

DEAR MARK,

PARIS IS MY DAY-TO-DAY
METROPOLITAN EXPERIENCE,
A CITY OF CONTRASTS FAR
REMOVED FROM THE FOR-
MAL IMAGE ENVISIONED BY
MANY. SINCE I STUDIED ART
HISTORY HERE IN THE '90S,
I HAVE BEEN FASCINATED BY
THIS MULTICULTURAL CITY.
MAYBE THAT IS WHY I

PHOTOS STEVEN WASSENAAR



THIS PAGE PORTE DE BAGNOLET INTER-
CHANGE, THE LOCATION OF ARCHITECT
SERGE LANA'S TOURS MERCURIALES.



stayed: Paris allowed me to do my thing. This agglomeration of 11 million inhabitants is both shabby and chic, overly restored in some places and dilapidated in others. The current trend to conserve the inner city as a national heritage is remarkable: this area has always been hacked and fractured. In the 19th century, the city centre was razed, making place for Haussmann's boulevards. Similar operations took place in the 20th century, which saw the arrival of the metro, the ring road, Les Halles, and La Défense, an area that seemed to arise from nowhere. This is how Paris was built, without sentiment and with a firm hand. Ever since I've worked as a photographer and an architecture critic, there are places for which I have a special affinity – because I interviewed a hospital director, or walked through a particular suburb for days on end.

A stroll through this city is a tour of modern architecture: Haussmann, Eiffel, Le Corbusier, Mallet Stevens... As it happens, I live only a five-minute bike ride away from the studio that Theo van Doesburg built in the district of Meudon in 1930. It's a functional dwelling, ambitious in concept but not too big, which still looks modern, compared with recently built houses in the vicinity.

Farther down the Seine is the island of Saint-Germain, a haven of diversity, where old borders new, wood abuts steel, and colour and individuality are tolerated. This is where Jean Nouvel built an ad agency in 1992 that looks like a steel ship run aground. I like poking around on this island. It's here that you realize just how strict the building regulations are that apply to the architecture in the inner-city, a formal style that's being imitated in new neighbourhoods, with their 'prestigious' Haussmann-like walls. A good example can be found in Issy-les-Moulineaux, where oppressively uniform '19th-century' streets went up not so long ago.

Meudon, Saint-Denis, Créteil: long ago *banlieues*, now municipal districts of Paris. The (real) borders of the metropolis lie far beyond the city centre that is girdled by the ring road. For an article published in *Archis*, I spent days tramping about and beneath this Périphérique. The ring road is a 35-km-long architectural structure, but it didn't take me long to discover that it is a real

building as well: hundreds of homeless people camp out under its viaducts in huts, while sofas and chairs brave the elements and, only metres away, a torrent of traffic flashes by. Cutting straight through the urban fabric, the Périphérique offers the motorist attractive views of the contemporary city and has brought about an architecture all its own, as exemplified by Architecture Studio's *Résidence Universitaire* (1996), a complex protected from the roar of

PARIS WAS BUILT WITHOUT SENTIMENT AND WITH A FIRM HAND

speeding vehicles by a black concrete wall whose blind façade can be rented as billboard space.

Whether or not it represents reality, Paris is divided into a central enclave, historical and chic – which I will call 'ParisTM' – and hundreds of independent municipalities that form today's poorer Grand Paris. An urban chaos – and periodic riots – is the result. Visits to the *arrondissements* of Grand Paris are cinematographic experiences through breathtakingly powerful contemporary landscapes. The zones are highly varied: here the carpet sprawl of single-family dwellings, there the *grandes ensembles*, some already beyond repair, based on concepts developed by Le Corbusier.

Chic districts like the 6th arrondissement are not my cup of tea. Give me the city as it was portrayed in films like Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) or Wim Wenders' *Der Amerikanische Freund* (1977): a somewhat alienating metropolis, filled with block after block of flats, that formed a powerful inspiration for these filmmakers. Sadly, recent French films like *Amélie from Montmartre* have enhanced the myth of a sugar-sweet Paris that's never existed. Never existed, because there are few cities that have applied the revolutionary concepts set down in Le Corbusier's Charter of Athens so drastically. These concepts



