

## **Promises and Disappointments in the Representations of Innovation in Architecture.**

### **The Goods Lifts in the Hôtel des Postes of Paris (1878-1888).**

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**ABSTRACT:** Goods lifts were crucial to the project of the Hôtel des Postes. The consequences of their failings were the most obvious, as well as paradoxical, indication of this. They were fundamental issues for the actors involved when the project was launched. They were still central to the reputation of the building at the time of its completion, but by mainly because of the delays they caused to its opening. This paper intends on shedding light on the vast range of representations of technical innovation in architecture. By measuring the discrepancy between the designers' "faith in the powerful means of modern mechanics" and the disappointment linked to the technical failure, the aim is to identify the factors at play in these representations, which involved the identity of the protagonists as well as the context.

The reconstruction of the Hôtel des Postes in Paris, between 1878 and 1888, was marked by the use of techniques emblematic of the industrial civilization. Their importance was apparent in the material aspects of the architectural project and of the building's construction. It was even more significant in the diverging images of innovation observed between the operation's beginning and completion. The Hotel's goods lifts were representative of the turnaround that happened during the building work: the lifts, crucial to its initiators when the studies started, were still central to the reputation of the Hôtel des Postes at the time of its completion, but by mainly because of the delays they caused to the building's opening. During the two years between the day announced for its inauguration in July 1886 and its public opening in 1888, a debate cropped up concerning the synergy between the mechanical equipments and the project, and the choices that prevailed in defining them.

Through this case study, this paper intends on shedding light on the vast range of representations of technical innovation in architecture. By measuring the discrepancy between the designers' faith in these devices and the disappointment linked to their eventual dysfunction when used, the aim is to identify the factors at play in these representations, which involved the identity of the protagonists (architect, contracting authority, technical expert) as well as the context.

#### **THE PLACE OF MECHANICS IN A PROJECT COMBINING THE RATIONALISATION OF ORGANISATION AND SPACE**

When the reconstruction of the Hôtel des Postes was decided in 1878, its design resembled, as it were, that of a prototype. Although operations such as this had been repeatedly planned since the turn of the century, the "experimental" character revealed during the conception of this public facility pertained more specifically to the necessity of defining a brief that as yet had no real model in France. Supported by the political determination of the nascent Troisième République, the project was fostered in a propitious context: it was simultaneously in line with an overall reflection on rationalizing buildings for state institutions, and with a general movement towards administrative reform touching, among others, the Postal and Telegraphic Departments. Previously working under the ministries of Finance and Interior, the services were united within a single department, supervised by *Adolphe Cochery* (1819-1900), future head of a full-fledged ministry created by decree on February 5, 1879 (Vaillé, 1947, Bataillé, 2002).

The development of the Hôtel des Postes project was directly affected by a political and institutional context favourable to renewal. One proof of this, in the first place, was the architect's appointment. The commission was not entrusted to *Jean-Marie Bousard* (1844-1923), the unofficial architect of the Postal administration, but to *Julien Guadet* (1834-1908), from the Department of the Bâtiments civils [Civil Buildings Department]. A former Grand Prix de Rome, *Julien Guadet* had collaborated with *Charles Garnier* and *Jules André* for the construction of the Opéra de Paris, and the Galerie de Zoologie (today the Galerie de l'Évolution) of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, respectively. By then, the Department of the Bâtiments civils, at the time placed under the authority of the Ministère des Travaux publics [Public Works Ministry], had lost exclusive control over the contracting authority, but the efforts towards administrative rationalization that marked the first years of the Troisième République made it a driving force in initiating the construction of several public facilities. Moreover, the project's designing conditions called for direct contacts between the architect and the Postal Department, including the minister himself, regardless of the uses determined by the various hierarchies. As the brief's defining and the building's designing were simultaneously led, endorsing each stage of the process required a constant attention to efficiency. The idea was, broadly speaking, to rethink the building's running itself, to "move on directly from the Post Office of our fathers to the Post Office of the future," as the architect remembered in retrospect (Guadet, 1887, p. 9). The process also involved a large number of authorities and official committees.

