

FRANCE :

CATHEDRALE OF NOTRE DAME...
... REIMS (N° 601)

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Mission Report : Project for a Médiathèque at Rheims

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The proposal by the City of Rheims to build a médiathèque on the square in front of the cathedral, a World Heritage Site since 1991, has raised concerns about juxtaposing a contemporary structure of steel and glass with the West Front of a Gothic cathedral and about the way such a structure might be inserted into an existing city block. The architect of the project, Jean-Paul Viguier, has chosen a scale and proportions derived from the cathedral (8.3 metre-wide bays) rather than from the existing buildings of the city block into which the médiathèque is intended to fit.

Rheims was largely destroyed in the First World War but, in the rebuilding, much of the old street pattern was retained. Immediately west of the cathedral most of the streets were widened so that city blocks became smaller. At the same time the square in front of the cathedral was considerably enlarged by building a relatively compact Palais de Justice on the site of the former sprawling Hôtel Dieu to the north, and by setting back and reducing the size of the city block to the south, thus fully exposing to the cathedral the two city blocks of the rue Rockefeller, one of which forms the site of the médiathèque. It is of interest to note, however, that the cathedral square (parvis) traditionally took in what is now the rue Rockefeller, extending as far as the rue Saint Denis (now rue Chanzy) and the Abbey of St. Denis, the demolition of which at the Revolution made possible the construction of the rue Libergier and the creation of a new axis centred on the great West Front of the cathedral.

The relationship of the new médiathèque to the cathedral will be best perceived from the cathedral square, from the steps to the west door of the cathedral and from the roof over the West Front to which the public is

admitted. But the relationship will also be evident when approaching the cathedral axially up the rue Rockefeller, from the rues des Fuseliers and Tronsson-Ducoudray, and especially from the rue Robert de Coucy which runs alongside the north face of the cathedral and whose recent closure to vehicular traffic will attract the pedestrian.

The site of the médiathèque is the northern half of the city block bounded by the rues Rockefeller, Chanzy, des Tourelles and des Fuseliers. On the corner of the rues Rockefeller and Chanzy stands the Hôtel de Police, a Neo-Classical building with a giant order of Ionic pilasters over a ground-floor podium, designed as an apartment block in 1923 by the architect Jean Walter, who is better known for his hospital and medical faculty buildings both in France and overseas. The corner and ends are emphasised by rustication and slight forward projection, the corner also being splayed and consisting of three bays with arches on the ground floor. Over the cornice rises a double-mansard roof with two tiers of dormers and many tall chimneys. The return gable facing the cathedral is an ugly reminder of unfinished business, for the intention must surely have been to continue at the same height and in the same manner up to and around the corner of the rues Rockefeller and des Fuseliers, as was done on the opposite side of the rue Rockefeller between the rues Chanzy and Tronsson-Ducoudray (the Résidence des sacres and adjacent apartment block), resulting in a coherent townscape on one side of the street. Instead a café barely two-thirds the height of the Hôtel de Police was allowed to be built and is now to be demolished to provide, together with the adjacent empty site in the rue des Fuseliers, the greater part of the médiathèque site.

The architectural competition for the médiathèque offered participants the choice of demolishing or retaining and adapting the Hôtel de Police. Jean-Paul Viguié chose to retain only the façades and, on the rue Rockefeller, only four of the six bays of the façade, without fully reconstructing the projecting rusticated piece which terminates the end bays, which is a necessary part of the whole, and without which the façades are incomplete. It is possible that this arbitrary truncation is deliberate, to help combine the old building with the new by weakening the integrity and separate identity of the old façade, in which case one begins to wonder whether there is any point in keeping the old façade at all. Far better, surely, to design one new building over the whole site and, without resorting to pastiche or even to the use of traditional materials, taking the volume, scale and rhythm from the buildings on the opposite side of the rue Rockefeller, to complete a balanced and ordered townscape.

The belief that it would have been preferable to build one new building over the whole site is reinforced when one considers that the character of an area depends not just on the street frontages but on the integrity of its buildings and the contribution they make in all dimensions. Thus not only is the interior of the Hôtel de Police to be gutted, but its double-mansard roof is to be replaced by a flat roof at the same level as the flat roof of the new building, which is nearly 2.50 metres lower than the rooftop of the buildings on the opposite side of the street. The difference in height and volume is bound to result in an unbalanced townscape.

