

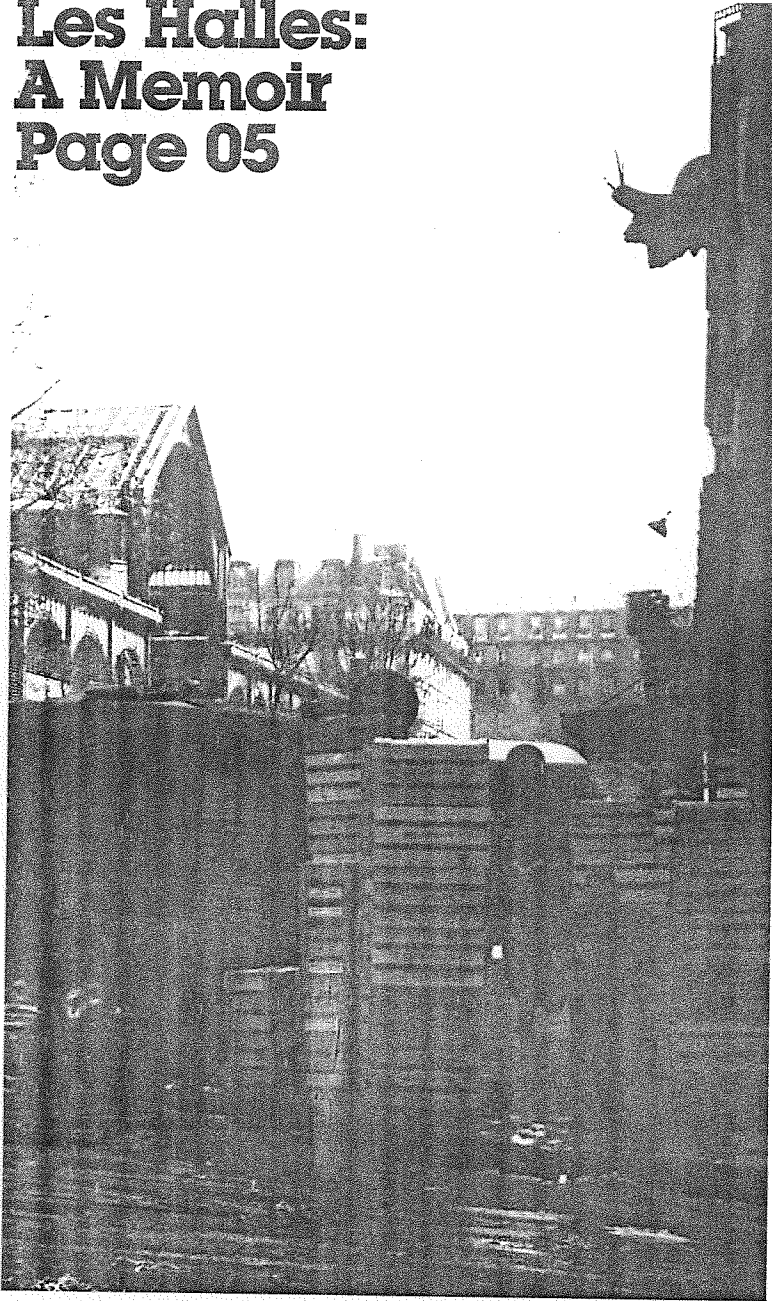
# The Paris Times

Free Monthly

Fresh Insights into Life in Paris September 2005

N°01

## Les Halles: A Memoir Page 05



Les Halles are going to be destroyed again. Like all important places, the Forum exists in reality, but perhaps more significantly, in the public psyche. The original pavilions were destroyed over 30 years ago, yet their presence hovers over all discussions of what is to become of the heart of Paris. An architect and former expat retraces the story of Les Halles and looks at the proposed project. One question arises: Can process and good design co-exist?

## Feature

Before there was eBay there was Drouot: here anyone can sell, anyone can buy, and all are welcome. How did the venerable institution survive the free flow of goods within Europe, the globalization of the art market, and the emergence of the Internet?

