

Everything comes in threes: the relocation and redeployment project for the National Archives of France from two to three sites (Fontainebleau, Paris, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine)

[Jamais deux sans trois ? : le chantier de déménagement et de redéploiement des collections des Archives Nationales sur trois sites (Paris, Fontainebleau, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine)]

The relocation and reinstallation of the National Archives' collections on three sites is the culmination of a process of change started over ten years ago when in 2001 President Jacques Chirac officially announced the decision to open a new center for conservation and communication to manage the central administration's contemporary archives. These activities constitute the most concrete "materialization" of the reorganization of this institution.

1. Starting situation and contextualization

a. At the outset: the National Archives on two sites

The "historical geography" of the National Archives collections has involved endless movement and reinstallation. It all began when the Revolutionary authorities decided to set up an official organ for managing the confiscated archives recovered from the institutions of the *Ancien Régime*. The immediate concern was to organize and take control over the rights defined by these documents. Originally installed alongside the National Assembly, the National Archives were moved by Napoleon I in 1808 to the Marais district in the heart of Paris, where they remained throughout the 19th century, growing in line with the submissions coming from the ministries and other authorities of the government administration.

However, it gradually became clear that the National Archives' historical centre was not in a position to provide the growing room to be able to handle all the documents produced by the central administration. After the Second World War, the situation started becoming critical. Several possibilities were examined in the Ile-de-France region, and in 1969 a new site was chosen in Fontainebleau, where the departure of the NATO headquarters had freed up some substantial spaces. Standing on a 9 hectare site, the new Interministerial Archive Centre, whose initial vocation was confined to deal with pre-archiving, was planned to have a total capacity of 800 km, in response to the estimated needs of the administrations. However, the distribution of skills between the Paris and Fontainebleau sites gradually changed, eventually leading to a new organization being adopted in the 1980s. The principle of pre-archiving was now abandoned once and for all, both of the National Archives' sites henceforth having the vocation to conserve and communicate definitive archives. The scope of the Paris site now covered the Middle Ages, the *Ancien Régime*, and the contemporary period up to the mid 20th century; the Fontainebleau site, whose capacity in the end represented a total of around 200 km, specialized in collecting and conserving contemporary archives from after 1958 (the date the Fifth Republic was established).

From the 1980s to the start of the 2000s, the collections conserved on the National Archives' two sites continued to grow regularly. The Paris site collects, albeit in a reduced fashion, the archives produced by the *notaires* of Paris (entrusted to the responsibility of the Central Deeds Officer) and the archives of the Presidency of the Republic, along with a number of private archives. The Fontainebleau site handles the archives coming from all the organs of the central administration: ministries, public establishments, parliamentary assemblies, and so on. In this way, the Fontainebleau site collects around 5 km each year.

b. The 2000s: saturation in sight

The pursuit of these missions of collection and conservation in spaces with limited, indeed very restrictive, conservation capacities reached its limits in the early 2000s. The Paris site, whose repositories are partly installed in historic buildings offering conservation conditions that are not very, or in places not at all, suitable for the needs of the documents, reached saturation with over 85 km of collections conserved. The archives of the *notaires* of Paris in particular are held up: the backlog waiting for processing in *notaires'* offices is estimated at several tens of km. The Fontainebleau site likewise, despite a policy of limiting contemporary archive entries on the basis of qualitative criteria and annually-set quotas, was anticipating saturation in around 2010.

Faced with this saturation on both sites, added to the need to ensure better liaison between the contemporary collections and the public of researchers and students likely to exploit them, an association was set up at the turn of the 1990s–2000s consisting mainly of readers, advocating the adoption of a project for an Archive Centre. It was in response to this strong lobby that the presidential decision was announced, at a colloquium in November 2001, to construct a new site for the National Archives, both with a concern to meet the needs of the public, and in order to fulfill as well as possible the missions of collecting, conserving, and communicating the Archives.

This new site had to meet several criteria of functionality of the premises, capacity for growth in the medium term, and accessibility and proximity to the public, researchers and users in the broadest sense of the term. The desire to maintain close links with the public from the Paris universities led to the consideration of sites within the capital or in the inner suburbs. Thus a list of five potential sites was drawn up in April 2002; it included sites in the wider Paris region (Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, Cergy-Pontoise), in the inner suburbs (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Pantin), and within Paris itself (Bercy). This criterion of proximity to the public and users, combined with the need to find a large-capacity site that could be developed and the desire to participate in the development of the areas to the north of Paris led to the choice of Pierrefitte-sur-Seine. The location, although situated outside the city of Paris itself, is accessible by metro. It is immediately adjacent to a university centre (Paris VIII), and is part of a global policy of developing the cultural facilities in north Paris: by way of an example, the new Diplomatic Archives center also left central Paris during the 2000s to set up shop in Courneuve; in parallel with this, a number of scientific centers are also being formed in this geographical area (like the Condorcet campus).

