

Paths Not Taken : Little-Known Projects by Henri Labrouste for the Bibliothèque Nationale

by Neil Levine

For most of those who have studied Henri Labrouste's renovation and enlargement of the Bibliothèque Nationale (then Impériale) in the years 1859 to 1868, when the architect's major work on the building was done, the north-south axis established by the sequence of entrance courtyard, *salle de travail*, and stacks has seemed to confirm a nearly unbroken lineage for such an axial solution.

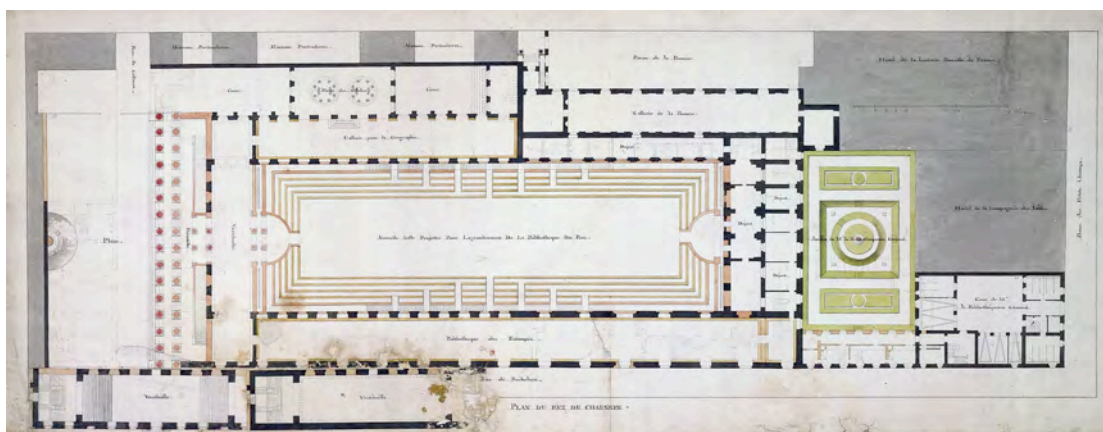


Fig. 1. Etienne-Louis Boullée. Bibliothèque Royale (later Nationale) project (rue de Richelieu site), Paris, 1785. Plan. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

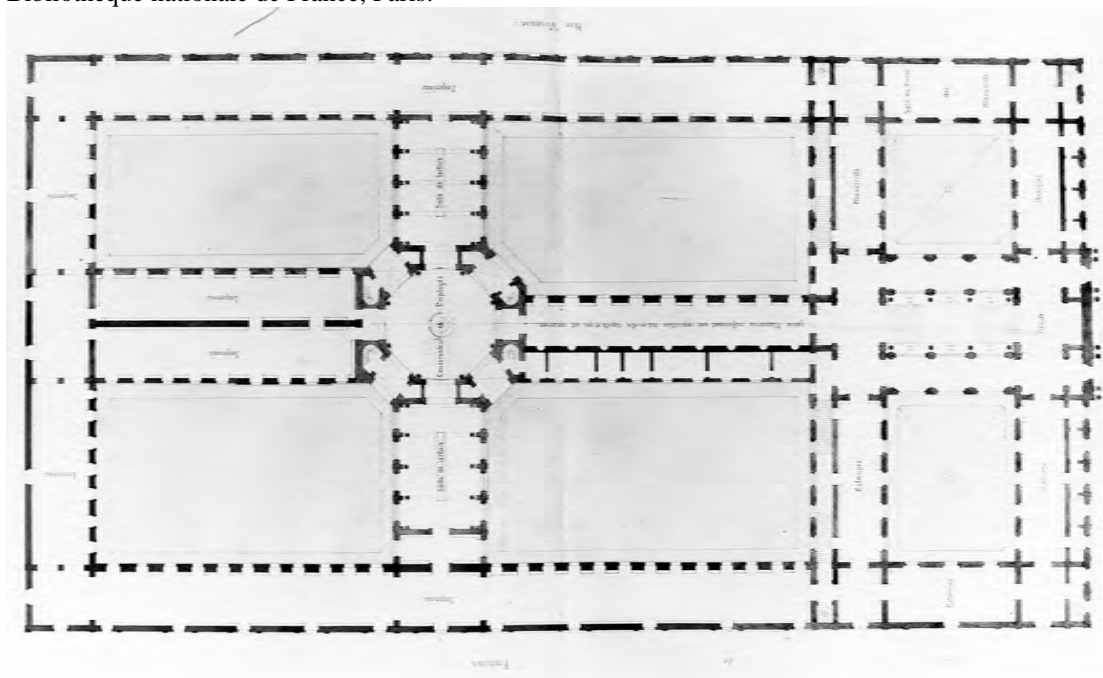


Fig. 2. Louis Visconti. Bibliothèque Royale (later Nationale) project (rue de Richelieu site), Paris, 1847. Plan.

