

## Exposing historical collections in a renovated building: the *BNU Nouvelle* experiment

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### Abstract:

*With over 3M documents, including unique antique, medieval and modern collections, the National and University Library (BNU) of Strasbourg is the second largest heritage library in France. Built in 1895, its main building is a landmark of the city architecture and protected as a historical monument. However, in 2010, it closed its doors for a complete renovation programme intending to give a new life to the building and its collections. Central to this programme called "BNU Nouvelle", or "The New BNU", was the intention to not only preserve these unique historical collections, but to present them to the broader public in a new and ambitious way. Next to the preservation of two levels of the historical stacks as testimonies of the architecture of the past, new reserves stacks were planned like an open museum to allow group visits to discover the richness and variety of the library's collections, including papyri, medals, western and oriental manuscripts, maps and drawings, statues, paintings and furniture, and precious printed editions.*

*This communication intends to present to the IFLA audience a very unique experiment of an old building being completely transformed in order to give the best value to its most precious treasures. Many difficulties were faced concerning preservation and conservation measures and the preparation of the collections, but also concerning the museographical aspects of the project. The reopening of the building planned at the end of November 2014 will show the result of more than four years of intensive work and finally give the libraries' historical collections the exposure they really deserve.*

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**Keywords:** Strasbourg; Heritage Collections; Library Architecture; Museography

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## Introduction

November 2014 will be a major date in the life of the National and University of Strasbourg, or in french the Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, in short BNU, the second largest library in France with over 3 million documents in its collections. This date will mark the reopening of its main building, located on the Place de la République in Strasbourg, the major city of eastern France, one of the capitals of Europe, after more than four years of extensive renovation works. Built in 1895, this building has since then been landmark of the city architecture, in the heart of the “Neustadt” quarter, and protected as a historical monument. However, having been renovated only once after the Second World War, the library was in the year 2000s facing major issues such as security towards fire, lack of space and bad conservation conditions for the collections in the stacks, old-fashioned reading rooms and facilities. The decision to address these issues translated in a very ambitious project, keeping the protected parts of the building (the external walls and the cupola), and rebuilding a completely new library inside this preserved shell. This project was also a unique opportunity to transform more extensively the whole institution, and a very broad strategic programme was defined, named “*BNU Nouvelle*”, or “The New BNU”. At the heart of the vision, beside the renovation of the building, was the consideration of the historical collections preserved by the library, and the fact that these collections belonging to everyone, should be easily accessible and visible. *BNU Nouvelle* is also a special vision, showing special collections in a very special place...

### 1. The Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg

#### a. History: a very brief summary

In the night from August 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 1870, during the French-Prussian war, the two libraries of the Temple Neuf and of the City of Strasbourg were burnt down and their very rich and unique collections (3446 medieval manuscripts, several thousand incunabula...) lost forever. Very soon after, the new German rulers decided to build a new and vast library in Strasbourg, and after a broad appeal for gifts, there were already 200 000 books available at the time of the official birth of the new Kaiserliche Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek zu Strassburg (“Imperial University and Regional library in Strasbourg”). A building was then built in the center of the new german town, on the Kaiserplatz (or “Imperial Place”), and opened its doors on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1895, with 600 000 volumes.



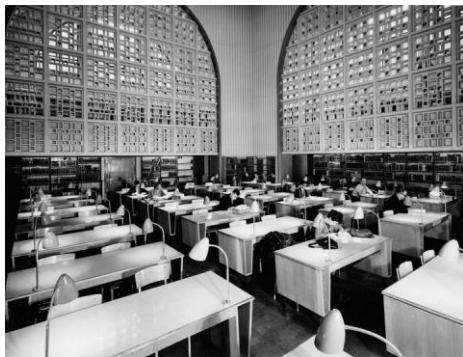
Fig. 1: The KULB in 1895



Fig. 2: The first reading room

At the time the regions of Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France in 1918, the library contained 1 100 000 volumes, making it the second largest library in France. The Decree of 29 July 1926 gave the library its title of “Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire” and its designation as a national public administrative establishment of national, academic and regional interest. The library received the statutory deposit of printed works for Alsace and the Territory of Belfort. No major alterations were made to the building apart from the installation of an exhibition room on the first floor.