The decision to construct a new building in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine was taken and announced in March 2004, but was envisaged for the medium term and could not reasonably be completed in less than five years. In order to ensure the continuity of the National Archives' missions before the new center was operational, plans were made to quickly build an extension in Fontainebleau, in the form of a building intended to provide the transition between the National Archives operation on two sites and the new organization on three sites. This building referred to as "Transitional" opened in 2007 and represents a capacity of 30 km, allowing the National Archives to regularly carry out their missions of collection and conservation until the Pierrefitte site opens.

c. The relocation, a key element in the project for the rebirth of the NA

The ratification of the decision to build a new site opened a great many avenues for consideration in relation to the new organization of the institution. How to reorganize the distribution of the collections (87 km initially conserved in Paris, 200 km in Fontainebleau) between the three sites? On what physical and intellectual criteria should this be based? On the basis of the results produced by the various working groups, and after considering different options, the new distribution of the collections between the three sites is based on a dual criterion, according to both chronology and type, whereas the previous distribution had been based primarily on the chronological criterion (Paris had previously been conserving the collections prior to 1958, with the subsequent collections in Fontainebleau). With the opening of Pierrefitte, the new scheme for distributing the collections is as follows: in Paris, all the public and private collections prior to the French Revolution in 1789, together with the collections from the *notaires* of Paris from the *Ancien Régime* to the present; in Pierrefitte, the public and private collections from the Revolution to the present; in Fontainebleau, certain types of public collections post-1789: digital archives, audiovisual archives, name and serial archives, together with the collections from private architecture practices. Hence the establishment of the new site involves a scientific project that place the emphasis on the unity of the contemporary archives, which had hitherto been split between Paris and Fontainebleau. Thus the Pierrefitte site needs to devote particular effort to exploiting and making the most of the post-1789 collections, considered as a continuum from the Revolution to the present. In parallel, the relocation must be followed, in Paris and in Fontainebleau, by major operations to restore and reorganize the spaces, made possible because part of the premises will be freed up once the collections have been transferred to Pierrefitte: bringing the old buildings in Paris up to meet current standards and restoring them, treatment and closure of the buildings in Fontainebleau affected by asbestos.

In addition to offering intellectual consistency *vis-à-vis* the needs of the public, the distribution of the collections must also be accompanied by a realistic collection policy on each of the three sites: in Paris, where no more than 30 km of the initial 87 km ought to be left, the space freed up will be devoted to collecting the backlog of the archives from the *notaires* of Paris. In Fontainebleau, where 150 km of the original 200 km are leaving, the spaces freed up will make it possible to collect mass groups of serial files, currently stored in the archiving services within the ministries. And lastly in Pierrefitte, where 200 km of collections from Paris and Fontainebleau have to be stored, the expansion repositories and the adjacent land available ought to allow collection to be programmed for the medium and long term.

Thus solely as far as the public archives are concerned, and excluding the archives of the Paris *notaires*, annual growth for the years ahead is estimated at a rate of 5 km p.a., i.e. 4 km submitted to Pierrefitte, and 1 km to Fontainebleau. A substantial intake in the private archives sector is also to be planned at Pierrefitte, given the numerous proposals that have been on hold since the 2000s.

2. Preparing for the relocation: over 5 years of “work on the collections”

a. A timetable in the medium term

In parallel with the architectural design and construction of the Pierrefitte site, from January 2005 the preparations for relocating the collections, and generally the management of the projects associated with the reorganization of the National Archives took the form of a specific mission, executed by project teams reporting directly to the institution’s senior management and devoted to the various aspects of the reorganization: development of a new information system, dematerialization of the research instruments with a view to their publication on line, and preparation of the collections.

In this way, the time taken to construct the building was spent preparing the collections, so as to ensure the management of the forthcoming transfer under the best possible physical conditions.

