

Walking on the Grass

Until the mid-70's, Paris was a city with little open space. Since then, more than 250 acres of parks and green space have been created, many nestled within formerly-ignored neighborhoods.

By Carol Berens

There are clues that you are not in the Tuileries. Sure, the limestone gravel paths crunch under your feet. And yes, you see the linden trees planted in straight rows. But you hear the excited shrieks of children jumping in and out of jets of water that spray up to the sky from spouts in the marble plaza. Teenagers are kicking a soccer ball and the park guard has not whistled them off the grass. You wish you could join the elbow and knee padded skaters pirouette around the fountain.

You ask yourself, "Am I really in a Paris park?"

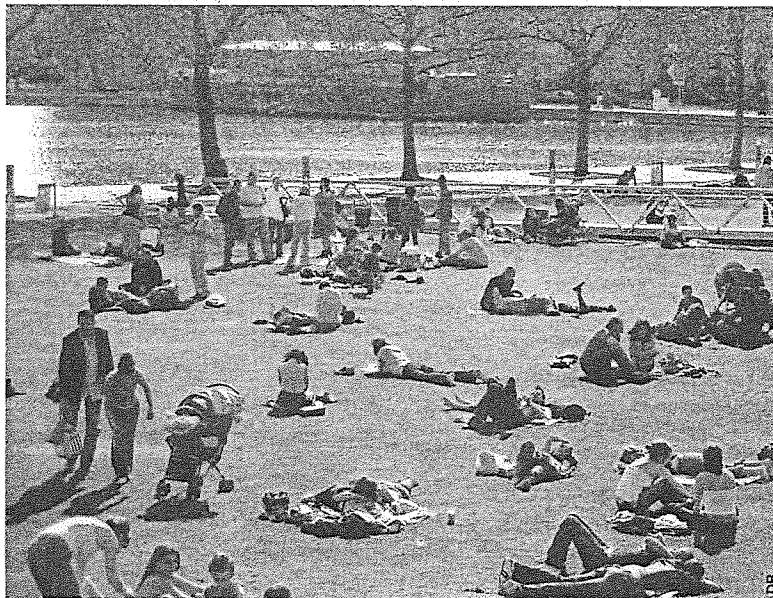
The answer is "yes." Paris parks are changing. This turnabout started nearly thirty years ago as modernization swept industry to outlying suburbs. Acres of land strewn with relics of abandoned factories were left in their wake. Paris turned those assembly lines and storehouses into parks. And not parks just for children and tourists. But showcases of new landscape ideas to set the design world buzzing.

Paris was a city with little open space. Since the mid-70's, however, more than 250 acres of parks and green space have been created, many nestled within formerly-ignored neighborhoods. Now greenhouses replace assembly lines. Vineyards grow on old slaughterhouse grounds. A clutch of maples sits atop a former railway viaduct. A tour of these parks reveals a little-known side of Paris, a Paris with a sure sense of its history and a desire to explore the future through new design ideas.

It is a future seen through the lens of the past. The land's former use—under Louis XIV, a century ago, yesterday—is palpable today. But don't look for a romanticized version of the unspoiled countryside loved by the Americans and English. Instead, the French evoke the memory of cultivated rows of agricultural fields and formal private gardens. Nature bends to their will. Order prevails. Here one shows off, strolls, and observes.

Go to these parks with all your senses unlocked. Designs are created to please the eyes, the nose, the ears, the intellect. In Paris, theme gardens refer not to fictional cartoon characters, but to ideas and natural phenomena. Hear the wind rustle through the Bamboo Garden at the Parc de La Villette. Watch and listen to the waterfalls cascade down the steep hills of the Parc Belleville. Think about the meanings of the red, orange, white and black serial gardens at Park Citroën.

These parks were until recently abandoned sites in forgotten corners of Paris. Now, they're unexpected oases that blossom throughout the city—the best places to enjoy May in Paris.



Parc de la Villette.

Belleville

From the Middle Ages to the turn of this century, miners scooped out the powdery white gypsum known as plaster of Paris from under the steep hills of this eastern part of the city. Today, the Belleville neighborhood is a cultural stew, filled with African, Chinese, Arab and Jewish immigrants as well as a smattering of artists. Seen from the top of the park, the broad vista of tourist's Paris spreads out below—from the Eiffel Tower to Centre Georges Pompidou. Honeysuckle-covered steps and flowering bushes cascade down the steep slope. Lushly flowered paths bob up and down like ribbons in the wind, gamely hugging the slope. The park's simple design is deceiving, for history is written in its elements. Reflecting the spring source that once made Belleville famous, water flows down the slope through a series of small waterfalls and ponds, inviting children's imaginations at every level. A small vineyard and grotto respectively recall former farms and taverns and the mineral that still lies beneath the surface.

Métro Belleville

Georges Brassens

Slipped within a high-density neighborhood, this 19 acre parcel evolved from a vineyard to a truck farm to the Vaugirard slaughterhouse until its closure in 1975.

The park, named after the late French poet and singer, is a comfortable neighborhood enclave bursting with activity. For children, there are puppet shows; for skaters, broad, paved areas; and for just catching up with the latest neighborhood gossip, small seating areas.

