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The destruction of Paris  
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A few years ago, Eric Rohmer made a movie about the mayor of a village in the Vendée who decides that what his picturesque hamlet needs is not a new library but a médiathèque, an untranslatable word for a fashionable multimedia boondoggle.

A médiathèque building must be erected, which means bringing in an architect and setting aside space for parking lots and handicapped ramps and the right municipal lighting. In this particular village, it also would mean cutting down the venerable and pleasant tree near the house of the “baba cool” village teacher.

The teacher, not surprisingly, is against the whole project, as are related other stock characters in this curious movie: the newspaper editor, the muckraking freelance journalist, the mayor’s good-looking girlfriend, all for their own reasons. But it is the teacher who sums up certain things best: he has always been against the death penalty, he says, but he is in favor of restoring it, for architects.

Parisians could be forgiven for sharing the spirit of that line. The last twenty years have seen a new dimension in the destruction of Paris, not only for the large projects of François Mitterrand like the Opéra Bastille and the Très Grande Bibliothèque, but also in the spirit of what the French call urbanisme, where large parts of poorer neighborhoods are razed to make way for the steel and glass concoctions of real estate promoters and fashionable architects, in the triumph of vulgarity, greed, and ignorance over the enduring aesthetic of one of the world’s most beautiful cities. Ironically, the most insidious force that is gnawing at the heart of Paris today is what has come to be called façadisme, in which the façades of old buildings are kept and the insides transformed, which started as a way to preserve at least the look of Paris and is now dangerously out of control.

With the current economic slowdown in France and the rash of banking scandals, some of the building has been slowed, and everywhere on the north and east side of Paris, like so many bomb sites, are the vacant lots where once stood zinc-roofed houses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the walls of the buildings that remain are the outlines of wallpaper or the ghosts of stairways and chimneys, silent reminders of what was and will be no more; that the graffiti bands have spray-painted many of them adds a particular pathos. In the neighborhoods where façades must be preserved, particularly along the Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann-era boulevards, countless buildings are either bricked up, or already being gutted and turned into some promoter-architect-banker-bureaucrat’s idea of what will make Paris a modern city, ready for the Euro and the hordes of businessmen and information workers just dying to set up shop on the Boulevard

Hausmann. Goodbye to the courtyards that gave life and light to these buildings, goodbye also to the interior buildings, many of which were works of art in their own right, and hello to the industrial marble and fake pierre de taille that is de rigueur for these builders, Balzacian in their cupidity and stupidity.

At a time when the economic future of Europe is invoked for almost every French government action, there is a growing civil and political reaction to the out-of-control wrecking ball, and some commentators believe that anger about urban renewal led to the Gaullist party's losing several of the Paris arrondissement mairies. It appears, however, that the forces destroying Paris will always be stronger than those trying to save it.

Twenty years ago, conservation and reasonable urban renewal seemed to have prevailed over the berserk urban planners who were responsible for the Tour Maine-Montparnasse and the CNIT at La Défense, not to mention the vertiginous public housing in the banlieue, but who had failed to run the Autoroute du Sud right through the city or to raze the center to build a high-rise business center (Le Corbusier's old idea). It is clear, nevertheless, that the construction companies, the banks, the planners and the politicians who form the unholy alliance pushing for more "renovation" (in the Orwellian language of urban renewal, *renover* means to destroy) have simply changed tactics. And the most recent onslaught threatens to turn the older parts of Paris into mini-Mont St. Michels surrounded by malls, high-rises, and buildings that look like cruise ships. Corruption, cynicism, and outright folly have been the marks of the French government and government-owned banks like the now famous Crédit Lyonnais, and the results are all over the city.

There is much intellectual ferment in France today on the subject of how culture money is spent and how artistic institutions should operate. This includes the question of the threatened monumental patrimoine, with a mostly conservative Fronde going after the republic's comfortable commissars. Still, it is disturbing, though not surprising, how little essential public debate there is over what it is that makes Paris great, over the role of urban planners, over the need to balance the commonweal against the rights of private property and the ambitions of architects. Too many of the culprits are politically well connected; governments Left and Right are terrified of mounting unemployment and thus always ready to bail out the construction sector; and it is political suicide to confront the greatest issue, cars, which have raised pollution to dangerously high levels. It is an ominous sign that the budget for the restoration of the patrimoine has been reduced far more than overall cultural spending, suggesting that festivals matter more to budget makers than the true riches of France.

