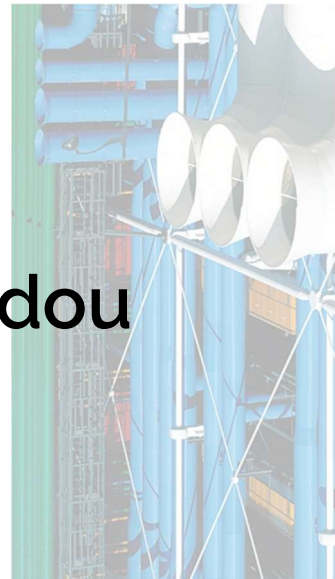


UWTSD

History and Theory 2 – Part 2

Breaking the rules, or maintaining them:

How true is the Centre Pompidou to its conceptual origins?



17/04/2026

Luc Robert Harris

2200290

Total Word Count:

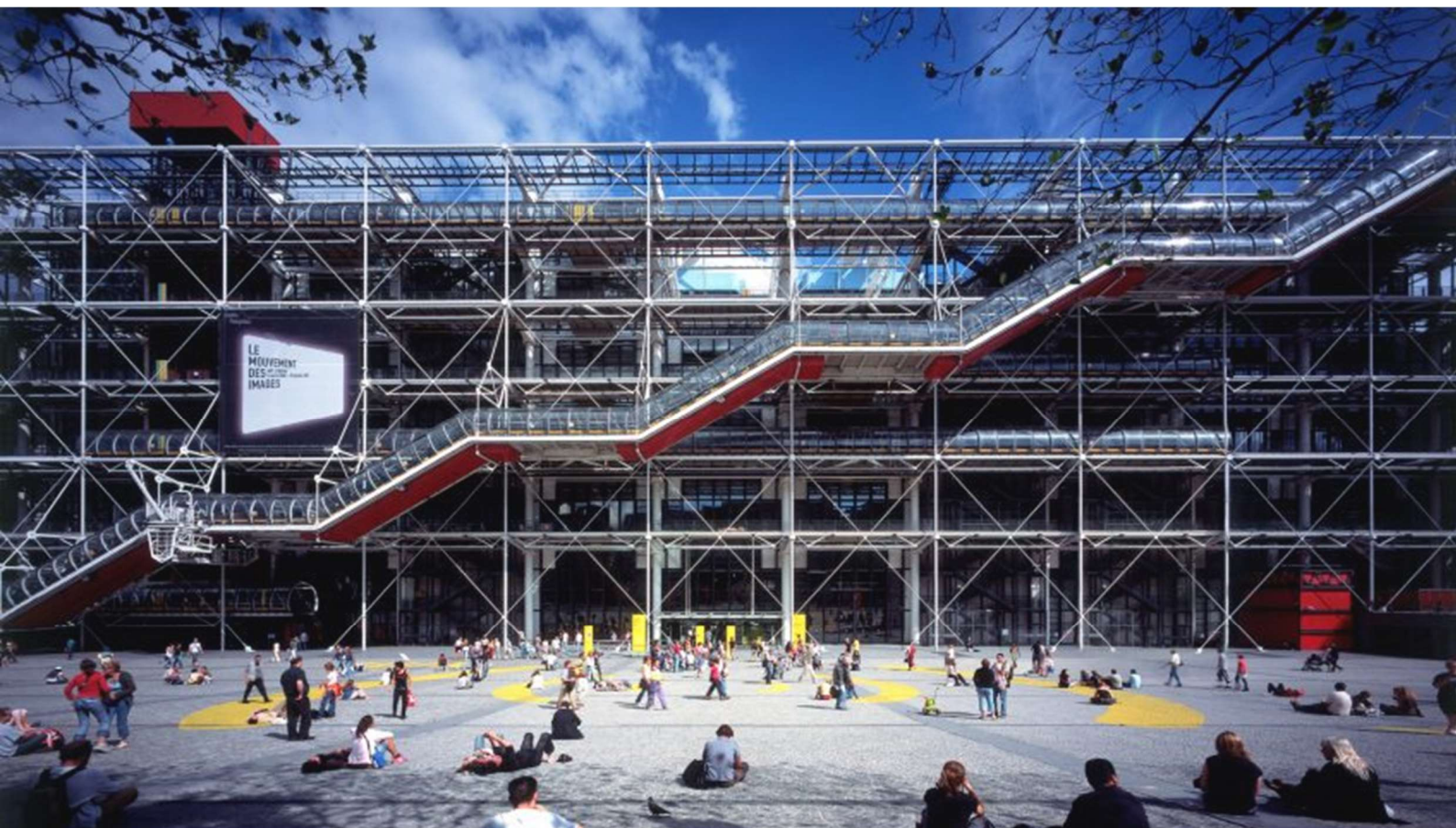
2,364

Cover Image: Photograph of the Centre
Pompidou (Denancé, 1771-1777)

The Centre Pompidou, built in 1977 and designed by Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano and Peter Rice, remains one of if not the most radical attempts to completely reimagine the archetypal institutional building. The Centre intended to not only reframe the ways of experiencing culture, but also dynamically change with it.

