Remaking Paris

By NICOLAI OROUSSOFF  JUNE 8, 2009

Until he took office, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France never seemed destined to be a patron of architecture. In the weeks leading up to his election, more than a few architects I spoke with in Paris disparaged him as “the American,” a reference to his supposed lowbrow cultural tastes. But the French presidency has a way of infecting its occupant with visions of architectural grandeur. Georges Pompidou is better remembered today for the elaborate populist structure that bears his name than for his Gaullist policies. François Mitterrand created nearly a dozen new monuments in Paris, including I. M. Pei’s glass pyramid at the Louvre, a gigantic new national library and the Bastille Opera House. And now Sarkozy seems determined to outdo even Mitterrand.

One of the first things Sarkozy did after he moved into the Elysée Palace was to convene a meeting of prominent architects and ask them to come up with a new blueprint for Paris. “Of course,” he said, “projects should be realistic, but for me true realism is the kind that consists in being very ambitious.” His job was to clean up the city’s working-class suburbs, and at the same time build a greener Paris, the first city to conform to the environmental goals laid out in the Kyoto treaty.

The results, a year later, may be the beginning of one of the boldest urban planning operations in French history. A formidable list of architects — including Richard Rogers, Jean Nouvel, Djamel Klouche and Roland Castro — put forward proposals that address a range of urban problems:
from housing the poor to fixing outdated transportation systems to renewing the immigrant suburbs. Some have suggested practical solutions — new train stations and parks — while others have been more provocative, like Castro, who proposed moving the presidential palace to the outskirts.

The architects will continue to refine their ideas over the next year, so it is unclear what form the final plan will take. And Sarkozy has yet to say how he would pay for such an ambitious undertaking. Whatever their chance of being realized, however, these proposals force us to rethink what it means for Paris to be Paris, and how to fix our faltering cities. At a time when “infrastructure” has become a catchword of politicians around the world, these plans offer a glimpse of what a sustainable, more egalitarian city might look like and the role government might play in shaping one.

“I think we’ve all begun to realize the importance of cities again,” Richard Rogers told me. “You see it in Bogotá, in New York — this new interest in the compact, sustainable city. But Sarkozy deserves some credit for this. I’ve never heard a politician speak so passionately about the importance of a city. He understands that the physical environment can be used to change behavior. And I think the architects responded.”

Late one afternoon in February, the architect Christian de Portzamparc took me to the roof of La Tour Pleyel, a 40-story office tower in a derelict neighborhood just north of the Périphérique, the circular highway that separates Paris from the outlying districts. It was a clear day. Portzamparc pointed out the grim housing projects in La Courneuve, which erupted in rioting four years ago and have since been partly demolished. Sarkozy, then interior minister, spoke of these projects as a place “where gangrene has set in.”

What struck me most about the view from La Tour Pleyel was the sense of isolation. The road to the airport looked like a scar, dividing the anonymous housing blocks on one side from the green parkland on the other. To the south, industrial wastelands bordered on a dense knot of rust-colored tracks that fed into the Gare du Nord. Another set of tracks, to the
Gare de l’Est, cut through an industrial landscape of decrepit sheds and vacant lots. Even the Seine, from here, looked like an open wound. Framed by these brutal incisions, the city seemed like a series of dying, isolated pockets.

La Tour Pleyel lies in one such pocket. When it was built in the early 1970s, developers saw it as a potential rival to La Défense, which was then a booming business district northwest of the city, just past the Place de l’Étoile. Plans called for four towers around a commercial center, but with the economic downturn during that decade, the project stalled. Only one tower was ever built. Instead of sparking new development in the area, it remained surrounded by empty warehouses — another failed, stillborn fantasy.

“Most of these new developments were artificially created,” Portzamparc explained as we looked out over the city. “They were built in areas with the most potato fields, where there was nothing. These developers were not interested in nurturing what was there.”

When Portzamparc and I descended to the lobby, a line had formed in front of the Caisse d’Allocations Familiales, a government benefits office. The people, who were there to pick up unemployment checks, represented a cross-section of working-class French society. An Arab man, a North African woman holding a baby, a young couple, an old Frenchman — all waited their turns in line. No one made a sound. The rest of the lobby was empty.

Portzamparc sees such neglected areas as ripe for reinvestment, if they can be linked to a good transportation network. To facilitate circulation among the anonymous zones that encircle the city, he proposes building an elevated high-speed train line along the Périphérique’s median. To give an identity to northeast Paris, one of the city’s poorest areas, and to reassert the city’s prominence as an international business center, nonlocal trains would no longer come into Paris via the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l’Est would be closed; instead they would enter the city through a station
northeast of the historic center, closer to Charles de Gaulle airport — the Gare Nord Europe.