This project to prepare the collections included in particular a very substantial proportion of dust removal and re-packaging of the documents, so the most fragile archives would be safe during the relocation transfers. Priorities had to be established within the 300 km or so of documents conserved in the National Archives: on the basis of inspections carried out in the repositories and the results of sanitary assessments performed in the buildings, 10 km of the collections conserved in Paris and 20 km of the collections at Fontainebleau were identified as requiring re-packaging. The most delicate operations, involving the most fragile collections, have been carried out in house; but given the sheer volume to be processed, the majority of these operations has been carried out through outsourcing contracts, involving the installation of contractors’ teams on the premises for a duration of nearly two years. In this way, the 20 km processed at Fontainebleau have been processed twice, first removing them from a building (referred to as “Transitional”) that was unsuitable for conservation standards, then removing dust and re-packaging, before being put back into repositories meeting the standards.



Illustrations 1 & 2: “Re-packaging the collections: before/after, 2006–7 (photo credit: French National Archives – Chantier des fonds)”

As the relocation project is also founded on the desire for the current and forthcoming transfer operations to have as little impact as possible on access to the documents by researchers, consideration was given to how to facilitate the availability of certain documents. Thus collections were identified that, because of both their physical condition and the frequency with which they are consulted, ran the greatest risk of deterioration in the short term: mass scanning operations were then undertaken in a systematic fashion on the collections of maps and plans of Paris and the former *département* of Seine (sub-series N III Seine), and on serial-type files of interest to genealogists, such as files for the awarding of the Legion of Honor, conserved in both Paris and Fontainebleau. These scanning operations resulted in onlining of these documents, either directly on the National Archives website, or in the form of special databases. In this way, nearly 1 km of individual Legion of Honor files are now offered on line to researchers and genealogists, in the Léonore online database, enriched and managed on a shared basis by the National Archives and the Ministry of Culture’s IT services. In an anticipatory move, a number of collections relating to the First World War have also been scanned, in preparation for the commemorations that are going to be taking place from 2014.

b. Physical preparation ... that is highly computerized

Over and above the localized operations of scanning and re-packaging associated with the preparation of the collections, the organization of the transfers needed to be based on a detailed, systematic knowledge of the archives conserved on the two withdrawal sites, whether these collections were destined to be transferred to Pierrefitte or remain on their original site. Conceived as the backbone of all the projects accompanying the relocation, the stock-take of the collections has made it possible to draw up an up-to-date list of all the articles conserved or declared missing on the Paris and Fontainebleau sites, each item being characterized by its physical description and location. This action served multiple objectives: to locate the archives more easily, on the basis of locations that have been checked and updated; to find out the exact volume of the archives; to find out and update the state of conservation of the archives and their packaging, so as to then program the priority operations for re-packaging, microfilming, and scanning; to identify missing articles and set about finding them; to rationalize the spaces available and the management of the shelving facilities; and to assess the state of classification of the archives and refine the distribution of the collections between the managing services in the new organization. Hence the stock-take was carried out on the basis of the organization of the conservation spaces, each space being identified to the most detailed level, using a systematic referencing mode applied on the two, then three National Archives sites (referencing scheme: site/building/level/repository/aisle/bay/shelf). Besides the transfers between sites, the stock-take has also played a determining role in anticipating the re-use of the spaces freed up by the relocation, in Paris and Fontainebleau alike: this is eventually going to involve deliberation as to how best to redeploy the collections remaining on these sites, in accordance with the spaces made available.

In Paris, which had never experienced such a huge and systematic operation to process the collections, the stock-take was based on the use of a special tool developed in house (the “Stocktaking database”), allowing identification of each physical packaging unit (and not of each intellectual classification mark), and its location down to shelf level. All the packaging units have been dimensioned, one by one, as have the conservation racks. It has been possible to carry out this operation through the in-house mobilization of all the site’s scientific and technical teams, i.e. around 200 people working in pairs in the repositories, entering data directly using portable computers. Starting from nothing, it proved possible to complete this data entry in 18 months, from October 2005 to Spring 2007. The data entered in this way have then been kept regularly up to date, according to the principle of a rolling stock-take: at that time, they represented, in Paris, a total of 86 km, i.e. 715,000 packaging units distributed across 250 repositories (equivalent to 100,000 shelves).



Illustration 3: “Bar-coding the collections on the Paris site, 2010 (photo Paris site, 2010 (photo credit: French National Archives – Chantier des fonds)”

The identification of the collections conserved in Fontainebleau employed a computer tool developed in the 1970s, in the form of a rolling stock-taking database (named Priam), whose structured data were able to be recovered into the new tool developed for tracking the relocation.