Ignoring the evident criticisms behind the stark busy appearance, especially in such an immutable part of Paris, the centre is known for its 'inside-out' approach, with exposed structural frames, exterior services and external circulation (fig. 1). The Centre rejected the traditional museum conventions and was set to revolutionise the cultural building (Lutyens, 2025). But these ideas did not emerge in isolation. The original concept for the centre drew heavily from an unrealised endeavour called the Fun Palace Project by Cedric Price and Joanne Littlewood, which imagined a constantly adapting and changing cultural experience (Jones, 2016). However, the realised Centre Pompidou differs heavily from Price and Littlewoods work, bringing into question just how much the current Centre Pompidou reflects the intensions behind its predecessor. This essay therefore looks to examine just how radical the Centre Pompidou truly is, or whether it has become something else entirely.

Fig. 1: Photograph of the Centre Pompidou from the Piazza (2006).



The centre itself was the product of a design competition ran by the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs and initiated by the current French president Georges Pompidou (Silver, 1994). He sought to repurpose the vacant Plateau Beaubourg, which once held a great vegetable market, centred in the 4th arrondissement deep within the baroque streets of central Paris (fig. 2). At the time Beaubourg was considered underdeveloped despite its location and as such Pompidou's main goal for the project was to revitalise the area and use the valuable piece of land to create a cultural centre for the people.



Fig. 2: Top view of Paris skyline from timelapse (Neiezhmakov, 2017).

Entering the competition in 1971, Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano and Gianfranco Franchini were, according to Jones (2016, p. 330), reluctant to participate due to the steep competition and ambitious brief. It was Ted Happold, an engineer who was then working at the world-renowned Ove Arup and Partners who convinced them both to join on the condition he covered the cost for entry. The competition was steep attracting over 600 entries in total from across the world, but despite this it was the proposed 'project 493' which won almost unanimously. Heavily influenced by the Fun Palace Project by Cedric Price and Joanne Littlewood (Nowicka-Wojnowska, 2025, p. 2), the highly adaptable cultural centre was proposed with almost no interior layout. The brief specified that the building must hold a dedicated modern art museum and a major library, yet Rogers and Piano left their plans ambiguous, this was intentional. The proposed eclectic form in a structural frame (fig. 3) was designed to house a multitude of exhibitions, amenities and activities. The frame derived for the express purpose of facilitating exactly what the inhabitants and visitors of the building wished. The initial concept was a fully glazed structural frame that could host a multitude of modular walls and rooms which could be swapped, edited and moved around the structure. The outer façade was intended to allow for screens and posters to project out onto the square with a completely open ground floor to allow free movement in and out of the structure no matter the time of day or day of the week. In order to free the interior, the architects pushed the main circulation routes and services outside the building's bounds, creating five stories of uninterrupted floorspace. But their concept was chosen

not only because of its radical ideas, Silver (1994) states, but also because of its intention to involve the building in its context. While most entries chose to completely cover the entire square, Rogers, Piano and Franchini gave up half the land to create a large public space, see figure 4, a choice that ultimately won them the competition.