Traceable back at least to Etienne-Louis Boullée's 1785 project for the site (fig. 1), it includes the numerous unbuilt designs that Louis Visconti did in the late 1840s and the early 1850s, when he was the library's architect (fig. 2). In the report explaining their project for the transformation of

the Quadrilatère Richelieu to house the Institut national d’Histoire de l’Art, the Ecole des Chartes, together with those parts of the Bibliothèque nationale de France that did not move to the Tolbiac site, the architects, Atelier Bruno Gaudin, repeated this same argument. They did so, however, not to place their project within this historical framework but, rather, to show that their plan for opening the site to a supplementary east-west axis offered a needed and welcome new direction. This short essay is meant to show that such an idea is not at all new and that Labrouste himself proposed the concept both at the very beginning and at the very end of his tenure as architect of the library.

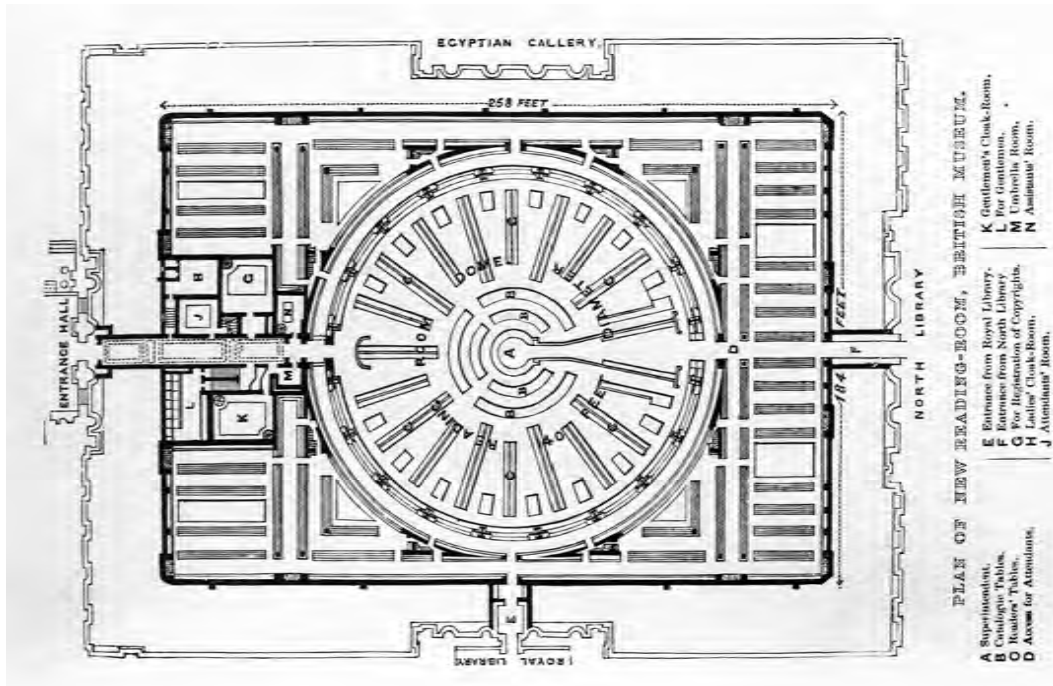


Fig. 3. Anthony Panizzi and Sydney Smirke, Library, British Museum (demolished), 1852-57. Plan. From *British Museum: New Reading-Room and Libraries*, 1857.

Although he was put in charge of the Bibliothèque Impériale in 1854, Labrouste was not asked to design a project for its enlargement until nearly three years later. When he received the commission in the latter part of 1857, he initially approached the design as a research problem rather than a purely compositional one. Although his Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève had been finished less than a decade before, a revolutionary change had occurred in the meantime in library design with the just completed British Museum library. Designed by its head librarian, Anthony Panizzi, in 1852-54 in collaboration with the architect Sydney Smirke, and built in 1854-57, the British counterpart of the French national library was based on Panizzi’s invention of the stack system, wherein skylit, freestanding iron bookstacks, independent of the masonry construction of the reading room, were deployed to separate the storage of books from the place where they would be read (figs. 3, 4). With a letter of introduction from Prosper Mérimée, a close friend of Panizzi, Labrouste visited London in late October and spent two days at the building with its head librarian.

