

Transferring France's National Archives: a transformation in progress

Introduction

The National Archives were set up by the Constituent Assembly under the French Revolution in 1790. Though their missions have remained virtually unchanged since then (conserving the memory of the Nation and making this memory available to citizens), the question of its location, on the other hand, has gone through several phases.

Originally installed in the de Soubise Palace, in the Marais district of Paris, by Napoleon I in 1808, they are still there today.

In the late 1960s, the vacant former NATO buildings in the Forest of Fontainebleau, 50 km from Paris, were made available to the National Archives. This location was intended to see the construction of 10 archiving units on five basement levels, each with a storage capacity of 100 km. The second of these was opened in 1984, and then the project ground to a halt.

By the late 1990s, the repositories started to become saturated (80 km in Paris, 225 km in Fontainebleau), and over a third of the storage space on the Paris and Fontainebleau sites is unsuitable for long-term conservation. A proposal to install the “archives of the 5th Republic” (i.e. archives since 1958) in Reims was investigated, then dropped.

Lobbying by researchers and archivists and input from the Seine-Saint-Denis local authorities finally helped the Presidency of the Republic take a decision. In 2004, Jacques Chirac announced the construction of a new site for the National Archives in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, in Seine-Saint-Denis, at the terminus of metro line 13.

Over and above the basic increase in storage capacity, eight years after this decision, the National Archives are undergoing a profound transformation.

Where are we currently at?

I. The scientific project

The Pierrefitte Project was the opportunity to launch number of new actions: repackaging and cleaning archives, bar-coding of all the packing units, digitalization of finding aids, and creating a new information system.

Just over a year before the building was finished, the scientific project reached a new turning point.

The overall spirit

The first idea was to write a scientific, cultural, and educational project, covering not just all the facets of the National Archives' missions, from collecting to promoting, but also to associate each agent, each department with this process.

Another idea was to move from a “defence” situation (the National Archives feel themselves under threat from another competing project, the History of France Centre – *Maison d'Histoire de France*) to take an offensive and forward-looking position.

And lastly, since the project covered the activity of the National Archives for the next four years, it had to set out the scientific programmes to be completed and the priorities to be followed for

collective work.

Out of the project would arise the organization of the institution, which necessarily needed to be brought up to date.

The priorities

The first priority was to meet the expectations of various publics, readers, visitors, or supplying services. For the publics, this objective includes problems of reception in the reading room (waiting time, quotas, opening hours), tools for readers (on-line finding aids and tools, guidance for researchers), particularly for young publics (educational packs, virtual exhibitions), secondly, to offer answers for supplying services and/or private archive donors (immediate use of archive fonds).

A second priority was to start collecting again. Because of the saturation of the repositories and the lack of space for long years, the collection must move towards collecting public and private resources (Paris notaries records, associations, politicians archives).

This recovery of collecting is totally parallel to the maintaining of the “Missions” system that has been organized in the Ministries for 60 years. Not only must the policies of collection and classification at the source remain bases for the actions of archivists on Missions, but it would also be necessary to re-establish institutional unity and continuity in archive processing chain, by incorporating the Missions back into the National Archives, thus resuming the situation before 2007.

The third priority is the question of digital archiving. The National Archives have been in a position to provide archiving for digital data for 30 years via “Constance” programme. Thus, 15 TB are preserved on the Fontainebleau site. What is needed now is to move up a gear, given the current information production media, and in order to allow for all the digital data (databases, electronic messaging systems, office computing records). The National Archives are working on this project in close association with the French Foreign Office Ministry (*ministère des Affaires Etrangères*) and the Ministry of Defence. This project is going to cover the whole archival chain, from collection to communication, and the promotion of the fonds.

An electronic archiving platform is going to be brought into service by 2016. Our future as a heritage institution, serving various publics, playing a part in political and administrative current affairs, is going to depend on our ability to collect, preserve, and communicate born-digital archives.

And lastly, the National Archives are confirming their desire to work within and with the existing institutional networks: public archive services, research centres and universities, historical foundations and associations, by developing and consolidating partnerships.

