

# Claiming Les Halles: Architecture and the Right to the City

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In 1985, Jacques Chirac, then mayor of Paris, assisted in the inauguration of what seemed at the time the final step in the long and complicated effort to renovate the Les Halles quarter in central Paris, which for centuries housed the city's fresh food markets. The day marked, for Chirac, "the final act in the most significant urban operation undertaken in Paris in decades."<sup>1</sup> Others involved in the project echoed Chirac's sense of finality. Three years later, the semi-public company founded to oversee the quarter's transformation was dissolved; the group's president, sociologist and politician Christian de la Malène, declared the work at Les Halles completed.<sup>2</sup> But de la Malène's statements were tempered by a recognition of the contingent nature of planning. "Parisians," he predicted,

... have not only appointed themselves censors of the project; they will in a thousand ways be the dynamic creators of tomorrow. Over the months and years the trees will grow and the facades will patina, and the inhabitants of Paris will give the quarter its role and its face. In the end, Les Halles will only be what Parisians make of it.<sup>3</sup>

Now, twenty years later, what has been made at Les Halles is vigorously criticized. Once-new buildings have aged prematurely and responded poorly to functional demands; gardens and other open spaces are widely perceived as dysfunctional. Meanwhile, 800,000 commuters each day hurry through an underground station that is congested and poorly linked to the neighborhood itself.<sup>4</sup>

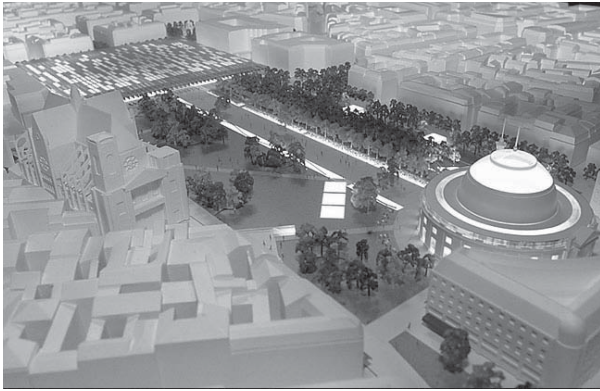
In response to these problems, new plans are underway, championed by one of Chirac's successors at City Hall, socialist mayor Bertrand Delanoë. The proposal of French architect and planner David Mangin was selected from a shortlist that also included Rem Koolhaas, Winy Maas, and Jean Nouvel.



Les Halles, Rue Lescot, 2007

But the efforts of Delanoë, as well as the designs of Mangin and others, have been subjected to withering criticism in the press and, especially, from neighborhood groups representing inhabitants, shopkeepers, and business people who have made the quarter home.<sup>5</sup> Delanoë has spent the last two years attempting to placate critics, and has gradually transferred large portions of the commission out of Mangin's hands. Most recently, Patrick Berger and Jacques Anziutti have been selected to design a new undulating canopy covering underground shopping, but this design too is under attack.<sup>6</sup>

Imbedded in this rancorous discourse are questions suggested twenty years ago by Christian de la Malène. To what extent are significant urban districts 'made' by design? Is the present 'role and face' of the Halles quarter one chiseled for it by architects, planners, and technocrats, or has it emerged from appropriation and use? These



SEURA/David Mangin, "Le Carreau des Halles," 2004

questions are certainly fundamental to any consideration of architecture, the city, space, and power. But they take on particular relevance for Paris and, especially, for the continuing efforts to find a new face for the Halles quarter. Present controversies echo those of decades ago, and demand a re-examination of earlier debates surrounding the renovation of Les Halles in the 1960s and 70s, as its ancient market was being carved from its center.

This paper reconsiders those forty-year-old debates in the context of a then-emerging 'philosophy of the city' that advocated a popular appropriation of urban space and questioned the ability of architecture to play a primary role in providing meaning for urban experience. I will argue that the act of removing the markets from the center of Paris, and the ensuing proposals for the area's redevelopment, exposed the social and formal inadequacies of architectural and urban strategies central to France's post-war resurgence. These strategies derived, to some extent, from the mid-nineteenth-century urban projects of the Second Empire, which had themselves adapted and escalated old-regime practices of absolutist display.

Spatial representations of power took on new meaning in Second Empire Paris. As David Harvey has observed, perhaps no Second Empire project demonstrated this as profoundly as Haussmann's sweeping reinvention of the city's central markets, which employed radical architectural form to inscribe the rationalist values of the regime on the provisioning of food and the spatial and social structures that supported it.<sup>7</sup> A century later, after decades of uninterrupted post-war growth,

the Fifth Republic of Charles de Gaulle attempted urban reforms on a similar scale, culminating in the expulsion of the markets and the reconfiguration of their setting.

