

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

In the Centre Pompidou's Pipes

Today the Centre Pompidou gives itself over entirely: discover its architecture, with its framework, piping and colours, but also its history, the issues at stake and the players involved in its birth.

Colour code:

In black, the narrating voice

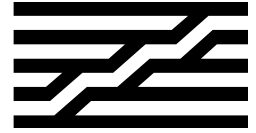
In blue, quotes and interviews

In green, the lift and the architecture voices

In purple, the musical and audio archives excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

Welcome

Hello, good evening and welcome on a visit to the Centre Pompidou.

Discover its architecture with us today, review its history, understand its issues, pace the length and breadth of its pipes and reflect on its exceptional audacity.

[jingle of the show]

[mechanical voice, aka lift] You, the public, the listener, you are here.

[sounds of the crowd in the Forum]

Level 0 : Forum, portrait of Georges Pompidou

[mechanical voice, aka lift] Level 0 of art. You are on the Forum level, under Victor Vasarely's portrait of Georges Pompidou.

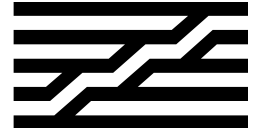
Georges Pompidou said : [actor with a deep voice, aka Georges Pompidou]

"Art always questions things, to one degree or another. If art consisted in saying: yes, bravo, it's admirable, it would be boring. There is nothing more terrible than academic art, non-confrontational art, art that accepts. Art should discuss, art should protest, that's for sure."

[sounds of the city] We are in the Beaubourg district in the centre of Paris.

Here, the multi-discipline National Centre for Art and Culture is open to everyone; where the arts, knowledge, works of modern and contemporary art can be seen, heard, discussed and experienced.

[sounds of the crowd in the Forum] You are in the Forum, where the outside space meets the discoveries to be made inside, a space with multiple functions, a zone of transition, an in-between zone, between what has been experienced and what is yet to be experienced.



Initially, this Forum was designed to be open to the city, with no walls.

Although this intention was ruled out, for climate reasons among others, this level 0 remains the starting point for encounters and exchanges, arrivals and departures.

Art is not isolated, inaccessible and timeless. It is related to the society it comes from. The Centre Beaubourg itself is totally rooted in its period: it is the fruit of a revolution, and reveals a whole generation.

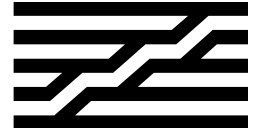
[audio archives excerpts: Protest in the Quartier latin, 8th of May, 1968, *Les Actualités Françaises*, INA] [sounds of protesters]

In May 1968, young people revolted in Paris. General de Gaulle was President of France and young people rejected a world they no longer wished to be part of; the authorities trembled. The artists followed the students and workers into the streets; time had come for a change.

In this conflict, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou opted for a middle course in order to prevent the movement from degenerating. This position would lead him to power a few months later, thus succeeding General de Gaulle.

Pompidou had scarcely been elected President, in 1969, when he decided to provide Paris with a great cultural centre, worthy of the city's past as capital of the arts. Yes, its "past", because since the Second World War, New York had taken over from Paris in the art world.

[actor with a deep voice, aka Georges Pompidou] "I passionately want Paris to have a cultural centre (...) which will be both a museum and a creative centre, where the plastic arts will go hand in hand with music, film, books, audio-visual research, etc. The museum can only be for modern art, since we have the Louvre. Creations should obviously be modern and constantly evolving. The library would attract thousands of readers who would automatically be brought into contact with the arts."



The project then called "Museum of the 20th century" was launched.

[transitional sound]

Forum : Level 0 of the architectural project

[mechanical voice, aka lift] You are in the Forum, on the south side, don't move for a few minutes.

[actor with a deep voice, aka Georges Pompidou] "I am struck by the conservative character of French taste, particularly by what we call the "élite". I am scandalised by the policy of the authorities in terms of art over the last century."

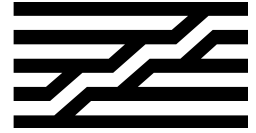
[sounds of voices]

The tone was set. In this conservative France, the future cultural centre was intended as an innovation outside the usual academic standards.

In this spirit the architect was chosen anonymously through a competition entrusted to an international panel chaired by Jean Prouvé, an industrial architect. Candidates were invited to provide a functional response to a precise programme.