The reconstruction of the Hôtel des Postes was closely linked to the extension of the Rue du Louvre and the Rue aux Ours (today Rue Etienne Marcel), two roadway projects carried out by the Ville de Paris and planned for by Prefect Haussmann. In this context the nonconformist stance of the architect's project, in view of the post office's traditional vocation, partly accounted for the directives he received from the ministerial departments. Although the postal service's development required increasingly large surfaces, it was also important to limit the new building's use of land to curb expropriation costs. These conflicting requirements in fact led *Julien Guadet* to lay out functions formerly located on a single level (sorting, delivery and trans-shipment of the mail and press) on three levels. The single layer arrangement vindicated by use and confirmed in previous projects for the Hôtel's reconstruction dating from the early XIXth century to the Second Empire, still prevailed among some department managers. However, the "brand new elements," linked to the layout in stories for which *Julien Guadet* argued in his report of July 10, 1878, bear witness to his "faith in the powerful means of modern mechanics" (AN, a) shared with his hierarchy and senior officials of the postal administration, in particular *Adolphe Cochery* who advocated the department's modernization. Implementing goods lifts then seemed absolutely relevant; this was certainly encouraged by the industrial field's development as shown in remarkable contemporary realizations such as the Trocadéro, built for the 1878 World Fair or the first department stores in Paris.

The adjustment of the premises to postal activities was the object of a totally new rationalization of space, a process honed by the architect in the course of his successive projects between 1878 and 1880. Likewise, his interpretation brought about a precise brief for the goods lifts. The attention he devoted to the building's utilitarian purpose determined the major lines of his project. The choice of a metallic structure was meant to allow for a layout adapted to the different levels and adjustable to the building's varying needs. Plans were articulated around two central courtyards serving to ventilate and provide light to the work spaces. The two shafts for the lifts dedicated to mail and press were also located there [Fig. 1-3].

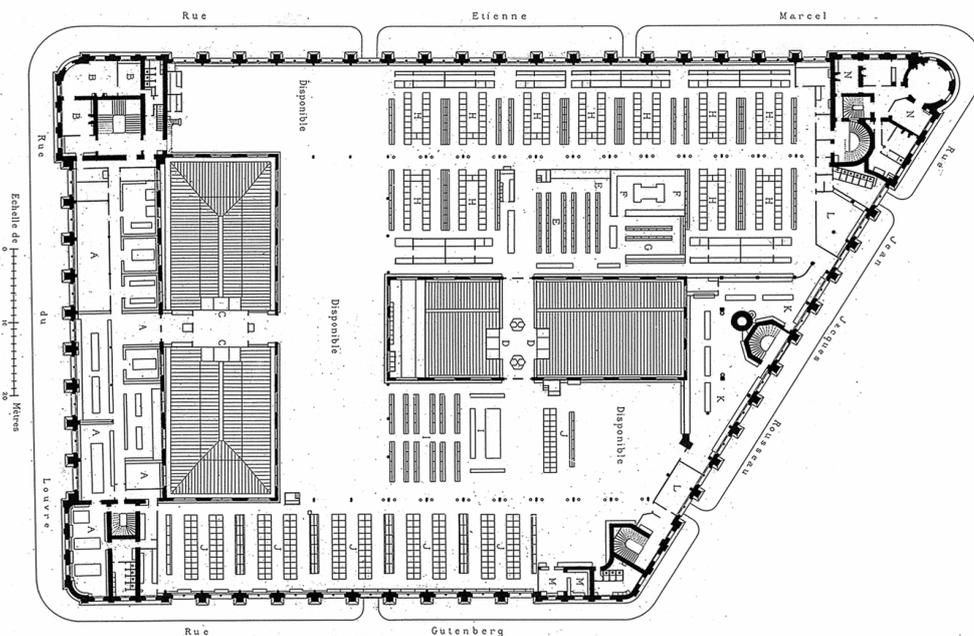


Figure 1: Hôtel des Postes First floor plan; (*L'Encyclopédie d'architecture*, June 1887, pl. 1128)