It was then possible to migrate the data gathered in this systematic fashion, following a scheme common to both the Paris and Fontainebleau sites into the management tool designed to ensure the traceability of the collections during the relocation, the *Outil autonome de déménagement (OAD)* [stand-alone relocation tool]. The deployment of this tool and the migration of all the information gathered during the stock-take made it possible to perform systematic bar-coding of the physical elements conserved from Spring 2010 onwards. The bar-coding of the collections is part of a dual objective of traceability of the archives during the inter-site transfers and also in all the procedures of communication of the documents, both in the reading room and in the administrations. This management tool considers articles as both physical elements and intellectual elements (if several classification marks are conserved within the same package, they will be associated with as many bar-codes as there are intellectual articles; if one intellectual article comprises different separate physical elements, each of these physical elements will be associated with its own bar-code). Specific packages have also called for suitable bar-coding protocols, such as fitting bands to registers to obviate sticking labels on fragile supports (leather, parchment, fabrics, etc.) Bar-coding the collections has made it

possible to systematically update all the descriptive and location data previously gathered during stock-taking of the collections.

Hence the “Stand-alone Relocation Tool”, designed in the form of a web application, plays the role of a transitional tool between the relocation of the Archives and the “target” functioning of the institution after reorganization. It has made it possible to organize the mass bar-coding of the collections, i.e. nearly 2 million labels applied, both in house and using outside service providers. The tool in fact associates each article from Paris or Fontainebleau with a target location in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine; thus it fulfills the role of a tracer at the moment of the transfers. The data that will come from it, associating each physical article with its final location (Paris, Fontainebleau, or Pierrefitte-sur-Seine) will ultimately have to be migrated into the new information system developed by the National Archives in the context of their reorganization, and which will take care of tracking all the functions of the institution (management of spaces and articles, tracking communications, organization of the reading room, writing research instruments, and so on). Hence the mission of the “Stand-alone Relocation Tool” will disappear once the relocation is over.

c. The key principles of the relocation

Advantage has been taken of the five years spent preparing the collections prior to relocation to refine the principles for organizing and tracking the transfers between the three sites. In point of fact, the whole difficulty in the operation lies in bringing together at Pierrefitte collections from two sites with their own characteristics, Paris and Fontainebleau. Thus the “old” collections coming from Paris are classified and marked according to the principle of the classification framework, which assigns each article a meaningful reference making it possible to identify its producer. As far as possible, articles are stored in repositories following the classification framework, in such a way as to conserve all the collections coming from the same producer within the same space, as far as possible. In Fontainebleau, on the other hand, the principle has been applied of managing contemporary archives, whose collections grow in line with the submissions from the producers; here, the collections are referenced according to the principle of continuous class marking: thus each article is associated with a numerical class mark that has no inherent meaning, but simply allows it to be located and traced during communications. In the same way, the repositories do not correspond to logical groups in terms of producers, but are filled up as and when new entries arrive.

In order to facilitate the work of the future teams in Pierrefitte, each of which will be assigned a strict “ministerial” field of action (Culture, Education, Environment, etc.), it has been decided to store the collections in Pierrefitte-sur-Seine according to their production context, in such a way as to bring together in the same space (level, repository) all the documents coming from the same producer. The only exceptions to this principle are special media (audiovisual, digital, photographs, maps and plans) that justify appropriate conservation conditions. The choice of this “intellectual” layout has played a determining role in defining the methods for withdrawal and transfer of the collections moving to Pierrefitte. The transfers have in fact been designed around the principle of ten or so “chains”, each corresponding to a major sector of State activity (Education and Culture, Interior and Justice, Environment and Agriculture, etc.) Each of these chains has been assigned a group of repositories at Pierrefitte, intended to receive the collections coming from Paris and Fontainebleau. Thus the collections for a given ministerial sector coming from Paris must be transferred to Pierrefitte, then once all the collections for this sector have been relocated from Paris, an equivalent transfer is performed on the collections from this same sector from Fontainebleau. In this way, the collections are laid out at Pierrefitte in accordance with a dual logic of the producer and the chronology. Consequently, in order for the collections to arrive at Pierrefitte in a logical order bringing together all the archives from the same producer, the relocation teams must withdraw the collections, in Paris and in Fontainebleau, in accordance with the picking model: the articles from the same sector must be assembled in advance into a grouping area, before being transferred together to Pierrefitte, where they arrive directly in the order of their position in the repositories.