The markets at Les Halles originated in a twelfth-century royal decree transferring older markets on the Ile de la Cité to an area adjacent to the Rue St. Denis, the principal northern entry to Paris.<sup>8</sup> The markets grew steadily in size and complexity, extending their influence throughout the quarter. Official antagonism towards the markets and their presence in the center of Paris was common, dating at least to 1610, when Henri IV demanded that his ministers: "get that market out of my good city!"<sup>9</sup> Even rulers less hostile to the neighborhood's market function have recognized its contradictions. On the one hand, Les Halles was the locus for the provisioning of a dense, heavily populated, and growing city. On the other hand, it was at the center of a great capital, and offered ripe opportunities for the spatial and formal projection of national power.

As market functions spread throughout the quarter in an ad hoc fashion, the space of Les Halles came to symbolize the growing power and autonomy of an emerging commercial class. At the same time, this space appeared increasingly resistant to efforts to appropriate it for the representation of centralized authority, which turned its attention instead to the rationalization, modernization, and regulation of market functions.<sup>10</sup> These efforts culminated in the 1840s and 50s, with the design of Victor Baltard's brick, iron, and glass pavilions that would become emblematic of Les Halles. The pavilions helped organize market activities, but also more firmly rooted them in the neighborhood and the larger urban framework.<sup>11</sup>

By 1964, the markets fed seven-and-a-half million people each day.<sup>12</sup> The dedication of Baltard's pavilions to wholesale activities spawned an intense retail trade in the surrounding streets and shops. The life that inhabited these spaces was frenetic, noisy, dangerous and nocturnal. Zola famously portrayed the markets as the city's ventre or "belly," and the metaphor stuck. By the 1960s, however, another body metaphor was preferred by officials and urbanists. As the city's "heart," they argued, Les Halles demanded rescue from the sclerotic circulation that served it. In 1959,



Victor Baltard, Les Halles Centrales, 1854-1870

an inter-ministerial council established new national markets on the periphery of Paris, at La Villette and at Rungis, and committed to moving the Halles markets to the new sites by 1966.<sup>13</sup> Between these decisions and the actual transfer—which was delayed until 1969—as teams of architects began preparing plans for the formal reinvention of Les Halles, residents and intellectuals worried about its inevitable social transformation. For many who worked and lived in the area, and for observers who saw in Zola’s “belly” something essential to Paris, the removal of the markets represented not therapy, but evisceration.

Representative of these concerns was the publication in 1967 of Louis Chevalier’s *Les Parisiens*. A historian and demographer, Chevalier’s groundbreaking previous work had helped turn attention away from the formal definition of Paris and instead proposed methods for better understanding its inhabitants. In *Les Parisiens*, arguing that the force of the city’s physical makeup had led outsiders to look past its citizens, Chevalier proposed to identify the unique qualities of the Parisian personality. His thesis was that, despite a diversity of background, neighborhood affiliation and temperament, Parisians shared certain distinct character traits that stemmed from the density of the city, the intensity of its collective life, and its spirit of freedom and creativity. For Chevalier, it was at Les Halles that the Parisian personality was displayed in its purest form:

Divided into many groups, this society presents a unity imposed on it by the toil of market work itself, which is to say the shared experience of difficult hours, of delimited space,... of a tumultuous, jostling, hectic, and brutal existence at the very limit of muscle and nerve. From this springs

the commonality that transcends all of the differences of trade and class: shared habits, familial relations, social codes, political opinions, and religious beliefs; shared conceptions of life and of the futility of life; and a shared attachment to this exhausting and stirring existence.<sup>14</sup>

Les Halles was, in fact, an intensified and microcosmic representation of Paris itself. Therefore, to evict the markets symbolized the destruction of Paris, and of the Parisian character that was most clearly revealed at Les Halles. This conclusion was at the center of Chevalier’s later book, *L’Assassinat de Paris*, a highly personal and outraged indictment of the forces of capital and technocracy that were, in his view, erasing the city.<sup>15</sup> Despite the strain that the markets’ presence placed on circulation in central Paris, countless observers reacted to their impending removal in ways that echoed Chevalier’s arguments. The intensity and violence of Les Halles were seen as central to Parisian identity. How would that identity survive in the face of the physical reshaping of the neighborhood?

