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Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

THE 'HALLES' REMODELLING PROJECT IN THE CENTRE OF PARIS: A CASE OF STUDY OF A POLITICALLY MEDIATED METROPOLITAN OPERATION?

ANNE JARRIGEON

PARIS EST UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

I wish to contribute to discussions about the city as a 'mediated' phenomenon, with an emblematic French case study: the 'Paris Halles' (Paris Market). A large-scale remodeling project of this central Parisian area began in 2002, more than 30 years after the historical wholesale food market that was destroyed in 1969. The project and its mediation via communication documents, exhibitions, public meetings, an official website and, since the beginning of the work in 2010, the worksite itself, can be analyzed as a real political metropolitan mediated operation.

The Halles is truly a nerve centre of the entire Ile-de-France, a Region subjected to the imperatives of rail-oriented town planning that bases urban development on transport networks and has made the centre of Paris accessible within half an hour for over three million people¹. As Pierre Sansot so aptly put it², this space of inter-connection and transit, like all the city's stations, is a real "inside door". While some find it oppressive, for others it is a mythical place associated with urban cultures and the *banlieue*³. Today it is the scene of a spectacular redevelopment project for which David Mangin was selected as the architect in 2004, in a competition widely publicized by the media⁴.

The work is currently underway after several years of debates and consultation that generated a profusion of discourses and visual productions by various stakeholders. The public can now see emerging, day by day, the famous "Canopée" designed by architects Patrick Berger and Jacques Anziutti, and which is an emblematic figure of this project and of its reshaping of underground/surface relations on a neighbourhood scale. As one of the achievements of Bertrand Delanoë, Mayor of Paris from March 2001 to April 2014, the "Halles project" – often presented by Anne Hidalgo, former Deputy Mayor in charge of planning and architecture, and now Mayor of Paris – can be considered as a particularly successful undertaking in political communication. But what about the metropolitan dimension of a project presented as an answer to "major metropolitan challenges"? Between current onsite practices and the images projected, how are the various spatial and social scales articulated in this reinvention of the centre which, more implicitly than explicitly, has a distinct discourse on its relations with its periphery ?

In this paper I will examine this discourse in relative terms by comparing the results of a long ethnological survey started in 2005 as part of my PhD research⁵ and an analysis of the various mediations of the redevelopment project⁶. This comparison of timescales and modes of action and representation raises questions on the enchanted sociability anticipated by renovation projects that incorporate into their plans uses which the current engineering and functioning of these places still preclude.

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I. PARISIANS' DISENCHANTMENT WITH THE HALLES: REJECTION OF ITS METROPOLITAN DIMENSION?



Figure 1. Halles remodelling worksite, February 2012 © Anne Jarrigeon

In early 2011 the metallic fences closed around the “Forum des Halles”, hiding from public view the first work on the regeneration of the centre of Paris. Rows of promotional boards concerning this vast architectural and town planning operation were attached to them. Many passers-by slowed down to look at the images, commenting on the changes to the garden, trying to peek through the slits to see the earth-movers digging a new “Halles hole” (*“trou des Halles”*), as the first urban planning project at the end of the sixties was nick-named. The atmosphere in no way resembles that described by witnesses of that period, who saw the demolition of the former legendary “Halles de Paris” leaving a strange and threatening void in the very heart of the capital city. Unlike the “Pavillons Baltard” which had been destroyed against the will of the residents and many collectives of architects, artists and French and foreign political personalities, those designed by Willerval in the 1980s found few defenders and were ready to be demolished against a backdrop of general indifference. The new “Halles campaign” has many detractors but few of them criticize it in the name of a heritage or social life to preserve⁷.



Figure 2. Chatelet les Halles Station, January 2005 © Anne Jarrigeon

The metropolitan vocation of the “Forum des Halles” does not seem unrelated to its poor image or its relatively bad reputation, with regard to both its initial urban planning and the people who frequent it. From the design stages, the technical conditions of metropolization (the deployment and interconnection of transport infrastructure at the origin of the strongly-criticized project) were met with disapproval. In the 1960s the project seemed to be a classic example of potentially difficult relations between architects, planners and transport engineers. Today's debates are reactivating, albeit in a more consensual mood, those of the time concerning the primacy of functionality and planning over architecture.

