



In Paris, it's out with the bold

By **Nicolai Ouroussoff** The New York Times Tuesday, January 11, 2005

Until recently, no one could say that Paris was afraid of bold new buildings. The city was at the forefront of contemporary architecture for decades, from the 1977 Pompidou Center to the major monuments commissioned by François Mitterrand that rose in the 1980s and '90s.

The knock against such efforts is that they often produced second-rate work, like the cold, dysfunctional towers of the Bibliothèque Nationale or outright embarrassments like the hideous Bastille Opera.

But at least the competition bolstered the city's image as a place where architecture matters. Obviously the powers-that-were understood the fact that no great city can remain creatively vital by wallowing in the past.

But the recent selection of David Mangin's plan for a major renovation of Les Halles, the fabled site of the city's former central market, shows how quickly such ambitions can evaporate.

The low-key design, selected over proposals by the Jean Nouvel, Rem Koolhaas and the Rotterdam-based firm MVRDV, is a banally tasteful vision of Modernity that is apt to please those who are pathologically averse to risk.

But given the importance of the site, the choice of design is the kind of missed opportunity that the city could regret for decades - even if it is never built. In a particularly odd show of spinelessness, the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, has decreed that Mangin's scheme will only be used as a master plan for the overall development, putting him in the same role as Daniel Libeskind at the World Trade Center site in New York: a toothless architectural figurehead.

The lack of nerve behind the decision signals that Paris, for all its grace and beauty, has lost its trailblazing energy.

The site is already loaded with painful memories. The market of Les Halles, housed in Victor Baltard's stunning glass-and-steel pavilions, was one of the great monuments of 19th-century Paris. Packed with humanity, it embodied the modern vision of the city as the great mixer of human experience, a place whose creative energy was derived from its pitch of social friction.

To Parisians, the demolition of the pavilions in the early 1970s was an architectural atrocity, comparable to the mid-1960s demolition of McKim, Mead & White's Beaux Arts-style Pennsylvania Station in New York. The creation of the Forum des Halles on the same spot - a soulless warren of underground shops that has been a favorite haunt of drug dealers - exemplifies the worst of late 20th century Modernity, with its tabula rasa approach to history and its penchant for sterile, inhuman spaces.

Debates over the Forum's fate raise uncomfortable social issues. The underground Métro stations there - the busiest in Paris - serve more than 800,000 people a day. Its RER train line is the city's main connection to the working-class suburbs ringing the city.

Arab and African immigrants from those neighborhoods have made the underground mall one of the most profitable in the city. Keeping them trapped underground serves the interests of developers and soothes the fears of the gentrified classes that live nearby.

Mangin's design removes many of the eyesores while gingerly tiptoeing around the social issues. The Forum's garish 1970s-era arched roofs would be obliterated. Its gloomy interiors would be ripped out, replaced by a new underground atrium that would link the shop levels to the underground trains.

Open and airy, the atrium helps bring clarity to what is now a terrifying maze of staircases and escalators and allows light to spill down to Métro and train platforms five stories underground.

The design's major architectural gesture is a low, glass-and-concrete roof structure that would cap off a renovated Forum mall. Conceived as a system of mechanized panels that would be used to control the flow of light and air into the building, the roof's streamlined silhouette sums up the spirit behind the design, a bland concoction that is impossible to hate or to love.

The relationship between the shopping mall and the gardens gives away why the project was so appealing to the city's political leaders. Entering the building, visitors will pass over a bridge that spans the mall's central atrium. From here, they can either descend to the underground shops or continue along a central pedestrian axis that divides the gardens in two, culminating at the massive dome of the 18th-century commodities exchange.

The design's rigid formal arrangement has its roots in Parisian history: Haussmann's grand 19th-century boulevards were often aligned to open up long axial views of the city's monuments. But the beauty of Haussmann's vision lies in the tensions he accidentally created between the bourgeois order of the boulevards and the congestion of the old medieval city - between rational and irrational worlds.

Mangin's tepid, soft-focus approach is about erasing differences. Its aim is to keep a lid on the city's underbelly, lifting it up only enough to take a cautious peek inside.

Strikingly, all three of the losing designs sought to plug into the Forum's underground scene, and to varying degrees, link it more directly into the fabric of central Paris. Nouvel's design, for example, carves up the existing Forum, creating a series of platforms that wrap around a central atrium. But his Forum rises nine stories into the air, a soaring tower that is a mirror image of the invisible world below.

A "vertical garden" conceived as a series of stacked platforms, including one with a children's playground and another that would be used by chess players, would extend along one side of the garden near St. Eustache Church. A natural landscape of ponds and fields would rest on the roof of the redesigned Forum, evoking a magic carpet hovering among the city's rooftops.

The result would have been a dramatic gateway to the city of Paris, breaking down the wall between the privileged residents of central Paris and the working-class commuters from the suburbs.

But the most intriguing proposal of all was the design by Koolhaas. Rather than focus all of the activity within the site of the old Forum, he created a series of small candy-colored towers and scattered them around the park. They look like Popsicles, but in fact, they are more like small geysers, allowing the life below to spill out into the city.

That approach extends to the Forum. In the current building, the shops that attract the most business are three levels underground, close to the train platforms. The upper-level shops are virtually empty. Koolhaas slices open an area above the upper-level shops extending down to create a canyon-like space would link the various levels and the train platforms.

Like Haussmann before him, he planned to attack central Paris with surgical precision. Yet rather than eliminate the social forces that Haussmann feared, Koolhaas wanted to let that energy seep out into the open and infect the city. The idea is to bind the two visions of Paris into a cohesive whole, in a genuinely contemporary view of how cities function.

That analytical approach no doubt intimidated city officials. The mayor, who made the final decision to have Mangin oversee a new design, had to placate the mall's owner and local residents who feared what might be unleashed if the boundaries were completely removed.

The tragedy here is the low level of ambition. At least Mitterrand failed on a grand scale.

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