By 1967, the contours of de Gaulle’s plans for Les Halles were becoming clearer. That year, the popular magazine *Paris Match* published a special issue subtitled “Paris in Twenty Years.” Presented as an exposé, the editors claimed to have won access to the government’s secret plans for the capital, arguing that *Paris Match* was best suited to break the story to the French public. The government’s trust was well rewarded; lavish illustrations and articles gushed about the “new capital” being created, “in which can be discerned the image of a reorganized France, one that will be more French because it will be more Cartesian.”<sup>16</sup> Much of the discussion focused on the implementation of plans for decentralizing the growing population of the capital. First presented to de Gaulle in 1964, and codified in a 1965 regional plan, this strategy oriented growth along two major axes that roughly paralleled the Seine. The development of *villes-nouvelles* along these axes would be supplemented by the construction of new high-speed commuter rail lines connecting the new towns to the city center.<sup>17</sup> This rail system, eventually called the RER, for “Regional Express Network,” would necessitate a major new underground transfer point, which would ideally be placed as close to the center as possible. This requirement, more than any other issue, spelled doom for Baltard’s pavilions. The RER station at Les Halles would be the first construction at the emptied former mar-



View of La Défense, *Paris Match*, July 1967

ket site, and was completed before any comprehensive plan for the site was settled.

*Paris Match* also displayed the twelve projects that had been prepared for de Gaulle by six different teams. Included was Jean Faugeron's proposal for a cluster of towers reaching nearly 300 meters in height. Other projects were more horizontal in orientation. Louis Arretche, for example, had designed a vast network of stepped platforms intended to create connections between distinct quarters. Admitting that these forms broke dramatically with their surroundings, Arretche nonetheless envisioned them as spaces "ensuring the continuity and diversity of pedestrian paths for the flâneur, the lover of Paris, the tourist, or the loiterer."<sup>18</sup> Despite this attempt to connect new forms with traditional sources of urban pleasure, publication of these plans did little to calm fears about the physical and social transformation of Paris.

Nor were all journalists as sanguine as the writers at *Paris Match*. When the projects were publicly exhibited—for just four days—in June of 1967, André Fermigier, art critic for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, summoned his readers to the defense of Paris.<sup>19</sup> Fermigier called Arretche's scheme appropriate for a southern hilltown, but not for Paris. Worse, Faugeron's project was nothing but a "tumultuous gang of towers... beneath which the old quarter of Les Halles would disappear entirely."<sup>20</sup> If forced to choose, Fermigier preferred the relative conservatism and simplicity of Claude Charpentier's proposal, if only because it showed the most respect for existing urban form. Over the next several years, Fermigier used his column to engage a spirited and increasingly popular campaign aimed at preserving the unique qualities of



Louis Arretche, Proposed site plan for Les Halles district, 1967

the Halles quarter.

Françoise Choay, writing in 1968, argued that these controversies represented a turning point—a 'maturation, an awakening to urban problems.'<sup>21</sup> De Gaulle's plans for Les Halles were intended to crown a decade of ambitious modernist urban projects in Paris and the provinces. Instead they had provoked, according to Choay, an 'explosion of indignation.'<sup>22</sup> She explained this popular rejection not by engaging a critique of individual proposals—a practice she characterized as both 'alibi and trap'—but instead by viewing the projects as broadly representative of a profoundly confused and conflicted relationship between architecture and urban form.<sup>23</sup> The self-conscious formalism of the schemes was indicative of a monumentality that was, in the end, hollow of meaning, deriving from authoritarian patronage and its misplaced faith in the architect as heroic *homme-d'art*.<sup>24</sup>

For Choay, the 'myth of the work of art' obscured the complex, interdependent, contingent, and essentially social nature of urban structures. The status of monument was obtained either retrospectively, she argued, through historical processes, or in expression of specific ideologies and authentic "signifying content." The monumentalizing pretensions of De Gaulle's designers attempted the latter, but the ideology they revealed and the content they claimed was the Fifth Republic's alliance between unquestioned centralized power, capital, and technocratic planning. As the events of May 1968 demonstrated, this alliance was increasingly viewed as hostile to authentic urban life and to individual and social development.

Hovering above Choay's characterization of the

monument were the glass and iron umbrellas of Baltard's market pavilions. Though still standing in 1968, their obliteration was assumed by nearly every proposal for the district's transformation. In her critique of the government's plans to convert Les Halles into a representation of France's institutional, administrative, and commercial interests, Françoise Choay posited an alternative strategy centering on the preservation of Baltard's pavilions, which, due to their functional neutrality, were "predisposed to re-employment, to a semantic metamorphosis: they can welcome sculptures, books, and spectacles, as well as vegetables."<sup>25</sup> This proposal anticipated the temporary public appropriation of the market pavilions after their abandonment in 1969, when some of the vacant spaces were used for a skating rink, for concerts, circuses, and expositions. Emptied of their commercial function, and neglected by authorities bent on their removal, the pavilions offered a home for a new kind of urbanism in the making—one founded on public involvement, inclusion, spontaneity, experimentation, and on equal access to culture. As Norma Evenson has pointed out, this new democratic vision of urban cultural life that briefly flowered at Les Halles would soon be institutionalized at the nearby Centre Georges Pompidou.<sup>26</sup> Both cases seemed to be manifestations of what Françoise Choay had called "a new dimension of urbanity, particular to the end of the twentieth century: the dimension of play."<sup>27</sup>

