PORTRAITS
OF PARIS SQUARES

9

ATTILA BATAR

Portraits of squares; what a nice idea! "An abstract space has no visage, it rather has a multiplicity of visages", according to Béla Hamvas, the Hungarian thinker . It is a matter of city spaces, squares, which have both personality and ambience. Among the five hundred Parisian squares , Attila has selected nineteen of them. By his own admission, this choice is a personal one. Then, why should not this book remain a personal business and to what extent is it worth of our interest? May be because it makes us acquainted with these places? Many things. If we visit the city as tourists, this book will guide us towards very characteristic places in the city, even not appearing in travelers' guides. If we are also interested in the history of architecture, we shall learn much on the history of the buildings which contribute to mould the personality of Parisian squares, either famous or neglected. And if we have some Cartesian spirit, we shall realize how their forms and their arrangement affect our senses, how they do influence our states of mind. We shall thus discover how squares can or cannot ease movement, the feeling of freedom, the joy of spending a moment there: we shall learn why some squares are more functional than others.

Attila Batar paints and finely analyzes these portraits of the squares. He relies on his background as a historian, a sociologist and an architect as well as on his rich living experience and his frequent visits to those places for some decades. The titles of the chapters do not make reference to square types but to a group of squares which have something in common. The precise and sophisticated photos by Illés Sarkantyu, as well as the plans of the squares, support the strength of the analysis and make the work accessible to the not initiate. The fact that the author has not been able to find a contemporary square worth being included in this selection is revealing. It is also possible to consider this book as a handbook suggesting the parameters to be adopted to shape today really functional city squares.

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PORTRAITS OF PARIS SQUARES

PHOTOS
ILLÉS SARKANTYU

le carré bleu

© Photo: Attila Batar

I dedicate this book to Olga and Jacque Rus, the proprietors of Le Petit Café, and the regulars of the café*. The café is where the text was nurtured.

* Alain and Flo Riou, Alain and Denise Pajot, Alberto Gonçalves, Jean-Louis Roi, Paul Gervasy and Sophie Morand.
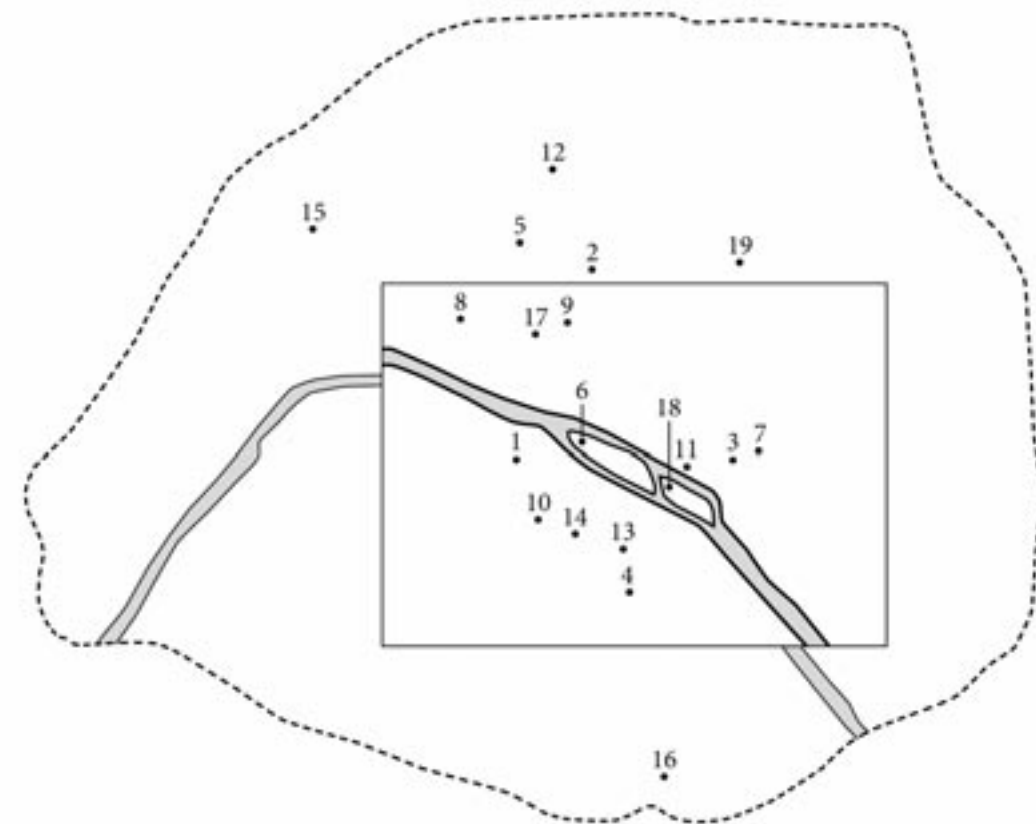
WHY SQUARES? WHY THESE SQUARES

Squares are the distinctive points of cities, except New York, which of course boasts Central Park, but that is certainly not a square. London abound in truly distinctive squares at the nodes of the its street network. The same is true for Paris, which has big squares where demonstrators like to gather, and lots of smaller, intimate squares cherished by local people.

A square

… can take shape accidentally in the space left empty between streets. It can also emerge step by step, over the centuries. Some squares are planned and set on the map by "diktat". For some, the terrain has determined their form.

… is, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, an "Open public area in a town where people gather." The definition in Petite Larousse is similar "a public space in a town and enclosed by buildings."[1] In sum, the French *place* is an open public space in a town, and it is surrounded by buildings and the venue for various human activities. Open spaces that exclude the public, such as private squares (*square*, in French) or motorized transport intersections, are not squares, and neither are stadiums surrounded by buildings, because they are reserved for single groups like football clubs.

… is an urban spatial composition cut out of infinite space, a finite, specific area of a definite extent. It is demarcated by a natural or built enclosure.

… in Paris, serve all kinds of demands. People taking a walk demanded a meeting place (place de la Contrescarpe), parents and children wanted playgrounds (place de l'Abbé-Georges-Hénocque), the city needed a market (place du Marché-Sainte-Catherine). Some squares are the venues for special occasions (place des Vosges), others places of commemoration (place des Victoires). Some were conceived as a *cour d'honneur* (rue de Furstemberg) and were shaped by the interests of speculators (place Vendôme, place Dauphine).

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[1] "Espace public découvert entouré de construction dans une conglomération."

… is a condition that emerges at one point in the historical process, an ephemeral state; tomorrow, it will evolve further. At any one time, it is an accumulation of various stages. An anthology, even if we identify what we see with one particular historical period.

… 's birth circumstances leave only tiny traces. But the effects of now-disappeared structures live on. During their existence, they affected their surroundings and are reflected in what survives.

… can affect us through more than what we perceive when we arrive. Past impressions and things we noticed before we entered are also involved. Your first experience as you set foot in a square is partly the product of the memories, knowledge and prejudices you bring with you.

… can take its place in the city fabric in many ways. It may be a traffic intersection (place Victor Hugo), the coordinating point of a quarter or the whole city (place de la Bastille), or a place for demonstrations (place de la République). There are also intimate squares (cité de Trévise). It can be a starting point, waypoint, continuation, changeover or destination for visitors discovering the city.

… has a form that can vary from the strictly geometric to the denial of all geometry. Triangular, square, trapezoidal, polygonal, round, irregular; laid out along an axis or made up of intersecting straight lines; anything goes. Some have a definite centre, others spectacularly lack one.

… takes its atmosphere above all from its architectural enclosure, the ensemble of façades. Enclosure is complete, despite the gaps, openings (streets) and perforations (alleys). The architectural boundary serves to block out any disturbance the square's own atmosphere.

… has an enclosure that acts as a barricade. Depending on the height and spacing of the buildings it comprises, the enclosure bears down on us in various ways. From near or far, through our skin and in our mind, we feel its strength, which may be confining or gently protecting. It may generate fear or a sense of security, but never leaves us cold. The grandeur or modesty of the façades, their lavish ornament or intimate designs, the rhythm of repeated elements and colours, and signs that evoke or deny historical times or awaken us to the present, all have an inescapable effect.

… is a place for human activity. It stimulates certain behaviours, active and passive, by virtue of its nature or the objects it contains. Some people sit on the benches to read, others to nap. Many stretch out to rest on the grass. There are always people strolling under the well-ordered lines of trees. They stop at a statue or column and comment on it. In hot weather, people go to the fountains to cool down. Some just stand and talk. Children shriek on the playground. The perimeter is also alive with café terraces projecting from ground floors. Waiters dance attendance on guests. They all add up to make the square what it is.

… among the grey, confined jungle of city stone, is a place for discovery and liberation. A places to take a breath. Every squares is created out of rational considerations, but what stays with us and lives on in our memory is the atmosphere and the special feeling it evokes.

There are about five hundred squares in Paris. Here I present nineteen, those that have affected me most. This is not any kind of value judgement. My aim is rather to gather together squares of different composition to give an impression of their diversity.

I have studies these squares over the last three years. Different things have brought me to them. Some, I just came across in my wanderings. Others were pointed out to me by friends. Sometimes some business I had to attend me took me there. I have avoided the very big squares, because I find them too disjointed, but some famous squares are too distinctively typical to be ignored. Those in my neighbourhood, for obvious reasons, make up a high proportion. My choice has been completely arbitrary.

The nineteen city squares covered in this book are too few to identify any general regularities, but they are all special, and hopefully enough to convey what squares in general contribute to in the fabric of the city.

Finally, a question: what are "non-squares" - streets, courtyards and parks, borderline cases of dubious connectedness - doing in this book? Well, I hope they help to clarify what fits into the concept of the square.

RUE JACOB

RUE DE FURSTEMBERG

MUSÉE DELACROIX

RUE CARDINAL

RUE DE FURSTEMBERG

RUE DE L'ABBAYE

PALAIS ABBATIAL
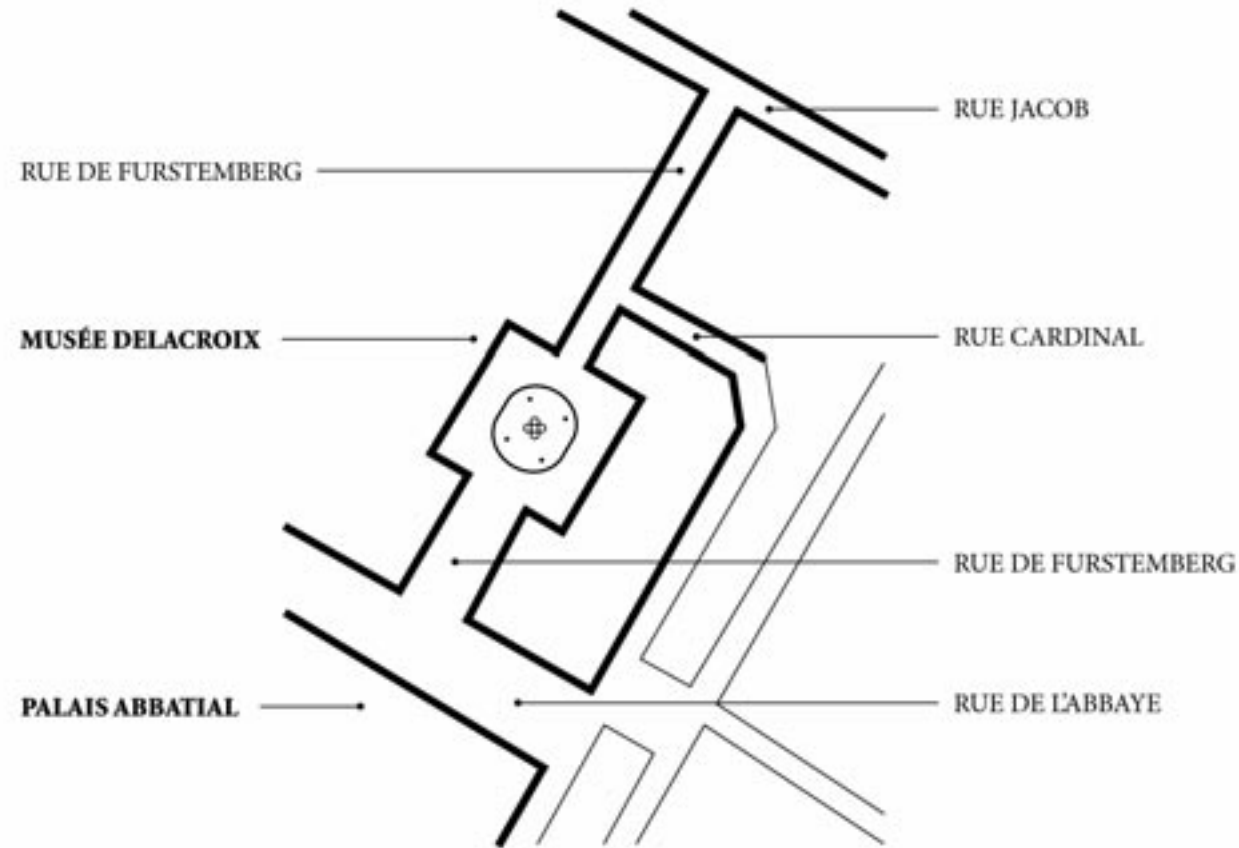
RUE DE FURSTEMBERG [1]

Furstemberg "square" is officially a street, and the street sign bears the word *rue*. But everybody says *place*. The misnaming is understandable, because Furstemberg is a stretch of street that has been widened out half way along. It is a miniature square, with proportions and vertical central outlines that make for an unforgettable experience. Rue de Furstemberg is said to be the most intimate square in Paris.

Indeed, rue de Furstemberg was introduced to me as somebody's favourite Paris square. When my friend first took me there, he suddenly stopped and said that, unfortunately, we were coming from the wrong direction. He asked me to close my eyes, and we continued right through the square, turned round, and started from what he thought was a better place. I returned to Furstemberg several times, but I could never work out which end it was that my friend considered the better starting point. It is beautiful from both directions, but certainly different. Which was his preference? And why?

The square divides the street into two stretches of different lengths and widths. One is long and narrow, the other short and wide. That is what gives us a unique impression as we look from each direction. Another distinction is the slight gradient. Coming from the north along the long section of the street, we are going uphill as we approach the square. These differences alter our perception. The same square generates an experience that is unique to each starting point. Yet another contribution to this difference is what is in our mind before we enter. From rue Jacob to the north, we come from Paris's dense milieu of narrow streets, and we bring this with us. If we enter from the lower end of the street, we leave behind us restrained residential buildings from the first half of the nineteenth century.

The elongated, narrow, upward-inclined street makes the square seem further away than it really is. The long introduction gives perspective, and makes the miniature square all the more surprising. As we pass through, the setting changes, and suddenly, we have an ending: a high elegant façade closes off the view. The counterperspective enhances the monumentality of this imposing, church-owned building of three storeys and a mansard roof. A sense of dignity emanates from the high

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[1] Revised version of an article in *Holmi* vol. XIV, no. 11 (November 2002).

Late Renaissance façade, the elongated windows, the ashlar-masonry verticals and horizontals (window frames and cornices), the brick inlays, the tower and at the east corner set forward from the façade, and the mansard windows on the roof. The cheerful colour scheme of red, sandstone and blue/grey playfully sets off the strict order of the design. The building bears the marks of the Henry IV style. It was built as a cardinal's palace[2] and now houses the parish library and the Institut Catholique de Paris. But the square is a victim of the building's beauty. From the background, it has a negative effect, distracting the viewer from the square.

It is not just this palace that marks the end of the street. At some time, the whole area belonged to the abbey of Saint-Germain. From every direction, the squat tower of the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés can be seen rising behind and above the neighbouring church-related buildings. We leave behind the everyday world of Paris to more elegant surroundings. The gradient also causes us to look up at the spectacle at the end of the street. The view from above elevates and commands respect. If this is the experience you are seeking, approach from Rue Jacob in the north.

If instead you start from rue de l'Abbaye in the south and proceed downhill with the palace at your back, you will have a fundamentally different experience. The short, broad stretch of street, from the first moment, gives a different view of the square. There seems to be no street at all, and the square appears to be the forecourt of the palace . as, indeed, it was originally intended to be: the cour d'honneur[3] of the palace of Cardinal Guillaume-Egon de Fürstenberg. Rather than the grand, authoritative impression we might expect from such an intended function, the square in its present state has a homely feel. As we approach, we at once sense its intimate atmosphere. Continuing on our way, we return to the everyday life of Parisians. If your preference is for quiet, everyday, urban surroundings rather than the magnificent and ceremonial, this is the direction for you.

For anyone looking round the city without a guidebook, the square is a welcome surprise. They see it and stop, enchanted. What makes the place so attractive? First of all the very modest dimensions, what we might call a human scale (600 m2), tiny by comparison with the spacious squares typical of Paris. It is all the more intimate set against the grand buildings beside it and the throbbing traffic nearby, hidden away from the busy boulevard Saint-Germain.

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[2] Charles I de Bourbon (1401–1456).
[3] The ceremonial courtyard of a palace

Rue de Furstemberg seen from rue de l'Abbaye....   and from rue Jacob
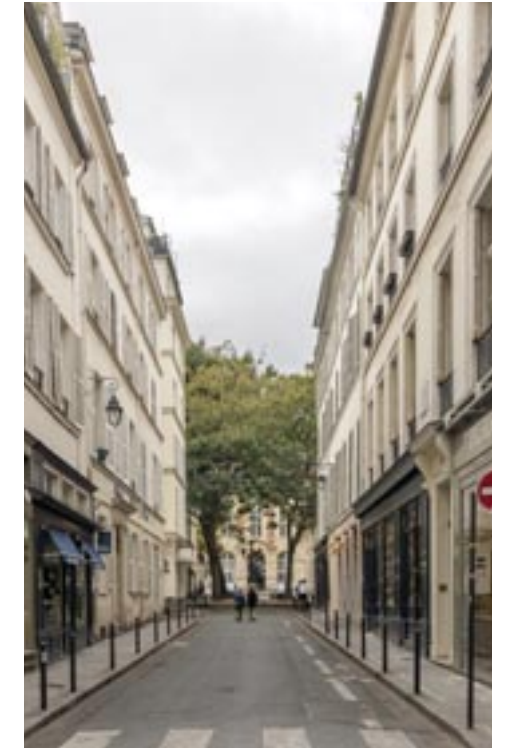
The intimacy of the square, in defiance of its grand surroundings, is just a matter of smallness. The residential buildings surrounding it are as high as the square is wide, giving a balanced, serene effect. The five- and six-storey-high walls hold the square in a friendly embrace, an effect amplified by the presence of the three-storey building that accommodates the Delacroix Museum. It was originally the stables wing of the palace, and has a similar brick-inset façade. It is the only feature that upsets the visual balance of the square, an effect offset by the afternoon sun shining over its roof. Its frontage also differs from the other buildings of the "square" in the details and colours, but the shadows cast by the trees moderate the effect.

The jewel of the square is the slightly-raised pavement island in the centre and the silhouette generated by its vertical features. Square with rounded corners, the island creates the illusion of a circle, enhanced by the roadway that encircles it. Around the loop of road is another pavement which makes the transition from curves to straight lines, so that the perimeter, along the line of buildings, is square. Circle/square, back/forward. In each of the four "corners" of the island stands a foxglove tree. At the intersection of the lines connecting the trees, a four-armed lamp post dominates the centre. A fifth, central lamp of the post points upwards. The trees, the lamp posts and the bollards make up a harmonious ensemble of the natural and the manufactured.

Composed around the centre, they wrap around the square, effusing serenity; the secret of the square likes in the regular but playful arrangement of these few components. The atmosphere of the square is created jointly by the enclosing walls and this central ensemble of "sculptures".

Before the street was laid out, the area belonged to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The story begins in 558 with the dedication of an abbey called Saint-Vincent and Sainte-Croix. Its name was changed in 754 to that of its founder, Saint Germain, bishop of Paris. The church (tower, nave, transept and aisles) and the monastery buildings were built in the Romanesque style, starting around 1000, with later Gothic and even Renaissance additions. The other thirteenth-century buildings of the abbey - the chapel (now at 6 rue de l'Abbaye), the refectory, the dormitory, the assembly hall and the cloister (1239-1255) - are the work of the architect Pierre de Montreuil.[4]

In 1210, during the reign of Philippe Auguste II, defensive ramparts were built around Paris. The abbey was left outside the city wall and constituted a separate settlement. Charles V started to reinforce the wall in 1368, and the associated royal decree specifically although the abbey was unaffected by the works, being made an exception in, it had to make its own defences. The enclosed area of the abbey fell roughly between what are now rue l'Échaudé, rue Gozlin, rue Saint-Benoît and rue Jacob. Additions were made to it in the seventeenth century. Cardinal Charles I de Bourbon, uncle of Henry IV, ordered the construction of the abbot's palace (now 3, 3/b and 5 rue de l'Abbaye). In 1691, Cardinal Fürstemberg - who was at the same time Bishop of Strasbourg and Abbot of Saint-Germain-des-Prés - extended and restored the building. Since then, this grand, elegant building has marked the termination of rue de Furstemberg.

When the palace was completed in 1699, the main entrance opened towards the square, which formed the cour d'honneur. This courtyard gradually turned into a street/square named after the cardinal. It was initially surrounded by houses, stables and carriage houses - of which traces are still visible in the courtyards of the buildings at number 6 and 8. The old buildings in the area started to give way to new ones after 1699, but the streets retained their seventeenth-century layout: passage de la Petite-Boucherie, rue de l'Échaudé and rue Bourbon-le-Château. The north end of rue de Furstemberg (rue Jacob) took its present shape after the death of Queen Margaret (first wife of Henry IV) in 1615 and the demolition of her palace, which lay parallel to the street. In 1794, the chapel and refectory in rue de l'Abbaye exploded and burned down. Their place was taken by dwellings in the nineteenth century, except for the new chapel, built in 1901.

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[4] Pierre de Montreuil (1200–1267), whose other work includes the Sainte-Chapelle in Vincennes.

Palais abbatial - the cardinal's palace

The best known building in the square stands at number 6: it was here that Eugène Delacroix, one of the outstanding figures of Romantic painting, lived and worked for the six years up to his death in 1863. The first floor of the building is now a museum displaying his works (Musée Delacroix).

The street/square has not changed much since the nineteenth century, except for the ground floors, which have gradually become occupied by shops and galleries. It is a one-way street, and remains quiet, partly because the island in the middle forces traffic to slow down. The main reason for driving along it is to look for a parking space. Even pedestrians hesitate to cross the square, feeling they are encroaching on private land. The foliage of the trees also advocates silence, and visitors speak in low voices. Noise dies off among the leaves, and echoes are subdued.

Musée Delacroix

Up until a few years ago (perhaps decades now), the square was a more eventful place. There were benches on each side of the island, and people who came along could sit there. The benches were replaced by bollards, first concrete, then cast iron, not as defences against parking cars, but to keep down-and-outs away. Some had been camping out there. They were peaceful, and disturbed no-one. After the disappearance of the tramps and the benches, a classical guitarist became the attraction in the square. He squatted on a concrete bollard as he sang, in a refined, quiet voice, and had many regular listeners. But it was not long before the local residents got rid of him, too. Now, you can come to the square, look around, and appreciate it, but only standing up.

The intimate disposition of the square remains untouched. The leaves on the trees still rustle, cars still crawl along slowly, and visitors linger, staring, with guidebooks in their hands. The five lamps on the post still light up at dusk, and the overall effect is still romantic.

