

The très grande bibliothèque and the library of the future

By Larry R. Oberg

Plans for the new French library cause debate

For some time now, controversy has plagued the ambitious French plan to build a new national library. It did not surface, however, at the recent Berkeley, California, conference on "La Très grande bibliothèque and the Library of the Future" where, for three days, President François Mitterrand's latest and most ambitious grand *projet* was ably described and defended by a knowledgeable, articulate, and enthusiastic contingent of French librarians, academicians, and architects.

Despite grumblings in the halls, the audience of 200–300 American librarians, architects, teaching faculty, and Berkeley undergraduates practicing their French, were polite, receptive, and at times reverential, as they struggled to fathom the mythic proportions of the new Bibliothèque de France, a construction that will not only be the "the world's largest library," but also a monument to a nation's scientific and cultural heritage that promises to alter substantially the landscape of Paris.

Held at the Clark Kerr campus of the University of California on April 10–12, the conference featured American panelists presenting plans for the new San Francisco Public Library, the new Science, Industry, and Business Library at the New York Public Library, and discussed the fate of the book and the implications of automation for networking in the 21st century. But almost everyone's time, attention, and interest were focussed upon architect Dominique Perrault's plans for a \$1.3 billion, 726,000-square-foot library in Paris that will house 15 million books, seat 4,000 readers, use 250 miles of bookstacks, and employ some 2,000 librarians and support staff.

Often facetiously referred to as the TGB, or très grande bibliothèque, a play-on-initials with TGV, the French high-speed train, the new library will subsume the majority of the collections and staff of the old Bibliothèque Nationale (BN). Construction of the new Library of France began on March 23 of this year and the facility is expected to open in 1995, a date that presumably only fortuitously corresponds to President Mitterrand's final year in office. The library completes his legacy of monumental architectural undertakings, which also includes the glass pyramids at the new entrance to the Louvre museum, the ultra-modern popular opera at the Place de la Bastille, and the startlingly white Grande Arche de la Défense.

The final design

A subject of intense debate in France, the plans for the new library were personally selected by President Mitterrand from among four final designs chosen by a jury of experts. Located on a 15-acre Left Bank site that overlooks the Seine, the new library is composed of four 24-story, L-shaped steel, concrete, and wood towers that resemble open books. Criticized as self-referential in France and as regressive in the United States, the book-towers ignore the river and open inward upon a sunken rectangular garden surrounded on all sides by four glass-walled subterranean levels of public access space that will house reading rooms, hanging balconies, open-stack collections, bookshops, and restaurants. Much of the controversy surrounding the project focusses on the fact that the library's readers and visitors will be served underground while the collections are to be housed on the upper eleven floors of the four towers.

Architect Perrault, until now relatively unknown even in France but omnipresent at the conference, defended his plan with consider-

able Gallic flair. His overarching task, as he phrased it, was to achieve a balance between monumentality and humanity. The container he has created will not only house and celebrate the cultural patrimony of France, but also serve as a functioning and freely accessible library and as the principal node in an evolving national and international information network. Perrault noted that the new library is at the heart of a major urban renewal project and that an entirely new neighborhood will be constructed around and coordinated with it. Perrault also emphasized that the library, rivaling in scale the Palais Royal and the Place de la Concorde, will introduce much-needed open space in Paris.

The rather thankless task of explaining the organization of the new library fell to Gérard Grunberg, head of library management, who emphasized that while the new Bibliothèque de France will inherit most of the collections and functions of the old Bibliothèque Nationale, its mission is not limited to serving scholarship narrowly defined. The new library will be open to a broader public, a function that challenges French librarians to reconcile their strong traditional heritage-preservation tendencies with "the democratic demands for open access" favored by their socialist government sponsors. To rise to its charge, the new library will offer two physically separate and conceptually distinct collections; the first, developed to research level and restricted to bona fide researchers, will consist of the supplemented collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale; the second, developed to a strong study level, will be open to students and the general public, categories of aspiring readers that were never received with noticeable warmth at the BN's rue de Richelieu site.

