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Revamp Of The "Belly Of Paris" Meets Resistance

By REUTERS

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PARIS (Reuters) - It was once a bustling area of merchant stalls, nicknamed "the belly of Paris" by Emile Zola. Its wrought-iron-and-glass arcades were filled every morning with fresh produce from all corners of France.

But what could have become Paris' Covent Garden -- London's former food market turned fashionable shopping area -- is now a 10-acre twilight zone, avoided by Parisians and tourists alike.

Drug pushers and gangs hang out under the dark and malodorous alcoves of the Forum des Halles, an unloved 1970s development in stark contrast with the elegant [Louvre](#) museum to the west and the artsy Pompidou Centre to the east.

Les Halles -- the area has kept the name of the demolished market built by Haussmanian architect Victor Baltard -- is one of the post-war urban projects that scarred some of Europe's finest historical centres.

"It's been 12 years I've been working here, it's become awful," says Kim Schou, 63, a cafe owner under one of the concrete arches of the Forum. "When it's hot, the cement becomes like a microwave. When it rains, it leaks."

The partly subterranean shopping mall is unanimously denounced as an eyesore. But resistance has sprung up surprisingly to protect the adjacent garden, and is now threatening the whole redevelopment program.

Work was planned to start in May, but a court suspended it after a group of residents appealed against the destruction of the much-loved Lalanne garden, a rare oasis of vegetation in a city where green spaces are scarce.

"It's the destruction of a now mature garden. The felling of 343 trees in an urban environment

really hurts," Gilles Pourbaix, the president of local residents' group Accomplir, told Reuters on the terrace of the Pere Tranquille cafe.

The bistro is located opposite the Forum des Halles, due to be replaced by a 30-metre high "canopy," a vast and undulating glass roof designed by French architect Patrick Berger.

"SOCIAL CLEANSING"

Pourbaix, 58, who lives in nearby Rue Saint-Denis, a street notorious for its sex shops and prostitutes, is also protesting against the gentrification of the area.

"We don't want to become a new Saint-Germain-des-Pres," he said, referring to the posh, intellectual Left Bank district across the Seine.

Drug dealing has been a problem since the 1980s, with petty cannabis dealers in the garden catering for well-off, occasional customers, while traffickers in the Forum attract homeless drug addicts, according to a 2004 local authority report.

The city of Paris makes no secret of its ambition to change the demographics of an area considered unsafe by many.

"Les Halles gives a rather pitiful impression of Paris," said Dominique Hucher of SemPariSeine, the public body in charge of redeveloping Les Halles.

"These public facilities receive more 'banlieusards' -- people from the suburbs -- than Parisians. The city wants to attract Parisians back here."

With 800,000 commuters using its underground station every day, Les Halles is a major transport hub, where five metro lines and three suburban train lines meet, giving those who live in the ghettoised outskirts one of their main doors into town.

Like many French cities, Paris is ringed by high-rise suburbs built in the 1960s to house migrants which are plagued by high unemployment and poor public services, with occasional spasms of violence like this month's in Grenoble.

After riots erupted in the Paris suburbs in 2005, President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) promised a "Marshall Plan" to integrate the fringes with the centre, partly by improving transport links.

Pourbaix said the proposed renovation of Les Halles was, in contrast, meant to drive out young people, mostly of African and Arab origin, who flock to the area to shop, use the swimming pool or go to the huge cinema complex.

"This is social cleansing," the local activist complained.

GRAND PARIS

But Parisians seem to have voted with their feet and wallets. Property prices in the blocks bordering Les Halles hover around 7,000 euros (\$9,000) per square metre, while they fetch more than 10,000 euros in the trendy Marais district a stone's throw away.

Since the city of Paris commissioned an international architecture competition in 2002, the selection process has been open to Parisians and residents, who were invited to vote on proposals for the redevelopment of Les Halles.

"That association represents 80 to 100 residents," said a spokesman for Unibail-Rodamco, the Franco-Dutch property firm that runs the shopping centre and is backing the project. "We cater for the needs of 45 million visitors a year."

Anne Hidalgo, deputy Mayor of Paris in charge of town planning, who may run for mayor in 2014, said work would resume before the end of July, after a new city council vote backed it.

But Pourbaix said his association would appeal again.

"The canopy will be just a big shopping centre, with public facilities like the music school moved elsewhere. We are ready to go all the way to the [European Court of Justice](#)," he said.

As Sarkozy draws ambitious plans for a "Greater Paris" meant to help the capital keep up with cities like New York and London, Socialist mayor Bertrand Delanoë is aware that a success at Les Halles would enhance his legacy.

"Unfortunately, it seems that each citizen has its own vision of the general interest," said Hucher from SemPariSeine.

(Reporting by Michel Rose; editing by [Paul Taylor](#))