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## Profile

In *A Year in The Merde*, Stephen Clarke revealed to crowds of fervent Francophiles what it was really like to be an Englishman in Paris. One book was not enough. His new novel, *Merde Actually*, is due to be released this month. We caught this disillusioned lover in his still-favorite city: Paris.

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## Food

If *lapin chasseur* sounds like an oxymoron to you and *pet de nome* a blasphemy, then it's time to enroll in one of the city's best cooking classes. We tested them for you.

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## Culture

*Le Parc*, the three-act contemporary ballet created for the Opéra Ballet and hailed as a masterpiece at its premiere in 1994, is scheduled to be performed at the Opéra Garnier this month. Its choreographer, Angelin Preljocaj, might be the hottest French choreographer today.

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## Books

Summer is over: watch for avalanches! Books avalanches. In France, September is not just about school. Traditionally, it is also the publishers' *rentrée*. This year, 663 new books have been published, including 96 first novels. We help you to make a choice.

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## Fiction

The lush smell of the damp lawn overpowered him. Spring. Photosynthesis. Stamens and pistils. The garden oozed green blood and swollen reproductive organs. Something was stirring by the fence to his right. He heard a snapping noise and thought he saw the fence quiver.

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And also: What's on? City Matters,  
Fashion & Design, Kids' Corner, Gateways, Classifieds...

## City Matters

# Les Halles: A Memoir

Paris tries to move its center from memory to reality.

By Carol Berens

When I heard Les Halles was to be destroyed again, I wanted to write a “formal” urban planning/design article about why change is necessary, how the present Forum and park came about, and the results of the recent competition for the redesign. Instead, muddled reminiscences insist on bubbling up to the surface of my mind.

I first came to Paris during the summer of 1974, so for me the old food market, Les Halles, is a place of memory based upon literary allusions of revelers greeting the dawn with onion soup and another *vin rouge* at *Au Pied de Cochon bistro*. When I arrived, only a part of one pavilion remained, sad witness to the demise of the bustling market. Its central

### Can process and good design co-exist?

location and industrial atmosphere—the allure of elegance and working-class roughness rubbing against each other—made cities interesting back then. (Cinematic proof: In *Charade*, Givenchy-clad Audrey Hepburn meets a mustached Walter Matthau by the meat pavilion, while in the background, slabs of beef are carried back and forth, vying with vegetable carts.) The market itself had moved to Rungis in 1969, initiating an irrevocable shift in neighborhood character.

Although there was a local movement to adapt the buildings for cultural uses, in 1971 their destruction was famously started during the annual August holidays, ensuring few protestors. I missed out on it all, but remember reading in the New York press about how aghast and up-in-arms Parisians were upon hearing what had happened.

Truth to tell, it had become a bizarre place for a raucous wholesale market that supplied Parisian stores and restaurants with the raw ingredients for its fabled cuisine. The area—a few steps from the Louvre and tourist hotels—had been congested, seemingly forever, with produce-laden trucks converging and blocking traffic on narrow, cobblestone streets. The frenzied activity, horn-blowing and, yes, the trash and garbage, made this area one of the poorest and unhealthy of Paris. Plans for change were talked about for decades.

We studied Les Halles in architectural history class because they were famous mid-19<sup>th</sup> century cast iron-and-glass structures designed by Victor Baltard (not particularly well-known), prime examples of when Paris and the French embraced the future. Commissioned by Baron Haussmann under Napoleon III (through a competition), Les Halles contributed to the transformation of Paris into a modern city by creating an organized, central location for the distribution of goods from an insalubrious warden of little stalls standing check-by-jowl on narrow, jagged streets. Napoleon wanted pavilions built of cast iron, inspired by the recent aesthetic success of the Gare de l’Est. Baltard did not look toward the past for inspiration, but created this functional building form, the market hall, with the new materials of industry that allowed for long structural spans and a visual lightness unattainable with masonry. Ironically, soon after Les Halles’

destruction, the construction of Centre Georges Pompidou, the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s apotheosis of the industrial aesthetic initiated during Baltard’s era, began a few blocks to the east.