The scientific programmes

A word about the scientific programmes that are described in our activities plan. Forty-one programmes, around six main themes, are going to be accompanying us for the next four years.

Theme 1: The individual in society

Theme 2: From the territory to the town, from town to buildings

Theme 3: France at war

Theme 4: From policies to politics

Theme 5: History of the State and the administration

Theme 6: Sources and sciences related to history

Each programme covers several points in the archival chain (for example, a classification, a digitization, and an exploitation), a pilot is designated for it, a number of partners listed, and a deadline set. The themes have been chosen in accordance with the work already in progress and the priorities set out above.

Here we are on the way for four years and with a very detailed roadmap.

II. The resources and tools are almost all in place

A new site in Pierrefitte

Following an international architectural competition, the project by Massimiliano Fuksas was selected in May 2005. In May 2009, the construction contract was awarded to Bouygues bâtiment Ile-de-France.

After three years of work, the new Pierrefitte-sur-Seine site was handed over to us on 21st June 2012. We are entirely at your disposal to welcome you there and show you round this building that has been specially designed for the National Archives.

A few figures:

62,000 m² of usable area in the building, including 75% for repositories, on a 4.4 hectare site capable of accommodating subsequent extension to the building.

Two blocks linked by walkways:

- the building known as “the high-rise block” (w: 47 m, l: 162 m, h: 38 m), with the reading room on the ground floor and the 220 repository units (320 km) on 11 upper levels;

- the 5-storey building known as “the satellites”, consisting of spaces with varying proportions, housing the areas for submitting archives, the public reception area, a 450 m² exhibition space, the auditorium, the educational department and offices, and the sorting rooms and workshops.

Located close to the stores, the 1,400 m² reading room will accommodate 160 places; the adjacent open-access catalogue room has 80 places; the mezzanine microfilm consultation room has 50 places.

The materials: concrete with anodized aluminium cladding for the “high-rise” building, which is carried on 524 piles with diameters from 50 to 122 cm, the largest of them 28 m deep; joinery in steel or aluminium for the satellites, which have a very extensive glazed surface. There is a recurrent diamond motif throughout the complex.

A number of innovations: the automatic fire extinguishing system uses a water mist, following conclusive tests performed by the Building Scientific & Technical Centre.

Three artworks have been commissioned from three artists: Pascal Convert, Susanna Fritscher, and Antony Gormley.

A building that at least at first sight appears very functional — we’ll see once we start using it — where almost 300 agents are going to be working.

The total cost of the works: € 194m including VAT; the overspend with respect to the original budget being due, on the one hand, to the changing costs of construction, and on the other, to the special requirements of a high-rise block.

At handover, 160 repository units (of the total of 220) are fitted with shelving, representing 260 km of storage. Once the relocation of the archives are complete, around 200 km of this will be occupied. The projected assumptions are as follows: saturation of the 260 km in 15 years, whence the necessity to fit out the remaining 60 km in order to gain another 15 years' capacity. There is also enough spare land to consider the possibility of extending the length of the high-rise building. These forecasts are only a reproduction of the linear quantity of paper archives received each year at the National Archives (4 km in Pierrefitte, 1 km in Fontainebleau), and do not take into account a radical change in production supports.

Lastly, let's not forget that 55 km of archives are going to be conserved on the Paris site, and on the Fontainebleau site, with a capacity of 200 km, around 100 km will be occupied after the relocation.

The Archival Information System (*SIA Système d'information archivistique*)

The new Archival Information System is partially in place.

This project, launched in 2005, started out from the observation that management and documentary data were produced on very varied applications, with possibility of communication. These data represented an information capital that was under-exploited and insufficiently distributed to researchers.

It was decided to create a single information system for the three sites, meeting all the needs of the archive processing chain, and to open access to a wide audience. The National Archives own exclusive rights on the system, which has to be brought online when the Pierrefitte site opens.

The contract was awarded in December 2008 to Logica IT Services and its sub-contractor, Klee Group, for the sum of € 9.9m (firm component for 5 years).