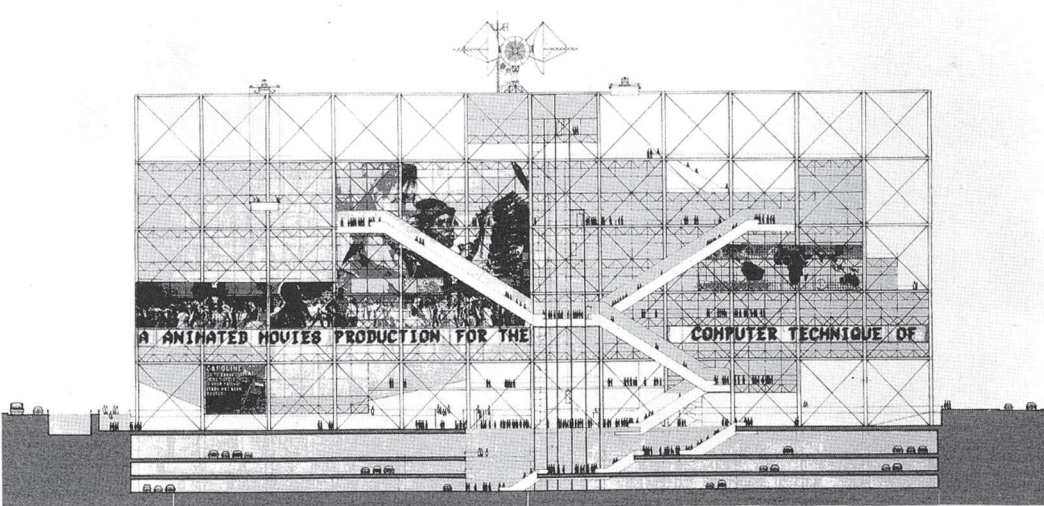
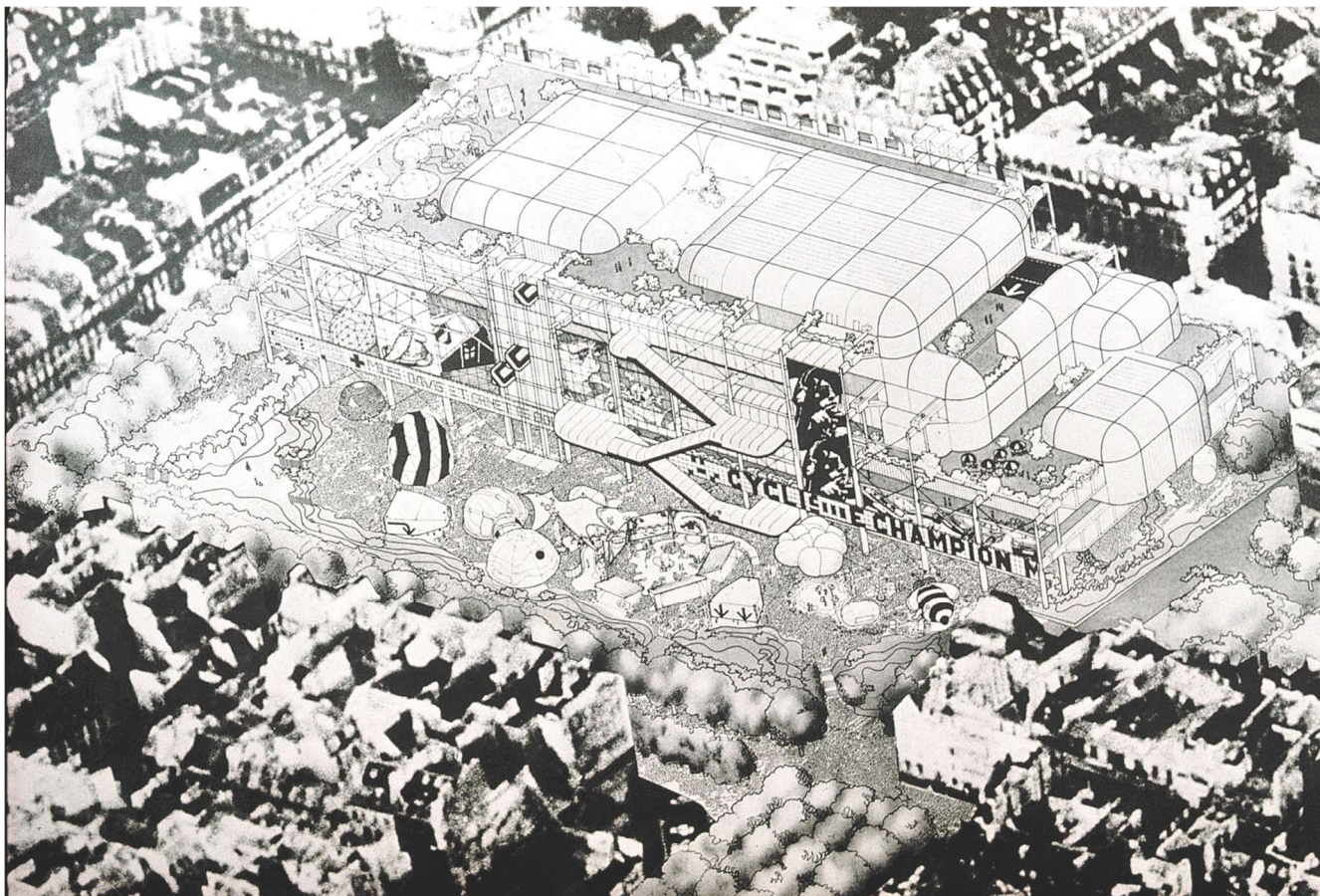


