussions about what designing culture meant. A number of people have said our design came out of Archigram and Cedric Price, but it really developed out of Richard's famous pronouncement that our building would be somewhere between Times Square and the British Museum. That is classic Richard. We then started to challenge the idea that culture had to be made out of marble, or that it came out of intimidation. Rather, we saw it as a tool, an urban machine whose floors would move up and down. But really, the whole thing was totally mad. Not least its size, which was completely disproportionate to everything around it. I mean, as built it is still out of all proportion, but in the design phase it was much worse. It was flying above the ground! But more than anything, this just shows the fun we were having imagining it.

EW *But in agreeing to do the competition, wasn't the fact that Jean Prouvé was president of the jury also an influence?*

RP Oh yes. For me that was really the number one argument for doing the



competition. Prouvé was my absolute idol. He was untouchable. I couldn't believe that someone like Prouvé could possibly run a bad competition. Prouvé was also someone I encountered long before I met Richard. Immediately after my studies in Milan I went to visit him in Paris at L'École des Arts et Métiers on Boulevard de Sébastopol. He was my hero, even more than Buckminster Fuller, and he became a kind of father figure. At that time he was still working with Abbé Pierre, for whom he had designed his low-cost housing prototype, the *Maison des Jours Meilleurs*, and so in addition to his ideas about lightness and flexibility there was also an extremely strong social dimension. In this sense he was a very good example of an architect who was able to mix the making of something with the rationale for that making. Later, when we moved the office to Paris, he became a good friend. His own office was just across the street from me on rue des Blancs Manteaux. We'd meet for lunch on Thursdays, and there'd always be other interesting people with him, like aircraft engineers or the guy who designed the Citroën 2CV. I remember he once said that if he had done

Beaubourg he would not have cast pieces but bent metal. He always used to say *je suis un plieur de tuyaux* – I am a bender of pipes or tubes. In his factory in Nancy he always worked like this, manipulating pieces of metal, bending and welding. For me this is what architecture is about. And it's not just architecture. If you talk to a musician about improvisation they will speak about it as a mixture of things that you remember and other things that you have forgotten. All good art is like this; always somewhere between memory and oblivion, between what you know and what you never knew existed. And I think both the design and the building of Beaubourg operated exactly like this.

EW *To what extent was the May 68 debate influential for the project?*

RP Winning the competition was one of those moments in life when all the stars and planets seemed to have come into alignment – Pompidou himself and his wife Claude, but also Prouvé, Philip Johnson and Oscar Niemeyer, who were all on the jury – but as you say, our design and the fact that we actually won was very much a consequence of *Mai soixante-huit*. We were so young then and so completely irresponsible. Yet everybody seemed intent on making something against the academy, rejecting the old model of the *École des Beaux-Arts*. In this sense, everything about the competition was a product of 1968. There is a nice story about when we decided to put the *pavés* – the cobblestones – in the piazza. Everybody came and said 'No, no, no, no, forget it, we've just spent two years clearing up all the cobblestones after the riots of 68.' One of the famous slogans used by protestors during these demonstrations was *Sous les pavés, la plage!* It was a lovely poetic idea – that under a piece of stone you would find a beach. It was also beautiful because they were right – when you put down cobblestones you lay them on sand. Richard and I always loved this sensibility, and so we made sure the piazza was eventually surfaced in cobblestones, regardless of the objections. This became just one small way of challenging the beaux-arts empire and all those old traditions of the Grand Prix de Rome and its closed circle of 24 architects declaring themselves the best in the world. In fact, we got the job in the first place precisely because we were outside of that tradition. But we were also not alone. After the building was finished they brought in other outsiders, not just architects but people like the composer Pierre Boulez from New York or the curator Pontus Hultén from Sweden, who ran the museum. In this sense the whole Beaubourg project was about reabsorbing the *ex communicato* – can you



Above: Jean Prouvé lecturing at Cnam, Paris, 1964
Photo E Remondino

Left: Jean Prouvé, Maison du Peuple, Clichy, 1939
© Bibliothèque Kandinsky Centre Pompidou

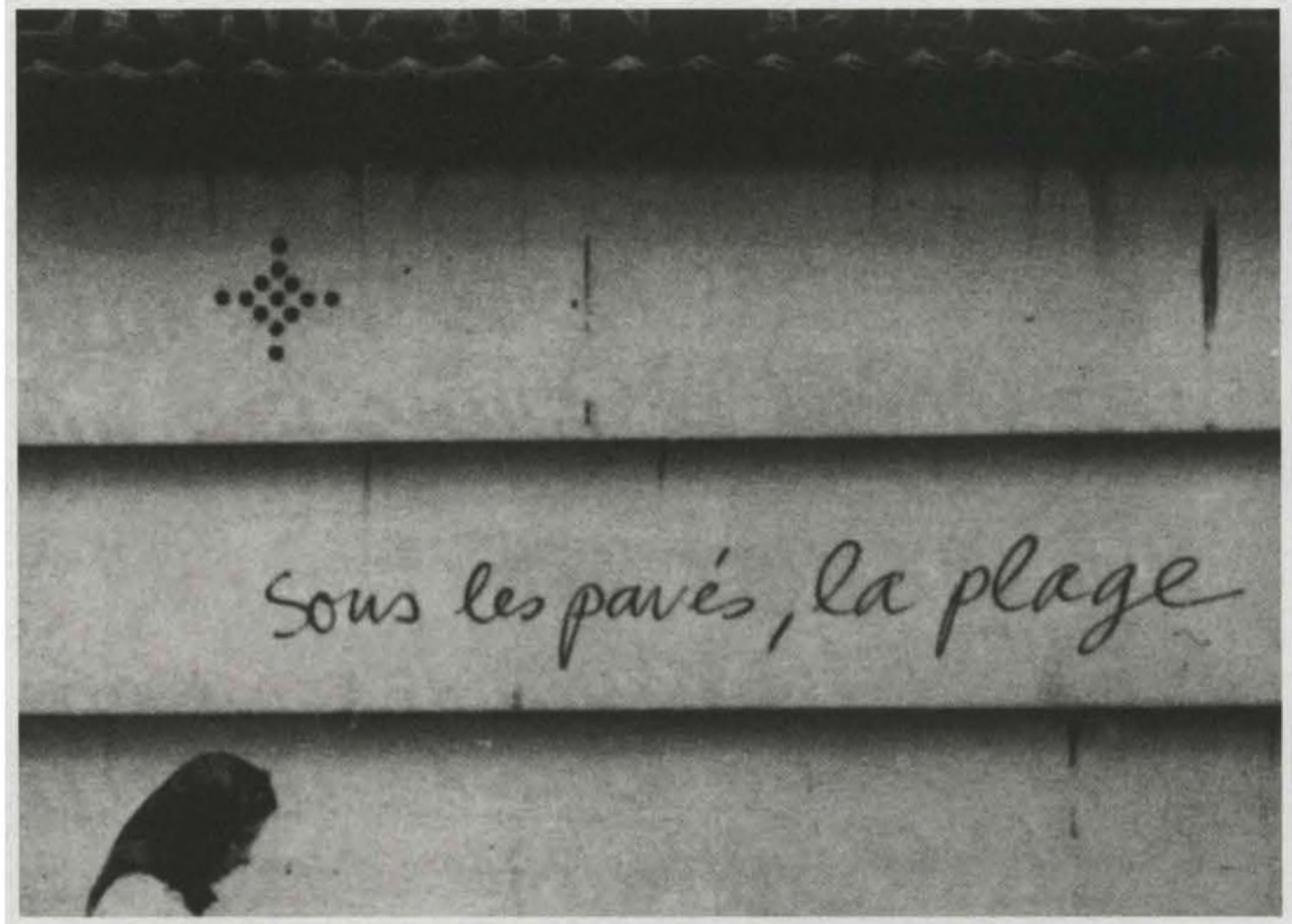
say that in English? The ex-communicated? All those people who were not part of the established church.