The AIS (archival information system) revolves around two applications:

- a management application: management of the fonds, incoming and outgoing resources, eliminations, readers, and communications. This first phase has been onlined on the three sites and has been operational since the beginning of July.
- a documentary application: production of finding aids and inventories in XML-EAD, indexing thesaurus, terms of reference for producers, access to the digitized resources.

Via an Internet portal, readers will have access to a virtual catalogue room, which is already accessible for signing up and ordering archive articles, and which from early 2013 will be offering virtually all of the National Archives' inventories along with research support modules.

The organization

The organizational structure presentation four themed directions (Fonds, Public, Scientific Support, and Administration) on the three sites, at the expense of independence for each of the sites. The headquarters are in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.

The Fonds Direction is organized :

- by the major domains of State operating (Executive and legislative, Interior and Justice, Education, Culture, and Social Affairs, Development, Agriculture and environment),
- by the source of fonds (notaries records, Architects' private archives, Private archives), and lastly,
- by chronological period (Middle Ages and Early Modern).

The Public division includes the 3 reading rooms, the National Archives Museum, and the

Historical Library.

The Scientific Support Direction includes the Preservation department, the Digital and Audiovisual Archives department, and the IT department.

Lastly, the Administration & Finance Direction manages all the functional aspects (budget, human resources, legal service, estates management, safety and security).

In the previous organization, since 1980, the fonds were distributed between Paris and Fontainebleau sites, around the year 1958: the Paris site was devoted to the storage and communication of archives prior to the constitution of the 5th Republic, along with the Presidency of the Republic archives, from the same date up to the present. The Fontainebleau site took care of the archives produced by the government structures (ministries, major bodies and operators of the State) since 1958.

The opening of the new Pierrefitte-sur-Seine site and the redeployment of the fonds over three sites has offered the opportunity to rethink the distribution around a new key date, the year 1790.

Once the National Archives relocation is complete, the Paris site will conserve the resources from the *Ancien Régime* and the archives of the Paris notaries: the space freed up by the relocation of the post-1790 collections will be devoted to redeploying Middle Ages and Early Modern archives and resuming the collection of notaries records.

The private and post-1790 public collections will mainly be stored in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine. The Fontainebleau site will concentrate on the preservation of specific media (digital and audiovisual archives) and private architectural archives.

At Fontainebleau will also be conserved serial and name archives, which are not very often requested in the reading room and can be communicated remotely.

The virtual catalogue room will make it easier to guide readers by indicating, at the top of each detailed catalogue, the geographical location (Paris, Pierrefitte, or Fontainebleau) of the files described.

Enough skilled staff

The total staff numbers to be reached when the reading room on the Pierrefitte site opens in early 2013 has been set at 515 posts. Hence a gradual increase in recruitment levels has been implemented since 2007. From 250 posts on two sites in 2007, we have currently increased to 460 on three sites.

The distribution of skill areas is as follows:

scientific staff: 165

technical repository agents: 190

restorers and photographers: 45

administrative staff: 88

safety and security agents: 27 (+ 18 fire-fighters on the Pierrefitte site)

They are spread across the three sites thus:

in Pierrefitte, 290 agents

in Paris, 175 agents

in Fontainebleau, 50 agents

Thus everything is in place to successfully complete this magnificent transformation that has been so long awaited.

However, given the sheer size of the operations to be implemented and their sometimes novel nature, there are certain areas to which we need to turn our attention if we want to put the finishing touches to the project of transforming the National Archives and make it a success.

III. The points requiring vigilance in the short to medium term

The relocation of the collections

From May 2012, the National Archives' fonds dating from after the French Revolution will gradually be removed to the Pierrefitte site. This transfer will have to take more than 18 months: there are 250 km of documents to be transferred from one site to the other or redeployed on the same site, in order to be conserved under the best possible conditions. This operation, unique in the history of the National Archives, has been in preparation since 2007; dust removal, repackaging, and disinfection of several tens of kilometres, and bar-coding of each article conserved in Paris or in Fontainebleau.