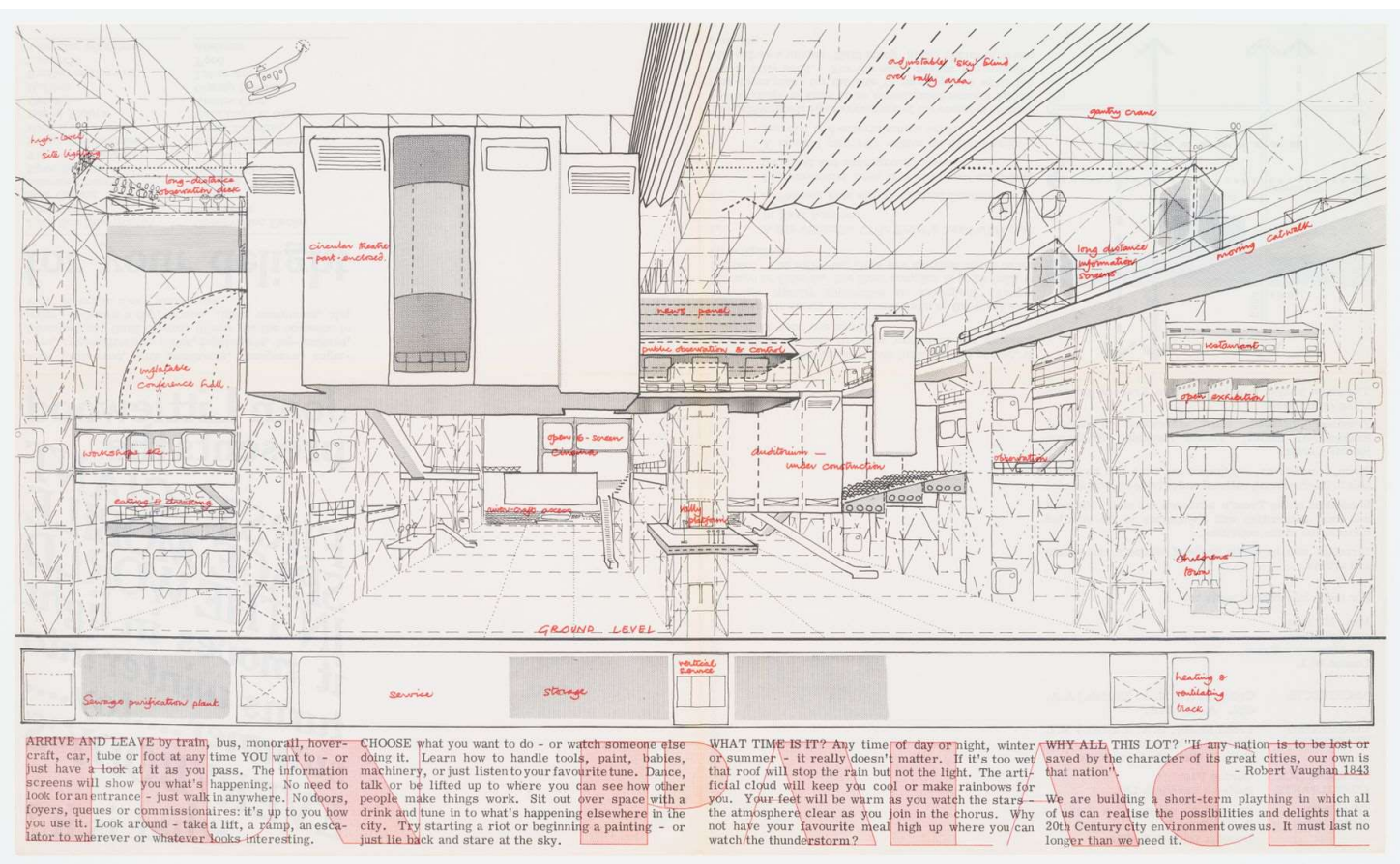
Fig. 3: Elevation to the square, as submitted for the competition (Rogers, Piano, and Franchini, 1971).

Fig. 4: Birds eye view, as submitted for the competition (Rogers, Piano, and Franchini, 1971).



While never openly expressed at the time, the concept was heavily inspired by the previously mentioned Fun Palace (Nowicka-Wojnowska, 2025). An unrealised project envisioned by British architect Cedric Price and revolutionary modern theatre director Joan Littlewood. The best-known depiction for the project (fig. 5) was published in 1964 and depicts a large expanse of uninterrupted space surrounded in an immense steel frame hosting a multitude of suspended modular scenes, including labelled theatres, restaurants and exhibitions some fully enclosed, others open. The various pods and platforms would be portable and highly versatile, being moved by various cranes and pulleys attached to the various service towers and large spanning trusses. The modules would be accessible via moving catwalks, stairs and escalators similarly hung from the frame allowing for an endless configuration of the space. Alongside the drawing is a short text with four main points marketing the intensions behind the structure. Firstly, the focus on accessibility, explaining that you can arrive at the palace however you want. Secondly, the activities, you can do anything you'd like there, learn, watch, dance or even start a riot. Thirdly, you can do these activities whenever you would like, day or night, rain or shine. And finally, they explain why they made this project, not to become a monument or a permanent tourist attraction, but to instead be a short-lived example of how 20th century cities should serve their inhabitants, "It must last no longer than we need it" (Littlewood, 1994).

Fig. 5: Fun Palace promotional brochure
(Price and Littlewood, 1964).