CITÉ DE TRÉVISE

CITÉ DE TRÉVISE

FONTAINE
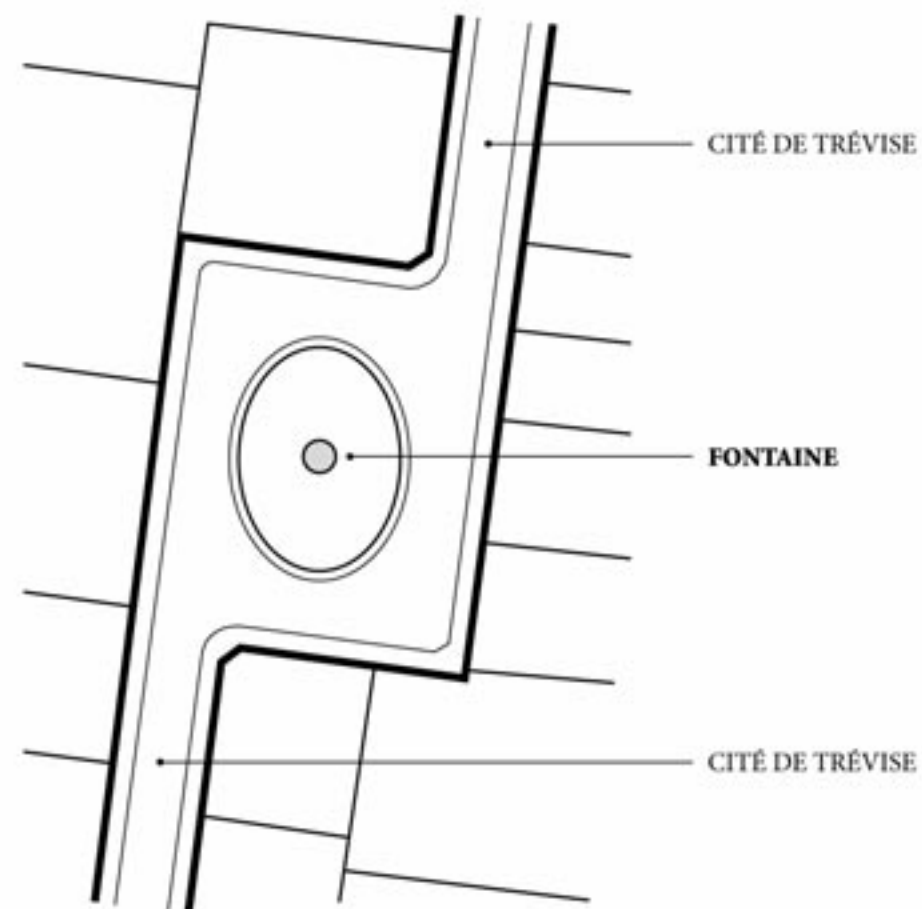
CITÉ DE TRÉVISE

CITÉ DE TRÉVISE

Anyone wandering in here accidentally finds himself in a secluded backstreet and then comes to a square from where he sees no exit. Cul-de-sac? Or the courtyard of a private block? Cité de Trévise is an odd phenomenon.

The buildings shut in the square like castle walls. An oval green island divides the cobbled street and relieves the first - somewhat cool - impression. The name cité[1] de Trévise[2] actually denotes a street, or streets. The straight line of the street takes a right angle half way along, marking the start of the square, and then continues at the far corner, shifted by the width of the square. As we go along zig-zag street with a park in the middle causes confusion for a new arrival, who cannot see where it is going to lead. It takes a while before the continuation becomes apparent, when he catches sight of the little opening diagonally opposite. This gives rise to the uncertainty: are we in a street, a square or a private courtyard?

Tucked away in one of the more crowded quarters of Paris, the square is not easy to find. It lies in the 9th arrondissement, half way between the two grand boulevards and parallel to rue du Faubourg Poissonnière. Nearby is the Folies Bergère, which is slightly removed from its peers in the Pigalle, but this is not typical of the neighbourhood. The streets of this densely-inhabited city quarter are lined with blocks of flats with shops underneath. The quarter has a history that goes back to the thirteenth century, when it was mostly marshland, crossed by paths in the north-south direction, and uninhabited until Charles V's city wall was built.

Today's square occupies the place of a palace demolished in 1838. It was then a private estate, and the residential blocks for the well-off were built speculatively. The arrangement is reminiscent of the privately-owned closed parks of London, an association reinforced by the oval green space in the centre. The street was originally fenced off at each end of the street to exclude outsiders. High moral standards were imposed on those chosen to be residents of the block. There was no space for shops or workshops. That was the beginning.

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[1] he word does not just mean city. It can also mean a small district or even a single block.
[2] It was named in honour of Adolphe Mortier, the marshal to whom Napoleon granted the title Duke of Treviso (Trévise in French).

View of the square from the north

Four- and five-storey blocks of flats surround the square on all sides. Relative to their height, the space between them is somewhat narrow and is dominated by the roadway. Uneventful, almost abandoned-looking, it is not a place anybody comes just to visit, except perhaps to walk the dog. The residents pass through hurriedly on their way to or from work. Vehicles are also a rarity, only the occasional bin lorry or a motorized street-sweeping machine that keeps public spaces clean. They pass, and the quiet returns. In the middle of the bleak, abandoned road is an oval island full of trees and vegetation. A green splash in the void. It makes the square look at once smaller and larger than it really is. By breaking up the square and adding more elements, it gives a new, larger scale.

But it also crowds the scene, reducing the walking surface, and our image of the square contracts accordingly. These two contradictory factors make for an ambivalent impression.
The green island is nonetheless the pride of local residents.

In recent years, several businesses have set up in the buildings around the square. One is an environmental organization. At midday, the young people who work there sit out on the kerb of the island to eat their lunch. Several others join them, some from outside the square. They like it here. They told me how much pleasure it gives them, except for the lack of benches to sit on and the denial of access to the green area, locked behind the fence. Just as I was going, one of them told that the square is beautiful at sunset, when the light catches the water of the fountain.

Two shapes define the cité de Trévise: the square and the oval. The buildings are arranged in a regular square, but the park in the centre is curved. Two contradictory shapes. Breaking the continuity are two street openings diagonally opposite each other. They pull the square shape apart like two arms, making the symmetric space appear asymmetric, distorted into a rhombus. Perspective makes the ellipse of the central island more elongated than it is in reality. We get confused. Changing focus from the square to the park, the difference is striking. This applies to characteristics other than the shapes. The buildings make a hard enclosure, while the line of the island and the pavement around it is soft. The pavement and road surface are laid with asphalt and cobblestones, while the island, on its elevated plane, is green. The former is a horizontal, low-lying plane, the latter features upward-branching trees and a fountain.

The centrally-placed mini-park resolves the rigidity of the stone desert. Its very form - an oval marked out with kerb, fence and ring of trees - is the first of the refinements. They continue with the fountain in the centre. On top of a pedestal is the bowl, a column, and a smaller bowl, one above the other. These elements add up to make an emphatic central feature. Surrounding the column are three intertwining nymph statues. The falling water drops spray out on to the plants and the square. It is a pleasure to breathe the fresh air. We can find multiple echoes in the square of the island's distinctive curve – such as the pattern of cobblestones and the archivolt of the ground floor windows.[3]

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[3] Archivolt: moulding along the underside of an arch.

Oval in the square

The two main components of the square are undoubtedly in tension, but they have some common features. Human activity, unfortunately, is absent from both. The road is not a pedestrian precinct, and the minipark is closed, only the gardeners being allowed in. The park has no benches or anywhere to rest. Even the locals are kept out. All we may enjoy are the sight and the refreshing impression. It has the form, but does not serve the function, of a square.

Despite being surrounded by individual buildings, the square has a homogeneous countenance. The buildings are harmonious in size and proportions. The light-coloured, smooth-rendered surfaces also contribute to the uniformity of the enclosure. The nineteenth-century buildings fit into the local milieu, similar but more ornamented, with designs drawn from classical architecture (architrave, window frame, balustrade, etc.). The surfaces are dominated by the vertical windows, their spacing regularly repeated. They are also unified by continuous cornices. A few visual exceptions also merit a mention: the brick inlay on just one building, and the individual portal designs on two. There is the occasional balcony and grille in front of individual or multiple windows. There are also balustraded parapets. All of the buildings faithfully preserve the neoclassical style they were built in. It is remarkable that security grilles appear on only a few ground-floor windows, and most residents make do with the traditional shutters. Perhaps they take comfort in the feeling that the square is still their own property?

PLACE DU MARCHÉ-SAINTE-CATHERINE[1]

RUE DE JARENTE

RUE CARON

RUE NECKER

RUE D'ORMESSON

RUE CARON

RUE DE TURENNE
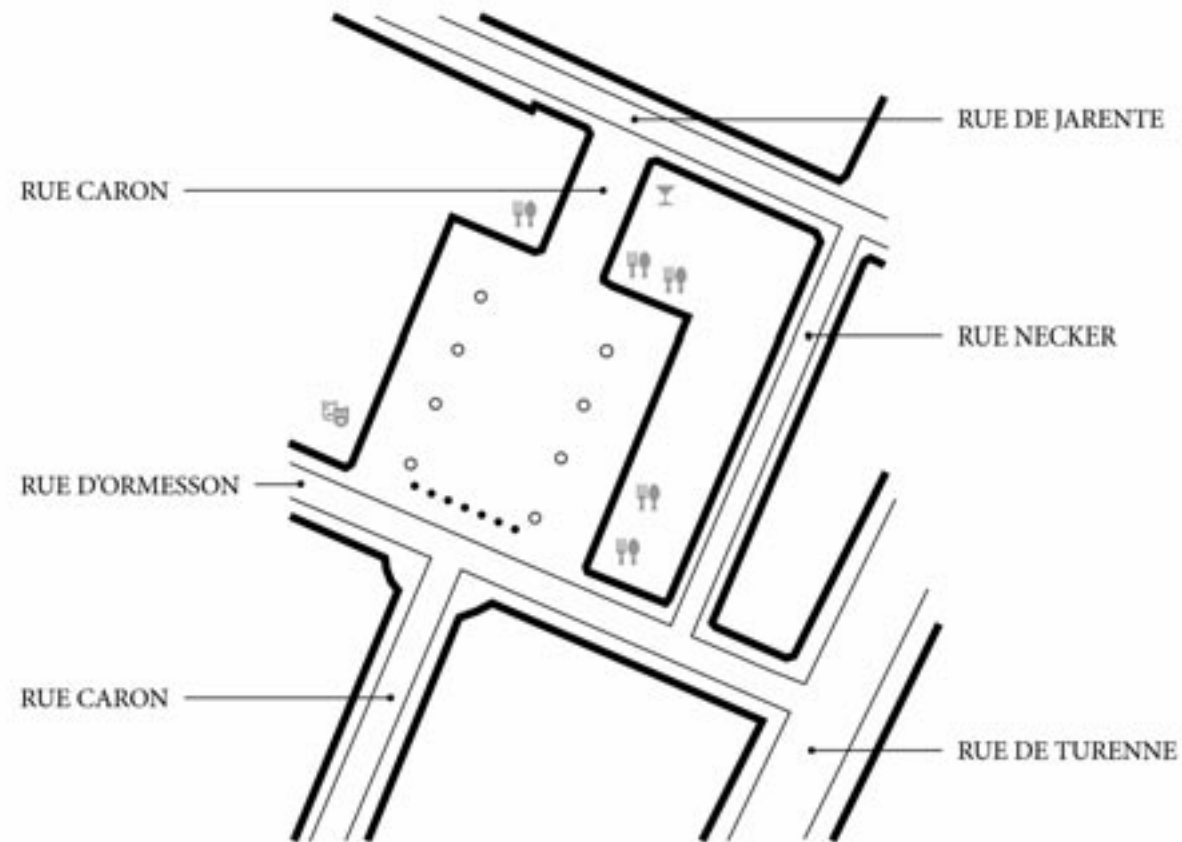
PLACE DU MARCHÉ-SAINTE-CATHERINE[1]

The Marché-Sainte-Catherine is a simple, modest place. Not mediocre or insipid, it just unflamboyantly does what it does. And that is simply to serve its local surroundings. Being out of the way, with modest dimensions and unostentatious facades, it is a place for people to enjoy its cheerful, serene atmosphere. Its unflashy restaurants are places where neighbours and outsiders alike may come and feel at home.

Almost a regular square (29 x 31 m), it is geometrically in balance. The surrounding six- or seven-storey blocks of flats are uniform in width and eaves height. The windows are vertical, with consistently repeating proportions. The façades are rendered smooth. The whole is coordinated, revealing a unified architectural concept.

A street, rue Caron, theoretically runs along the north-south axis of symmetry of the *marché*. In reality, it is forced round the central island before returning to the axis at the other side. Concrete bollards stand in the way of cars on the central island, and only vans delivering to the restaurants are allowed to enter and park on the square for limited periods, on a short section of road laid out for them on one side.

People usually approach the square from one of the main thoroughfares of Paris, the busy rue Saint-Antoine. We leave the rush of cars behind us as we turn into rue Caron and as we arrive at the square, we see only pedestrians. It is a arrangement that evokes the mood of nineteenth-century Paris, and it may seem like a peaceful courtyard. By contrast, if we come from the quiet rue de Jarente the other side, the north, the square seems full of activity. We pass from a motionless street to a living space. These two directions of approach set us up for different kinds of experience.

In the centre of the square is an island raised above the road level. The empty space in the middle gives the square a - negative - central emphasis. No triumphant monument, no grandiose fountain. The space is there to be used, as in the past, when the market was there.

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[1] Revised version of an article in *Holmi* vol. XIV, number 11 (November 2002).

View from the north

The square from the south

The defining elements of the square are arranged along the two edges of the empty central area, parallel with the rue Caron axis. Stretching out from the lamp post at the half-way point, they are lined up in strict symmetry to right and left: two trees on each side, a bench in each space. Even the litter bins are incorporated in the scheme, sitting at the two ends of the row, in the shade of the trees. Different objects are lined up in the perpendicular direction, along the other two edges of the square figure. On the north side there are only benches, and on the south side, a line of concrete bollards. Each of these series forms a different system, and they come together as a unified whole.

Trees, benches, lamp post, litter bin

The fixtures in the square talk back to each other: the natural and artificial, the high and the low, the horizontal and the vertical, the filigree and the solid, the lines and the areas, the wooden, the iron and the plastic. All are in play, juxtaposed in order and at random.

The same elements appear again and again, but unexpectedly, in a syncopated rhythm. It's a sprightly square. We do not feel alone even sitting solitary on the bench, because the objects surround us, we are joining in with them. The picture is complex but not chaotic, because the towering trees rule over the small elements, the lamp posts, the benches, the bollards.

The playfulness continues in the paving: cobblestones laid in a rustic, busy pattern of alternating curves, in square sections marked out by stone blocks.

On the perimeter, ground-floor restaurants under grey and yellow-grey façades beckon with their colourful terraces. Blue, red, green and brown sunshades and a cavalcade of tablecloths and furniture draw the customers in. The bustle, the clatter of plates, the smell of food, the buzz of diners' conversation and the colourful background all add into the carefree atmosphere of the square. The square is a system of zones, some serene, some busy: the walls, solid and unmoving, adjoin the zone of restaurants, with their lively mood, then come the benches, where calm figures read or softly converse under the trees. Finally, the silent, empty space in the middle.

These alternating spheres draw in visitors. Parisians from all parts of the city come to eat in the atmospheric restaurants. Only a few tourists find there way here, however, usually by accident, even though the square lies in the middle of the popular Marais quarter with its well-known *hôtels particuliers*[2] and museums. People coming here use its facilities in their own individual ways. Chess-players lay out their boards, surrounded by kibitzers. Those coming to rest seek out a shady bench, or perhaps a sunny one. It is the human interaction with the physical features that generates the special character of the place.

Human presence – or absence – is essential to the character of any square: people sitting, milling around or just passing through. Here, there is a constant flux of people on the benches and terraces, and the restaurant-show plays to its well-practised choreography as the waiters roll the sunshades in and out and lay and change the tables. The activity and the setting are always in flux. Those taking a rest stand up from the bench after a while and go on their way.

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Long before it was a square, this place was the site of the Augustinian priory of Sainte-Catherine du Val des Écoliers, founded in 1201. The church was completed in 1230, and the whole complex, including house, cloister and park, was surrounded by a wall. The area was otherwise unbuilt-on at the time and lay outside the Paris boundary, but was subsequently absorbed into the city.

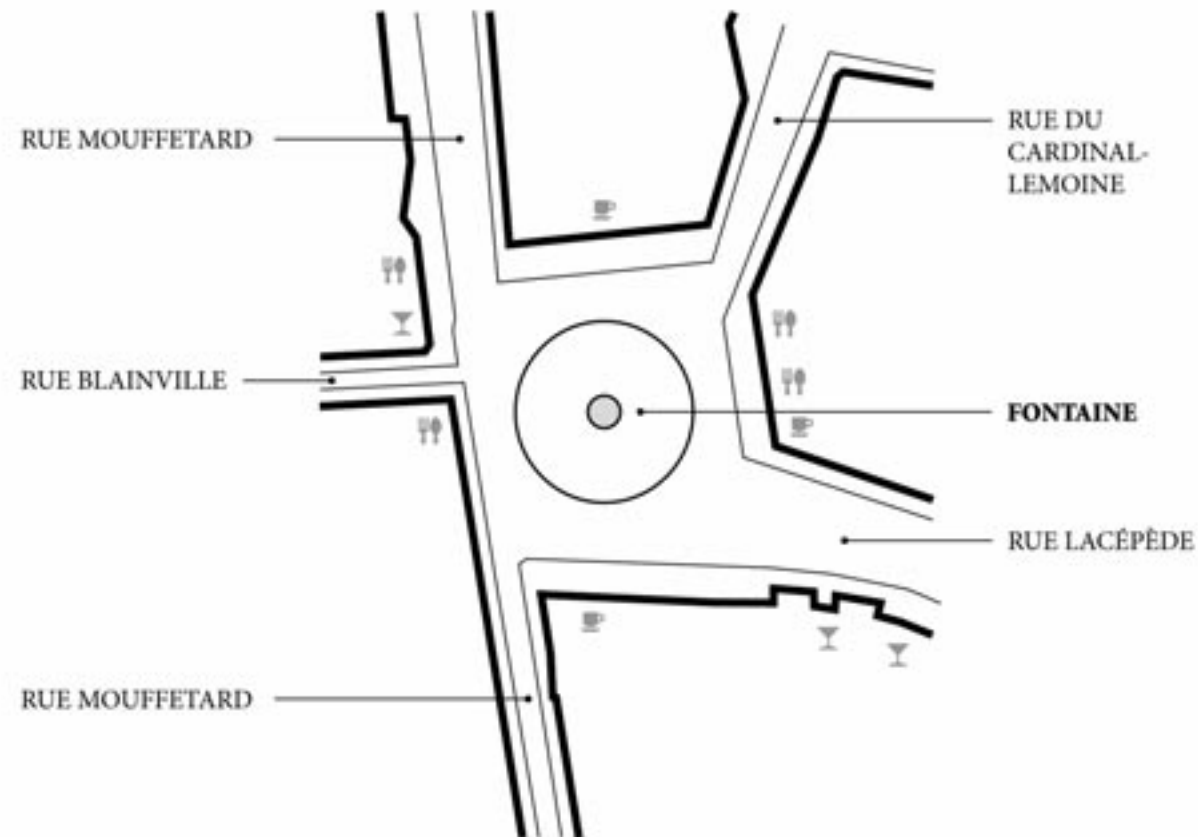[2] A *hôtel particulier*, often simply *hôtel,* means a grand townhouse.

The defensive walls built by Charles V between 1367 and 1383 brought the area under the city's control, and the resulting security led to rapid urbanization. Before the end of the fourteenth century, the area hosted houses of aristocrats and haute-bourgeois and residences of prelates. The grand residences that went up in the sixteenth century reflected the new movement, the Renaissance. In the second half of that century, all of the empty or cultivated land on the site of the priory of Sainte-Catherine was divided into plots, on average sixteen metres wide. Only palatial buildings could occupy such an area. In the seventeenth century many bankers and senior officials built their *hôtels particuliers* in the area, by then in the classical style. Finally, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the wide areas between these great buildings were filled in, and the Sainte-Catherine area became one of the most densely built-up quarters of Paris.

The square as it is today was laid out within a large block of buildings between 1783 and 1785. Its original purpose, as the name conveys, was to host markets. Nowadays, particularly in the mild seasons, it is a venue for concerts and ceremonies. Sometimes it also attracts filmmakers looking for the old atmosphere of a Parisian square. Seven restaurants have terraces on the Marché Sainte-Catherine and there are another seven on the connecting streets. These bistros greatly contribute to the identity of the square. Over the years, restaurants have opened one after the other, each with different ambience, offering Polish, Italian and oriental cuisine as well as French. One corner even has a casino advertising card games. This all adds to the diversity of the Marché Sainte-Catherine.

Are the people sitting on the square aware of this eventful, changing past? Do they imagine themselves surrounded by the market with its stalls and carts, do they hear the shouts of traders or the music of organ grinders? Do they think about the lives of the personages who inhabited the great houses? Do they know that a church stood here once, and a monastery where monks prayed as they walked round the cloister? Do they see the peasants on the land, following their ploughs and bending over their crops? Unfortunately not. For this diverse past is part of the present, and continuity preserves some pieces of that past. Remains of the old things are built into the square - the layout and the confinement within the walls, if nothing else. The past is accumulated here, and lives on to shape the character of the square.

THROUGH THE AGES
PLACE DE LA CONTRESCARPE

RUE MOUFFETARD

RUE DU CARDINAL-LEMOINE

RUE BLAINVILLE

FONTAINE

RUE LACÉPÈDE

RUE MOUFFETARD

Place de la Contrescarpe, lying on the plateau of one of the hills of Paris, Montagne Sainte-Geneviève,[1] started life with the demolition of an entire block in 1852. But its story starts in antiquity. What is now rue Descartes lies on what was the road from Lutetia to Rome. Until the end of the Middle Ages, the land was planted with crops and vines. The city of Paris absorbed the area very slowly. One important milestone in the city's expansion was the building of the first major line of defence. This was a wall[2] - of which some remains still survive - along the left bank of the Seine, built between 1200 and 1215 by King Philippe Auguste of the House of Capet, after whom it was named. It ran along what is now rue du Cardinal Lemoine and so touched on the site of the square.[3] A few metres from the square, the wall, having run from the north east, took a bend towards the north west. Near there, at the intersection of rue Descartes and rue Thouin, was the site of the city gate known as Porte Bordelle (Bordet) or Porte Saint-Marcel. This formed the border of the city at the time, and the western part of Montagne Sainte-Geneviève fell within it.

A moat was added to the Philippe Auguste wall in the fourteenth century (under Charles V). A branch of the Bièvre[4] running quite far from the wall[5] played a similar defensive role. By the end of the medieval period, firearms had rendered the defensive zone obsolete. The redundant system of forts was demolished by Louis XIV in 1670.[6] In 1830, another wall was built, but that was for tax purposes.

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[1] 5th arrondissement.
[2] The city wall was 2600 metres long on the left bank and 2800 metres on the right.
[3] The wall was 3 metres wide at the base, tapering towards to top, and 6–8 metres high. The top was smooth and passable to pedestrians. Semicircular bastions 15 metres high stood every 60 metres along the wall.
[4] The other branch is a backwater.
[5] About 100 metres away, near rue Monge.
[6] There are remains of the wall at various points in Paris. See *Sur les Traces des Enceintes de Paris*. Parigramme, Paris, 2004.

Approaching from the north

After the demolition of the defensive zone, the church of Saint-Médard[7] and the village around it, Bourg Saint-Médard, dating from the ninth century, became part of the city. The church was built beside the abbey. The loss of independence also marked the end of a way of life that had lasted for centuries. It had been a mainly residential quarter, where people lived primarily from the waters of Bièvre - dyers, tanners, washerwomen, butchers and millers. Changes to the population of the "bourg"[8] came with the rise of the bourgeoisie. All sections of society were represented among its inhabitants, including nobles and descendants of the old landowners, but most were artisans and merchants. The farmers were gradually displaced. The end of the Hundred Years' War ushered in a time of prosperity, when the nobles (many of whom had died in the fighting) were displaced by bankers and other bourgeois. Society had been restructured.

The area still retains the atmosphere of old times, with many elements from the seventeenth century. The building at 9 rue Blainville is one. A well at 60 rue Mouffetard also reminds us of the past (Pot-de-Fer, 1624). The buildings on rue Mouffetard facing on to the square[9] all evoke past ages. There are more medieval-type timber-frame houses than buildings of brick or stone. The structure is now hidden behind the rendering, but the character and motifs of the old buildings, the rhythm of the windows, their cornices and roofs nonetheless generate the crowded atmosphere evocative of the past. They became homes of the middle classes, the owners living on the upper storey, with their shops and workshops on the ground floor. The row of shops is now broken by cafés, bars and places to eat. These were formerly cabarets, the best-known being the *"Pomme de Pin"*, as recorded by an inscription on the wall of 1 Contrescarpe (although the actual cabaret was on the opposite building at the corner of rue Blainville). The streets, particularly rue Mouffetard, were passages and markets, and still are. Traders extend their operation out of the ground floor on to the pavements. This makes a special mood, a colourful spectacle, filling the street with scents and the shouts of traders. The noise of shopkeepers and stallholders blends with the bustle of customers. The melee rises above their heads and diffuses outwards, and the residents above do not escape the noisy life of the street. The smell of fruit, vegetables and spices spreads through the air. The array of wares is like a carpet of flowers running down the hill.