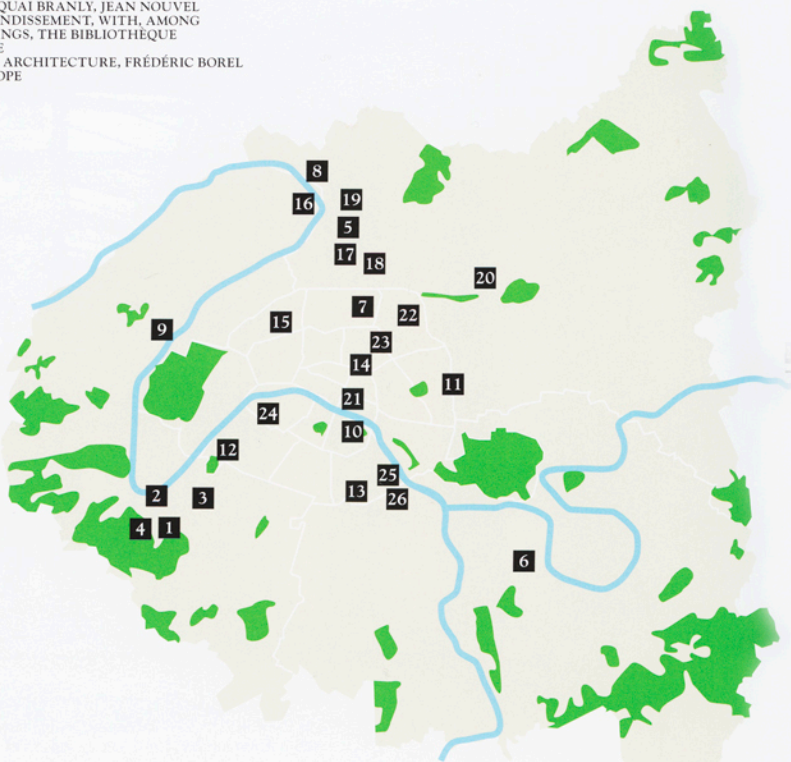
OPPOSITE LES OLYMPIADES, A UTOPIAN ENCLAVE FROM THE 1970S THAT HAS EVOLVED INTO A PARISIAN CHINATOWN.

THIS PAGE PASSAGE DU PRADO, ONE OF THE FEW INNER-CITY ARCADES THAT HAVEN'T BEEN RESTORED.

PARIS

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led to modernist districts in Créteil, Epinay-sur-Seine, La Défense, the Jussieu campus. Not to mention Porte de Bagnolet (1964), where two towers and a shopping centre are decked out with reeling motorways and viaducts tumbling over one another: *magnifique*, a historic monument.

Other examples are Front-de-Seine on the Quai de Grenelle and Les Olympiades, now the Parisian Chinatown, projects from the 1960s that also followed the principles of *urbanisme sur dalle*: a concrete pedestrian area looks down on the level designated for cars. These are utopian enclaves that testify to another era and that send clichés about this city straight to the rubbish bin. On the underground level below Les Olympiades is a Chinese market where lorries arrive and depart, and rusty rails refer to the trains that once delivered supplies to this neighbourhood. Nothing about this place seems right. It's too big, too empty, too dirty – exactly as a metropolis should be. Passage du Prado is one of the few arcades in the inner-city that *hasn't* been restored. Here multicultural society goes its own way. African barbers, Turkish teahouses and Arab travel agencies form an aesthetic that's in harmony with elements of glass and steel. Market vendors park their graffiti-adorned lorries all over the inner city: a contrast to chic display windows and yet part of the city's changing landscapes.

Conceptually speaking, housing projects from the '60s and '70s are outmoded, they bear witness to a historical era, to the will to solve the then serious housing shortage. They are now in need of restoration, and such makeovers lead to interesting architecture. In the 17th arrondissement, Edouard François dressed an old apartment tower in pots of bamboo (Flower Tower, 2004). Architect Roland Castro has made the defence of modernist apartment complexes his speciality. District officials would much rather blow up such buildings, but Castro gives them new life. In Villeneuve-La-Garenne, he sawed long flats in pieces, renovated the whole complex, and built other dwellings right up against it. He demonstrates that nothing is wrong with this kind of architecture as long as one introduces fragmentation to break the monotony of the blocks. In Saint-Denis, the architects at Périphériques applied the same sort of variation and colour to another resi-

dential complex, Torpédo Housing (2005).

Rapid development in the northern part of the metropolis, around Stade de France, includes office buildings, film studios and apartments. At the core of this district the Fratellini Circus Academy has been constructed from canvas, wood, corrugated sheet material and the like. The cluster of volumes can be seen as a permanent camp site. To the north, another striking structure is Du Besset-Lyon's university building, which seems vulnerable in an environment filled with flats and warehouses. It's the only building

GIVE ME THE CITY AS SEEN IN PLAYTIME OR DER AMERIKANISCHE FREUND



THIS PAGE EDOUARD FRANÇOIS'S FLOWER TOWER (2004), A PROJECT IN THE 17TH ARRONDISSEMENT THAT EXEMPLIFIES THE CREATIVE RESTORATION OF A RUN-DOWN HOUSING COMPLEX.



here that has flowing forms and no right angles, matte-glass façades rather than grey concrete walls. A couple of metres away from the building is a caravan camp: it's January, and little kids are running around outside in T-shirts. In France, social suffering was invisible for a long time, banished to peripheral areas outside Paris™ or deep beneath the Périphérique. Until Doctors Without Borders began distributing dome tents to the homeless: the inner city is now filled with tents; parks and quays have become camp sites. Elsewhere in Grand Paris – in Saint-Denis, in Bobigny – new slum areas are reappearing 30 years after vanishing from the metropolis. Colourful, inventive wooden huts form villages with hundreds of inhabitants, ankle-deep mud, no water, no electricity. This is the Third World, and such extremes are what make Paris fascinating: it takes exactly 20 minutes to get from the slums around the Bobigny-Pantin metro station to the

Champs-Elysées: 20 minutes link the two extremes of one city.