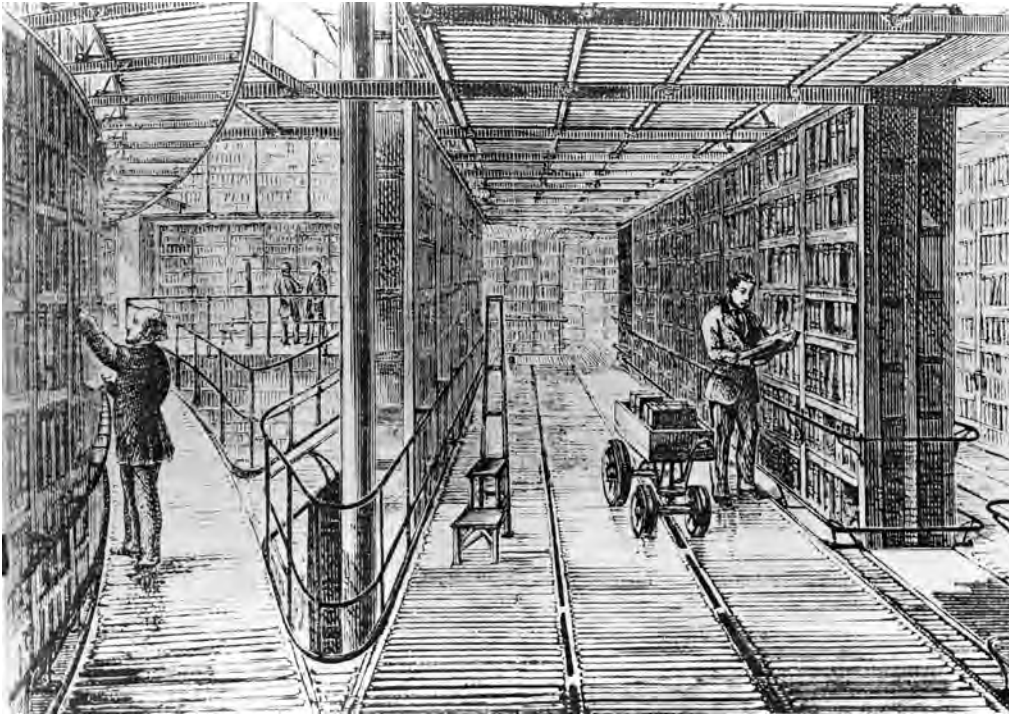


Fig. 4. Library, British Museum. Stacks.

Labrouste was impressed with what he saw. Mérimée reported to Panizzi that he returned to Paris “enchanté de votre monument et un peu jaloux des succès que vous avez à chasser sur ses terres.”¹ In the designs he produced for the Parisian library in the year following this research trip, Labrouste not only adopted the Panizzi invention for the book storage areas of his structure; he also drew spatial conclusions from it that led him to depart radically from the classical principles of planning that undergirded earlier projects for the site. In terms of library design, going back to such celebrated examples as the Escorial Library outside Madrid and continuing in Boullée’s and Visconti’s projects, this meant a rejection of the long, representational gallery with books displayed along the walls like paintings in a museum. It also meant a rejection of the various compositional devices typically used to multiply and connect such galleries and provide them with light by means of intervening courtyards. The reading room was now to be conceived as a singular double-, triple-, or even quadruple-height volume surrounded by or directly adjacent to a separate, multistory construction (or constructions) of a completely different material (iron and glass), at a different scale (smaller, repetitive elements), and of non-corresponding floor heights. The result, if carried to

Notes

¹ Pr[osper] Mérimée to A[nthony] Panizzi, 5 December 1857, in Prosper Mérimée, *Correspondence générale*, ed. Maurice Parturier, 2nd ser., vol. 2, 1856-1858 (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1955), 115. When construction on the Paris library was just beginning, Labrouste sent his assistant Julien Thobois to London to study for himself the British library. In his letter of introduction to Panizzi, Mérimée wrote that “M^r. Thobois se rend à Londres, pour examiner votre salle de lecture et se préparer à une imitation dont vous serez je pense satisfait.” Mérimée added: “Croyez d’ailleurs que personne plus que M^r. Labrouste n’apprécie vos arrangements du British Museum et qu’il s’adresse à vous comme au plus malin.” Mérimée to Panizzi, 22 July 1859, in Mérimée, *Correspondence générale*, 2nd ser., vol. 3, 1859-1860, 181.

its logical conclusion would be a new kind of compact plan juxtaposing unrelieved, barely articulated volumes. Such is what Labrouste produced in two very different, alternative schemes (figs. 5, 6).