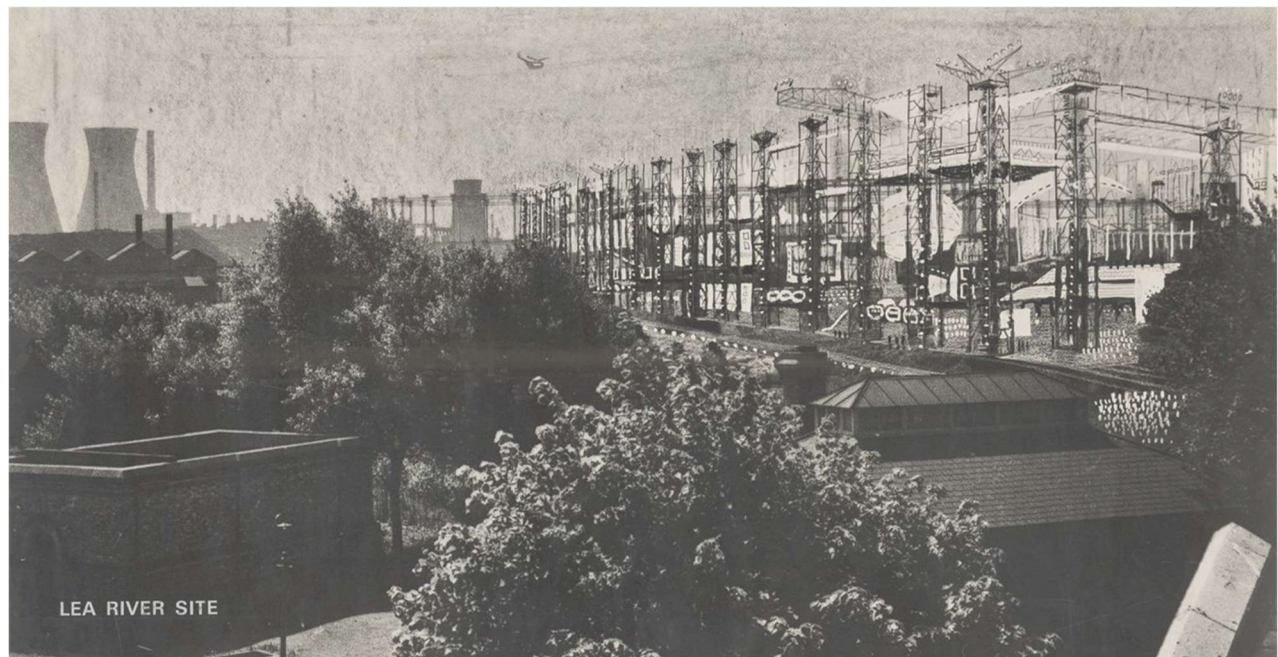


Fig. 6: Fun Palace perspective for the Lea River site on photomontage (Price, 1961-1965)

Littlewood has always been a revolutionary in her field, and Cedric Price was much the same, according to Jones (2016), the ideas behind the Fun Palace were originally Littlewood's but it was only after meeting Price that they both decided to move forward with the project, financing it themselves. At this time Price was not yet established in the industry, but before he joined this project he was already criticised for his unique approach to design, disregarding aesthetics and often ignoring the exterior of a building, in order to maximise the user experience. He also had controversial views on conservation, being a firm believer that a building should last exactly how long it is useful for, and when it is done, it should be demolished. He went so far as to even advocate against the listing of historic buildings (Obrist, 2003). Later he would become an advocate for the circular economy concept, believing all buildings should be as easy to deconstruct and repurpose as they were to build.

The Fun Palace project was never meant to end as a concept, both Price and Littlewood fully intended the project to come to fruition. From 1961 to 1965 they proposed the project on a range of sites, the most likely of which was the Lea River site in London, illustrated in figure 6. At this stage they had further developed the idea into a full concept, including further plans and reportedly unreleased drawings, but whether due to its overly indefinite form or heavy bureaucracy on the site, the project was abandoned (Mathews, 2007). Despite this the Fun Palace was heralded as a greatly influential conceptual piece. Banham (1976) wrote that the Fun Palace Project was a crucial milestone in the movement. He wrote that It failed because it did not offer a monument, something which Banham respected, despite this he described the structure as a "kit of parts" (Banham, n.d., cited in Mathews, 2007).

Despite both concepts, the Fun Palace and the Centre Pompidou, being built off of very similar philosophies, Jones (2016) finds that Price would never approve of the Centre's final manifestation. After winning the competition, everyone involved quickly realised just how ambitious the project was. Silver (1994) describes the many difficulties and mishaps that caused the elaborate design to be simplified down to a more feasible product. Most notably, the initial glazed façade had to be pushed back, separating the structure from the curtain walling, while now a distinct key aspect of the building (fig. 7), at the time this was done to adhere to fire safety regulations and to simplify the detailing. Additionally, there was no plan for how to support the immense floor spans, a crucial component of the proposal. By this time engineer Tedd Happold, the very person who initiated the project, now left due to the difficulties. It was engineer Peter Rice of Ove Arup & Partners who found a solution, he pinned the colossal 45m floor trusses to the structural column using unique rockers called gerberettes seen in figure 7. These steel arms could counterbalance the load of the structure using an array of solid steel members that make up the busy grid which defines the façade, almost the entire structural front is in tension, pulling downwards (RSHP, 2026). Another iconic design choice made at this stage was the brightly colour coded service pipes that wrap the exterior of the building. Due to the services being pushed outside of the building they needed to be heavily weatherproofed, and Rogers advocated that the paint would help make maintenance on the building cheaper and easier. However, this choice has now become a bane to the upkeep of the building, according to Moore (2017), the array of external components has exponentially increased the surface area that is exposed to weather. Nonetheless, the playful addition has helped define the building's identity.



