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# A Portrayal of French University Libraries 1989–2024

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**Abstract:** The evolution of French university libraries since 1989 has been marked by the construction of library buildings and the training of librarians in the languages and rules of architects. Starting from the beginning of the 21st century, university reforms have reshaped the landscape of university libraries, aligning them with societal changes and emphasising a greater focus on user services. This paper looks at all aspects of university libraries, from training to research.\*

**Keywords:** University libraries in France 1989–2024; building new libraries; higher education reforms

## Ein Porträt der französischen Universitätsbibliotheken 1989–2024

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Entwicklung der französischen Universitätsbibliotheken seit 1989 ist besonders durch die Bedeutung des Baus von Bibliotheken und das Erlernen der Terminologie und der Regeln ihrer Konstruktion durch die Bibliothekare beeinflusst. Seit dem Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts hat außerdem die Universitätsreform die Landschaft der Universitätsbibliotheken revolutioniert; darüber hinaus haben die gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen dazu geführt, dass die Benutzerservices in den Vordergrund gerückt sind. Die Universitätsbibliotheken werden unter den Aspekten Studium und Forschung behandelt.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Universitätsbibliotheken in Frankreich 1989–2024: Bibliotheksneubauten; Hochschulbildung改革

## 1 1989: A Paving Stone in the Pond\*

André Miquel's Report, *Les bibliothèques universitaires: rapport au ministre d'État, ministre de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports*, was an historic moment for

\*The French text was translated into English via DeepL and corrected by Ann Matheson.

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the profession.<sup>1</sup> The report described a real and concrete situation:

Cramped or outdated premises, or insufficient openness, lack of positions, all-too-frequent demobilization of staff, general weariness, student disaffection caused, at least in part, by the lack of available resources, renunciation of reading or discouragement in the face of the difficulties of documentation (which we compare, to our disadvantage, with this or that foreign library which functions as an intense and permanent call to curiosity), the non-existence or inadequacy of specialized reading courses, all of which points to the fact that libraries are one of the most depressed areas of the university system and, beyond that, of the national fabric.

This critical portrait of university libraries in the mid-twentieth century was originally commissioned for political reasons. It left its mark on the minds of politicians and professionals alike. By describing in very concrete terms a set of libraries which, in addition to their poor state of repair, were under-funded and unable to provide the services expected of them by students and lecturers, it provided the basis for an ambitious modernisation of university libraries in France. Over and above the miserable state of libraries, the Miquel report already raises the question of the library's position within the university, recommending that it become the "nerve centre of the university".<sup>2</sup>

The Miquel Report could be summed up as follows: not numerous enough, not big enough, not rich enough, not enough staff, French university libraries need the mobilisation of public authorities and politicians.

## 2 Years of Construction and Training in Construction Supervision

Between André Miquel's picture of great misery and what university libraries are like in France today, a considerable step has been taken. Years of construction, training and structuring followed. Not only the Ministry, but an entire profession has seized upon the Miquel Report.

1 Miquel (1988) 361, Miquel (1989).

2 Miquel (1988) 357.

Although France's demographic context – that of ever-increasing student numbers – has not enabled the country to improve its position in terms of the square metre/student ratio considerable progress has been made. Some 650 000 m<sup>2</sup> of university libraries have been built or renovated since the 1990s: the latest detailed inventory, conducted by Philippe Marcerou, indicated that between 1995 and 2025, at least 230 university libraries had been – or would be – opened or renovated.<sup>3</sup>

The **quality of the facilities** opened or re-opened after conversion is a constant: architectural quality, quality of materials, quality of the urban setting, quality of the interior fittings. Between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, university libraries have positioned themselves as visible and remarkable buildings on campuses and in cities.

The quality of these buildings is no accident: it is the result of a long process of adopting the architectural programming approach/method by library directors and their teams. This appropriation has its roots in the Ministry department in charge of university libraries: a long-term effort led by the team in charge of university library buildings within the Ministry, which accompanies projects, organises specialised training on construction projects, monitors architectural programming and provides a forum for knowledge and reference.

These post-Miquel Report years are marked by a profound change in public contracting: increasing decentralisation is reflected in the singularity of new libraries built by and for a university in a particular city, on a particular campus. The most visible sign of this evolution is the abandonment of the standard programmes that marked the beginning of the 20th century and still mark the French landscape.

This long journey has involved the acceptance of the technical dimension of construction and its corollary: the need for librarians to be trained and attuned to the vocabulary and techniques of building construction. The books published bear the hallmark of this, going beyond the definitions and questions surrounding the mission of libraries; they detail the programming approach, the rules for an architectural competition, the vocabulary specific to projects, safety issues and so on. The book *Construire une bibliothèque universitaire : de la conception à la réalisation*, edited by Marie-Françoise Bisbrouck,<sup>4</sup> is on every project manager's desk. Major training programmes have been set up, by ENSSIB<sup>5</sup> both in terms of initial training and contin-

uing education for curators. The aim is for librarians to be able to talk to construction professionals, describe their needs, read a plan, and understand the consequences of a technical choice for users.

Throughout these years, an emphasis has been placed on the **architectural programming** exercise, the objective of which is to think about present and future uses, to place them in a space and to connect them with one another. It has enabled librarians to reflect on what it means to be a library in a university or a school; and the place of users in these facilities, and the way in which libraries contribute to student success. The notions of welcome, comfort, ease of use and the link with teaching and research are at the heart of the architectural programming approach.