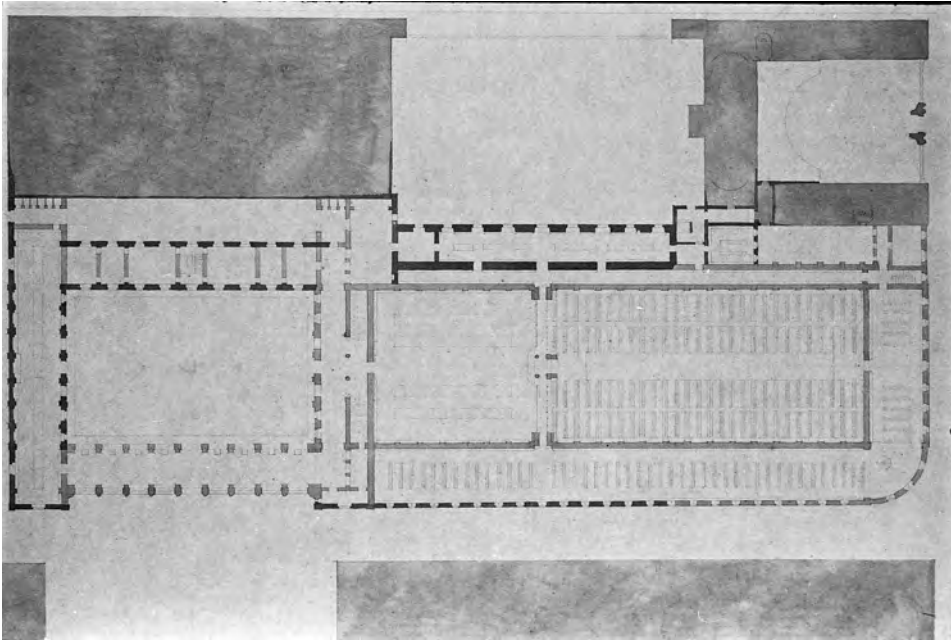


Fig. 5. Henri Labrouste. Bibliothèque Impériale (later Nationale) project, Paris, 1857-58. Scheme 1. Plan. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

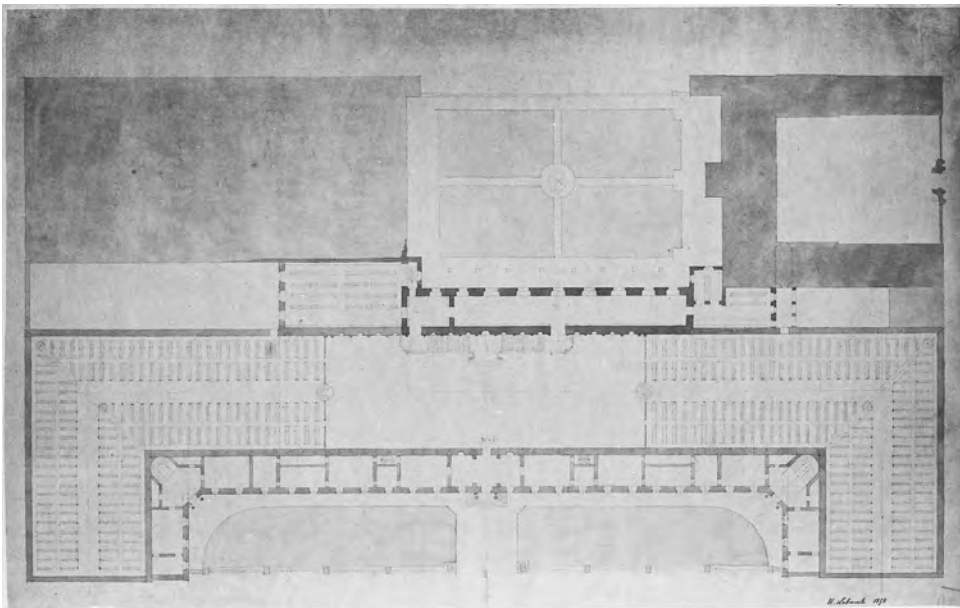


Fig. 6. Henri Labrouste. Bibliothèque Impériale (later Nationale) project, Paris, 1857-58. Scheme 2. Plan. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