Massive destructions of Paris have taken place through wars, religious fanaticism, royal vainglory, and police concern over controlling the seething Parisian masses. Debates about preserving the older parts of Paris are nothing new: Hugo and Baudelaire railed against architects; arguments still rage over Hausmann's huge projects; and the Commission du Vieux Paris, an energetic ombudsman for the city, is about to celebrate its centenary. So why do the present threats to Paris matter? Leaving aside the obvious aesthetic answer, they matter because even though Paris is architecturally a nineteenth-century city it works in the late twentieth century, and rather better than some younger cities. Public transportation is extraordinary, city sanitation services are legendary, violent crime is low. So there is no good reason for all this

destruction, except the rage for the new and the rage to make money, and to hell with both the past and the future.

That a city has to develop according to the vast changes of modern life is self-evident, but the irony of the deep changes being pushed through in Paris today is that, under the guise of renovating and modernizing squalid streets and buildings, providing more housing for Parisians and getting control of traffic, many of the projects have driven out people of small means while creating sinister urban environments that create delinquency, or fairground-style commercial areas that attract bums and looters. That a city cannot simply mummify its architecture is also self-evident, but the effects of both bad and good intentions are in fact something worse: they are transforming a living city that works, with harmoniously planned neighborhoods and a mix of residential and business development, into a mess of styles that creates crime zones, dead-at-night business districts, and, here and there, little museums where the rich and the foreign can live costume-party lives under the daily inspection of tourists.

What distinguishes the most recent massacre is that, under the code words of modernity and urbanisme, what animates the many culprits, in and out of government, is the same kind of contempt for knowledge, tradition, beauty, and truth that animates the enemies of the idea of a Western canon in education and of the more time-tested values of human civilization. For them, all that is old is unimportant unless it can be given a new and politically useful “spin.”

Thus an attachment to Paris’s magnificence is labeled nostalgia by these forward thinkers (many of whom prefer to live in beautiful old apartments and country châteaux), and the critics of urban renewal are called intégristes, like the late Monseigneur Lefebvre’s ultra Catholics or like the Algerian terrorist opposition. Paris’s strict—on the books—preservation laws are regularly flouted with barely concealed disdain for objecting petitioners, treated like maiden aunts who don’t understand the ways of business. Old buildings are torn down to be replaced by buildings vaguely in the same style, so that parts of the Marais have become like Disney representations of the eighteenth century, and the modern apartment buildings along the Canal Saint Martin have evocative, old-fashioned names to mask their banality.

Part of what has made Paris a city that “works” is the mixture of the humble and the great in neighborhoods with distinct looks and legends. In the thirteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth arrondissements, particularly in the now lamented Ménilmontant, two- or three-story buildings, courtyards, and ateliers kept these working-class neighborhoods on a human scale. They could have been “rehabilitated.” Instead, they are now overrun by shoddy apartment high-rises with sterile lawns dropped into concrete sidewalks, and they have become places where people are afraid to walk at night. The opposite syndrome is that, through big construction programs, particularly those centered on a cultural project of some kind, normal neighborhoods where people lived, worked, and died are suddenly made trendy, which means they become meccas for fake bohemians, Americans wearing berets, hideous art galleries, and restaurants with fake wooden beams. In either scenario, the neighborhoods essentially die.

Although both advocates of extensive urban changes and those fighting for preservation say now that the worst horrors are over, it seems that few lessons of the past have actually been learned. If it has become unthinkable that one of the major train stations would be razed, for example, or

that an eighty-story building would be erected in the Ile de la Cité, the lessons about the consequences for crime or for small business of stupid planning haven't been absorbed into current thinking. In that sense, recent projects like the development of the east side of Paris and the commercial overhaul of the area around the Gare St. Lazare are in the lineage of the murder of Les Halles.

The moving of the old central market to Rungis was a long-discussed project throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and was punctuated by dire descriptions of the quarter as insalubrious, dangerous, and infested by rats and prostitutes. Although it was clear that the market had to go, it was never clear why the magnificent Baltard pavillions had to be destroyed. Up until the last minute, appeals came from around the world, but folly prevailed.