A large share of the spaces was to be reserved for receiving adults and children, for work spaces for the personnel (workshops, reserves, management), the other part for certain permanent activities like the library and the museum and for other temporary activities like exhibitions or shows. The jury paid particular attention to the solutions proposed in order to enable the public to access and move about in the different spaces.

[mechanical voice, aka lift] London, December 1970, 32 Aybrook Street, 2nd floor of an old industrial building.



[background of English voices, people working in a office, laughs...]

Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers set up their own agency, "Piano & Rogers".

These two young architects had a passion for light, mobile structures, and tested their ideas in the pop-up pavilions they constructed in the square opposite the school where they taught in London.

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "London was a vibrant city and there was a fine atmosphere of disobedience and rebellion, a sense of liberation".

[musical excerpt: *London Calling*, The Clash]

It was an engineer, Ted Happold, who asked them to participate in this great architectural competition launched in Paris. Piano and Rogers refused at first, on ideological grounds and because of their mistrust for power, but they finally accepted for the sake of the challenge.

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "In short, we went in to the competition positive we'd never win".

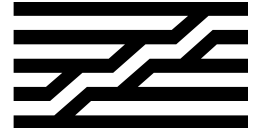
On an architectural level, they adapted the flexible principles they were applying in their experiments to a monumental scale.

On a social level, they were opposed to pretentious and intimidating cultural buildings that no one dared to enter.

[transitional sound]

Level 1: Mezzanine, between high culture and popular culture

[mechanical voice, aka lift] Intermediate level. You are on the mezzanine on the Rue Beaubourg side.



Reacting to the competition and before agreeing to participate, Richard Rogers had spontaneously penned a text, a sort of anti-establishment tract.

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "He explained cultural centers weren't needed, they are stuffy and comatose, while society needed places where people could get together and socialize".

[musical excerpt: *London Calling*, The Clash]

This text, which is now lost, served as a guide for them as they elaborated their project, which was designed in a genuine spirit of revolt and as an anti-monument.

[street sounds]

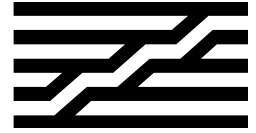
In Paris, of the 681 projects received and studied, the jury chose project no. 493, which was revolutionary without being extravagantly formal.

The names of the architects, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, were revealed to the jury and announced publicly. [claps]

Their building was also the only project to include a large outdoor space: a place for everyone, for popular pastimes, friendly gatherings or simply for accessing the cultural centre. [sounds of the square with children's cries, adult voices]

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "The project was a sort of cross between Times Square and the British Museum. Fun and culture. A fun Palace, a hybrid place that would host culture while belonging to the City. That's why we included a *piazza*, which was a completely absurd choice because the space was quite small and it was hardly big enough for the building!"

Its resemblance to a factory or a culture supermarket delivered an essential message: that of curiosity.



[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "An invitation to come and see, not be scared away. And this intriguing quality was fundamental, because curiosity is the spark of cultural behaviour (...) after all, that's how young people find their way, by rebelling".

What an atmosphere on the day the Centre was inaugurated on 31st of January 1977: a crowd waited impatiently to discover this unusual new centre: the gamble had been a success!

Imagine yourself in the Forum as it was when it first opened: you are welcomed by an infernal machine with a deafening din of clanking metal: while the building was under construction the *Crocodrome* had been made using the scrap materials, by three artists, Jean Tinguely, Bernhard Luginbühl and Niki de Saint-Phalle.

[*Crocodrome's* audio archives] [metal noises, shocks, resonances]

The spectacle was complete: the first visitors strolled through the gigantic mobile and sound sculpture that concealed a ghost train in its entrails. On the side, they entered "La boutique aberrante" [The Ridiculous Boutique] or the "Musée sentimental" [Sentimental Museum] by artist Daniel Spoerri. [sounds of a wagon running on a rail]

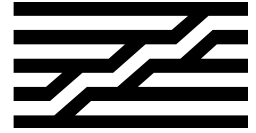
[witness, female voice] "Everywhere in the Forum, communities came together and chatted. People discussed what they'll go to see, what they have seen. Sometimes, you could see performances or rehearsals, you could also see technicians putting in place artworks. Here, art is connected to life."

[transitional sound]

Forum -1: Underground level of the works

[mechanical voice, aka lift] Underground level of the works: "go down into the pit".
You are in Forum -1.

[city noises: cars, people talking and walking, street vendors]



The idea of placing this venue for the arts in the centre of Paris came from Claude and Georges Pompidou in the days when they lived nearby in the Marais district. They had noticed the location, the Beaubourg plateau, which was then a wasteland that served as a car park for users of Les Halles.