At the risk of appearing to give precedence to one over the other, I shall, purely for practical purposes of identification, refer to these alternatives as Schemes 1 and 2. As far as we know they were developed concurrently.² Furthermore, if one of the two alternatives was preferred by the

² In addition to the two schemes referred to by Mérimée in his report of July 1858 (see note 3 below), Labrouste drew up two other schemes most probably preliminary to these. The first, which exists in two nearly identical drawings, was

architect as well as Mérimée himself, who in December 1857 was named head of the commission charged with recommending a future course for the national library including plans for its rebuilding, it was most likely Scheme 2. While in no way conventional, Scheme 1 was the less radical of the two. It became the basis for what was eventually built beginning in 1859. It preserved a good deal of what existed, namely, the masonry of the wall of the former Palais Mazarin along the rue de Richelieu, the sacrosanct Galerie Mazarine near the center of the site, and the Robert de Cotte buildings around two sides of the north court. In contradistinction to the entrance that Boullée proposed for the extreme north end of the site, on the rue Colbert, and the one proposed by Visconti for its south end, on the rue des Petits Champs, Labrouste's Scheme 1 used the existing court as the entrance to the library from the rue de Richelieu on the west. Labrouste stressed the public nature of this new entrance by opening it fully to the Square Louvois across the narrow street by a nine-bay arcade. Yet despite this gesture to the west, the main axis of the plan remained a north-south one, running laterally through the court, the *salle de travail*, and the stacks, thus paralleling the Galerie Mazarine and sandwiched between it and the former Palais Mazarin buildings on the rue de Richelieu.

The reading room in Scheme 1 was to be a square, skylit, double- or triple-height space, echoing in its simple geometry the circular volume at the British Museum. But instead of being surrounded by L-shaped stacks, which in London square the circle before extending it into a rectangle conforming to the shape of the Museum court, in Labrouste's plan the stacks were designed as a double-square volume extrapolated from the adjacent reading room through what glazed, floor-to-ceiling partition walls in the center of which stands an isolated masonry portal. The simple juxtaposition of the two spaces creates a unitary composition divisible into thirds.

While it shared with Scheme 1 some of the same elements previously used in the London library, Scheme 2 offered an entirely different interpretation of how the site should be developed in urbanistic terms as well as a completely different approach to the more purely architectural aspects of the design. From the latter point of view, Scheme 2 can be said to represent more fully and unqualifiedly Labrouste's rigorously rational and uncompromisingly minimalist conception of form

rendered simply as a *plan de masse*. It was composed of a double bar running north-south that enclosed two courtyards and connected two square elements, located at the corners of the rue de Richelieu and the rues Colbert and Petits Champs. These had square central courtyards. A different scheme, more fully developed and perhaps leading up to what I am calling Schemes 1 and 2, had a long rectangular north-south sequence of spaces comprising what looks to be an open courtyard to the north separated from a similar-sized reading room to the south by a square, central atrium court, serving as a kind of large vestibule. The latter is set back from the rue de Richelieu by a shallow forecourt similar to the one in Scheme 2. The open courtyard and reading room flanking the central atrium are both surrounded on nearly three sides by a double range of stacks. I want to thank Marc Le Coeur for clarifying to me the role of these preliminary projects.

and space. Scheme 2 preserved almost nothing of the existing buildings (only the Galerie Mazarine) and was forthrightly, even blatantly, oriented to the west. A very broad and shallow forecourt, symmetrically planted with grass beds, opens onto the rue de Richelieu and what Labrouste undoubtedly conceived of as a much enlarged Square Louvois. This public “welcome mat,” so to speak, provides direct access to the ground-floor *salle de travail* through a narrow range of rooms for offices and services forming the rear of the entrance court.

