

The new banks of the Seine: all for the best, or just another Woody Allen set?

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June 2013 saw the completion of a project to transform the riverside expressway on the Left Bank of the Seine in Paris into a pedestrian promenade, accompanied by a series of leisure and recreation features. Historian Mathieu Flonneau delivers a scathing critique of what he sees as a purely cosmetic measure for the prestigious city centre, decrying both its underlying ideology and its unintended consequences.

If the great film-maker Woody Allen were to shoot *Midnight in Paris* (2011) again, many charming scenes would undoubtedly be filmed on the new banks of the Seine, which have been “reclaimed” from motor traffic since the summer of 2013. As a result, the rose-tinted postcard image of Paris for wealthy American tourists travelling in the living museum of old Europe would gain even more in terms of standardised beauty. But would it gain in authenticity? Nothing could be less certain, now that so much of the city’s soul and spirit – itself the fruit of the spirit of the time – seems to be marketed and merchandised!¹ Although the idea of freeing the lower banks of the Seine of traffic was a potentially interesting idea, the result is highly questionable. Furthermore, is the collection of bars, leisure facilities and associated activities that now occupy the quayside really compatible with the site’s history and status owing to its listing as a world heritage site by UNESCO?

Fake “authenticity”: Paris the poseur

On the new Left Bank, which the anti-modernist essayist and novelist Philippe Muray unfortunately was never able to discover, the superbly executed staircase leading up to the Musée d’Orsay would have been enough on its own. Alas, all along the pedestrianised site (in total, 4.5 hectares spread over 2.5 km/1.5 miles), conceptual originality vies with insignificance and the ridiculous vies with the grotesque, complete with sleighs in winter and “music”... all year round! The fun, family-oriented redevelopment includes converted shipping containers for naps and picnics, deckchairs for relaxation, tepees for children’s birthday parties, track markings for sprint sessions, a miniature “*via ferrata*”, and spaces for free expression on the walls beneath the embankment.

An impeccably controlled public relations campaign, full of good, unassailable intentions, manages to juggle the different, and highly variable, public-interest objectives. The forcefully proclaimed statement that “Change is good!” – in English, as is *de rigueur* – is ultimately a violent conviction. The specially developed mobile application, recommended by leaflets titled “*Berges, mode d’emploi*” (“The riverbanks: instructions for use”), greets users with the message “La Rambla

¹ Frank Scherrer talks about the “stranglehold of liberalism on the politics of new sustainable urbanity” and the “idealised pretence of what is presumed to be a less technocratic means of producing the modern city, planned from the top down to result in a sustainable city propelled into a participatory process” (preface to Reigner *et al.* 2013): the new banks of the Seine are a particularly pertinent example of this.

welcomes you”. It is interesting to note the use of a Barcelonan term to describe a site whose “Parisian-ness” is apparently insufficient for promotional purposes. The highly commercial reality of the site is confirmed in the leaflet by the four levels of partnership available to private companies: “official partner, major partner, project partner and media partner”!

“Your auntie in a tutu in the sound shower...” – sorry, what?!

This commodification of public space is complemented by an general infantilisation of the site in the style of a vintage children’s programme, as evidenced by the “performance” piece – narcissistically reflected by distorting mirrors – titled “*Ta tata en tutu sous la douche sonore !*” (“Your auntie in a tutu in the sound shower!”). Is this really a cultural event worthy of the City of Light? Above all, the muddled farce and carnivalesque folklore of the new riverbanks highlight the fact that we live in a self-satisfied era of constant immersion in sound, approved by the media’s uniform, self-defined “progressive” mindset. The naming of the new riverside esplanade after André Gorz is also revealing in this regard.² Here honoured as an “anti-Pompidou” figure, the name of this thinker – a pioneering but ultimately marginal figure in the field of political ecology – has been used to definitively bury an optimistic age of the city that has been replaced by comfortable, greenwashed self-segregation and a sort of social “weightlessness”, rather like the conceptual floating gardens that now grace the Seine upstream of the Pont de l’Alma. We cannot in all seriousness talk about “gentrification in progress” in this part of the 6th and 7th *arrondissements*³ of Paris; given the wealth of these districts, that particular phenomenon is clearly no longer at play here. But the process in question, which has recently been studied in depth (Clerval 2013) – and not before time – is yet to be analysed in terms of all of its implications, particularly with regard to the pressure that has been exerted in order to modify public space and mobility conditions.

This operation on the Left Bank is, in fact, a continuation of what was initiated with “Paris Plage(s)” on the Right Bank – whereby the northern riverside expressway (and later also the Villette canal basin) is temporarily transformed into a beach each summer – at the start of socialist mayor Bertrand Delanoë’s first term in office. There have been many positive effects, but also many unintended adverse consequences that hitherto have been either largely underestimated or hypocritically “hushed up”.