During the Second World War, the main building was hit by a bomb and at the end of the war, had lost (as a result of destruction, theft or censorship), several hundred thousand volumes. From 1951 to 1956, a substantial renovation project was conducted, that resulted in the disappearance of this interior decoration, a complete reorganization of the public spaces, and the doubling of storage capacities. In the 1960s, two sections (Medicine and Science & Technology) were moved to the university campus. In 1976, the administration and the sections on Alsace-related items and Law were transferred to two buildings the library had acquired just opposite the main building on the Place de la République.



**Fig. 3 & 4: The main reading rooms after the renovation of the 1950s**

Today, the BNU is still the second largest library in France in terms of numbers of works, one of the very best collections on Egyptology in Europe, the leading library in higher education, and the biggest supplier of inter-library borrowing in France for human and social sciences.

#### b. The building

The library building, built from 1889 until 1895, has a typical wilhelminian architecture, very similar to other German libraries built at the same period (e.g. the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Unter den Linden, or the Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig). Built in red sandstone like the famous Cathedral of Strasbourg, is it crowned with a very large dome made from metal and glass, visible from a far distance. The outside decoration, with medallions representing the main literary figures in history (like Plato, Cervantes, Dante...) and statues around the topics of knowledge and wisdom, are remarkable. Built around a central reading room, with two inner courts and stacks on the perimeter, it had storage place for 800,000 volumes at the time of its inauguration.

The renovation works that were carried out from 1950 until 1956 transformed the inner spaces most notably by adding new reading rooms, an exhibition area, a new central stack, and a new entry. The historical reading room was no longer to be seen. In the stacks, new areas, new metallic stacks were added in between the existing stacks from 1895, doubling the

storage capacity. These new metallic stacks were built on a structure that went through the 8 floors of the building: this was to ensure stability, but as a consequence, this structure had the potential to allow the spreading of fire through the whole building very rapidly... Fortunately, a fire never happened, but this was the main reason for deciding to launch extensive renovation works in 2005.

Before that, little change had been made to the interior of the library since the restructuring carried out in the 1950s. The most notable change took place in 1992, involving the reading rooms on the first floor.

In 2004, the facades and the cupola obtained the “historical heritage” label, and were protected as such.

At the time the building closed its doors in November 2010, it housed 42 km of books, had 7 reading rooms allowing 550 readers at a time, had an exhibition space of 200sqm on the seventh floor, but was at the same time an old library, not adapted to the new needs and habits of its readers, with a real security issue in case of fire due to structure of the metallic stacks of the 50s, and was close to its full storage capacity.

### c. The historical collections

The BNU holds more than 3 million items, out of which around 1 million are anterior to 1920. Since the BNU's collections only began to be constituted in 1871, they do not reflect the historical strata of cultural and scientific activity in Strasbourg and Alsace over the years, as is the case in other major libraries. Nevertheless, an effort is made to reconstitute the old wide-ranging collection, either through the acquisition of entire collections, like it was very often the case during the early years of the library, or through purchases, gifts, and deposits of single documents. The retrospective acquisition of documents with a direct connection to Alsace (Alsatian manuscripts, books published in Alsace (including incunabula), posters for events that took place in Alsace, portraits of Alsatian characters, etc.) and the safeguarding of the contemporary Alsatian heritage for future generations (manuscripts of contemporary Alsatian authors, and artists' works) are the two main objectives of the BNU's heritage collections development.