It was in this dark and delinquent Paris that cultural audacity was to find its home. President Georges Pompidou opted for a powerful political gesture, supported by his wife Claude, a cultivated and audacious woman with a passion for contemporary art.

[sounds of voices]

Claude Mollard said: "The President of the Republic wanted the Beaubourg to be established in a working class neighbourhood and open to a very broad public: to his mind, cultural events should not remain the privilege of a small élite."

The Beaubourg plateau would thus be home for the future Centre Beaubourg.

[building site noises]

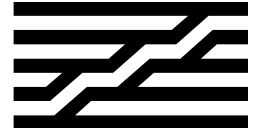
The work finally began in 1972. The first stage was to excavate a 16 to 20 metre deep hole: 100,000 cubic metres of earth were removed. The hole was then reinforced with a concrete infrastructure.

Then the superstructure could be installed, but everything came to a halt at this stage.

[sound of machines stopping]

The works had hardly begun when Piano and Rogers found themselves facing a refusal from the French steel companies whose only response was: unfeasible. Or rather: feasible, but only by doubling the budget!

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "To tell Richard and me something was impossible was an invitation to raise hell (...) we were young but we were tough and we didn't let ourselves be intimidated by someone saying "It can't be done". I'd learned to ignore the word "impossible". Whenever I hear it, my first reaction is to think, "Let's look at this more closely" (...) we dug our heels in and defended our project".



Thanks to the firm support of Pompidou, a solution was found; the steel companies would be German. A first, 25 years after the Second World War. [metal noise]

But tragedy struck on April 2nd, 1974: the death of Georges Pompidou, who saw no more of his project than a vertiginous hole. [sad music]

Although he managed to get the work going before he died, the enterprise was not yet certain, faced with the hostility of the new President of the Republic. Finally, the project was saved by renaming it after the former President of the Republic. The Centre Beaubourg became the Centre Pompidou.

[transitional sound]

Level 1: Making this utopia viable

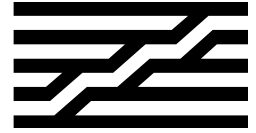
[mechanical voice, aka lift] You're back on the south side mezzanine.

[city noises, cars]

Museums in 1960s and 1970s in France had lost visitors on account of their classicism and austerity. Modern art was no exception to this deplorable situation: 100,000 people visited the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, which was in the Palais de Tokyo at the time, compared to 4,000,000 visitors to the MoMA in New York.

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "Museums were élite places, boring and self-referential, visited by a few art lovers and specialists".

The Centre Pompidou revamped the image of museums by introducing an audience that was not used to museums. Inside, spaces were open and interchangeable. To do this, the architects proposed six floors entirely free of weight-bearing walls. They pushed all the functional elements to the exterior. Raise your head and you will see a part of the skeleton of this superstructure, and the entrails of the building, a veritable organic system.



[mechanical voice, aka lift] Made up of pieces of welded steel, the primary structure comprises: the beams, the posts and the beam hangers.

In the forum, the beams support the floor of level 2, crossing the building from east to west, and come to rest on the external posts.

As for concrete, it was used for the foundations and the construction of the floors.

Engineer Peter Rice made the functional plans. They determined one important thing: the structural materials of the Centre Pompidou would be concrete and steel.

Architects and engineers, together, drew everything down to the smallest bolt.

There were at least 10,000 drawings. [sound of pencil drawing on a sheet of paper]

[witness, female voice] "Beginning with the south part, the structure was built up span by span. The steel beams and posts were manufactured in Germany and transported by train to the north of Paris, then by truck, between 2 and 5 o'clock in the morning."

[truck noises]

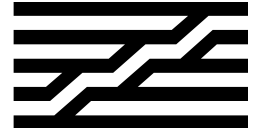
[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "It took them two hours to cover a few kilometers.

The freight truck was preceded by another smaller vehicle that performed an essential task. It laid heavy steel plates a few centimeters thick over the manhole covers. This prevented the weight of the trusses from caving in the streets."

Once they reached the site, each 45 metre beam was mounted directly on the site on the same night. Each morning, the giant Meccano construction gained a few metres in height and in breadth.

To avoid provoking more criticism and rekindling the still-lively debates around the project, this nightly waltz of trucks resembled a clandestine operation.

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "Being a pair of rowdies, we actually enjoyed the fun, we thought it was a riot. A refinery, a car park, a supermarket of culture... the abuse came in all colors..."