Fig. 7: Centre Pompidou under construction (Vincent, 1975).



Fig. 8: The interior of the modern art museum (Jones, 1983).

The Centre was finally opened to the public in 1977, and while the architects tried to preserve as much of the original concept as possible, many of the ideals that were present in both the competition entry and its predecessor the Fun Palace were conceded. The ground floor, originally designed to be open on all sides at all times, had to be closed off for safety reasons, leaving only a few entrances. The spontaneous plan had to become more defined, creating clear separations between the institutions using the building. Slowly it became closer to a traditional museum, then the intended radical concept, the only grace being its free admission. Finally, according to Jones (2016), the modularity that was integral the Fun Palace, and featured in the concepts was not realised, the separation of the structure made creating a modular façade implausible. And while the large spanning floor spaces created a perfect stage for larger exhibitions, there were no such exhibitions at the time. What was considered ideal when the centre opened was a controlled minimalist space with consistent north light, something that the heavy exposed trusses and large artificially lit halls could not offer (fig. 8).

Despite this, after the Centre Pompidou opened it quickly experienced a surge in popularity, while its performance as an art gallery and cultural centre certainly weren't optimal, this did not stop the building from quickly becoming a key attraction. According to Dejevsky (1996), The centre had to close after only twenty years for extensive renovations. This was due to the footfall far exceeding the estimated ten thousand visitors a day the building was designed to accommodate, reaching an average of twenty-five thousand visitors a day by 1988 (Heinich, 1988, p. 198). This led them to impose many changes on the building during this renovation, most notably the implementation of a charge on entry, a change which directly attacks the initial concept of an open cultural centre (Riding, 1999). The entrances were now restricted to only two, one for the external escalator whose primary attraction now became a viewing platform, and one for the centre itself. Additionally, the internal layout of the museum was completely redesigned by interior designer Gae Aulenti, whose controversial changes included creating internal circulation halls and heavily partitioning the floors (Tzortzi, 2016, p. 155). This called into question the need for the 45m spanning trusses in the first place, the existence of internal columns wouldn't have been noticed amongst the new layout.

This brings into question, after so many compromises, just how close the centre is to its intended semblance. Compared to the origin of the ideas in Cedric Price's and Joan Littlewood's Fun Palace, the centre is almost unrecognisable. Banham (1977) finds the building to be an almost complete incarnation of the ideas brought through by Price and Littlewood; however, they just took a snapshot of their Fun Palace and created a monument of it. While the original concept much more closely resembles the eclectic jig saw style Fun Palace, Banham finds its final form to much more closely follow the ideals and aesthetics of the Archigram collective, most notably the Plug In City by Peter Cook seen in figure 9. While the Fun Palace was conceived as entirely free of monumentality, Banham describes the Centre Pompidou as the only world-class monument to emerge from the 1970s.

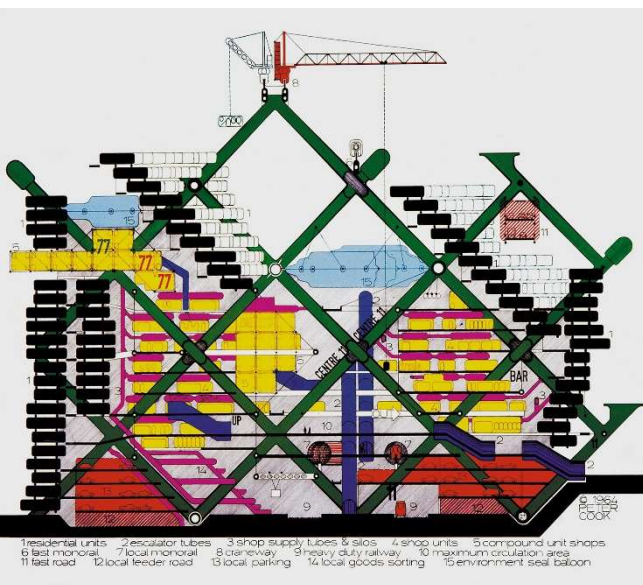


Fig. 9: Archigram, Plug-in City, Section (Cook, 1964).

