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Author:

[Dixon, John Morris](#), American Institute of Architects, Committee on Design

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Paris Album

Viaduc des Arts *Syl Damianos, FAIA*



The American Institute of Architects Committee on Design explored innovative design in Paris and Lyon for five and a half days last summer. Our year's theme of "Cross Sections in Time and Space" helped us to understand the ways in which individual architects and their buildings can contribute to the ongoing processes of building the best city in the world.

We began and ended our time in Paris's historic core, studying careful efforts to serve twentieth-century needs (automobiles, parking, services) while enhancing the character and quality of some of the world's best-loved public spaces. We spent two days examining how former industrial sites are being redeveloped as residential neighborhoods whose parks and public spaces incorporate artifacts from the past. A one-day visit to Lyon demonstrated how these same approaches can work in a smaller city.

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—Raymond Gindroz, AIA, Chair,
Committee on Design

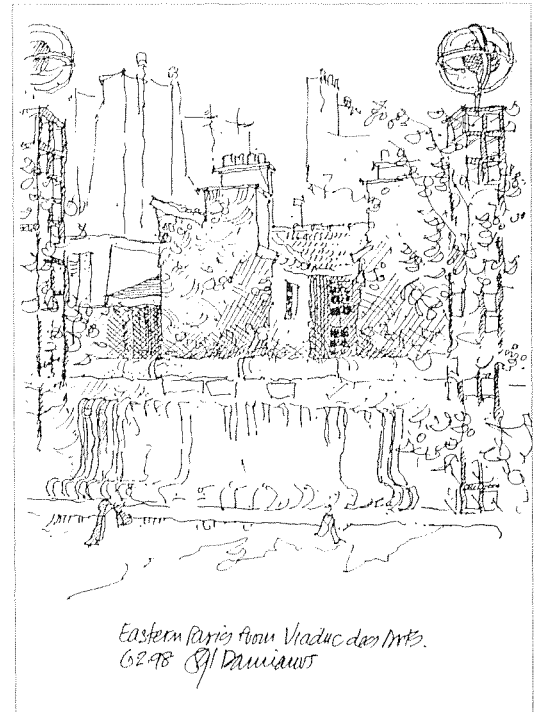
The most enduring lesson of a visit to Paris is how deeply satisfying the everyday urban environment can be. Perhaps, we think, Paris should be frozen exactly as it is—or even returned to its 1930s condition, before high-rises and expressways. But Paris is after all a living, evolving capital, facing changes in technology and lifestyles. And in recent years, the French have responded to these challenges with remarkable creativity. While the attention of the world's architects has been drawn to high-profile cultural facilities, such as the expanded Louvre and the huge new national library, Paris has also been carrying out large-scale projects meant to pump new life into deteriorating districts outside the glamorous core.

Some of the most ambitious efforts are centered around new parks on tracts formerly occupied by factories and wholesale markets. Each of these is surrounded by new residential, commercial and cultural development in what is obviously meant to be a complementary relationship. The parks we visited are provocative examples of open space design, but unfortunately most of the parcels around them are occupied by hulking structures, physically aloof from both the parks and the city fabric.

Parc de la Villette, the earliest of these public spaces, continues to confound our notion of park. Bernard Tschumi's competition-winning design of 1982 rejected conventional landscaping approaches as inappropriate for the site of the former Paris meat markets. Often criticized as abstract and unwelcoming, the park is laid out on an insistent grid, with red "folly" structures—used as a day-care center, a café, etc.—sprouting at every crossing. Compensating for this regimentation are pocket gardens reserved for design by others, including a terraced mini-vineyard and a sunken bamboo garden.

Long bordered by a vast, ugly science center and a banal entertainment arena, Parc de la Villette is now properly framed at its main entry by the two parts of Christian de Portzamparc's recently completed Cité de la Musique, teaching facilities on one side and public halls on the other. These buildings acknowledge Tschumi's grid in unexpected ways, while providing both a much-needed street wall toward the existing city and a sympathetic gateway into park.

Two subsequent peripheral parks we visited are more conservatively designed, as if in reaction to La Villette, by



local design teams rather than international competition winners. The Parc de Bercy, replacing the wine markets, includes a few old buildings and ruins in its picturesque gardens, which are loosely dispersed across the site. It is best known as the setting for Frank Gehry's ill-fated American Center, empty since its nonprofit sponsors ran out of money (and recently bought by the French government for a new Maison du Cinema).

Parc Andre Citroën, on the site of an automobile factory, is similar to Bercy in scale, but with a stronger plan of broad terraces and individual gardens around a central lawn. An intriguing system of walks, ramps and bridges links a series of gardens and crisply rectangular greenhouses. Facing this park for a few hundred feet is a mid-rise apartment complex thoughtfully related to it, but across the park is yet another corporate citadel clad in reflective glass.

The Viaduc des Arts ingeniously reuses a mile of abandoned railroad track elevated on handsome masonry arches, with artisans' workshop-showrooms at street level and a linear garden above. Some exuberant turn-of-the-

century apartment buildings border the viaduct, and new housing has been effectively arrayed around a ground-level green at one end. Here is an excellent effort at integrating new amenities into the city fabric, without any neotraditional allusions in the new storefronts or housing.