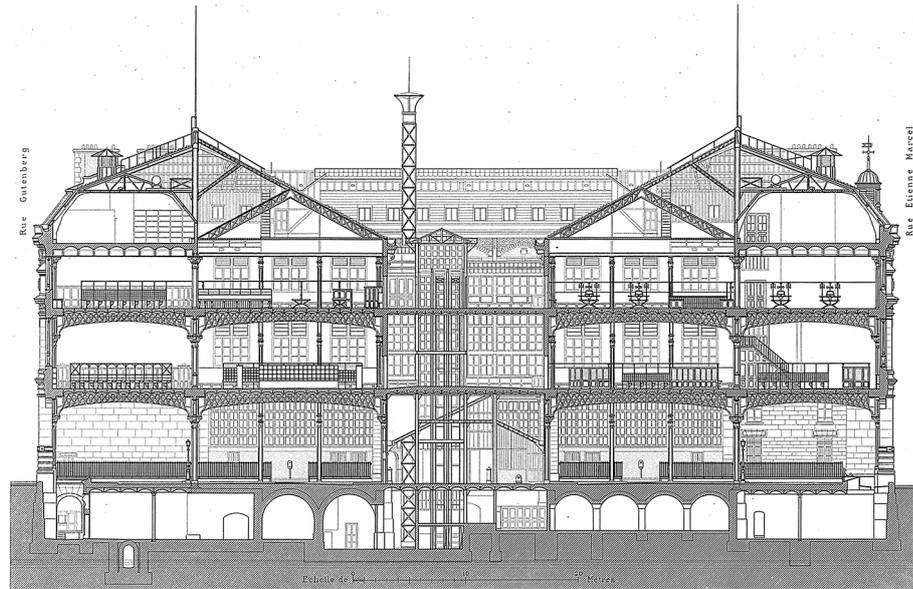


Figure 2: Transversal section; (*L'Encyclopédie d'architecture*, June 1887, pl. 1124)

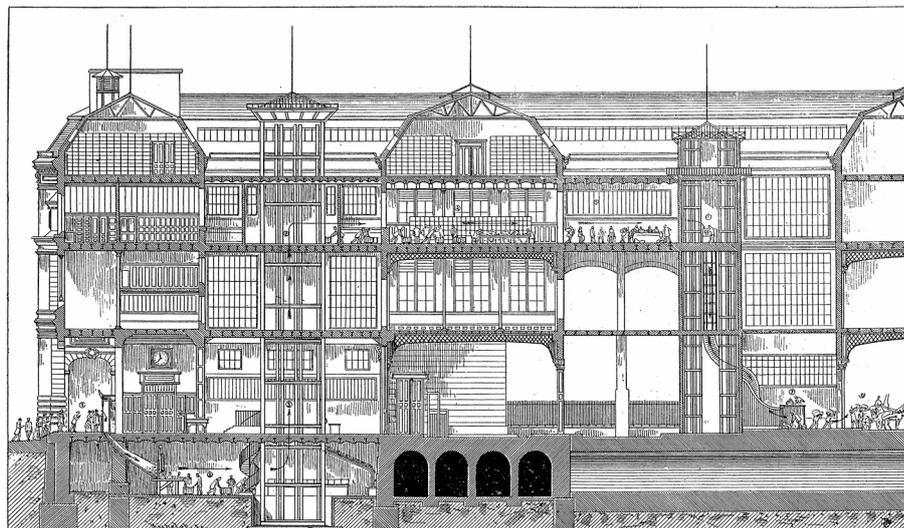


Figure 3: Longitudinal section showing the two shafts for the lifts; (*L'Univers illustré*, July 30, 1886, p. 484)

To ensure continuity and to meet the important flows of mail which he anticipated, *Guadet* ruled out the use of ordinary lifts and in July 1880 opted for "permanent motion" devices. (AN, a, *Guadet* report, July 13, 1880) He later designated them under the more expressive term of "norias," which was quickly picked up by all the other professionals involved. Regularly spaced out platforms constantly moved upwards in one shaft and downwards in the other, at a speed slow enough to allow the loading and unloading of objects. The operational planning of transfers determined this choice: "I have to cover vertical distances that reach 25.8 meters; if one had to wait for a platform to be brought up, unloaded and brought down before sending off another load, even at a very high speed, I would have to count several minutes between two loads. That was unacceptable." (*Guadet*, 1886, p. 534) Drawing from a principle whose examples he had seen abroad, for instance in the postal office of London, devising and implementing these goods lifts called for specific innovations to meet the expectations of the post office's managers. These adjustments were partly induced in the standard practices of the postal services and partly by a special attention devoted to the security of facilities and agents. On one hand, platforms were designed not to flip over between the way up and the way down, but rather to stay strictly horizontal to prevent a possibly forgotten package from falling out. On the other hand, the use of pushcarts for the mail rather than bags required automatic stops at regular intervals to make horizontal transfers easier.