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[7] The church was consecrated by a papal charter of 1163. The section of the church that faces rue Mouffetard was built in the fifteenth century.
[8] A "bourg" was a market town.
[9] Numbers 12 to 20.

The western slopes of the hill, within the city wall, have accommodated cultural institutions[10] since the earliest period of the city, and these have exerted a strong influence on the entire hill, which is sometimes referred to as "l'Université". The ridge was the dividing line. To the west, the behemoth buildings of culture radiate strength and dignity, while on the east, the buildings are lower in stature, but buzz with life. This busy quarter was gradually inhabited by merry bands of students. These two very different worlds complemented each other. The district still displays this duality, although its denizens are of a different composition. Life buzzes with the same intensity, but nowadays marketgoers are joined by troops of tourists. Mont Sainte-Geneviève and place Contrescarpe are now places of pilgrimage for tourists just as much as Montmartre and Montparnasse.

Baron Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine, who brutally redrew the plan of Paris, was thwarted in extending his rectangular grid of wide streets to the hill by the natural features and the existing cultural buildings. The fabric of the old city stayed intact. Sainte-Geneviève's hill retained the streets that evolved over the centuries, following their irregular routes, and kept many of its buildings too. Spaces left at intersections broadened into squares, further breaking up the order (place Emmanuel-Levinas, place Jacqueline-de-Romilly, place Lucien-Herr) and complicating the winding system of streets. To reach the place de la Contrescarpe, you have to work your way through this labyrinth. Despite the alterations made over the centuries, this complex fabric has survived, with all its surprises.

The area has lost none of its liveliness and bustle. For centuries, the nearby porte Saint-Marcelen[11] was the city gate admitting entry from - or departure to - the east. People were always passing through the area. Porters pushed their barrows of goods for merchants and artisans. The commotion has never died down. Today, swarms of tourists and shoppers descend on the square from rue Mouffetard.

The square lies fifty metres from the old city wall, from which its name derives.[12] Today, it is the market rather than the wall that gives the place its character, breaking rue Mouffetard into two stretches of unequal length. As we go along it, the mood traverses a scale of lively to serene. The square is at the top. The bustle of the market gives way to café terraces. As we continue, rue Descartes gets steadily quieter. Apart from rue Mouffetard, there are three streets[13] that lead down the gentle slope. These are the square's feelers, seeming to strap it on the hill.

Compared with its busy surroundings, it is a relaxed place. Although it is full of people walking to and fro, they are taking their time, looking around. The mood remains lively, but at a lesser pace. Having been freed of through traffic, the square now affords authority to the hill in a new way. It stands at the summit, but not as citadel, and nobody wants to take it by storm. The new conquerors, walking, staring or glancing at guidebooks, are seeking a café to enjoy something to eat and drink. We are above all in a place of entertainment and exploration.

Many people come here just because others do, but a summit is always an attraction. People feel they have arrived when they get here. They want to enjoy the positional energy of the hilltop. Unlike most summits, this place has no view. The streets leading up to the square are narrow and take many bends, hiding the valley bottom. The experience of getting here is what generates the feeling of reaching the top of a hill. Some visitors stay, others go back to where they started, and only rarely do they just keep going, having something else to do. This place is not a thoroughfare. The square is a destination, a plateau waiting as a gift for those who have made the steady climb up the streets.

People emerging from the maze of streets are drawn here in the hope of discovery. But what keeps them here? Perhaps it is a welcome change after the street vendors, the thronging shoppers and the din of tourists. But the place has something of its own to offer the curious other than relief from its surroundings. To enter here - by virtue of the layout and architecture, the cheerfully roaming visitors and the life of the cafés - is to get a feeling of friendliness. The intimate mood is partly down to the dimensions. You can take it all in with a single glance.

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[10] The educational establishments founded on the side of the hill facing the city, on the site of the former abbey of Sainte Geneviève, were the Sorbonne (1257), the Collège de France (1530), the Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève (1530), the Lycée Louis-le-Grand (1563) and nearby, the École Normale Supérieure (1704) and the Institut Curie (1909). The church of St Étienne-du-Mont was founded in 1222.
[11] The porte Marcel, otherwise known as Bordelles or Bordet, lay at the intersection of today's rue Thouin and rue Descartes.

[12] A counterscarp is the outer wall of a defensive trench.
[13] Rue du Cardinal Lemoine, rue Lacépède and rue Blainville.

The surrounding four- to six-storey buildings may close off the view, but they are not oppressive. Indeed, they make a framework that keeps in the atmosphere generated within. Even the quiet song of the guitarist lingers. The proportions of the square also contribute to the milieu, the distance across it being about twice the height of the buildings.

Another attraction is the dual geometric character, the ensemble of square and circle. The geometric square is a product of the surrounding buildings, although it is slightly distorted, more of a trapezium. The circle is formed by the island in the centre, like a discus thrown into the middle of the square, its surface swelling slightly towards the centre. It reminds us we are at the top of a hill. The "discus" is paved with cobblestones laid in a pattern of repeating curves and bunches of flowers. The form of the arc takes on emphasis from the kerb around the island, and the same kerbstones line the pavement in front of the buildings.

Artificial stone blocks beside the kerb are arranged along the curve of the island. The angular forms echo the square enclosure, while their layout, the curve, alludes to the circle. Another duality. At the centre of the island, the fountain emphasizes the central character of the square, and contributes to circling the square. The four trees on the island take us back to the square motif. The juxtaposition of square and circle is thus a recurring phenomenon. Despite the angular enclosure, the place de la Contrescarpe lives on in the memory as a circus.

There are a few elements that interfere with this dual regularity. Although three of the five streets enter the square in a star pattern (two at corners and one in the middle), rue Mouffetard comes in at a tangent, like a stretched rope on which the hoop of the square is threaded. These connections break up the scheme of the two geometric shapes, making the square more complex. Some disharmony arises from building masses of varying dimensions. Different periods also add to the variety. The buildings on the stretch of rue Mouffetard passing the square are narrow with tall windows and, together with some other old buildings, convey the milieu of times before the square was born. The buildings on the other three sides date from when the square was laid out. These are more horizontal blocks, although the tall windows breaking up the façades have the same rhythm as those on the older buildings. Similarity and difference.

Exit to rue Mouffetard

Discontinuities of roof contours also tend to break up the order. There are surprises down to the smallest details. A roof that is suddenly cut off, a clump of protruding chimneys, a bare gable rising to the sky, idiosyncratic mansard windows, assorted window divisions and balcony railings, ground-floor shops and windows in contrasting colours - all of these force variations on the basic system. Until recently, there was a reminder of other former building decorations: a panel painting on the wall of 14 rue Mouffetard, "Au Négre joyeux". It has been removed for restoration.

Nature has a somewhat low-level presence here: four trees and the water of the fountain. But the wind keeps the square airy. The sun throws as much light here as on any other square, but the near-white-painted façades make for a sharper image.

The guests of the eight restaurant and café terraces lining the square also liven up the mood. They enjoy the parade of colours of the sunshades, tables and chairs, and the busy attention of the waiters. People sitting in these terraces are part of the setting, as well as viewers. Meanwhile, in the middle, the cars slowly make their way around the island.

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But where is the past, the Middle Ages? Where are the fortifications, the city gate and the village of Bourg Saint-Médard? The ruins have disappeared without trace, or perhaps just in the vicinity of the square? Where they still exist, they are well hidden. There are a few memorial plaques,[14] but there is no word of what might be in courtyards[15] or cellars. There are, however, some minimal allusions. Rue Descartes and rue Mouffetard follow the route of Roman roads. There are books telling us of rue Thouin, the site of the old city gate. The connecting streets are also clues to the past. For a long time, the rampart was an obstacle that constrained the design of new buildings. The lines of surviving buildings are the consequences of lost features, traces of the past in the present. There is a need for information, some explanatory signs to bring back, at least in words, what has gone.[16]

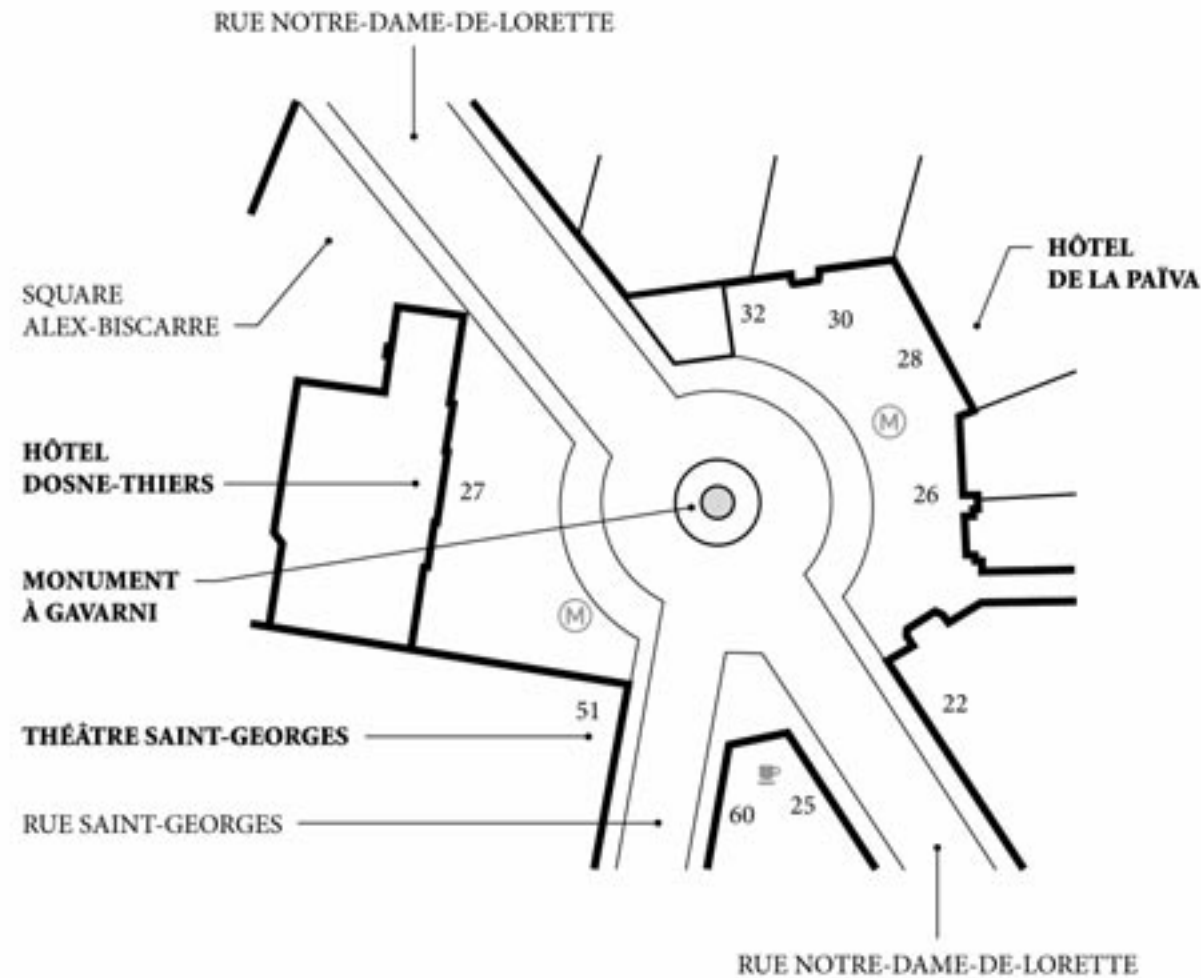[14] On the wall of 11 rue Blainville, carved into stone above the street sign is the old name of the street, rue Contrescarpe. It marks the place of the old Philippe Auguste rampart.
[15] Remains of the old city wall can be seen in the courtyard (cul-de-sac) of the building at 10 Rue Thouin.
[16] At the intersection of rue Thouin and rue Descartes there is a sign marking the site of the city gate Porte Marcel, built in 1200.

RUE NOTRE-DAME-DE-LORETTE

SQUARE
ALEX-BISCARRE

HÔTEL
DE LA PAÏVA

32   30

28

Ⓜ

HÔTEL
DOSNE-THIERS

27   26

MONUMENT
À GAVARNI

Ⓜ

THÉÂTRE SAINT-GEORGES

51   22

RUE SAINT-GEORGES

60   25

RUE NOTRE-DAME-DE-LORETTE

PLACE SAINT-GEORGES

Complexity is in the essence of this square. The circle in the central area and the polygon at the perimeter are its defining shapes. These are in tension, but have the same function: to surround the centre, which is marked out by a sculpture. Were the buildings designed to coordinate with the central object, the fountain that preceded the sculpture, or did the centre have to be highlighted to befit the status of the great houses around it? What was the deciding factor in the evolution of the square: the shape or the function? Which of these has come out stronger? Have they collaborated or competed in creating the character of the square?

Buildings and connecting streets

Rue Notre-Dame-De-Lorette: the main through road of the square, thirteen metres wide. Laid out in 1824 and extended to rue Pigalle in 1826.

Rue Saint-Georges: has existed since 1672. Mentioned in 1734 as rue Neuve-Saint-Georges, extended in 1824 up to the square, which was built by then. Given its present name in 1846. Narrower than the main road: 11.7 metres.

27 place Saint-Georges: the first on the square, Hôtel Dosne-Thiers,[1] was completed in 1830. After the original building was demolished, the one visible today was built in 1875, and since 1905 it has accommodated the Institut de France (Fondation Dosne, Bibliothèque Thiers, Musée Napoléon). The new building was designed in the neoclassical style with two storeys. An additional storey, set back from the façade, was added at the same time as the three-storey building beside it was built. It is the most architecturally balanced façade on the square, noble and dignified. Its central section, approached by steps, is crowned with a tympanum. The cornice and the arched form of the windows and the entrance passage are the main ornaments. Part of the garden area between the building and the fence has been carved out for a Metro entrance.[2] A spear-tipped wrought-iron fence separates the garden from the pavement. As we approach the square, it is the imposing edifice of the Institut de France that greets us.

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[1] Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877), president of the French Third Republic (1871–1873), financier and business magnate. He brutally suppressed the Paris Commune in 1871.
[2] The north-south metro line was led under the square in 1906.

The buildings at 26, 28 (hotel de la Paiva) and 30 of place Saint-Georges.

51 rue Saint-Georges: built in 1885 as the offices of various newspapers, the building has housed the Théâtre Saint-Georges since 1938. The only wall visible from the square is a gable wall looking on to the neighbouring garden. Stucco ornament alluding to classical architecture has been added in an unsuccessful attempt to harmonize it in with the neighbouring neoclassical building. The otherwise blank wall facing the street is decorated with some trompe-l'oeil window imitations.

60 rue Saint-Georges / 25 Rue Notre-Dame-Lorette: La Place Saint-Georges café sits between these two streets, one building with two addresses. Set back from the square, the café has a terrace that follows the curve of the pavement, its boundary a continuation of - or substitute for - the curved fence enclosing the gardens of the neighbouring buildings. The façade above the two floors of the café, with its enormous glass windows between pillars, is reminiscent of an industrial building or a department store from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It markedly jars with the other façades on the square, unavoidably drawing attention.

22 rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette: a detached six-storey-plus mansard corner building with a slightly modified Haussmann frontage, and a garden towards the square. On the second floor is a balcony resting on corbels under the two central windows. The grilles running in front of the French windows on the fifth floor also rest on corbels. Everything else is a door or window. The window architraves run through all kinds of variations. The rendering imitates architectural stone and gives the façade its texture. The building is separated from its single-storey neighbour by a narrow empty space, and high bushes grow in the garden, behind a wrought-iron fence.

26 place Saint-Georges: A miniature pavilion attached to a three-storey building, and probably built at the same time, to judge from the continuity of the cornice. The pavilion has a single arched ornamental doorway with one large glass door, perhaps originally the carriage entrance, and a lacy parapet above the cornice. The larger façade is dominated by accentuated cornices (the pilasters being subsidiary). Another prominent element, the arched form of doorways and windows, is shared with its neighbour on the other side. Both buildings feature similar decorative motifs. Our eyes are drawn to the crowded Ionian patterns on the tympanum-shaped architraves, contrasting with the composite pattern of the pilaster capitals. Taken together with the neighbour, the three frontages look like a building covered by a nineteenth-century Christo lace curtain. Today, they accommodate various institutions.

28 place Saint-Georges (Hôtel de la Païva):[3] with three storeys plus a mansard, built between 1873 and 1875, this is a curious blend of neo-Gothic and neo-Renaissance. It, too, has a façade arranged out of cornices and pilasters between windows. The whole surface, including the pilasters, window surrounds and curved architraves are encrusted with small, lush motifs.

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[3] Here, "*hôtel*" means large townhouse.

At the top of all this are the balustrades in front of the mansard roof. Despite the busy details, the overall effect is refreshing. One curious feature is the way the frontage collides with the neighbouring Haussmann-style building.[4] The pre-existing building seems to have been shown an unbelievable lack of consideration when the later one was built. The fence in front of the garden of numbers 26, 28 and 30 has a similar counterpart on the diametrically opposite side of the square. The continuity of the fence is broken at one point by a Metro station that looks like the entrance to a bunker.

30 and 32 place Saint-Georges: a six-storey-plus-mansard residential building on the corner of rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. Its façade bears the features of the Haussmann style. Although the two street numbers seem to belong to a single block with a uniform façade and main cornice, there are two separate main entrances. The balconies running the length of the building divide the façade into a horizontal surfaces. The windows vary in their spacing and their architraves, and the façade of number 30 has a double balustrade. The ground floor of number 32 has been mutilated by the addition of a real estate agent's premises. The pavilion-like box is clumsily stuck on as if it was the covered terrace of a restaurant, which it is not.

La Fontaine Saint-Georges: this was originally a true fountain, a sculpture from which water spouted into a bowl designed for watering horses. The water had to be cut off when the Metro tunnel was dug in 1906 and the fountain was replaced in 1911 with a statue of Paul Gavarni (1804–1866), an illustrator who depicted the lives of the "Lorettes", the ladies of the night the area was known for. Balzac also wrote of them in the 1840s. The quarter was known for its vibrant, demi-mondaine life. The bust, set upon a column, looks like a circus act of a dwarf held aloft.

The square

Coming down the slope from the north, the field of view opens out at the end of the street to reveal the square. We face the statue in the centre of a circular space. The spear-tipped wrought-iron spike fence, the pavement kerb and the panorama of the buildings behind all serve the same purpose: to embrace the statue, and those who enter the square.

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4   The hôtel seems to crash into the wall of the neighbouring block of flats, but was actually built first.

The square takes its character by coupling the central circle to the polygonal background. They make unequal contributions. The circle is strictly geometric, but the buildings make an untidy ensemble. The circles and the statue have the job of linking up the sundry architectural outlines around the square. The circle is a continuous, endless line. As on a carousel, it creates a centrifugal force tending to push the buildings away. Set against the unrelenting closed form of the circle, the other spatial elements are degraded, peripheral phenomena.

The green space takes a bite out of the circle, breaking its hegemony. Rather than occupying the centre of the square, the vegetation appears at the east and west sides, like whiskers. The two growths deform the circle, but the effect is not dramatic, and the greenery is a refreshing sight.

The enclosing background changes with every step. We observe differences in dimension (from single- to six-storey buildings), outline (narrow and wide, great leaps in roof heights), position (distance from the centre) and appearance (façades). Every frontage is individual: we see neorococo and neoclassical, something resembling an industrial building, a frontage spectacularly cut off, a bare surface, and - on two buildings - the Haussman style.

The dominant presence in the square is the Institut de France, a balanced neoclassical building that elicits respect. The row of building fronts opposite (26–28 place Saint-Georges) display a stimulating profusion of ornament, with a little single-storey trinket at their side. The theatre building is a smooth, bare box, boring and dumb. The café is attractive, but the large windows above it are out of place here. As varied as the buildings themselves are their functions. There is a hôtel, a museum, a library, a block of flats, a theatre, a café and an office-residential block.

This juxtaposition of phenomena gives cause to wonder. Is place Saint-Georges a sophisticated ensemble or a rag-bag? Do the buildings in the background stimulate or unsettle? Those on the east side of the square bridge their differences through a shared feature, the rich ornateness of their façades. Another factor unifying that triplet of buildings is their positioning between two Haussmann-style buildings. The same is not true the west side. There, the buildings are at odds with each other, classical jammed between the green of the park and the dreary grey of the theatre. The unequal ends just ramp up the confusion. Despite all this architectural discord, the buildings enclosing the square do their duty in creating a square around the statue. The factors that confirm this sense of an embrace combine with sufficient power to unify the square.

Mass of the buildings at 28 and 30 of place Saint-Georges.

The panorama of interconnected building sets the limits of our view and the confines of our movement, but it is a protective background rather than a prison wall. The square is spacious and airy (32.50 m across), but the staggered backdrop of the walls firmly contains its atmosphere. The seven joints between buildings cause the border to turn through various angles. The buildings on the east side seem to be part of an octagon. The principal spoiler of this order is the main street running through the square, rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, which makes large gashes in the already less-than-continuous wall. The slope of the square, in the same direction as the main street, is another unbalancing factor.

The angles between adjoining buildings amplify the way the architectural dissimilarities deform the square and our impressions of it. We may distinguish negative and positive angles. The obtuse angle at the Hôtel Dosne-Thiers is open and welcoming. The acute angle at which the café building is squeezed between two streets makes us wince. The right-angled junction of the Fondation with the intrusive theatre gable is startling. As for the collision of the Hôtel de la Païva and the Haussmann-style flats, it is simply incomprehensible. The acute angles are strict and aloof; the obtuse angles understanding and welcoming. Nonetheless, the polygonal back wall, however rhapsodic, serves the same function as the circle: to embrace the centre and make an enclosure for the square.

Finally, the statue-fountain in the centre is the force that holds the entire complex together. It links the square's two principal components: the fragmented perimeter panorama and the regular circles at the centre. The rim of buildings and the smooth round fence serve the same purpose. The circular form is emphasized by the road around the statue. The same cannot be said, however, for the traffic. Instead of going round the statue and turning into rue Saint-George, most cars cut straight through the square. Nonetheless, the emphasis is on collaboration rather than contradiction. Both the close-up and distant visual experiences, together with what we touch and the direction we move, have the same consequence: to take us around the centre of the square. The circle experience takes control, as a crown rather than a manacle.

There are other factors whose effect, though powerful, is invisible. We glimpse only the corner of the park behind the Institut de France (Square Alex-Biscarre), but we sense it in another way, from the fresh air it delivers to the square. Behind the Hôtel de la Païva on the other side is a crescent, rue Laferrière, which seems to repeat the curve of the east side of the square.

Hôtel Dosne-Thiers.

We cannot see it, but we know it is there. Metro line 12 passes underneath on its way from north to south. We sense its vibration, but all we see are the two station entrances. We are made aware of the public transport by the groups of people gathering at the steps down to the Metro and beside the bus stop rather than by the signs. And supplementing our direct image of the square are prior observations, more distant memories, and the present perception of human activity.

What stands out from among all these experiences? Do they combine to create a coherent milieu, or act individually? The multiply-repeated circle is the dominant form in the square from the first moment, despite the fragmentation of the enclosure. Everything exists as part of the circular system around the centre.

At first sight, we might think that place Saint-Georges is not the result of a conscious, all-embracing idea. But the arrangement of the buildings around the centre cannot have been accidental. Speaking in favour of this is that the spear-tipped iron fence predates the surrounding buildings. That is how the square was born. And even before its birth, there was a fountain where the statue stands today. The first building of the Fondation was built in 1830, facing the centre, upholding the strict geometric system. This was the predecessor to the present building, which went up in 1873. The relations between these three components - the centre, the circle and the building - may have been consciously planned. The positioning of the next building, the Hôtel Dosne-Thiers (1875), also supports this hypothesis. The three-block complex on the west side presumably formed part of a larger polygonal (probably octagonal) system. This is suggested by the configuration of the buildings. The Haussmann-style block of flats also, if somewhat approximately, follows this polygonal layout. The buildings fitted into the plots between, however, departed from this hypothesized system. We can therefore detect an initial plan that eventually gave way to development ad hoc. The streets that break through the rows of buildings have also contributed to this disintegration.