Efforts to wrest the Halles neighborhood from state-supported developers and technocrats in the name of a festive and popular urbanism were inspired in large part by the late-sixties writings of sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Anglo-american intellectual circles associate Lefebvre with his work on the sociopolitical production of space and, more recently, architectural theorists have been drawn to his work on everyday life.<sup>28</sup> In France, however, it was Lefebvre's urban theory that had the greatest impact. Published in 1967, and dedicated to the centennial of Marx's *Capital*, Lefebvre's book *La droite a la ville* (*Right to the City*) argued for an urban praxis based on social development—a "realization of urban society."<sup>29</sup> Preventing this necessary social evolution were, according to Lefebvre, ideologies of urbanism founded on traditions of centralized state planning, on the reorganization of private enterprise, on the optimization of productivity, and on

instrumental conceptions of "habitat" as product and service. Opposed to the latter was the act of "inhabiting," of actively claiming the city. Here again the notion of "play" was crucial, describing a uniquely urban way of living emphasizing spontaneous creative action.

Lefebvre's conception of an urbanism based on spontaneity, creativity, and play had much in common with that of the Situationists, to whom he had been close in the late 50s and early 60s.<sup>30</sup> It is tempting, therefore, to imagine Lefebvre's new urban society in a setting akin to that of the "unitary urbanism" advocated by the Situationists and, most notably, by the Dutch theorist Constant Nieuwenhuis. Constant's decades-long elaboration of his "New Babylon" project was aimed at exploring the relationships between physical form and the more internal and psychological aspects of Situationist activity. Lefebvre, however, in *Right to the City*, questioned the centrality of architecture and built form, and pointed to their limited potential to effect change. "Architecture taken separately and on its own," he argued, "could neither restrict nor create possibilities. Something more, something better, something else is needed. Architecture as art and technique also needs an orientation. Although necessary, it could not suffice."<sup>31</sup> The orientation capable of giving meaning to monuments and spaces is towards the festival, and the creation of "structures of enchantment."<sup>32</sup>

By placing emphasis on modes of urban living, rather than on urban form itself, Lefebvre's work contributed to the generalized mood of rejection that greeted plans for the formal renovation of Les Halles. In their opposition to the wholesale redefinition of the neighborhood, writers like Fermigier, Choay, Chevalier, and Lefebvre were all united by a sense that urbanism must be considered primarily a social act, and that the complexities of existing urban structures came closer to satisfying that requirement than did monumental proposals for sweeping change. As criticism solidified around calls for a socially oriented urbanism, contemporary models of planning and development were exposed as not up to the challenge. The result was a steady retreat on the part of national and municipal officials. By 1969, the Paris Council had rejected all of the six official proposals presented to it. They bought time by requiring further study, and eventually settled on a strategy that backed

away from large-scale above-ground construction altogether.

The Les Halles project, as eventually constructed, made a series of compromises. Efficiency of circulation was provided by networks of underground auto and train paths and connections. Commercial interests were represented by plans for a vast shopping center, also underground, that became known as the Forum des Halles. In 1974, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was elected to succeed Georges Pompidou as president. Giscard further scaled back ambitions for the project, and called on his favorite architect, Barcelona's Ricardo Bofill, to design the Forum and surrounding structures. Three years later, in 1977, Jacques Chirac was elected the first mayor of Paris, ending centuries of direct state control over the city. Chirac claimed control of the Halles projects and halted construction on Bofill's buildings. The few programmatic ambitions that survived were pushed underground, as the central design question became how to fill what locals called "the hole"—*le trou des Halles*—a vast pit that had been opened by construction of the underground facilities. Settling this question would take another five years, and construction five more. In the end, open space—mostly in the form of gardens—became the ultimate compromise position, allowing a limitation of enclosed construction and, theoretically, a maximization of social use.

Over the course of fifteen years, then, the grandiose schemes of the late 1960s were gradually but decisively dismantled. This reflected a growing consensus around the idea of a socially-oriented urbanism, one aimed at liberating inhabitants from the spatial mechanisms of capitalist development. But agreement that the city belongs to its citizens raises other questions. Which citizens, for example, and with what freedoms? Which interests and constituencies should be represented and supported by planning? How can conflicting claims of "rights" to the city be resolved? And how can the skills of architects and planners be brought to bear on these claims?