Such requirements probably prompted calling upon the skills of a researcher or inventor rather than on those of an industrialist. The matter was entrusted to *Auguste Bonnet* (1842-1889), civil engineer and teacher at the *École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures*. Since 1881 he had already been involved in the *Hôtel's* jobsite, where he was called to study a special type of crane with counter-balance lever needed for the façades' masonry. To produce a model of his goods lift system he established a partnership with the *Renaux fils et Bon-*

pain firm, builder-mechanics in Rouen. At this time, innovation was entirely submitted to the rules of state sponsorship and ministerial approval. Therefore, the production process was evaluated on a regular basis, with inspections and tests carried out under supervision of an official committee. The committee was in fact directly involved in the technical specifications of the work, as shown by the contract bill drawn up after the experiments. This document determined the motive power's transmission mode using a worm (endless screw) and steam machines. Owing to this close collaboration, constructing the devices was quite naturally entrusted to the technicians who had adjusted the machines. The care devoted to the conception of the goods lifts as well as its intellectual framework echoed their narrow link with the project, to which they were, so to speak, indispensable. In reality, innovation is located at the junction between "organisational" and "technical" thinking, or more precisely, between taking into account the organisation and patterns of work on the one hand, and their impact on the conception of mechanical devices on the other.

#### FROM TECHNICAL DAMAGE TO INNOVATION'S UNDERMINING

Between summer 1885 and summer 1886, at a time when the Hôtel des Postes was in the most part finished, the press coverage of the building illustrated the importance of mechanical implements in the conception of this public facility. While the account made of the building's machines was more often an illustrated list rather than a detailed description, the specificity of the goods lifts called for a few lines devoted to the lifts' innovative character in architectural and technical journals such as *Le Génie civil*, *Mémoires de la Société des ingénieurs civils* and *La Construction moderne*. Owing to the unusual nature of their designing, the most in-depth review came from its designers *Julien Guadet* and *Auguste Bonnet*, for their lectures at the Société des ingénieurs civils in November and December 1885. In this report *Guadet* underlined to what extent the technical conception of vertical circulations reflected, and was crucial to, the overall conception of the whole building's running (*Guadet*, 1886, pp. 533-535). Paradoxically, the only images then available of these devices were provided in a colourful way by the illustrated press (*L'illustration*, *Le Monde illustré*, *L'Univers illustré* and *La République illustrée*), that published fictitious views of the offices in use. [Fig. 4]

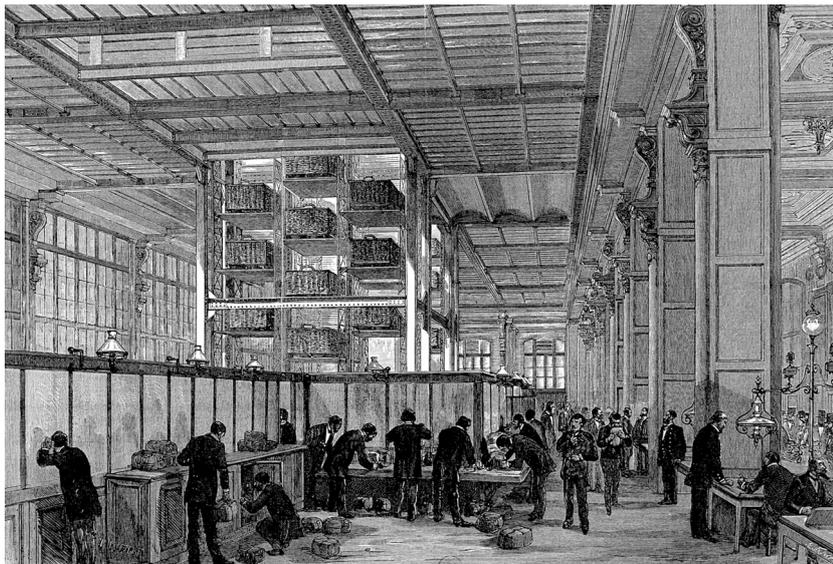


Figure 4: Interior view of the public's hall showing one of the two norias published before the building's opening; (*L'illustration*, July 17, 1886, p. 45)