I like taking photos in the metro. It's a city beneath the city, a network of architecture, stations, corridors, made for circulation, for movement. Paris mixes in the metro, not on the street. Some of these people are standing still, are working – people like illegal vendors, whom you rush past. What attracts me is this contrast of mobility and immobility, of mass and individuality, with very elementary, bare architecture. Nothing is drab in the metro: the walls are a constantly changing palette of posters. Certain stations testify to architectural ambition: the entrance to the Palais Royal station, the Kiosque des Noctambules, the copper-clad Arts et Métiers station. Europe's largest station, Les Halles, is also underground; a recent design competition was organized to give this place a more contemporary look.



OPPOSITE DOME TENTS GIVEN TO HOMELESS PEOPLE BY DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS FLANK BOTH BANKS OF THE CANAL SAINT-MARTIN.

THIS PAGE SLUM AREA IN BOBIGNY. THIRTY YEARS AFTER BEING ERADICATED, SLUMS ARE TURNING UP AGAIN AROUND PARIS.



The Parc de la Villette, with its Cité de la Musique (1997), by Bernard Tschumi and Christian de Portzamparc is one of the more successful realized projects, because it creates a bridge that links Grand Paris with the city centre and because it successfully unites architecture and nature. You enter De Portzamparc's building through a passage that embraces the oval concert hall like a spiral. Glazed roofs and steel, it is the style of Paris, applied at the Louvre Pyramid or at the recently restored Musée d'Orangerie. The Gare du Nord, another building boasting glass overhead and slender steel columns, dates from 1865 but is still one of the city's more beautiful interiors; an extension by AREP Architects was completed in 2002.

The image of the inner city is one of diversity. Much of the architecture here dates from the years between 1960 and 1980. These buildings prove that for decades anything was possible in the field of architecture. Centre Pompidou (1977) is a good example. But even here, architecture is confined within a straitjacket of regulations: maximum heights, exterior walls that have to align perfectly. Forced to look for solutions, architects designing for the inner city have come up with countless variations on the Haussmann block. Examples are Francis Soler's French Ministry of Culture, not far from the Louvre, and De Portzamparc's recently erected building for *Le Monde*. When the government itself commissions a project, architecture has a far more open playing field. Take, for instance, Jean Nouvel's museum on Quai Branly. After repeating the glass screen that he used at Fondation Cartier, Nouvel designed a heavy sculptural structure on steel feet; coloured cubes house the objects on display.

Recently completed, an elegant footbridge across the Seine joins Left and Right Banks and provides access to the Bibliothèque Nationale and environs. The promise of a place for innovative architecture has only partially been fulfilled in this 13th arrondissement. Avenue de France is filled with classically proportioned blocks: slicked-up Haussmann. Christian de Portzamparc made the master plan for an area closer to the Seine, where his 'open housing blocks' principle is giving rise to a varied streetscape. Frédéric Borel designed both a school of architecture

(2007) and a nearby residential complex. Next to it, former factory halls are being converted into university buildings. The Frigos, once used for cold storage and now occupied by squatters, have become a graffiti-scrawled spontaneous cultural centre that contrasts with high-tech buildings in the neighbourhood. A different approach was used in Val D'Europe, part of *ville nouvelle* Marne-La-Vallée. This enormous shopping mall and its surrounding streets are curiosa, repro-

IT'S TOO BIG, TOO EMPTY, TOO DIRTY – EXACTLY AS A METROPOLIS SHOULD BE

duced Renaissance architecture, French *passages*. A perfect city of spectacle and décors, which – like the town of Celebration, Florida – was financed by the Walt Disney Company. The hub, Place de Toscane, is a copy of the Italian Lucca. It's Las Vegas in Paris. This zone has never been averse to experimenting with the past: in nearby Noisy-Le-Grand, the well-known Espaces d'Abraxas, realized by Ricard Bofill in 1982, epitomizes a category of public-housing architecture that is both chic and unsuccessful.

With the realization of the 13th arrondissement, the inner city of Paris is complete. Strict building regulations will relegate nearly all innovative architectural adventures *and* sharp contrasts to areas in Grand Paris outside the Périphérique. Unless Paris, following in the steps taken by an unhesitant Haussmann some 150 years ago, once more breaks open the city centre...

Best regards,
Steven Wassenaar



OPPOSITE LEFT THESE NEW HOUSING BLOCKS IN THE 13TH ARRONDISSEMENT ARE CLOSE TO THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE.

OPPOSITE RIGHT THE RECENTLY OPENED SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE (2007), DESIGNED BY FRÉDÉRIC BOREL.

THIS PAGE FRATELLINI CIRCUS ACADEMY (2003) IN SAINT-DENIS, DESIGNED BY PATRICK BOUCHAIN.