The building of the Centre Pompidou, which led to important destructions of eighteenth-century buildings, along with the malling of the "trou des Halles," the Quartier de l'Horloge, and the Square des Innocents, have combined in the last twenty years to turn the area from a place vibrant with life, where the toute bourgeoisie turned out for the famous onion soup, into a squalid, smelly, dangerous flea market, where cheap clothing stores and fast food have replaced good restaurants and cafés. It is now infested with drugs and with thugs (and there are still rats and prostitutes). Many adults flee the area, where junk food is smeared on the ground, the escalators are broken, a carnival noir atmosphere prevails with flame eaters, bongo drummers, and roller-skating acrobats, and where the young panhandlers are truly frightening with their dogs and ferrets. The underground Forum shopping center is dark, poorly ventilated and, in the evenings and on weekends, populated by vaguely menacing hordes of kids with stoned eyes under their baseball caps. Beaubourg itself is closed for extensive and very expensive renovation; it is falling apart. That the Baltard pavillions would have made fine venues for shops and cultural activities is made evident by the single one that survived and was replanted in Nogent-sur-Marne.

Another 1960s project that symbolizes all that is wrong with imposing the latest trendy idea on a time-tested city was the building of the university at Jussieu, which involved the destruction of the Halle aux Vins in the fifth arrondissement and, with its tower and great gloomy rectangles on pylons, blights the nearby Jardin des Plantes. It was once associated with all the spring-break ferment of the late 1960s; today, in a fitting development, it has had to be closed for an emergency removal of the asbestos that has caused a number of illnesses among the staff.

Part of the Socialist credo in the 1980s was to favor the buildup of the working-class parts of the city in the east, dangling before the public the idea that at last the "prolo" was going to be favored as the "aristos" had been. In fact, between demolitions and the real estate price surge of the 1980s, poorer people were either pushed out of town or into the worst kind of bleak public housing, as various monuments to postmodern taste were scattered over the old meatpacking and entrepot district.

In La Villette, the Cité de la Musique built by Christian Portzamparc is not in itself an unattractive building, but it is weirdly out of place, looking like a flying saucer with its landing lights hovering over a blacked-out earth. Although both the Cité de la Musique and the science museum at La Villette have succeeded in pulling in weekend and vacation visitors, as parks on

the edge of the city always have, the east side of Paris has hardly become the urban magnet it was supposed to be. The area's remoteness may indeed have been one of the factors that contributed to the famous mess in which the American Center's patrons sold its building on the Boulevard Raspail and sank more than forty million dollars into a Looney Tunes Gehry in the Bercy area. For a while, it advertised the usual avant-garde nonsense like lesbian dance troupes, and then went bankrupt.

The Opéra Bastille—whose present director, Hugues Gall, once said the opera was the answer to a question no one had asked—not only destroyed the symmetry of the pleasantly flamboyant Place de la Bastille, but it disfigured the skyline of the whole neighborhood. Its large ungainly front terrace drew in the Rollerbladers. A sure sign that things were going seriously downhill in the neighborhood was when the press started chirping about all the new bars bringing life to the area, and the art galleries started opening (and closing) on the charming Rue de Lappe, which is no longer charming. The Opéra is no great improvement over that circular giant of an earlier era, the Maison de la Radio, and it is sad but by now not surprising to see that it is sheathed in netting because its façade is falling off.

The Très Grande Bibliothèque, a disaster from the beginning in which the government rode roughshod over the objections of the scholars who are its users, is now mostly open. Its immense ungainly towers—which, meant to look like books, resemble suburban public housing—blink with airplane warning lights in the bleak skies beyond the Gare de Lyon. The train station itself, which used to be surrounded by quirky, Simenon-inspiring restaurants and cafés, has been built up in the currently fashionable airport-and-ring-road style. Buildings that could have been rehabilitated have been razed to make room for the shabby-flashy buildings favored by airport hotel chains. There are also high-rise bank and insurance megaliths that psychically diminish any pedestrian foolish enough to venture into this maze of mini-freeways.