EW *In retrospect, given this combination of radicalism and inexperience, what was it that allowed you to keep control over the project?*

RP Beaubourg was built out of obstinacy and protest. We just never accepted 'no' for an answer. For example, there is the whole saga of the large air ducts we designed to ventilate the underground car park. The *préfet de Paris* took one look at them and immediately demanded that we throw them away. 'I never want to see them again!' But we didn't destroy them, we just hid them in a garage for a few months. In Paris we had become friends with the artist Jean Tinguely, who at the time was making his vast *Le Cyclope* sculpture for Milly-la-Forêt. He loved our funnel ducts so much he integrated one into his sculpture. Encouraged by Tinguely, we pulled three of them out of the garage and positioned them in the piazza. The *préfet* soon reappeared and shrieked *Ce n'est pas possible!* But then, a few months later, the poor guy died. Of course we were sad about this, but it wasn't really our fault, and it did mean we could quickly fix the ducts into position. They have been breathing perfectly for 40 years ever since. And actually, thinking about it now, every aspect of the design was like this. We never did what we were told. And the most important phrase we learned on this project – a phrase Richard became expert at – was *je ne comprends pas trop bien*, 'I don't understand'. We hid behind this ignorance and went through the whole job constantly saying it. *Je m'excuse Madame et Monsieur, mais je ne comprends pas trop bien*. It became a kind of applied protest.

EW *I understand that Robert Bordaz, the man President Pompidou appointed to oversee the construction of the building, was also a decisive ally.*

RP Bordaz was a genius, very much a *commis du temps*, a dedicated civil servant, but also a really fantastic man. It took him a year to fully understand us and what we wanted to achieve but then he adopted us and defended us at every opportunity. It became a kind of love story. I'll never forget one day soon after Pompidou died and Giscard d'Estaing came in, there were discussions about removing Bordaz and replacing him with someone else. Richard and I flew into a rage, shouting 'if he goes, we go'. In hindsight, we really were insane. This was our only job. Without it we would have been destitute. But we were making declarations like this all the time, constantly marking a line in the sand. As Bordaz himself used to say about us, *vous êtes gentils mais insupportables* – you are really nice but also unbearable. In a way it was all a kind of game. And to me now it is still something of a mystery that we ever survived: it seems pure luck that it all worked out and the building came together. At the beginning we were not more than five or six people, and so we



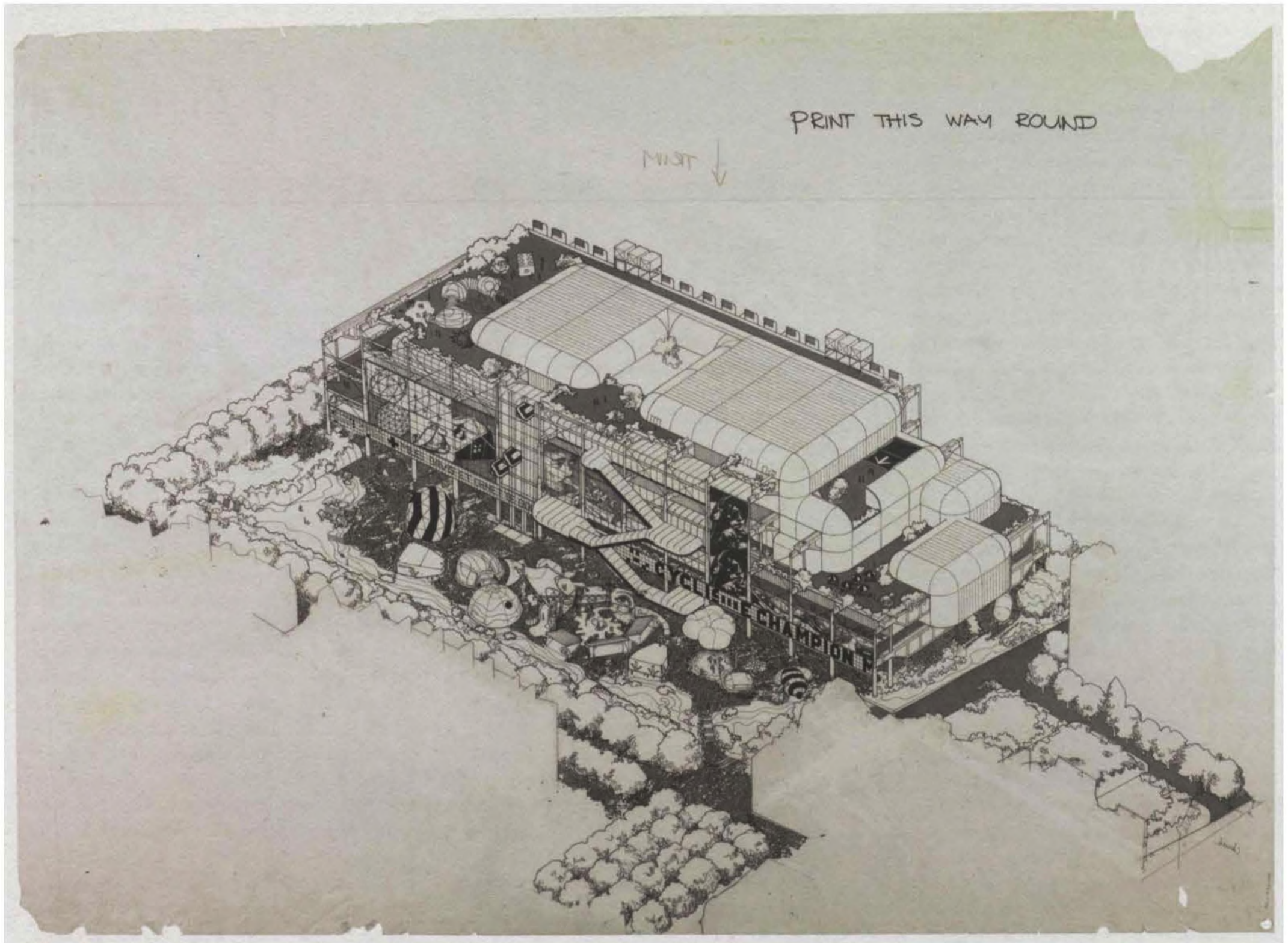
needed help fast. I called a young friend from Genoa called Gianfranco Franchini who joined us, and then other colleagues, former students and friends from the US. It became a big team – by the end, 40 or 50 people. It was like an incredible party. Although the size of the design team meant we also lost our way a few times. There was one moment in particular when the project turned into a kind of jelly mould, with all these rounded corners. At some point Richard and I looked at the drawings and said 'What the hell are we doing? We've lost our sharpness.' And so we redeveloped the scheme, and returned to the crisper edges of the first design. But these kinds of things are inevitable on a big project like Beaubourg. Architecture is about exploring. The jury also helped us out at certain moments. Philip Johnson came to London and we would also have conversations with Prouvé and with Oscar Niemeyer. He seemed like the oldest man in the world then, but he was probably younger than I am now. We'd work on the section and endlessly sketch out the basic diagram, a box 170m long, 50m wide, with 13 bays and with pipes that move here, and people that move there. This was not so much a strategy as a kind of innocent game. We really weren't very smart or in touch. Bordaz was right, we were actually just *insupportables*.