Several specific collections need to be mentioned to better understand how the BNU is a very special library in the French context:

- A unique collection of antique and ancient egyptian items including nearly 6000 papyrus, 5000 ostraca (pieces of pottery or stones bearing the earliest forms of script in Egypt, 500 cuneiform tablets, 400 wooded labels for mummies, and a thousand other objects including oil lamps, statues, seals, engraved bricks and stones);
- A manuscript collections of about 7000 items, from 700 western medieval manuscripts to 500 oriental (arabic, persian, indian...) manuscripts, to contemporary manuscripts and archives from Alsatian writers;
- Over 2000 incunabula and several thousand books from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, remembering that Gutenberg had lived in Strasbourg, at the heart of the humanistic Europe;

- A very broad collection of german scientific documentation from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, covering every major area of knowledge and comprising many items which are now to be found nowhere else, because of the conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century;
- A collection of over 150,000 pictures, including photographs, postcards, posters...
- Over 50,000 maps, some of same dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century...
- 39,000 medals and coins;
- And many more collections holding a historical value in themselves.

Special collections held in a special building, within a very special institution: the *BNU Nouvelle* programme was defined to make them face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## 2. The *BNU Nouvelle* programme

The *BNU Nouvelle* programme consists in the architectural project and 10 “projects within the project”, including an extensive work on the physical collections, and the construction of a digital library.

### a. The architectural project

The decision to completely renovate the building was made in 2005, after many years of discussion. Security was the main issue, but storage capacity, the need for modern facilities like a new exhibition hall, a cafeteria, an auditorium, modern learning spaces, and the need for more storage capacity, were strong arguments as well. Finally, it was decided to keep the library in its original building, at the center of the historical town, and to do all the necessary works during one phase. This meant to close the building to the public during 4 years. Since the facades and the cupola were protected, only a restoration was planned for them: for the internal spaces however, a complete transformation was planned by the chosen architect, Nicolas Michelin.

