

# The Fall of the Wall

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Revisiting the Bibliothèque nationale de France, almost thirty years after the start of the project and twenty years after its opening to the public is a delicate exercise. Two decades seems only a fleeting glance with regard to history, which, moreover, is the history of an edifice built to serve the ambitious republican project of providing access to knowledge for all. And yet, these twenty years can also seem long, or rather extremely condensed, given the extent to which they are characterized by the radical mutations of the world, of customs and practices, and of life in general. And yet, the Bibliothèque is outside of time; it stands there like a permanent fixture—symbolic, before political.

The decision to produce this monograph today is intended to reveal a little known and poorly understood aspect of the specifically architectural, rather than media or institutional history of the Bibliothèque. This book covers the different stages



Conceptual model, 1989  
Moss, copper sheet, wood, lead, cotton muslin, photocopies, scale 1/1500

of its design and construction and shows the nature of the process implemented over a decade; a complex project undertaken with an attitude of openness to experimentation and notably marked by the emergence of our contemporary digital condition.

This return to the Bibliothèque consists, to my mind, of taking stock of the moment of a passing, a shift from one paradigm to

another. 1989, the year we won the project, is a crucial one for contemporary history: the Berlin Wall fell in November, marking the apogee of the collapsing communist regimes in central Europe.

No one could imagine at the time the world that was to come, though the perspective of an unprecedented geopolitical and cultural reconfiguration was obvious with the swiftly approaching millennium as vanishing point. The modern world, founded upon totalizing visions was splintering. Though in all this some saw the “end of history”\*, I personally think of it as the entry into geography.

The area of the European Union swiftly expanded, and the basic freedom of movement—of goods and people—was established across a territory that would continue to expand. 1989 was a pivotal year, heralding this paradoxical movement of the expansion of a territory nevertheless known to be finite. The sudden disintegration of existing entities brought forth a new more fragmented landscape.

The Bibliothèque, in its own way, fully participated in this moment. It is a complex object, simultaneously belonging to two worlds. It is a conclusion and at the same time heralds the future, and the choice was made to underscore this tension: classic while projected into an uncertain future; still modern, but already beyond it; no longer entirely analog, but not yet digital either; borrowing from history, of course, but based more on the story created by the maps and the geography of the place.

This edifice, desired by François Mitterrand, was intended to underpin an ambitious cultural policy. For me, it was not about imagining a showcase but rather of building architecture that would become the primary tool for broader access to knowledge, as open as the generous and inclusive vision that was to prevail there.

To achieve this, the Bibliothèque too brought down walls, both physically and metaphorically: first of all, the traditionally hermetic enclosure

of great French monuments, to create a void anchored to the Seine offering an open space that everyone can cross. If the reference to heritage is fully assumed, along with a certain idea of the incarnation of state power in the urban space, it is in order to make it absolutely available, both materially and symbolically, in the way the “treasure” it conserves also had to be made available.

This transformative capacity is also embodied in the architectural system we deployed to organize space. The Bibliothèque can be understood as the last modernist edifice. Though it borrows its vocabulary from the specifically international style, the purpose here is to affirm the humanist approach and the idea of progress.

But the most important thing I have kept in mind is the abstract character, the idea of pure reason that makes it possible to snatch the Bibliothèque away from all the historicizing folds of the period. Omnipresent geometry provides an ordering principle that neither freezes nor prescribes. Through its blending with a form of hyper-materiality, it outlines a fundamentally contemporary landscape, a collective horizon open to individual forms of appropriation.

By bringing down its walls, the Bibliothèque encompasses all around it. It is open to the industrial landscape of the 13th arrondissement, to the sky and to the Seine. It was designed to welcome every sort of public; to embrace knowledge and open fully to what would become the digitized

world, just beginning to emerge. It was a gamble: the digital wave was approaching, but still undetermined. The Bibliothèque had to possess a physical organization that could allow users to find their bearings in this new dimension and, when the time was right, to invent new adapted ways of learning, reading and working. The asserted abstraction functions like a synthesis: for me, the effort to gather knowledge of the past, data and ideas constitutes the foundation upon which other possibilities can germinate. More than an object, the Bibliothèque marks a moment of conclusion, anticipation and promise.

This is perhaps the epiphany this monographic book reveals best and most accurately, by tying together a range of views, stories, and writings, dating from the period and from the present. These voices are accompanied by a rich and varied iconography, blending the immediate precision of the line with the famous cabinet filled with digitized plans, already compiling mountains of data from the late 20th century onward.

\* Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History and the Last Man”, *The National Interest*, 1989



The Wall at the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, November 11, 1989