

PAWEŁ ŻUK\*

## WHAT HAS RICHARD ROGERS BEEN HIT WITH AN UMBRELLA FOR?

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### ZA CO RICHARD ROGERS OBERWAŁ PARASOLKĄ?

#### Abstract

The article describes a little-known fact about the very well-known building that is the Paris Pompidou Centre. In an era of social revolution, the project was a kind of revolution in the world of architecture. Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers changed the story of architecture almost unwittingly by playing with it.

*Keywords: Centre Pompidou, museum, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers*

#### Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje mało znane wątki dotyczące bardzo znanego budynku – paryskiego Centrum Pompidou. W czasach rewolucji społecznych projekt ten był swoistą rewolucją w świecie architektury. Renzo Piano i Richard Rogers bawiąc się w architekturę nieomal niechcący zmienili jej historię.

*Słowa kluczowe: Centrum Pompidou, muzeum, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers*

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## 1. Playing the competitors

In 1971, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers won the competition for a cultural centre in the Beaubourg district of Paris, named after Georges Pompidou, who died in 1974. The future winners of the Pritzker Prize were not sure whether they wanted to participate in this competition. They had a lot of doubts whether it made sense. There were more than 600 participants, the historical context of the area, the initial lack of ideas – all of this gave rise to doubts. They were young, not very well known and did not take their participation in the competition seriously. We still do not know who came up with the main idea first. In an interview in 1977 Piano notes that the idea was not born in one mind, but rather in two minds simultaneously, and not on a piece of paper. “We said to ourselves: Let’s try and think about this competition. If we get a good idea for it, we’ll do it.” “And within the first 10 days, we had quite an interesting idea: that of counterproposing, in a slightly controversial vein, the concept of a big contraption, or machine, to that of the large cultural centre – an idea we both had simultaneously. This idea, although it hadn’t been drawn yet, seemed interesting enough to warrant our participation” [1]. Finally, they took part in the competition. We all know that they won.

## 2. Playing Jules Verne

We may get the impression that Renzo Piano played the role of Jules Verne. People think that, together with Rogers, Piano invented high-tech, and he says that it was just fun and full of irony. “In reality it is quite an ironic building. It is not a real spaceship – it is a Jules Verne spaceship. It’s really more a parody of technology than technology. It was just a direct and quite innocent way to express the difference between the intimidating cultural institutions like they normally were in the 60s and 70s – especially in this city [Paris, where his studio is based] – and the modern building, very open, and a curious relationship with people. The idea was that it doesn’t intimidate. We were young bad boys and we liked that”.

“But the Beaubourg is not really a triumph of technology. It’s more about the joy of life. It’s a rebellion” [1]. This means that high-tech was created unwittingly by the fact that people did not get the allegory. In 1997 the NEMO building was opened in Amsterdam. Verne, Again! This time, more literally.

## 3. Playing revolutionaries

While the design itself was a chance for Renzo Piano to play the role of Jules Verne, for Richard Rogers it was a chance to play the revolutionary. Rogers believes that the Centre Pompidou perfectly captures the spirit of the revolutionary year of 1968. We remember the historical context of that time from the perspective of the Polish. Western Europe was also not a haven of peace at the time. In France, after a wave of student protests, bloody riots and brutal police actions, President Charles de Gaulle, who had ruled since 1959, was forced to resign. Georges Pompidou was de Gaulle’s successor. Let’s add to that the social and moral hippie revolution and protests against the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and we obtain the image of France at the end of the 1960s as that of a country turbulent and unstable. According to Rogers, the architecture of the Pompidou Centre reflects the spirit of those times: “The facade

on the building, if you look more carefully, was very much about the riots and very much about Vietnam (...) the idea of the putting all the structure and services on the outside of the building to maximise the flexibility of the internal space also has its roots in the volatility of this period of history (...) The one thing we knew about this age is it's all about change, if there's one constant, it's change" [2]. Revolution was the inspiration for the project, which caused a revolution in the world of architecture.

#### **4. Playing the museum**

Designed to be a little fun, the Pompidou Centre completely changed the relationship between the museum and the audience. It has become a meeting place, a melting pot, a container, a machine open to people interested in culture and the arts. The critics of architecture said so. Jencks called the Pompidou Centre a department store of culture and prohibited the spreading of its pattern [4, p. 13]. The building's goal was to reduce the distance between art and its audience. An important point of the program was the educational section where children are taught through play how to become a conscious recipient of art, who can later become a loyal customer. We can say that the Centre Pompidou differs from the usual museum that we can play inside. At that time in Poland we walked around the museum in felt slippers.

#### **5. Playing the design**

Renzo Piano approached the construction of the centre very seriously. Unfortunately, there was no time for that. In an interview, he complained that the sketches were taken directly from the board to the construction site: "France was terrible. It was a bizarre school [of thought] where being the architect was just a sketch-making job," he says. "They said, 'Merci beaucoup, monsieur, now we'll do it' and we said, 'No you can't. We'll do it' "[6]. Perhaps it was then that Piano got the idea that he can sketch in all stages of design. A great boon for the project was the participation of the creative Irish designer Peter Rice, who was not a beginner in combining art with technology, as he previously designed the construction of the Sydney Opera House. It was Rice's idea to cast the huge steel frame structure of the Pompidou Centre. The final construction project was very different from what was in the conceptual design submitted to the competition.

#### **6. Is high-tech a form of postmodernism?**

A paradox is that high-tech architecture is considered a branch of postmodernism by some sources [3]. If modernism is modernity, and high-tech architecture dazzles with modernity, it is obvious that... It turns out that it is not that obvious. We also think that if postmodernism references the past and high-tech references the future, it's almost the same thing. Technology becomes an ornament, and for the modernists ornament is a crime. This slogan better suited modernists, although Adolf Loos wrote the essay *Ornament and Crime*. Charles Jenks wrote that ornament swallows the building [4, p. 48]. In short – the Pompidou Centre is almost postmodernism, the building – a machine filled with technological ornament.



III. 1–3. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Photographs by the author of the article

### 7. A dangerous game

Designing architecture can be a dangerous job, also in the literal sense. Few architects take this into account in their work and perhaps few of them have experienced it. It turns out that the selfless hate of ordinary people can be dangerous to their health. Richard Rogers experienced it in reality. He reflects: “I remember once standing outside on a rainy day and there was a small woman with an umbrella who offered me shelter. We started talking, as one does in the rain, and she asked: ‘what do you think of this building?’ Stupidly, I said that I designed it and she hit me on the head with her umbrella. That was just typical of the general reaction of the people, especially during the design and construction stage. [People thought we were] destroying their beautiful Paris “[2]. Fortunately, time heals bruises and

hate expires turning into love with a bit of sarcasm. “Paris has a long history of controversial architecture.” writes Kim Willsher in The Guardian “In 1887 a “Protest against the Tower of Monsieur Eiffel” was published in French newspapers describing the structure as “useless and monstrous”. The Pompidou Centre, by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, caused a furore in 1969. Critics claimed it had the best view of Paris – as you could not see the building itself. In 1989 the Louvre pyramid was branded a defacement of the building but has become an acclaimed landmark” [7]. Or maybe people just get used to something, and then an initially hated building or structure becomes an icon.

## References

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