**Paris’s current problems** as a city can be traced to the very thing that makes it most delightful — its beauty. When Baron Haussmann, working under Napoleon III, carved grand boulevards through the medieval quarters, he gave the city its Cartesian order, filling them with light and air. Haussmann’s vision for Paris ranks as one of the greatest — and most influential — urban achievements of the 19th century. Its traces can be found in cities as disparate as Buenos Aires, Bucharest and Chicago. Even Robert Moses may be viewed as an extension of Haussmann-as-urban-planner, not least because Haussmann’s work was also a radical means of social engineering. The enormous width of Haussmann’s boulevards had as much to do with moving troops through the city as with aesthetics, part of an effort to control the masses after the revolution of 1848, which brought Napoleon III to power. Effectively, the sidewalks that gave an emerging bourgeoisie a place to gather (a place from which to enter the theaters, opera houses and shops of a fashionable life) pushed the poor farther away from the center.

“In the time of Haussmann, the Paris bourgeoisie often spoke about ‘les classes dangereuses’ — the dangerous classes,” Jean-Louis Cohen, an architectural historian, told me recently. “He sought to expel the popular classes from the center, to push them out, to the north and northeast of the city. But it marks the beginning of a long conflict. The site of the Pompidou Center was originally razed in 1939 as part of a slum clearance project, for example. There is a pattern of pushing the working classes out.”

During the next wave of modernization in the ’60s and ’70s, there was talk of demolishing the great iron-and-glass food halls at Les Halles, the city’s old, congested market area. The halls were finally torn down in 1971, an act that is still considered one of the great tragedies in the city’s history — the equivalent, for the Parisian, of the demolition of New York’s Pennsylvania Station. Most of the bars and cafes that surrounded Les Halles were destroyed, too. By the early ’70s, the government was planning
hundreds of miles of new freeways, including one along the Seine and another that traced the footprint of the city’s old defensive wall (now the Périphérique). Dozens of old wood-frame and plaster houses in the eastern working-class neighborhoods of Paris were bulldozed to make room for generic apartment blocks.

The threat to historic Paris — to the heart of France’s cultural identity — eventually led to an equally violent counterreaction. In 1972 La Tour Maine-Montparnasse, a modern tower erected not far from the Luxembourg Gardens, caused a national uproar. Five years later all high-rises were banned from the center. The glittering office towers we associate with most urban downtowns were grouped in La Défense. Soon it seemed that anything that was ugly and modern was simply banished to the city’s edges. The Périphérique became a dividing line, isolating the city of Haussmann from the growing modern sprawl in the banlieues that surrounded it.

This shift in the development of the city coincided with an equally striking shift in population. In 1919, there were three million people living in municipal Paris, and its working-class neighborhoods were some of the densest in the world. Today there are only two million in the city; the majority — eight million people — live in the banlieues. More than 100 years after Haussmann’s death, old Paris has become the world’s most elegant gated community — the sandblasted facades of its Haussmann-era buildings glistening with affluence. True, every now and then, a contemporary building is added. But this is mostly architectural fine-tuning. The city’s essential fabric remains the same. Even its few ethnic neighborhoods, like La Goutte d’Or and La Chapelle, are mainly on the edges.

Meanwhile, just inside the Périphérique and beyond, is another Paris: a city of often dehumanizing public housing developments, concrete-slab office towers and arrested utopian schemes that embody many of Modernism’s failures. On some level, Sarkozy’s team of architects faces the same challenge Haussmann did 150 years ago: to give order to a vast,
squalid, disordered metropolis that grew in fits and starts.

The day after I met with Portzamparc, Jean Nouvel drove me to another vision from the 1970s, Les Olympiades, a housing project in the 13th Arrondissement. At 63, Nouvel has often been on the wrong side of the city’s urban planning wars. In the late 1960s he fought to save Les Halles from demolition, but he later lost the competition to redo the site. (Forum des Halles, which won, is considered one of Paris’s modern horrors; it is also a main access point, via Paris’s rapid-transit commuter rail, to the predominantly Arab banlieues to the north.)

The vast housing complex of Les Olympiades was built for Paris’s then-booming middle class: teachers and academics as well as laborers. Today it is occupied mostly by Chinese immigrants. We climbed an escalator to a vast plaza two stories above street level, punctuated at the far end by a generic modern tower, its cast-concrete facade stained by water leaks. Two shorter apartment complexes framed it on either side. Sometime in the 1980s, a developer added some landscaping to make the plaza more welcoming, but the plants only make it look more forlorn.

