

Reuters (25/03/11)

Dated Paris shopping hall gets multi-million makeover

By Vicky Buffery

PARIS, March 25 (Reuters Life!) - Paris is building a colossal shell-like glass and steel canopy over its Les Halles shopping centre in an 800 million euro revamp of what has become an eyesore of dated architecture at the heart of the capital.

The vast project -- costing more than London's 2012 Olympic stadium or France's 2.5 km (1.5 mile) Millau viaduct which is the world's tallest bridge -- should transform the decades-old transport hub and underground mall into a striking visual landmark, even if Parisians are divided over the aesthetics.

The city's latest grand architectural project follows the building of a giant glass pyramid as a new entrance to the Louvre museum and a book-shaped national library by the Seine.

The architects plan to put together the 17,000 sq metre canopy offsite and erect it in one piece.

"We'll bring it in almost pre-fabricated, and everything has been designed to rest on the existing underground structure without adding any more pillars so as not to disrupt activities," Patrick Berger, one of the designers, told Reuters.

The renovation, set for completion in 2016, will include a redesign of the site's 10-acre garden and a revamp of the underground station. One of Europe's busiest, it connects five metro lines and three suburban train lines including the one that brings in visitors from Roissy airport.

But it is the undulating canopy with its pillarless greenish-yellow louvered roof that will take up the bulk of the cost and which is attracting the most criticism.

"It's going to be an absolute catastrophe. Architecturally it's rubbish and financially it's a scandal. The cost is absolutely astronomical," said Elisabeth Bourguinat of local association Accomplir which is fighting to halt the plans.

The louvered glass slats could let in rain, critics say, while the steel cables needed to stop the roof from caving in may block natural light, making electric lighting indispensable.

EMBLEMATIC SITE

Planners defend the design and say it will open up the confined and in places tatty underground shopping centre, creating a much-needed sense of space and accessibility.

They also say the cost is worth it for such a long-neglected and emblematic site. Formerly a bustling wholesale food market, immortalised by Emile Zola as the "belly of Paris", Les Halles is a gateway today into the centre of Paris for millions of commuters, tourists and youths from the city suburbs.

"We see it as a work of architecture, something that is completely in tune with the times, something that will leave a beautiful and lasting mark on the heart of the city," said Anne Hidalgo, deputy mayor of Paris.

Few would deny that Les Halles is badly in need of a makeover, to rid it of the stigma of a 1970s urban regeneration project widely regarded as a failure.

The original food market was moved out of the city to the now famously sprawling site of Rungis, and the elegant 19th century steel and glass pavilions designed by Victor Baltard to house the stalls were all ripped down.

In their place came a vast subterranean shopping centre, topped off at ground level with a labyrinthine garden and a jumble of glass, concrete and plastic buildings that soon became better known for drug dealing and shabby fast-food shops.

"It's totally hideous, it really doesn't make me feel like coming into work," said Flora Mazie who for five years has commuted in from the suburbs to work in a shop at Les Halles.

"The architecture has had its time. Maybe when it was built it was original and innovative but with these materials it really wasn't built to last," she said.

As the bulldozers move in to flatten the gardens, many are reserving judgement, wary of any grandiose architectural ambitions after the disappointment of the 1970s rebirth which also followed years of wrangling and consultation.

The destruction of the Baltard pavilions is now seen as a major architectural mistake. Only one was saved and moved out to the suburb of Nogent-sur-Marne where it was classed as a monument, although it now serves as the less illustrious setting for France's version of Pop Idol.

Asked how she feels about the new renovation, Caroline Joucla, who also works at the Forum, glances gloomily at the shabby concrete and discoloured glass and shrugs.

"I'm waiting to see what happens, it's a good idea in principle because it really isn't very nice here, but who knows how it will turn out," she says. (Editing by Catherine Bremer)