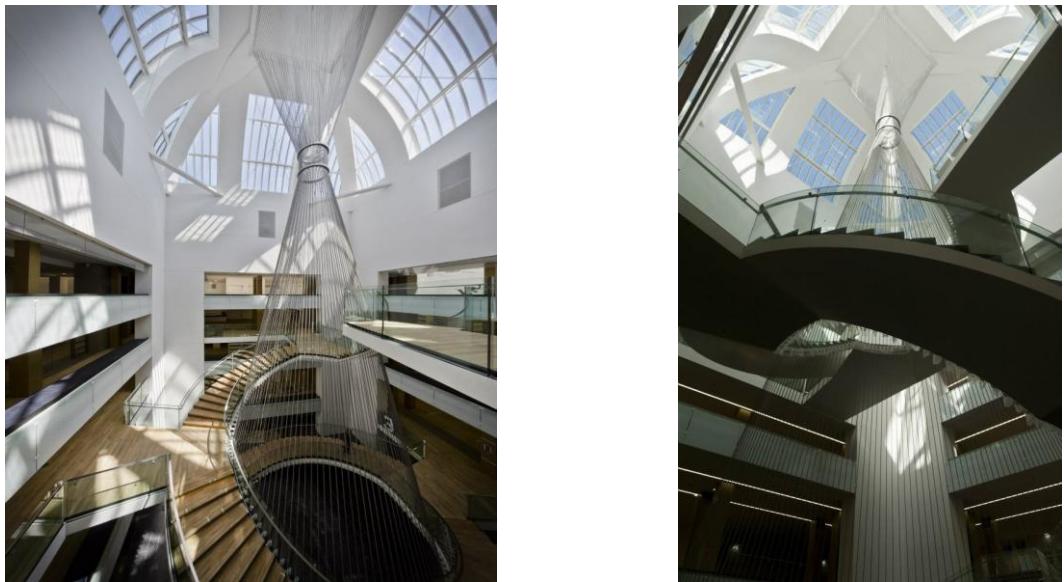


**Fig. 5: Work going on in the inner courts  
(oct. 2011)**



**Fig. 6: Columns hanging in the air, before the reconstruction of 2 levels of historical stacks**

The major architectural feat at the heart of the project, is an impressive central circular staircase, allowing a direct view on the cupola from inside the building, which was never possible before. Four levels of public spaces offer now place for 660 readers and 150,000 books on open shelves (compared to 550 and 30,000 before), several group working rooms, a special room for electronic resources, automatic book transaction facilities, but also new facilities: an auditorium for 146 seats, a cafeteria able to host more than 100 people at the same time, an easily accessible exhibition space of 500sqm on the first floor, a training room, and more, larger and better equipped internal spaces (offices for the staff, workshops for the digital library and the conservation department...). The storage capacity is now of around 60 km, stacks being under close climate control. Geothermy is also used to cool or heat the building.



**Fig. 7 & 8: 2 views of the new central staircase**

Since parts of the building, the facades and cupola, were protected, a close collaboration between the architect and the national administration for the protection of historical buildings was necessary, and a very interesting choice was made: traces of the historical building should be preserved as much as possible. That is why we can see today parts of the ancient sandstone walls inside the building, and why two stacks were preserved in their original configuration (of 1895 for the first one, of 1955 for the second).



**Fig. 9 & 10: Walls belonging to the historical building included in the new architecture**



**Fig. 11: View of the preserved historical stacks with the first collections back in place (july 2014)**

The original building and the contemporary building are now two in one, coexisting very harmoniously, giving the institutions' historical identity a new dynamics for the decades to come.

#### b. The work on collections

The *BNU Nouvelle* project includes an extensive work on the collections in parallel to the renewal of the building. Many different conservation and preservation operations have been conducted during the last years:

- Over a 2-year period, complete dust removal of 45km of shelves before moving the books out;
- Improvement of the conservation conditions of the whole newspapers and journals collection, by putting them into conservation boxes (15,000 in 3 years);
- the same operation was done for the ostraca and antique objects collection (more than 6,000 items), completed by a preservation work on some of the most fragile or damaged pieces;
- Light preservation works on historical collections, among others big-size books from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, planned to be showed in the preserved historical stacks at the reopening of the building;
- Systematic preservation work on the most precious manuscript and printed documents, in preparation of their exhibition in the future "library museum" ...
- Plus: preparation of 150,000 volumes for the exposition on open shelves in the reading rooms, including RFID.

In parallel, retro-conversion of the catalogues progressed very significantly, as did the bibliographical treatment of the library of the European Council, which has been in deposit in the BNU since 2009.

#### c. The Digital library

The last main goal of the *BNU Nouvelle* vision was to build a modern digital library, especially to facilitate the access to the collections in a time when the number of seats in the 2

temporary reading rooms was limited to less than 40 in total. The BNU had begun to digitize in 1990s, doing more and more project since 2000/2001 (including 30,000 pictures, 3,000 maps, 5,000 coins, hundreds of books and manuscripts...) and was since 2011 a partner in the great *Europeana Collections 1914-1918* project.

In December 2011, the BNU decided to launch a call for partnership to build its digital library. In April 2012, it chose the proposal of the French National Library (BnF), based on the sharing of the technical infrastructure of Gallica, the digital library of the BnF, under the concept of “Gallica in white label”. The partnership was officially signed on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013, and the digital library of the BNU, named Numistral ([www.numistral.fr](http://www.numistral.fr)), opened online on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013, with over 40,000 digital documents available, representing over 600,000 pages. It was the first application of the “Gallica in white label” service of the BnF, and a major and very innovative association between the two main French libraries.

Besides the work on the physical collections and on the digital library, other “projects within the project” included some local policy and governance issues, relations to the University of Strasbourg, the continuing of an ambitious cultural activity, and the development of international relations, which were successfully achieved during the time of the closing of the main building. The success of the last project however will be assessed only after the reopening: the visitors will then be able to have a look at the library’s most precious collections in the “BNU museum”.

### **3. Showing historical collections: the museographical project**

#### **a. The concept**

In fact, the museographical project is not about the constitution of a museum proper, or of a museum only. The concept is in reality double: the intention is to have a place for showing the most precious collections to the public, but also a place to preserve them. The objective is also to have a reserve which is also a museum, or a museum which is also a reserve.