EW *During its construction, and immediately after completion, both Left and Right really took against the building.*

RP Beaubourg generated an absolute mountain of protest. It was attacked by everybody. Out of the thousand critics in the world, maybe three of them praised it. But I've always

said it was not consciously designed as a work of the Left or the Right. It is a work of innocence. It was just about putting some pieces together to form a kind of cultural tool. And in the end people began to appreciate it, not least because it works really well. I was actually there the day before yesterday with my wife Emilia and with Richard and Ruthie. It still looks good, despite the fact that over the last 30 or 40 years it has been changed around a number of times. I also think its survival comes down to the fact that it is fundamentally a public building. It's not about triumphalism, or a flexing of muscles, or about money or the state, it's about the community and a sense of civic space. And ever since Beaubourg I've been in love with civic buildings. If you look around my office now you'll see that 80 per cent of our work is civic – universities, courts, hospitals, museums, concert halls, libraries. This is what we do. And Beaubourg was the prototype of all that. It still amazes me that it was ever built. Looking at it now always reminds me of the moment we stood outside in the piazza for the opening ceremony. There was a huge crowd of people but everyone was saying the same thing – *Oh, ça finit comme ça?* They were astonished that this was it. They thought we hadn't finished and that the scaffolding was still up. And so in the end, by pure chance, we became the people who did the dirty job of breaking idols, tearing down the old model and making sure that culture really is something for everybody. Of course, this miracle of Beaubourg was still sacrilegious for some people, who thought we were contaminating culture by democratising it. *Un supermarché* they called it. Others called it a refinery, but as soon as they said that I roared 'Fantastic! *Bellissimo!*' because, really, what more could we have possibly hoped for?

Sous les pavés graffiti,
Paris, 1968



Piano + Rogers,
'Jelly-mould' Pompidou scheme, 1972

Richard Rogers

EW How did your collaboration with Renzo Piano begin?

RR Ah, so this is a kind of 'why did you get married?' kind of question. Well, Renzo and I have different recollections of exactly how it all started. Renzo thinks it was our doctor who played matchmaker – Dr Owen Franklin was the client for the Murray Mews house we did with Team 4, and after a bout of mumps or measles or some other illness he apparently suggested that I should meet another of his patients, a fellow Italian architect in London. I don't remember it quite like that. I just know that I was familiar with Renzo's work and at some point in the late 1960s we met and clicked immediately. This was about two years before the Pompidou competition. At the time Renzo mainly lived here, having left Italy and his home town of Genoa for various social and political reasons. Once in London, though, he couldn't find any work. But nor could I – I mean, we had one or two very small things going on, but not much, and I thought why be just one unemployed architect when two unemployed architects working together would be more fun. In those early days, I remember we talked and talked and talked. At some point we did get around to doing a project together – the competition for the Burrell Collection in Glasgow – but we didn't even make the top ten. Soon after, though, we started to take things more seriously, working on designs for the ARAM Module and the PA Technology Centre.

EW What common agenda did the new practice entail?

RR It was basically two people thinking more or less in the same way and getting on very well, exchanging ideas. I remember even without any work, we'd wander through London pointing out various things and discussing how we'd overcome certain problems in the city.

EW And how did the Pompidou Centre competition come about?

RR It came through the engineer Ted Happold, who was running Arup's Structures 3 group at the time. I had known him for a couple of years – when I was working on a design for a new stand for Chelsea football club, I had asked Frei Otto to recommend an engineer and Frei suggested I speak with Ted. Anyway, Ted phoned up, asking if Renzo and I would be interested in doing the Beaubourg competition with him. My initial response was 'no way'. This was not long after the student protests of May 1968 and I had absolutely no interest in what I saw as a crudely right-wing concept of a centralised cultural venue. But Ted kept encouraging us, and so we decided to be very democratic and to put the thing to a vote. I was

sure the decision would be a no: while Ted would remain very enthusiastic, Su and I would resist and Renzo would float. But on the day our baby was sick and Su had to return home, meaning we had the vote without her and somehow I lost. But I accepted it, partly because Renzo quickly arranged for a young architect called Gianni Franchini to help us out on the design.