The Les Halles controversies exposed these questions, rather than answering them. As planning theorists have observed, cities are comprised of multiple "publics," but designers can help these groups to forge consensus about what constitutes

the "public good."<sup>33</sup> In the words of Leonie Sandcock and Kim Dovey, "urban design decisions shape the public interest by simulating alternate futures and by catching (or failing to catch) the public imagination."<sup>34</sup> At Les Halles, the ambitious projects of de Gaulle's designers indicated a future at odds with popular conceptions of what it meant to be Parisian. The failure to articulate decisive formal and programmatic responses to these critiques indicates the ambivalence of architecture when faced with calls for an urbanism for the people—for a public right to the city.

## ENDNOTES

1. François Serrand, *Le pari des Halles de Paris* (Paris: Aubin, 2001), 3. Where I cite English editions of texts originally published in French, I have used translations from those editions. Translations from texts with no English edition are my own. I am grateful to the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts for providing support for this project.
2. Christian de la Malène, introduction to *Les Halles, La renaissance d'un quartier, 1966-1988*, by Christian Michel (Paris: Masson, 1988), 7.
3. Ibid.
4. *Paris - Les Halles Concours 2004* (Paris: Le Moniteur, 2004), 41.
5. The most vocal and consistent criticism has come from the neighborhood group ACCOMPLIR. Editorial campaigns have also been waged against the Delanoë project in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and elsewhere. See for example "Drôles de corps," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 17 May 2007.
6. The Association ACCOMPLIR's efforts are documented on the group's website. See <http://www.accomplir.asso.fr/admin/edito.php>
7. David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 10-13.
8. Bertrand Lemoine, *Les Halles de Paris* (Paris: L'Equerre, 1990), 9.
9. Amédée Brousset, "Transfert des halles et rénovation de Paris" in *Les Conférences des Ambassadeurs: Grands discours Français et Internationaux* (1964), 5.
10. Peter Wolf, "City Structuring and Social Sense in 19th and 20th Century Urbanism," in *Perspecta* 13 (1971): 220-33.
11. Luc Dupont, "Étude sur les Halles," in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 352 (May-June, 2004): 56-59.
12. Brousset, p. 7.
13. See Alice Thomine, "About Les Halles in Paris: the leading role of the historian in the city (1960-1971)," in *The Journal of Architecture* 9 (Summer 2004): pp. 209-17; also Bernard Marchand, *Paris, histoire d'une ville*

*XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), 297.

14. Louis Chevalier, *Les Parisiens* (Paris: Hachette, 1967), p. 34.

15. Louis Chevalier, *L'Assassinat de Paris* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1977). This work has been published in English as *The Assassination of Paris*, trans. David P. Jordan (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

16. Marc Heimer, "Huit mois d'enquête pour venir à bout des secrets du Paris futur," in *Paris Match*, July 1, 1967, 42.

17. Ibid. Also see Norma Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 344-59.

18. In addition to their publication in *Paris Match*, most of the early schemes for the Les Halles redevelopment have been collected in *600 contreprojets pour les Halles: Consultation internationale pour l'aménagement du quartier des Halles Paris* (Paris, Editions du Moniteur, 1981).

19. André Fermigier, "Les Tours de Babylone," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 28 June 1967. Fermigier's columns both for *Le Nouvel Observateur* and for *Le Monde*, written between 1967 and 1985, present a fascinating history of urbanism during the period, and effectively map the opposition to it. They have been collected in André Fermigier, *La Bataille de Paris*, ed. François Loyer (Paris: Gallimard, 1991.)

20. Ibid.

21. Françoise Choay, "Problèmes des halles," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 39 (1968): 53.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Evenson, p. 303.

27. Choay, p. 53.

28. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, "Lost in Transposition--Time, Space, and the City," in Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*. Trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, p. 6. Also see *Architecture of the Everyday*, ed. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke. New York: Princeton Architectural Press / Yale Publications on Architecture, 1997.

29. Henri Lefebvre, "Right to the City", in *Writings on Cities*, p. 177. For all quotations from this work, I have used the translation published by Kofman and Lebas, cited above.

30. Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*. New York and London: Routledge: 2006, pp. 30-35.

31. Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 173.

32. Ibid.

33. Leonie Sandercock and Kim Dovey, "Pleasure, Politics, and the 'Public Interest,' Melbourne's Riverscape Revitalization," in *Journal of the American Planning Association* 68:9 (Spring 2002); p. 152.

34. Ibid., 153