In the city's core, the prevailing strategy is to support intensive activity through adaptive reuse and the insertion of parking beneath buildings, squares and parks. The

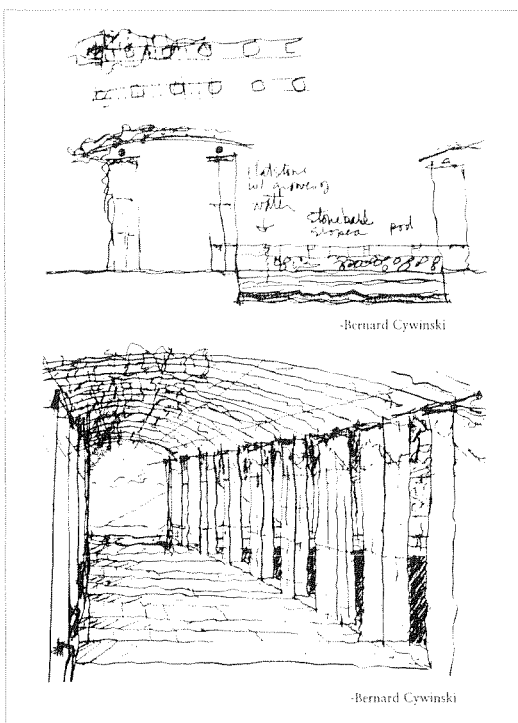
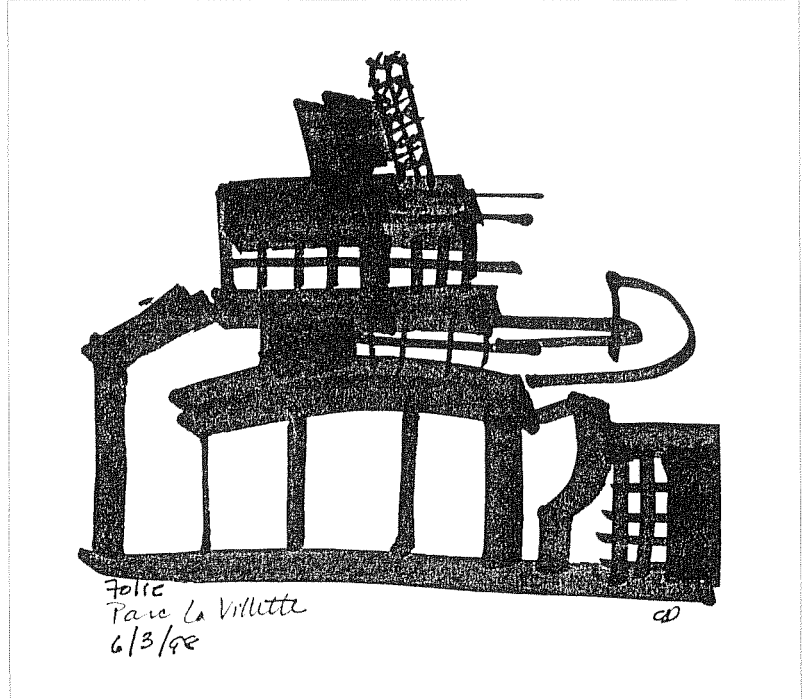
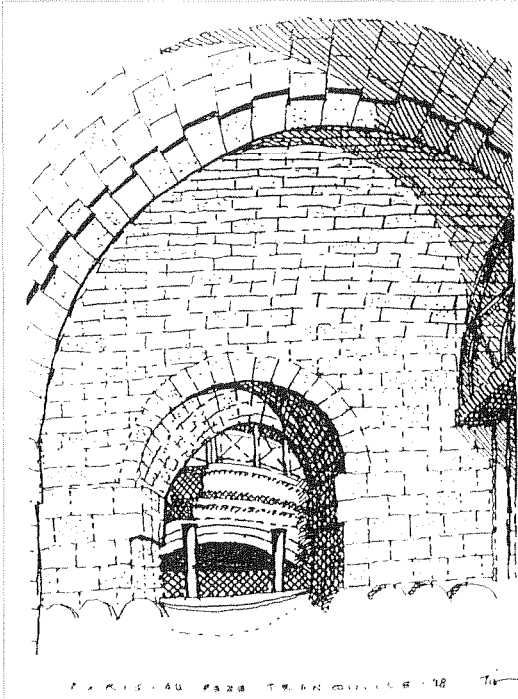
Louvre now has acres of shopping mall and parking extending from Pei's underground lobby, but its best moments are the galleries and skylighted courts the Pei firm has reclaimed inside the palace's wings.

In one development with an above-ground presence, six levels of parking are inserted below an elegantly glazed six-story office building by Ricardo Bofill, on the site of an old above-ground garage. Underground parking is

*Below left: Viaduc des arts
Stanley Tigerman, FAIA*

*Below right: Folie, Parc
de la Villette
Carole Dixon*

*Bottom: Parc de Bercy
Bernard Cywinski, FAIA*



apparently seen as the key to prosperity in Lyon, as well, where we visited four imaginatively remodeled public squares, each over with subterranean parking.

Instructive as these efforts are for visiting architects, what do they portend for Paris? The adventurous parks should provide popular leisure time destinations, but they'll remain largely cut off from everyday life. In parts of the city, street life remains marvelously intense, but these areas may already have become sectors of a Paris theme park, whose visitors increasingly arrive by car. As urban populations withdraw to the privacy of cars and electronic media, the public realm, even in Paris, is in danger of becoming a sometime thing.

John Morris Dixon, FAIA, a writer and consultant, was editor of Progressive Architecture from 1972 to 1996.