Place Saint-Georges can affect people in many ways. Some feel at home there. The variety comes over as entertaining for some, infuriating chaos for others. Some spend a long time there. It makes a lasting overall impression on some, while others pick out some favourite details. There is no universal reaction but nobody leaves untouched.

The gable wall of the Théâtre Saint-Georges
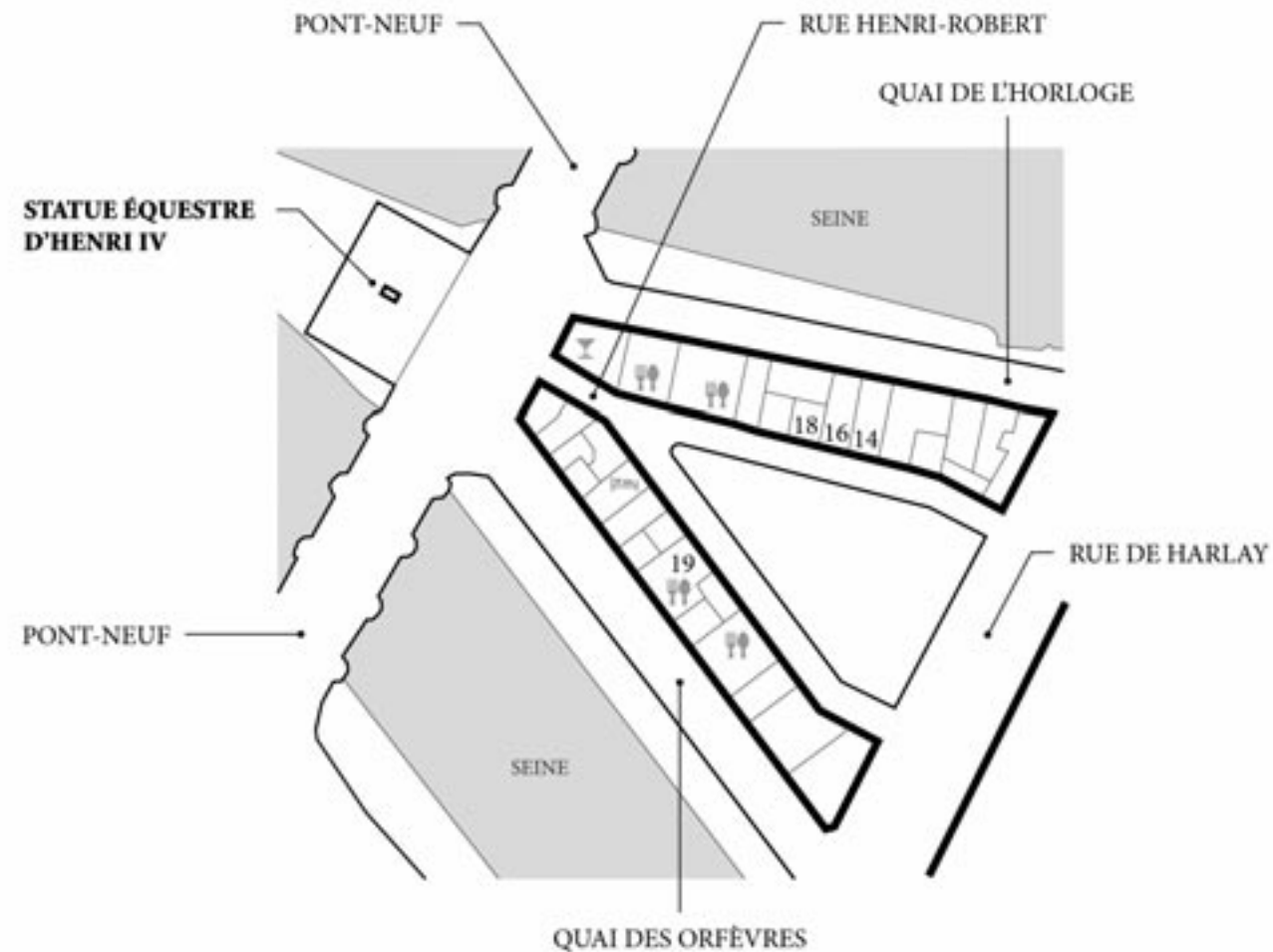
As we approach the centre of Paris - the Roman Lutetia - from the west, we are greeted by the sight of the island between two branches of the Seine, the Cité. The buildings of the left and right quays surround the river, Pont Neuf, the equestrian bronze statue of Henry IV[1] on section of the bridge crossing the island and, behind these, the complex of buildings on place Dauphine. All we see of place Dauphine from this direction is a tiny glimpse through the narrow opening of rue Henri Robert. But the panorama that opens up before us the very emblem of Paris. The square exists only together with these. Everything that makes Paris what it is, at once magnificent and intimate, is present in this scene. It forms the impression in our mind as we enter the square.

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The west end of the Cité was not always so enchanting. The area was a marsh, like Marais on the opposite bank. Nobody looking at that could have had imagined that the land would one day host one of the most imposing squares in Paris. After the marsh was drained, the king's orchard (Verger du Roi) and flower-and-vegetable garden (Jardin du Roi) were laid out here. For a long time, only one building, built for the king, lay on this trapezoidal-plan garden.

As Paris grew, the Cité, lying at its centre, became increasingly valuable, a prime site for building. The two little islands to the west, île aux Juifs-et and île du Patriarche, were attached to the Cité in the sixteenth century. Pont Neuf was the first structure to be built on the west end of the expanded island (1578–1606). This required that the surrounding land be improved. The sandy riverbank was replaced by a stone quay. The "new bridge" connected the Cité with the Ville on the right bank and the Université on the left. The bridge has outlived its name, and is now the oldest bridge in Paris.

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[1] King of France, lived 1553 -1610

Paris flourished under Henry IV, whose urban developments and improvements included several large-scale constructions. One of his town planning projects[2] was the place Dauphine. Henry IV named it after his young son, the heir to the throne (later Louis XIII[3]). Work in the plans started after the king's decision to develop the area in 1607. He entrusted supervision of the project - along with ownership of the land - to Achille I de Harlay (1536-1616), premier president of the Paris Parlement[4]. Claude Chatillon (1547-1616) was put in charge of building. The king applied his usual mixture of financial and aesthetic considerations, and was pursuing his own financial interests in having the square built up.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

To grasp the essence of place Dauphine, we first need to consider the extraneous factors. Our image of anything new always starts from previous experience and our thoughts as we make our approach. In this case, however, the observations we bring with us as we enter are not just a matter of memory: things from outside the square are also visibly present within it.

Immediately striking is the trapezoidal ground plan. The royal garden on the site had a very elegant shape, but the trapezium is actually dictated by topographical factors: the course of the river and the intersection of the island's two riverbanks. This sets place Dauphine apart from every other square in the city. The two converging sides of the trapezium are formed by the rows of buildings running parallel to the Seine. Originally, there was also a row of buildings along the base of the trapezium at the east, with an exit running through the middle towards the old Palace of Justice. The west end was open, without any buildings, and most visitors entered there.

The trapezium layout allows two opposing perspectives. Looking east along the two legs of the trapezium, the view opens outward, ending at the Palais de Justice. The experience of looking from the opposite direction is generated by the narrowing of the space towards the end. In the tapering space between the building frontages, the square manifests allusions to the world of the statue, the bridge and the river. Only when we take these together does the square becomes a full composition.

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[2] Another, built before place Dauphine, was Place des Vosges. The plan for "place de France" got no further than the drawing board.
[3] King of France, lived 1601–1643.
[4] TDuring the reign of Henry IV, the Paris Parlement was the highest court of justice.

The regular geometric form prompts us to seek the forces that shape it. We can imagine several axes passing through the Henry IV statue. It effectively lies on the intersection of connecting lines. One such line runs along quai des Orfèvres, the other along quai de Horloge. The lines linking the statue with the square are more ambivalent, and we might start from either the statue position or the axes of the square. We cannot tell which was the original starting point. The statue certainly dominates and acts as a point of reference, but has a different effect depending on our location in the square or the direction we approach it – from the quays or from the bridge. Everything here seems to be subordinate to the statue.

The square within the enclosure of buildings coexists with this wider composition of the surroundings. Whether or not we see them, we sense and invoke them. The river is among the images in our mind when we are in the square, and we can also hear it. We more than sense the bridge, because part of it is close enough to see. The statue of Henry IV is certainly part of the square even though it stands outside. Strikingly visible in the tapering opening, the statue conveys the strong message, amplified by the perspective, that Henry's spirit is still present: the design of the façades, produced to the king's specification, have endured, despite subsequent alterations; it is what has since been termed the Henry IV style.

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The land was divided into approximately - sometimes very approximately - equal parcels. Each plot consisted of two sites, one facing the square, the other, the quayside. The individual owners had the interiors designed to suit their own interests and needs.[5] Most of the buildings went up between 1608 and 1610, the last in 1620. All the plots, and the finished houses, quickly found suitably wealthy buyers. Owning and living in property on the square was fashionable.

Although built on individual plots, the buildings repeated each other in the proportions and details of their façades. The ensemble of features lined up in long-extended rhythm exuded a sense of ceremony. Each frontage was designed with a three-way division. Ground-floor arcades supported two residential storeys, crowned by a steep mansard roof. It is interesting to compare the two city development projects completed during the reign of Henry IV, place Dauphine and place des Vosges.

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[5] The flats are more modest than those on place des Vosges.

Numbers 18 and 16   Number 19.

The intermediate cornices on the place Dauphine frontages created greater horizontal emphasis, with the repeating verticals of the French windows. A squared façade. The windows were not identical, but followed a pattern of a narrow window inserted between two larger ones (A–B–A). It was a more playful rhythm. The Italian Renaissance can also be detected in the design,[6] but façades of the Henry IV style are more delicate and cheerful than their Italian counterparts.

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[6] Italian masters were often invited to France. They also designed some of the chateaus of the Loire Valley.

South row

The use of materials followed the same scheme as in place des Vosges. For the pilaster-like verticals, brick was used to fill the spaces. This rhythm of colours, alternating red and sandstone, livened up the surface. Contributing to this was the grey/blue slate of the high roofs. The colours luxuriated to even greater effect on the sun-drenched north side. Full of life, place Dauphine was the star of the city. It arcades bustled with shoppers and diners. The grand times went on for a century. Then came a fall. The standard of the shops declined, and with it the milieu of the square. Stylish goods gave way to trinkets and junk, and the shops eventually disappeared altogether. The arcades were walled up in 1874. The well-off inhabitants gradually abandoned the square in the eighteenth century, taking the high-class atmosphere with them. In their place came "poets, lovers, dandies and gawpers".[7]

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[7] *Dictionnaire Historique des rues de Paris.* Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1972.

North row

The atmosphere was still lively, just different. Exhibitions were held, covering large sections of the façades with pictures.

Having retained its beauty throughout the seventeenth century, the square steadily declined, or was destroyed, over the following centuries. The house owners made brutal alterations to boost their income, vandalizing by extension. The dismal process started some time after 1700 and reached its lowest point in the nineteenth century. The wing at the end of the east side was damaged in 1871 and was demolished three years later. This caused a radical change. By opening up to the newly-built Palais de Justice,[8] the square lost its intimacy. In the narrow street, the oversized steps

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[8] Designed by Joseph-Louis Duc.

Variation sur un theme. Arcades disparues..

leading up to it jarred with their surroundings. Additionally, the counterperspective that opened up caused the Palais de Justice to appear in sudden close-up, magnifying what was already a behemoth of a building and degrading the square to forecourt status. Baron Haussmann wanted to go even further and demolish the whole square to fit his new vision of Paris. Through causes outside his control, he was unable to put his plan into effect. Nonetheless, only two buildings (number 16 and 19) have retained their original spirit and external appearance. Rather than being a row of similar buildings spoiled by ugly intruders it was eventually the few surviving originals that stood out by virtue of their rarity.

What still remain are the widths of the plots and the arches, al though the arcades have been built in. More striking, however, is the change in building height. The owners extended upwards, adding storeys. Two upper floors became five. There was more emphasis on the vertical, finishing off with uneven roofs, the complete rejection of what had gone before. Despite the many alterations, the façades still retain some traces of the Henry IV era, in the way the surface is divided, the design of the details, and the patterns. The tall windows have retained their dimensions, just as the proportions of the walls relative to doors and windows are unchanged. The repeated rhythm also persists. The original building materials, the facades of brick and stone, however, have largely given way to smooth rendering (number 18). Fortunately, there have been few attempts at anything fancy. About a dozen that more or less conserve the original era have been declared historic buildings. Most importantly, the most faithful preservers of the time, the two corner buildings at Pont Neuf, are in almost their original condition.

For a long time, the interior of the square was empty space. Later, it featured a line-up of triumphal arch, obelisk and a fountain glorifying Napoleon, but these were all eventually demolished. The only survivor is the statue of Henry IV, and that stands outside the square.[9] Having been opened up, the space was planted with chestnut trees. Like a French garden, they are arranged in military order and provide shade for people sitting on the benches and eating their lunchtime sandwiches. Pétanque[10] players stir up some life under the trees, their balls making a loud clink as they collide. Then there is a game of knocking over wooden skittles with wooden sticks, making a dull sound. Fortunately, there is no traffic noise, because the posts along the pavement make parking impossible. The terraces of the eight restaurants around the square make a visual, and the subdued background chatter of their guests an auditory, contribution to the atmosphere of the square.

A long time ago, I stayed in the old Henry IV Hotel that stood in the square, one of the original buildings. There was a spiral staircase to the upper floors, the toilets opened from the lounges, and there were two storeys for hotel guests. The ceilings were low enough to bump your head on, with wooden beams that reminded of the original. Maybe they were. The breakfast room was on the mezzanine above the portal. One morning, I caught sight of an elderly black street sweeper in front of the window of the building opposite doing an elaborate dance with his broom.

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[9] The original statue was erected in 1614, the one there today is a copy, made in 1818.
[10] A game played with large steel balls, especially popular in Southern Europe.

The next moment, the curtain was drawn and the smiling face of a little girl appeared in the window. They started to dance, the girl inside, the street sweeper outside. Their movements were coordinated, and it was obvious it was not the first time they had danced. The glass of the window was no obstacle. Eventually, mother appeared and drew the curtain again, putting an end to the fun. A few minute later, the door of the house opened, the girl burst out, waved in farewell and set off for school. It was the end of the dance. Today, there is a luxury hotel where the old one stood.

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The change came with the Second World War. That was when the Malraux rehabilitation of France's historic monuments began.[11] This put the life back into place Dauphine. There could be no return to the original, but further decay was stopped, and many of the façades were restored. The standard of housing also improved. The boutiques disappeared, but the restaurants were joined by a bookshop and a hotel. The ruined building on the north corner of rue Harley was replaced by one that imitated the original, at least in its façade. The enormous curved staircase, visible from the outside betrays the building as "new old". Opposite, on the other corner of a square, is a monstrosity of unforgivable brutality.

The atmosphere of the square today is the product of buildings preserving the old, and later alterations. The survivors, though much reduced, still dominate, and the presence of old times is palpable. The components that convey the past to the present are definitive even when in the minority. What takes precedence is not a matter of quantity. A distinctive building, even if small, can stand out and assert itself.

HISTORIC SQUARES
PLACE DES VOSGES

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[11] André Malraux (1901–1976), writer and minister of culture 1958–1969.

RUE DES FRANCS-BOURGEOIS · PAVILLON DE LA REINE · RUE DE BÉARN · RUE DU PAS-DE-LA-MULE

RUE DE TURENNE
HÔTEL DE SULLY

EQUESTRIAN STATUE OF LOUIS XIII

PAVILLON DU ROI

RUE DE BIRAGUE

MAISON DE VICTOR HUGO
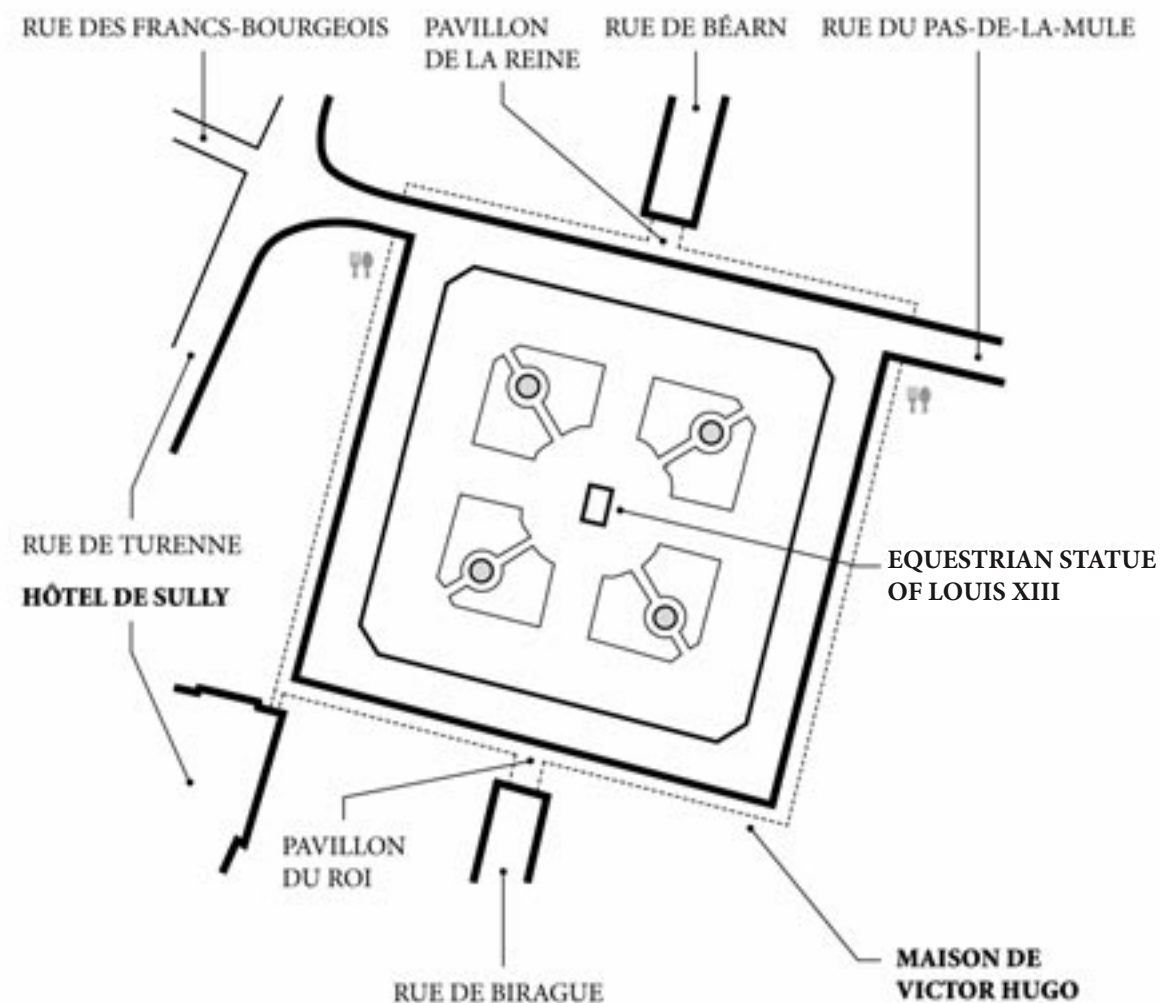
PLACE DES VOSGES

Place des Vosges is one of the most esteemed squares in Paris. Many consider it the most beautiful in the city. The word "beautiful" can of course mean just about anything, but we cannot avoid it when trying to express the real and deep feelings a work of art arouses in us. So what is aroused in a visitor arriving in place des Vosges?

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Lying in the Marais quarter,[1] on the right bank of the Seine, place des Vosges was the masterpiece of Henry IV's developments in the city. The king's ideas were turned into plans by the two architects he appointed, Androuet du Cerceau and Claude Chastillon, and they finished their job in 1605. A palace, La Maison Royale des Tournelles, had stood on the marshy ground towards the north of the present square since 1338. After it was demolished along with its defensive walls in 1565, the moats were filled in and the marsh was drained. The area served as a horse market for a while, and became a military training ground in 1578. Later, the military area became a factory[2] with 200 workers.

Henry IV chose this area (as well as place de Grève, now Hôtel de Ville) to satisfy the long-felt need for a place to hold large gatherings and military games in the city. It was initially known as place Royale.

The first construction project resulted in three ranges making up the king's residence. A fourth range, which closed off the square, was built for the queen. Neither the king nor the queen, however, ever lived there. The other residences were soon taken up by aristocrats, wealthy businessmen and bankers. There was originally a house at the north east corner of the square, blocking they way to the rue du Pas de la Mule, but it was demolished in 1660 to allow the passage of traffic. The arcades built in the first phase soon become fashionable places, where elegant dames were to be seen promenading up and down.

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[1] The word means "marsh".
[2] A silk and wool works founded by Henry IV.

The interior of the square was left empty for a long time. It was sometimes used for military displays and sometimes as a venue for duels between noblemen, until the lethal wounds they inflicted on each other was considered unacceptable and the practice was banned. The park was initially laid out in 1783, starting with a barred fence around an empty space. The square became a recruiting ground for volunteer soldiers during the Revolution, but the buildings remained untouched. Later, a row of trees was planted in a square formation, and fountains were set up at each corner in 1866. A kiosk built in 1899 has since disappeared. The first equestrian statue of Louis XIII was erected in the centre of the square in 1639, but the one that stands there today dates from 1819.

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After the narrow streets of the Marais, with their solemn, grey-walled houses, place des Vosges is astonishingly different. The spaciousness[3] and fresh air of the square draws people in. In the background, the eye is drawn to the rows of buildings with an endless assortment of motifs, bright and splendid colours. It is an arresting sight. The park and the grand buildings attract and captivate. The orderly arrangement of the buildings exudes security, but despite being completely enclosed, we feel free. The green park is a cheering sight, a place to stretch out and relax.

As I have mentioned elsewhere,[4] the first impression upon entering the square is a combination of new perceptions and memories. The experience is a blend of past and present. We make comparisons. But we must ask what the relationship is between outside and inside - continuity or surprise? Continuity is certainly present in place des Vosges, because it lies in a quarter full of historic buildings. The palatial buildings of the Marais, however, are of later ages,[5] and we immediately notice the difference. The quarter also has a different mood. However imposing its buildings, the streets of the Marais are crowded and busy. The contrast comes as a surprise. After the dense, narrow maze of streets, we find ourself in a broad, open, well-lit place. The change from confinement to openness, suffocating to airy, grey to green, is striking. Contrast and change are thus what we feel above all when we enter place des Vosges.

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[3]   The square measures 140 x 140 metres.
[4]   Rue de Furstenberg, place du Marché-Sainte-Catherine and place des Vosges.
[5]   The Henry IV-era *(classique français)* buildings of the square mark it out from the other palaces of the Marais quarter, which are built in later styles (Louis XIII and XIV and subsequent periods). Only the Hôtel de Sens (1475–1519), beside the Seine, is medieval.

A square is usually an endpoint. Visitors get there and stop. In place des Vosges, the objective is being inside it. It is wide open, and we see the whole square in a wide field of view as soon as we step inside. First we explore the park, and then discover the houses surrounding it. We do not get lost in the great expanse, because we constantly get our orientation from the enclosure. Place des Vosges is at once expansive and intimate. The architecture of the frontages that line it is on a large scale, and its multiple repetitions open up a new dimension, conveying a sense of the infinite. Not, however, at the expense of intimacy, because at any time we only see a small part of the whole or one side, foreshortened. Although we are denied a proper view of the whole row, details of single buildings peep through the gaps between tree trunks and foliage. This little slice of the entirety creates a warm, sheltered feeling.

Strict geometric principles govern these grandiose frontages, arranged into nine separate architectural units on each side of the square, but a multiplicity of the details saves regularity from becoming rigidity. The housefronts have a basically horizontal character, with three bands: arcades on the ground floor, mansard roofs, and two residential floors in between. They are fundamentally identical in dimensions (plot width and building height) and design. Standing out from this uniformity are the king's pavilion in the south and the queen's in the north. Their upper floors and mansard roofs rest on higher arcades, so that they rise above the other buildings and impose a hierarchy on an otherwise egalitarian system. In their proportions and decorative elements, however, the royal pavilions fit in with all of the "lesser" houses around the square. Uniformity reigns. The place des Vosges is a balanced architectural ensemble.