However, from July 1886, the date officially announced for the inauguration, a series of technical malfunctions brought about several postponements. In the first place, the committee in charge of taking delivery of the generators and motors observed the presence of water in the steam machines' cylinders. Such a specific problem required appointing a committee of experts. The lifts' trials, impossible as long as the machines were out of order, were put off to November 1886. Initially they worked properly, but after a few days it appeared that certain transmission parts, the cogwheels, wore out abnormally fast, under the effect of friction, to the point of total incapacity. After several unsuccessful repairs the builders judged it more efficient to change the transmission system completely, using gears rather than an endless screw. But owing to the purchase order's particular framework, the change had to be confirmed by an official committee. Three engineers were commissioned in January 1887 to study the question and to propose the most adequate means of ensuring the lifts' functioning. *Julien-Napoléon Haton de la Goupillière* (1833-1927), a Polytechnique engineer and Chief Inspector of Mines, named by the Ministry of Public Works, asked to collaborate with two colleagues, *Victor Contamin* (1840-1893), a Compagnie des chemins de fer du Nord engineer from the École centrale des Arts et Manufactures where he also taught, and *Gustave Richard* (1849-1912), a Mines civil engineer, then head of the Société de constructions mécaniques spéciales and member of the commission on machines at the 1889

World Fair. Initially assigned to examine the machines in place, the three experts were also rapidly asked to assess the solutions spontaneously submitted by other inventors and manufacturers. Their gradually broadening mission favoured the radical conclusions reached in the report by *Haton de La Goupillière* in July 1887, which purely and simply recommended giving up the norias system. [Fig. 5] Beyond the unusual circumstances under which it was made, the assessment revealed the relative value of technical choices. Analysing the line of argument provides the opportunity of examining how the variety of the actors' specific backgrounds accounted for the wide range of judgement and decision criteria.

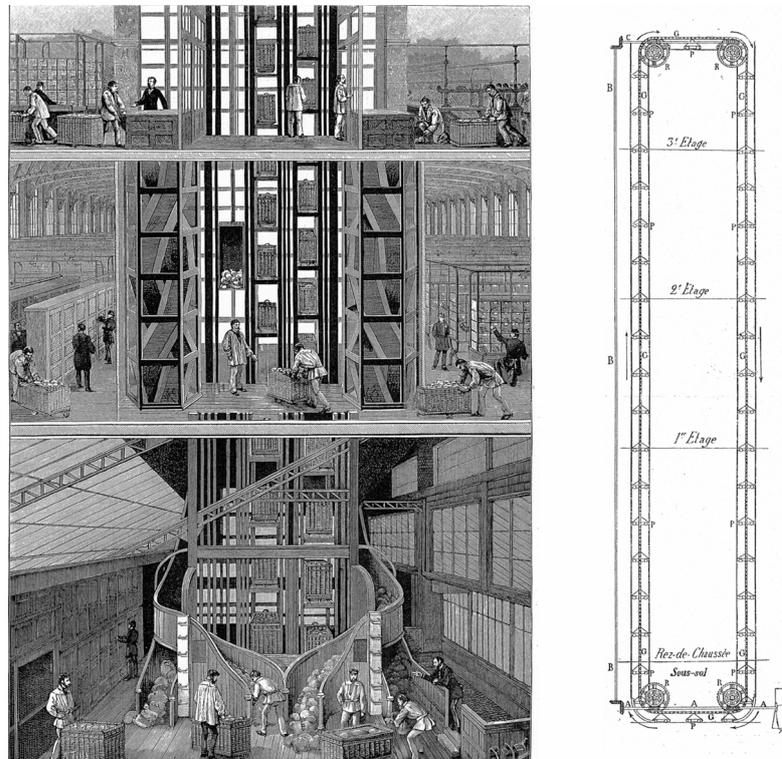


Figure 5: The norias as published by the illustrated press after their failings, a fictitious view in use (left) and an explanatory diagram (right); (*L'illustration*, August 13, 1887, pp. 100, 112)

