

Bigger, brighter, better

After significant renovations, the new self-service canteen at the French Senate has opened with 220 seats and the capacity to serve up to 700 meals per service. Victoria Brownlee speaks to **Denis Daveine** FCSI about the conception, design and delivery of this multi-building project.

Seeing the bright, spacious self-service canteen and dining rooms of the French Senate's administrative staff now, it's hard to imagine how the bustling activity could have been contained in a smaller, underground space.

At lunchtime, the canteen comes alive with diners – ranging from police and firefighters, to the large administrative staff. The dining rooms – which were formerly office spaces and, even further back in history, the Senate's stables – have also been transformed to be both functional and comfortable.

An extension into the building's courtyard, with a full wall of glass, brings a lot of natural light to the space and reduces crowding. A coffee area with bar tables completes the dining space and allows people to linger over the last moments of their lunch break while cleverly ensuring that dining tables are turned over at an appropriate pace.

A growing project

Having long outgrown the former kitchen and dining area, the Senate asked Denis Daveine FCSI of ALMA Consulting to undertake feasibility studies looking at renovating their current offerings and



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creating new facilities in various locations within the Senate's buildings. After deciding on the location, the concept grew.

Daveine knew he needed to create a kitchen capable of making and serving up to 700 meals daily. The numbers alone were not challenging for Daveine – in France, self-service lunch canteens remain commonplace in schools and many large organisations – but creating the Senate's new kitchen and dining rooms over three levels, spanning different buildings, complicated things slightly.

ALMA Consulting worked with architects Architecture Patrick Mauger and building engineering company, OTE Ingénierie, due to the complexity of the project. "We needed to create staircases, service lifts and do a lot of structural work, include breaking down walls. Then there were the technical requirements >

– ventilation, electricity and plumbing – in a building that wasn’t designed to accommodate them,” Daveine explains.

As the project evolved, plans changed to increase the size of the dining area, extending it into the courtyard. The former outdoor green space then had to be reworked, all while avoiding an oven dating back to the Roman era that still stands in the courtyard. “The project was bigger than we initially planned, more expensive, and took longer to complete,” Daveine says.

For the Senate’s restaurant manager, Jean-Christophe Trubert, one of the most important parts of the project conception was the design of the self-service food zones. Trubert wanted something more modern than the traditional self-service lines. “With ALMA Consulting, we wanted to have these different collection zones... we didn’t want diners arriving with trays lining up one after another like in the old diners and canteens,” he explains. Instead, people can move around freely, choosing from a wide variety of entrées, cheeses and desserts, or creating their own salad, before selecting their main course.

The hot-food service counter sits



Left to right from above: One of the Senate’s historic rooms; Denis Daveine FCSI; the dining room was extended into the courtyard; an artist’s impression of the new extension with its floor-to-ceiling windows



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alongside the self-service zones. A large array of main courses is on display, both on example plates and on large TV screens above the service area, helping to speed up selection and reduce queuing. Mains are served by kitchen staff, which allows diners to personalise their orders – for example, a smaller serving, no meat or no sauce – which both reduces food waste and improves the dining experience. Diners then collect bread and cutlery before paying and heading to the adjoining dining rooms, which are fitted with 220 seats, spanning multiple areas.

All the elements

Where the ALMA Consulting team really came into its own on this project was in the kitchen fit-out and design, especially considering the complicated floor plans. “Our work is first and foremost to find the



correct pathways so that everything runs smoothly,” says Daveine.

Just off the ground floor dining room is the dishwashing room. The space – large, clean and relatively quiet – receives diners’ trays via a conveyor belt, where staff members sort any waste before dishes are put through the dishwasher. The surprising calmness of this room can be attributed to the dishwasher itself, which Daveine explains uses a heat pump to collect the hot air from the dish drying and uses it to preheat the water for washing, vastly improving the ambient temperature in the room. “We try to find ways to make working in each area of the kitchen as pleasant as possible,” he says.

The store rooms, cool rooms and kitchens are all located over two levels underground, accessible via a staff staircase and two clearly labelled service



lifts, one for prepared food that has come out of the kitchen, and one for everything else. “We don’t want people to have to waste time thinking about things like hygiene pathways,” explains Daveine.

Throughout the kitchens and dishwashing rooms, a non-slip granulated resin floor – which also curves up to form the skirting boards – has been used, which Daveine says is both easier to clean and quieter than something like tiling. “At ALMA Consulting, we often do projects without collaborators, so we’re well versed in the different elements that make up a kitchen, from ventilation to flooring.”

Thinking sustainably

Along with the removal of plastic water bottles and non-biodegradable takeaway boxes, the Senate’s canteen and kitchen actively look for ways to improve sustainability. They have signed up to a programme that sees their used coffee grounds being reused to help grow oyster mushrooms (see box on p64).

There is also an emphasis on local produce where possible. Trubert estimates that 99% of their suppliers >



QUICK DETAILS

Size: 1,400 sq m (plus 645 sq m courtyard and garden)
 Cost: €6.3m (excluding tax)

TIMELINE

2015–2016: feasibility studies
 2017–2018: project implementation

THE KEY TEAM

ALMA Consulting
 Architecture Patrick Mauger
 OTE Ingénierie





are based in France, keeping food miles down. These efforts are perhaps best demonstrated by the honey being served, which is collected from beehives located within the Luxembourg Gardens just across the road.

Furthermore, the focus on dining-in reduces the amount of packaging and waste associated with takeaway lunches. “The takeaway offerings are recent, we only launched them a year ago, and today, they only account for 4-5% of meals. The French like sitting down to eat. Anglo-Saxons like standing up to eat and eating in the street, but that’s not our culture,



Main picture top: Diners can move around freely to select their meals. Above: The room where the Senate sits

although people are starting to do it a little,” explains Trubert.

To cater to the small percentage of people who do require a takeaway lunch, a small section of shelving before the cash registers is stocked with to-go items such as club sandwiches and biodegradable boxes that can be filled at the self-service counters. “We voluntarily don’t multiply our take-away offerings, because the majority of clients still choose to create their own salad or select their own hot meal,” says Trubert.

Final results

In a project like this, success can be viewed in the day-to-day running of both the kitchen and the dining room. Smooth processes result in efficient service and contented diners. According to Daveine, “People are a lot happier now. Before the dining room was underground. It was dark and poorly organised. Now, we have somewhere that works better for distribution, and that is more comfortable. It’s so much better, in fact, that certain senators come to eat here rather than in their own dining room.” ■



SUSTAINABILITY STEPS: GROWING MUSHROOMS FROM COFFEE GROUNDS

Jean-Christophe Trubert, Senate restaurant manager, entered into a circular-economy partnership with organic waste transformation association, UpCycle. UpCycle collects around 60 to 70 kg of the canteen’s used coffee grounds per week. These grounds are then used to grow oyster mushrooms for the Senate’s kitchen, which Trubert claims are of excellent quality.