EW I understand that Renzo had been persuaded by the fact that Jean Prouvé was on the jury, and you were later encouraged by the presence of another juror, Willem Sandberg from the Stedelijk Museum.

RR I wasn't so much encouraged by Sandberg, who I had met before, as I was worried about Philip Johnson, who with Prouvé was head of the jury. But I have to say that Philip was the one who made it happen in the end. Along with Prouvé, he really pushed for our scheme.

EW Let's turn to the competition itself, which called for a new building type.

RR Beaubourg was really the first major European architectural competition in the postwar period. The only thing comparable in terms of scale was the Sydney Opera House competition in the mid-1950s. There, the engineer Ove Arup was very close to Utzon who of course walked away from the project before its completion. Badly burned by the whole experience and having lost a friend, Arup was reticent about working again with other young architects who really didn't know what they were doing. Of course, those young architects were us! But Ted – who as a young engineer had also worked on the opera house design – brought Arup round, as he had Renzo and I. In the end, it became a beautiful and wonderful thing. But even at the outset, I remember being amazed at the scale of the whole competition. I mean, there were 681 entries, when we were expecting something closer to six. It was also clear from the brief – which was immaculately and very thoroughly put together – that the project had the backing of the French Ministry of Culture and so nobody was going to get in the way of its realisation.

EW What were the questions in the brief that instigated your own particular project?

RR The first thing we did was to look at the site and the surrounding area. It became clear to us almost immediately that the scheme had to be structured around the provision of a new public space. In the late-1960s the nearby Les Halles was still a fully functioning wholesale market. The market itself was perfectly good, but there was absolutely no space. The idea of the piazza then became fundamental to our design. The first sentence in the text accompanying our proposal was in this sense the most important thing we came up with – that our scheme would be 'a place for all



people, all ages and creeds, and for both rich and poor'. This established the whole social and political framework for the project, though in addition to the idea of a democratic space, the other key component was of course the notion of flexibility. Knowing my Banham, and from everything I'd learned at the AA and later working with Norman Foster with Team 4, flexibility seemed crucial to architectural design. Renzo had been working with similar ideas through all those wonderful lightweight studio structures he designed in Italy in the 1960s.

EW Your argument for the project, as you once described it, was the meeting of the British Museum with Times Square.

RR We always perceived our design as something that was full of life, by which we meant it would be largely public and popular, not elitist. In those days we had real difficulty with the word culture, which seemed like a highfalutin, class-orientated word, very much aligned to the high-brow German concept of *kultur*. It's interesting that now I use it all the time, without any of these reservations. After all, I helped persuade Tony Blair to call his Ministry of Culture just that. But at that time the word was just too problematic. We were adamant that the architecture we produced should not be a sterile monument, and much as we were drawn to the model of a big shed or beautiful big barn – like the Reliance Controls factory or the Spender House – we also wanted this container to be flexible. At the same time, we insisted on a more egalitarian social model. Again, the reference for this was Reliance Controls, which was one of the very first factories built in Britain where the workers

Team 4, Reliance Controls
electronics factory, Swindon, 1967
Courtesy Foster + Partners

shared the same front door as the bosses. So Beaubourg maintained multiple agendas – about flexibility, about structure and truth in materials, and also about social integration.

EW Which converged into a simple concept – an open frame and an open square.

RR Yes, although the jury took some convincing. I remember after we submitted all our competition materials there was a period when the jury travelled around and visited the offices of the shortlisted firms to look at their work in more detail. One day I got a call at 9.30am to say that Philip Johnson was outside our office wanting to look around. No one was there – probably because we had all worked till 4am the previous night – and so I dashed over to let Philip in. He immediately asked to see our plans for Beaubourg. 'We don't have any plans', I said, 'only sections'. 'Okay, well then please show me where you have placed the library and how you have distributed the various departments.' By then, slightly irritated, I said 'I don't know where the library will go, and frankly I don't care.' 'But the plan drives the form', he argued. 'Not on this project it doesn't', I replied, 'it all comes from the section'.

EW When I spoke with Renzo he also said there were no plans, but there was one diagram of the frame, flanked by the circulation and services zones, that you kept repeating.

RR When I say there were no plans, what I mean is that the spatial division of the building was only worked out in section. We did of course have mechanical servicing plans and structural plans. Actually, I think this vagueness worked in our favour. I'm told that when the various museum departments were shown the designs, because they couldn't see a precise place where they'd be located, they imagined their future environment in more idealistic, optimistic terms.

EW What precedents did you discuss while formulating the project, both in your own work and elsewhere?

RR One of the first schemes Renzo and I worked on was a design for a shopping centre in Cambridge – the Fitzroy Burleigh project – which had a number of formal similarities with Beaubourg, being a big shed with an escalator running up the facade, but from my side of things (and I realise this sounds so simplistic) the strongest link to Beaubourg is the house I built for my parents in Wimbledon at the end of the 1960s, which like Beaubourg is a lightweight, flexible structure, but on a much smaller, domestic, suburban scale. At the same time, of course, we were thinking of more common references, like the Japanese metabolists and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, especially his Larkin Building, which was the first time he really separated out the building's cores. The period I spent in the US, studying at

Yale, was also hugely influential, mainly on account of my exposure to Mies' American work and Louis Kahn's Richards Laboratories, but on the US West Coast I was also interested in the Case Study Houses, particularly those by Charles and Ray Eames and by Raphael Soriano, who I would later get to know quite well. In this sense, all of the modern masters were sitting heavily on our shoulders.

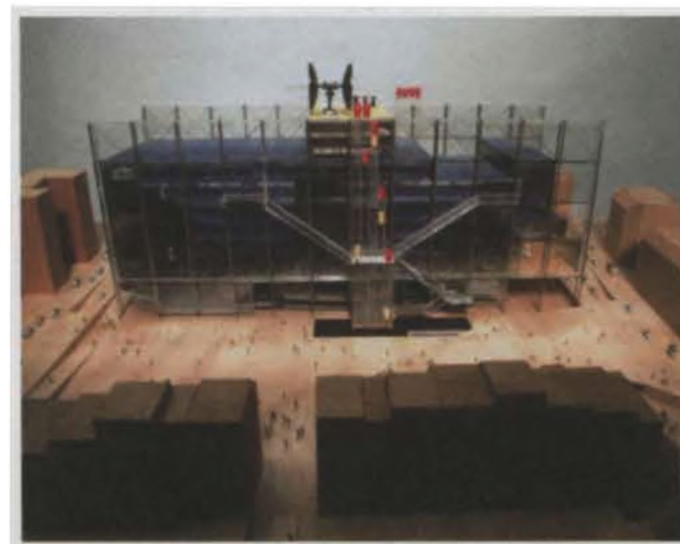
EW To what extent was the May 68 debate – which was quite suspicious of architecture – also an influence?

