

Cité du Train, Former French Railway Museum in Mulhouse—A New Rail Heritage Perspective

Jean-Marc Combe

After 8 years of hard work and steadfast vision, the Cité du Train was officially inaugurated on 14 April 2005 by Mr Gilles de Robien, the French Minister of Transport. When first mentioned in a March 1997 report, the project had a scientific and cultural basis, drawing inspiration from a previous conceptual study by l'Atelier de l'Île in 1995. These two documents clearly established the need to do more than simply exhibit railway equipment, however perfectly it may have been restored. It was obvious that new encompassing themes should be developed, such as how rail transportation has changed history, how it created a unique society of railway workers, and how the expectations of rail passengers, no matter what their place in society, have changed over time. It was also thought that visitors to a modern museum should have access to up-to-date devices and services, including audio-tour devices, a restaurant and a boutique.

The architectural contest organized in October 1997 was won by the company, Francois Seigneur-Sylvie de la Dure, and construction started soon after.

After many recommendations encompassing architecture and museum science, the budget was set at €8.6 million with the financial burden shared equally by four institutional partners: the national government (through DRAC Alsace), the Alsace Region, the Département du Haut-Rhin, and the Communauté d'Agglomérations Mulhouse Sud-Alsace.

The architects recommended preserving the large hall of the museum in its existing state and suggested improving the hall by enhancing its museum-oriented functions. They also recommended building a new annexe to the older structure near the courtyard, housing the reception and administration offices, and a museum about firefighting (whose collections had to be relocated). The

architects worked with museum expert Marcel Meyer to develop a vision for this new building to house new exhibitions. They developed a building design enveloped by a multicoloured surface delineating dimly lit space; once the main design concept was accepted, it was necessary to determine the arrangement of exhibits within the space. The following six themes were defined after studying the collections.

Six Themes

- *Les jolies colonies de vacances* (Fun Holiday Camps)
This theme focusses on the massive flow of holiday travellers resulting from the 1936 introduction of a paid holiday system for employees. The theme is illustrated by the 'railcar Michelin,' a train on rubber tyres (the famous *Micheline*), and by a third-class passenger railcar belonging to the Paris-Orléans Railway, with laterally opening doors. Visitors can enter the carriage where they can watch a film about the new system of paid vacations.
- *Les trains présidentiels* (Presidential Trains)
This theme starts from the spectacular jump from a train on 23 May 1920 by then-President of the Republic, Paul Deschanel. The theme is grounded on a *Forquenot* locomotive and the PR 1 presidential carriage.
- *Le Chemin de Fer et la Montagne* (Rail Travel in the Mountains)
This technical and historical theme recalls the numerous difficulties railway engineers faced in conquering high altitudes. Exhibits include a self-propelled carriage for the meter-gauge linking St-Gervais with Vallorcine, a rotary snowplough, and the Paris-Orléans Railway's steam locomotive pushing it.
- *Le Chemin de Fer et la Guerre* (Railways and War)
This spectacular theme is illustrated by a locomotive on its side, representing sabotage by the French Résistance in 1944. Other exhibits recall WWI and the Holocaust. Visitors can also see a flatcar carrying a mock-up of a German tank, and a covered rail wagon with the inscription, 'Capacity: 40 men, 8 horses in single file.'
- *Le Monde des Cheminots* (The World of Railway Workers)
This theme illustrates the many skills of railway workers. It includes, the celebrated 'mythical couple' joining the functions of engine driver and fireman as seen in an extract from Jean Renoir's 1938 film, *La bête humaine* (*The Human Beast*), which was inspired by an Emile Zola story and starred Jean Gabin (see *JRTR* 25, pp. 46–51). Exhibits presented within the theme include a large 241 A 1 steam locomotive built in 1925, a wagon on bogies, and a pump car.
- *L'Univers du Voyage* (The World of Travel)
This theme focusses on the many passengers who have travelled by train over the years. It shows examples of rolling stock offering luxurious rail travel, suburban commuting, the Paris Metro subway, and urban trips. The theme is supported by an impressive line-up two steam locomotives (an *Atlantic Nord* and 030 *Bourbonnais*), a 4th-class Alsace-Lorraine carriage, a restaurant car, a carriage with open top deck once used by suburban commuters, a motorized Sprague carriage from the Paris Metro subway, a Pullman carriage, a sleeping car, and a *Nord* carriage on bogies with laterally opening doors.