These two dimensions, showing and preserving, seem of course contradictory. The challenge was to find a way to present, in the same limited physical spaces, a coherent museographical organization, with a logical itinerary for the public through the collections, while at the same time storing the collections in stacks where they would be held as complete as possible, and of course well preserved and protected. According to this last purpose, climate-control was defined to be stronger and closer in these areas than in the rest of the building, with an allowance for variation of +/- 2° C and +/- 5% RH compared to +/- 5° C and +/- 10% RH in the other stacks.

The collections concerned with this project were initially the following:

- the antique collection of papyrus, ostraca, cuneiform tablets, Mesopotamian and Egyptian objects...,
- the coins and medals collection,
- the manuscript collection,
- the incunabula collection,
- a sample of precious books from the 16<sup>th</sup> until the 21<sup>th</sup> century,
- a sample of remarkable maps, posters and other graphic documents,

- and the Gobineau collection (books, furniture, object of the count Arthur de Gobineau, given to the library by his widow in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

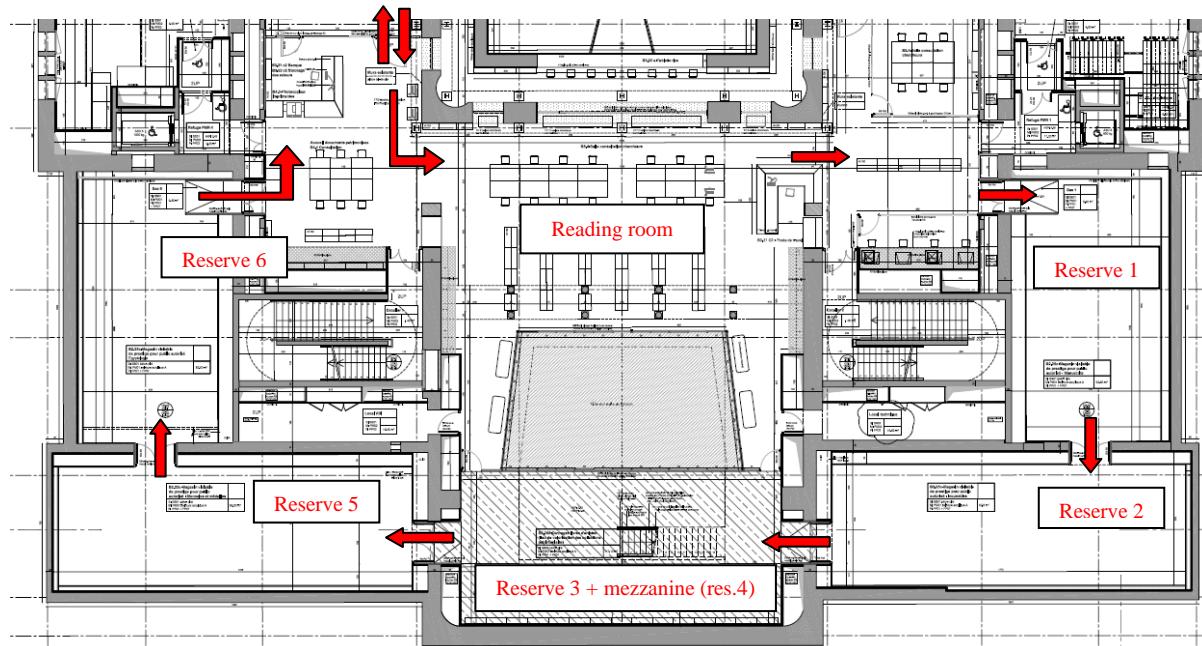
Following the acquisition of the “Maritain” collection, comprising the archives and library of the philosopher Jacques Maritain and the bedroom of his wife Raïssa Maritain by the BNU in 2013, it was decided to add a section about this collection in the project, including the reconstitution of the bedroom. It was also decided to put light on the regional collections or “Alsatica”, and on specific themes like archives of local musicians, precious books of the greatest authors like Goethe or Dante, of smaller collections like the Soennecken collection on the history of writing and calligraphy.