In order to limit the length of time for which communications are closed to readers (in the reading room and in the administrations), the collection preparation phase has also laid down that articles would only be blocked from communication during the actual transfer proper. So the relocation timetable is not decided globally for all the collections to be withdrawn from the same site (or within the same space), but staggered according to the ministerial sector whose collections are currently being transferred. Nevertheless, in order to limit the overall duration of the relocation, the collections from each sector are not relocated strictly one after another, but in *parallel* with each other: thus the collections for the Education/Culture sector have to be withdrawn at the same time as the collections from the Environment/Agriculture sector, each withdrawal being performed by a specific team of removers, in such a way as to avoid flows crossing or confusion at the moment of re-shelving. Each flow has its own transport facilities and is received at Pierrefitte by a dedicated team, who put away the collections from

each sector in the corresponding repository(s).

In order to ensure the best humidity/temperature stability for the collections, it had also been envisaged to organize the transfer timetable in accordance with meteorological factors, which would have made it possible to avoid abrupt changes in humidity/temperature between the repositories, particularly in Paris, where the conservation conditions are very variable, and the new storage space, whose humidity/temperature characteristics would still be in the process of stabilizing when the collections arrives. However, the complexity of the timetabling by chains or “homogeneous” groups of collections forced us to abandon this attempt to take weather conditions into account; in any case, the delays in the timetable associated with the construction of the building would very quickly have disrupted these seasonal plans.

Lastly, besides the intellectual formation of the chains or relocation transfers, the design of the project had to take account of the geographic constraints specific to each site. Hence the transfers leaving the National Archives’ historical center in Paris had to make allowance for the dimensions of the old premises, not very easy for access. Its location in the heart of Paris likewise ruled out the use of heavy goods trucks. Under these conditions, only trucks of medium size (20 and 30 m³) could be used for the transfers from Paris to Pierrefitte. In Fontainebleau on the other hand, site access was much easier as it is located on the outskirts of Greater Paris, and the circulation areas had been designed from the outset with great concern for practicality. It very soon became necessary to use articulated trucks.

Taking into account these various scheduling elements, the traffic and access constraints specific to each site, as well as the overall volumes to be transferred (50 km from Paris, 150 km from Fontainebleau), combined with the wish to not let the actual removals last longer than 24 months, it was possible to define volume targets to be transferred each day. Thus for the transfers from Paris, allowing for the traffic difficulties, gaps in loading, and the dispersion of the collections between buildings that are poorly interconnected or not all, the daily target was set at 150 m per day and per transfer chain or flow. So by way of an example, if two teams of removers work in parallel on two different ministerial sectors, the daily transfers must achieve a volume of 150 m per flow, i.e. 300 m.



*Illustrations 4 & 5: “Withdrawal from repository and departure on truck from the Paris site, June 2012
(French National Archives – Serge Reby)*

At Fontainebleau, a site that is more accessible and easier to get around, the daily target was set at 250 m per chain, i.e., following the same logic of parallel double withdrawal from two separate sectors, a potential of 500 m withdrawn each day. This figure also allows for the very great dispersion of the collections from the same sector between the different repositories at Fontainebleau: the last principle of the collections transfer (but not the least) consists in preparing the withdrawals 24 to 48 hours ahead of their physical transfer to Pierrefitte, so that all the articles coming from the same producer, previously dispersed between different repositories and in random order, could be brought together in one place before being loaded onto the trucks.

3. Carrying out the relocation

a. The contract for the removals: publication and award

Drawn up during 2011, the specifications for the operation are based on the essential principles of the relocation: application of the principle of removal chains in a precise order for the withdrawal and re-shelving of the collections and adherence to the predefined volumes to be transferred daily are the principal criteria for selecting the remover. A number of avenues were also outlined to offer bidders

practical tracking tools, without imposing them, however: thus the possibility was suggested, but without making it an obligation, for the removal company to make use of the bar-codes applied to the articles during the stock-taking for the traceability of the transfers. Following a number of technical visits organized on all three sites in Autumn 2011, the proposals submitted by the seven bidders were examined through the Winter, and the contract was awarded in late January 2012.

The whole issue in the contract rested on the remover's proper grasp of the difficulties specific to the operation: the complexity of the Paris premises, a high picking rate at Fontainebleau, managing the co-activity on the two and then three sites, and so on were all critical points on which strong expertise was been expected from the bidders. Most of them relied on experience gained through relocating archives or libraries, acquired for example during the (recent) relocations of the French National Library or the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, analyzing the bids did offer a pleasant surprise, inasmuch as the rates proposed were well within the expected average, or indeed slightly below it...

