

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Norman Foster" exhibition

In this podcast, Frédéric Migayrou, curator of the exhibition (10 May - 7 August 2023), takes us through the retrospective of Norman Foster's work. He introduces us to this major figure who has left his mark on the history of world architecture with his systemic and global approach to nature and technology. Extracts from an interview with Norman Foster shed light on the thinking of this visionary architect and on several iconic projects.

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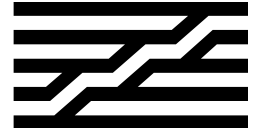
In black, exhibition curator Frédéric Migayrou's voice

In blue, the narrative voice

In green, Norman Foster's voice

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

Reading time: 7 minutes

1 – Introduction

[jingle of the show] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears. You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

Hello Frédéric Migayrou, you are the curator of the Norman Foster exhibition, currently on show in Gallery 1 on Level 6 of the Centre Pompidou. Could you start by telling us a little about this exhibition's scenography and its content in general?

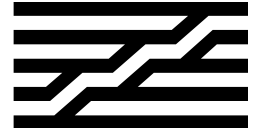
The Norman Foster exhibition at the Centre Pompidou occupies 2,200 square meters. It is the largest exhibition dedicated to a living architect. It presents his work over nearly 60 years through 130 projects in different areas. The scenography was designed entirely by the architect himself and provides an overview of his work that starts in a Drawing Gallery.

Throughout this podcast, you will hear Norman Foster's voice extracted from the interview by the curator of this exhibition.

2 – The Drawing Gallery

The Norman Foster exhibition starts in a large Drawing Gallery that brings together sketchbooks and the historical drawings that have accompanied his work over the past 60 years.

For Norman Foster, at the head of a firm of 1,500 people, drawing has been a means of communication and mediation for presenting projects and working with colleagues throughout his life, making this collection a unique corpus that spans his career and allows visitors to understand his work. [transitional sound]



3 – Nature and Urbanism

As early as the 1960s, Norman Foster was concerned about the environment and the way in which his buildings fitted in with their natural or urban surroundings.

The ecological aspect was a central issue. It was seen as a positive balance between industry, technology and nature. Many of his projects throughout his career have been truly innovative.

Apple Park is the realisation of an idea to integrate buildings into the natural environment. It is a large circular building that stretches out over 71 acres and hosts some 12,000 employees.

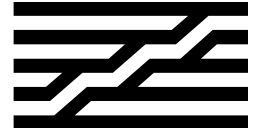
The roof is entirely covered with photovoltaic panels that allow the energy required to be generated on site. The boundaries between inside and outside are completely blurred. The campus immerses its occupants in nature and is a manifesto for the integration of landscapes into architecture. [transitional sound]

4 – Skin and Bones

Norman Foster has always been fascinated by technology, particularly planes and cars, and sees the architectural object as a kind of structure which he has defined through the notion of skin and bones. In his view, the building structure defines the envelope. All his buildings are designed in this way. [transitional sound]

The *Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank* headquarters was the first major competition won by Norman Foster. It completely revolutionized the typology of high rise buildings.

This 179 metres tall building houses a hollow core and a large atrium from which the different office spaces lead off. The building is designed around three parallel masts arranged around a large exoskeleton, which is a structural frame relegated to the outside that supports the entire building.



Air conditioning is provided by a pump that draws water from the harbor basin, a first in architectural design. It was also the first manifesto to revolutionize the concept of high rise buildings, which have featured among Norman Foster's major projects throughout his life.

This building makes a celebration of its services. You can see from the outside those elements which are heating and cooling this building and the structure.

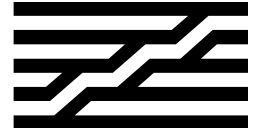
If you look at the *Sainsbury Centre* of that period, you had the structure, and all the services are integrated in that structure. So it is designed for the environmental performance as well as the structural performance and the appearance. It makes for a building which is breathing, which is a healthier building. [transitional sound]

5 – The Vertical City

Norman Foster's towers are built like parts of a city, the floors are assembled in groups and separated by large communal spaces. This idea offers an understanding of the vertical city since the base of the buildings is open to the surrounding urban environment and the public. [transitional sound]

The *St. Mary Axe Tower* is an iconic building in the city of London and has been nicknamed the "Gherkin" because of its streamlined shape that resembles the fuselage of an airplane.

It was the first ecological building to be built in the city and it builds on the ideas explored for the *Commerzbank Headquarters* in Frankfurt and the *Climatoffice* designed with Richard Buckminster Fuller. Its exoskeleton structure completely frees up the inside spaces and the whole building benefits from a system of natural ventilation.



The structure would be designed not just to hold up the building – it has voids in it – but to design it, so that you could thread the building services through those voids.

That's the opposite of a traditional way of thinking where you think the structure and then you suspend the ductwork below it. So that produces something which is higher performance, has more joy. [transitional sound]

6 – History and Tradition

Although his architecture is considered high-tech, Norman Foster has always paid close attention to the historical context, history, buildings and technology.