From the content point of view, the purpose of the project is to give light on the major collections and themes held by the library, and a small glimpse of the richness and diversity of its treasures.

However, because the museum is also a reserve, access to these areas will be very limited: most probably, there will only be guided tours once or twice a month, under the guidance of a curator, and no free access by the public like it would have been in a real museum.

#### b. How the project is conducted

This project was defined in the early stages of the *BNU Nouvelle* vision, as early as 2006-2007. It was decided that these “accessible reserves” would be immediately adjacent to the special reading room dedicated to the consultation of the historical collections. As the following plan shows, the 5 rooms (plus a mezzanine over the central room) dedicated to the reserves surround the reading room, located on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the library.

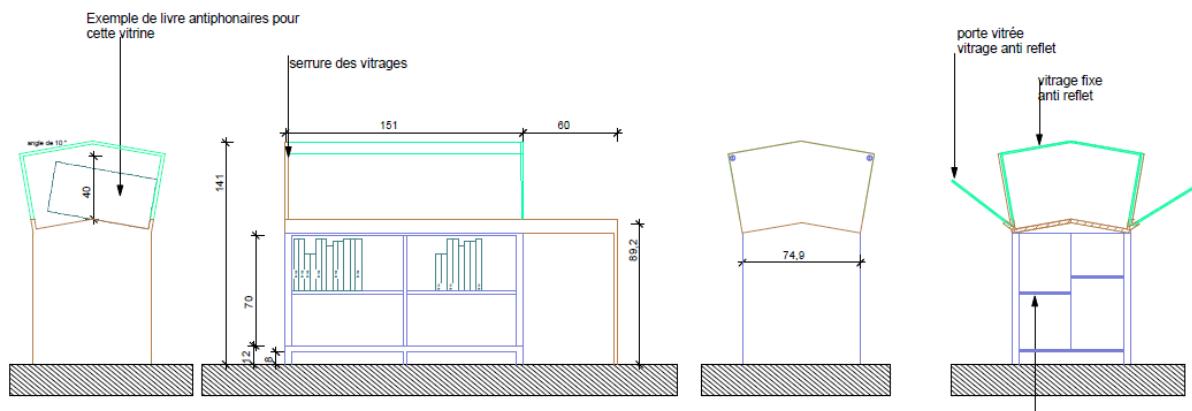


**Fig. 12: Plan of the museographical areas and circulation**

The itinerary of the visit was also defined to follow a logical semi-chronological path:

- Reserve 1: antique collections
- Reserve 2: manuscripts and incunabula
- Reserve 3: 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century collections, documents around the first years of the library, and the bedroom of Raïssa Maritain
- Reserve 4: coins and medals, and 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century books
- Reserve 5: graphic documents
- Reserve 6: special collections (Soenneken, Gobineau, musicians,...)

Following these preliminary requirements, the library recruited a professional museum-planner to help draw the furniture that needed to be acquired, and as a consequence define how many items could really be presented in these areas compared to the initial vision. A close discussion between the curators of the library and the museum-planner, a local agency from Strasbourg, was conducted during three months, from November 2013 until January 2014. The curators presented their demands concerning conservation and presentation conditions (materials for the furniture, light control, security...) and the museum-planner helped with her experience in the museographical field (circulation of visitors, norms for disabled people, knowledge of the market for museum furniture and equipment...). The museum-planner then wrote the technical specifications for a call for tender concerning the production and installation of the furniture for these areas.



