Paris museum

Discovery for the people

A GIANT abattoir on a 135-acre site in north-west Paris, now under conversion into a permanent spectacle of science and technology at a cost to the French state of some FF 4,500 million (£450 million), is to be launched in the next few days as an independent "commercial and industrial" organization.

"Launched" is the word, for the *Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie* at la Villette is surrounded by a great moat, which led to headaches over the access of emergency services solved only by driving a road across two bridges and right down the spine of the building. But this was a minor problem for the originator and present director of the *Cité*, physicist Maurice Levy, who was brought back to get the project under way again after the previous director was beaten by conflicts between the scientific planners of the *Cité* and the architects.

Now Levy says the *Cité* will open in March 1986, and he welcomes its new independence which "will give us much more freedom to deal with partners in industry and the banks". Under fire from all quarters for the cost of the grandiose project, Levy has enough money in this year's budget to complete the building and equip three-quarters of it (leaving room for expansion). But there may be some concern over projected ultimate running costs of FF 500-600 million (£50-60 million) annually.

Levy estimates that 30 per cent will be covered by receipts from 5 million visitors a year, but the rest must be covered by the state — or by industry, which might thus gain too strong an influence over the policy of the *Cité*. And there is a general election next year, in which the government seems likely to shift to the right.

Levy insists, however, that the approach to science and technology at the *Cité* will be "critical". But criticism will be "neutral, discussing the pros and cons; science and technology are no longer taken for granted". So the *Cité* is to emphasize the socioeconomic consequences and context of discovery and technology, Levy claims, but he admits that there is little of this to be seen in a vignette of the coming exhibition now on show on site in the small hall *Janus II*, recently visited by President Mitterrand.

Other features that will distinguish the *Cité* from most science and technology museums around the world are:

- that it will deal essentially with the present and future, and not with the past;
- that it will aim to serve the whole public, and not a specialized community;
- and that it will make use of "the enormous revolution in computing and audiovisual communications technology" since the construction of similar museums (such as the Air and Space Museum in Washington).

Levy's vision for the *Cité*, which will be part of a park including a "Great Hall" for exhibitions (built around a vast 19th-century cast-iron cattle-shed) and the Paris Conservatoire de la Musique (which is moving to the site), is that it should "modernize the minds of the people". The material in the *Cité* will not be presented by discipline (as at the existing Paris *Palais de la Découverte*, which Levy sees as more for science specialists than the *Cité*), but according to people's real-life experiences.

The *Cité* should "make people much more aware of the changes that are taking place, of industrial restructuring, preparing people for the next industrial phase", says Levy of his brainchild.

Considering the costs and implications of this restructuring, the investment in the *Cité*, is small, Levy believes. The site is

peripheral to Paris (unlike the *Centre Pompidou*, a similarly expensive and controversial arts centre designed by British architect Richard Rogers, which now attracts eight million visitors a year and is no longer controversial) but "people are willing to move all over Paris now for cultural events" and underground railway and road links are good. Levy hopes that by the end of 1986, after nine months open to visitors and probably facing a new government, the *Cité* will be able to demonstrate as much success as the *Centre Pompidou*.

But so much for Paris. For the rest of France, the *Cité* will host 40 classrooms continuously for provincial schools to visit for two weeks at a time ("like they do for skiing trips"); Levy is also arranging exhibitions and a variety of events with bodies outside the capital. "We shall be a resource" for the whole of France, says Levy. Sooner or later, everybody comes to Paris.

Robert Walgate

French universities

Appointments in doldrums

THE bigger French universities are facing a major problem over an increase in teaching duties imposed upon them last year — because they cannot find the students to fill the hours they should teach. The result is that "it is impossible to ask for new posts", says one geophysicist affected by the problem at the University of Paris VI.

But according to the Ministry of Education, which is in the midst of a thorough reform of the higher education system in France, the problem varies greatly from university to university, and from discipline to discipline.

Also, as universities such as Paris VI reorganize their entry year (the *premier cycle*) and provide more "orientation" teaching for the incoming students (many of whom leave after the first year), their teaching load will be taken up and they will be free again to request new posts; or so the ministry officials hope.

More teaching, however, means less time for research, unless the universities "modulate" their teaching load by distinguishing, effectively, between teaching and research careers in their departments, shifting more teaching to one professor than another. Under last year's new regulations the universities are free to do this, but, says ministry research director for the universities, M. Bernard Descompes, "I must confess I know no university where the distinction is important".

By discipline, the number of free posts varies greatly because the number of students entering those disciplines varies greatly, and because of government policies of expansion in technology-related areas. In computer science, electronics and all the engineering disciplines, "we need many

more teachers" says Descompes.

On the one hand, in certain areas, the number of new posts offered is so large that "it is impossible to be sure that in all cases we are appointing people of quality". Descompes puts the threshold at 5-6 per cent a year of the total number of staff in a discipline. So in computer science, for example, where French universities are expanding at 10 per cent a year, "we are in danger", says Descompes. Electronics and management sciences also come above five per cent.

On the other hand, in the fundamental disciplines, in particular chemistry, physics and "of course" in literary disciplines, the number of appointments throughout France has fallen to just one per cent. There is a "great danger for the future of those disciplines".

Molecular biology has benefited a little from the connection with biotechnology, and is showing 2 per cent growth in posts, says Descompes. But French biology has been dominated for a long time by traditional disciplines and molecular biology was late to take a grip so the need for expansion in this field is particularly great. In traditional biology, expansion is only 1 per cent. But there is not the great dichotomy in biology that there is in the physical sciences between electronics and basic physics.

Nevertheless, the net recruitment in French universities is now 3 per cent a year, compared with only 1 per cent in 1981, so there has been some progress. "But the situation is still critical in more than half the disciplines", Descompes warns. And in the parlous French economic situation a major increase in appointments does not seem to be on the cards.

Robert Walgate