“There is some life here,” Nouvel said, leading me toward an arcade of shops in the tower’s base. Inside, we passed a predictable assortment of hair salons, Chinese restaurants, video stores and pharmacies. The corridors were crowded with people coming home from work. Nouvel, with the practiced eye of an architect, noted that the proportions of the spaces were not bad. Interior walls could be knocked out to create bigger apartments, he said. Part of the plaza could be demolished to create a more direct connection to the street. But as Nouvel pointed out, the real issue is not whether this plaza can be saved. The question is what to do with the hundreds of developments like this one. “The scale of the problem is impossible once you begin to look at it,” Nouvel told me later as we sat in his office flipping through hundreds of nearly identical pictures taken from a helicopter above this city. “The only possibility is to find a few strategic points of intervention. And then, maybe, you begin to imagine a different city.”
Nouvel traced the outer edges of greater Paris on a map, outlining a border roughly 625 miles long. A range of generic middle-class communities lies just inside this line. Beyond is rural France, a patchwork of fields and forests. Nouvel’s plan is to create a harder, more defined edge — “a thick band of gardens and fields that come right up to the front door, like a gigantic communal farmers’ market. It is a place where you can grow tomatoes, care for children, play sports — a whole ecological life can happen.”

He proposes a similar strategy for the city’s industrial canals, which could be framed by a mix of lushly landscaped parks and new housing developments. Rungis, the dreary suburb to the south where the city’s abattoirs and markets were relocated after the destruction of Les Halles, would be transformed into a contemporary version of the old food halls. The nearby Orly airport could be opened to the surrounding area, so that the global elite and local residents might mingle in area restaurants and clubs. “The point is that if we give people these things, then they have a reason to be there. They become real places, with their own identity, as interesting in their way as parts of central Paris.”

One way to stitch the city back together is by re-engineering what already exists. Richard Rogers’s proposal, for example, focuses on the six major rail lines that run in and out of the city center. Many of the system’s soaring cast- and wrought-iron stations were intended as emblems of a mobile, modern society. But the tracks divide the outskirts of the city into a series of wedges. “The track beds are sometimes 300 meters wide,” Mike Davies, the partner in charge of the project, told me. “What’s interesting, however, is that they are radial — like spokes. They’re a natural place to bind the exterior and interior of the city.”

Rogers and Davies propose partly submerging the tracks underground and covering them with big public parks. An interstitial layer would contain technological services: water-purification systems, train maintenance and recycling centers. Enormous light wells cut into the parks would illuminate the trains below. Isolated neighborhoods, which now have little green
space, would be intimately woven into the city’s fabric. And the parks would link to a vast new greenbelt defining the city’s edge.

Djamel Klouche, at 42 the youngest architect of the group, is also exploring the unique qualities of seemingly unsalvageable areas. Rather than demolish the dehumanizing apartment blocks in the poor and working-class suburbs, he proposes rethinking them. Walls might be blown out to create airier, loftlike apartments; bigger windows would let in more light. (This strategy is also being pursued by more-established French architects like Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal.) “I live on the Boulevard de Strasbourg,” Klouche said. “A very noisy street. But heavier, more modern glass could shut out almost all of this noise, and suddenly this becomes a high-end luxurious apartment in the heart of Paris. Quieter electric cars, too, could eventually make corners of the city that now seem horrible quite beautiful.”

Even more quixotically, Klouche imagines building “social collectors that attract all kinds of people,” like a semisubmerged ring of shops and parks near the freeways. His most-tongue-in-cheek proposal would extend this vision into the heart of the old city, building a commuter rail line and multi-tiered mall — much like the current Forum des Halles — underneath the Grand Louvre. Here immigrants and workers coming in on trains from the poorest suburbs would mix with tourists in the city’s great palace of culture. “The beginnings of it are already there,” he insisted. “The Grand Louvre is a classical shell, but when you enter it, it is a radically contemporary space. You could have a much more aggressive interaction between what’s underground and the history above.” Klouche’s fantasy is unlikely ever to be built, but it underscores the tensions between achieving cultural integration in theory and doing so in practice.

“We have to work with what’s there,” the Italian architect Bernardo Secchi, another participant in the design study, said recently. “It is a city of 10, 11 million people; we can’t destroy it. But we have to give a new spatial structure to this city.” To save it, he says, we need to stop the city from spreading outward and to turn it in back on itself, to fill in these empty
pockets with something of meaning.

Sarkozy has asked the 10 architectural teams working on the Paris plan to collaborate and produce a more cohesive blueprint for the future. The chances of a definitive plan emerging from such an effort seem remote — and even if one does, architecture won’t solve all the city’s social ills. Nonetheless, the Grand Paris project represents a critical shift in how we think of urbanism. The tabula rasa Modernist experiments of the 1960s and 1970s not only damaged cities across the world; their failure spelled the abandonment of visionary master planning. In places where large-scale urban projects did re-emerge, like China and the Middle East, older, poorer neighborhoods were often bulldozed to make room for new development at a frenetic pace, with little regard for how the pieces fit together.

The plans presented for Grand Paris suggest that it is possible to believe, once again, that government can play a decisive role in achieving a truly egalitarian city — and that architecture is essential to that transformation.

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