**Fig. 13: Sketch of a showcase for historical books, in the Reserve 2.**

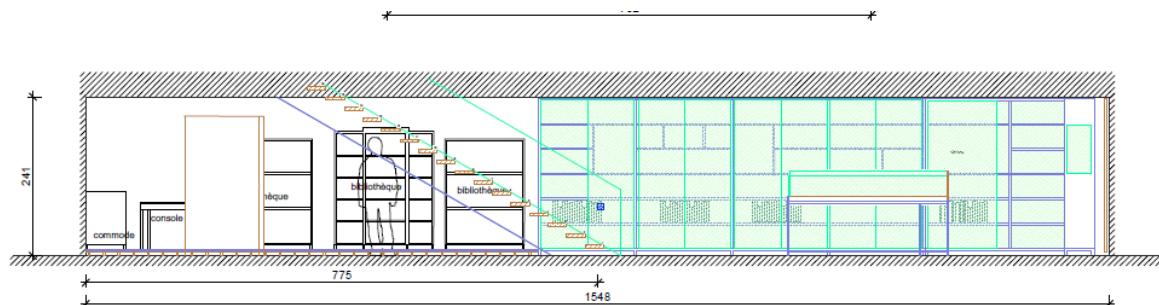
Based on the quality of the answer as well as on financial elements, a company specialized in furniture for museums and exhibition was chosen in June. A long meeting with the library curators helped precise some points and details, as well as validate a prototype for the furniture, before launching the production of it during the summer. The agenda plans to install the six areas in two phases: the first four will be ready by the end of September, the last two at the end of October. This will allow the library curators to install the collections in time for the reopening of the library mid-November. A very close following by the curators will be necessary in order to avoid any delay or any deviation. At the time of the IFLA WLIC 2014 in Lyon, I hope to report on the good advancement of the project.

### c. Main points of awareness

The final result of this project will only be seen after the reopening of the library, in the second half of November this year. The reactions of the public who will visit these spaces will prove if we did right in our intention to show our treasures, but they will not be the only

truth-teller. As a matter of fact, we will need to keep a close eye on the documents to keep track of any physical damage or deterioration that could be linked either to the storage conditions or to the proximity with the public.

Another important point of awareness will be the management of the collections, since continuity of storage won't be assured anymore: for instance, only a selection of the manuscripts, the 16<sup>th</sup> century books and a small number of medals and coins will be preserved in these areas, the rest being stored in the pre-existing reserves in another building just across the street. A very precise mapping of the collection will be more important than ever.



**Fig.4: Cross-section of Reserve 3**

Our intention is also to have a turnover of the particular items showed, for preservation reasons of course, but also for the sake of renewing the interest of the public by showing different documents regularly. The staff, especially the curators not belonging to the heritage collections department, will need to be trained to be able to guide the public through the visits.

Assuring good security and preservation of the collection, in parallel to an efficient collection management, were since the beginning two conditions for the success of the project. The scientific and cultural agenda around these spaces after the opening will be equally important.

## Conclusion

Many challenges were faced during this project, and constraints were numerous: the architectural project itself with limited and pre-existing spaces; the available budget, not only for the project but for the renovation works of the building; the delays at the end, with the urgency of finishing it all for the grand reopening (this is a challenge still in front of us); the physical conservation of the documents, very often in a bad shape; the necessity not to forget an important document or collection; etc...

But in the end, a special space for special collections, that is what the new main building of the National-and University Library Strasbourg will be. A successful and brilliant marriage between the most contemporary architecture and traces from the past, the *BNU Nouvelle* will now be able to show its most beautiful and precious treasures to the broader public, thus becoming a significant touristic attraction in the centre of this European capital. You are all most welcome to visit us in Strasbourg!

## **Acknowledgments**

Nicolas Michelin, the *BNU Nouvelle* architect;

Natalia Moutinho SARL Strasbourg, the museum-planner;

Jean-Pierre Rosenkranz, photographer of the BNU and author of the pictures reproduced in this text.

## **References**

Website of the BNU: [www.bnu.fr](http://www.bnu.fr)

Photos of the renovation works of the BNU, from 2011 until 2014:  
<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.553869387961663.141804.132082773473662&type=3>.