Centre Pompidou: The Reproduction of Parisian History and Culture in a Postmodernist Building

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Abstract

This essay has explored how Centre Pompidou, as a postmodernist building, recreates the history and culture of Paris in its design and function. Centre Pompidou is more than just a museum, art gallery and community centre, it is also a symbol of a city's history and culture. By analysing the building's exterior design, interior spaces and functions, this essay examines how Centre Pompidou blends Parisian tradition with innovation and how it reflects the city's multicultural and historical heritage through its unique design and functions. In addition, the essay discusses how Centre Pompidou serves as a bridge between past and present, tradition and innovation, providing visitors with a platform for a comprehensive understanding of Parisian history and culture.

Keywords: postmodernist architecture, Parisian architecture, Centre Pompidou, high-tech architecture, cultural references in architecture

The Centre Pompidou, as one of Paris's cultural landmarks (Figure 1), is renowned for its unique appearance and design style. It attracts visitors from all over the world every year. However, this building is not only a role as an art and cultural centre, but also a representation of Paris's history and culture. The Centre Pompidou, as a postmodernist architecture, references elements of Parisian history and culture in its design, while uniquely carrying forward the Parisian characteristics within the realm of postmodernist architecture. Its exterior, spatial layout, and functional design contribute to the significant position of the Centre Pompidou in Paris's urban cultural environment.

Figure 1. Centre Pompidou. Photo Credit: Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

The Centre Pompidou is located in the Beaubourg district in the heart of Paris, France, next to the Canal Saint-Martin and Place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville, in a bustling urban area with convenient access to other popular tourist attractions such as Notre Dame Cathedral and the Louvre Museum. The main structure of the Centre Pompidou is 168 meters long, 60 meters wide and 42 meters high, with 10 levels, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano and British architect Richard Rogers (Pile, John & Judith Gura, 2014). The newly appointed French President, Georges Pompidou, was dedicated to promoting France's artistic development and cultural innovation. He decided to build an art museum that would embody the spirit of democracy and cater to the public's needs, serving as a multidisciplinary cultural and artistic centre accessible to all. His vision was, "I passionately want Paris to have a cultural centre […] where the plastic arts go hand in hand with music, film, books, audiovisual research, etc. (Pompidou, Georges, 1969)" Therefore, in 1971, an international competition was launched to select a design proposal. Rogers and Piano created a design that aligned with the social needs of Paris. In their proposal, they allocated half of the site area to construct a plaza for people to gather, which set them apart from the 681 competing entries and led them to victory in the competition (Dal Co, Francesco & Steve Piccolo, 2016). The Centre Pompidou was completed in 1977 and opened its doors to the public in February of the same year. The establishment of the Centre Pompidou was a response to traditional art institutions and concepts. Its openness, innovation, and multifunctional design, along with its recognition and support of modern art and culture, made it a symbol of the spirit of social transformation in France, providing artists with a platform to showcase their avant-garde and innovative works.

The main structure of the Centre Pompidou is designed to be flipped inside-out, with the entire building supported by 28 49-meter-high steel tubes located on the exterior of the building. The piping lines, which are usually hidden inside the architecture, have also been moved to the exterior of the building. A long snake-like glass tube, carrying escalators, painted in a striking red color, crosses its exterior main facade diagonally. The exterior of the Centre Pompidou is covered with bright colors, mainly blue, green, yellow, white and red, five neat colors that were used by the designers as a color coding system to mark the different uses of the pipelines of the building, which are the air conditioning, water, electricity, building support structures, and escalators and elevators. These peculiar exterior features make the Centre Pompidou look like a spaceship that has suddenly landed in the heart of Paris (Piano, Renzo, 2018) (Figure 2), which is out of place with the classic Parisian