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The “Forum des Halles”, a polymorphous project, was presented as a set of interconnected elements, without the points of view organized by each space allowing for junctions to be established between them. It defied description or a global perspective. While there are effectively architecturally distinct spaces offering different qualities in terms of volume, light and sound, on the whole the Forum's space is underpinned by a labyrinth logic. Irrespective of the arrangements of its various "places", the Forum only really seems to be associated with its famous "*niveau -3*" ("level -3"). Situated just above the RATP (public transport) area, this level organizes the most common part of what here, at the Halles, plays out between the limbo of metro and suburban trains, and the neighbourhood outside with which it has no direct connection. This level seems to reflect a popular metropolitan attraction, as both the clientele and the position and distribution of the various shops attest. The space of inter-connection of the RER (express suburban metro) – nicknamed the "flipper" because users seem to be propelled in all directions, miraculously avoiding collision with other users and the immense columns – is accessed through heavy metal doors that are constantly slamming open and shut onto corridors leading to yet other corridors. City-dwellers who visit this neighbourhood cannot escape these movements: the crowd is thrown into the “Rue Basse”, a sort of main crossing of the Forum, between the RATP area and the main exit, the “Porte Lescot”. In this relatively narrow space with a low ceiling, individuals are nothing but bodies, thrust against one another, barely avoiding one another.

This teeming atmosphere of the modern Halles is a less enchanted continuation of the popular imaginary of the old Halles. In past years people went there to mix with the riffraff at all hours of the day or night. Today, the capital's former "belly" as the French writer Emile Zola used to describe it, now devoted to the leading international brands, absorbs metropolitan flows, centralizes commuter migrations, and catalyzes paths before redirecting them away. Associated with the massive arrival of "youths from the *banlieue*" and the Hip-Hop movement, of which it has effectively been a French Mecca, the Halles is in a sense the archetype of the negative image of the urban crowd: dense, compelling and worrying. Over 45% of the people who "go down" to the Halles come from the peripheries, and their average age is around 28⁸. For many Parisians, the "*zoneurs*", "junkies" and "rastas" of the garden, along with the "*banlieue rappers*", cause a general feeling of insecurity that actually existed before them. The adjacent “Rue de la Petite Truanderie” and “Rue de la Grande Truanderie” still bear witness to that⁹.

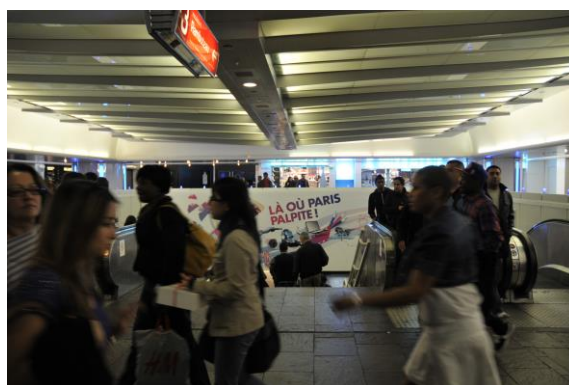


Figure 3. Halles Forum, March 2013 © Anne Jarrigeon

The lack of attention paid to its spaces of transition contributes the Halles' oppressiveness. The place feels like a space of concentration acting out its role as an "inside door", a type of throttle. The general organization of the neighbourhood that the pedestrian streets distinguish from the rest of the city extends this effect of congestion. Physical constraints weigh heavily on the arrangement of visibilities at the Forum des Halles. The reorganization of access paths and the improvement of inside/outside articulations are at the heart of the redevelopment project that, from this point of view, is a historical

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continuity. Although it is being done in the shadow of the spectacular “Canopée”, the remaking of the modes of circulation from the RER and the metro to the surface is one of the key aspects of the rehabilitation.

This is one of the first things that an analysis of this project as political mediation teaches us. Whereas the urbanization challenge essentially concerns the redevelopment of underground transport, its modes of access, and the articulation of the transport networks, this project started with the surface, that is, its parts that are above ground and therefore visible: the “Canopée” and the public garden (especially the “adventure garden” presented as a “recreational space”, “innovative”, “favouring learning about life”, reserved for children and supervised by facilitators)¹⁰. It was in this movement of making visible/invisible that the image of the new heart of Paris was built. I am now going to show that it was the result of a significant process of removal of the contemporary uses and users that tended to contribute to the neighbourhood's negative image.