Aerial view of Cité du Train

(Cité du Train)

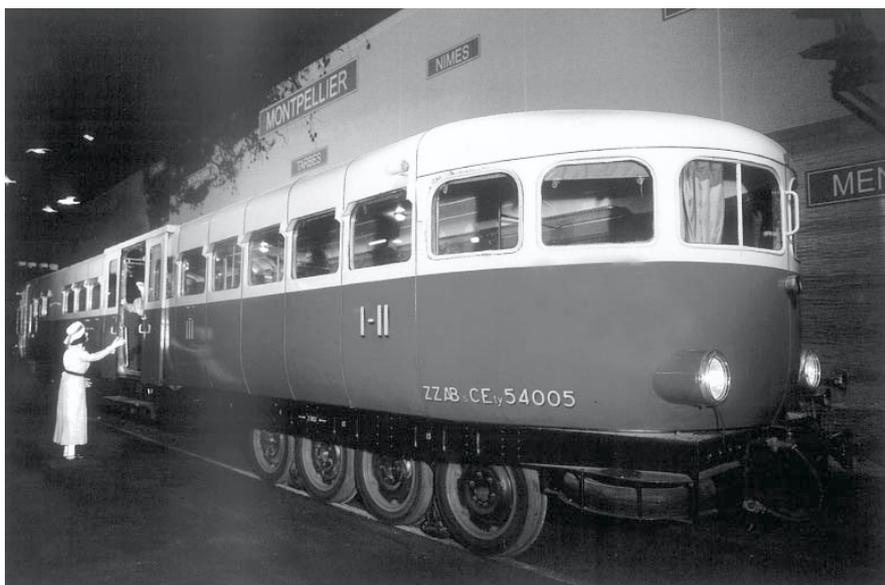
Historic and Social Ties

The first four themes have a strong historical character, while the last two have a decidedly social one. Each theme is highlighted by many pieces of equipment and most are illustrated by

mannequins in costumes conveying short but lively messages on the theme. The exhibits are also illustrated on TV or video screens, always with a perspective, making the exhibits and theme easy to grasp. As an example, the Fun Holiday Camps theme is illustrated partly by the *Micheline* railcar and the Pullman *Orient*

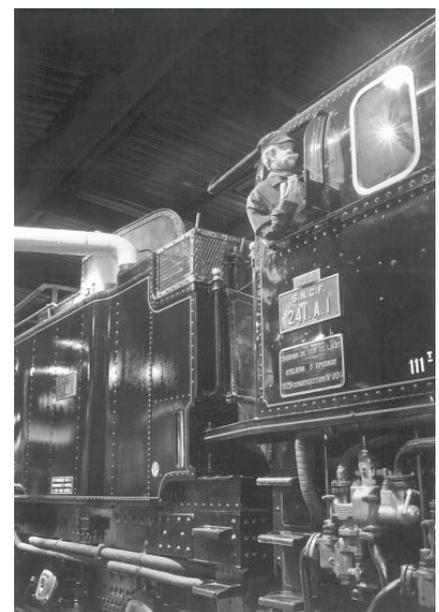
Express C5DT railcar, partly by a film on the *Micheline's* history, and partly by another film showing the extensive trips taken by workers and their families after the 1936 introduction of paid holidays. I should also emphasize that The World of Travel theme is underlined by an impressive (and barrier-free) footbridge offering a direct view into the carriage interiors. The footbridge is given greater impact by a film projected on the carriage windows and the sound of a steam locomotive running on the rails, creating the illusion that the train is moving. All themes in the new building come under the generic title 'The Golden Age of Rail' while 'Adventure by Rail' is kept for the old building.

