The Editorial Notebook The Future of the Past in Paris
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The Editorial Notebook

The Future of the Past in Paris

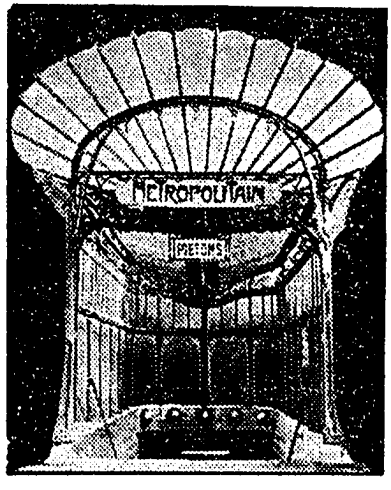
Travel is a state of mind, as much as moving from place to place. It is a heightened awareness of a strange city's colors, rhythms and nuances. There are messages to all of the senses about a city's style.

On arrival in France at the Charles de Gaulle Airport, the message delivered by people-movers in perpetual motion through long, eerily-lit tunnels is that Paris is the city of the future. There is a sinister clicking of bubble-domed advertising stanchions where projectors snap pictures on and off for the captive audience on the moving belts. They turn out to be messages for French brandy and perfume. It is Paris, after all.

One proceeds, prepared for pleasure and beauty. Cities are also a state of mind. Paris promises grand palaces and verdant boulevards where memories are secure.

But even this is changing: the avenues bordering Montmartre have become a North African street bazaar where *couscous* challenges the *croque monsieur*. The once-fashionable theater, the Palace, has died and been reborn as the city's most popular discothèque, complete with laser lights and a house champagne, a *blanc de noir*. The hole of Les Halles where Baltard's market sheds were demolished is being filled with acres of concrete and the prospect of a parking garage, with much-debated mysteries on top. The edges of the hole are already blooming with chic clothing boutiques in anticipation of whatever will be built, and the streets around the adjacent and still-controversial Beaubourg are bristling with new galleries and bars.

Even with change, the center of Paris holds; it is the edges that are vulnerable. From the still canals of La



Villette to the handsome heights of Belleville — places the tourist rarely reaches — office buildings and apartment towers in pink and purple concrete are being put up by a new breed of French developers, usually a powerful alliance of government, banks and business known discreetly as *Societés d'Economie Mixte*.

In Belleville, they bring middle-class tenants to a working-class neighborhood where alleys behind picturesque facades lead to courts with single privies surrounded by small, bootleg family industries. The area's views of the city are beginning to be in demand and the poor are not all that nostalgic about houses without heat or plumbing.

Citizen groups protest the insensitivity of the "redevelopment" and call for rehabilitation, and the present government has placed a moratorium on tall buildings. But the future of these quarters is as unpredictable as Parisian politics.

Now the city's planners are trying to capture and measure the quality of the city, or what is increasingly being called Paris's *tissu urbain*, charting the delicate fabric of streets, lots, buildings and character that are the physical base of the city's unique style. This is not an easy thing to put on maps, and officials have been slow to recognize its nature or its monuments: even the famous Métro "noodle" entrances, the Art Nouveau landmarks by Hector Guimard that evoke the turn-of-the-century city, have just been listed for protection.

Whether it is possible to protect the *tissu* against further erosion by the new brand of Parisian speculative development is anyone's guess, but it should be everyone's concern. No other city has a present so magnificently enriched by its past. And nowhere else are the lessons of art and urbanism so suitably enhanced by the pleasures of the stomach, heart and eye.

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