Grunberg made it clear that the French take their preservation obligations seriously. In addition to in-house ateliers, a high-technology conservation center designed to serve the needs of the new library, is now under construction outside Paris at Marne-la-Vallée, a location perhaps more familiar to North Americans as the home of EuroDisneyland. Imaging is a primary concern to the French in that it serves the new democratic ideal of making texts available to

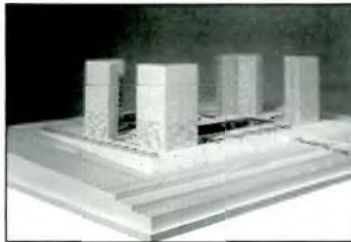
the broadest possible public, while at the same time protecting their original containers from sticky populist fingers. The new preservation facility includes a wide range of reproduction services with photographic, micrographic, and electronic digitization capabilities. Preservation plans call for the deacidification of some 2.6 million volumes, the production of 500 million microform images, and the rebinding of one million volumes.

Grunberg expects that as many as 200,000 volumes will have been digitized by the 1995 library opening date and plans call for the digitization of all texts, images, and sounds contained in the

library within a reasonable period of time. Digitization, Grunberg suggests, will ultimately replace microfiche as the preferred storage and preservation medium, although other French panelists made it clear that the library also remains committed to the preservation of the document in the form originally chosen by the author and the publisher. Finally, Grunberg assured the audience that French concerns that the book storage areas in the towers could become "solar furnaces" in the hot summer months will not materialize. The stack areas will be maintained at a constant 18 degrees centigrade through an efficient combination of air-conditioning and wooden shutters that will close automatically during the day.

The daunting prospect of moving a 10-million-volume collection of books from the Bibliothèque Nationale to the new Library of France has been a source of great concern in France, both to preservation-minded librarians and to scholars who fear they will be deprived of needed research materials for long periods of time. French panelists assured the audience that legions of experts will move the books with extreme care and that no book will be unavailable for more than two weeks. Jacqueline Sanson, head librarian of the BN's main reading room, noted that the move presents librarians not only with cleaning and preservation opportunities, but also with the opportunity to:

- consolidate a collection that since 1934 has been split between the rue de Richelieu site and a remote storage facility at Versailles;
- store books and periodicals in the same



A model showing the new Très Grande Bibliothèque of France and its four-tower design.

location (their separation was a serious complaint of scholars in the past); and

- modify the 23-letter classification code designed by Nicolas Clément for the Royal Library that has been in use since 1688.

In addition, the famous *résèque* collection of rare and precious books will be expanded from approximately 50,000 to perhaps as many as 150,000 volumes in the new facility.

Plans for the automation of the Library of France were discussed by Alain Giffard, head of information technologies. *L'Informatique*, the French conceptualization of library automation, will be much in evidence and serve a wide range of internal processes and public func-

Either you are going to build pretty buildings with a computer add-on, or you are going to join the world system.

tions. Building on the Geac system currently in use at the Bibliothèque Nationale and supported by an initial government grant of 50 million francs, the new library will be equipped with a vast number of sophisticated public workstations. Giffard is currently wrestling with a choice between accepting potentially limited but currently available proprietary workstations or risking the more flexible and sophisticated "equipped-desk" concept that accommodates the use of laptops and, one might add, introduces potential security risks and other problems. In any case, whatever form the workstations take, researchers will be able to construct personalized catalogs tailored to their individual needs, within which they will move about freely and call up the full text of many documents for annotation, manipulation, printing, and downloading.

At a technical panel discussion, questions were raised concerning the depth of French commitment to the emerging international networks. ("Either you are going to build pretty buildings with a computer add-on, or you are going to join the world system.") Giffard noted that, in fact, short-range plans place emphasis upon local French networks. The Bibliothèque de France will serve as the nerve center of a national network; maintain links with the multi-purpose French network, Minitel; and work toward the completion and online availability of the French national union catalog. Closer linkage with international networks is a long-range goal. Participants suggested that the need for scientific information extends beyond the el-

egant glass walls of the Bibliothèque de France and even beyond France's national borders. Indeed, the demands of scholarship are likely to move the French toward closer electronic ties with the rest of the world, but for the moment, the French forms remain nationalist.