The forward-looking dimension of architectural programming is emphasised, encouraging project managers to think about the library of tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. The support given to library professionals by architectural professionals such as programmers enables them to understand well before the architect's work and drawings, what it means to commission an architect for a space destined for uses that are themselves destined to evolve.

### 3 University Reforms: Autonomy and Mergers

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a succession of university reforms designed to lead universities towards autonomy, or at least **greater autonomy from the State**, as is the case in many European countries. This process began with the 2007 law on the Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities (France) and continues to this day with Act II of Autonomy initiated in 2024 with nine pilot schemes. These numerous reforms, at least in rapid succession, have brought about fundamental changes in the way universities operate and are governed, as well as an increase in the power of their central services, embodied in the position of Director-General of Services.

The other trend at the turn of the century was the regrouping and **merging of universities**. Historically, this is an interesting trend for France, since it is the opposite of the Faure Law (1968), which led to the break-up of universities. The movement initiated in the 21st century has given rise to large universities, such as Lille (the merger of Lille 1, 2 and 3) and Aix-Marseille (the merger of three universities). These changes have had a direct impact on the organisation of university libraries, as well as on every part of the universities concerned. For all these universities, the need to create a new identity, a common culture and shared tools

<sup>3</sup> Marcerou (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Bisbrouck and Chaintreau (1993).

<sup>5</sup> The ENSSIB (Ecole nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques) trains library managers: <https://www.enssib.fr/>.

has become apparent. These mergers have mobilised management teams in transforming the framework for their organisation.

The gradual autonomy of universities is enabling them to **better integrate their libraries**. This is being achieved not only by bringing the operations of the various parts closer together, but also by making the library function as an integral part of the institutional strategy. Libraries have two major advantages in this respect: they are one of the places where teaching and research are linked within the university; and they are also a place where different disciplines can coexist. University libraries are not the domain of law, medicine, or sport: they work for all these disciplines and their users. They are a cross-disciplinary resource, an original example of transversality that should be seen as an asset in building institutional strategies. However, this integration is not yet complete, and the academic world still often sees the library as a place: a place that is immensely popular with students, but simply a place. The integration of libraries into universities, i. e., into training and research, has yet to be achieved. The library as a **tool** for interweaving student success, research promotion, knowledge dissemination, digital management, attractiveness, mobility, etc. remains unthought-of.

## 4 French University Libraries in 2024

The fact is that despite many new buildings and refurbishments (to name but a few) and despite the creation of large-scale documentation services, the growth in student numbers has been such that the ratios at the time of the Miquel Report (0.6 square metres per student) have hardly changed at all, and in any case have failed to reach the recommended one square metre per student. Between 1960 and 2022, the student population in France rose from 310 000 to 2.93 million at the start of the 2022 academic year.

There are several ways of characterising French university libraries in 2024. There are two main areas that seem essential to the evolution of these institutions.

## 5 The Search for User-Friendliness

The programming of new libraries and the refurbishment of existing buildings are marked by a growing interest in users and their needs. Whether in terms of collections made available, ways of working (alone or in groups, silently or

aloud), students' tools or their pace of life, new buildings are designed around the idea that they must be adapted to usage. This is reflected in the creation of specific spaces: spaces dedicated to silent work, to group work, to naps, etc. It is also reflected in the multiplicity of postures offered to users: classic workplaces, but also armchairs or sofas, terraces, and meeting places. The **differentiation of spaces** is the direct translation of the primary concern of the programming approach, which can be summed up as follows: "a library, for what use, for what user?"

## 6 A Wide Range of Services and Skills

Numerous studies of all categories of library staff show a consistent evolution in the missions and skills deployed. Librarians, in the generic sense of the term, conduct a wide range of tasks: from communication to project management, from catalogue management to open archives management, from responding to calls for proposals to welcoming the public, from regulating schedules to building management, from training to animation, and so on. User training has taken on a particular importance in the last decade.

To these two axes, we could add a third, which also took off in the early 1990s. This was the creation in 1994 of ABES<sup>6</sup>, the bibliographic agency for higher education, which laid the foundations for assertive co-operation, the logical outcome of the IT strategy for the university library network launched by the Ministry in 1992. In parallel with the construction and training programme that marked the end of the 20th century for university libraries, this creation was to have a profound impact on the way French university libraries functioned, by making **sharing and co-operation** the essential modes of operation.

The inclusion of ABES in the French university landscape is profoundly changing relations among university libraries and transforming the work of all those involved in cataloguing. For users, the opening of SUDOC (Système universitaire de documentation)<sup>7</sup> in 2000 represented a minor revolution, enabling them to locate documents from a screen.

These developments are successes to be credited not only to the profession, but also to universities and the Ministry responsible for Higher Education. However, these

<sup>6</sup> Agence bibliographique de l'enseignement supérieur: <https://abes.fr/l-abes/presentation/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sudoc.abes.fr/>.

successes should not conceal the structural difficulties: as mentioned above, the integration of libraries into universities is incomplete, and there are still many problems concerning resources in relation to the student population. The fact remains, however, that French university libraries seem to have embarked on a path that takes them a long way from the libraries of the early twentieth century, a path that focuses on service to the user, whether in terms of collection, training, mediation, or construction.

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