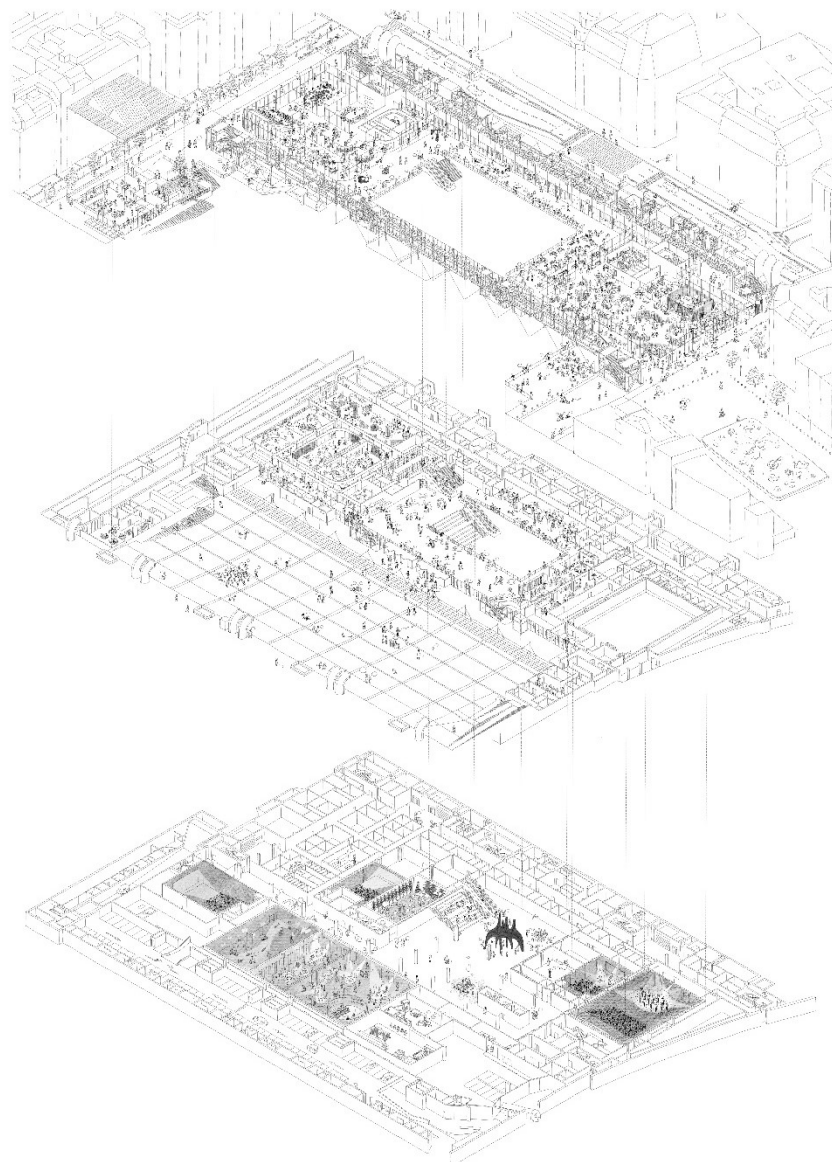


Fig. 10: Axonometric view – Agora, Forum, Mezzanine, hand-drawn (Kusunoki, 1975).

This brings us to the modern day, where the Centre Pompidou is again closing for restorations and another competition was held, being won by Moreau Kusunoki, Frida Escobedo Studio and AIA Ingénierie (Aprosio, 2025). With the Centre planned to be reopened in 2030, this will be the longest the Centre has ever remained closed, five years in total, with extensive reworks planned to include replacement of flooring, improved accessibility, a new research facility in place of the underground carpark, and most pertinently a complete re-design of the interior spaces and circulation. According to a press kit (Centre Pompidou, 2025) released on the centres closing, the intent behind the re-design is to simplify the internal layout, making it more intuitive for new visitors while trying to uphold the original intentions behind the wide floors. With larger exhibitions becoming progressively more feasible, Kusunoki intends to make use of the wider uninterrupted floor spans to create larger continuous halls. In an interview with the *domus* (Aprosio, 2025), Renzo Piano is quoted giving his wholehearted support to the project, indicating they have fully understood the ethos of the building.

While the recent renovation suggests the structure may once again be used closer to its initial intention, it remains ironic that Cedric Price would likely have preferred the Centre be dismantled instead of renovated. It can be argued that the Centre Pompidou has long since fulfilled its purpose, and in a final gesture of recognition of its radical roots, finally disappear allowing for something new. However, the continued use and renovation of the Centre directly contrasts this. What was intended to reject monumentality was ultimately what resolved into one of the most recognisable monuments of the 20th century. And as Banham suggests, the Pompidou is not what Price, nor what Rogers and Piano had intended for the structure but is instead a still interpretation of it. A static rendition of the rule breaking architecture it was meant to encapsulate. Nevertheless, the building will remain the final realisation of Prices work, a monument to the movements impact on all of institutional design.