The collections are going to be transferred and arranged according to a chain principle that follows the new organization by themed centres. Maps, plans, and photographs will be moved at the end of the operation, so as to be included in repositories especially equipped for them.

In all, over 50 km will be going from Paris and 160 km from Fontainebleau.

Each of the collections transferred in this way will be out of communication for a maximum of three months — the time to organize the transfer and, above all, to update the information system. While waiting for the opening of the Pierrefitte reading room next January, the collections already transferred will be communicated to the Paris site by shuttle.

Throughout the relocation, new repositories will also be handled on the three sites, thereby preserving the vital growth of the fonds.

There are several challenges: preserving the archives, finalizing the relocation within the allotted time, maintaining the service to readers and to supplying services.

Taking the building over and opening to the public

So in the immediate term, nearly 300 agents will have to come to work on the Pierrefitte site. Their relocation has been organized in five waves, between June and December of this year.

A few days before handover of the building, the agents in charge of supervising the works and the technical installations, security and safety, logistics, and archive entry agents started work. Currently, there are 55 people present on the site.

This gradual build-up is rendered necessary for several reasons: on a scientific level, we naturally make every effort to co-ordinate relocation of the collections with the relocation of the persons responsible for them. On an organizational and technical level, this familiarization period is essential in order to ensure the agents are trained to the proper level, particularly for the maintenance of the technical installations, to put in place the security and safety procedures, to calmly organize the co-existence with the company tasked with clearing the reserves on the building, which will be present on the site until October.

Over and above the technical and physical operations, the teams are leaving a prestigious site, the National Archives quadrilateral, and a very lively district, the Marais, making a break with habits that have sometimes been acquired over several decades, seeing acquired sociabilities modified,

sometimes being separated from friends. So our attention has been particularly focused on accompanying the agents collectively and individually in their mobility, as well as on the conditions under which they will be received on the new site (user-friendliness, furniture, work tools, etc.) So we have systematically tried to find solutions appropriate for each individual situation, conscious of the fact that in an environment that has a reputation for being stable, this uncharacteristic avalanche of change could give rise to worry and anxiety.

To conclude, as the reading room is not going to open until January 2013, the teams in charge of this will only be arriving in early December.

This step is itself dependent on new factors: delivery of the furniture for the reading room, chosen in good time by the architect, onlining of the second phase of the AIS (in particular, the access to the finding aids via the virtual catalogue room – *Salle des inventaires virtuelle* – *SIV*). We are also preparing ourselves for the eventuality of dissociating the opening to the public from the extended onlining of the *SIV*: a “plan B” for every situation...

New challenges: mastering the functioning of this brand new building with sophisticated facilities, accompanying each person in this new working life, and providing the public service of communication of the archives.

Improving the preservation conditions in the stores on the Paris site

Following a survey of the conservation conditions offered on the Paris site, where the repositories have been built and converted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, we reach the conclusion that a third of the repositories have preservation conditions that are totally unsuitable (temperature, humidity, shelving, floors, dimensions, etc.)

For the remaining two thirds, which will be enough to provide conservation of the archives as planned in our scientific project (55 km), it is vital to bring them up to standard, as well as carry out maintenance work connected with the “historic building” status of the buildings. The whole thing could be costed at nearly € 100m. The key issue of course lies in the urgency of carrying out this work before the stores emptied by the relocation are filled up again!

Recruitment and appeal

The target intended to allow functioning of the institution has been set at 515 full-time equivalents. We have filled a large number of posts since 2007, but we have been able to identify certain factors that are hindering finalization of the recruitment:

- the lack of appeal of archives in general, when posts with equivalent training are offered in museums, for example. Agents who have passed their civil-service competitive examination are indeed assigned to the National Archives, but they leave the institution very soon after appointment. Agents who are already in post are not applying. Our ability to bring to life and promote the scientific, cultural, and educational project is undoubtedly going to be the factor that will win the loyalty of new staff;
- the relative distance of the Pierrefitte site, with respect to the geographical location of the Marais district. Unfortunately, we’re going to have to wait several more years yet for the Greater Paris public transport networks to make access to Pierrefitte easier.
- the succession of departures in recent years: retirements, the choice to stay within central Paris, etc. In 2011: 70 new arrivals as against 40 departures.
- the overall context of public finances, which is proving a considerable hindrance to so-called

“external” recruitment (recruitment of contract staff who are not public employees, recruitment by transfer from other ministerial bodies or from country-wide public service) in order not to exceed the permitted ministerial threshold.

