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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Something Is Awry in Paris

**T**he meeting held under French Government auspices in Paris earlier this month on the subject of architectural criticism and the French press was opened by the Minister of the Environment, Michel d'Ornano, with a quote from Paul Valéry. (One expects that at French conferences.) The city, Valéry wrote in his "Théorie Poétique et Esthétique," is virtually all of civilization.

This is not a hard idea to support in Paris. Civilization, at its highest levels of order, beauty, urbanity, civility and grandeur, is a tangible and exhilarating thing in the French capital, a fact of history and art made manifest by architecture. I am bowled over by Paris every time I go there; no matter how I mean to keep my cool, I am overwhelmed by the unabashed elitism of its glorious buildings and spaces and superb architectural quality. This architectural image is at the heart of everything the world loves about Paris. Surely, one thinks, architecture will always be a part of the Parisian consciousness, "sans le savoir," like Molière's prose-speaking bourgeois gentilhomme.

Well, one thinks wrong. The French public, like just about every other public, has been estranged and alienated by new and unfamiliar architectural vocabularies, by the clash between the 19th and the 20th centuries, by environmental failures, by the inability of architects to communicate with anyone but their peers, by the increasing remoteness and difficulty of today's theory and practice. The Paris meeting was meant to explore means of raising the French public's architectural consciousness. The first concern was for an orderly intellectual approach to the problem, or how

to restore architecture to its proper place in the realm of French ideas and culture. The second aim was to find ways to close the gap that exists between architecture and the general public.

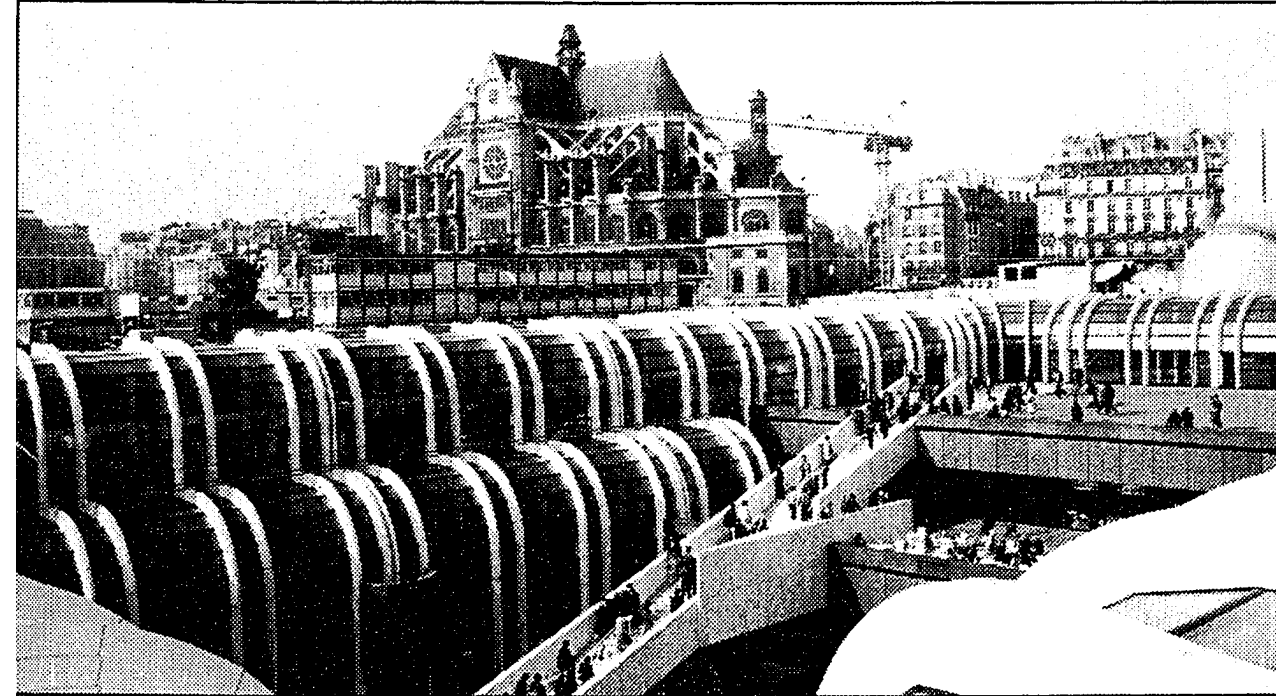
However, it is not the public I am worried about, so much as architecture. Many architects today are espousing an increasingly detached and solitary role. Some of us still believe that architecture must be a social and responsible art. This does not mean that we rap visionary work. I have no quarrel with those concepts that stretch reality and imagery as an essential parallel stream to the restrictions of the built world in order to form a significant part of the history of art and ideas.

But I came away from Paris thinking the unthinkable: A part of the problem is that something awful has happened to French architecture. One hesitates to ask the unaskable and unanswerable question, particularly when the concern and sensitivity of one's hosts are so evident, of why so much recent French building is so bad. Where are the creative impulses, the superior standards, the subtle excellences, the worldly skills that informed tradition or revolution? What went wrong from the 1920's to the present? Even with the necessary exceptions and disavowals, and with the obvious knowledge that everything isn't always roses on this side of the ocean either, the all-too-visible reality in and around Paris today is of an architecture that no one could love.

