

Learning from the First Step. Uni Mail in Geneva

by AGNES GODA

1. SHORT HISTORY OF THE BUILDINGS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA.

In 1559 Jean Calvin established the Genevan Academy to train students in humanist learning in preparation for the ministry and positions in secular leadership. The first building of the Academy, the so called „Auditoire de Calvin” still exists and is located next to St Peter’s Cathedral. Although law is also taught, the theological spirit remains predominant until the end of the 17th century.

In the 18th century, the age of enlightenment, Geneva was the birthplace of men of Science, philosophers, naturalists, physicists and mathematicians and the Academy opens up to the physical and natural sciences as well as to profoundly innovative teachings in law and philosophy. In 1817 a botanical garden and a museum of natural history were created in the now so called „Parc des Bastions”. This project was conceived by Guillaume-Henri Dufour, engineer and army officer, and the chair of natural history was occupied by Augustin-Pyrame de Candolle. He was also in charge of the botanical garden and created a library in the building. None of these buildings exist today.

The political and social upheaval of the 19th century will profoundly transform the ancient Academy: its ecclesiastic allegiances are abandoned and in 1873 the Academy acquires the status of University, with the creation of the faculty of Medicine. The first stone of the new university, now called „Les Bastions” was laid in 1868. The construction was terminated in 1874.



Fig. 1: 1874 Bastions

This complex would house the future university, the public library, and the museum of natural history. Until today the public library is located in one wing of the building, while the rest of the complex is now occupied by the faculty of letters and theology.

In 1876 the Faculty of Medicine was located in a building called „School of medicine” along the Arve river. Anatomy and pathology were taught there. The clinical lectures took place in the Cantonal hospital, which opened in 1856 and with which the medical school worked in close collaboration, as they still do now.

1879 saw the construction of the school of Chemistry. This building is now a classified historical monument. Today it takes the name of the avenue on which it is located, „Les Philosophes” and is occupied by the faculty of Letters and the human sciences.

It took nearly 80 years before the construction of a new building, namely the school of physics. Chemistry now resides in the building of „Science II” which was built one hundred years after the old chemistry building.

The CMU or school of Medicine was planned in the 1970’s. Two thirds of the full complex are open today and the last third is still to be started.

Since 1974, the Authorities of the University and its central administration reside in a new building, Uni-Dufour.



Fig 2: 1979 - 1999 Uni Mail

Uni Mail is the most recent building of the university. It houses the faculties of Law, Economics, Social sciences, Psychology, Education, the School of translation and interpretation, and one huge library (of 9,000 square meters) for all these faculties. It is unusual to have a large library incorporated in the same building as the premises for research and teaching.

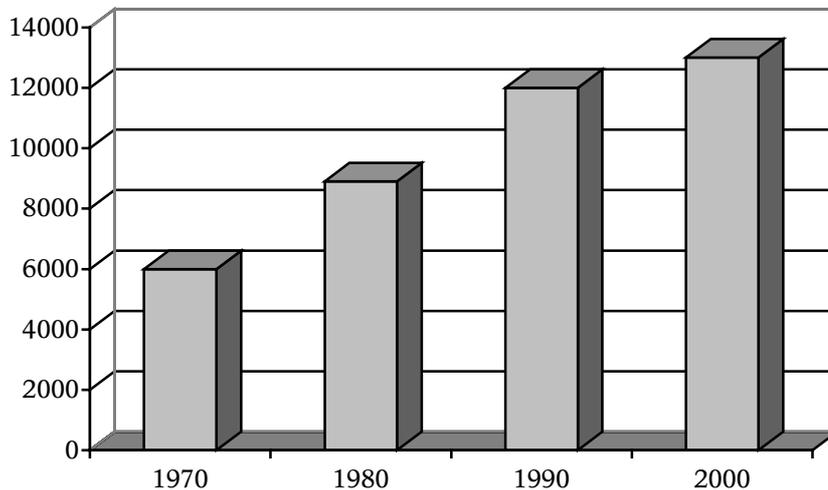
2. PROSPECTIVE STUDY FOR UNIVERSITY BUILDINGS

Planning constructions is a modern concept. Historically, the rapid evolution of science and the necessity to form new generations of scientists and engineers, made it necessary to introduce some concepts of forecasting and planning the evolution of buildings.

A prospective study for the construction of university buildings for the future must take into account

- a strategy of growth, such as the number of students
- the evolution of domains of research and technologies (like computer facilities)
- real and financial constraints
- the inventory of the existing buildings as a basis for calculating the surfaces needed in the future, according to the growth of different things.

Number of Students



The graph shows the change in the number of students between the start of the study for the building and the end of construction 20 years later.

A prospective study is based in the first place on the extrapolation of the tendencies observed in the past, projected in the future and corrected for the demographic component.

We may consider 3 types of estimates, namely

- the short term planning, based on existing surfaces
- the medium term planning, based on estimates for 5 to 10 years in the future
- the long term planning, based on estimates for 15 to 20 years in the future

In Geneva we always have to consider long term planning, because of possible long delays in political decisions. Switzerland is a direct democracy and therefore the people have the possibility to accept or refuse the political decisions by referendum and this whole procedure can be very long.