Obviously the museum could not ignore the evolution of railway equipment, especially because the need to depict the history of rail science and technology was considered the primary reason for establishing the original museum in 1971. This is why the rehabilitated older building continues to be used exclusively for this purpose. All tracks except two were shortened in order to offer a suitable



Micheline XM 5005 rubber-tyred railcar

(Cité du Train)



Locomotive 241 A1 (1925)

(Cité du Train)

configuration for the 232 U1 locomotive running every 20 minutes on one of the original-length lines, which is perhaps the most impressive attraction in the older part of the museum. The space created by shortening the other tracks is used for temporary exhibits.

The collections have been completely reclassified into coherent and homogeneous themes as follows:

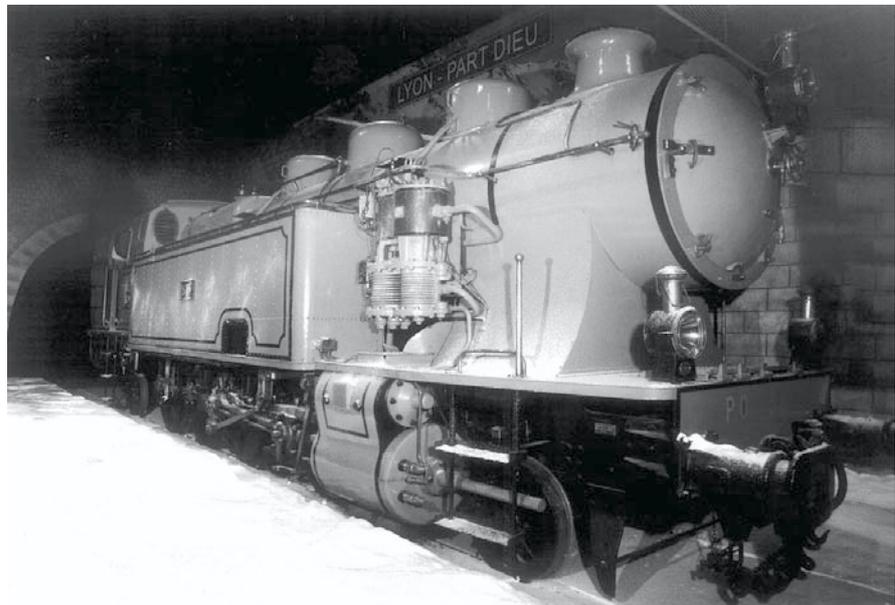
- Trains from the Industrial Revolution, including the 1844 *Buddicom* locomotive and the 1852 *Crampton*, followed by a train from the Second Empire (1852–70) era
- History of steam locomotion, including the No. 3. 1102 *Nord* partially cut open for the 1937 Paris International Exposition
- Interesting railway equipment and track sections positioned at the end of the above two thematic arrangements, all enhanced by 'a forest' of old mechanical semaphore signals
- One line for regularly changing exhibitions of signalling systems and other equipment
- Alternatives to steam locomotion (electric and diesel traction)
- Speed records achieved by the Bugatti railcar, BB 9004, and CC 7107 (1955 world record holder)
- Railcars

Although the new building is dimly lit, the equipment in the older building is boldly illuminated. The centrepiece of the old building is the 232 U 1 steam locomotive, which runs every 20 minutes, as well as an operating mechanical coal bin, and an old, track-side steam-driven water pump.

Visitors can explore the last four lanes of the older building where they see equipment—much of it highlighting railway evolution—that could not be

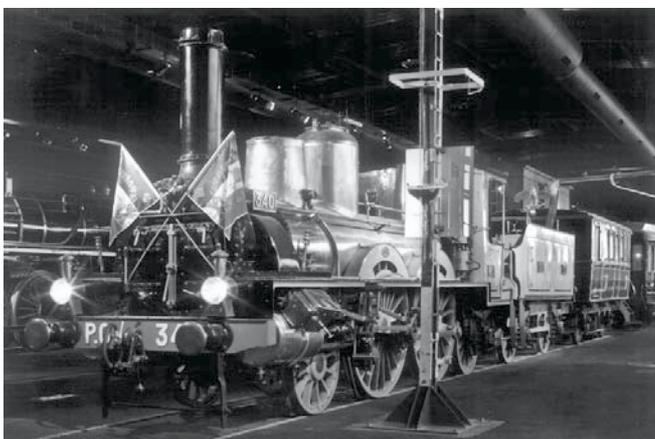
displayed in the new building or in the theme sections of the old building.