The central reading room, which is nearly three times as wide as it is deep, is entered on its long side, opposite a staircase leading to the Galerie Mazarine and to the to a less restricted room for casual readers to the north of it. The stacks are divided into two, in line with the recommendation made by the Mérimée commission.³ At the south end of the main reading room, on the right, is an L-shaped wing of stacks to house the collection of books comprising the *anciens fonds* and, mirroring it to the north, on the left, are stacks for the *nouveaux fonds*.⁴ The entire U-shaped unit of reading room and stacks was to have been roofed in iron and glass. In contrast to the open, double- or triple-height central space, the stacks were to have been broken up into several stories constructed of an integrated system of iron shelving and floor grating. Prosper Mérimée described the solution in glowing terms to Panizzi as “des cages vitrées,” adding that he was sure his friend would be justly proud since “on vous copie autant que la disposition des lieux le permet.”⁵

It is almost as if Labrouste simply turned Panizzi’s plan on its side, cut off the bottom half, then squared up the reading room, and finally, and most crucially, replaced the solid wall between the London reading room and stacks with a transparent screen of glass. The space in both is created by a process of subdivision of the whole rather than addition and combination of parts. And, unlike the Labrouste Scheme 1, there is no remnant of masonry construction to define or articulate the spatial division. Rather, a glass-enclosed, cylindrical spiral staircase, half inside the reading room and half inside the stacks, marks the center of each of the end walls of the main public space with an image of modern technology expressing, in its actual physical form, the dematerialization of traditional figures of representation, and in its daily use, the substitution of distinct and specialized realms of reading and of storage for the earlier concept of a unity in display.

³ “Rapport présenté à son Exc. le ministre de l’instruction publique et des cultes par M. P. Mérimée, sénateur, au nom de la commission chargée d’examiner les modifications à introduire dans l’organisation de la Bibliothèque impériale,” *Journal des débats*, pt. 2, 23 July 1857, 1.

⁴ A description with a sketch corresponding to the plan of Scheme 2 (fig. 7) is given in Mérimée to Panizzi, 15 December [18]58, in Mérimée, 626.

⁵ *Ibid.*

If the architectural aspects of Scheme 2 are extraordinary for their time and amazing in their protomodernity, the urban aspects are no less innovatory in terms of the planning tradition associated with the Bibliothèque Nationale. Except for a rare instance in 1829, when Visconti's first project allowed for an east-west cross-axis that had a secondary, or rather tertiary, entrance from the rue Vivienne (fig. 7), architects, as noted at the beginning, generally favored a north-south axis with an entrance either from the north, west, or the south. Labrousse's Scheme 2 retained the west entrance, even exaggerating its significance in urbanistic terms by the shallow forecourt and implied relationship to a monumental square opposite it. But the axis of movement inside the building now continued east through the main reading room space to the monumental stairs leading to the Galerie Mazarine and the non-specialist's reading room. Perhaps even more important was the fact that the latter reading room could also be accessed through a public entrance to the library through the garden court giving onto the rue Vivienne. Indeed, it was this very fact that played a significant part in the rejection of Scheme 2 in favor of the less audacious Scheme 1.

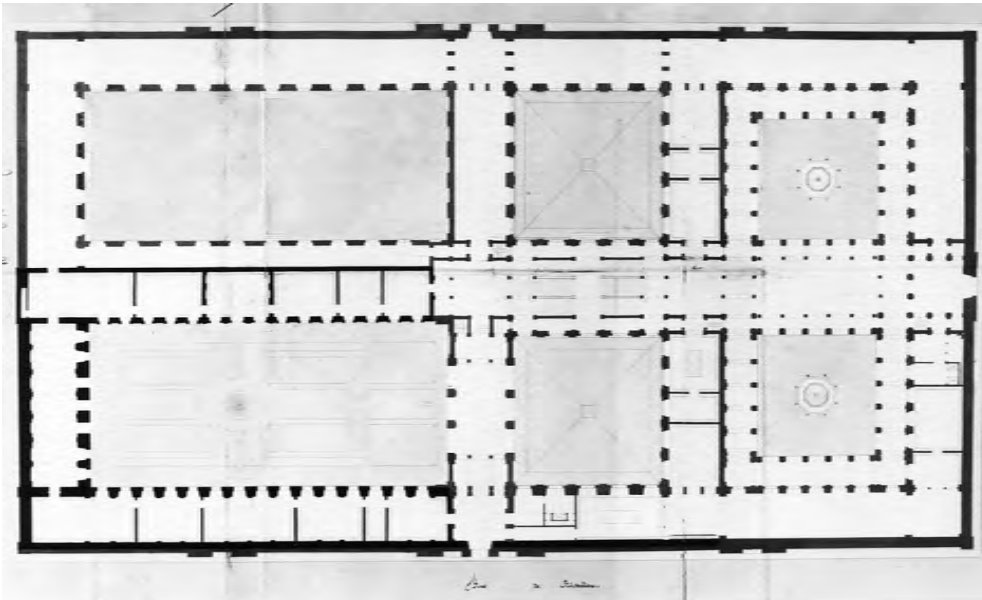
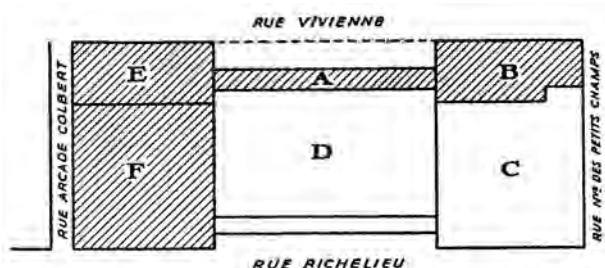