The investigation these new actors focused on the machines conceived by *Auguste Bonnet* led them to retain only the disadvantages these presented: "the ensemble unquestionably points to an ingenious mind flushing out a series of difficulties to solve each one after the other, but this intellectual effort ultimately leads to an extreme complexity." (AN, b, *Haton de La Goupillière* report, July 1887) To their technical reservations, they added economic and practical considerations. On this very last point, "the extraordinary complexity of the machine room and the accumulation of organs to the point of confusion in a limited amount of space" (*idem*) were considered a hindrance to the mechanism's upkeep and the replacement of pieces. Imperceptibly, the line of argument shifted towards challenging the principle of permanent motion itself, for various reasons mentioned in the report. Firstly, noting that the mechanism required a permanent motive power, even when empty, the experts emphasized the discrepancy between the amount of work expended and its limited effects. The system's output seemed to them "disastrous." (*Ibid*) But more broadly, the hypotheses that had prevailed during the norias' conception were also re-examined. The three experts' conclusions were diametrically opposed to the initial choices. Thus, a new interpretation of the security rules and of the postal service requirements concluded in favour of goods lifts with a back and forth motion, hand-operated on demand. Deemed more convenient, this solution also seemed more profitable to the system's functioning: "unencumbered as fully as possible by the difficulties of loading and unloading, we can, if need be, increase the average speed, and consequently the carried load." (*Ibid*)

For all that, while recommending to replace the norias by lifts with back and forth motion, the three experts also ruled out the proposition made by the *Samain* firm to the Ministère des Postes et Télégraphes [Ministry of Mail and Telegraphs], in the name of the same principles of convenience and economy of energy. As for carrying out entirely new studies and replacing the machines in place, they recommended a system using "only very simple organs, well known, and well tried" and encouraged the administration "to deal from now on only with a first rate firm." (AN, b, *Haton de La Goupillière* report, July 1887) They suggested replacing each of the two norias by six independent goods lifts fitted into the upwards and downwards-going shafts. *Haton de La Goupillière* and his colleagues, aware of the circumstances which involved them in the project, emphasized how much the new system would easily cope with possible breakdowns. The number of machines allowed for the equipment's maintenance, because stopping one goods lift wouldn't prevent the others from working. This new brief was studied in collaboration with Mr *Couronne*, engineer at the Ponts et Chaussées Municipal De-

partment and inspector of the elevating machines of the Ville de Paris—he was also a member of the commission that examined the Hôtel des Postes machines in August 1886—and with the *Cail* Firm. Carefully chosen by the Haton committee, the former was in fact really quite competent to execute the work.

The change of brief due to the experts' study aptly illustrates the link between the technical choices and the criteria that determined them. More widely, it allows one to measure the new developments that occurred during the work, between the initial intentions and the construction time. Such is probably the case for many projects (Lambert, 2007), but the present jobsite's history precisely shows the various factors of these changing judgements. First, the emergency of repairing the technical damage was a situation radically different from the reasoned approach for a project's development. Furthermore, from the technical standpoint, much progress occurred in the field of lifts during the period when *Auguste Bonnet* worked on conception and adjustment of the goods lifts, from 1882 to 1886. This increased the discrepancy between the imperfection of their mechanism, the result of an innovating research process over a relatively long period, and the quality of available machinery when the Hôtel's lifts were re-assessed. Last but not least, the protagonists' respective background was doubtless one of the most crucial elements. Abandoning the norias, as argued by *Haton* and his colleagues, was approved by the Post Office's managers. To what extent did the turnaround in estimating the needs reflect the change of institutional players? On one hand, the Post and Telegraph Department was presented with a new director in 1885, before being placed under the authority of the Ministère des Finances [Finance Ministry] in 1887, and on the other, the Department of the Bâtiments civils [Civil Buildings Department] was also transferred, to the Ministère des Beaux-Arts [Fine Arts Ministry]. In that context, what could remain of the dynamic spirit lent to the project by the understanding between the architect and senior officials, and fuelled by a climate of administrative reform? Under the combined effects of circumstances the consensus achieved some years before concerning the brief's major orientations lost all legitimacy. Technical innovation which, in *Bonnet's* system, answered specific functional needs, was rejected by *Haton de La Goupillière's* report: instead, for the sake of simplicity and energy savings, machines were implemented that were, if not standard, at least of more ordinary conception.