An open space created between the two buildings, in front of the restaurant, extends into part of the old interior courtyard, and is enhanced by a shelter from the old Cluny Station that was removed to the museum. Various events are held here, trains can be brought in, and equipment from the museum's large hall or storehouse can also be exhibited. The old hall also displays many models



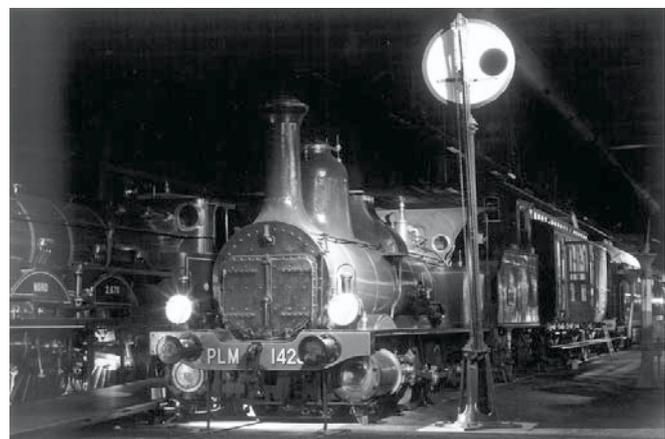
Paris-Orléans Railway's Locomotive 5452 (1922)

(Cité du Train)



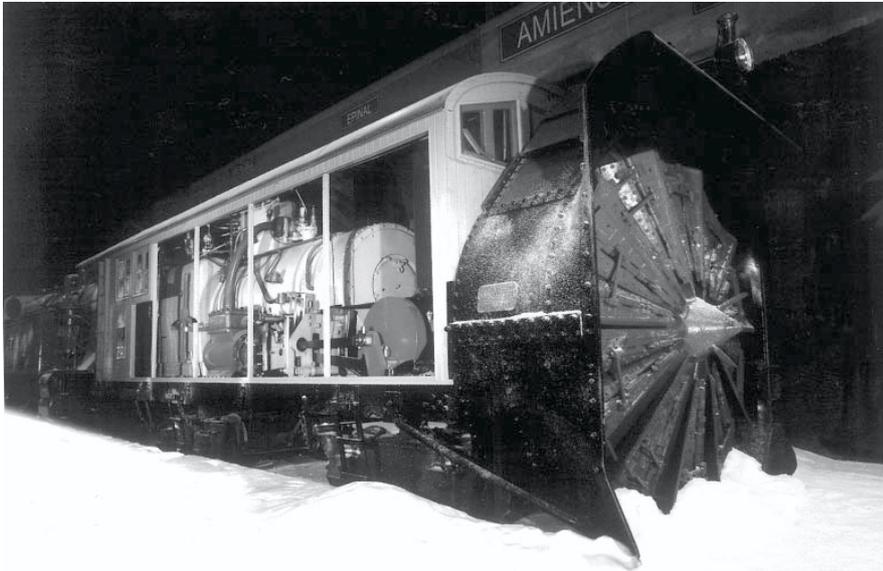
Presidential Trains exhibition

(Cité du Train)