II. REMOVING THE CONTEMPORARY: PLAYING DOWN THE METROPOLITAN FACT



Figure 4. Halles, June 2007,

While many urban, architectural and social studies were conducted before the architecture competition¹¹, they no longer seem to be considered important. The project itself and the communication about it now seem irrelevant to the present, apart from that of the building site, which receives extensive coverage. The site is indeed truly staged, and is now open to the public, which is invited under certain conditions to see the building “show” underway. The installation of the “Canopée” took place before everyone's eyes. Each of the construction phases is the subject of a particular scenography, like the testing of materials in scale-one prototypes, which curious residents have been able to see on the site itself. Many visits are organized. The dimensions of this new glass and metal cover, presented as a technical feat aimed at reconciling Parisians with their memories of the old Halles, make it visible from several spots in the neighbourhood. The “Canopée” is higher than the carefully maintained fences bearing educational information about the operation: chronology of the neighbourhood, origins of the concepts used, representations of the sources of inspiration, etc. An “observatory” was even set up in 2012 to monitor the building work from an elevated point of view (three metres high). The panorama thus created appears to do away with any blind spots. This way of enhancing the image of the work is reinforced by the description of its most concrete aspects and by highlighting the various stakeholders involved: architects, engineers, builders, security agents, cleaners, etc. The *chronicle*, the centrepiece of this reduction of present time to the monitoring of the work, is materialized by numerous publications. The first copy of *Les Halles métropole* that accompanied the “launching of the operational phase of the project”, claimed to monitor “news on the redevelopment of the Halles neighbourhood”. It was replaced by a larger magazine (about twenty pages): the “mag’ of the Halles neighbourhood's redevelopment”, tellingly named *Demain les Halles* (“Tomorrow the Halles”).

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Figure 5. Press release, April 2004

Whether it be on Internet, in brochures or special media, on the fences cordoning off the building site, or at special exhibitions at the Hotel de Ville (the city hall) or within the Forum, communication on the project juxtaposes (virtual) projected images with those, stamped with nostalgia, of the old Halles (photos, prints, engravings). The photos of the most well-known French photographer, Robert Doisneau, have for example been exhibited several times since the launching of the first consultations in 2002.

The current situation seems to be suspended between a past whose mythology is returned to the foreground and an enchanted future, through multiple rhetorical and enunciatory processes¹². This overshadowing of the contemporary corresponds to a form of minimization of the metropolitan vocation of the place, and of the potentially conflictual nature of the uses of this central urban space.

III. TOWARDS A PUBLIC SPACE ON THE SCALE OF THE METROPOLIS?

On the users of the Halles, often described as "inhabitants of the metropolis", and occasionally euphemistically associated with "diversity" and "*mixité*" (cultural mixing), very little is actually said. No social and ethnic "diversity" is visible. Whereas David Mangin and his team (SEURA) introduced a faithful representation of users of the Forum in the book that they dedicated to them¹³, the same cannot be said of the synthetic images that show a crowd of white city-dwellers strangely distant from the everyday reality. Apart from this visual neutralization, the "*voyageurs franciliens*" ("Ile-de-France travellers") as they are called, seem to be reduced to nothing more than the flows they represent in the orchestration of a more fluid and efficient mobility, from the platforms of the RER.

Yet the project reactivates the myth of the origins of the said "Forum", that of creating an "underground" city that is "welcoming" and offers real "public spaces". Officially devoted to collective appropriation, this central urban space whose very name brings to mind the political utopia characteristic of its years of construction¹⁴, has from its origins – and more recently with debates over

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its regeneration – been given the positive qualification of a "public space" after authors like Hannah Arendt¹⁵, Richard Sennett¹⁶ or Isaac Joseph¹⁷. Effectively without entry rights, equipped with public facilities, and frequented by users from all social and geographical horizons, the Forum corresponds in many respects to the practical utopia defined by the French theoretician of public space: Isaac Joseph. Its internal rules, far more restrictive than the regulations applying to public roads, yet to which it refers, have established for example a sort of partial curfew in the in-between spaces. The company Unibail, the Paris municipality and the RATP share the management of the Forum's spaces and organize the maintenance of order according to their own procedures, based for example on differentiated security systems.