The new building will stand on the corner of the rues Rockefeller and des Fuseliers, with the main entrance a discreetly recessed slot in the rue des Fuseliers facing the great triple porch of the cathedral. The design of the building is doctrinaire in as much as it is better suited to a free-standing pavilion than to a building which has to adapt to the irregular configuration of an existing city block. A perfect square on plan, made up of 16 bays (4 bays by 4), the building has an exposed steel structure of columns and beams, but with the corners cantilevered and the corner or end columns omitted. As there is only one exposed corner, the full effect of this is strictly limited, even if it can be appreciated to a lesser extent where the building abuts on adjacent structures in the rues Rockefeller and des Fuseliers. The effect of the cantilevered corner and ends is heightened by the recessed glazing line which leaves the outer line of columns free-standing except at ground-floor level where a more solid wall of alternating stone and glass strips projects forward and abuts on the columns.

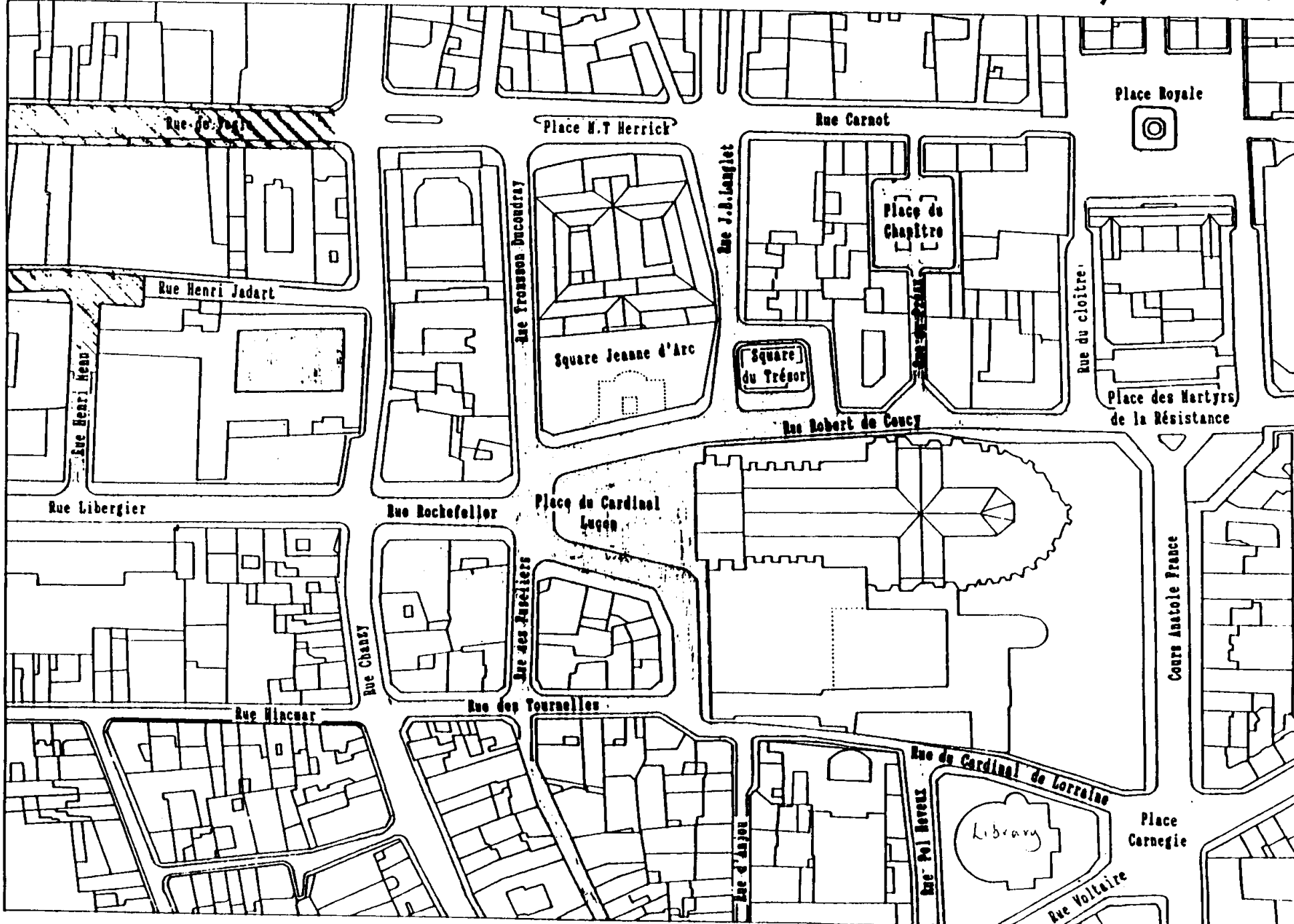
To obtain a perfect square for the plan of his building, the architect has ironed out an irregularity in the building line, creating a right-angle at the corner of the rues Rockefeller and des Fuseliers and thus altering the street line of the rue des Fuseliers, which will no longer be aligned with its continuation, the rue Tronsson Ducoudray. The effect will be somewhat disturbing and results, of course, from the doctrinaire design approach. In favour of the design, however, it is worth mentioning that the splayed corner, which appears to have been a planning requirement for all city blocks in Rheims, is recalled in the cantilevered open corner and would be even more so if the entrance to the médiathèque was actually on the corner.