List of Figures

Cover Image: Denancé, M. (1771-1777) *Photograph of the Centre Pompidou*. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/paris-architectural-masterpiece-center-pompidou-renzo-piano-and-richard-rogers> (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Figure 1: *Photograph of the Centre Pompidou from the Piazza* (2006). Available at: <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/11/05/centre-pompidou-piano-rogers-high-tech-architecture/> (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Figure 2: Neiezhmakov, K. (2017) *Top view of Paris skyline from timelapse*. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/paris-architectural-masterpiece-center-pompidou-renzo-piano-and-richard-rogers> (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Figure 3: Rogers, R., Piano, R., and Franchini, G. (1971) *Elevation to the square, as submitted for the competition*. Available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/64028/ad-classics-centre-georges-pompidou-renzo-piano-richard-rogers/5037e1be28ba0d599b0001d3-ad-classics-centre-georges-pompidou-renzo-piano-richard-rogers-> (Accessed 16/04/2026).

Figure 4: Rogers, R., Piano, R., and Franchini, G. (1971) *Birds eye view, as submitted for the competition*. Available at: <https://architizer.com/blog/inspiration/stories/mvrdvs-industrial-architectural-icon/#media-13> (Accessed 16/04/2026).

Figure 5: Price, C. and Littlewood, J. (1964) *Fun Palace promotional brochure*. Available at: CCA, London. DR1995:0188:525:001:023

Figure 6: Price, C. (1961-1965) *Fun Palace perspective for the Lea River site on photomontage*. Available at: CCA, London. DR1995:0188:525:001:023.

Figure 7: Vincent, B., (1975) *Centre Pompidou under construction*. Available at: <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2024/01/30/the-original-drawings-of-the-centre-pompidou-have-been-rediscovered-everyone-thought-they-were-lost.html> (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Figure 8: Jones, P.B. (1983) *The interior of the modern art museum*. Found in Jones, P.B. (2016).

Figure 9: Cook, P. (1964) *Archigram, Plug-in City, Section*. Available at: M+, Hong Kong, CA36/T.61.

Figure 10: Kusunoki, M. (1975) *Axonometric view – Agora, Forum, Mezzanine, hand-drawn*. Available at: <https://moreaukusunoki.com/project/centre-pompidou-2030/> (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

List of References

- Aprosio, G. (2025) 'Visiting the Centre Pompidou for the last time, before it closes in September', *domus*, 23 February. Available at: <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/gallery/2025/02/18/centre-pompidou-closing-september.html> (Accessed: 9 April 2026).
- Banham, R. (1976) *Megastructure: urban futures of the recent past*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Banham, R. and Partridge, J. (1977) 'Pompidou cannot be perceived as anything but a monument', *The Architectural Review*, 11 May. Available at: <https://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/pompidou-cannot-be-perceived-as-anything-but-a-monument> (Accessed: 15/04/2026).
- Centre Pompidou (2025) Press kit: Centre Pompidou 2030. Available at: https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/English_Press_Kit_Centre_Pompidou_2030_1.pdf (Accessed: 10 April 2026).
- Heinich, N. (1988) 'The Centre Pompidou and its public: the limits of a utopian site', Translated by Turner, C., in Lumley, R. (ed) *The museum time machine: putting cultures on display*. London: Routledge, pp. 197-210.
- Jones, P.B. (2016) *Architecture and ritual: how buildings shape society*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Littlewood, J. (1994) *Joan's book: Joan Littlewood's peculiar history as she tells it*. London: Methuen.
- Lutyens, D. (2025) 'The pioneering building that scandalised Paris', BBC Culture, 27 March. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/article/20250326-the-pioneering-building-that-scandalised-paris> (Accessed: 16/04/2026).
- Mathews, J.S. (2007) *From agit-prop to free space: the architecture of Cedric Price*. London: Black Dog Publishing.
- Moore, R. (2017) 'Centre Pompidou: a 70s French radical that's never gone out of fashion', *The Guardian*, 8 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jan/08/pompidou-centre-40-years-old-review-richard-rogers-renzo-piano> (Accessed: 6 April 2026).
- Nowicka-Wojnowska, M. (2025) 'The fun palace: how an unrealised project influenced art museums', *Arts*, 15(4). Available at: DOI: 10.3390/arts15010004.
- Obrist, H.U. (2003) *Interview with Cedric Price*, Basel: Birkhäuser.
- Riding, A. (1999) 'Arts abroad: Pompidou unearths the museum within', *The New York Times*, 22 December. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/22/arts/arts-abroad-pompidou-unearths-the-museum-within.html> (Accessed 16/04/2026).

RSHP (2026) *Centre Pompidou*. Available at: https://rshp.com/projects/culture-and-leisure/centre-pompidou/?_gl=1*17lxvl2*_up*MQ..*_ga*MjAxNTU1MjU0NS4xNzc2MTk1Njc5*_ga_XoXXDV7MK4*czE3NzYxOTU2NzkkbzEkZzEkdDE3NzYxOTU3MDMkajM2JGwwJGgw (Accessed: 1 April 2026).

Silver, N. (1994) *The making of Beaubourg: a building biography of the Centre Pompidou Paris*. London: The MIT Press.

Tzortzi, K. (2016) *Museum space: where architecture meets museology*. Oxford: Routledge.