The conference was chaired by Dorothy Gregor, new University of California, Berkeley, librarian, who coped ably with low-tech sound and other systems failures while keeping the participants on schedule. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, chief administrator of the Bibliothèque Nationale, professor at the Collège de France, and historian of note, was a ubiquitous and bemused presence. His talk entitled "The Daily Life of an Administrator of the Bibliothèque Nationale" delivered more than the title promised. Le Roy Ladurie went to some pains to assure the Americans in the audience that during his tenure at the BN he has made every effort to implement the Anglo-Saxon efficiency that we tell him is lacking there. For example, Americans complain frequently that the single public telephone in the entry hall is *en panne*, or somehow malfunctioning. Monsieur Le Roy Ladurie wishes it to be known widely that he has resolved this annoying technical problem quite simply by giving a coin to his assistant every morning with which to check its proper functioning.

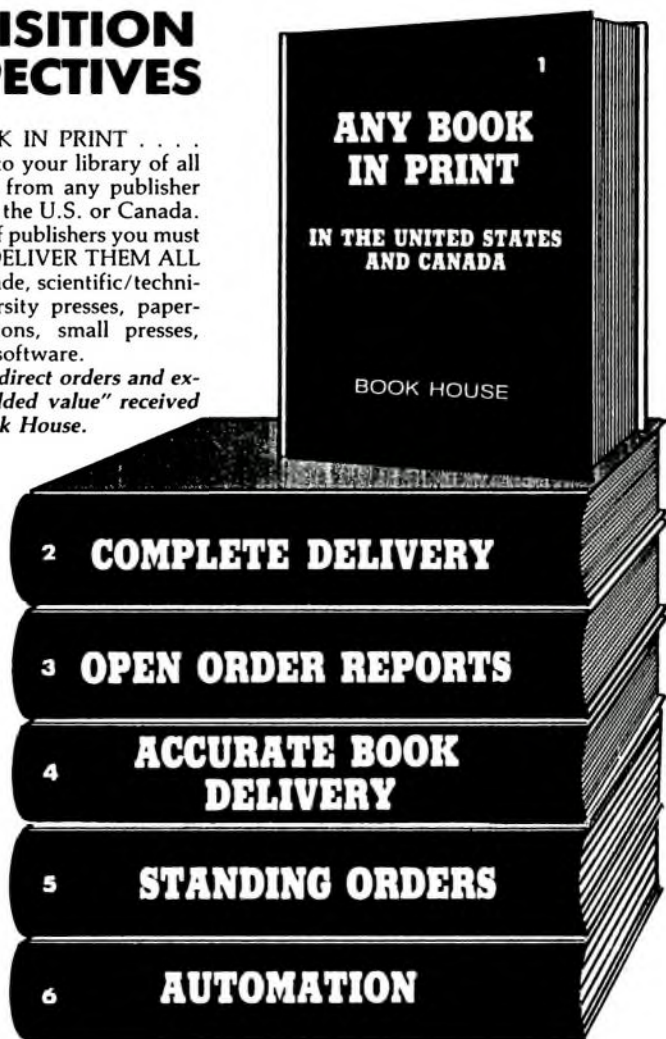
The academics on the panel, perhaps carried away by the grandeur of the project, provided a sweeping context within which it may be viewed and evaluated. The construction of the new library, conference organizers Howard Bloch and Carla Hesse suggested, is an historically pivotal moment, comparable to the development of the codex in the 4th century, or the printed book during the Renaissance. UC-Berkeley's Roger Hahn suggested that the project will modify the ways in which we think, conceive of the world, and construct our reality. In any context, however, it is clear that the French are building much more than just a library. How well their project balances the needs of researchers against a commitment to "democratic" access to information, how well and in what form it preserves the French cultural heritage, and how deeply it commits France to the emerging worldwide information network, have profound implications for all of us.

Author's note: For more information about the Bibliothèque de France or French library automation, contact Jack Kessler, University of California, Berkeley, at e-mail: kessler@well.sf.ca.us or phone (415) 282-4850. ■

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