In conclusion there seems to have been an error of judgement in the decision to retain only the façades of the Hôtel de Police. It would have been possible, no doubt, to retain this building in its entirety (many buildings older and in worse condition have been saved before now), and one of the main reasons for demolishing the roof, the unsightly appearance of the gable opposite the cathedral, appears to be invalid, since the gable would be made largely invisible by the new médiathèque in front. An impact study would have clarified this and many other visual matters resulting from the proposed development.

It would have been preferable to demolish the Hôtel de Police and to use the whole site for a single new building designed to create through its form, scale and rhythm, a balance with the buildings opposite, and a more sympathetic relationship with the adjacent private residences in the rues Chanzy, des Fuseliers and des Tourelles, all of which appear to be well looked after and not likely to be redeveloped in the foreseeable future.

It is the scale of the proposed building which is too large, and its height and form which will not provide a balanced townscape. It is not the steel columns or the glass which are objectionable. The effect of a material depends on how it is used. Here the spacing of the columns has resulted in a monumental scale which is wholly out of context with the building's immediate surroundings and which is likely to produce strong contrast and discord rather than harmony. The fixed wooden blinds with adjustable louvres, on the other hand, seem an entirely appropriate way of handling the north- and east-facing all-glass façades of a library.

Finally it seems important to point out that the situation which has called for this and other reports is unlikely ever to have arisen had there been a proper buffer zone around the World Heritage Site of the cathedral, Palais du Tau and abbey church of St. Remy, and had there been management plans for these monuments and their surroundings. It is true that the site of the médiathèque falls well within the 500-metre protection zone around historic monuments in France, but 500 metres is an arbitrary figure whereas a buffer zone is tailored to each case and is therefore fully flexible and a surer form of protection. The buffer zone, like the management plan, is a useful instrument and acts as a check on the planning authority, which is put on its guard. The management plan suggests, among other things, how to "manage" development that might affect the setting of a World Heritage Site. In the case of Rheims it could have been instrumental in putting into effect many of the recommendations in the 1989 Etude d'aménagement des abords de la cathédrale by Yves Boiret, Architecte en Chef des Monuments Historiques and at the time cathedral architect. It seems essential, therefore, that the inscribed World Heritage sites are given adequate buffer zones and that management plans are prepared forthwith.



Rue de la Vierge

Place H.T. Herrick

Rue Carnot

Place Royale

Rue Henri Jadart

Rue Fromson Ducoudray

Square Jeanne d'Arc

Place du Chapitre

Rue Henri Hen

Square du Trésor

Rue du cloître

Place des Martyrs de la Résistance

Rue Robert de Cochy

Rue Libergier

Rue Rochefeller

Place du Cardinal Luçon

Cours Antoine France

Rue Chanzy

Rue des Angéliers

Rue Hincmar

Rue des Tournelles

Rue de Cardinal de Lorraine

Library

Place Carnegie

Rue d'Anjou

Rue Pol Bovez

Rue Voltaire