Fig. 7. Louis Visconti. Bibliothèque Royale (later Nationale) project (rue de Richelieu site), Paris, 1829. Plan.

In his report on the “modifications à introduire dans l’organisation de la Bibliothèque impériale” presented to the Ministère de l’Instruction Publique et des Cultes in July 1857, Mérimée did not out definitively for one of the schemes over the other, but seemed, in the end, to favor Scheme 2. He stated that the main advantages of Scheme 1 were “l’économie et la conservation d’un monument remarquable.”⁶ Scheme 2, which “suppose la démolition et la reconstruction de tout le palais Mazarin,” offered, in Mérimée’s opinion, “des avantages sur le premier [Scheme 1] au point de vue de la facilité de service et de la symétrie des dispositions.” It also gave the library an “aspect . . . plus monumental” when seen from the rue de Richelieu. On the other hand, to create that forecourt

⁶ “Rapport présenté à son Exc. le ministre de l’instruction publique et des cultes,” 23 July 1857, 2.

and façade Labrouste had to sacrifice the existing interior court.⁷ It was only much later in the year, when a final decision was about to be made in favor of the more conservative Scheme 1 that Mérimée wrote to Panizzi stating what he maintained was the most objectionable and deciding factor regarding the feasibility of Scheme 2. Not even referring to the existence of the alternate Scheme 1, Mérimée described at length Scheme 2, even including a sketch of it with an annotated legend (fig. 8). In his closing comments, he stated despairingly: “Le diable, c’est que cette disposition suppose deux entrées. L’une sur la rue Vivienne pour aller aux estampes et aux médailles ainsi qu’à la salle de lecture publique [non-spécialiste]; l’autre par la rue de Richelieu pour la salle de lecture privilégiée [salle de travail] et la collection géographique.”⁸



- A. est la galerie des estampes que vous avez vue.
- B. l'hôtel Tubeuf, actuellement le logement du Directeur.
- C. les maisons des conservateurs démolies.
- D. la grande cour.
- E. maisons particulières.
- F. ce qui reste de l'ancien palais de Mazarin.

Labrouste propose de couvrir toute la cour D en verre, et d'en faire la salle de lecture des travailleurs *admis* à étudier dans la Bibliothèque. En C on mettrait tout l'ancien fonds, sur plusieurs étages desservis par des escaliers, avec des planchers à claire-voies, exactement comme chez vous. En F on mettrait le nouveau fonds. D, C, F sont des cages vitrées. On vous copie autant que la disposition des lieux le permet.

La salle de lecture publique serait ouverte dans la galerie A au rez de chaussée. Les estampes seraient placées au premier étage de cette galerie A. Le rez de chaussée de la galerie entre C et F est affecté aux services du dépôt légal, reliure, etc. Au premier étage est le dépôt des cartes et plans. Le cabinet des médailles serait disposé dans un petit local entre A et B.

Fig. 8. Prosper Mérimée. Sketch of Henri Labrouste's Scheme 2 for Bibliothèque Impériale, 15 December 1858. From Prosper Mérimée, *Correspondance générale*, 2nd ser., vol. 2, 1867-58, 1955

Although he was unable to build Scheme 2, Labrouste stubbornly stuck to his preference for an east-west axis that would weave the library into the surrounding urban fabric in a way that the longitudinal north-south one could not. For security reasons, he had to give up on the idea of a second point of access from the east. But he continued to try, unsuccessfully it must be noted, to make the site more porous to its neighborhood. For this, he first focused on the entry point from the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mérimée to Panizzi, 15 December [18]58, in Mérimée, 62-27.

west; only much later did he try to drive that east-west axis through the entire depth of the site up to the buildings bordering the rue Vivienne. When it was decided to develop Scheme 1, Labrouste made a number of significant changes to the exterior, including the substitution of an expressed rotunda for the barely uninflected radius curve at the corner of the rue de Richelieu and the rue des Petits Champs. He also made important changes in the design of the *salle de travail*, its connection to the stacks, and the relative size of the main stacks themselves. One thing he retained, however, but could not convince the authorities to allow, was the open arcade leading into the entrance courtyard, opposite the Square Louvois. Security was once again the key factor maintaining the institution's closure to the street.