Mobility kitsch and car-use denial

For the historian of Paris, the romantic glamour of these places is largely a political and historical construction that is borderline ideological manipulation. It is the result of the wholesale application to Paris of the criticisms of the cities of the “*Trente Glorieuses*” post-war boom years and, in part, of the automobile, all the qualities of which are denied – first and foremost the fact that it democratises access to the city. The recent redevelopment of the banks of the Seine is, in reality, the final avatar of a long period of gradual disappearance and rejection of the car and *automobilisme*⁴ (Flonneau 2005, 2010). This period, which began in the 1970s, was primarily concerned with the industrial dimension of car use. In the capital that witnessed first-hand the birth of the motor car, the former “four-wheeled goddess” has now vanished, in both body and soul, with not even a proper museum of motor transport to commemorate and interpret this heritage. Moreover, with regard to traffic, it is interesting to note that, at a time when the subject of greater integration between Paris and its periphery is high on the agenda, congestion issues are far from resolved have been merely

² See André Gorz’s ever-stimulating essay titled “L’idéologie sociale de la bagnole” (“The social ideology of the car”; Gorz 1973).

³ The 6th and 7th *arrondissements* (city districts) cover, respectively, the central and western parts of the Left Bank, including neighbourhoods such as Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Odéon, the Luxembourg Gardens and the northern part of Montparnasse (in the 6th), and Faubourg Saint-Germain, Invalides, Gros Caillou and the Eiffel Tower (in the 7th).

⁴ This term is used here to refer to all the political, social and cultural uses of automobile as an object.

pushed further out into the suburbs. While the urban fringes are today – in Paris as elsewhere – the key focus of urban and social questions, any evidence of the suburban mobility crisis is completely absent from this cosmetically beautified city centre.

A new “assassination of Paris”?

There will, of course, be those who object that the pedestrianisation of the Left Bank has been well and truly accepted and welcomed by the population. Of course, it would have been surprising if the opposite had been true. The fact that the permanent party buzz in downtown Paris (always heavily subsidised and always a self-proclaimed “resounding success”, whether we are talking about parades, *Nuit Blanche*⁵ or mass sporting events with herds of runners) is a success should go without saying: *panem et circenses*, after all! This idealistic and moral vision of the city is accepted by those political persuasions that claim to be “progressive” while at the same time willingly consenting to the “touristically correct” exigencies of urban neoliberalism – such as the fact that the banks of the Seine now serve as a sponsored promotional space for many business operations.

The French capital – and, in a way, we can rejoice in this fact – has therefore become standardised and trivialised: from Paris to Périgueux to Palavas-les-Flots, the problems and solutions are the same! Just like a charming provincial town, Paris has recently seen the arrival a miniature tourist train to brighten up what were formerly its most economically active neighbourhoods. This “train” (powered by a diesel automotive engine, to top it all!), complete with its English brand name, “Another Paris”, is a sign of the times: Paris, and more particularly the Right Bank between the Arc de Triomphe and City Hall, has become a primary-coloured city of “Paris Authentic” Citroën 2CVs (that are, in fact, anything but...), articulated “daytime disco” buses, Solowheels, tuk-tuks, “City Fun” rickshaws, “green” (but noisy) pedicabs and tricycle taxis, electric scooters, light-up skates, Segways, and so forth. Although this has without doubt done a great deal to increase the heterogeneity of the city’s streetscape, the aesthetic benefits are less obvious. From this standpoint, we can see that mobility is unique in that it is possible to consider it as something that is purely picturesque – with zero attention paid to “the Parisian being”, that strange, concrete abstraction, complex and paradoxical, to which corresponds the artful nature and finesse of the city’s streets. In these riverside spaces, empty of booksellers – those Parisians *par excellence!* – we shall search in vain for “the roots of affect and attachment” that are so dear to Philippe Le Guillou (2014, p. 168).

Ultimately, on whose behalf are these new developments carried out, and of which society are the “new” banks of the Seine the expression? This question deserves an answer that is more than a simple caricature, but let us nevertheless venture the opinion that a form of self-righteous, moralising capitalism has managed to perfectly accommodate the departure from reality represented by these cinema-ready urban spaces. We can applaud the good intentions associated with the advent of a new ecosystem of more environmentally friendly mobility – but which is surely not more efficient in terms of public spending or when it comes to alienating public space for the benefit of major corporations (Reigner *et al.* 2013), such as Bolloré with its Autolib’ car-hire scheme or JCDecaux with its Vélib’ rental bikes. Without naïvety, it can also be seen as a kind of “assassination of Paris”, in the words – albeit put to ironic use here – of the great historian Louis Chevalier (1977). Yes, ridicule can kill: in this case, the victim is the Paris of past industry (Robin 2014), a Paris that has lost its punch, been made guidebook-friendly and is now definitively consigned to obscurity, but a Paris which also had its own coherence, legitimacy, respectability, dynamics and hopes.

⁵ *Nuit Blanche* (literally “Sleepless Night”) is an annual arts and culture event that takes place over the course of a single night, from sunset to sunrise, with installations and activities spread across the city.

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Further reading

Paris city council's English-language web page on the new banks of the Seine: http://www.paris.fr/english/english/welcome-to-the-new-seine-quaysides/rub_8118_actu_132293_port_19237.

In French, the city council's dedicated website on the redevelopment, titled *Les Berges, la nouvelle Seine* !: <http://lesberges.paris.fr>.

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He recently co-edited *Les Transports de la démocratie. Approche historique des enjeux politiques de mobilité* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014) and published an essay in which these ideas are further developed, titled *Défense et illustration d'un automobilisme républicain* (Descartes et C^{ie}, 2014).

To quote this article:

Mathieu Flonneau, translated by Oliver Waine, "The new banks of the Seine: all for the best, or just another Woody Allen set?", *Metropolitiques*, 21 May 2014. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-new-banks-of-the-Seine-all-for.html>.