



Forty years ago: **Beaubourg**

Lorenzo Cicarelli

FONDA
ZIONE
RENZO
PIANO

STORIES_2

www.fondazionerenzopiano.org

In the almost endless river of images that record the overwhelming success of the Beaubourg, one in particular brings out the significance of that adventure. It is a photomontage of many of the people who, for seven years, contributed to the design and construction of the famous building. The figures are not neatly arranged next to each other, posed around Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, as one might expect. Rather they are clustered at random, as in a whirlwind, on different scales, some upside down, others repeated several times. This is an image of what the Beaubourg was: the entry into a vortex, a collective enterprise dictated by the hectic pace of the delivery of the working drawings and the immense building site set in the fragile monumental center of Paris.

While the hand of a single artist can suffice in painting and sculpture, architecture is a collective art that always requires, by its statute, the convergence of different and complementary figures and skills. A building embodies and interlaces the stories of a multitude of actors who weave its fabric in the long duration of the building site: the commissioning body and public authorities, architects, engineers, technicians, decorators and fitters, suppliers and site managers, construction companies, and much else. This collective dimension not infrequently means that encounters and close friendships are formed as the project unfolds and crop up again like underground rivers, decades later, when everyone moves on to other projects.

Photo 1_View of the "parvis" from the Forum of Centre Pompidou.

Photo 2_Collage of the people working at the project.

Photo 3_The Piano & Rogers team on construction site.



In Renzo Piano's long career, no building showed this more than the Beaubourg. The Parisian museum was more than just a building for him. For almost half a century, one of his offices has been located in the shadow of the Beaubourg and over the decades it has continued to function, adding pieces to the great "spaceship" – the IRCAM (1973-90), the Atelier Brancusi (1992-96) and the restoration of the building itself (1997-2000). And practically every week Piano feels the urge to climb the escalator and have lunch at the terrace restaurant, as if to check that every gear in the machine is well oiled and still working perfectly.

Like a writer who takes down his first book from the shelf, or an actor who restages his first performance after many years, so the Beaubourg is to Piano the irresistible return to the moment when it all started one day in July 1971, with the announcement of the winners of the international competition. Then the Beaubourg was a training ground where he came of age professionally, having until then practiced at home, on a handful of experimental structures in plastic materials erected by the family construction company.

Photo 4_ *The gallery on top of the escalator.*

Photo 5_ *The library.*



It is often forgotten that the Beaubourg was not built by an organized professional office, hierarchically clearly defined and forged by other large construction sites; but by a band of young architects – Italian, English, American, Swiss, Japanese, Austrians, Dutches, Greeks – engaged in their first experience who had been picked up wherever possible, as quickly as possible, among friends and acquaintances. When Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers received news of their success in the international competition, they could count only on a handful of collaborators, who were helping them prop up a shaky professional activity divided between London and Genoa. Ove Arup & Partners promised to repay their expenses, so persuading the pair to take part in the competition together with Su Rogers, John Young, Marco Goldschmied, and in collaboration with Gianfranco Franchini and Ove Arup & Partners.

This group was joined by Mike Davies, Alan Stanton, Laurie Abbott, Shunji Ishida and Noriaki Okabe, among others. “We were all foreigners, all beginners, all enthusiastic,” recalls Bernard Plattner, who soon joined the team of architects.

Photo 6_Piano & Rogers team in 1971. Left to right: Richard Rogers, Marco Goldschmied, Su Rogers, John Young e Renzo Piano.

Photo 7_Robert Bordaz with Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano.



If Plattner and Ishida are still among Piano's most trusted and valued collaborators, the Beaubourg adventure brought him other precious friendships, such as Tom Barker and Peter Rice, the engineers at Ove Arup & Partners who worked most closely with the Piano & Rogers office on construction of the center. Significantly Barker and Rice, the former as systems engineer and the latter structural engineer, continued to be two of Piano's most trusted interlocutors in the 1980s and 90s, playing a leading role in the design and construction of the Menil Collection, Houston (1982-86), or the great roof of Kansai International Airport in Osaka, Japan (1988-94).

Another was Jean Prouvé, the French builder and "great metalworker," who, as chairman of the competition jury, promoted Piano & Rogers' victory and then scrupulously and generously oversaw construction of the "great spaceship" on the Plateau Beaubourg while lavishing advice on them. Piano and Prouvé had professional offices in the same labyrinth of streets: Piano at rue du Cloître-Saint-Merri and Prouvé at rue des Blancs-Manteaux.

Photo 8_ *Peter Rice with Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano.*

Photo 9_ *Meeting of the first "avant-projet sommaire".*



Pontus Hulten, the first director of the Centre Pompidou, in 1981 recommended Piano to Dominique de Menil, the Franco-American collector who, after the sudden death of Louis I. Kahn, was looking for an architect to design the premises housing his collection. Piano met Pierre Boulez and Luciano Berio while designing the IRCAM, the institute for musical research, a rib of the Pompidou Center. The friendship with Boulez and Berio, as well as Luigi Nono, was the spring that would trigger Piano's passion for music and his interest in designing spaces for containing it, starting from the "ark of Prometheus" in Venice (1983-84).

Photo10,11_Performances
on the "parvis" of Centre
Pompidou.



PHOTO CREDITS

Photo 1, cover_View of the “parvis” from the Forum of Centre Pompidou, 1981.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __151
Author and © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

Photo 2, pag. 3_Collage of the people working at the project, 1974.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __234
© Fondazione Renzo Piano, © Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

Photo 3, pag. 3_The Piano & Rogers team on construction site, 1972.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __080
© Fondazione Renzo Piano, © Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

Photo 4, pag. 5_The gallery on top of the escalator, 1981.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __348
Author and © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

Photo 5, pag. 5_The library, 1981.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __376
Author and © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

Photo 6, pag. 7_Piano & Rogers team in July 1971. Left to right: Richard Rogers, Marco Goldschmied, Su Rogers, John Young e Renzo Piano, 1971.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __402
© Centre Pompidou

Photo 7, pag. 7_Robert Bordaz with Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, 1974.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __081
© Fondazione Renzo Piano, © Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

Photo 8, pag. 9_Peter Rice with Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, 1974.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __404
Author: Evans, Tony; © Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, © Arup

Photo 9, pag. 9_Meeting of the first *avant-projet sommaire*, 1971.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __401
© Centre Pompidou

Photo 10, pag. 11_Performance on the *parvis* of the Centre Pompidou, 1981.

Centre Georges Pompidou Project 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __153
Author and © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

Photo 11, pag. 11_Performance on the *parvis* of the Centre Pompidou, 1981.

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971- 1977
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Be1 __015
Author and © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

CREDITI

Testo: Lorenzo Ciccarelli, 2017
© Fondazione Renzo Piano

Questo testo non può essere riprodotto, né totalmente né in parte, incluse le illustrazioni, senza il permesso scritto dell'autore e della Fondazione Renzo Piano.

This text may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form, without written permission from the author and from Fondazione Renzo Piano.