Opposition to the project was still very strong in 1974.

As ever with visionary projects, the public was not ready.

Countless articles, street protests, court cases and interviews expressed opposition to the future Centre Pompidou.

The climate remained very hostile right up to the end of the works, and although curiosity won the day when the Centre Pompidou opened in January 1977 and visitors came massively, acts of protest continued.

[sounds of crowds in the street]

[witness, female voice through a megaphone]

BEAUBOURG

It's the death of art

Squandered, tens of billions stolen from French tax payers

A fire station for the new firemen, a Pantheon-warehouse for international excrement

Chardin, Delacroix, Cézanne thrown onto the rubbish dump

AGAINST

This multinational mess

COME AND SIGN

Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées

April the 16th, 1977

THE ACT of re-naissance of French art

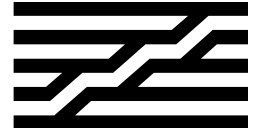
[transitional sound]

Escalators or lifts: The circulation visitors, ideas and energy

[mechanical voice, aka lift] Use the escalators or the lifts.

You are on the western facade of the building.

All the circulation systems for distributing fluids and energy, including visitors, are deliberately visible. By making everything visible, no element is more noble than another, a pipe is just as important as a door or a terrace. No ornamentation.



Everything is made to be seen in a spectacular didactic manner, with a special terminology: "Forum", "Levels", "Caterpillar", "Piazza", "Gangway/Passageway". And a language with a colour code: yellow, blue, red and green. [metal noises]

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "Richard and I were absolutely convinced the building should be colorful, and we stuck to our guns on this point. But we spent at least nine months discussing what colors had to be coded. And according to the code, red stood for whatever moved, yellow electricity, blue air and green water. That was the solution."

[mechanical voice, aka lift] The Caterpillar.

[sound of escalators]

The main circulation system, it runs diagonally up the western facade of the building, serving all levels of the Centre Pompidou.

[mechanical voice, aka lift]

Level 1: You are at the foot of the Caterpillar

Level 2: 1st first floor of the BPI Public Information Library

Level 3: 2nd floor of the BPI, Kandinsky Library and Cabinet of Graphic Arts

Level 4: National Museum of Modern Art, contemporary collection

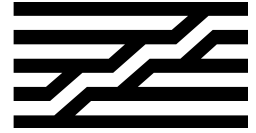
Level 5: National Museum of Modern Art, modern collection

Level 6: exhibition spaces and panoramic terrace

[sound of escalators]

This large transparent tube is one of the key attractions of the Centre Pompidou, along with the spectacle it leads to: the panoramic view of Paris.

The organic, industrial character of the architecture, the topic of so many conversations, disappears as soon as we are inside. You are swallowed up by the Centre while enjoying an original view of the outside, from the main artery, suspended from the western facade of the building.



This large satellite tube, better known as the Caterpillar, takes visitors to higher levels and reminds them where they come from when they look down on the Piazza.

[mechanical voice, aka lift] La Piazza.

[street sounds]

It has its origins in a famous square, the Piazza del Campo in Siena.

Its slope encourages visitors to sit down, to meet people or to go down to the entrance to the Centre. All paths cross with strollers, street artists, rushing visitors, students, tourists and many more.

It plays the same role as the squares in front of the cathedrals of old, popular intermediate spaces between the sacred and the profane.

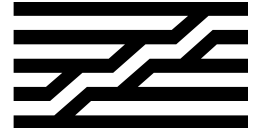
[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "In a city like Paris with heavy traffic, the pedestrian zone was of fundamental importance because it is obvious that the Centre Pompidou landed in this neighbourhood like a sort of great catalysing magnet."

[street sounds]

It facilitates access to the Centre Pompidou and integrates it into the life of the neighbourhood, offering local residents a respectful living environment and providing visitors with a recreational space away from the tumult of the city.

Streets were pedestrianised, Rue Saint-Martin, Saint-Merri and a part of Rue Rambuteau, against popular opinion at the time, when cars were omnipresent in the city.

[witness, female voice] "Although its 42 metres exceeded the regulatory 25 metre ceiling for Paris at the time. Its rooftop terrace harmonises with the horizon line of Paris roofs, and it fitted into the urban fabric: it cannot be seen from the bridges over the Seine. At a stretch, it can be seen from the Hotel de Ville. In the old streets of the



surrounding neighbourhood, it plays a permanent game of hide-and-seek: the centre appears and disappears depending on your position."