### THE SPECTACLE OF TECHNICAL FAILURE?

The successive postponements in Hôtel des Postes' opening and the waiting situation that followed deeply affected the way the press covered the matter. In December 1886 and January 1887 a multiplicity of articles jumped on the opportunity to denounce the technical malfunctions that arose from the building's conception. The outburst of the press obviously reflected a climate of widespread impatience, but also bore witness to a real undercurrent of hostility expressed by a conjunction of rumours and slanders: the opinions formulated by opponents of the nascent République or of *Cochery's* reform of the postal service sometimes owed more to political or trade union motivations than to anything else. Their impact was not only significant on the way the building was perceived, but even on the ways the protagonists acted and official decisions were taken. (Lambert, 2009)

The notion that mechanical damage was enough to entirely paralyse a public facility catering to the entire centre of Paris sparked off repeated criticisms. In the first place the criticism challenged the brief's definition, but this imperceptibly led to discrediting the architecture itself. Among the subjects of controversy the most scathing and recurrent criticism naturally concerned the decision to stack the services, which made lifts a necessity, as opposed to the traditional one-story layout. Arguably, however, the building's architectural appreciation, be it slanderous or not, ironically seemed to echo *Julien Guadet's* line of argument itself, largely reproduced in the press before July 1886. Aware of the utilitarian dimension of his interpretation of the Hôtel des Postes he described his approach as "a severe discipline of sincerity and adjustment of the work to the brief, inspired above all by the needs, by moral decency as well as material decency." (Guadet, 1886, p. 547) Aware of the building's duality—defined both by its function and by its sponsor, "a state factory, in the centre of Paris, a monument" (*Idem*, p. 547)—he emphasized the importance of the stone façades, crucial according to him to express its civic character. But he especially valued a design approach guided by the project's adjustment to the service's practical needs. These are convictions which *Guadet* will not forget to assert at other moments in his career, as a teacher among others (Guadet, 1901-1904). The more the project's functional part seemed significant in the architect's approach—more than its artistic or monumental expression—the more his position was open to the attacks from the press of which he was the subject. These attacks prompted his reply in January 1887 in a booklet entitled *À propos du nouvel hôtel des Postes*. Written to justify his project's orientations by retracing all the stages of the commission and brief's process, his text reasserted the doctrinal stance he previously expressed. A new fact, however, appeared, directly linked to the recent incidents: in his booklet *Guadet* isolated the role of mechanics in his project's designing; "I am an architect" he writes "and I am not a mechanical engineer." (Guadet, 1887, p. 11) His specifying the distinction showed his awareness of the various degrees of the polemic that surrounded him, in terms of responsibility in particular. Strictly speaking, constructing the machines was a specialists' matter, but their correlations with the building's arrangements and the specific demands that generated the innovations were actually the architect's prerogative within a comprehensive and collective conception approach. To our knowledge, such an argument never appeared explicitly in the press, but *Haton de la Goupillière's* report was indeed underpinned by the evidence of close links between the brief's organisational and technical specifications and the project itself.

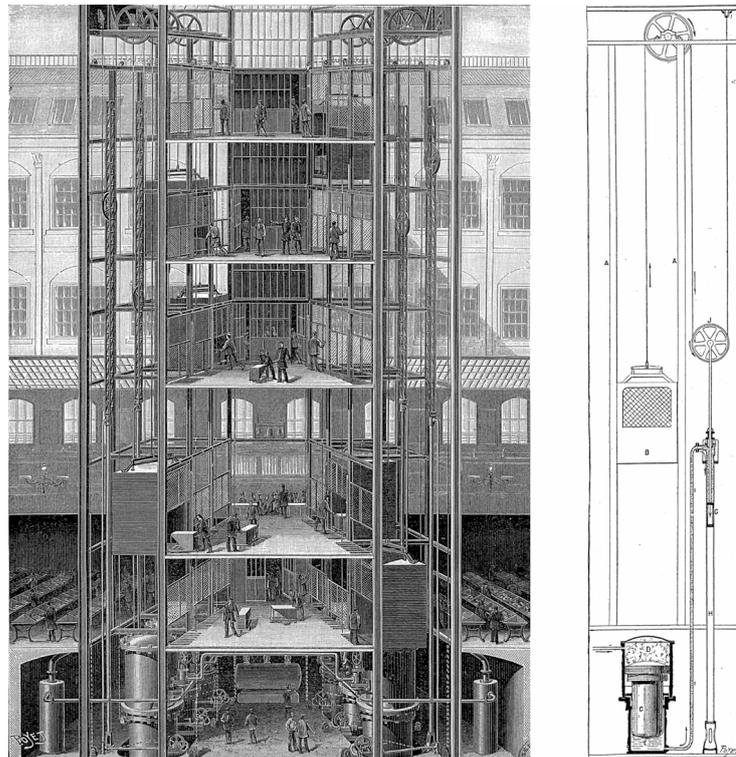


Figure 6: The new good lifts as published by the illustrated press, a fictitious view in use (left) and an explanatory diagram (right); (*L'illustration*, July 7, 1888, pp. 5, 20)