Haussmannian style architecture (Sutcliffe, Anthony, 1993) around it, making the Centre Pompidou a highly recognizable landmark in Paris. Since the building structures and pipes have been moved to the exterior, the interior of the Centre Pompidou is free of any partition walls or columns, which allows for maximum use of the interior space and makes the building more functional. The open rectangular spaces make the interior of the Centre Pompidou flexible and inclusive (Figure 3). Its functions range from being the exhibition center, museum, library, art studio, cinema, stores, cafes and a public community square for outdoor performances and exhibitions, but the Centre Pompidou's functions are more than that, it can be suitable for the needs of a wide range of different types of art exhibitions and cultural activities. As its designers intended, 'Each level is therefore completely free and usable, for any form of known or future cultural activity. (Piano, Renzo, n.d.)' The exterior walls of the Centre Pompidou are covered extensively with glass, which brings an abundance of natural light into the interior. Such transparency responds to Centre Pompidou's open interior spaces, creating an atmosphere of openness and interaction, creating a visual connection with the external environment, enhancing the sensory experience of the interior spaces and allowing visitors to feel the continuity and fluidity of the entire space. The interior of the Centre Pompidou is also rich in color (Figure 4). Its eye-catching wayfinding system, mainly in yellow, is based on the use of hanging neon lights, signage and other techniques to provide visitors with clear and concise guidance. The open interior layout of the Centre Pompidou makes the wayfinding system particularly important. It is designed to be simple and clear, to convey exactly what visitors need to know, and encouraged to get their bearings without a compass through a mental map formed by necessarily always-changing information, which is compatible with the international spirit of the Center Pompidou (Dal Co, Francesco & Steve Piccolo, 2016).
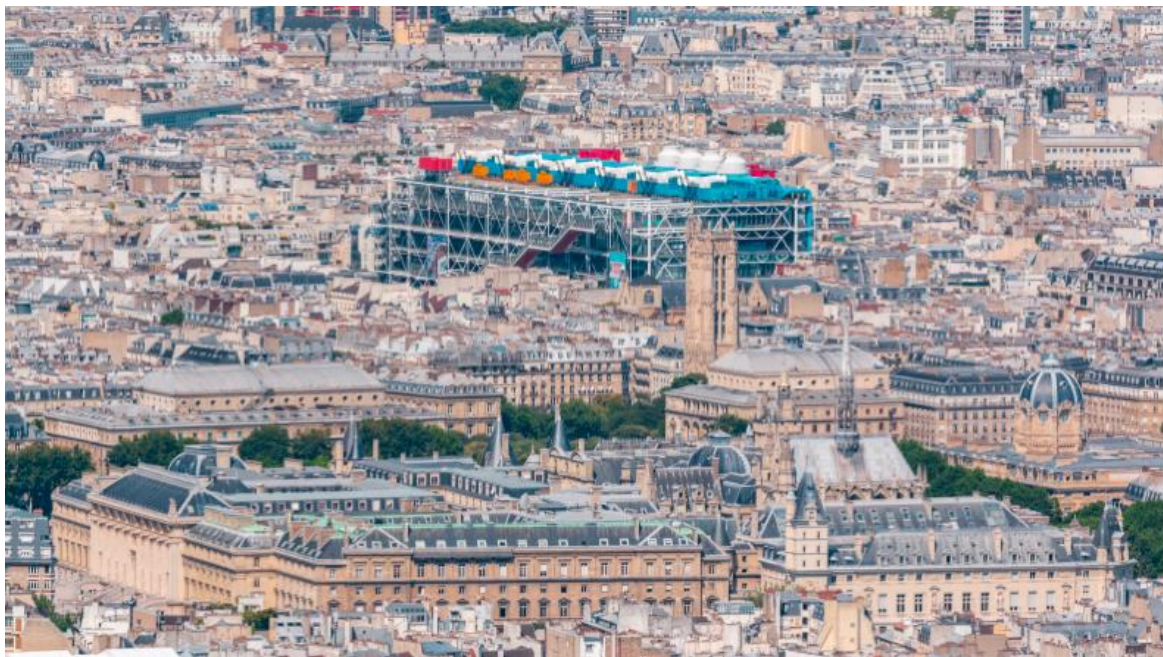

Figure 2. The Centre Pompidou contrasts with the surrounding architecture. Photo Credit: Kirill Neiezhmakov

Figure 3. Interior of Centre Pompidou. Photo Credit: Dal Co, Francesco, and Steve Piccolo

Figure 4. Wayfinding Signs in Centre Pompidou. Photo Credit: Dal Co, Francesco, and Steve Piccolo

The Centre Pompidou, not initially acceptable to the people of Paris, was jokingly referred to as 'an oil refinery in the heart of Paris (Dal Co, Francesco & Steve Piccolo, 2016)'. Its post-modernist design and industrial appearance gave it an avant-garde, offbeat feel that did not match the classic ambience of historic Parisian architecture. This conflict initially led people to hold a skeptical attitude towards the Centre Pompidou. At that time, France was dominated by a preference for sleek, geometric, and minimally decorated modernist architecture. The emergence of the Centre Pompidou as a postmodernist architectural marvel made it difficult for the people of Paris to accept it at first. Postmodernism, like a rebellion, seems to oppose all the ideas of modernism. Contrary to 'less is more (Amiri, Niki, 2016)',

postmodernist architects believe more in 'less is bore (Venturi, Robert, 1977)', and they advocate diversity instead of modernist simplicity. Postmodernist interior design and architecture emphasizes the different needs of people and the diversity of social life, often with historical metaphors and full of decorative details. As Charles Jencks, a postmodernist architect, said, 'The language of postmodern architecture is not a language of form, but of reference. (Jencks, Charles, 1981)' And Rogers, the designer of the Centre Pompidou, has also indicated that they used the history, city and culture of Paris as a reference in their design (Rattenbury, Kester, Richard George Rogers & Samantha, Hardingham, 2011). Postmodernism and modernist architecture share a common quest for functionality and practicality. Le Corbusier, one of the proponents of modernist architecture, claimed that the house is a machine for living (Le Corbusier & Frederick Etchells, 1931), while the Centre Pompidou is a machine for exhibition. All design decisions were made with practicality as the primary focus, and the entire building is supported by the steel frame on the exterior, so that there are no walls or columns inside the building, thus freeing up the interior space for maximum freedom and allowing the arrangement of the exhibition and working areas to be adjusted as needed; all the pipes are painted in different colors to indicate their purpose and are exposed for future surveys and access. The large area of glass on the façade is designed to provide an unobstructed view of Paris, and these elements highlight the design characteristics of postmodernist architecture.