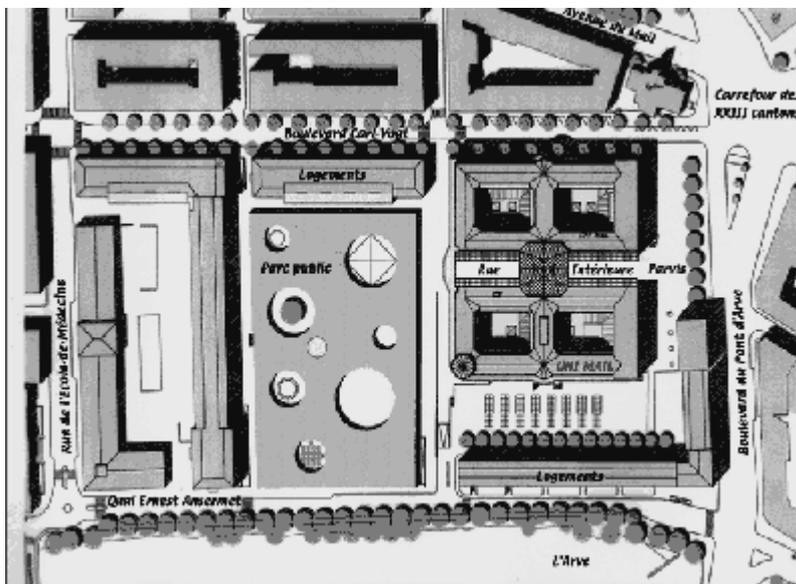


Fig 4: The Uni Mail

The 3 major architectural concepts of uni mail are

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- the opening towards the city
- the conviviality and collaboration between faculties with the unique library for all the faculties and the open spaces where students can meet
- the luminosity in the building. For example, all the lecture rooms have natural light. All this with the intention of saving energy.

Since the need for more space became evident, a major decision had to be made, whether to leave the university in the city or to move the university onto a campus.

The Parliament of Geneva decided in 1979 that the university will remain in the city in three major sites:

- one for the faculty of medicine, close to the hospital
- one for the faculty of science, along the Arve
- one for the faculties of human sciences, in the vicinity of the Bastions and Plainpalais.

1979	The first programme of Uni Mail
1981	A competition of ideas was organised and the architects were chosen
1984	Funding for the study of the first phase. The project is directed by an „Operational Group”. Its members represent the faculties, i.e. the future users and the president is nominated by the rector of the university. Decisions are taken by vote. This group was created in 1984.
1987	Funding for the construction of the first phase
1992	End of construction of the first phase



Fig 5: Uni Mail – phase 1

During the discussions concerning the allotment of space, the requirements of the faculties of humanistic sciences and the faculty of Law were carefully studied. The conjugated efforts of the administrators of the faculties, the representatives of the planning of the construction and the representatives of the faculties, has made it possible to include the library in the surface of the first phase of construction. The close collaboration between the Operational group, in other words, the users on one side and the architects and engineers on the other side, has made it possible to solve the occurring problems to the satisfaction of the users.

1994	The vote for the funding of the study of the second phase
	The funding for the construction had some difficulties of being voted and therefore we decided to conduct an enquiry as to the satisfaction of the users concerning the first phase.
1995	The funding for the construction of the second phase was voted
1999	End of construction of phase 2



Fig 6: Uni Mail – phase 2

3. THE ENQUIRY BETWEEN PHASE 1 AND 2 OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF UNI-MAIL

50 people, among whom there were professors, collaborators, students, administrative and technical staff and librarians, participated in this enquiry. One of the objectives was to prove the need of the construction of the second phase. The interviews covered questions on the opinion of 6 elements: the offices, the library, the lecture rooms, computer rooms and other things, for example the size of name plates on the doors, the colors to designate each faculty, the audiovisual equipment. The enquiry was made by individual interviews and every participant was able to see the results of the enquiry. The enquiry was important for the following reasons:

- to justify the construction of the second phase
- to find out rapidly what has to be improved in the second phase.

That which is negative would disturb the teaching and research. The improvements can be technical, conceptual, in the materials used or in the choice of equipment. The list of questions asked must cover as many subjects as possible to give a complete image.

OFFICES			
	Positive	Negative	Suggestion
dimension sound proofing storage space ground cover insulation blinds other things			

The enquiry concerned questions about the elements listed in the left column and the answers were positive, negative or suggestions. Many suggestions were formulated for phase 2.

LIBRARY			
	Positive	Negative	Suggestion
dimension sound proofing functioning ground cover lights equipments other			

The questions were the same for the library, the lecture rooms and the computer rooms.

SIGNALING			
	Positive	Negative	Suggestion
quantity dimension functioning other			

In 1989 there was a competition for the decoration of the whole building. The winner was the group led by Mr Max Bill, well known architect and artist from Basel. Some of the problems concerned

- the size of the name plates on the doors
- the colors to designate each faculty and many other things.

OTHER REMARKS	Positive	Negative	Suggestion
meeting rooms lifts cafeteria toilets odors corridors other things			

At the end of the questions I asked for all other suggestions concerning the items listed in future. The enquiry about the equipment of multi-media in the different teaching spaces was the last on the list. The evolution of this equipment was rapid. We had many suggestions from multi-media specialists for the second phase.

The enquiry has shown the general satisfaction with natural light, the varied spaces adapted to different kinds of readers. It has also revealed some secondary problems such as insufficient ventilation in the rooms with photocopiers or rapid deterioration of the wall-to-wall carpeting of the library, or inadequate identification of offices.

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