RR May 68 was immensely influential, not just on Beaubourg but on all my thinking. It even affected my home life – I mean, I was only able to meet my second wife Ruthie because she and her US friends were coming to Europe to escape the Vietnam draft. I remember imploring my students at Cambridge to march against Vietnam, and in support of the French students, intellectualism and the workers. They just replied that they had paid the Brighton architecture students to march for them – that was their typically condescending position on class war! As I'm sure you've seen, when we submitted our boards for the competition a few years later, we implanted graphic traces of the student uprisings on our drawings of the facade of Beaubourg, and all those anti-war slogans and projected images. Even after we had won and started making our weekly trips to Paris there were still rumblings of protest in the city. We even got ensnared in one battle between police and rioters – Renzo and I were walking to a restaurant in our own special way and somehow we got scooped up by the police along with all the protestors. It was actually pretty nasty. But the sense of hope and optimism that characterised much of the student ideologies was fundamental for us.

EW What would you say was the preeminent design decision for the project: to divide the site in two – an open square and a large-span building – or to provide a maximum span without columns and the rest of the site open?

RR I don't think we ever saw either as taking precedence. Our proposal was a large pot of simmering concepts, all intermingled with each other. But if you are looking for the provenance of the open square, it probably came from the Piazza del Campo in Siena, a space that Renzo and I both knew very well. As I said before, we always wanted the scheme to provide public space, and perhaps our most original idea was therefore not to build in the middle of the site – as any other modern movement architect would have done, creating space only around the building's perimeter – but to push the building to one side, creating a large open square between it and the busy rue Saint-Martin. If you look at the competition drawings, though, you'll see that the edge of this site is a bit battered. This is because we

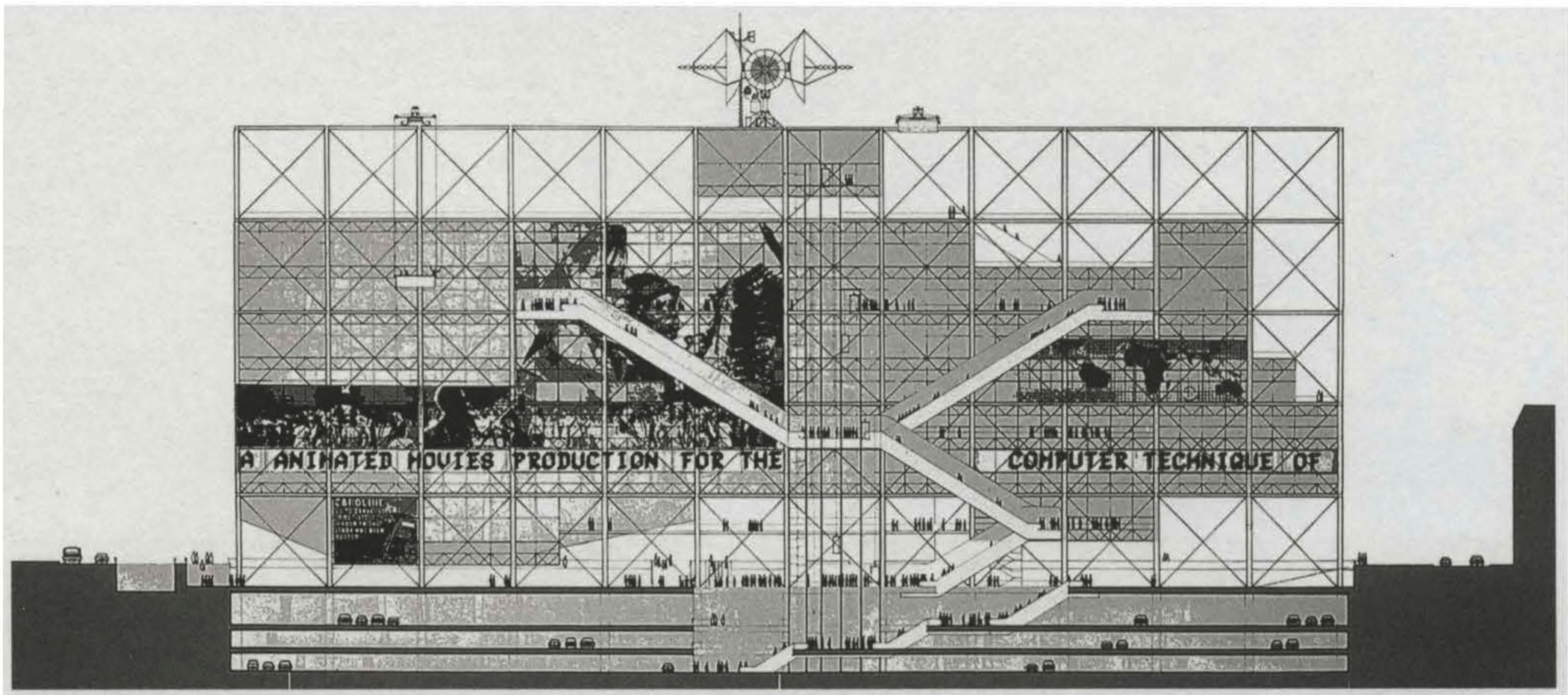
were working right up to the deadline. With minutes to go, Marco Goldschmied dashed to the all-night post office in Leicester Square to send off our drawings and get the package date-stamped to show that we'd made it, just. I remember it was a very cold January night and the post office was surrounded by all these poor old homeless guys and drug addicts, huddling in the doorway to try and keep warm. When Marco got to the head of the queue the woman behind the counter said that the drawing tube exceeded the maximum dimensions permitted by the Royal Mail, and so Marco had to borrow a very blunt pair of scissors from one of the homeless guys and hack off the end of the tube, and with it the drawings inside. The tube was duly dispatched, but a couple of days later I got a note saying we'd paid insufficient postage and the package would not be delivered until we stumped up the excess. There followed a flurry of furious phone calls with the post office. Then I think the French even briefly misplaced all of the British entries. It was quite a saga, but they got there in the end – though I remember Philip Johnson asked us with a certain degree of exasperation why a dog had chewed all our drawings.



