ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A PROMISING SCHEME FOR LES HALLES ARCHITECTURE VIEW
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A Promising Scheme for Les Halles

The best-watched hole-in-the-ground in the world has probably been "Le Trou," the excavation on the site of Les Halles, the demolished produce market in the heart of Paris. It has also been the most controversial hole-in-the-ground, first for the international protest that accompanied the destruction of Victor Baltard's 19th-century glass-and-iron pavilion when the "belly of Paris" was moved to suburban Rungis; and after, for the equally widespread debate over what would fill it, in the plans for the future use of the land.

It is a very big hole, roughly a mile in each direction. And it is also a traumatic hole, because it replaces an intensely special kind of place — in this vast nothingness was the vital, chaotic, colorful food market romanticized by generations of Parisians and visitors nourished on its legendary midnight onion soup and the sense-filling sights and sounds of functional urban theater. If Les Halles no longer worked very well for the 20th century, and was less than romantic to those employed there, for a great many people it was the heart as well as the belly of Paris. Architectural historians, who long believed, with Zola, that the dramatically engineered structures built from the 1850's to the 1880's were among the "original monuments" of the 19th century, and all those who found the pavilions handsome and historic, were reduced to letter-writing and tears.

But the market was removed in 1969 to a facility in Rungis 50 times larger than the site in the center of the city, and the Baltard iron "umbrellas" requested by Napoleon III began to come down in 1971. For the last five years, the hole has been filling up with massive concrete that looks like an underground Maginot line, as Les Halles is turned into a central hub of rapid transit serving a multi-level system of local Metro lines and suburban R.E.R. trains. (Paris has poured money into mass transit as the basis of its regional planning, which has been precisely targeted and executed.)

Since 1971, there has been a series of schemes proposed for the land on top. Between one and two dozen plans, solicited and unsolicited, in response to competitions, invitations and official coalitions, displayed to the public (generally hostile), and discussed by experts, have been studied and restudied by a succession of special government bodies set up for the development of Les Halles.

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Both governments and policies have changed from the investment-and-growth emphasis of the Pompidou years to the more conservation-minded Giscard administration. Early plans were heavy on large-scale private development; later plans emphasized more open space. In a parallel development during the 1970's, what had been the parking for Les Halles at the neighboring Place Beaubourg became the site of the Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, known as the Beaubourg, which soon became the biggest tourist attraction in Paris.

Meanwhile, at the offices of SEMAH, the Societé d'Economie Mixte pour l'Emenagement des Halles, maps and models proliferated. At a session on Les Halles at a Paris conference on urban affairs attended by this writer last spring, doubletalk reigned supreme.

Now, at last, the decision has (apparently) been made. The plan that will be followed, pending ratification by the Paris Municipal Council this month, will place its emphasis on a large, formal park. That can only be good news, in view of some of the brutalist building schemes that have been considered, and the stylistic conflicts between new and old that have continued to be a major stumbling block.

The star-shaped park presently proposed will have a great deal of planting and shrubbery, in contrast to the vast platforms of concrete and stone of some of the original plans. Six allés of beech, plane and linden trees will radiate from a circular plaza in front of the Church of St. Eustache. The buildings included earlier have either evaporated or shrunk in size, and all new construction is relegated to the edge of the park.

A "forum" for open-air performances has survived through all of the stages of the program. This facility will be augmented by a crescent-shaped "amphitheater" facing the church, one of those space-filling landscape clichés of the 60's that is usually conspicuously unused. One wonders, somewhat churlishly of course, if the saturation point of trained dogs, redundant jugglers and amateur singers has not been reached at the Beaubourg, just a few blocks away. A more rational part of the scheme will be a pedestrian mall joining the Beaubourg and Les Halles, which will formalize a pattern of movement that has developed between the two.

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This plan could almost satisfy the charter members of the Let It Alone Club (of which I am one), whose motto is leave it be, roll with the punches and cherish the assets. The sometimes unwitting assets in this case have turned out to be the unexpected impact of the open space in an area of historic congestion; the equally unexpected views of the handsome elevations and buttresses of St. Eustache, which have not been visible for centuries, and the new, spontaneous patterns of social and land use in the area.

In several ways, the delay has been a blessing. The abortive studies have served the purpose of shaking down ideas from futuristic kitsch to historical recall. In 1969, APUR, the Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme, put out an excellent issue of its superior publication, Paris Projet, devoted to the past and future of Les Halles. After the ambitious building schemes of the early 70's, President Giscard let it be known that he favored green space. As time passed, the 20th-century conflict between tradition and modernism softened. And it became increasingly clear that the use and ap-

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pearance of the section was being transformed, even while no planning decision was being taken.

Several independent factors have come together with results beyond anyone's expectations or predictions. One element, of course, is the construction of the Beaubourg. Another is the restoration of the Marais, the handsome 17th-century district just east of the Beaubourg, by a process of "gentrification" that has turned a slum into one of the most fashionable quarters of Paris.

What has happened is that the Beaubourg and the Marais have reinforced each other to completely transform this part of Paris. The Marais spawned a moneyed middle class; the Beaubourg begat galleries and boutiques. The 18th-century structures around Les Halles — previously as notable for their low toilet count as for their shabby charm — are now as full of trendy shops and the affluent young as they once were of onions and artichokes. Land values have risen so sharply throughout the entire area that the poor have been almost totally dispossessed; many have moved to the government-sponsored new towns, leaving expressive manifestoes on old walls.

In the 18 years of planning for the move of the market, this part of Paris has developed its own forces and momentum. The present long-delayed scheme suggests that planners can adapt to the realities of change. Perhaps it can still incorporate some of the lessons we have learned in the meantime about the vulnerability of cities and the uses of the past. ■