Published as two separate work packages, the first corresponding to the transfers from Paris and the second to the transfers from Fontainebleau, the contract was subjected to an overall technical analysis, based on the bidders' proposals in terms of the organization of the work, the packing and protection of the archives, and the traceability of the data. Following a comparative analysis, both work packages were awarded to the same contractor, which made it possible to quickly come up with mutualization solutions between the two withdrawal sites.

On the basis of their recognized experience in both the archive relocation sector and the transport of works of art, the company Bovis Transports, contracted for the operation, made the choice of simple, systematized technical processes on both withdrawal sites: thus roll cage trolleys (wheeled metal cages) were proposed as units for transporting and loading the archives into the trucks, as these devices, unlike wheeled cabinets, are flexible enough to be adapted to very varied types and formats of documents. The contractor has also developed a special computer tool, into which the traceability data coming from the stock-take of the collections are loaded as the withdrawals and transfers take place. In point of fact, at the time of preparing the relocation, the storage layout for the approximately 200 km arriving at Pierrefitte had actually only been defined in a projected manner, and only at the level of each repository. So it is down to the remover to enter on the computer system the exact actual location (to shelf level) of each article, as the collections are re-shelved, in accordance with formats imposed by the National Archives. These data are then recovered on a monthly basis, and gradually integrated into the Archives' own information system. By dint of some computer processing, the archives are also made incommunicable for the time they are being transferred to Pierrefitte; assigning them on the computer system a new final location on the destination site automatically makes them once again open for communication.



Illustration 6: "Arrival of the removal trucks at Pierrefitte, June 2012 (photo credit: French National Archives – Marc Paturange)"



Illustration 7: "Unloading roll cage trolleys from Paris at Pierrefitte, June 2012 (photo credit: French National Archives – Serge Reby) »

b. A painless operation? Managing the co-activity

In fact, the organization of the relocation is based on the desire to maintain a maximum level of service to the different publics, which implies as little reduction as possible in the communication procedures in the reading room and with the administrations. Closed for communication for just two weeks prior to their transfer to Pierrefitte, the collections can be consulted again by readers as soon as their physical

placement has been carried out and checked on the computing level. Nevertheless, since the Pierrefitte reading room will not be open till early 2013, a transitional solution has had to be found for consulting the archives transferred between Spring and Winter 2012. The solution adopted for the period from September to November 2012 is a daily shuttle from Pierrefitte to Paris to transport the articles requested by readers, who will thus be able to consult them in the reading room in Paris; this daily shuttle service also forms part of the removal contract. However, the collections transferred to Pierrefitte will be completely closed for communication in the reading room for the whole of December 2012, a month devoted to the final preparations for opening Pierrefitte to the public in early 2013.

In practice, the choice to maintain all of the institution's "normal" activities, despite the constant presence of the removers in the repositories, sometimes turns out to be a source of difficulties, in particular in the confined spaces on the Paris site. Hence a number of compromise solutions have had to be found, particularly in the event of breakdown in the lifts, whose proper functioning is crucial both for managing the communications in the reading room and, of course, for supervising the relocation. In fact, after examining several technical possibilities, such as fitting external goods lifts to allow the collections to be taken out via the windows, only the use of the existing technical resources (supplemented by a temporary internal goods lift) turned out to be realistic. So in order to ensure the daily collection withdrawal targets were being met, it was essential to give the relocation priority over all the institution's other activities. Consequently, despite the theoretical principles set out above, in the event of withdrawals from spaces too confined to allow a double activity of removal and handling requests for communication, the reality principle has led to closing whole sections of buildings for consultation; which has also had the effect of leaving the removers as sole users of the goods lifts...

At Pierrefitte, the choice of co-activity is also being seen in the acceptance of new submissions of archives coming from the ministries, with effect from June 2012. In order to avoid the crossing of flows between the transfers internal to the National Archives and the new "entries" coming from the administrations, a specific time slot had been identified in advance (Friday afternoons) to be devoted specifically to the arrival of these submissions on the site. The fact of providing this collection service as soon as possible, i.e. barely a month after the building was handed over by the builder, had been made necessary since the Fontainebleau site had stopped collecting public archives in December 2011. Hence the National Archives had to very quickly ensure a resumption of this mission, especially since the Presidential elections in Spring 2012, through the resulting changes in the government, risked stockpiling large volumes of backlogged archives within the ministries. It was possible to avoid this risk by opening Pierrefitte for collection quickly; every Friday afternoon it receives a maximum volume of 200 m coming from the administrations.