The Queen's Pavilion

The King's Pavilion

The pillars and cornices provide the system of divisions on the upper-storey facades. Tall windows and their surrounds and the vertical spaces between them combine to raise the building upward, but do not go unchallenged. The series of four windows, taken together in a singular pavilion, assert the horizontal. Balance is maintained. If we extend our view to whole pavilions, the verticals regain authority, but the pavilions are not strongly demarcated, and each group of nine appear as a continuous row. This delivers the final verdict in favour of the horizontal. It is tug-of-war, but rather than pulling the ensemble apart, the tension enriches the spectacle.

Like the repetition of elements on the buildings, we see the same patterns recurring on successive frontages. The position of the sills and cornices, the protruding stones of the window surrounds, the shapes and divisions of windows, the form of the architraves and the repetition of other decorative elements all have their own regularity and combine to the overall pulsating rhythm. The variety of patterns nonetheless prevents this repetition from becoming monotonous. An observant eye can pick out little deviations among the identities on the façades. Nothing is repeated precisely. The windows have different heights. Some window leaves have three panes, others have four. Most French windows have individual grilles in front of them. But there are also buildings that lack the grille running along the whole frontage. The window architraves are usually straight. In some, the lintel stands alone, elsewhere are elements of entablature. Settlement has caused several elements of the houses to deform over time. It is a complex frontage: definite but not rigid, detailed but holding together, often slightly confused, but not irritatingly. Through all of the vibrancy of the multiple elements, the similarities exude serenity, and this takes greatest effect.

We derive our deepest impressions, however, from the experience of the arcades. Their delicately drawn curves (on the outside) and vaulting (on the inside) make up a motif that is repeated 144 times, and the effect is formidable. There are some differences to watch out for the arcade height, the shape of the arches, the internal apex and the small details, all show myriad variations, but only if we look intently. Each one is so small we can easily pass it by without noticing. Some arcade arches bear the marks of time, having deformed through settlement. What impacts us most is the assertive presence of the arches, standing solemnly under the ornate frontages. Despite the squat vaulting, the arches are well-proportioned. People feel drawn to take shelter under the arcades, and there are several cafés to welcome them.

On top, the grey tile hat, the mansard roof. A crowd of assorted windows and chimneys marches cheerfully up and down. The dormer windows vary even on a single house; even more so from one to the next. The chimneys are also grouped differently on different roofs. The occasional tower adds further variety. The otherwise uniform façade thus breaks out into diversity at the top. But the inhomogeneity is not disturbing. And apart from some minor modification, what we see are the original buildings.

For anyone regarding the splendid colour scheme of the façades, the effect is irresistible. The contrast of bright whitish stones of the pillars and window cases with the pink and red bricks (or painted imitations) enhance the liveliness of what is already a busy surface. The bluish-grey slate of the mansard roofs and the rendered surface of the chimneys bursting out of them are the icing on the cake. Underlining the profusion of colour on the buildings is the green of the park. The colours alone are enough to refresh us.

The attraction of the square, other than the palatial spectacle, is the park, laid out with trees, statues and other structures. The three rows of trees all round, the lawn in between, the geometric arrangement of paths, the fountains on all four corners, are a dazzling and colourful combination. The grass is just right for sunbathing, people sit on the benches to relax and appreciate the surroundings, mothers can let their children run free, there is space for picnickers to spread out their lunch. It is unfortunate, however, that the equestrian statue of Louis XIII, hidden in the central group of trees, is only theoretically the central reference point. We almost stumble upon it as we wander around. Consequently, everybody's attention is drawn outward, toward the grand frontages. This is the effect of the park and the buildings, separately and together.

RUE DES CAPUCINES

RUE DE LA PAIX

PLACE VENDÔME

RUE DANIELLE-CASANOVA

COUR VENDÔME

COLONNE VENDÔME

PLACE VENDÔME

RUE SAINT-HONORÉ

RUE DE CASTIGLIONE
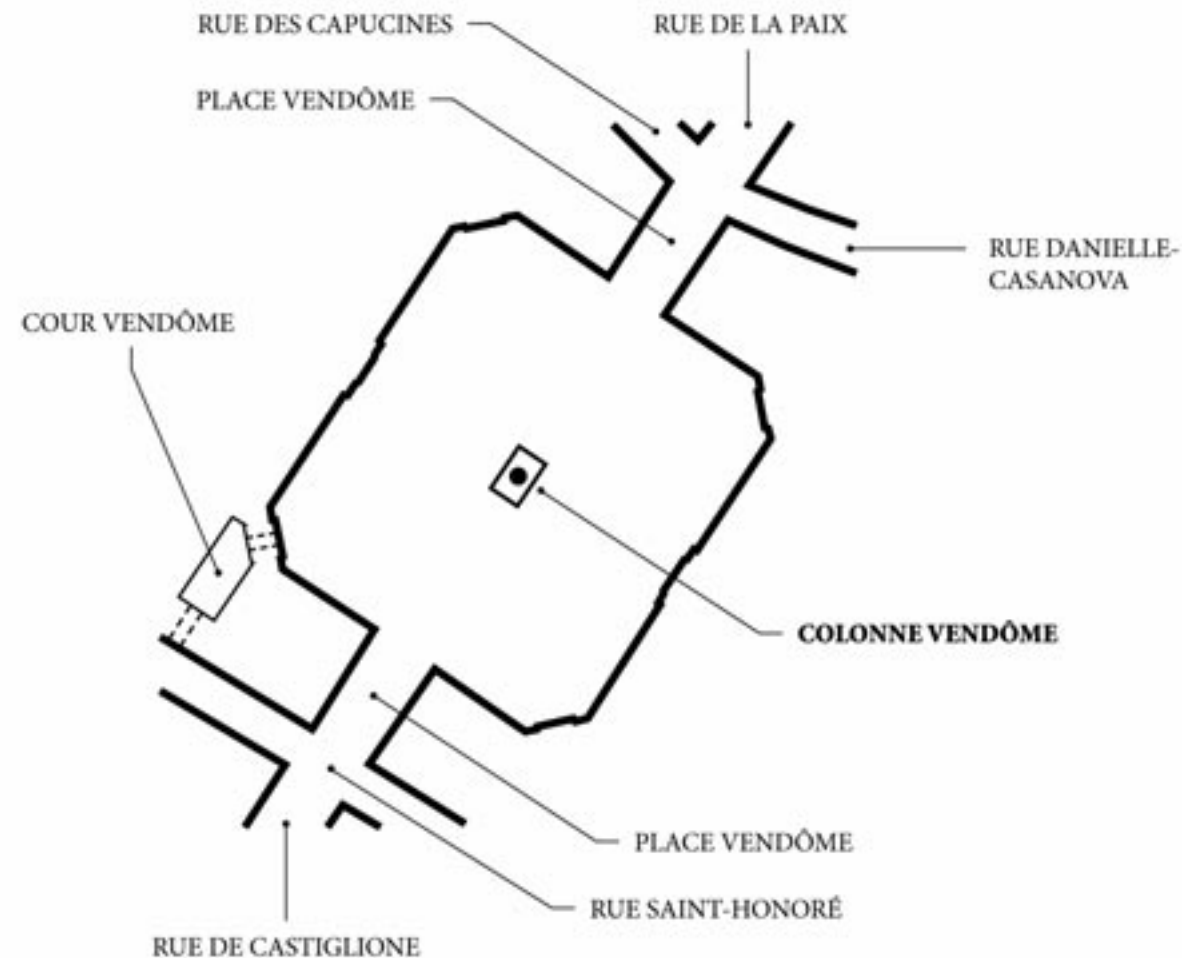
PLACE VENDÔME[1]

Place Vendôme is the pre-eminent square of an elegant quarter of Paris, also well known for its rue Saint-Honoré. Locked in among the fabric of streets, it does not organize its surroundings, has no special place in the urban structure, and is not a point of reference; neither is it isolated or cut off from the outside world. It is open to inspection, but does not reveal itself without effort. Entering it is a surprise, a imposingly grand open square. It is similar in many respects to place des Vosges in that it commands respect, but without the warm radiance. Vendôme is cold and aloof.

The ground plan of place Vendôme, originally intended to be square, has had its four corners cut off to make an irregular octagon. The neoclassical[2] buildings that enclose it have an authoritative countenance. The four cut-off corners are a further refinement to the distinctive enclosure, with six *avant-corps*[3] to emphasize the key points. The square lies on a single street that provides its only axis of symmetry. In the centre rises a single column glorifying Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz. The emperor looks down on the uneventful square. He reigns, but only over a few rank-and-file lamp posts surrounding the memorial.

Whether we come from rue de Castiglione or rue de la Paix or the arcades under the buildings, it is this triumphant column we find ourselves facing. We have to venture in further before we start to take in the surroundings. The closer we get, the less we get a view of the column's full height, and the proportions of column and square steadily change. The gigantic triumphal monument is tamed by the dimensions of the square, and our attention is increasingly engaged by the panorama of grand buildings along the perimeter.

The square is part of an integral unit that includes the two streets that share its name, inherited in 1799 from the Vendôme Palace, which stood there until its demolition in 1685. Despite the gaps left for the two connecting streets, the row of buildings seems continuous. The streets do, however, prevent us from feeling we are in a prison yard.

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[1] Revised version of an article in Holmi vol. XIV, no. 11 (November 2002).
[2] French neoclassical, otherwise known as the Louis XIV style.
[3] *Avant-corps*: part of a building that juts out from the rest of the frontage over the full height.

In a city that since its birth has been continuously renewed, demolished and rebuilt, this square is remarkable for having retained its buildings in their original condition, completely unchanged. The massive, sober buildings, however, have been obliged to comply with changing demands. The façade specified by the king was at the time obligatory for owners and residents. And all of them complied – whether they were ministries, hotels or private houses. This was not much of a sacrifice, because the frontages of place Vendôme are stage sets, pseudo-buildings. Maintaining the homogeneous original design, they actually mask various blocks of flats, hotels and offices. What lay behind the building project that preserved the reputation of Louis XIV was, as for many other projects, a drive for profit: the king had to shore up his finances.

Unlike the buildings, the central element of the square is not an original structure that qualifies as a fortunate survivor. The predecessors of the present column were demolished one after another. Originally, Louis XIV wanted to commemorate himself for posterity in a statue. But history got in the way. The plan for the centre, unlike the façades around it, did not stand up to successive demands for change.

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The area around place Vendôme, the Saint-Honoré quarter, started to develop in the late sixteenth century. After the Marais district was built up, Paris extended to the west. The aristocracy remained in Marais and the Saint-Germain quarter, and the new district was inhabited mainly by wealthy commoners, mostly those moving to Paris from the provinces. Various religious orders also built houses there, such as the Capuchins in 1586 and the Feuillantines in 1587. A hundred years later, when a site was needed to for a proposed square to honour Louis XIV, the choice fell on the Saint-Honoré quarter, where the demolition of the Hôtel Vendôme and the relocation of the Capuchin friary opened up land suitable for a square in 1652. Building started in 1686 and continued, with some breaks, until 1720.

The first plan was drawn up by Jules Hardouin-Mansart.[4] This envisaged cultural institutions, the royal library, an academy and prestigious embassies in the buildings around the square. They would have lined three sides.

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[4]   Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646–1708), architect of the Louis XIV Baroque, otherwise known as the "French neoclassical" style. He also designed buildings on Les Invalides, the Grand Trianon and the Vendôme.

Entrance from Cour Vendôme

From the outset, the great buildings standing side by side were to have façades that were identical down to the smallest details. Even this plan consisted of pseudo-buildings: façades facing the square without buildings behind them. The walls were already twenty metres high when the king changed his mind and halted construction. A new plan had to be made, and the frontage walls demolished. Demolition cost half as much as construction.

In 1699, the king commissioned Hardouin-Mansart again, this time together with Germain Boffrand, to draw up the plans and put them into effect. Place Vendôme became slightly smaller than had originally been planned, and with different proportions. The new dimensions (124 x 113 metres) meant it was now elongated, an effect amplified by the street entering the square on the north and south sides, and through the openings, a more distant horizon came into view. There were now to be buildings on all four sides, and the ground plan changed from rectangular to octagonal. There was also a new entrance to the square from Cour Vendôme, through the ground-floor arcades. The perforated ground floor relieved the feeling of confinement in the square.

Construction was already under way when the king's financial difficulties obliged him to hand over the land to the city, together with the responsibility for construction. His decision also caused a change in the buildings' functions. Commercial interests displaced the cultural institutions, and ownership passed to wealthy speculators. An exception was the building at numbers 11-13, which the regent acquired for the chancellor in 1717; it and later became the seat of the Chancellerie Royale. It has been occupied by the Ministry of Justice since 1815. The building at number 16 was maintained for provincial senators to hold their meetings in Paris. The design of the buildings behind the façade was awarded to the foremost architects of the time: Hardouin-Mansart was joined by Jacques V. Gabriel and Pierre Bullet.

The buildings that went up behind the repeating facades had the most diverse functions and floor plans, none reflected by a single detail on the exterior. This has made Vendôme the most uniform square in Paris. Harduin-Mansart's second attempt was just as homogeneous as his first, but better reflected the spirit of classical architecture. Compared with other buildings of the period, the façades are restrained, with simple ornament. Some parts of it were redecorated during the reign of Napoleon III. The walls are twenty metres high, and the total height of each building, including the roof, is twenty-five metres. The roofs of course had to wait until the buildings behind were completed.

The image of the square is only a mask, independent of the buildings behind the façade. The walls work in two directions, concealing what the buildings actually are, and expressing what lies before them: the royal square. The façades still perfectly evoke the world of the late seventeenth century. Place Vendôme is an emblem of the era.

Corner design – *avant-corps*

Twenty-eight almost identical frontages make up the enclosure of place Vendôme. The buildings are dignified, and the atmosphere of the square is ceremonial. The consistency of the enclosing walls arises from the identity of façade components, in unending repetition. The dominating features are the cornices running all along the row and the succession of arcades, mansard roofs and dormer windows. The reign of the horizontal is diversified by interposed verticals - the rows of tall windows and Corinthian pilasters running up the two upper floors (Ionian on the *avant-corps*). All repeated over and over, but any tendency to monotony is dispelled by emphatic features arranged at highlighted points, notably the *avant-corps* with tympani, interrupting the rhythm with a rhythm of their own, and relieving the monotony.

A closer look also reveals some deviations in the details of the buildings. This is most manifest on the ground floor, where the original arcades have been converted to arched windows and doors. In the place of the arcades, the portals of the hotels and, even more prominently, the shops, compete for attention: advertising boards, display windows and ornamented doors. Some of the arcades remain in their original form and serve as the entrance to courtyards and hotel lobbies or lead through to neighbouring streets.

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As originally planned, an equestrian statue of Louis XIV was set up in the centre of the square. Unveiled in 1699, it was torn down in 1792, exactly one hundred years to the day after the bronze was cast. The massive original plinth and statue, seventeen metres high, must have been a fitting central feature of the square, in perfect proportion with the buildings around it. Its place was eventually taken by a column based on Emperor Trajan's triumphal column in Rome. Spiralling up the forty-three-metre high column are a series of reliefs that relate the story of the Battle of Austerlitz. Unlike the original statue, the column stands apart from the building frontages that surround it. Rather than connecting with the buildings, it reaches for the sky, violating the stage set.
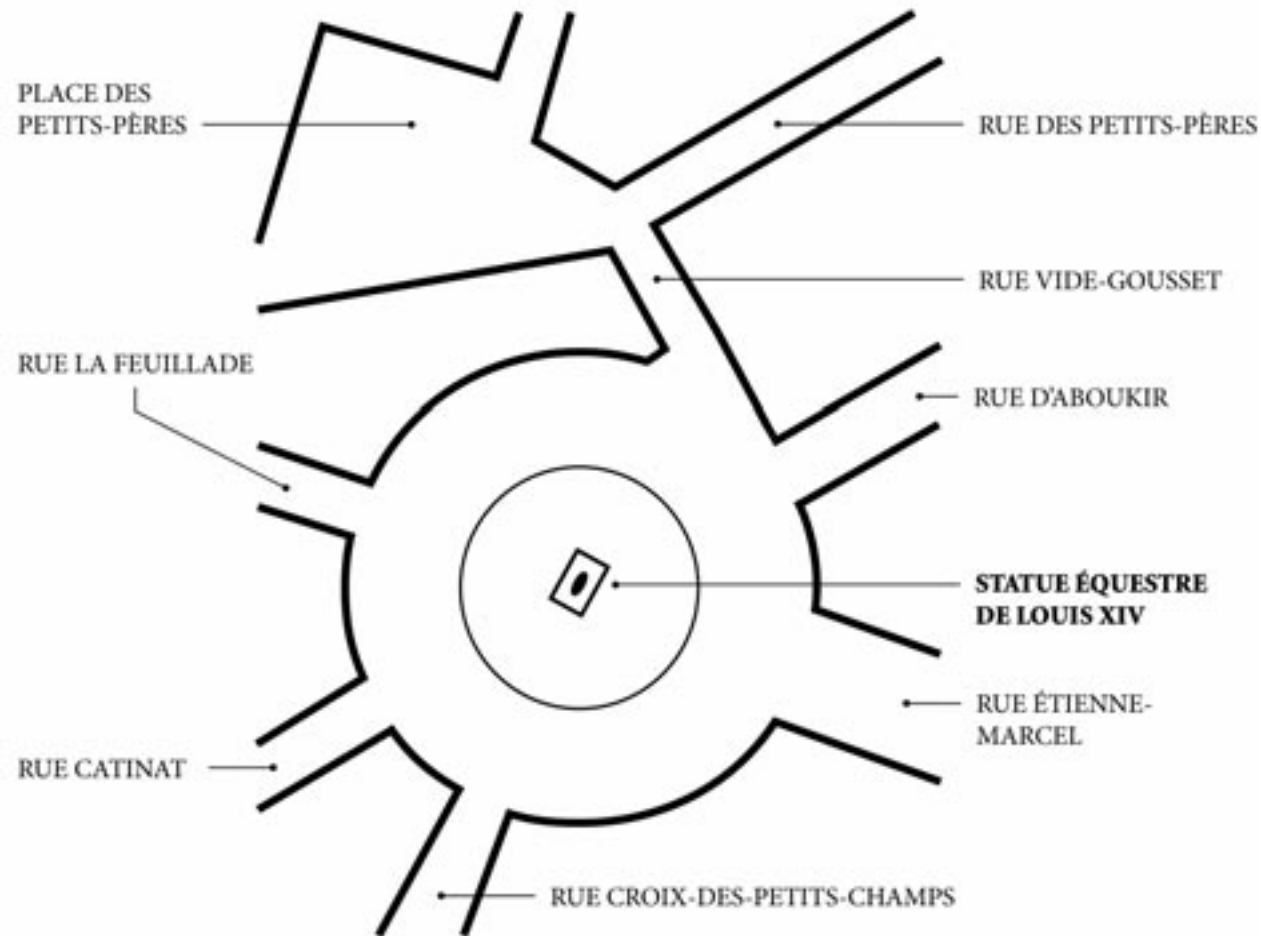
The square has been the venue of a succession of ceremonies and markets through several historic eras. In an annual tradition that started in 1764, for four weeks in August, the square was given over to tightrope walkers, puppeteers and other spectacles. Later, it became a place for such things as aristocrats' betrothal ceremonies, and this lasted up to the Revolution, when popular ceremonies replaced aristocratic entertainments. In 1825, the first gas lighting in Paris was installed on the square.

During the Second Empire, it was used for victory parades. Fashionable shops started to appear during the eighteenth century, but butchers, bakers, and other trades that used ovens were banned from renting space in the buildings, and workers were not allowed to occupy the flats. Today, the ground floors have been taken over by elegant jewellery shops like Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels and fashion shops like Chanel and Dior. Some of the buildings are now luxury hotels, like the original Hôtel Vendôme (number 1), the Ritz (since 1898) and the Hôtel d'Évreux.

The refurbishment of the square in 1991 revived Hardouin-Mansart's original vision. The work also included the installation of new elements, such as the seventy-one Haussmann candelabra. Some of the changes are invisible. The underground garage is only perceptible from as entry and exit ramps and passenger entrances. The square is paved from edge to edge with stone, divided into a grid. It is consistently urban, undisturbed by a single tree. Designed for carriages and pedestrians, it is now mainly given over to cars. Few people come to stroll, more to shop. It is as originally planned: exclusive. Some find it soulless. Vendôme, however inviting its architectural charms, is an inhospitable place.

N

PLACE DES
PETITS-PÈRES

RUE DES PETITS-PÈRES

RUE VIDE-GOUSSET

RUE LA FEUILLADE

RUE D'ABOUKIR

STATUE ÉQUESTRE
DE LOUIS XIV

RUE ÉTIENNE-
MARCEL

RUE CATINAT

RUE CROIX-DES-PETITS-CHAMPS

PLACE DES VICTOIRES

This circus was laid out at a stroke in 1685, following no tradition and without historical precedent. The area had to be cleared of its existing streets and blocks to make way for a statue of Louis XIV. François d'Aubusson, Prince of La Feuillade, expressed his loyalty and respect for the king by erecting the statue to commemorate Louis XIV's victorious military campaigns of 1678–1679. He purchased and then demolished the buildings that stood on his chosen ground. Some of these had been well known, such as Hôtel de Senneterre (built in 1634) and Hôtel d'Hémeryt (1635). The city of Paris also contributed to the purchase and construction. The form chosen to give the statue the most imposing possible setting was the circle. The new buildings put up around the circus were intended as a fitting background for the statue. The prince's motivation was confined to the erection of the king's statue.

There has been a succession of ill-fated monuments in the centre of the square. Martin Desjardins made the first statue, the standing figure of the king set on a podium (1686). It was unveiled before the buildings were completed, and the planned but unbuilt façades were represented by painted canvases. The first statue was torn down in 1792, during the Revolution, its place taken by a wooden pyramid. In 1810, Napoleon had a naked statue of his general, Louis Desaix, raised there. This was demolished after Napoleon's fall in 1815. It was replaced in 1822 by an equestrian statue of Louis XIV, portraying him as a Roman emperor. The memorial was set on an island and surrounded by a wrought-iron fence.

The king took a personal interest in the development of place des Victoires, and his office undertook the supervision of the works. He commissioned Jules Hardouin-Mansart to produce the design. The statue was duly placed in the middle of the circus with buildings that provided a suitable background. The façades were designed by the architect Jean-Baptiste Prédot. The buildings went up in stages rather than in a single project. All of them started as private grand houses and were gradually converted, some with the addition of a storey. During the reign of Louis Philippe (Duke of Orléans and King of France between 1830 and 1848), the square embarked on a sad process of degradation. Windows were converted, and sunshades reminiscent of a penny market stuck out above them. Shops moved into the spaces behind the arcades. Today, all of these sell luxury articles. In pictures from the previous century, place des Victoires is unrecognizable, the façades chaotic.

In recent times, however, most of the superficial alterations have been removed, and the buildings in the circle again appear in their classical form and close to the original condition.

Today, the square is balanced. It has a ceremonial atmosphere generated by the proportions of the space and of the façades. The height of the buildings is one third the diameter of the circus, a dignified proportion.[1] The number three appears elsewhere: the island around the statue divides the diameter into three. The same three-way division appears on the façades. Repetition is the dominant and striking feature throughout. It is manifest in the arcs of the buildings and in the details. Doubling is another feature of the repetition. Nearly all of the buildings have two upper storeys resting on what were originally arcades, all now built in. The shops behind them also have two storeys. The buildings are uniformly topped by mansard roofs. The doubling is repeated on the roof, with mansard windows arranged in two rows, one above the other. Finally, the arcades, the upper-storey windows between pilasters running up two floors, and above these, the motif of the mansard windows, are repeated a total of thirty-eight times. This pattern defines and dominates the whole circus. Most of the blocks are original. On some, an additional storey now runs along part or all of the block, and there is a bastion-like outline at one corner. Even so, the blocks still make up a system, repeating themselves in rhythm, with two identical long blocks and two short ones, both pairs standing opposite each other. Recurring motifs (rhythm) set into a system (unity).

The proportions of the façades lend the buildings a ceremonial character. As well as delineating the top of the frontage, the principal cornice coordinates with the intermediate cornice to divide the frontage into three approximately equal parts. The horizontal dominates. In tension with this are the two-storey pilasters, the upright form of windows set one above the other, and the mansard roof, exerting a vertical force that stretches the façade upwards. These verticals combine with the horizontals to make a square pattern. The principal cornice is echoed in the row of balconies dividing the upper storeys from the arcades. Another repetition. And finally, another doubling: the arch above the mansard windows on the roof allude to the ground floor arcades. The rhythm repeats.