EW If we now turn to the development of the project and its construction over the next five or six years, you had to battle an alarming number of problems, including ever shorter deadlines, budget cuts and even the death of President Pompidou.

RR All of these things were terrible. And such a contrast to the beginning. I mean, when we first heard the result, it was like we'd won the football pools, especially when we found out how many other entries there had been. But very soon afterwards we encountered nothing but animosity. I think in the whole of the next six years there was just one piece that celebrated what we were doing – a review by Ada Louise Huxtable in *The New York Times* – everybody else was antagonistic. They just hated it. A group of French architects even started an organisation whose sole aim was to put a stop to the building. When they discovered that the boundaries of

Piano + Rogers, model of the competition-winning scheme, 1971



the site as defined by the city were slightly different from the local *arrondissement's* definition they gleefully took us to court. We were constantly under attack. Later on, we were even informed that we were not allowed to practise architecture in the country – some antiquated by-law stipulated that only French architects could design French cultural buildings in Paris. But this is where President Pompidou himself really helped us out, pushing through a new act that allowed us to work. I remember having to go with Renzo to some dark municipal room and swear allegiance to the country and basically promise to be a good boy.

EW *In retrospect, what allowed you to keep control over the project?*

RR We had a really tremendous client in Robert Bordaz, who the president had appointed to run the competition and construction. Without Bordaz, Beaubourg would never have been built. Bordaz himself was an interesting man, 65 years old, very big, white hair, and with practically no experience in building. He once admitted to me that his only knowledge of construction came from the time he was in charge of the French withdrawal from Dien Bien Phu in the First Indochina War. He then became a senior judge, and his legal skills proved extremely useful in getting us out of one scrape after another, but especially in sorting out the French steel industry, who were quoting us prices double what we had first agreed and being increasingly difficult in terms of all the regulations we had to satisfy. But as I said, there were so many problems to deal with. Along with the issue of the steel, there was the slashing of our budget, and the belligerent Paris fire brigade, who insisted that we couldn't build a building higher than their ladders, which

extended only 24m. In the end this did bring down the height of the building, and actually helped us to manage the budget. Of course, the other key person who enabled us to resolve the more technical difficulties was our engineer Peter Rice, who was just brilliant. Peter was a classical thinker, in that you didn't really know if he was an engineer or an architect. In this sense he was like Brunelleschi. He just sculpted a solution. Peter came in when we realised we couldn't possibly build it without him. He had this wonderful ability to explain complicated things in very simple terms. And he also believed that any problem could be resolved by going back to first principles, rather than working through existing or traditional solutions.

EW *Peter Rice once suggested that one of the main reasons you succeeded was because none of you spoke very good French.*

RR I'm sure he's right.

EW *Around Rice you also assembled a group of other very able people, most of whom ended by being collaborators for many years.*

RR Yes, we basically phoned up a lot of friends and put together a very good team. People like Gianni Franchini, who became a dear friend, and who was perhaps the only person who could speak both French and English (as well as his native Italian). I also got Laurie Abbott involved. He had studied with me at Yale and had worked with Norman and me at Team 4. In typical Laurie style, just two days after I called I saw his old car pull up outside our office, with his wife and kids strapped in, and all his stuff on the roof. 'I'm here!' he shouted.

Piano + Rogers, elevation of the competition-winning design, 1971

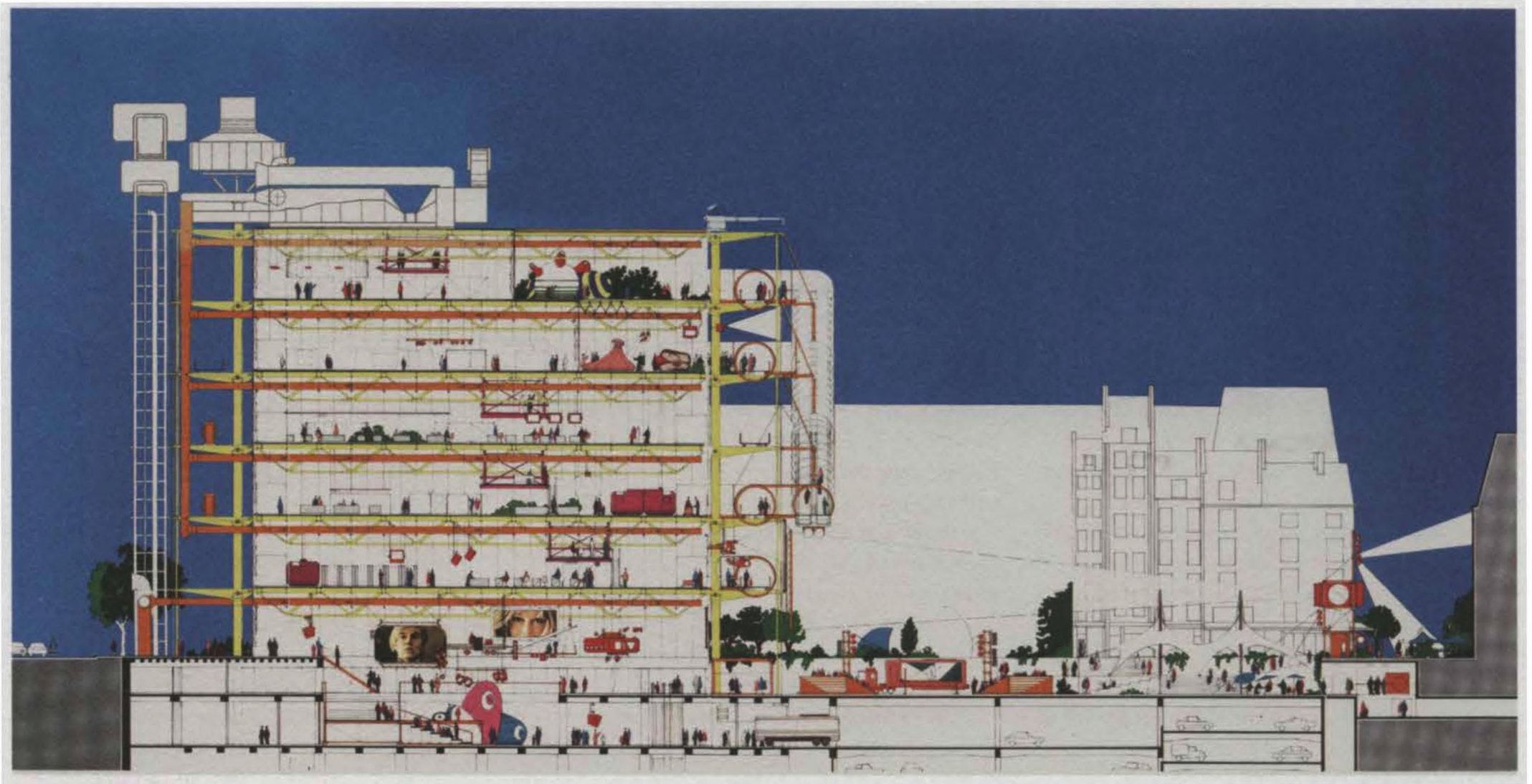
Laurie was one of the real heroes of the building's design, supervising all the structure and services. Mike Davies also came in, and we brought Alan Stanton back from Los Angeles, and then all these Japanese guys turned up out of the blue, uninvited, and Laurie immediately set them to work. None of them could speak English but they could really draw. And it went on and on like this for three or four years, working on the project night and day.