We need to recruit another 50 agents between now and January 2013...

Maintaining institutional unity

Our 40 years’ past experience of co-existence of the Paris and Fontainebleau “centres” holds plenty of lessons for us on this point. Two worlds have been living in parallel; there has been hardly any relationship in terms of the scientific work, just unified administrative management. Out of this arose certain disproportions in terms of the distribution of staff, priorities sometimes poorly calculated, very different relationships with the outside world, received ideas by some people about the work of the others, and so on.

We are attempting to do everything to avoid these pitfalls:

- by preserving the legal status of the National Archives as a “nationwide service”, guaranteeing it visibility and scientific independence while maintaining it as part of the national network of archives in France
- through the organizational structure adopted: the presence of each division on the three sites, elimination of the position of “Site Scientific Director”
- by the way the missions are implemented: each site is tasked with at least one mission that is useful to the other two sites: for Pierrefitte, overall steering, the educational department; in Paris, cultural added value with the presence of the National Archives Museum; in Fontainebleau, management of the audiovisual and digital archives. We make a point of talking about “sites” (from a geographical standpoint) and not “centres” (more independent)
- by writing procedures that are common to the three sites, in order to ensure an effective public service, and the same service to the public
- by bringing into service an intranet and shared on-line resources in order to encourage collective, collaborative working
- in the daily life of the institution: senior management regularly visiting each site, setting up “service offices”, valuing each person’s activities, “telemeetings”, and so on.

New challenges: preserving the institution’s institutional unity in order to ensure the missions entrusted to it are carried out efficiently and consistently.

Integration into the territory

The choice of the location in Pierrefitte was made by the National Archives which wanted to be:

- very close to a Paris metro station, Saint-Denis-Université
- close to a university centre: we are next door to the Paris VIII University, not far from the Paris XIII University, and within a few years, from a major social and human sciences campus, the Condorcet Campus in the neighbouring municipality of Aubervilliers.

This choice of location was also the result of a conjunction of wider interests:

- the local authorities’ interest in the project: the district and the urban communities of Seine-Saint-Denis bought the land for the State and since then have constantly offered every co-operation. The National Archives are associated with all the co-operation projects (cultural projects, university projects); redevelopment of the metro station is under serious consideration, with a view to turning

it into a space for tertiary activities and social interaction, while the adjoining green spaces are going to be redeveloped to provide public amenities and sports facilities.

- the authorities' interest in constructing Greater Paris and the creation of centres of development outside central Paris.

All the conditions need to be met in order to pull off the gamble of integrating the project within its context, of opening up this public facility to the people, and of building cultural projects to serve all publics.

Conclusion

The long-awaited Presidential decision to construct a third site for France's National Archives has made it possible to commence real modernization of our institution.

Gradually, each step is being taken, the National Archives are gradually being transformed. The complexity of the various projects and the multiplicity of tasks to be accomplished represent many challenges to the institution, and the teams are showing a great deal of interest, involvement, and a certain enthusiasm for this construction.

The points for vigilance highlighted are major ones, and if we don't take care, we risk very soon going back to a retrograde situation, or even failing to take action and turning in on ourselves. They clearly require a general commitment and involvement by the Ministry of Culture & Communication, indeed by the Government.

But we have great hopes and confidence for the future, by choosing to open ourselves up to the world!

I invite you to come and discover our facilities that are worthy of the 21st century whenever you have the chance.

Agnès Magnien
Director of the National Archives, France
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