The lengthening delays in the lifts' repair and implementing radicalised the forms of controversy, both in the public opinion and in the wheels of public administrations. Even after the experts' recommendation of the system proposed by the *Cail* firms in July 1887, implementing it still took an extra year. [Fig. 6] Identifying the responsibilities engaged in this matter and the financial questions linked to the added costs involved even members of the parliamentary assemblies, as shown by the questions at the *Chambre des Députés* [Chamber of Representatives] or the *Conseil municipal de Paris* [Paris Municipal Council]. The institutional climate was moreover affected by the disagreements between the various ministerial departments involved, emphasized by the previously mentioned transfers and replacements of their managers. The alleged inaction publicly denounced was in reality hiding something far more complex. Behind the succession of postponements publicly announced for the building's opening, there was in fact a conjunction of extra time required both to carry out evaluations and to study and implement new technical solutions, a situation worsened by the added constraints of public sponsorship and voting credits. Thus the application of the three experts' recommendations in July 1887 took no less than a year. Therefore, what the *Hôtel des Postes* case seemed to emanate above all were the uncertainties and trial and error nature characteristic of innovation. To measure its impact on public awareness, such a perception must be related to the general state of mind at the end of the century. The *Hôtel*'s "serial story" doubtless suffered from the contemporary vision of a capital city's transformation in full swing. At a time when "technical progress" was so highly valued, the sight of the difficulties on the *Hôtel des Postes*' jobsite emphasizes the distance between the glorious side of technique, then celebrated at the 1889 World Fair, and its dark side, revealed by the failings of the *Hôtel des Postes*.

#### CONCLUSION: TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT, THE METAPHOR OF A FORM OF FUNCTIONALISM?

Goods lifts were indeed crucial to the project of the *Hôtel des Postes*, and the consequences of their failings were the most obvious, as well as paradoxical, indication of this. Beyond their role in the building's running, the uncertainties of their implementation indicate what they represented for the architect himself. Guadet wanted the *noria* system but the postal administration ceased to defend it after *Haton*'s report. The fact that it was finally abandoned does challenge *Guadet*'s technical choice. Actually, his design regarding façades and their role in the building's expression, conveyed also by his own comments (*Guadet*, 1886; *Guadet*, 1901-1904), should not overshadow his reasoned approach to the project's conception. He deemed his stance "rationalist," but today we would easily consider it as functionalism, of the kind that gives primacy to a building's function over the architectural elements, as such. His successive projects between 1878 and 1880 reveal a nearly obsessive search for the most appropriate arrangements, perpetually guided by the conviction that "something better can be done" as he wrote in his July 13, 1880 report. (AN, a) Some changes he introduced were purely on his own initiative... From this standpoint, the instructions for the goods lifts should be related with other spatial arrangements designed to organize circulations in the building, from the mail traffic, to the vehicles and agents themselves. The separated access—in and out—were the most basic elements of this search for

fluidity, to which the vertical circulations also contributed. Thus, in the first project of July 1878 the work rooms were served by a large double helix staircase, with two independent stairs going either up or down. Such a degree of sophistication was abandoned in the subsequent versions. In these, the same problem was solved by laying out independent stairwells. However, these dispositions reveal Guadet's truly functionalist mindframe. The comparison between the good lifts and the other arrangements designed to enhance fluidity is doubtless useful to understand Guadet and his project partners' preference for the noria system. Beyond its assets in workflow management, is not the constant motion of the goods lifts a metaphor for the postal service's permanent activity? If so, the appeal of this technical choice seems far more intellectual than practical. In this respect, does not Julien Guadet's relationship with technical innovation and the use of mechanical equipment in his project prefigure a logic which became systematic in more radical stances of twentieth century architects? The connection may seem even more relevant when considering the gap between the hope and the public disappointment triggered by such a doctrine, exemplified by several examples in modern architecture's historiography. (Guillaume, 1987; Reichlin, 1997; Vigato, 1985)

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