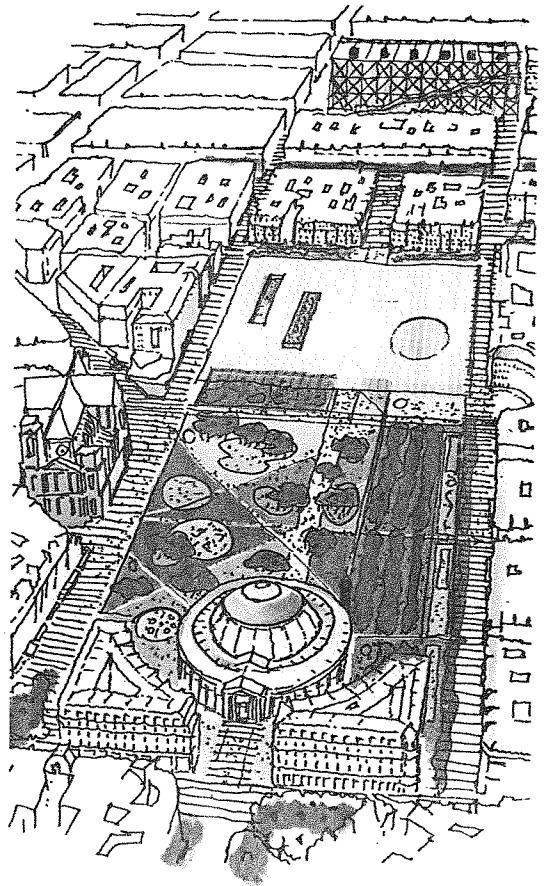
For almost a decade, all that remained was the seemingly permanent fixture of an extremely deep hole, not so fondly called *le trou* by one and all. There were no published plans of what was to be built. Bureaucrats were silent; rumors were rife. Some of the time was apparently taken up with the creation of the RER hub, which exists today. I do have fond memories of *le trou*, though. With no buildings obstructing views, we watched the sun set at the amazingly late (for us Americans) 10pm hour over *le trou* while eating at what had become a favorite restaurant whose name I’ve since forgotten and where I was first introduced to the delicious *profiteroles*.

The *trou*, sorry true, horror of what was built still shocks. To this day, the dreary, anomic-producing shopping mall and insipid park have no advocates. Closing the streets around the Forum to traffic supposedly to encourage pedestrians worsened the situation. The narrow dark streets without cars only emboldened criminals. As a result, the area has become one of the most unsafe in central Paris. The 1970s, I think, was a strange time for French architecture—a time of round buildings sheathed in bathroom tile. I believe the Forum des Halles reflects the unease and inability of French architects to address how people live and what the future should look like. In Paris especially, fiasco begat change, however, and the French have since modified the way large public projects are done.

The Château de Versailles, Haussmann’s Boulevards and the recent *Grands Projets* prove that France never shied away from ambitious

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projects. Present-day French presidents adore them as much as past kings. Public projects have evolved from being traditionally authoritarian to appearing open and egalitarian. Formerly, the government decided in secret what was to be built, deaf to local concerns. With the present Les Halles project, change was announced, a design competition held, exhibitions mounted, informal votes taken, and an official website\*



Les Halles in ten years?

kept up-to-date.

Will this new process produce a better project? Can process and good design co-exist? The invited competition pitted four firms: Rem Koolhaas of OMA, MVRDV, Jean Nouvel, and David Mangin, of SEURA. The details of the proposals were, and still are, posted on the website. None of them struck me as the best solution—they miss an urban focus—and in reality, none will be built the way they are shown. Last year, the locals chose David Mangin’s design, considered the least visionary of the four. It keeps the stores and creates a formal, even classical, landscaped park. Costing 200 million euros, it was also the least expensive one.

At this stage, a discussion about staid or risky design misses the point about how large numbers of people use urban space. A park, no matter how formal or gimmicky, seems to be the default solution. Now, the political process will take over, and in 2012 (when the work will supposedly be done), we’ll see if new design directions develop from committees and democratic voting. ■

\*www.projetleshalles.com