After level 4, we rise above the rooftops as our view embraces the horizon line.

[transitional sound]

Level 6 : From town to architecture

[mechanical voice, aka lift] From the rooftop terrace on the south side.

At the very top of the Caterpillar, the rooftop terrace provides a view over the south of Paris: Saint-Merri, Notre-Dame, the Tour Saint-Jacques.

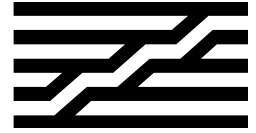
The Centre Pompidou is a cathedral of modernity just a few yards from medieval Paris. The architects of the cathedrals had technical solutions for building their walls ever higher, thinner and pierced with windows.

[mechanical voice, aka architecture] Here, the superstructure is held upright by all of four modules, combined like in a Meccano set: beams, posts, hangers and tie-beams. It is important to say a few words about the pieces called hangers, which are borrowed from bridge building.

Why be inspired by bridge building?

We find ourselves faced with the same problems: like the apron of a bridge, the beams span a 50 metre space; in all, representing a piling up of several suspension bridges of exceptional weight. The technical solution that was retained was to transfer the forces to the outside. This is where our beam hangers come into play: arrow-shaped and looking like a bird's beak, they fit into the posts of this great steel organism at the level of each floor, like the pearls in a giant necklace. This piece of steel measures 8 metres in length and weighs about 10 tons. [sounds of metal echoing]

[mechanical voice, aka lift] You are now at a height of 42 metres, on the level of the exhibitions, Gallery 1 and 2.



[lift sounds]

All is light and transparency on the 6th floor of the Centre Pompidou.

As we move along the suspended gangways we feel that we are levitating, looking down on our surroundings. The Centre Pompidou emerges out of Paris, a flat city. Before us in the distance, the Eiffel Tower rises up, and the Sacré Cœur, perched on Montmartre. Further still, we see the towers of La Défense and the new Regional Court building, one of Renzo Piano's last works.

[actor, aka Richard Rogers] "We used the word "democratic", we wanted a building open to everyone. Democracy in architecture translates into transparency and permeability."

Permeability between domains, always with an eye on the world, introducing know-how and knowledge, coming and going freely as we are.

[transitional sound]

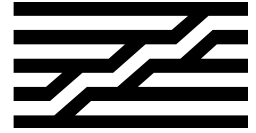
Level 4 and 5: The Museum

[mechanical voice, aka lift] Enter the greatest collection of modern art in Europe.

[lift sounds]

Entering the national collections of modern and contemporary art is an opportunity to discover great 20th and 21st century masterpieces, over more than 12,000 square metres, but also to enter the life of the museum.

Where we come across women and men who have shared know-how and skills that have been passed on and transformed since 1977: curators, art restorers, archivists, researchers, works managers and space managers, carpenters, painters, lighting technicians, electromechanical engineers, packers, framers, production managers, hangers, supervisors, mediators, lecturers, maintenance technicians.



From level 5 of the Museum to level -2, in the guts of the Centre Pompidou, these skills come together, 364 days a year to enrich, preserve, show, exhibit and explain the art of yesterday and today. [workshop noises: sander, impact of metal pieces, boards ...]

[actor, aka Renzo Piano] "Anyway the center is not and has never been a place for superficiality or a place where culture is neglected. Instead it's a hybrid complex place and this enriches it. It's an advantage, a force. It's not a dilution or leveling down. Because they are so many things in this building, and very important things. The art is exhibited in a remarkable way, the collection is outstanding".

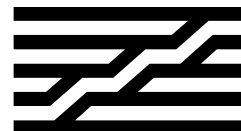
[actor, aka Richard Rogers] "For forty years I've continued to feel the same anxiety that led me to write the text against the competition. I didn't want, I still don't want, the Centre Pompidou to become a monument."

In rooms and passageways, on benches and in lifts, behind a microphone or in front of a painting, with a camera in hand or a pencil in your pocket, with a confident look or a timid voice, you, the visitors, lookers, players in the world of art and culture, ensure the Centre Pompidou continues to be so much more than a monument.

[jingle of the show]

It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou web site, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon!

[jingle of the show]



Credits

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Sound-engineer for voices: Ivan Gariel

Voices: Laurie Bellanca, Julien Campani, David Guez

Practical information

www.centrepompidou.fr/en

www.centrepompidou.fr/en/visit/accessibility