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[1]   *This is only an approximate ratio, because additions made over time have made the roof lines uneven.*

The tangent, rue Vide Gousset

Five streets run into the circus in a star configuration. Alterations over the years have resulted in different street widths. The only major deviation from the system is the rue Vide Gousset, a sixth street running at a tangent and connecting the place des Victoires with a smaller square, place des Petits Pères. his tangential sideshow, making up no more than ten per cent of the length of buildings ranged around the circus, consists of a single-storey structure of a wall and two arcade arches, and the side of a pitched-roof building. The building is at odds with the character of the square, the two arches continuing the neighbouring arcades but with no storeys above. The walls of the single-storey buildings on each side of the street end with a building of several upper storeys and a mansard roof. These fit into the system.

To our surprise, we find ourselves in a courtyard behind low walls. What is this empty space, this "remnant" doing here? Why has it been left unbuilt? Even the two arcade arches bear no resemblance to those of the neighbouring buildings. Is it the remains of a courtyard, a cour d'honneur? But there was only a small building on this area, which could not have had such a thing. Certainly, instead of a "block" we have a gap, a "negative building". Even the connection of the street is surprising, because it links place des Victoires with the smaller place des Petits Pères.[2] It only touches on place des Victoires, while all the other streets branch out radially. Nonetheless, it is this sideshow, this tangential street that sets place des Victoires apart from all other circuses in Paris. For all its uniformity, what sticks in our mind is disorder attached to order, a deep impression of the exception, the irregular.

Victoires itself is refined, cool, but impressive. Emphasizing this are the luxury shops under the arcades and their coolly radiant displays. Except to take a look at the statue, the only reason to come here is buy something in a luxury shop. Shoppers go in, then out, and move on. Nobody just comes to take a stroll in the seventeenth-century atmosphere. It was not always thus. Old photographs show people going to and fro, a place with some life in it. Today, it is a centre of chic, as is the whole neighbourhood. The sense of emptiness derives not so much from the cold stone paving as from the total absence of anything to make a passer-by tarry, apart from the shops. It has not a single bench nor a restaurant nor a café. Lacking any green spaces, it confines the accidental pedestrian, and the shopper, to the pavement.

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[2] Work started on building the Notre-Dame-des-Victoires church on the square in 1629. One street in the area, rue des Petits Pères, is recorded as early as 1615.

Two thirds of the area is empty, or at most used by vehicles passing through. The parking spaces in front of the shops are full of cars and delivery vans, obscuring the view of the ground floor arcades.
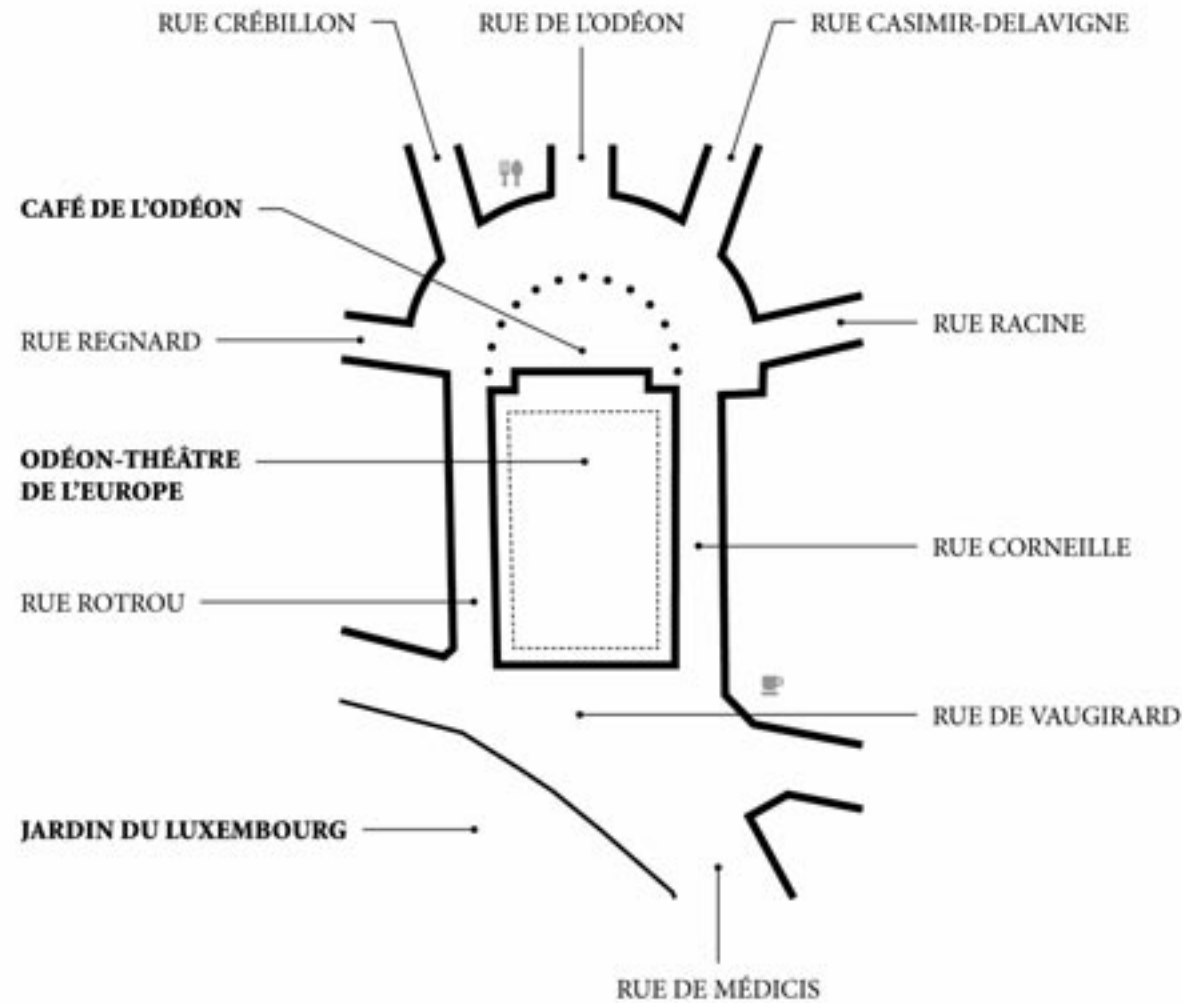
There is no pedestrian crossing on the area around the statue, and it takes a brave devotee of Louis XIV to venture over the road. Close up, the statue commands respect, and we stand before it solemnly. Perhaps the sacrilegious braying of a brass band, the somersaults of a clown or the jingle of an organ grinder, perhaps a guitarist or even a rock band could inject some atmosphere into the place. But somebody whistling or cartwheeling through place des Victoires, even though it is far from a place of prayer, would no doubt be looked on as sac religious. If you want something else, there are atmospheric restaurants in the vicinity and bars in arcade passages, but you are no longer in the circus.

Nonetheless, the coolly restrained, noble proportions of Victoires draw us here, and we look around with satisfaction. The panorama of buildings surrounds the statue like a crown. The rigorously repetitive and rhythmic architecture lends a sense of ceremony to the spectacle. And the "exception" gives a refreshing jolt.

The square has no precedents or traditions and has associations with nothing except the seventeenth century. It communicates nothing about what has happened since (except perhaps the luxury shops). The result of a single decision at the highest level of government, and built in a specific era, it records one specific moment in history. That, of course, accounts for its unity. Its frozen condition precludes any further development, and condemns it to lifelessness. We enjoy it as a photograph rather than a movie. A snapshot from the past.

RUE CRÉBILLON
RUE DE L'ODÉON
RUE CASIMIR-DELAVIGNE
CAFÉ DE L'ODÉON
RUE REGNARD
RUE RACINE
ODÉON-THÉÂTRE DE L'EUROPE
RUE CORNEILLE
RUE ROTROU
RUE DE VAUGIRARD
JARDIN DU LUXEMBOURG
RUE DE MÉDICIS

PLACE DE L'ODÉON

Take a walk south from Boulevard Saint-Germain towards the Jardin de Luxembourg, and you will step out of the shady streets and faded residential buildings of the densely-built quarter and be startled by this broad, semicircular square painted white by the light. The surprise is the shape, rarely seen in a city square. Opposite us, at the straight edge of the semicircle, is the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, one of the leading theatres of Paris. Then another surprise. In a circus, it is rare for the monument or art work for which the space was created to be anywhere but in the centre. But in this case, the centre of the - imaginary - circle is the edge of the "square". So the Odeon Theatre is both in the centre and at the edge.

What draws our attention is the theatre building itself, radiating serenity. The buildings around the semicircle serve merely as a frame for the theatre. The curve of the buildings is repeated in the semicircle of iron chains hung between squat concrete blocks in front of the theatre entrance. This double semicircle underlines the significance of the theatre at the centre. The curve of the buildings works as a counter-perspective. By contrast with the perspective concentrated on the vanishing point, the semicircle opens up the view, widening out and bringing closer the background view, the theatre, boosting its authority.

The main frontage of the theatre, with the entrance, looks north towards the Seine and the place that has been city's centre since the foundation of Lutetia. City traffic has turned everything around – the starting points, the destinations, and the viewpoints. The centre has remained, but today, broad boulevards, avenues and Metro lines, the arteries of the city, all approach the distinguished points from different directions. As the structure of the city has transformed over the centuries, the theatre has stubbornly held on to its place. It was built in a position and an orientation to make the most of its main frontage. But nowadays, what most people first see of the building as they approach on foot – most of them, inevitably, from rue de Vaugirard[1] – is the back wall of the theatre. A similar change has befallen the main entrance of the neighbouring Luxembourg Palace. This complex now houses the Senate, the highest institution of state. Its entrance also faces north, and can only be approached through the narrow rue de Vaugirard, denying a fitting entrance to the palace.

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[1]   The longest street in Paris (4360 metres)

All we see of the building from the street is a foreshortened detail, and even that does not easily fall into our field of view. When official cars enter or leave, the traffic has to be held up. It is an absurd situation. We can say same of the approach to the Odeon Theatre.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The area already a theatrical tradition when the site for the Odeon Theatre was chosen. Nearby, in what is now rue de l'Ancienne-Comédie, the Comédie-Française operated between 1689 and 1770. When it closed, there was an urgent need for a new, large-scale theatre. In 1773, Louis XVI bought Hôtel the Condé - which incorporated the site of today's theatre - and its extensive gardens, complete with fountains and ponds. The spring under the theatre still exists, although it is closed off. The new theatre was built between 1774 and 1782, but did not last long. It burned down in 1799 and only opened again in 1808. A few years later, in 1818, fire ravaged the building again. This time, it was repaired quickly, and the theatre was back in operation within a year. Both times it was rebuilt, great effort was put into restoring the original building. Initially, the theatre had a very varied programme, presenting everything from plays and ballets to vaudeville.[2] Gradually, however, more serious productions prevailed, and actors enjoyed greater respect. Having gone through many changes in name, it is now called the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe.

The building is both dignified and modest. (Its simplicity stands in striking contrast with the glittering chocolate-box Opéra National de Paris [Palais Garnier]; the Comédie-Française, its competitor in other respects, is part of the Palais Royal complex and does not stand out as a building in itself; and the new Opéra Bastille struggles to come to terms with its surroundings.) The Odéon Theatre dominates its surroundings by virtue of its position and its noble aspect, a fine example of neoclassicism. Its mass is balanced, and its proportions are repeated in the colonnaded porch in front of the façade, which is uncluttered by decorative motifs. The main ornament is the pattern of ashlars evoking the Renaissance and the joints between them. We approach the building up steps on to a podium, from which three doors admit entrance to the foyer. This podium also supports the colonnade. The roof of the portico, resting on the eight Doric columns, is surrounded by a broad cornice decorated with metopes.[3] Upright rectangular and round windows are spaced out along the façade, making a pierced frame that highlights the portico and creates a true visual experience.

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[2]   Dramatic production based on a comic situation.
[3]   Square fields on the cornice of the frieze of Doric temples, often with relief decoration.

Facing rue de l'Odéon.

The most memorable motif of the theatre, however, is the ground-floor arcade along the other three sides of the building. Looking from the square, the two end openings of the arcade are dark spaces into which we might thrust our arms[4] to embrace the building. The arcade continues, with a few breaks, along the rue de Vaugirard, opposite Palais de Luxembourg where the Senate sits. These arcades imbue at least a little grandeur into the road that approaches the Senate.

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In good weather, the square, or at least its internal arc, functions as the super-terrace of the theatre café. Guests sit down at the tables not to wait for a performance, but to enjoy the relatively relaxed surroundings. Above them is the cheering view of some white sunshades. Lower than the surrounding buildings, the theatre lets in the midday sun. The square fills with light and life in spring and summer, but is empty at other times of year, when our eyes are drawn only to the long curve of black motorcycles parked beside the chain barrier. These replace the sunshades as the square's visual motifs.

The residential blocks that form the arc of place de l'Odéon[5] were built at the same time as the theatre. The curved row is broken by seven street openings. Three[6] lead away radially, two[7] lie at a slight angle to the straight side of the semicircle, and the remaining two[8] exit at the sides of the theatre. The radial streets all rise towards the square, and to approach is to see the theatre in its most dignified aspect.

The individual blocks are all of the same width and height. The buildings lying along the curve clearly bear the marks of a single architect's invention. Set side by side, they make a pleasing rhythm, but the façades themselves have little to offer. Their standardized design pales along side the works of art ordered by the king in previous ages.[9] Some ornamental motifs, however, stand out as exceptions, notably the arched mezzanine windows above the ground floor, the triple tall windows above the intermediate cornice, and the mansard windows above them.

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[4] Like the muff our grandmothers wore.
[5] The semicircle has a radius of thirty-eight metres.
[6] Rue Crébillon, rue de l'Odéon and rue Casimir Delavigne.
[7] Rue Regnard and rue Racine.
[8] Rue Rotrou and rue Corneille.
[9] Place des Vosges, place des Victoires and place Vendôme.

The monotony of identical windows is broken mostly by shutters closed or left open. And on a few buildings, there is the unexpected appearance of a balustrade over first-floor windows, but overall, eye-catching detail is lacking. Deviations on the ground floor are later alterations. Café Voltaire at number 1 was a popular meeting place for artists[10] until 1956. On the first two floors of number 2 is La Méditerranée, a restaurant renowned for its fish and seafood. It was the building where Camille Desmoulins lived until he was taken off to the guillotine in 1794.
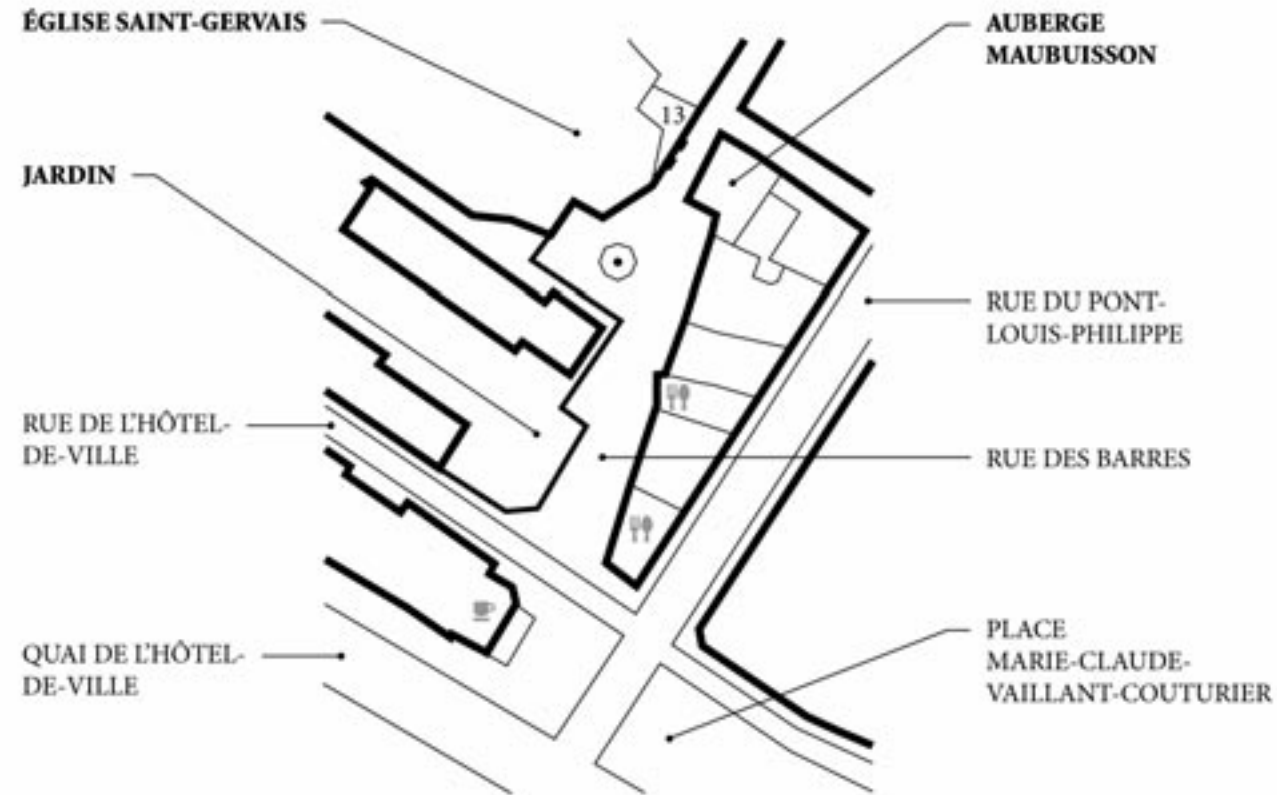
<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The whole square may be conceived as a theatre. The buildings arranged in a semicircle are the auditorium, their windows theatre boxes from where residents look down on the performance below. The empty square, however, provides little action. Nonetheless, when the stage fills up with café-sets, and the guests/actors sit down at the tables, or the theatre audiences come and go, as if part of a performance put on by the theatre, the square and the buildings combine to become an amphitheatre. The theatre repeats itself in the square.

10   Paul Gauguin, Paul Valéry, Paul Verlaine and André Gide.

SQUARE OR STREET?
RUE DES BARRES

ÉGLISE SAINT-GERVAIS

AUBERGE MAUBUISSON

JARDIN

RUE DU PONT-LOUIS-PHILIPPE

RUE DE L'HÔTEL-DE-VILLE

RUE DES BARRES

QUAI DE L'HÔTEL-DE-VILLE

PLACE MARIE-CLAUDE-VAILLANT-COUTURIER

At the end of the Louis-Philippe bridge, on the right bank of the Seine, the traffic diverges. Pedestrians continue along the oddly-shaped rue des Barres and vehicles along rue du Pont Louis-Philippe, which is straight with buildings aligned on both sides in the usual way.[1] On the pedestrian street, rue des Barres, the buildings on one side take a completely different course from those on the other: a straight line on the east side, but a curious zig-zag opposite, where the street is bordered by a garden, a church and some associated buildings. Variously jutting out and receding, they form a kind of "square". These bulges offer themselves as terraces, an opportunity grasped by the restaurants opposite. Beyond the terraces, the space continues into a little park planted with thick vegetation, a space effectively within the compass of the street.

Overall, the street tapers along its length, and there are variations in height. To help pedestrians up the mild gradient, there are steps with long flat stretches between. The playfully-arranged intersections ease the ascent and please the eye. The zig-zag borderline of rue des Barres looks as if a child has cut it out with scissors. The street furthers its aspiration to squarehood by co-opting place Marie-Claude-Vaillant-Couturier, the grassy area where it connects with rue de l'Hôtel de Ville and quai de l'Hôtel de Ville. The park on the bank of the Seine is part of the same area, and the parapet behind it forms the perimeter. The road beyond the square continues across the Louis Philippe bridge.

At one time, the area was a marsh with a mound[2] rising out of it. There has been a religious building on the mound since the early Middle Ages, and the first small Christian church, with graveyard, was built in the seventh century. The first enclosure around the mound, by then named after St Gervais, was erected in the late tenth century. These first wooden palisades - roughly along the line of rue des Barres - were gradually replaced by material that could withstand a siege.

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[1] The street continues along the axis of the bridge of the same name.
[2] Monceau Saint-Gervais.

View of the street towards the north

The earliest written mention of its name[3] dates from 1152, in a document that tells us that the street was part of the defensive line. It later (in 1250) got another name, Moulins de Temple, after the nearby watermills on the Seine. Part of the original fortifications was Port Baudoyer, a gate at the intersection of rue François-Miron and rue du Pont Louis-Philippe. The security provided by the fortifications wall allowed the mound to be built up.

The second line of fortifications, named after Philippe Auguste, was built in 1190 about half a kilometre east of rue des Barres. A gate and tower, Tour Barbeau, was built on the bank of the Seine at the south end of rue des Jardins-Saint-Paul. This defensive wall finally brought the mound into the city of Paris.

Alterations to the first small church of Monceau Saint-Gervais started in 1213. The Église Saint-Gervais-Saint-Protais took two centuries to build and was completed in 1420. By that time, the church was too small for the swelling population, and in 1494, during the reign of Charles VIII, work started on the third church, which took 163 years to build and still stands today. The nave[4] displays the features of Late Gothic, but the façade[5] is resplendent in the French Baroque style. The positioning of the church fundamentally influenced the later history of the area. It predated the street and contributes to its erratic line. The side of the church that touches on rue des Barres is not the main entrance but the east-facing, semicircular apse, making for a pleasant surprise - an unexpected encounter with a fragment of Late Gothic.

Monceau Saint-Gervais was populated very quickly, starting mainly with fishermen and sailors. The simple dwellings of the late Middle Ages gave way to the homes of the wealthy. The whole of the Marais quarter soon became fashionable, and aristocrats started to take up residence in the area in the seventeenth century. The church had a dominant presence in the street. A building that served various church purposes was built in 1499 on the site of what is now number 13. The parish priest lived in a house at what is now number 15, built in 1626. The buildings connected to the north of the church have a mass and form that is at odds with the customary buildings of the city.

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[3] Barres here means "stakes", as in a palisade.
[4] The nave was completed in 1530, and the transept in 1578.
[5] Work on the façade started in 1616, and it is the first example of French Baroque.

They attempt to blend in with the church: on the wall of the two-storey building is an enormous Gothic opening, clearly intended as the continuation of the church. Its neighbour, built on to it, evokes the Renaissance.

The entrance in the low wall is framed by classical columns. The double cornice above, although small, is an imposing sight. The next building (number 13) goes further than its neighbours in its three-storey puritanism. Half of its windows are no more than loops, and in addition to the cornice-divisions, the wall is lumpy and awkward. The change comes in number 15, which is more reminiscent of a tenement building. It has a stucco frontage, but with stone facing on the two lower floors, exuding strength. It bears no resemblance to its predecessor, which was a rectory.

The building at number 12, on the east side of rue des Barres, was a girls' school attached to the abbey and is now a hostel for young people, Auberge de jeunesse MIJE Maubuisson. The ground floor of the four-storey building is stone but the wooden construction of the upper floor is exposed on the back wall and is visible from rue Grenier sur l'Eau. Its origins go back to 1540. The other buildings on the street (numbers 2 to 10) are blocks of flats of between four and six storeys built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They are all successors to grand houses but bear no resemblance to what stood there before, lacking any ornament on their rendered façades. They are almost the ultimate in simplicity. The only exception is the historic building at number 2, which has an imposing balcony on its south façade.

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Rue des Barres links up two streets, François-Miron and rue l'Hôtel de Ville, but only for pedestrians. It is officially a street. How, then, can we put it in a different category? What factors cause us even to think of reclassifying it from street to square? The justification in terms of area and shape derives from the way the street bulges out at some points. The air space is also bigger than what we might expect in a street. But the buildings also follow a line that deviates far from the normal contours of a street.

The factor that truly justifies our reinterpretation, however, is not the form, the framework or the air space, but human activity. The things people do on rue des Barres are just what they do on squares: they come to meet, relax, be entertained, and wander about.

Street becomes square

The atmosphere is more serene than on many squares, inviting you to relax. Life here is also different to life on the street. Here, nothing is urgent. People walking along it stop and marvel at the church that has "dropped in" here, and are glad at the chance of collapsing on to a chair. They can eat their fill and enjoy themselves. So the area has all kinds of uses.

