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Paris Finally Gives Les Halles A Face Lift

By Jeffrey Iverson / Paris

As Paris real estate prices reach new highs, and residents flee their neighborhoods for the suburbs as swiftly as they did in the 19th century when Baron Haussmann bulldozed through Paris' working-class strongholds, many Parisians are wondering if their city is destined to become the exclusive playground of tourists and the wealthy. In recent years, few events have been more revealing of the city's conflicted sense of self than the ongoing debate over the redevelopment of Les Halles, a once thriving food market now associated with drug dealers and a dreary, claustrophobic shopping complex. With renovations looming, it's more than a 37-acre construction site: it's a stage where Paris is striving to ensure its place among the world's great capitals, while preserving the vitality and soul of one of its most historic quarters.

The project has been a long time coming. On Oct. 18, after eight years of heady town hall debates, dueling architectural plans, successive budget revisions (now reaching 765 million euros) and a summer of legal challenges, Anne Hidalgo — mayor Bertrand Delanoë's urban planning chief — appeared before the city council to formally announce the launch of the redevelopment project. Speaking to TIME ahead of the meeting, Hidalgo brimmed with enthusiasm. "For Les Halles, this is the beginning of a new chapter," she says. "In touching Les Halles you stir everything up — you stir up history, you stir up the beating heart of the metropolis." ([See pictures of Paris expanding.](#))

Hidalgo hopes the project will undo the "urban catastrophe" that befell Les Halles in the late 1970s. At that time, the city demolished the 19th century steel-and-glass pavilions of the 800 year-old market and replaced them with 10.6 acres of gardens, and a five-level underground shopping mall, subway and train station. Today tourists and the public alike scorn the site, viewing the commercial center as an unsightly abomination in the center of Paris, and the garden, with its maze-like alleys and alcoves, as a haven for drug dealers. And while plans to renovate the underground station — which serves up to one million commuters daily — have been applauded, neighborhood residents oppose the project now underway to cover the shopping center with a 151,000 square foot (14,000 sq. m) undulating glass canopy and to flatten the gardens into a vast

"prairie."

Les Halles project director Dominique Hucher of SemPariSeine, the public body overseeing the redevelopment, believes constructing a new exit for the complex — one that leads to this open lawn — will create a safer, more welcoming space. "The current site has tons of little hidden corners, which tends to favor a certain delinquency," he says. But Gilles Pourbaix, president of ACCOMPLIR, the resident's association which has sought to block the destruction of the site's well-loved but aging Lalanne children's garden in court, doesn't buy it. He says the security argument stems from irrational fears of the young minorities from the suburban projects who frequent Les Halles. "Some people when they see a group of ten black adolescents fooling around, for them it's insecurity, but that's their problem, for me it's not insecurity, it's just kids having fun," he says. Warranted or not, City Hall is keen to recast Les Halles' reputation — and draw back locals. At the moment, Hucher says that Parisians make up just 15% of the site's visitors, while "banlieusards" make up 85%. ([See 10 things to do in Paris.](#))

Pourbaix for one appreciates the slightly gritty image of Les Halles, which retains vestiges of the neighborhood's wilder years including sexshops and aging prostitutes, but also celebrated jazz clubs like Duc du Lombard and historic brasseries like Louchebem. He cringes at Hidalgo's assertion that the project will "allow people to come to Les Halles as they do to the Tuileries or Luxemburg" gardens. "I wouldn't want to live in a neighborhood where everything is clean and orderly, as if we were in Switzerland," he says. "We want to live in Les Halles."

But for now, Pourbaix has admitted defeat. Late this summer, bulldozers went to work in the Les Halles garden one day after an administrative court rejected a second demolition permit challenge by ACCOMPLIR. Critics worry the renovation is draining the site not just of soul — but also residents. First district conservative mayor Jean-François Lagaret says school registers and confessions by fed up constituents suggest that locals are already leaving. "We're starting to see the warning signs, people aren't ready to live through eight years of an unbearable construction site," he says.

The debate has so far largely focused on the fate of Les Halles without considering its role in transforming the city into a 21st century metropolis. "Today Paris is in a historic crisis, and to survive it needs to open itself up" says tenth district municipal council Serge Federbusch. "But the reality is the Paris of Delanoë has closed in itself, for bobos and the privileged few." Federbusch insists that Paris needs to invest in underground transportation to and around the suburbs with Les Halles as the center of that network. Unfortunately, he says, politicians are unwilling to address these needs "because everyone wants to defend their little privileges, budget and power slices."

The fate of Paris also worries Francophiles like Mark Kurlansky, the bestselling food historian who last year published a new translation of *The Belly of Paris*, Emile Zola's novel set around the

bustling Les Halles food market of the late 1850s. Kurlansky has developed the same disdain for Paris' urban policies as Zola had for those of Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann. "I think its terrible what's happening to Paris, but also New York and London — not only are they driving the poor out, they're driving the middle class out, and becoming enclaves for the rich," he says. But if *The Belly of Paris* can offer any solace, says Kurlansky, it's in learning that more than a century ago, "Zola was griping about the same things." ([See pictures of the Champs-Élysées going green.](#))

But today, amidst the griping, City Hall is turning toward 2013 and the raising the canopy's green glass roof (a few months before the end of Delanoë's term). Hidalgo promises "a spectacle for all those who love architecture, urbanism and Paris," and isn't intimidated by the prospect of further dissent. The truth, she says, is that "today a city cannot be built without these contradictions." And somewhere among those contradictions, Hidalgo believes she's seen the future of Paris in Les Halles. "We want to conserve these dimensions of a very unique neighborhood, with these young people from the suburbs, the homeless, the residents, bobo and otherwise," she says. "This is the image of what Paris is becoming today in the metropolis, and we must preserve that."

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