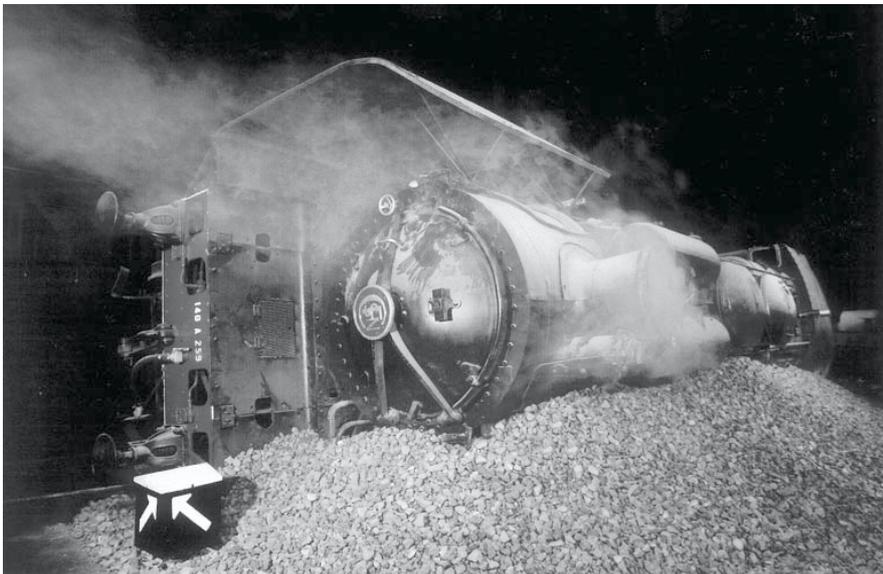
The World of Travel exhibition

(Cité du Train)



Paris-Orléans Railway's rotary snow plough (1909)

(Cité du Train)



Locomotive 140 A 259 of Nord (Northern Railway, 1928)

(Cité du Train)

and rolling stock component parts, all helping visitors learn more about locomotives, carriages and other railcars. In addition, display windows on one side of the building exhibit many devices once used for communications, including telephone technology and signalling, motors to activate switches, office equipment and measuring devices.

More Rolling Stock and Audio Tours

Enthusiasts of old railway memorabilia will be pleased that not only has the quality of the exhibits been improved, but the quantity is greater too. The impressive rolling stock inventory has grown from 80 to 102 pieces. The old storehouse, which

was previously crammed full and not open to the public, now holds only a dozen or so locomotives and is now open for some viewings.

Visitors can borrow free audio-tour devices and the new section of the museum includes simultaneous English or German interpretation of explanations and films. In the older section, the audio tour offers a comprehensive history of the rolling stock exhibitions. Visitors not wanting to use the audio devices may prefer to read signs describing the engines, although they are not as informative as the audio tour.

The reception hall behind the ticket office has a boutique selling books and various items related to rail transport.

Young people have not been neglected. Booklets for different age levels help children understand the museum's collection and the basic scientific principles that govern the functioning of railway equipment, whether steam, electric or diesel locomotives, railcars, or safety devices.

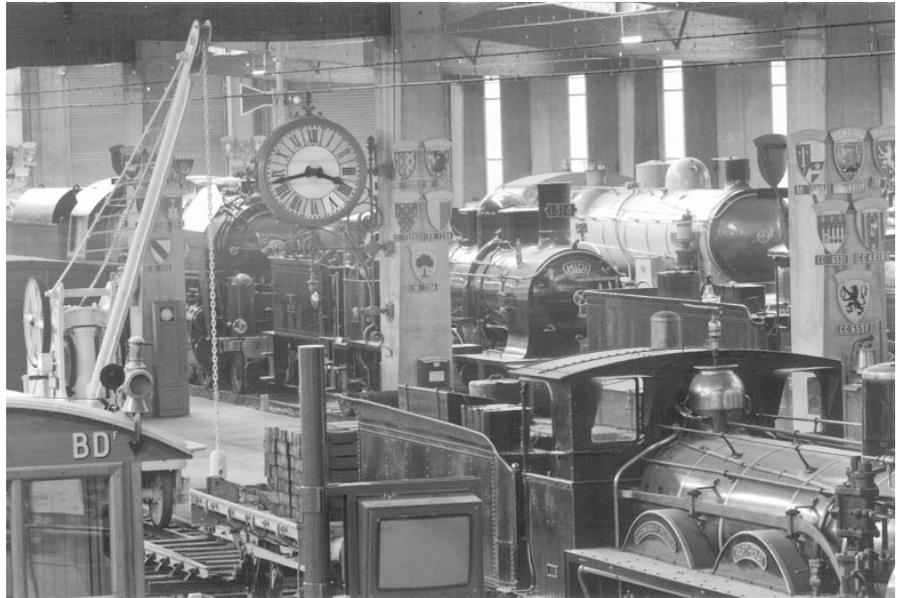
The museum also has archives with a comprehensive collection of historical documents for researchers to consult near Mulhouse Station.