The new buildings inserted into Paris streets are an insult to the streets and their neighbors, and not just because they are different from the old ones; so were the radical additions of Hector Guimard and Auguste Perret earlier in this century. Those buildings succeeded by offering innovation with grace and art. The new developments on the periphery of Paris are either depressingly ordinary or aggressively trendy — which is more depressing still.

Most discouraging of all is the whole sad affair of Les Halles — the destruction of Paris's central food market and the vicissitudes of the plans for this important site. The first mistake, and it was a bad one, was to tear down the "iron umbrellas," built for the market by Victor Baltard in the 19th century, when the operation was moved to Rungis in the 1960's. The handsome and historic glass and iron pavilions would have been as susceptible to reuse — and every bit as successful — as Boston's Quincy Market buildings, which, as the Faneuil Hall Marketplace, offers a phenomenal demonstration of the imaginative commercial recycling of a

*Continued on Page 30*



The Forum, a new shopping center on the former site of Les Halles—"a nonplace"

# Something Is Awry in Paris

*Continued from Page 29*

distinctive place. There are close similarities in location, scale and use.

Once the pavilions were demolished, however, the future of the "hole" in the heart of Paris, as it became known internationally, was a matter of general speculation. What followed were countless inept, unsuitable or controversial schemes over a period of more than 10 years. Fortunately, none were built. Meanwhile, the hole's lower levels were filled with a subway and suburban rail line complex. (Mass transit is one of the areas in which the French have invested substantial resources for a large planning plus.)

The one constant component that survived from the earliest, commercial development proposals was a large shopping center for part of the site, called the Forum. For the rest of the site, the plan that has finally been adopted calls for an amorphous open green space and plaza, usually described in ambitious terms of a combination of Paris's formal parks and the Campo di Siena.

The Forum is now finished and operating, and is supposed to be Paris's No. 2 wonder after the Beaubourg. More of that in a moment. The park plan will, presumably, go ahead. But while government officials like it, much of the architecture profession does not. Motivated by the sincere belief that it is a failure of design and that the heart of Paris deserves better, a group of architectural leaders set up an international

restaurants and assorted bars dispense everything from haute cuisine to fast food, French style. A series of new-old street signs mark underground corridors that seem to be named after streets demolished above, a cute cliché appearing in other rebuilt parts of the city.

Like all shopping centers, this is a standardized non-place. Inside, everything is carried out at a high level of competence and dullness. The details are conventionally expert and often quite cheap; unattractive exposed ceiling services, for example, are camouflaged by open, high-tech metal grids. There is pricey consumerism to the point of overkill, but nothing to surprise, delight or enrich the eye and the mind. There is no real architecture or urbanism here at all. It is hard to prefer this flashy, replicable and ultimately ordinary merchandising formula to the eccentric charms of the streets above. Yet, this is what the official communiques describe as the "renaissance of the heart of Paris."

The news about the competition for a more inspired design for the rest of the razed area is equally bad. It is polite to say merely that the results are disappointing. The truth is that they have brutally betrayed the Candide-like faith of the sponsors in a better architectural world.

The submissions range from the bizarre to the banal. But it is not the French, alone, who have failed; this is an international group of entries including some very familiar names. There are the usual trademarks of the

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competition for an alternative plan. The results, which have been on display in Paris, were not exactly what was expected — or were they? More of that, too, in a moment.

The Forum is the work of Pencreac'h and Vasconi, a French architectural firm responsible for a good deal of building in the new town of Cergy-Pontoise. It is a super shopping center, consisting of four cleverly disposed levels of stores and services surrounding a depressed open plaza that celebrates nothing. An escalator slashes diagonally through the plaza from its top level to the ground, for a kind of spurious high drama. Around this plaza, which seems to be the least used of many entrances, and at present has absolutely no amenities beyond some extraordinarily banal sculpture, is an arched, double-level, metal-framed, clear plastic enclosure that creates an eye-catching container for the commercial space. This striking design feature also admits daylight into the lower ranges, and that is the high point of the plan.

The Forum has room for 200 shops, from the enormous facilities on two levels of FNAC, that remarkable dispenser of books, electronic equipment and sporting gear, to the familiar, brand-name couturier boutiques that appear automatically in new construction everywhere and that look, and are, the same all over the world. Twelve

cult figures and their imitators, devices narcissistically superimposed on central Paris with a disregard of anything but personal images. There are private languages of codes, metaphors, symbols and typologies. Or there is the mumbletypog mannerism of a pastiche of neo-Hausmann nothingness that puts down what it is supposed to emulate. But above all, there is a striking unconcern with the real challenge — how to create a distinctive and sympathetic intervention in the historic fabric of Paris.

Again, a reservation is necessary; there was some thoughtful work. But what this generally curious and frightful array of "solutions" demonstrates is that a lot of today's architects are arrogant, isolated or out of touch, or interested only in esthetic and theoretical fun and games. There is a point where they must touch base with the real world, and the failure to do so here was particularly irresponsible. The presentations are often quite beautiful; they will look great in a volume of visionary designs.

Something is clearly awry — and not in France alone. The breach between architectural performance and public needs and expectations has never been so great. It begins to seem that rather than attempt a dialogue between architecture and the public, architecture should just shut up. We are a long way from Valéry's humanistic definition of the city and civilization. ■