Illustration 8: "New submissions of archives from the ministries arriving at Pierrefitte, June 2012 (photo credit: French National Archives – Stéphane Meziache)"

Lastly, the proper management of the internal co-activity, in terms of both collection and communication depends on the participation of all the National Archives teams in the monitoring of the removals. Even though the chosen contractor is entirely responsible for the physical handling of the archives, it has in fact been systematically established that on the three sites of the operation, the removal team are constantly accompanied by the institution's staff, both at the withdrawal stage and during loading or re-shelving of the collections. To handle one removal chain, the contractor's teams theoretically comprise five staff: three removers who take care of withdrawing the articles, removing the dust from them, and putting them into a roll cage trolley; a computer operator tasked with flashing the articles and following the procedure from the computing point of view; and a remover/driver, who helps with loading and drives the truck to Pierrefitte. Each of these operations takes place in the presence of a National Archives agent: their role is to verify that the articles withdrawn do indeed correspond to the predefined program and that the handling protocol complies with the specifications, particularly concerning the order of withdrawal of the articles. Each loaded truck is subjected to one last check before being sealed and driven to Pierrefitte, where the seal will be broken and the contents checked, on the basis of the transfer slip. Only after these checking stages have been validated will the roll cage trolleys be able to go off to the repositories for the articles to be re-shelved.

The fact of having the National Archives agents totally involved in these various steps of withdrawal and re-shelving has made it possible to give them a sense of responsibility in the supervision of the operation, which affects the collections for which they also have a scientific responsibility. It is also vital to rely on all the National Archives teams, regardless of which department they belong to, as the staff specifically dedicated to preparing and supervising the operation have been deliberately reduced: in addition to two people taking care of overall co-ordination of the operation and administrative and financial supervision, the operations are being run by a single designated manager on each site, supported by one or two deputies. Hence the team strictly devoted to the relocation is made up of about ten people, spread across the three sites, who as a result are unable to ensure a continuous presence at all the withdrawal points in the operation; so the constant accompaniment of the removers necessarily involved the contribution of all the institution's agents. This involvement is also playing a major role in the change management associated with the reorganization of the institution. Starting very shortly after the handover of the Pierrefitte building, the relocation of the collections has in fact been being paralleled, since July 2012, by the "physical" relocation of the agents from the Paris site to Pierrefitte. This relocation of the agents too has been conceived along the principle of successive waves, spread out monthly from July to November 2012, the agents relocating at the same time as the department to which they belong. So the operations for re-shelving the collections at Pierrefitte started before the agents arrived; conversely, the withdrawals will still be continuing in Paris after the majority of the institution's staff will be installed at Pierrefitte. This offset in the timetables, even though it has led to additional constraints in managing the schedules, has however enabled the agents to get a foretaste of the forthcoming changes: the fact that a person participates (voluntarily) on a one-off basis in supervising the re-shelving at Pierrefitte, while their own office is still in Paris, offers them the best means of gradually familiarizing themselves with this new working environment, thereby reducing the "shock" caused by their own relocation.

c. Report on the first weeks: first successes, first difficulties...

Two full months after the operations were launched, it's time for a first report, on the Paris site at least; the timetable for Fontainebleau is offset, so the first transfers will not be taking place until the beginning of August, so as to re-shelve at Pierrefitte all the collections coming from Paris for a given ministerial sector, before adding to these the more contemporary collections from Fontainebleau.

The first difficulty in implementing the operation arose from the delays in handing over the building, the date of which determined the launch of the transfers. However, this delay remained modest, given the scale of the construction project: thus the relocation, originally programmed to start in April, was at the operational stage by mid May 2012. Advantage was taken of the four full months between the awarding of the contract (in January 2012) and the first truck transfers to perfect the quantitative and qualitative tools for monitoring the operation. They also made it possible to organize additional visits to each of the three sites, in the presence of the contractor engaged, so as to better anticipate their respective geographical constraints.