The Centre Pompidou, as a postmodernist building, was driven by the historical situation of Paris at the time. The design of the Centre Pompidou can be seen in its references and responses to the history of the time. In the 1960s, French society underwent a great transformation, a social, cultural and political change known as the "May 68 (Sutcliffe, Anthony, 1993)", which began with protests by university students and quickly expanded throughout the country. The movement was intended to challenge the authoritarianism, capitalism, university education system, and war participation of French society at the time, as students questioned traditional authority and values and called for greater individual freedom and democratic participation. In this climate of social change, artists expressed their views on the obsolescence of traditional art forms and concepts, pursued liberal, innovative and avant-garde forms of art, and attempted to reflect and critique the realities of society through art. Art movements and trends such as neo-realism, avant-garde art, and conceptual art emerged during this period, and artists challenged traditional art concepts and creative forms, using new forms of expression such as multimedia art, installation art, and performance art. In the field of architecture, traditional modernist architecture has been criticized as too rational, mechanical and lacking in humanistic concerns. Architects began to call for breaking the traditional shackles and exploring more individual, expressive and innovative forms of art and architecture. Postmodernist architecture rose as a reflection and response to traditional modernism under the changes of the time.

The Centre Pompidou, as a response to this social transformation, references this rebellious spirit in its design (Dal Co, Francesco & Steve Piccolo, 2016), attempting to draw a clear line with past concepts of art and culture through its innovative and avant-garde design language. The design of the Centre Pompidou focuses on openness and multi-functionality, providing a variety of different types of exhibition spaces, art studios, libraries, cinemas and more. It breaks the boundaries of traditional art institutions and encourages public participation and interaction, making art and culture more accessible and open, in line with postmodernist architecture's pursuit of interaction and participation between architecture and people. The design of the Centre Pompidou emphasizes diversity and variability, abandoning the uniform and normative design style advocated by Modernism and using elements such as three-dimensional grid structures, colored facades and glass walls to give people a sense of dynamism and change. This style of design reflects the diversity and atmosphere of change in society at the time, and contrasts with the uniformity of traditional architectural forms.

In addition to referencing and reflecting on history, the Centre Pompidou also incorporates references to local culture and architectural forms in Paris, particularly the inheritance of French Gothic architecture. Traditional Gothic architecture uses a structure called a "flying buttress (Groce, Jenae, 2012)" to support the weight of the building (Figure 5). That is

composed of a vertical support column and a diagonal outward extension of the arch support. This structure allows the building to be built taller and larger, without the need for thick walls to support it. In the design of the Centre Pompidou, the designers borrowed the concept of flying buttresses from Gothic architecture and used the exterior steel structure as the building's support, reinterpreting it in a modern way that responds to the load-bearing system of Gothic architecture in form and function. Gothic architecture is usually characterized by vertical lines on both the interior and exterior, giving the impression of rising upward, in contrast to the Centre Pompidou's vertical building support structure, which emphasizes the building's uniqueness and striking appearance (Figure 6). The flying buttresses of Gothic architecture are detached from the main body of the building, resulting in a rich framework on its exterior facade. Similarly, the designers of the Centre Pompidou employed an inside-out technique, creating a visually intriguing exterior with multiple layers. Whether viewed from the inside out or from the outside in, observers experience a sense of wonder. In addition, the interior design of the Centre Pompidou also references French Gothic architecture. Gothic architecture values high and large interior spaces and the use of natural light (Bony, Jean, 1983), while the interior design of the Centre Pompidou also emphasizes openness and permeability. The building's interior features a large number of glass walls and an open space layout, allowing natural light to fully enter the interior, creating a bright and spacious atmosphere that reflects the architect's respect and tribute to the local architectural culture.

Figure 5. The iconic Gothic architecture - Bourges Cathedral

Figure 6. The facade of the Center Pompidou. Photo Credit: Michel Denancés

The Centre Pompidou stands for rebellion and innovation in the course of history. It references and inherits the city's history and culture of Paris in its unique way. The Centre Pompidou is a new era of postmodernism architecture with a classical spirit created according to the functional structure of today's architecture, combined with new materials and technologies, completely departing from traditional building materials and forms, and transcending the superficial imitation of historical symbols to abstractly remind the local historical and cultural qualities in a new way. At the same time, this integration also highlights the uniqueness and innovation of the Centre Pompidou as a postmodernist architecture. By combining traditional elements with modern design, the Centre Pompidou becomes a unique and striking cultural landmark, highlighting the architect's review and reinvention of French history and culture.

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