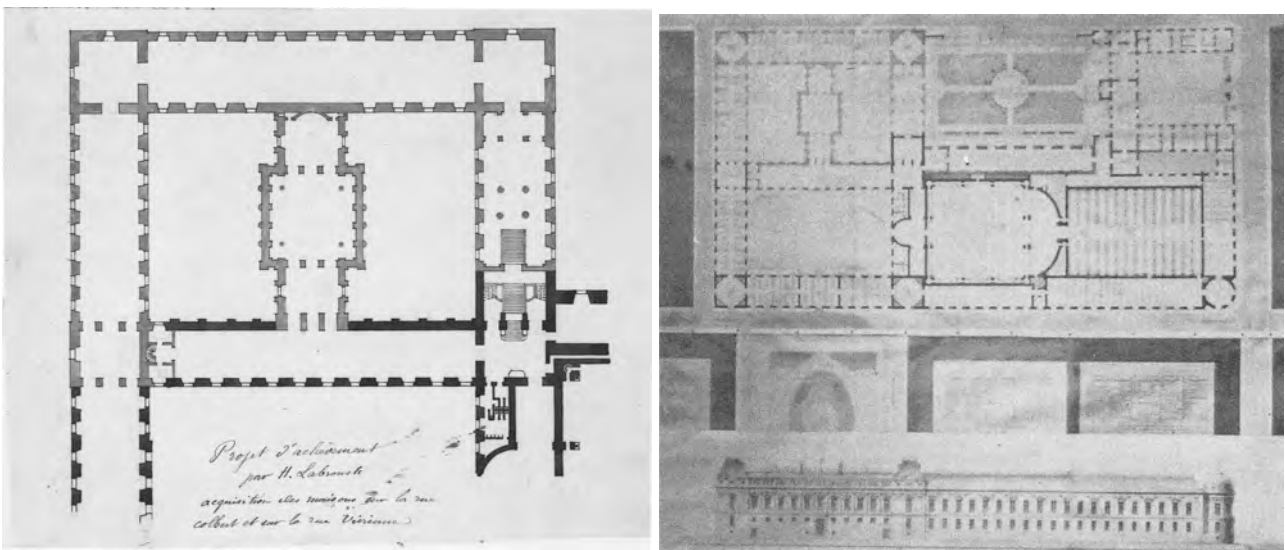


Fig. 9. Labrouste. Bibliothèque Nationale, project for addition to northeast corner of site, 1871-73. Plan
 Fig. 10. Labrouste. Bibliothèque Nationale, final plan with addition to northeast corner of site, c. 1872

Still, the issue of the importance of the east-west must have constantly weighed heavily on Labrouste's mind. Near the end of his life, during the early years of the Third Republic, he was able, finally he thought, to do something about it. The northeast corner of the *quadrilatère*, directly to the east of the entrance court and fronting onto the rue Vivienne and the rue Colbert, had remained in private hands. In advance of efforts to expropriate the block of houses, Labrouste designed a new section for the library centered on a relocated Cabinet de Médailles. The design he developed between 1870 and 1873, when it was shown and premiated at the international exposition in Vienna, added three new galleries to create a rectilinear space mirroring the main courtyard (figs. 9, 10).⁹ The major difference was that in the center of this new space was placed a basilical element meant for the Cabinet des Médailles. It was to be entered on axis from the main courtyard, in line with the main entrance itself (only opened in 1872). After widening into square room, most likely

⁹ Léon Labrouste, *La Bibliothèque nationale, ses bâtiments, ses constructions* (Paris: H. Lurier, 1885), 72-78.

double-height and skylit, it narrowed to end in an apse-like enclosure. This provided the newly reinforced east-west axis with a point of focus and climax akin to a religious space and to the processional movement from entrance at the west to termination in the east a sense of deep penetration into the heart of the building complex. When Jean-Louis Pascal took over after Labrouste's death in 1875, this final attempt by Labrouste to complicate the axial directions and orientations of the Bibliothèque Nationale were disregarded and consigned to historical oblivion like the earlier, extraordinary Scheme 2.

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