Unlike the many discourses in which the "Carreau des Halles" is simply a continuation of the streets outside, the Forum is a distinctly separate space. Les Halles seem more than ever subjected to a veritable circulatory paradigm in which the engineering of the crowds reinforces spontaneous practices. Everything is aimed at preventing the crowd from stopping or coagulating, so that the passer-by is not only the main figure but above all a compulsory one among the Forum's users. The steps outside the most visited shop (the FNAC) are not sprayed several times a day, as in the past, to chase away tramps and other undesirables, but they are under close surveillance by numerous agents who call to order the uninformed every fifteen minutes. The undesirables of the Halles, those that the system controlling fluidity targets the most directly, rarely stop at this place in the Forum. These young men readily labelled as "*banlieue* youths", who are doubly stigmatized for their supposed geographical and ethnic origins and their style or the colour of their skin, have generally internalized the constraints weighing on them and master the space by physically moving through it.

Only one concession has been made in the form of a homage to these youths and the urban practices that they have contributed to having recognized in the past, by making the heart of Paris the French capital of Hip-Hop inspired by the United States: the creation of a new dedicated cultural space. This seems however to be much more of a new form of political and institutional harnessing than of a reopening of possibilities¹⁸, for it has actually no longer been possible, for a long time now, to organize musical meetings of dance "battles" at the Halles, outside of institutional frameworks.

Apart from the creation of an institutional space devoted to Hip-Hop and the announcement of future gatherings, it is legitimate to wonder whether "this living place" will not require a total shift in its management policy if it is to function socially as a metropolitan public space.

CONCLUSION

The media surrounding the Halles project, a real instrument of political communication for the City of Paris, tends to neutralize existing conflicts or tensions between the centre and the periphery. Despite the stated ambition of recreating a large-scale metropolitan public space in the very centre of the city, the implicitly constructed view discretely prolongs an old injunction to maintain fluid sociability coupled with a control of what can be observed and of forms of self-exhibition. The least desirable users, those precisely who were not, or hardly, involved in the consultations prior to the studies defining the project, and in the architecture competition, are also removed from the project's mediation.

Moreover, these young people from the periphery who participate so actively in the popular atmosphere of the neighbourhood would certainly, in many cases, have wanted the Halles not to change, and to remain the field of collective wandering, of the dizziness of being together, and of open confrontation with the otherness that they associate with Paris.

At the time of the Greater Paris and the celebration of the metropolis by all the actors of Ile-de-France, the Halles project ultimately seems to clearly reaffirm a certain Parisianism at the centre of Paris.

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² Pierre Sansot, *Poétique de la ville* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971).

³ In France center of the city is much more valuable than « suburb ». I decide to keep the word « banlieue » in French because it has a negative meaning that the English translation doesn't express.

⁴ In 2002, the City of Paris embarked on public consultations concerning the redevelopment of the Halles. Forty meetings, four public exhibitions, and eight surveys were carried out in this respect. The study to define the project was concluded with an architecture competition that received wide media coverage. The winner, chosen in 2004, was David Mangin and the SEURA team. Patrick Berger and Jacques Anziutti's project was selected for the underground part, including the railway station. The operation, that is scheduled to be completed in 2016, has four main partners: the Région Île-de-France, the Syndicat des Transports d'Île-de-France (STIF – the transport organizing authority), the RATP (which exploits the entire transport hub), and the Société Civile du Forum des Halles de Paris (for the shopping mall).

See the official website of the "Les Halles métropole" project.

<http://www.parisleshalles.fr>

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⁷ Françoise Fromonot, *La campagne des Halles. Les nouveaux malheurs de Paris* (Paris : La Fabrique, 2005).

⁸ RATP

⁹ A *truand* is a gangster, and the term previously also referred to a vagrant. [Transl.]

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Berhard, in *Demain les Halles* (November 2012): 8.
This garden was inaugurated in 2012 by Bertrand Delanoë.

¹¹ See in particular Thierry Baudouin *et al*, *Jeunes métropolitains aux Halles* (CEME and LTMU research report, 2007).

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¹⁸ Virginie Millot, " The French touch. Le hip hop au prisme de l'universalisme républicain", *Anthropologie et société* 30 (2006): 175-197.