Rue des Barres gets much of its lively atmosphere from two restaurants, Chez Julien and L'Ebouillanté. Their terraces draw people in, and steadily expand to accommodate them. Another attraction is the Café Louis-Philippe, closer to the Seine, a restaurant with a terrace opposite the park. The street might be termed an uncovered passage, or one big, cheerful garden.

Visitors to the Marais happily make their way up the steps. To sit among the guests under the sunshades and breathe the fresh air wafting out of the gardens, while observing people walking up the slope and waiters hurrying two and fro across the street, is an enlivening experience. The back of the Saint-Gervais church also attracts visitors, where they have the chance to go in, but there is also a path round to the main entrance. Both are unexpected gifts.

Another special experience of this place lingers in our memory. It is the road surface: cobblestones arranged hither and thither into steps. The ramps and steps take lots of different forms, in a truly extraordinary layout. The gradients running in different directions mean that there are wide spaces between the steps, and the pavers have had to come up with unique designs. They ended up with a pattern of straight lines and geometric shapes that changes with every step. The closest thing to a reference point is the octagonal island in the bay beside the church. From there, the stone river rolls down its zig-zag course. A step starts out from a wall, collides with another, and continues in a different direction. The underfoot landscape holds attention just as staggered rows of buildings along the street and the vibrant colours of the restaurants. The cobblestones seem to have been laid out by a paver with true artistic inspiration, creating the image that comes to mind whenever we think about rue des Barres.
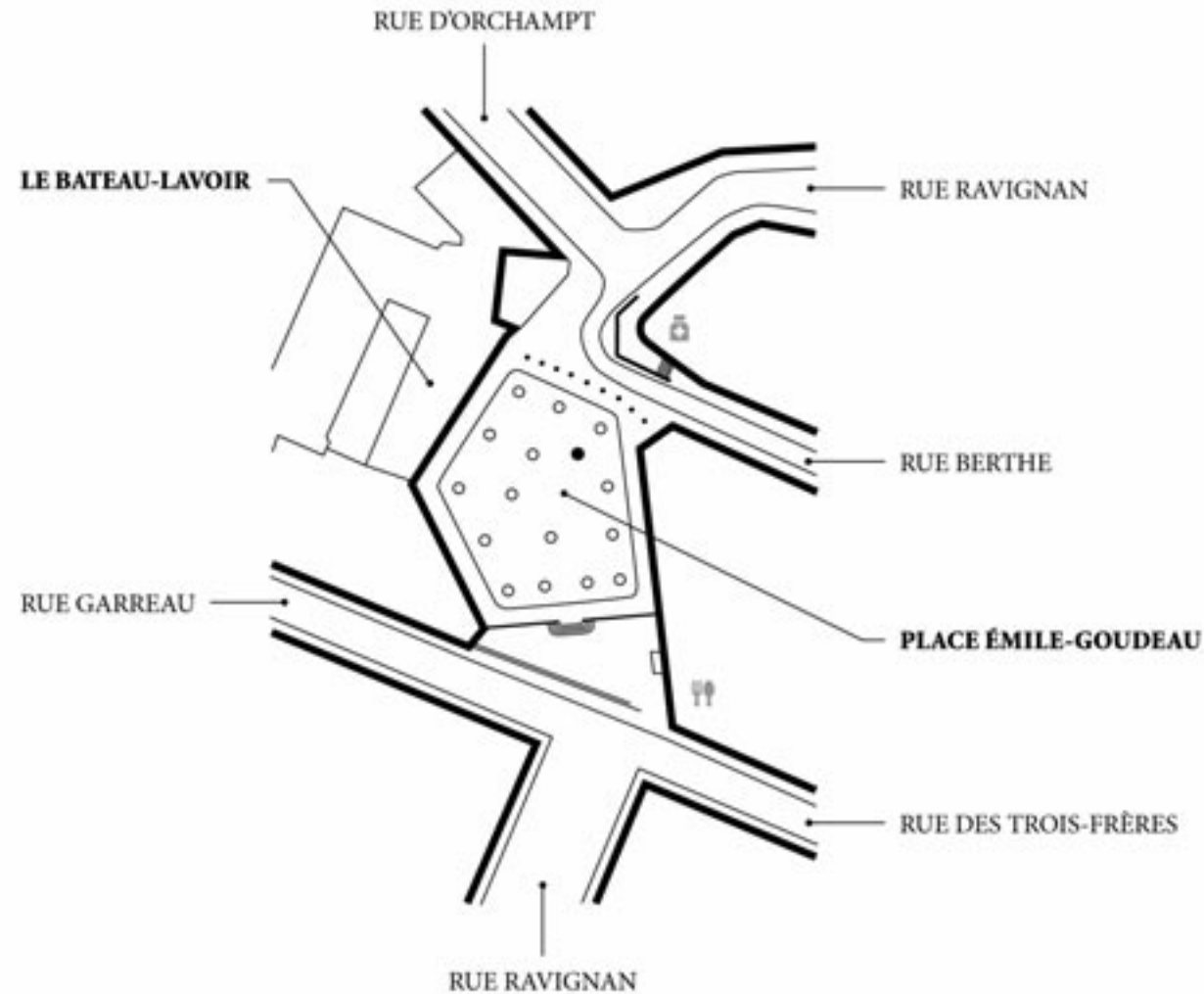
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Rue des Barres is a place determined by unusual natural and built features. Its slope was formed by water flowing down the hill. The hill in its natural state stood in a marsh, and the first human influence was the draining of the land. From then on, the place was shaped by human hand. The Seine had been quietly flowing along its course for millennia when the locals started exploiting it. The river was made to drive mills, carry boats, give up its fish, and be a source of water for those settling beside it. Centuries of historical events joined the geographical features to make the street what it is today. The first settlers fortified their dwelling place with a wall, and their faith with a church. The fortifications have disappeared, but their form lives on in the layout of the streets. The church and its buildings persist, and their sheer existence sets the limits for all the other buildings. Today, the great mass of the church is the dominant feature. Its smaller predecessors also took effect in setting limits to the street's evolution, which has taken its course through the interaction of human and natural powers.

The street nowadays serves changing or expanding demands. People come to the area for entertainment and tourism. Places to eat, previously enclosed in buildings, have spilled out on to shady spots under the trees. Visitors settle on the terraces or search for the church entrance, or just look around. The old street has been taken over by modern life. But there are some demands the square fails to completely satisfy. There are no benches where you can rest without eating or drinking, and there is nowhere to pay pétanque or chess. There is no place to stop for locals who love the square to come together and gossip. It is reminiscent of a private square, deprived of public functions. It is incomplete. With some development, it could become a real square.

PLACE ÉMILE-GOUDEAU

RUE D'ORCHAMPT

LE BATEAU-LAVOIR

RUE RAVIGNAN

RUE BERTHE

RUE GARREAU

PLACE ÉMILE-GOUDEAU

RUE DES TROIS-FRÈRES

RUE RAVIGNAN

PLACE ÉMILE-GOUDEAU

Place Émile-Goudeau[1] may be the most irregular square in Paris. Its enclosing buildings do not align in any known geometrical form. There are spaces between some buildings, others adjoin, but at all different angles, the frontages are of different widths, and the blocks are utterly dissimilar. It has taken shape not through human will or rational thought, but by force of nature. The gradient of the hillside, the terrain, the park and the spontaneous path crossing it are what defined the outline of what was to become the square. Although it is a *place* by name, it seems more like a widened-out stretch of street or just a connection between streets. Up to a couple of hundred years ago, it was an orchard.

Squares are usually laid out where streets intersect, and have traffic running through them. Not so here. Vehicles cannot drive through Émile-Goudeau. Only pedestrians may enter. The rumble, roaring and screeching of vehicles are absent. Silence reigns, broken only by human speech, footsteps and the rustle of vegetation. People sit calmly on the benches, resting legs that are tired from walking the Paris streets.

In the eighteenth century, pear trees blossomed here. In 1792, the orchard of the Dames de Montmartre convent was declared the property of the nation and sold off. On that land, a tavern was built and named after an outstanding pear tree, the Poirier sans Pareil[2] (13 place Émile-Goudeau). It attracted crowds of Parisians, who sat at long tables and dined, drank and danced. It soon established itself as a popular place of entertainment, and in 1811 it also became the meeting place of an archery society with a long history. In 1830, however, an underground cavity caused by the ground opened up under the feet of the revellers, and the tavern closed (underground water was found to have hollowed out the soil beneath). In its place, a rickety wooden building was erected in 1860. By 1880, it had become a meeting point and residence for artists, and later became the Bateau-Lavoir, of which we will have more to say.

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[1] Named after the poet Émile Goudeau (1840–1908).
[2] Pear tree without rival

From rue des Trois-Frères

Over time, the path through the orchard graduated into a street, rue Ravignan. It was transformed into a square in 1911, but not one that existed of itself. It incorporated the widened ends of the connecting streets. The extension at the top end consisted of the area south from the intersection of rue d'Orchampt, rue de la Maire, rue Ravignan and rue Berthe. Place Émile-Goudeau is the continuation of this. Further south, another slightly-sloping area connects the central square to the intersection of rue Garreau and rue des Trois-Frères. This lower extension is divided from the top half by a two-metre retaining wall, and reached by steps. The whole square is thus made up of three areas – three terraces on the sloping terrain.

The whole place looks like frozen lava that has flowed down the hill. The slope of the three sections varies from steep to gentle, and as we walk through them, we have the sensation of freewheeling down to the street at the bottom. The way seems to have been trampled out by someone who was drunk, veering to left and right as he staggered down the street, an impression amplified by the uneven line of the perimeter, causing a succession of wider and narrower spaces. It is this unorthodox layout that makes the place memorable.

Place Émile-Goudeau

Bottom terrace

The middle level is the square named after Émile Goudeau.

From the north, rue Berthe makes an unusual entrance to the first and highest of the three terraces. The slope of the ground around the corner building has been levelled by a curved retaining wall reached by steps. The way this natural feature is handled, with a rustic stone wall and wrought-iron handrail, is an ornament in itself. The ground then slopes gently towards the central area of the square, marked out by a kerb. As we proceed further, the descent to the third terrace is made down a retaining wall, and at the edge of this third section, only two steps are required to reach the streets running along the bottom. So it is a series of parks.

Behind the square, the upper terrace.

Only in the central stretch do we encounter any greenery. True to the principles of French garden design, the horse-chestnuts are planted in strict order. Their thick foliage and makes this middle terrace into a shady refuges that contrasts with the bright open spaces on either side. Set among the trees is a drinking fountain - the traditional Parisian Wallace Fountain - and a few decorative lamp posts. At various points are park benches tempting visitors to linger. These few items under the trees freshen up the miniature park. Finally, on the bottom section, at the corner of rue des Trois-Frères, on the restaurant terrace of Le Relais de la Butte, the square opens out to offer a place to rest for those coming up the hill. The jolly companies at the tables are reminiscent of the picnickers of the past. Even without guests, the white sunshades and chairs against the green background are an arresting sight.

The buildings around the square are a hotchpotch of outlines and façades. The skyline goes up and down from six storeys to one storey, the differences amplified by the sloping ground. Some of the housefronts are rendered smooth with some kind of stucco decoration (cornice, window moulding). Elsewhere there are balcony balustrades and railings. Nothing special. Rather than the buildings, the square's attraction lies in the park and the people wandering around it. Groups of tourists pass through on the busy route up to the top of Montmartre. But it is also a place to stop. Some people are staying at the hotel here, others are looking for the restaurant, and yet others are just tired and want to sit down on a bench or stop to enjoy the view. Then there are people who come especially for the Bateau-Lavoir.

The Bateau-Lavoir (13 place Émile-Goudeau) is an attraction in itself. Visitors get a feel for what it was like to be an avant-garde artist at the turn of the century, and they come back again and again. The art colony occupied the site of the former tavern Poirier sans Pareil. It has a single storey to the front and two storeys to the back, and was built in 1860 as a piano workshop. Artists started to occupy the place in 1880, and by the end of the nineteenth century it was the home and studio of avant-garde artists that included Modigliani and Picasso. It was the birthplace of Cubism. As well as being a home for artists, the house became a meeting place for writers, poets and journalists, a kind of unofficial club. It was christened Bateau-Lavoir, or "laundry boat" by Max Jacob, because it had the shape of a boat and there was a constant puddle under the single water tap that served all of the rooms. The building burned down in 1970, and only the frontage survived. A new building was put up behind the refurbished frontage in 1978. It has a window display of objects that tell us about the artists of the Bateau-Lavoir, and their life and times. The residents are still artists, and several Hungarians have stayed and worked there, including Tibor Csernus, Katalin Sylvester and Endre Rozsda. The smooth surface of the refurbished façade hides a colourful past and present. The smallest, lowest building on the square, it keeps its secrets. It is not hard to see why the avant-garde artists of the time chose this irregular square on the slopes of Montmartre as a place to live and work. Unorthodox artists needed unorthodox surroundings.
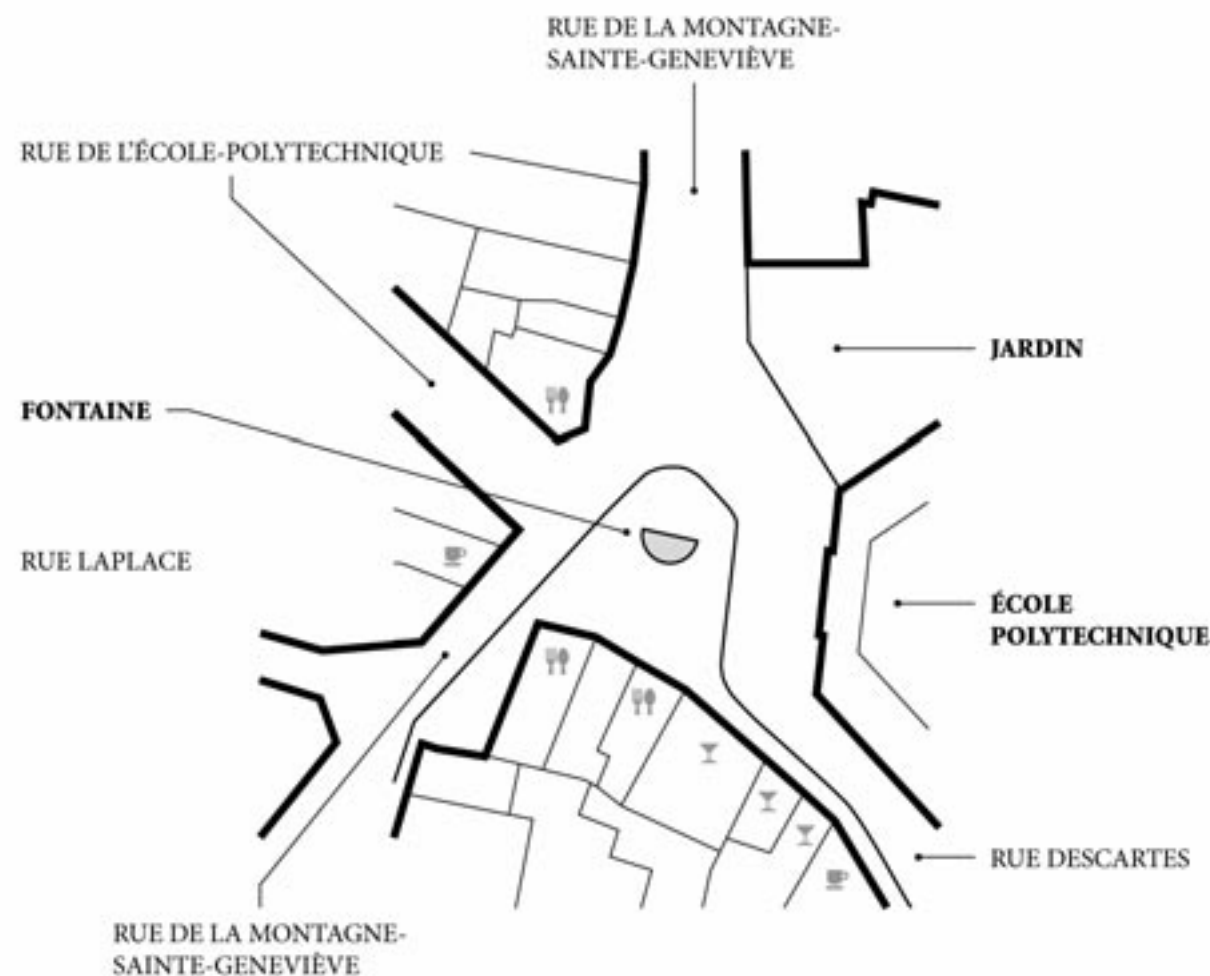
Unlike the closed geometrical regularity of the usual square, the outline of this place is open at the north and south ends, at the top and bottom of the slope. A half-square. Open in two directions, it is nonetheless held in the pincers of the buildings along the other two sides, keeping in the atmosphere of the past.

The square has preserved the past for us. The slope persists, but the land has been terraced. The path has melted into the square, or transformed into the confluence of streets. The park is still dominant, and although the trees have changed, their leaves keep the square in shade just as they did a hundred years ago.

The den of artists and revellers is just a memory, but the tourists keep up a Bohemian atmosphere on the restaurant and café terraces. The view has changed as the buildings have been built higher, but the line of the square continuing along rue Ravignon still presents a grand Parisian panorama.

STREET OR SQUARE?
PLACE JACQUELINE-DE-ROMILLY

RUE DE LA MONTAGNE-
SAINTE-GENEVIÈVE

RUE DE L'ÉCOLE-POLYTECHNIQUE

JARDIN

FONTAINE

RUE LAPLACE

ÉCOLE
POLYTECHNIQUE

RUE DESCARTES

RUE DE LA MONTAGNE-
SAINTE-GENEVIÈVE

PLACE JACQUELINE-DE-ROMILLY[1]

The square is marked out by the confluence of three streets – rue de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, rue Descartes and rue de l'École Polytechnique. As they widen out, they create a generously-dimensioned space, with a visual connection to another nearby street, rue Laplace.[2] The first two streets, and the square, lie along the route of the road the Romans built to Rome via Lyon. The land was owned by the abbey of Sainte-Geneviève after the end of the twelfth century, and the monks built their monastery here and laid out the cemetery of Saint-Étienne du Mont.[3] The streets were first mentioned in charters in the thirteenth century. The Philippe Auguste wall, built between 1200 and 1215, ran near the square, at the south end of rue Descartes. The presence of the wall encouraged building on the area. The streets that pass through the square are of medieval origin, and most of the buildings are more than a hundred years old. The whole of the surroundings have retained their old, traditional feel.

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From the north, we reach the square on the hillside via rue de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, passing buildings that evoke a nineteenth-century atmosphere. As we emerge from the narrow street into the square, we have a moment of euphoria. To our surprise, the road is split down the middle. The several-storey blocks of flats opposite block off the way forward. Rather than simply closing it off, they bulge in an arc that protrudes into the square, splitting the hitherto straight street into a y-shape. The windows of the buildings within the branches of the fork afford a magnificent view of the surroundings. The sight of the convex figure as we enter the square, however, causes our attention to diverge rather than concentrate on the centre. It is a wide field of view. The block of buildings is like an amphitheatre in reverse. The elevated position also makes for a breathtaking view from the ground-floor restaurants. Those proceeding upwards and in need of a short rest get their reward: the inviting terraces of eight places to eat and drink on the square – Les Pipos,[4] Le Village, Kaza Maza, La Méthode (and its extension, L'Annexe), Le Petit Café, Hurling Pub and La Table de Geneviève. This is a lively place. The cafés are crowded.

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[1] Jacqueline de Romilly (1913-2010), French writer
[2] Pierre Simon Laplace (1749–1827), French scientist
[3] Part of the cemetery was where the building at 65 rue de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève now stands.
[4] The old nickname for university students.

View of the square from rue Des Cartes.

The fork presents a choice for continuing our journey. Left or right? Should we continue upwards along rue Descartes or rue Saint-Geneviève? Both wind their way up to the top, but they give different experiences on the way.

The outline of the square is somewhat confused, a broken polygonal enclosure that has no geometrical classification. As we look round, nothing is repeated, certainly not the size and shape of the buildings. Each of the streets enters the square in its own individual way. Looking from the square, they approach at different angles and have different widths and gradients. The blocks of buildings between the openings all make different angles with their neighbouring streets. Every corner is different. Right, acute, obtuse, or indefinite angle, they are all there. This directional anarchy makes for bizarrely configured blocks.

The haphazardness of the square is increasingly palpable as we approach the centre. Opposite the multi-storey blocks on the west side, the east side is nearly empty. We can immediately identify and distinguish the three main constituents of the square's outline. Opposite us are the buildings in a convex row. To the west and north are five- and six-storey buildings, but rather than a convex arrangement, they mark out the perimeter in a zig-zag of straight lines. The multi-storey buildings along the enclosure - a mixture of old (nineteenth century) and new - make a coherent impression, despite their differences. All have light-coloured rendered facades with very little ornament and tall windows, some with French windows and railings.

The Y-shaped street with a convex row of buildings at the fork

Opposite, on the east side, stands a solitary building, joined to a park. Its silhouette is the square's main attraction. With three entrance portals, this two-storey building[5] guards over the square like a fort, but it has no military associations. It used to be the main entrance to a university. Above its great central portal is the inscription ÉCOLE POLYTECHNIQUE.[6] In the Middle Ages, there were three schools on the site, one of which, the renowned Collège Navarre,[7] was founded in 1304. The other highly reputed school was the Collège de Boncourt, at 21 rue Descartes.

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[5] At 5 rue Descartes.
[6] The École Polytechnique was founded in 1794, but was moved to the rue Descartes area in 1805.
[7] Only the wealthiest families could afford to send their children there.

Later, that was where the first real Parisian theatre held its performances. The university was moved to Palgaiseau, to the south of Paris, in 1976. Most of the buildings there were demolished to make way for new ones, and only a few fragments remain for posterity.

The main building connects at each side to a two-storey building, set at an obtuse angle. These wings, with their thick walls and small, loophole-like windows, look as if they belong to a prison rather than a university. Overall, it is a monumental structure reminiscent of a city gate. Above it is a parapet with medallion reliefs of great scholars. Behind and beside it is a courtyard and garden on the site of the demolished buildings. A wrought-iron fence continues the line of the façade facing the square.

Such a combination of a great architectural mass and empty space is rare in an urban environment. The ensemble is the perfect foil to the residential buildings opposite. The two sides of the square are locked in a permanent spat. A hotchpotch of a square, knocked out of balance.
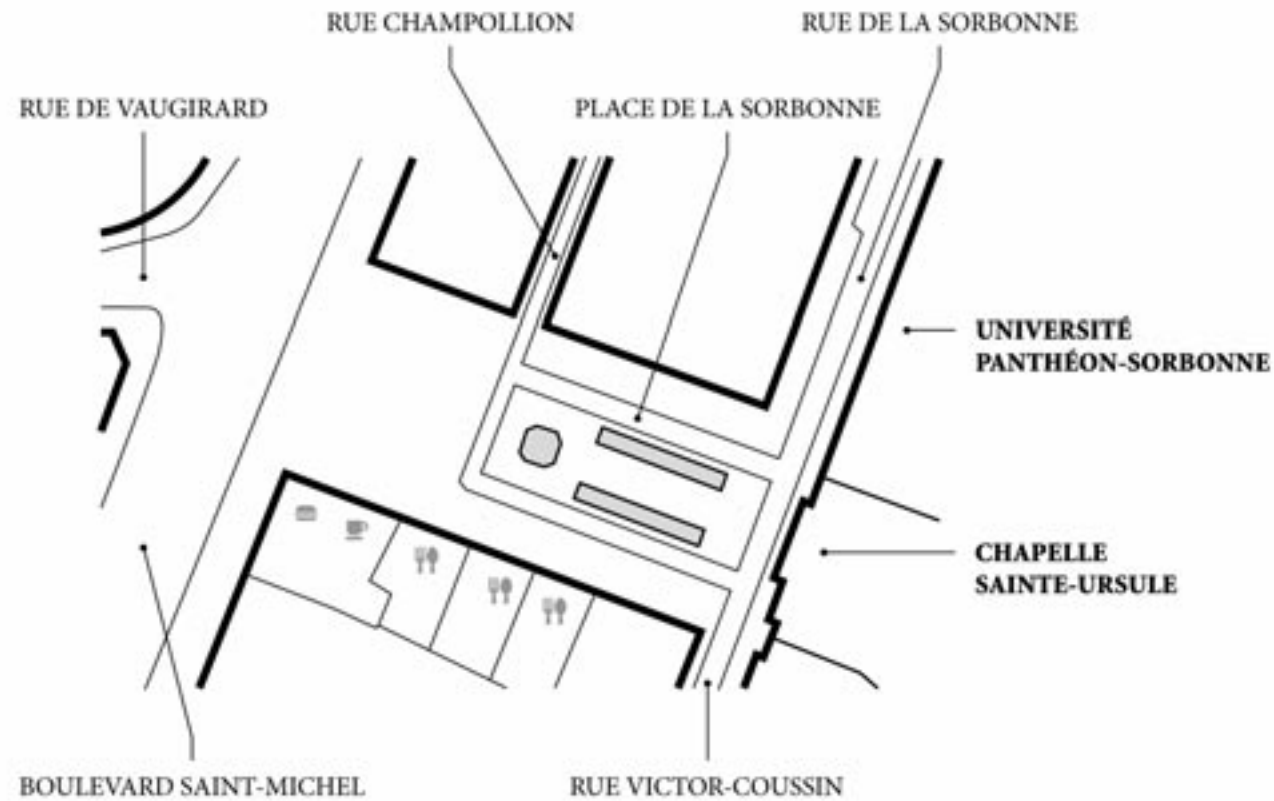
The semicircular island with low stone wall and lion-head fountain in the middle has insufficient presence to organize the square around it. But at least it is there, the only central component, and takes on some emphasis from the blue-painted wrought-iron fence running along the top of the wall.