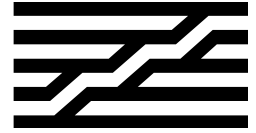
His architecture reactivates these contexts, brings them back to life, and showcases often forgotten materials and techniques. [transitional sound]

The *Carré d'Art* in Nîmes was the first project in which Norman Foster took on a historic site, one that faced the *Maison carrée*, a first century Roman temple.

The architect decided to clear the space around the building to make it a feature of the city. The new media library, like that of the Centre Pompidou, relates to the historic building and revitalises the historic city center.

In the same way, the *British Museum*, built by Robert Smirke in the 19th century, as well as the great roundhouse, the reading room built by his brother, is covered by a gigantic 6,000 square metres roof that brings the whole building together. Like the *Crystal Palace* by Robert Paxton, a lattice of transparent triangles that weighs around 800 tonnes, confers unity on the ensemble and integrates it into the city in an elegant blend of old and new.

I've said that if you want to look far ahead, you first look far back, and you can see in that approach the imprint of history. In projects like you mentioned, the *British Museum*, you go back in time.



You find that the heart of that original building was a courtyard which had been lost over time, with nothing precious in between the original central library and the facades of the courtyard. [transitional sound]

7 – Planning and Places

Norman Foster is not just an architect, but is also an urban designer. He's worked on the reconstruction of large scale urban plans for many cities. He focuses on flows, places and public spaces in order to give fresh identity to urban areas.

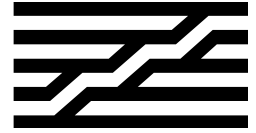
[transitional sound]

In 2011, the Urban Community of Marseille commissioned landscape designer Michel Desvigne to redevelop the old port. He worked in collaboration with Norman Foster, who reconfigured the road layout and proposed the construction of a large canopy on the edge of the port.

This large structure of 46 by 22 metres has a mirrorlike surface and draws the public. Overall, the building updates the awareness of the public space for all the people in the city.

The infrastructure of public spaces is really the glue that binds the individual buildings together. It determines the DNA of a city, the identity of the city, the separate identities of, say, New York, Marseille, London.

If I take the transformation of Trafalgar Square, for example, the closing of one side, that transform not just that space, but the whole area, the whole quarter of the city. And you can quantify afterwards the benefits: less accidents, it's safer, it's more delightful, the quality of the air is better, it's quieter.



Also, you can use anticipatory design, as you mentioned, space syntax, simulating the movements of pedestrians and exploring that before the decision is taken.

[transitional sound]

8 – Networks and Mobility

Norman Foster is an architect and an engineer for whom mobility, travel and connections between places has always been important. He's built many airports, train stations, port terminals and vehicles. This notion of communication and links between different places, cities and countries has earned him worldwide renown.

[transitional sound]

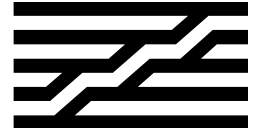
The *Millau Viaduct* is a magnificent example of structural art. This cable stayed bridge links the two banks of the Tarn and was designed in collaboration with engineer Michel Virlogeux.

It helps open up the entire region by linking Paris to the Mediterranean coastline. The bridge design is based on seven concrete piers ranging in height from 75 to 245 metres, which is nearly as tall as the Eiffel Tower.

It is crowned by masts and cables that spread out in a fanlike pattern and are painted white. The viaduct draws a very elegant line across the landscape and transforms the entire area.

I think there are those networks which are physical and there are the invisible networks in the sky, but at some point, they all come down to the physicality of a built element.

So in this digital world, with these invisible networks that connect us digitally, it's usually tempting to go into an architecture which is a digital experience and to rely on wayfinding by numerals, by letters of the alphabet.



I see the challenge as to make it an analog experience rather than a digital age. So whether it's an airport or a subway system, a metro system, somehow the architecture should lead you effortlessly. [transitional sound]

9 – Futures

Norman Foster has always been considered an extremely forward looking architect, envisaging the future of our societies through projects focused on sustainable development and the environment.

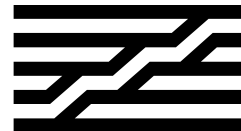
He pursues these projects with his foundation in Africa and India, but also by imagining the development of technology that would allow the development of visionary space-based projects on the Moon or on Mars. [transitional sound]

With *Lunar Habitat*, Norman Foster designed a lunar habitation in collaboration with the European Space Agency. Foster imagines extremely simple yet technologically complex habitation systems, designing inflatable structures to be coated with regolith using 3D printing. Regolith is the material found on the Moon.

With this habitation, we are confronted both with the idea of a vernacular dwelling like the Earth buildings in Africa and high-tech structures that allow us to explore the idea of lunar settlement.

In a quest, I would suggest a holistic approach to achieve a balance of nature. Energy has to be at the very heart of that issue because it relates to every aspect of global warming, pollution.

The quest for clean energy is not just to anticipate the population growth, but its implications, too. If we look statistically at the form of energy that can occupy the smallest footprint on the planet, no pollution, the absolute safest record above all else, it is nuclear and the new generations of nuclear which have the promise of autonomy that I find very exciting.



[jingle of the show] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!

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