EW *I understand that the project was developed by six independent teams.*

RR Well, yes and no. We did have separate teams, but there was also an overriding sense of the whole. Actually most of the meetings and discussions involved client relations. Beaubourg more than any other job required a hell of a lot of client meetings. Renzo largely did these because he spoke French better than the rest of us; certainly better than me. And speaking French was key. I remember strained meetings with the contract lawyer trying to make myself understood in my own lousy French, because no one it seemed was able to communicate in any other language. It was actually a very nationalistic thing. I used to think that the British were the most nationalistic of people but the French are far, far worse. All the consultants insisted we only spoke French. A few years after Pompidou I met up with this same contract lawyer again and he cheerfully said hello to me and chatted away in English. 'What, you can speak English?' I said. 'Of course', he replied.

EW *During this whole period didn't your Paris office keep moving, from the Grand Palais to an inflatable structure?*

RR That's right. The first space was in the Grand Palais, which sounds appropriately grand, but with 700 models of all the



Piano + Rogers,
cross-section with integrated
projection screens, 1974

competition schemes laid out it was like working in a morgue. So we moved out. Twice actually. First to a boat, a barge on the Seine that briefly operated as our floating office, and then to an inflatable structure that the architects loved but the engineers absolutely hated, largely because whenever it rained it would slowly collapse. It also had an incredible echo inside, so you could never make yourself properly heard. It was a daft idea, really. In the end we moved to a space very close to the site on the Boulevard de Sébastopol.

EW *I would now like to discuss three decisive changes that were made during the project development, and correspondingly five ideas that did not materialise.*

RR Sure, let's take them one at a time.

EW *The first one was the use of cast steel for the structure, rather than standard steel sections, as originally imagined.*

RR That came from Peter Rice, who developed this idea partly after seeing the cast-steel nodes in the vast space-frame designed by Kenzo Tange at the 1970 Osaka Expo. We immediately liked it because it gave the building structure a grain and a transparency. But it was also another example of Peter's genius for sculpture, as much as his humanism.

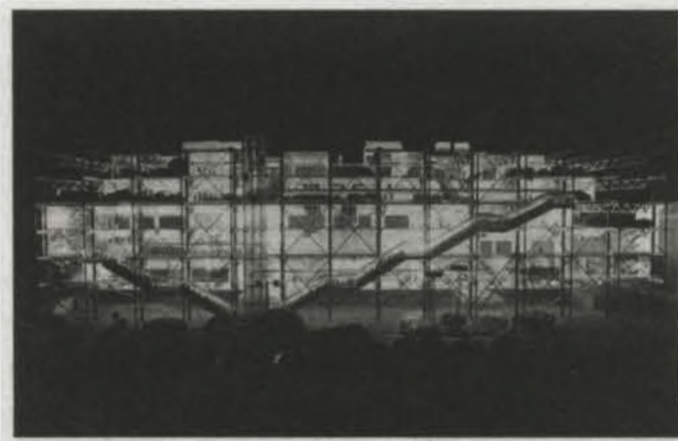


EW *The second one was the use of the gerberettes.*

RR That took us a hell of a long time to resolve, but again this came from Peter. It's basically a bracket, if you like.

EW *And the third one was the implementation of the diagonal escalator across the full building, rather than the original forking escalator.*

RR As you say, in the competition scheme the escalator divides in two from a central point and goes upwards in separate directions. But you have to remember that we didn't have much experience. When we started to think about it more carefully, we soon realised that two escalators couldn't get you all the way to the top of the building. You can actually see this on the competition model. So we just extended one escalator all the way across the main facade – there, I've drastically simplified years of really hard work in one sentence. Of these three transformations, the escalator was the key one. From the outset we said that movement throughout the building should



be visible. To ensure this visibility, the escalator had to go on the outside, taking up the whole of the main facade. Movement therefore followed the model of services and structure, which were also expressed on the outside of the building.

EW *The escalator, not unlike a public street, was also the element to activate the building throughout the day, a central concern in the competition brief.*

RR That's right. The brief had been put together by the local architect François Lombard, and it gave us hope that the building could be used in this way, with people moving across the piazza, up the escalators and through the building in a kind of perpetual continuum. The problem was the heads of department in the actual museum, who were only concerned about their own domains – so the library could only be a library, and not some other kind of space, synthesised with another. This is why two years after we finished the project they moved everything around, unable to accept the idea of a sort of 'shopping centre', as someone derisively called it. At the same time, the museum did initially stick with the idea that the escalators would be free to use, and anyone could enter the building also for free, which was very important. And some of the later curators, especially Pontus Hultén, who was fantastically good, really understood the building.

EW *Then there are the five ideas that didn't materialise, the first of which was having movable floors.*

RR Personally, I never really thought these could work. But Arup believed in them, and Ted especially was convinced he could do it. But for Renzo and me, the fact that they didn't make it into the actual building was no real loss. Of course, at the same time, it *would* have been wonderful, even magical, to have them. Although imagine the fire problems! Even without movable floors we had so many difficulties satisfying the fire regulations – the French kept ratcheting up every stipulation when we went with a German steel company rather than a French one. They insisted that all the columns had to be filled with

Above: Piano + Rogers, model of the revised scheme, 1973

Left: The structural gerberettes as delivered to the site, 1975

water, even after Arup proved that this was completely unnecessary, and then they demanded that this water be pumped around the whole system. I know that the pumps are no longer there, and I bet the water has been drained out too. You just don't need it.