Typical of these new parks, thematic

gardens abound, including a scented garden for the blind, a rose garden showcasing 20 varieties, and rows of grapes recalling former vineyards. New and old co-exist: The imitation-boulder amphitheater looks toward the tower of a former market building.

Métro Convention

Park de la Villette

This "Grand Hall" was the entry to the animal market and slaughterhouse of La Villette from 1867 to 1971; 50 acres in the northeast corner of Paris where the city and country met. An international design competition in 1976 called for an innovative cultural urban park—a 24-hour center combining a science museum, a center for music as well as public open spaces.

Applause, music and drama now fill the refurbished Grand Hall, a multi-purpose public theatre that is spectacularly illuminated at night with red, white and blue lighting. Small red pavilions, or "folies," of different designs and use, are placed throughout the park at intersections of an invisible square grid, unifying this vast space into an organized scheme. White bulbs outline the undulating walkway awning that reinforces the north-south axis. Blue invites strollers into open spaces, which range from broad lawns and promenades to smaller theme gardens of bamboo, of fog, of mirrors.

Métro Porte de la Villette

Bercy

Barrels of wine were once rolled in from barges on the Seine to Bercy. Once an enclave of cobblestone streets, low brick buildings and

majestic sycamores and chestnuts, the area became an insular world encircled by expressways, railroads and bridges. As the effort towards renovating the eastern half of the city continues, Bercy now contains new housing, the Ministry of Finance, the Palais Omnisports and the new Cinémathèque, formerly the Frank Gehry-designed American Center.

"Gardens of Memory," the winner of the 1987 design competition, pays tribute to the history of the site and traditional French landscape design. Paths, laid out in a grid and notched to when they encountered any of the 400 existing trees, connect to surrounding streets and bring to mind the old village. Three distinct types of gardens extend the length of the park parallel to the Seine. A great lawn with small stone structures, on axis with the Palais Omnisports, welcomes soccer players and loungers. Further east are nine large "parterres" or squares of formal French gardens showcasing roses, vegetables, orchards, vineyards, as well as abstract representations of the four seasons. The final, romantic garden manipulates water into canals, grottos, islands and waterfalls.

Métro Bercy

Parc André-Citroën

By 1970, the last Citroën had rolled off the assembly line and its factory's smokestacks, machinery and bricks were dismantled without a trace. For the 1985 competition for this 34 acre "blank slate" abutting the Seine, designers were asked to create a new park for all of Paris, not just the immediate neighborhood.

The result is one of the more theoretical or intellectual parks in Paris—a place for learning as much as lounging. A large manicured lawn framed within a mini-canal or moat, echoes in size and axis formal French parks such as the Champs de Mars by the Eiffel Tower. Water spumes from a jets in the granite plaza, the stage for the large greenhouses filled with exotic plants. Crushed stone paths lead past small, themed gardens. Red, orange, blue, silver: each color has its own garden whose plaque explains meanings



Parc de Belleville.

and associations. A black garden, a white garden, and a garden of bamboo that moves and rustles with the least wind all serve to make every step a discovery.

Métro Balard

PROMENADES

Explore miles of traffic-free Paris from the Parc de la Villette to the Bastille and on to the Bois de Vincennes. These byways, slipped within neighborhoods not on the usual tourist itinerary, connect newly refurbished areas with stops for markets, cafes and galleries. Stumble upon unexpected green oases scattered throughout the city. Travel from the Gardens of Memory to the Garden of Movement. Enjoy sophisticated new French landscape design.

Over 150 years ago, Napoleon built canals and railroads to bring goods from the French countryside into the heart of Paris. Trucks

have supplanted mules and barges. The markets long ago moved to the city's outskirts. Today the same routes that once carried flowers and food are landscaped public walks perfect for an afternoon of leisurely exploration and enjoyment.

From Parc de la Villette to Place de la République: Cyclists now spin through landscaped paths bordering nineteenth century waterways connecting the City of Music at the Parc de la Villette to the Place de la République. Midway, at Place Stalingrad, the Bassin de la Villette provides a shimmering front yard for Ledoux's 1784 round tollhouse that once collected revenues for wine and produce entering Paris from the Marne and Ourcq Rivers. New hip restaurants and shaded benches border the Canal St Martin.

Métro Porte de la Villette - République

Promenade Richard Lenoir: From the Canal St Martin to Place Bastille, the promenade Richard Lenoir cuts a swath through residential Paris. Normally, a quiet retreat with varied seating areas screened from the road by shade trees, the interior of the mall hosts periodic street markets.

Métro Gare de l'Est - Bastille

Promenade Plantée: From 1859 to 1969, a railroad transported commuters over viaducts, within tunnels and at the bottom of ditches through the 2.5 miles from the Bastille to the Bois de Vincennes. The city literally grew up around it. By the time the line was supplanted by an underground system, many abutting buildings were actually attached to its infrastructure.

Now the rail line that once divided neighborhoods is a park connecting them. From second story vantage points bridging busy intersections to the backyards of leafy housing courts, this linear park follows the rail bed, changing character with each section. Linden trees and flower-laden trellises border narrow paths that expand into larger neighborhood parks. The *Viaduct des Arts*, the brick and stone vaults near the Opera, now house stores and ateliers.

Métro Bastille - Bel Air ■

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