On-time Reopening

The expansion and reconstruction work started in the autumn and winter of 2002-03. The first task was demolishing the old reception hall, offices, restaurant, old gallery linking the buildings, and the Firefighters' Museum, in preparation for construction of the new building, which was completed in March 2005 a few days before the public opening. The museum was closed during the construction period from 1 January 2004. All work was completed on schedule and within budget. The last 3 months before the reopening were spent arranging exhibits in the old and new buildings, finalizing modifications to

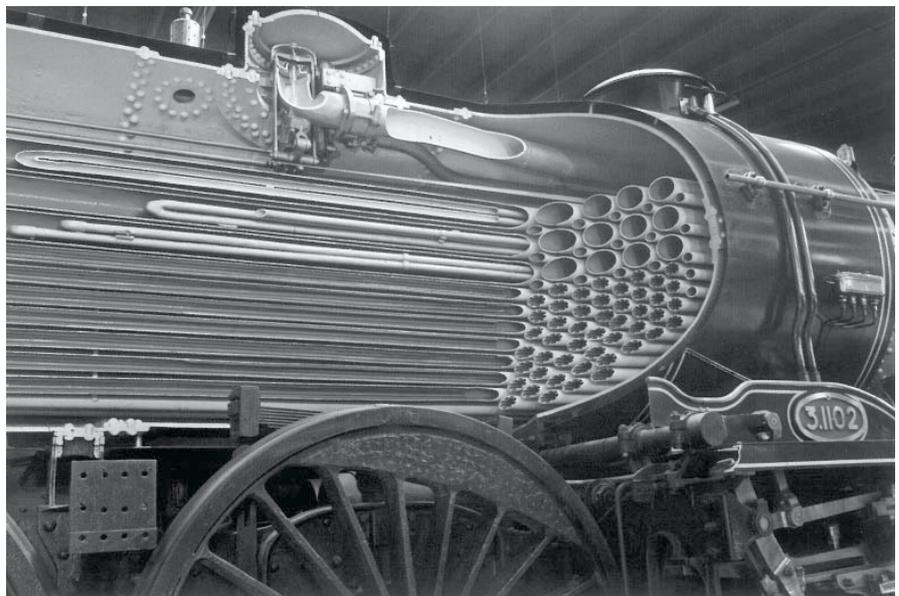
electrical, heating, and air-conditioning systems, and completing the interiors of the restaurant, boutique and offices.

I should add that a provisional budget of approximately €150,000 was established for future improvements to the galleries in the old building and to the Michel Doerr Hall (where meetings and seminars are held), and for creation of a garden around the rotunda, which was previously used as the Musée Express space for exploring railway history and technology. For legal and administrative purposes, the association supporting the museum has signed a contract with the Société Culture Espaces à Paris to manage all commercial operations of the Cité du Train (boutique, ticket office and restaurant) as well as promotional and marketing services. It is also important to note that French National Railways (SNCF) still owns nearly all the equipment displayed in the Cité du Train, with a few pieces belonging to Wagons-Lits and RATP. With such a valuable collection, the Cité du Train looks well placed to face the challenges of the 21st century and beyond. ■



Steam locomotives in rolling stock hall

(Cité du Train)



Smoke pipes, superheating tubes and steam dome of Baltic-type 3.1102 of Nord (1910)

(Cité du Train)



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