EW *The second one was having the square extend directly underneath the building.*

RR I think Renzo and I became convinced quite soon after the competition phase that it would actually be rather good not to have any activity underneath the building, largely because we were worried about how dank and dark it would be. Keeping the place alive, and stopping it from becoming somewhere the homeless would sleep each night would have been a real problem. And so we turned our attention instead to developing the so-called 'Siena slope'

EW *The third one was the screens.*

RR Yes, that was a pity. In the original competition the whole of the main facade was presented as a patchwork of projected images. But what we probably hadn't allowed for – and this is a little bit of a post-rationalisation – is that the French are so good at what in Italy we'd call the *passeggiata*, the slow urban stroll, an opportunity to look at other people and to be seen yourself. So this whole social ritual might have been eroded if the focus had shifted away from the street towards these giant screens. But that wasn't the reason we abandoned them. We actually had the money in place to install the screens. French electricity were willing to finance them. It was only when Pompidou's successor, President Giscard d'Estaing, came along, that they were dropped. When we presented the scheme to him he immediately focused on the screens and said 'Okay, so who's going to control the facade, the Left or the Right?' Rather romantically we replied, 'Neither. They'd be controlled by culture.' 'Pull the other one', he said, or whatever the equivalent French phrase is! And so we lost that one. But really, these things are never real losses, they are all just constraints. Building anything means working within constraints. And on Beaubourg we had so many. Perhaps more than the animated facade, the toughest one was pedestrianising the surrounding streets. Remember, a year before the competition Pompidou had made one of his grand statements in which he said that 'Paris must make way for the car'. We had completely the opposite view. And so we really had to fight to remove cars and traffic from the surrounding streets. It was only at the very last moment that traffic adjoining the piazza was closed off.

EW *The fourth one was a series of elements that would programme the square.*

RR The piazza is probably the single most successful aspect of the whole design. Its use is also a response to the destruction of Les Halles,



which in my opinion was a really terrible mistake. As I said earlier, we designed our scheme around a public space because the area was so constricted. But when Les Halles was torn down it suddenly produced a kind of lung or void space. In the first years of Beaubourg the pressure for space meant that the piazza was filled with even more people, more music, more theatre, more activities, precisely because there was nowhere else to go.

EW *And the last one was the mezzanines.*

RR There's not so much to say about the mezzanines. I think they were a nice idea, and could have been very interesting. They were actually trying to address the issue of storage, which only now, partly through my involvement with the Tate, do I see as a huge issue for big museums and galleries. With our first scheme we were trying to make this storage accessible to the public.

EW *I'd like to now turn to the reception of the building, which interestingly seemed to have been misunderstood by both progressives and conservatives, Left and Right.*

RR Exactly. But I have to tell you, in the days immediately after we finished it, I was not terribly worried about the characterisations critics used to attack us, especially by the Right, because of course I liked the idea of it being perceived as a people's place, a 'cultural supermarket' as one critic called it (even if today I spend my whole life fighting against supermarkets in cities). I should also add that a few years after we built Pompidou I worked as an advisor to President Mitterand on his own *grands projets*, and I remember the first time I met him he was with his culture minister Jack Lang, and he reminded me that he had supported the Pompidou Centre from the beginning (though Lang had not).

EW *Then there is also the reception of the building in terms of use, and the fact that, paradoxically, some of the departments within the Pompidou Centre ended up endorsing a conventional, and fixed, organisation.*

RR The biggest single change was that the museum offices moved out, even if for us this wasn't a problem. Much more difficult to accept was that the library won the battle with the director of the Pompidou to have its own separate entrance. But interestingly, at this very moment we are working again with the building, and trying to return the library entrance to the way it was. Whereas before we used to say there is no entrance to the Pompidou, people now always ask, 'Where is the entrance?' My response is still that it's not really supposed to have one. At least not one single entrance. It did have two for a while, but the mandate to check everyone's bag means they want all visitors passing through one single point. The other great regret about Pompidou after we handed it over was that in the 1997–2000 renovation they made the escalators private – a tremendous mistake – meaning people now queue up on the wrong side of the building, presenting their tickets at the bottom of the escalator rather than the top. And yet we still see it as being very flexible. It can change into whatever it wants to be. We used to say something similar about the Lloyd's Building, that after

Piano + Rogers, proposal for the Pompidou facade as a giant information wall, 1971
Opposite: aerial view of the rear facade of the Pompidou Centre, 2010
 © Boris Horvat / AFP / Getty Images

All images, unless otherwise stated, courtesy Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners

the insurers move out Lloyd's would make a very good university. The idea was that whatever happens – and this was our thesis continually – the building should not constrain the user.

EW *Lastly, I wanted to talk about the building's conceptual legacy, not least the way it basically defined the cultural centre as a new architectural type.*

RR Well, I think that really started a few years earlier, with de Gaulle's culture minister, André Malraux. The imperative to contain and project culture was really his idea. The fact that every major city now has a cultural centre is testament to that idea. For us, what was interesting is that I'm told that Pompidou himself originally only wanted a library, not a museum. His expectations for the project were much less grand. But later, of course, it grew, with the addition of the museum and galleries, and also the IRCAM music centre, which was basically a ruse to attract Pierre Boulez back to Paris from New York, and give him an instrument he could really play with.

EW *At the same time, the Pompidou Centre became the blueprint for the later grands projets, and the assumption that a set of buildings can potentially transform a city.*

RR For me, the legacy of Pompidou is more to do with the idea of regeneration – simply, that it turned a very run-down quarter of Paris, full of brothels and prostitution, into a vibrant new district. What is positive about this is that the neighbourhood was revitalised; on the negative side, all the prices were soon pushed up so high that very few people could afford to live there. But this is always one of architecture's main dilemmas – you transform part of a city with a building that is fundamentally egalitarian, but in the process you make that district exclusive.

EW *Not long after you completed the Pompidou Centre your collaboration with Renzo came to an end.*

RR We did a few little things afterwards, like the B&B Italia offices, but our partnership basically ended because of a lack of work. Immediately after Pompidou there was a two-year period with practically no commissions. I had to almost give up practising and was making ends meet by teaching in the US, in Los Angeles and in New Haven at Yale, before eventually coming back to London. Renzo decided to keep an office going in Paris and to look for work, but it was tough. We were also so exhausted after all of the stresses of building Pompidou. Frankly, in the end, running a collaborative architectural office is like a love affair. It's great and wonderful when it's going well, but when things start to go wrong and when there's no longer that pull – I don't just mean the sex, I mean everything – it becomes very hard work.

