

The New York Times (07/07/07)

For Paris, the Newest Look Is a Canopy

By ALAN RIDING

PARIS, July 6 — When it comes to renovating Les Halles — the troubled neighborhood, nicknamed the belly of Paris, which for generations supplied the city with food — the appropriate motto might well be: If at first you fail, keep trying.

Certainly, since its elegant 19th-century steel-and-glass markets were torn down in the early 1970s and the wholesale food distributors moved to the Paris suburbs, failure has been the zone's leitmotif. The so-called Forum and the gardens that replaced the 12 pavilions have never been popular, but efforts to replace them have often stumbled.

Now the Paris government is trying again. This month Mayor Bertrand Delanoë unveiled the winners of the latest architecture competition for a new Forum. And the pledge is that the project, expected to cost 120 million euros (\$163 million), will be completed by 2012.

If it really is built, the design by Patrick Berger and Jacques Anziutti, two French architects experienced in working in Paris, anticipates creating new commercial and cultural spaces beneath a vast glass roof, variously described as a canopy, layered leaves or a shell but perhaps most evocative of the undulating movements of a manta ray.

The structure, which in a model has a greenish-yellow color supposedly inspired by vegetation, will cover a construction area 396 feet by 462 feet and will open onto nearly 11 acres of gardens, which another French architect, David Mangin, was chosen to redesign in 2004.

Significantly, rising 36 feet above ground level, the Forum's canopy — that is the architects' favored description — will not compete in height with two older landmarks of the neighborhood, the Church of St. Eustache on the southern edge of the gardens and the 18th-century Commodities Exchange to the west.

The real challenge facing Mr. Berger and Mr. Anziutti, though, is that they are not starting from scratch: they are expected to build something new without replacing all of the old.

The razing of Les Halles some 35 years ago led to what became known as the black hole of Paris, an enormous area of excavated land that scarred the city for almost a decade as arguments raged over what should be built.

When the Forum was finally inaugurated in 1981 by Jacques Chirac, then the city's mayor, most construction had taken place below ground, notably with an enormous station serving the metro system and the R.E.R. regional train network. Five levels of shops were linked by escalators. Resembling steel-and-glass mushrooms, the buildings above the ground included a small museum and other shops.

But while the newly opened Georges Pompidou Center quickly gentrified the nearby neighborhood of Le Marais, the Forum had a different impact, drawing fast-food shops and, worse, drug peddlers. When Mr. Delanoë announced plans to restore the area in 2002, he called it “a soulless, architecturally bombastic concrete jungle.” It was also an area that many Parisians avoided.

The first architecture competition for a new Halles in 2004 failed to convince, and of the four finalists — the others were Jean Nouvel, Rem Koolhaas and Winy Maas — only Mr. Mangin’s conservative proposal for the gardens was retained. A new competition was organized, with Mr. Berger and Mr. Anziutti now chosen from among 10 finalists, including Massimiliano Fuksas, Toyo Ito and Paul Chemetov.

“The life of the Forum has to continue while we are building this,” Mr. Berger said in an interview. “We will do it in stages. Obviously, with 800,000 people using the metro and R.E.R. station every day, transportation cannot be disrupted.”

Their design will in effect reach 66 feet below the ground to the roof of the station, though the shopping areas will remain largely intact. The principal novelty will be a so-called patio, measuring roughly 215 feet by 150 feet, which will be open to ground level and protected from the elements by the canopy.

Above the ground, albeit not directly visible from adjacent streets, the canopy will also provide cover for a museum, a music conservatory, restaurants and shops.

Inevitably, though, it is the glass canopy itself — a computer-generated image suggests it will glow like a spaceship at night — which will eventually define the new Forum’s image. Interestingly, three years ago Mr. Nouvel proposed covering the Forum’s commercial and cultural areas with a roof garden, but the approved design will not have plants or be reachable by visitors.

Mr. Berger contends that his design still echoes the forms of nature and responds directly to the trees of the gardens. “There is an enormous complexity of forces meeting here,” he said. “The energies of Paris merge with the energies of nature. The challenge was to find a morphology of these ideas.”

Mr. Mangin’s proposed redesign of the gardens should help the Forum interrelate with nature. In the late 1970s the gardens were landscaped into mounds and paths, ideal for people crossing the zone but uninviting to those who wanted to pause for rest or reflection.

Under Mr. Mangin’s proposal, the gardens will have shaded paths in the manner of Barcelona’s Ramblas and offer large lawns where Parisians can play, eat or snooze. And as Mr. Berger imagines his own design, the gardens themselves will slope down toward the edge of the patio, in effect blending with the interior world of the canopy.

Mr. Delanoë, for one, seems persuaded that the long-promised rebirth of this part will now proceed. In contrast to what happened three years ago, there have also been no protests

against the Forum-to-be by local residents. That alone is a relief to the mayor, who is expected to seek re-election next year.

As with every major urban renewal project, of course, only the public can offer the final verdict. And before that happens, the patience of the nearly 300 million people who go through Les Halles each year will no doubt be sorely tested. In that sense, Mr. Delanoë's own image may not be safe for another five years.