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A Paris Plan, Less Grand Than Gritty

By **STEVEN ERLANGER** JUNE 10, 2009

PARIS — Every president of France’s Fifth Republic has had his Pharaonic project, by which he believes he will leave his mark on the capital and French culture.

François Mitterrand, a fierce Socialist known as the Sphinx, left the new French national library and, to continue the Ozymandias theme, the controversial glass pyramid in the Louvre. Jacques Chirac left the Musée du Quai Branly, an anthropological museum, with an argumentative design by the French architect Jean Nouvel.

President Nicolas Sarkozy, no slouch, wants nothing more than to leave behind “Le Grand Paris.” In more than a year of discussions, there have been some spectacular ideas and drawings by 10 teams of famous architects, drawn by the president’s invitation to reimagine Paris as a city integrated with its suburbs and responsible in its environmental footprint.

Antoine Grumbach imagines Paris stretching along the Seine to Le Havre and the sea. Roland Castro, whose team included a sociologist and a philosopher, proposed a 250-acre park circled by skyscrapers in La Courneuve, one of the grimmest of the poor Paris suburbs. Richard Rogers plans rooftop gardens and parks built above railway lines. Yves Lion sees

Paris sprouting with fields and forests, with citizens able to cultivate their own vegetable patches, an unfortunate similarity to the necessities of Soviet cities.

The architects have provided the ribbons and the balloons, but few if any of the plans are likely to be carried out. Pressed by politics and financing, Mr. Sarkozy has concluded that he will reach for reduced goals that are grittier and essentially practical. The ambition remains the same: to try to bring about a significant improvement in the city's transportation and housing stock, stimulate economic development and break the stranglehold of an artificial "wall" around a relatively small city. The wall is represented by a roughly 22-mile circular highway that separates Paris from a "crown" of suburbs — legally separate cities — where many Parisian workers live.

Mr. Sarkozy has even given up on an effort to reorganize the government and incorporate some of these smaller towns into what really would have been a Grand Paris. A plan for local government reorganization he commissioned from former Prime Minister Édouard Balladur proved so unpopular with the mayors and local councils of the rest of Île-de-France, the administrative region that includes Paris and its suburbs, that the agile and realistic Mr. Sarkozy simply shelved it.

But that left Mr. Sarkozy with a problem. What would be so grand about his Grand Paris?

His answer was, simply, infrastructure. In a speech at the end of April, Mr. Sarkozy said he would leave the dreams of reform to another generation. He said that the state would provide around \$50 billion for what he said were complementary proposals for extended subway service that would allow people in the suburbs to travel between them without having to enter Paris, improve existing and saturated subway and train lines, tie some of Paris's most marginalized and poor neighborhoods into the grid and finally connect all three Paris airports to efficient public transportation.

But construction is not expected to start until at least 2012, and it would take at least 10 years.

The regional council had already drawn up ideas for a circular subway line called the Arc Express, with an estimated cost of \$8.4 billion, to connect the inner “crown” of suburbs.

But Mr. Sarkozy’s idea is for a more extravagant automated subway line known as the Grand 8, because it both goes around Paris in a wider circle and also cuts through it, looking like a figure 8 on its side. Some joke that the Grand Infinity might be a better name for it, given the length, some 80 miles, the difficulty of acquiring the land and the cost, around \$25 billion, including needed improvements and extensions to three existing lines.

While Mr. Sarkozy has concentrated on transportation, housing is another crucial component of the plan. Paris is already badly overcrowded, with its poorest minorities largely placed in big public housing projects in the outer rings or suburbs of the city. Still, with only 41 square miles in land (just 1.7 times the size of Manhattan) and a strict height restriction of 121 feet for buildings, there is a severe housing shortage.

To meet demand, the government and private industry are supposed to be building 70,000 housing units a year inside Paris, but in fact have been building only 35,000. Mr. Sarkozy has now backed the 70,000 annual goal as part of his plan, including 19,000 more public housing units. Officials have been talking about a public-private partnership to create new poles, or magnets, for development and housing, made possible by easy transportation and intelligent investment.

Skyscrapers are an inevitable part of the answer, despite extraordinary aesthetic and cultural opposition to them from many French, who like them in New York, Tokyo or Shanghai but detest the few that have been built in Paris. One reason is the architectural nightmare of the Tour Montparnasse, which is generally regarded now as a mistake.

The Socialist mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, already has courageously begun the debate over building skyscrapers on the edges of Paris and finally won the support of Mr. Sarkozy, who said he was not against building tall “so long as it’s beautiful.”

The economic crisis has created all sorts of difficulties in every big city in terms of financing, investment and empty office space. But the state is the dominant player in France, and the president is practically royal. The secretary of state for development of the capital region, Christian Blanc, said that the crisis “simply obliges us to think differently,” adding that even in the private sector, “money for good projects, that exists.”

As for the vision thing, Mr. Blanc said that “grand architectural gestures” would be an important “signature of the Grand Paris project.” But he gave no specifics, saying that “they will be studied with local elected officials in the framework of existing projects.”

There is another aspect to the plan. Mr. Sarkozy, who made a name for himself with some tough talk during the suburban riots of 2005, when he was the interior minister, is also moving to create a “Grand Paris of police.” He is ordering up a super prefecture to coordinate all the police in Paris and the “small crown” of innermost suburbs — Hauts-de-Seine, Seine-St.-Denis and Val-de-Marne — that he failed to incorporate politically into Paris.

“Only 45 percent of delinquents live in the interior of the capital,” he said. “Delinquents don’t have borders, particularly those belonging to gangs.”

It may be a long way from visions of rooftop gardens and urban forests, but it is good politics.

Jeanette Coombs contributed reporting.

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