Apart from the choice of maintaining co-activity throughout the duration of the removals, the main difficulties arising internally, once the relocation entered the operational phase, were again connected with the timetable for handing over the Pierrefitte building: the presence on the site of a large number of teams building and finishing off the building demanded vigilance at all times, indeed incessant negotiations, as the National Archives only gradually took over full control of the premises. These difficulties, associated with the ongoing building work in parallel with the launch of the removals, were fortunately resolved after a few weeks, with the building coming fully under the control of the National Archives from June 2012. Nevertheless, the finishing works are still going to have to continue until Autumn 2012, which is the projected deadline for final acceptance of the building by the institution; even though now it is only occasional, the proper management of this co-activity still does depend all the same on constant vigilance by the relocation teams.

Over and above these questions linked to the current circumstances, the real questions raised by carrying out the transfers concern the volumes defined in advance as targets for the daily transfers. In the specific context of the Paris site, where the premises are often not very, or badly suited to the presence of a number of removers, and where despite everything the collections are stored in a quite dispersed way between the buildings that are poorly interconnected, the operations for withdrawal and transfer of the collections to the grouping areas prior to loading into the trucks soon turned out to be more complex than had been foreseen.

The operation also presents a number of difficulties common to any outsourced service, as had already been seen in the previous operations of packing and bar-coding the collections: despite a number of solid technical briefs, at the moment of implementation, the contractors need step-by-step supervision of their work, as well as repeated reminders, in order to apply all of the resources announced in their bid. Faced with a greater delay than predicted in the timetable for withdrawing the collections, a

number of clarifications therefore had to be made with the contractor, and have led to redesigning the methodology for the operation. The essential point of these modifications has consisted in doubling the number of withdrawal points for each chain or flow currently being transferred, so as to speed up the phase of preparing and grouping together the collections prior to loading. Setting up this double organization has led to a few negotiations, since it could only be achieved by the contractor's making more staff available; however, the performance obligation to which it was committed in the contract, independent of the resources employed, and adhering to the predefined timetable constraints, did make it possible to obtain rapid implementation, and it has fortunately been possible to see a real adaptation of the procedures to the constraints in the field.

The fact of having started the withdrawal operations on the Paris site, which presents more constraints in terms of both access and circulation space, ought to make it possible to amply anticipate the difficulties liable to be encountered at Fontainebleau. In this way, starting with the most "complex" site, whose daily targets have however been estimated accordingly (150 m to be withdrawn each day for each transfer chain from Paris) has made it possible to very quickly confront the realities in the field. The move into the operational phase has also revealed the "unforeseeable" element inevitable in any project of this: the simple fact of working with registers or cartons with standard dimensions leads to very substantial differences in the daily results.

In order to speed up the steps of picking and loading the collections prior to their transfer to Pierrefitte, one additional solution might have been to abandon the withdrawal of the collections by producer and to transfer the documents in the order they were originally stored in, without selective picking. This technical solution, which was contemplated in the last few months leading up to the move into the operational phase of the transfers, would however have required a complete review of the philosophy of the relocation, along with the storage principles at Pierrefitte, indeed also the management rules in the institution's new information system, which could not then be entertained. The principle of withdrawing the collections while respecting the producers thus constitutes the essential bedrock of the National Archives' relocation.

After only two months of operation, it would be premature to draw any final conclusions from an operation set to last more than 18 months. The operations carried out in the context of the preparations for the relocation had already shown that each activity shows a marked increase in the speed of its results as it progresses, and that the speeds achieved once up to "cruising speed" bear no relation to the initial results during the running-in phase. This is why the choice had been made, when preparing the legal contract, not to impose daily results figures on the contractor, but rather an overall average to be envisaged over longer operational periods.

Since the measures put in place during July are set to produce a noticeable improvement in the rate of transfer from Paris, the fundamental issue for Summer 2012 is going to be to achieve as quickly as possible the expected results when going from Fontainebleau, in particular by drawing inspiration from the first lessons learned from the experience in Paris. The substantial volumes projected to be transferred from Fontainebleau to Pierrefitte (150 km in all) require particular vigilance during the first weeks of implementation.

Whatever the solutions to be contemplated in the event of difficulty, it is going to be a question of ensuring the presence of collections in significant volumes at Pierrefitte when the National Archives' new reading room opens in 2013.

Eleonore Alquier, 20th July 2012

Summary: key figures in the National Archives relocation

- 5 years preparation
- 18 months of transfers
- an outsourced removal contract worth € 3 million
- 2 withdrawal sites (Paris and Fontainebleau),
- 1 main receiving site (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine)
- 200 km stored (50 from Paris, 150 from Fontainebleau)