

CONTROVERSIAL ART COMPLEX

Parisians love 'centre'

DUART FARQUHARSON
Southam News Services
PARIS — It's about as French as the Calgary Stampede. It has the charm of a boiler room and the historical appeal of a Brave New World. You could put the \$200 million Georges Pompidou National Centre of Art and Culture down anywhere—except in Paris. Its aggressive functionalism is pure Americana, its architects are English and Italian, its director Swedish.

Yet it's here: garishly painted red, orange and blue pipes surrounding, inside-out, six storeys of glass and steel the size of two football fields, smack in the middle of grey, old, pastellized Paris.

And the Parisians love it. In its first week open to the public the world's biggest cultural super-market has received 200,000 visitors, almost all of them that special cranky, critical breed known as natives of this city.

They've fought through police barricades, lost buttons off their coats and huddled, cattle-fashion behind fences in the mud and rain waiting their chance to push finally through the centre's doors built to handle a mere 10,000 people a day.

Being Parisians, many of them come to jeer. If Monsieur Pompidou, the late French president who received the centre as "a monument to our epoch", could be here he would be more impressed by their numbers than their shouted comments.

"The exterior is shocking but the interior is revolting," said a 50-year-old saleswoman. "It is a monstrosity which will display to foreigners the decadence of France."

"What atrociously bad taste and what a relief to know that the architects are not French," said a history teacher from a Paris high school, in a typical comment.

She was no less angry to be informed that some Canadians had objected to the payment of vast sums to Paris architect Roger Taillibert for the building of Montreal's Olympic stadium. Pompidou Centre architects Renzo Piano of Milan and Richard Rogers of London won an international competition with more than 60 applicants.

"All those glass-in gangways are just like the passenger ramps at Charles de Gaulle's hideous airport", said a racehorse owner, puffing up

an escalator put out of action by the authorities for the crowd's safety. "Pantheon of the arts, indeed", she winced.

The centre has been given many unkind labels from "Pompidouism", to "a hangar for art", to "a cultural oil refinery". Its architects prefer "living urban machine", a surprisingly apt description when viewed from the street with its human circulation surging like blood through glass arteries.

Seen as a new people palace rather than the erected mecano set it looked like before opening, the centre clearly has a future.

Despite all the carping the French have already learned to enjoy it. An opinion poll published Sednesday by the mass circulation newspaper France Soir found that 73 per cent of its

readers who had toured the centre like it.

When the question was whether they would advise their friends to come and see it the affirmative reply of the same respondents went up to 84 per cent.

A survey of French artists and experts would probably come up with a less enthusiastic response. But then that group wanted to pull down an earlier "Tower of Babel", the Eiffel Tower, which no one any longer opposes as a Paris landmark.



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