The down-at-the-heels area around the Gare St. Lazare in the ninth arrondissement, a district once inhabited by musicians and painters as well as the new grande bourgeoisie, has been at the center of enormous real estate operations, with heavy involvement by the Crédit Lyonnais, where former bank officers now are being investigated for corruption. A block of nineteenth-century buildings was destroyed directly across from the train station, then rebuilt to house, among other businesses, a stereo equipment chain store. It is a sign of the melancholy state of affairs that the Parisian (whose taxes will be rescuing the Crédit Lyonnais from its enormous debts) must be grateful the mall was built in the alignment of what it replaced, and in a distant copy of the style: it could have been worse.

There are few heroes in the fight to preserve Paris, and many villains, beginning with De Gaulle and particularly Pompidou (who wanted to remake Paris for cars) and Malraux. The various organizations that have fought to preserve the city continue the good fight, and not all the news has been bad. In the 1970s, the Commission du Vieux Paris prevented the destruction of a number of buildings that were to give way to the projects surrounding the Centre Pompidou. The Gare d'Orsay was saved in extremis. The Grand Louvre project finally allowed serious digging on the Philippe Auguste foundations, now a major tourist attraction. The Grand Louvre project also, to the credit of the Mitterrand administration, got the cars and the tour buses out of the Louvre courtyard. Most recently, brakes were put on a project that would essentially have

destroyed the old artisan district of the Faubourg St. Antoine. Serious alarms are now being raised about façadisme.

An interesting and potentially powerful newcomer to what *Le Monde* and others wish to call “les intégristes” is the quarterly newsletter *MoMus* (for Monuments, Musées, Sites Historiques), set up in 1993 by a group of scholars and journalists including the political scientist Pierre Nora, so closely associated with the question of the French patrimoine, the historian Marc Fumaroli, increasingly prominent as a scourge of government cultural policy, and Claude de Montclos, who published *La Mémoire des Ruines* in 1992. *MoMus* is funny and sharp, in the pamphlet style, with unsigned or pseudonymous pieces as well as primers on who does what among all the complicated institutions that, in principle, are there to preserve French treasures.

Part of the effort to fight destruction is to catalogue it, as does the Commission du Vieux Paris and, in more modest ways, SOS Paris, which works neighborhood by neighborhood. A few books provide serious but non-scholarly overviews, notably an updated version, published three years ago, of Louis Reau’s controversial, uneven but extraordinary *Histoire du Vandalisme* (Robert Laffont) which starts with the Middle Ages and ends with the Second World War. Michel Fleury, the historian who is secretary-general of the Association du Vieux Paris, and Guy-Michel Leproux added a chapter on the Fifth Republic, and it is very grim indeed. The small publishing house Ivrea has recently reissued a handsome edition of *L’Assassinat de Paris*, Louis Chevalier’s classic essay about the deep changes in French society that are inseparable from the changes in the Parisian landscape (a translation, in slightly different form, is available from the University of Chicago under the name *The Assassination of Paris*). It is a sad and interesting coincidence that Gallimard recently published an excellent biography by Jean-Paul Goujon of the poet Léon-Paul Fargue, whose *Le Piéton de Paris* is a guide to the Paris that was, much like traveling between bars with Fargue in the taxis he preferred to walking.

The battle over Paris has been less spectacular than the debate sparked by Prince Charles’s famous comments on the “carbuncle” planned for the National Gallery in London. But the questions that ought to be raised—and mostly aren’t—are the same: what makes cities livable, and should the public be at the mercy of a lot of renovating madmen? If Prince Charles has had as much popular success as he has, denouncing the arrogance of architects, it is because so many ordinary people agree that the older buildings are nicer than the ones that replace them.

If Haussmann’s destruction still hurts, nevertheless what has come to be called Haussmannian architecture, though often pompous, is a handsome, workable structure for a city like Paris, and one that doesn’t go out of fashion. Postmodern buildings, on the other hand, often look dated before they’re even built. You can deplore Viollet-le-Duc’s theatrical restorations but surely Viollet-le-Duc’s Notre Dame de Paris is preferable to—Frank Gehry’s? It has been the sad fate of many of the defenders of Paris that they have been proved to be Cassandras. The current round of destruction, after which so many magnificent portes cochères will open—surprise!—onto the bad taste of a few twentieth-century architects, will be deplored some day soon. Never again, it will be said, never again, until the next time.

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