

CONSTRUCTION SITES IN PARIS

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Paris has some of the finest construction works in the world. Louise holds that I am wasting my time and that a guidebook on building sites is useless because by the time they are plotted on maps, photographed, captioned and then published in some slim (or fat) volume to be sold alongside the Lonely Planets, the Frommers and the Rick Steve's by some papeterie on the Rue de Grenelle, the construction will have been completed and the high-viz workers and the traffic barriers will have departed. This is a common misconception which holds that building works are ephemeral; the truth is that they are as fixed and permanent a part of our cities as the cathedrals, palaces and park benches where the privileged prayed, ate and lounged while feeding cake to the pigeons.

Consider the birth of modern Paris and those two scoundrels Napoleon III and Baron Georges-Eugene Haussman. Under the euphemism of urban renewal they took a satisfactory though smelly medieval city and imposed a hub and spoke arrangement of broad tree-lined boulevards and straightened streets. This greatly increased traffic flow. They also introduced functioning sewers, an urban water supply, regulations on advertising, building heights and set backs and became fantastically wealthy in the process. It was these reforms that gave modern Paris its distinctive character and affected many Parisians' lifestyle. The traveller will notice the constant din of conversation in cafes, bistros and brasseries up and down the grand avenues. Some suggest that this is because the French are passionate in conversation and become animated while talking on subjects such as existentialism, sexual politics or whether scarf wearing really makes men look effeminate (it does).

In fact, most public conversations in Paris are so drowned out by traffic noise that the hand waving and loud repetition is necessary because most of what your interlocutor (or interlocutrix) is saying will be misheard first time around.

And to the point of this essay, urban renewal work commenced in 1853 and continued through the 1870s and well beyond. Ephemeral indeed! For twenty years at least during the Second Empire all of Paris was a construction site.

Building works are not solely a feature of the modern epoch, however. The seven-tapestry series *The Hunt of the Unicorn* commissioned to celebrate Anne of Brittany's marriage to Louis XIIth in 1495 which depicts the pursuit and taming of the mythical beast, has recently been supplemented by the discovery of an eighth panel. Restoration work shows the hunt being diverted around fencing erected by workmen who are busy repointing the walls of what is assumed allegorically to be the Jerusalem, the Fortress of our Lord. Some scholars contend that the figure in the right of the panel with the yellow coat and traffic sign may be the first recorded traffic management coordinator (or lollipop man) in the western canon.

Among the more spectacular building works, Le Halle is not to be missed. Stretching across several city blocks, excavations to a depth of more than 15 metres and substantial earth-moving machinery are on display and, provided you don't arrive during lunch time (12.00 to 2.00pm) or on a weekend (Sunday to Monday) or during a public holiday or a union holiday, you can hear some of the more sonorous drilling and compacting in all of the 3rd Arrondissement. The site also boasts some wildly optimistic artists' impressions of what the space will look like once completed. In this future world the sun will be shining and women will smilingly lead pleasant children and handsome non-smoking husbands out from shady groves across a fountained parade ground. On the day we visited it was raining, the drains were blocked, the women were bedraggled and the children were over-stimulated and irritable.

The building works have been going for so long the owners have constructed a four-level shopping centre directly over the works. Originally designed to service the workers and their families as part of a new enterprise agreement with the

militant shop stewards running the site, the shopping centre now offers boutiques, home wares and a food court to the general public at prices generally cheaper than many large centres around Paris. However, the shopping centre has no exit. In their haste to erect the centre the owners neglected to provide egress onto the outside world. Some visitors have been forced to shop for days traipsing up and down the escalators and last year a group of German tourists had to be rescued by French Special Forces who abseiled onto the roof and cut their way in using oxyacetylene equipment. When we visited, we only found an exit by following one of the centre staff up a temporary staircase to the third level, through a fire-door, past the records office and the personnel department and eventually climbing out a window in the staff canteen and shimmying across the roof.

Just across the road from Le Halle is the Church of St Eustace, also known as the Gardeners Church. There you can observe in the South East quarter one of the oldest building sites in Paris. A plywood barrier hides a 10 metre square excavation which was begun during the post-war reconstruction to strengthen the foundations of the nave which had been damaged during the Axis bombing. Work ceased in 1963 when the excavation uncovered an earlier set of foundations. Consulting archaeologists confirmed that these were the foundations of a fifteenth century church which was to have been constructed on the site. Careful explorations by the archaeologists showed that this work had in turn been held up because the earlier builders had uncovered Roman blocks scattered about on the site and a half completed wall and some mosaic work. Scholars have translated inscriptions found on these blocks as "coming soon... a new basilica bringing life to the old quarter."

It is not just Paris; all of France is on the move. The Cote de Rhone is full of diversions and detours and most of Marseilles is shut as it is being transformed into the European Union's City of Culture in 2013. Without some creative poster work on the hoardings that completely surround the old dock (*Quai Ancien*) and the tell-tale seagulls the traveller would never guess that this city has been a centre for maritime trade and gritty action movies for many years.

During our visit to Paris, several key museums and galleries—the Picasso, the west wing of the Louvre, substantial parts of Quai Branly and the upper levels of the Pompidou—were shut, most not expecting to re-open for business for several years.

The charm of Paris though is not just these major closures but those small monuments you may come across while walking along a quiet avenue in the afternoon (perhaps with your favourite interlocutrix). Look past the hoardings and the weather worn '*Ferme, sans interdit*' posters and you'll see a fountain, a small green park bordered by dark trees leaves brilliant in the last of the day's light and over there is some tired old scaffolding pushed up against the marble facade. Look closer and you may notice the weary expression on Apollo's face, a god who sees time as eternal and the present as something to be tolerated patiently until the works are finished.