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The outline of the square seems capricious and inconsistent from the first glimpse. The square takes its character from a juxtaposition of unrelated items. But there are reasons for its ad hoc nature: the terrain (lying on a slope), human demands (student quarter, area popular with tourists), preservation of the past (Roman road, university). The interaction of mutually contradictory factors have resulted in a curiously amorphous form. The very oddness of this little square attracts people looking for something different.

STREET OR SQUARE?
PLACE DE LA SORBONNE

RUE CHAMPOLLION

RUE DE LA SORBONNE

RUE DE VAUGIRARD

PLACE DE LA SORBONNE

UNIVERSITÉ
PANTHÉON-SORBONNE

CHAPELLE
SAINTE-URSULE

BOULEVARD SAINT-MICHEL

RUE VICTOR-COUSSIN

PLACE DE LA SORBONNE

On any day of the week, Place de la Sorbonne throngs with visitors. Some are students of the educational establishments in the vicinity; the rest are Paris-loving tourists. The students sit on the stone benches around the fountains; the tourists mostly in the café terraces. They come across all kinds of squares and streets as they walk along boulevard Saint-Michel. They can peer into Luxembourg Park, with its flower beds, lawns, avenues, and palace. Then they come to the broad rue Soufflot, with the monumental Panthéon at its far end. The next street, rue des Écoles, leads to the main entrance of the city's most famous university, the Sorbonne. Then comes the grand boulevard Saint-Germain, one of the main thoroughfares of Paris, carrying a constant flood of cars. All of these connections are in a constant buzz of movement.

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Place de la Sorbonne is different. Looking from boulevard Saint-Michel, it makes a shallower recess than these others. At the far side of the square we see a church that immediately calms the mood. We welcome the quiet after the busy, throbbing boulevard Saint-Michel. Enhancing the sense of peace are some soft sounds: the splash of the fountains, the occasional musical performance,[1] and the murmur of conversation. Even the few taxis that venture here pass through quietly on their way to the hotel entrance beside the church. The lazy motion of the car disturbs nobody. The tourists traversing the boulevard stop for a moment, some wander in, others keep going.

It is the quiet that attracts, but the spectacle that detains. We are struck most of all by the handsome façade of the Sorbonne chapel, the Chapelle Sainte-Ursule. The pleasing proportions of place de la Sorbonne the square ground plan, an elongated rectangle,[2] also contribute. Reinforcing the long axis are some parallels: the buildings lining the two sides, the rows of trees in front of them and the fountains lined up beside them. Together with this, like courtiers standing against the wall at a royal reception, they usher in the visitors. It is like a cour d'honneur, and even though the main entrance of the chapel opens on to the interior courtyard of the university, it plays the part of a grand forecourt with aplomb. It is only half a square, however, because after leading us in, it turns out be incomplete, lacking a closure along the fourth side. Perhaps it is more of a street? Certainly not a cul-de-sac, because it has a continuation, a way out. Perhaps it is neither. Or something of both?

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[1] Provided by an ensemble of university students.
[2] 72 x 35 metres.

The central, open part of the square provides a good view of the ornamental façade of the church. There is nothing to interrupt the viewer's gaze, no conspicuous object on the approach road that might get in the way. There is a danger of tripping, however, because the fountain bowls are under eye height. Good for looking around, not so good for a stroll. The rise of the ground also enhances the view, the height making the chapel façade all the more imposing. At the side, the water spraying from the fountains casts a mysterious veil over the scene. The only elevated object on the square is the statue of Auguste Comte,[3] but that stands on the side that opens out towards the boulevard. We have a great scholar to usher us into the square.

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The chapel is the great experience of the square. A succession of *collèges*, providing education at various levels, were set up what is now the area of the Sorbonne starting in the twelfth century. They were merged to create first the Petit Sorbonne (later called Collège de Calvi) and then the Sorbonne university. At the same time, the *maisons* were built for the students in the Quartier Latin. Robert de Sorbon[4] merged the *collèges* in the area in 1271, including the one already bearing his name, Collège de Sorbonne. The original Gothic chapel, whose foundation stone was laid in 1326, was demolished together with the old Sorbonne buildings by Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1647), chief minister to Louis XIII,[5] in 1629.

Richelieu built up the new Sorbonne between 1635 and 1642.[6] The university's new church, however, was completed some years later (in 1653). Richelieu planned the Chapel of St Ursula as a monument to himself.

The architect, Jacques Lemercier,[7] designed the building in the style that was current in the reign of Louis XIII.[8] Built on the site of the demolished Collège de Calvi, it is a cruciform church with a dome at its centre. The entrance from the square lies in the axis of the nave and leads to the space under the dome.

The church façade is a continuation of the university's, lying in the same plane, but the difference between the buildings is striking. Set beside the serene countenance of the chapel, the university seems lumpy and awkward.

The church façade takes shape in stages as we approach. We get different impressions from different distances. From afar, the dome rising behind the tympanum looks like an ceremonial soldier's helmet plonked on top of the chapel. Closer up, the dome is no longer visible and the even-tempered, finely-wrought façade takes on its real beauty.

Dominating the lower level are six Corinthian columns. They frame the entrance portal and support the cornice and its parapet. The composite pilasters above, also six in number, support the crowning tympanum. Between the pilasters are two female figures holding the famous clock in a large niche, flanked by two smaller niches containing statues of saints. Although the robust cornice above the lower level weighs down on the window architraves, the load does not seem oppressive, because the lower level elevates and stretches the whole building. The tympanum is a fitting crown on a building that is the masterpiece of Early Baroque Parisian churches. Its façade has a gracefulness and geniality that set it apart from what many consider to be its precursor – the Chiesa di San Carlo ai Catinari in Rome – and from many of its contemporaries. The workmanship of the details (column capitals, scrolls, niches, tympanum) betray the mastery of the stonemasons. The whole is executed with a delicacy reminiscent of a jewellery box.

Unlike the church, which has stood here unchanged since it was built, Richelieu's university building has long since been demolished. The neoclassical edifice that stands in its place today was built to plans by Henri-Paul Nénot between 1883 and 1891. Despite its somewhat awkward appearance, the university passes off beside the seventeenth-century chapel, and only a tiny slice of it on each side is visible from the square. Richelieu intended the chapel as his own mausoleum, but he was an unpopular figure, and his remains were alternately been removed and returned upon changes of regime. Today, his skull is held in the church. After secularization, the chapel was taken away from the church and has been used for various state purposes since 1906.

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[3] Auguste Comte (1789–1867), French philosopher, the "father of sociology".
[4] Robert de Sorbon (1201–1274), theologian, chaplain and confessor to Louis IX.
[5] King of France, lived 1601–1643.
[6] The new Sorbonne incorporated the Collège de Calvit and the Collège des Dix-Huit.
[7] Jacques Lemercier (1585–1654), French architect.
[8] The Jesuit architecture of the French Early Baroque, also known as the French neoclassical or Louis XIII style.

Place de la Sorbonne was laid out in 1639, as part of the redevelopment of the university. The site had previously been a street, rue au Corbeau, which connected with rue Saint-Jacques. The square is bounded by rue de la Sorbonne and rue Victor Cousin to the east, boulevard Saint-Michel to the west, and – mostly nineteenth-century – blocks of flats to the north and south, some from the 1800s.[9] The square was reconstructed in 1980. Silver limes were planted in place of the old trees. Beside them, in the upper section of the square, the columns of water sprouting out of the pools are watery echoes of the trees beside them. Approximately in the centre, near the axis of the narrow rue Champollion that runs into the square from the north is an octagonal pool. The jet of water rising upwards here is a kind of reference point for the square. The cobbled street is broken into a grid of square sections conforming with the terrain. Underground, another invisible surprise awaits us: the remains of two houses from the first century discovered in an excavation in 2000.

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9   Numbers 3, 3b and 5 are from 1838. The building spanning number 2 to 6 was originally a collège, as was number 7.

View from boulevard Saint-Michel

The square was a place of ferment during the student demonstrations of May 1968. On 10 May, the "night of the barricades", the students clashed with police here. The demonstrations resulted in a reorganization of university education. Under the reform, the university was divided into thirteen sections. The central administration is now accommodated the old Sorbonne building, which also hosts the Panthéon-Sorbonne, also known as Sorbonne I. The university is still a place of student revolt, and the starting point for demonstrations.

The square is a place many people come to visit in Paris. People stop to listen to the Baroque music. Echoes. Resonance with the Early Baroque chapel. Others sit on the edges of the pools reading or just listening to the play of the water. The concrete rim does not make a comfortable seat, nor was it intended to.
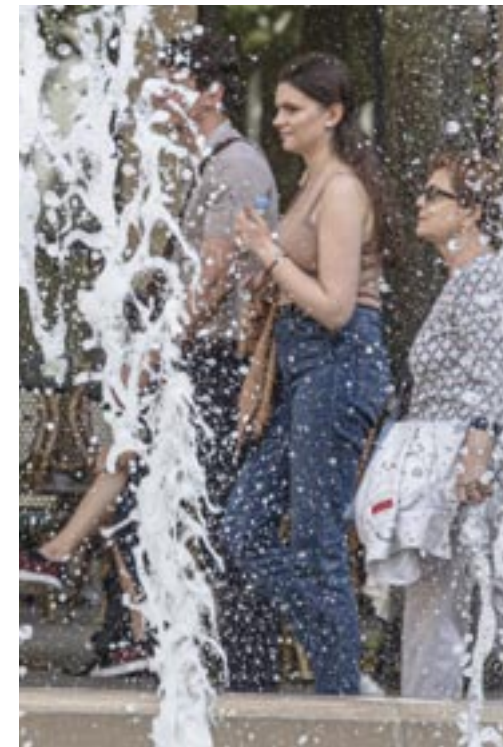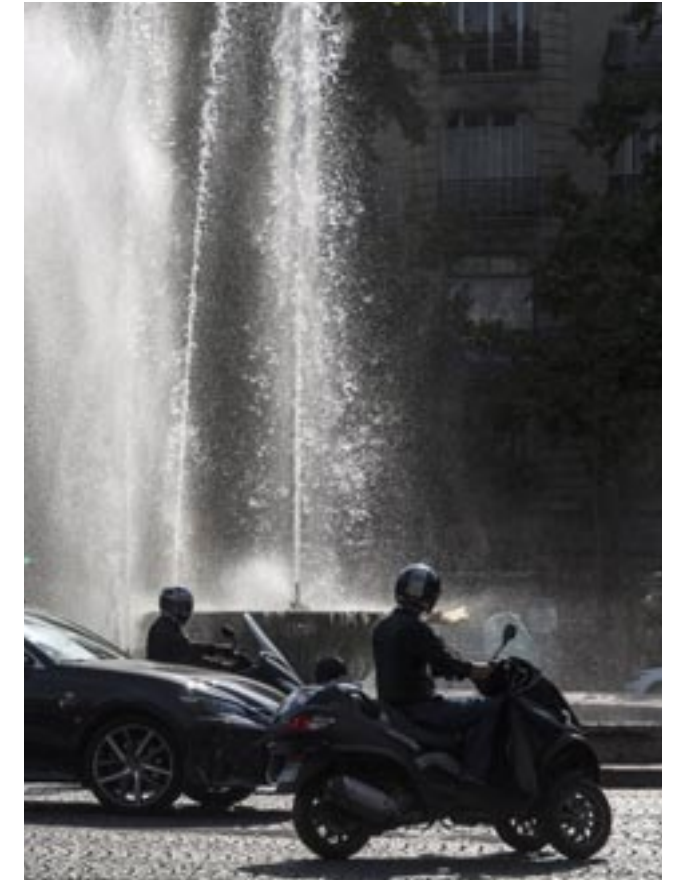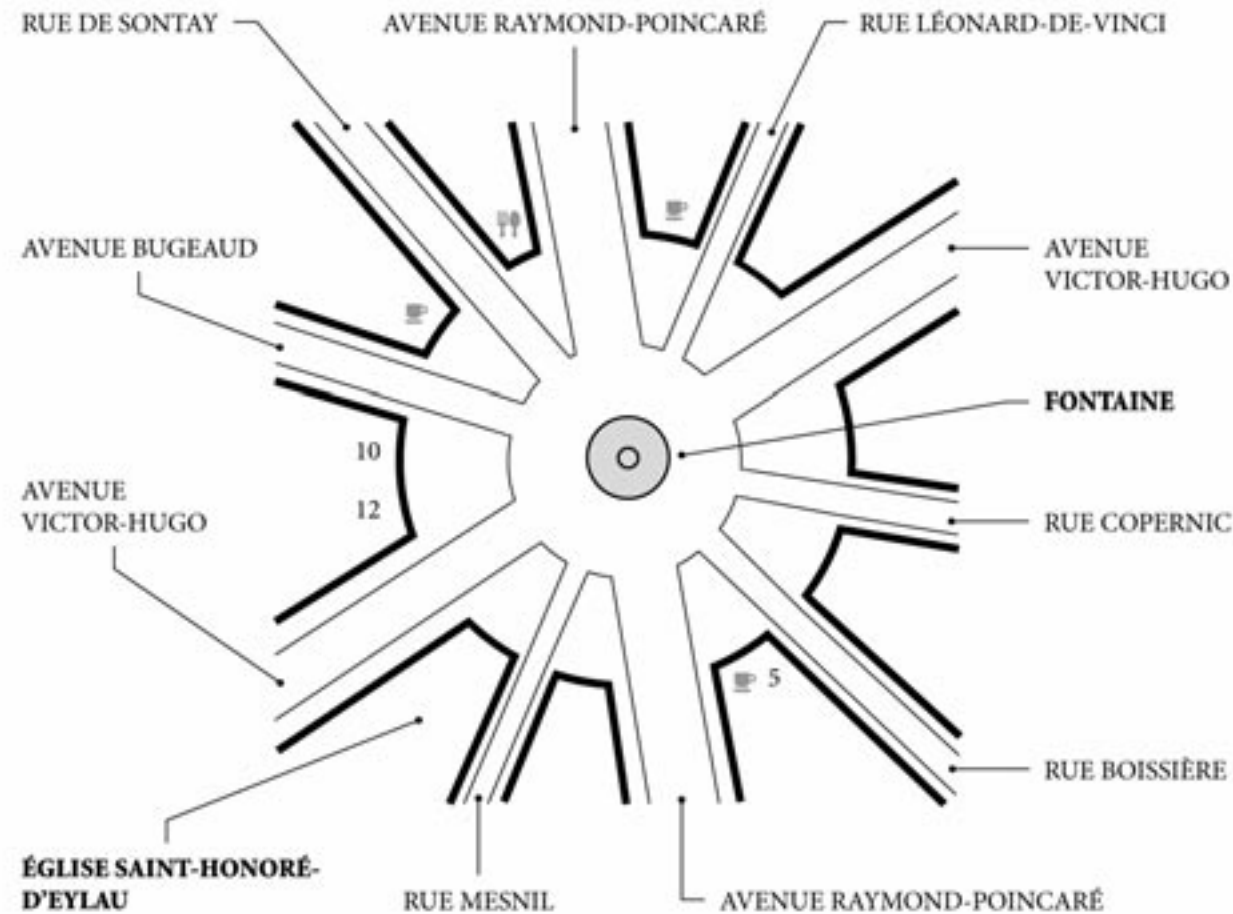
Some just wander about, others make for one of the cafés and restaurants that form an unbroken row[10] along the south side. There are five to choose from in this short stretch.

It is a matter of taste and wallet. People sit in the café watching passers-by, and vice versa. Theatre. The entertainer is the entertained. Some of the terraces have encroached on to the middle area of the square. The sun does not shine on them, but the sunshades are stretched above them anyway. On the opposite - sunny - side there is only a clothes shop, a bookshop and a photocopying business. A lopsided square.

Visitors move on with a pleasant memory of the architectural experience and the intimate atmosphere. The guidebooks promise a chapel, but tourists get a bonus - a fine church. This peaceful, restful square takes us out of the buzz of the city, but does not deprive us of sights.

[10] Prêt à Manger, Les Patios (Café Pizzeria), Brasserie les Patios, Sorbonn'Dog and Café l'Écritoire.

N

RUE DE SONTAY

AVENUE RAYMOND-POINCARÉ

RUE LÉONARD-DE-VINCI

AVENUE BUGEAUD

AVENUE
VICTOR-HUGO

AVENUE
VICTOR-HUGO

FONTAINE

10

12

RUE COPERNIC

RUE BOISSIÈRE

5

ÉGLISE SAINT-HONORÉ-
D'EYLAU

RUE MESNIL

AVENUE RAYMOND-POINCARÉ

PLACE VICTOR-HUGO

Place Victor-Hugo is an all-round example of a Paris circus. The main circle is drawn by the blocks of flats around its perimeter. The only exception is the Saint-Honoré-d'Eylau church,[1] whose shape and function interrupts the continuity. This slight break, however, draws all the more attention to the otherwise remarkable regularity. The tall sycamores in front of the buildings further reinforce the circularity of the layout - the trunks strongly, the foliage rather less. The accentuated centre carries on the circular theme in the bowl of the fountain and the bench around. The road between the fountain and the pavement is unusually broad. Cars go round it in a constant rumble. Their motion further enhances the concentricity. The ten streets that entering in star formation, their axes focused on the centre of the circle, generating another central experience. The circle and the star elevate the place above the grey monotony of its surroundings. With all these attributes, we should be ready to heap praise on Place Victor-Hugo.

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Victor-Hugo has not, however, earned a place in the roster of famous Parisian squares. Why does it not get more respect? The town-planning and architectural conception are laudable. Its proportions are balanced (the height of the buildings relative to the diameter of the circus).[2] The airy space, the ecological feeling and the circular configuration all draw in visitors. To walk round it is an inspiring experience. The only disturbance is the constant stream of cars.

The outermost of the system of concentric rings comprises the perimeter buildings. All except the church are blocks of flats. It is a single-theme spectacle. The heights and masses of the buildings are approximately identical. The frontages vary only slightly, and mainly in their widths. With one exception, there is a single building between each street opening,[3] but there are differences in the numbers of window axes - between two and five, most commonly three. The buildings on the circus make up a fundamentally homogeneous ensemble.

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[1] Built in 1855.
[2] The circus diameter is 100 metres, four times the average height of the buildings.
[3] The adjoining buildings at number 10 and 12 make the exception.

Constant repetition is what gives the place its integrity. The buildings follow the Haussmann system (ground floor and five or six upper floors, with a mansard roof). Only numbers 5 and 7 stand out with their over-ornamental mansard windows. One of them even boasts a tower. There are some variations on the upper floors, in the window architraves, walls between the windows (some ornamented, some plain) and grilles in front of the windows. The ground floors have a different kind of individuality. The shops break the monotony, the café/restaurant terraces even more so[4]. The sunshades and furnishings (reds and purples) make a joyful spectacle, especially when the sun is shining. But it is the people strolling along the pavements and sitting on the terraces who give the place its true liveliness. As life buzzes on the pavement, the diverse café terraces under the green strip play a secondary part.

The trees of the "secondary ring" vie with the buildings for dominance of the view. Like a colonnade, the tree trunks repeat and amplify the arc of the building frontages. Further up, the intermingling branches and leaves dilute the effect. The trees allow only parts of the buildings to be seen. The indeterminateness of their form dissipates the effect of the hard, resolute barricade of the walls. Nonetheless, the trees and the visible sections of façades together make a homogeneous background. The circle of buildings and trees resonates with the pavement kerbs underneath and in front of them. These are of course broken by the street openings, but in the way they channel the cars on the roadway, they also generate a circle.

The roadway is the third ring. The traffic that flows between the kerb and the pool around the fountain is intense. Cars go round up in five lanes. Other squares have cars and lorries going round them, but not to such an oppressive degree. Here, the noise and the fumes are extremely unpleasant. The constant carousel could be a positive aspect, captivating and creating space. But the traffic on place Victor-Hugo is not a revolving display. Its presence is intermittent. The vehicles are noisy gate-crashers to the party. The traffic lights admits them in a series of impulses. Instead of going round, they depart a couple of streets further along. There are frequent scenes of chaos as cars cut in front of each other. Sudden braking makes an unpleasant screech and leaves a criss-cross of black streaks on the roadway. Coming through in waves, they alternately fill up and empty the circus. The space is bleak until the next posse of cars thunders along. The picture changes in an incessant rhythm. Deafening confusion alternates with bleak emptiness.

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[4] Two restaurants and an ice-cream shop have terraces.

The building at number 5 place Victor-Hugo.
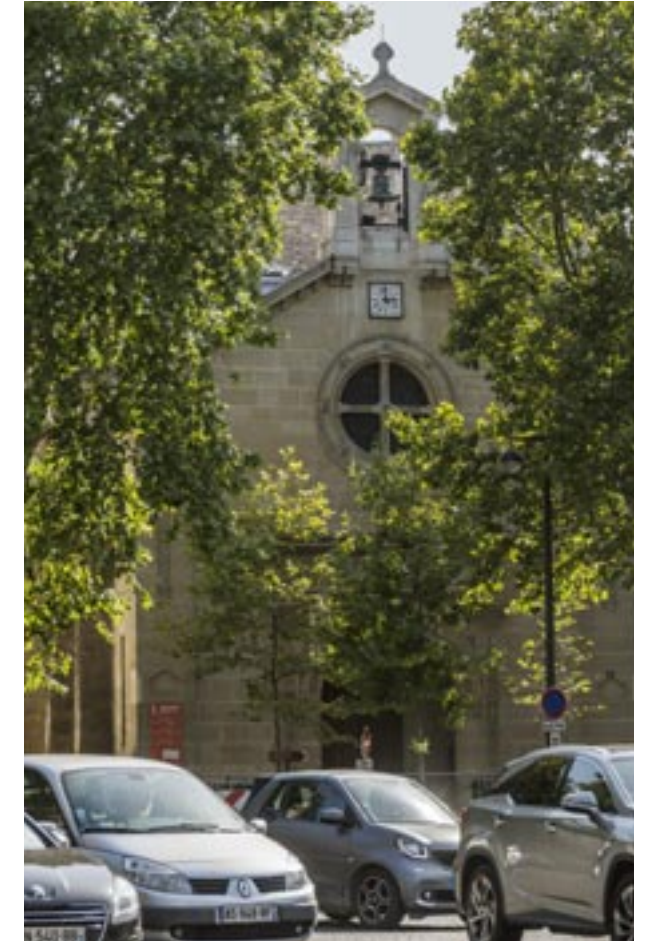
The Saint-Honoré-d'Eylau church.

The connecting streets make systematic breaks in the continuity of the circle. There are ten of them,[5] all stretching out radially, drawing out a star on the map.[6] They enter the square at approximately equal intervals, making a very regular configuration. The series of acute angles thrusting into the space at the points of the star seem to threaten the gentle sweep of the circular arc.

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[5] The streets entering the circus are: avenue Victor Hugo (twice), rue Léonard de Vinci, avenue Raymond Poincaré (twice), rue de Sontay, avenue Bugeaud, rue Mesnil, rue Boissière and rue Copernic.
[6] Twelve streets run into the nearby Étoile.
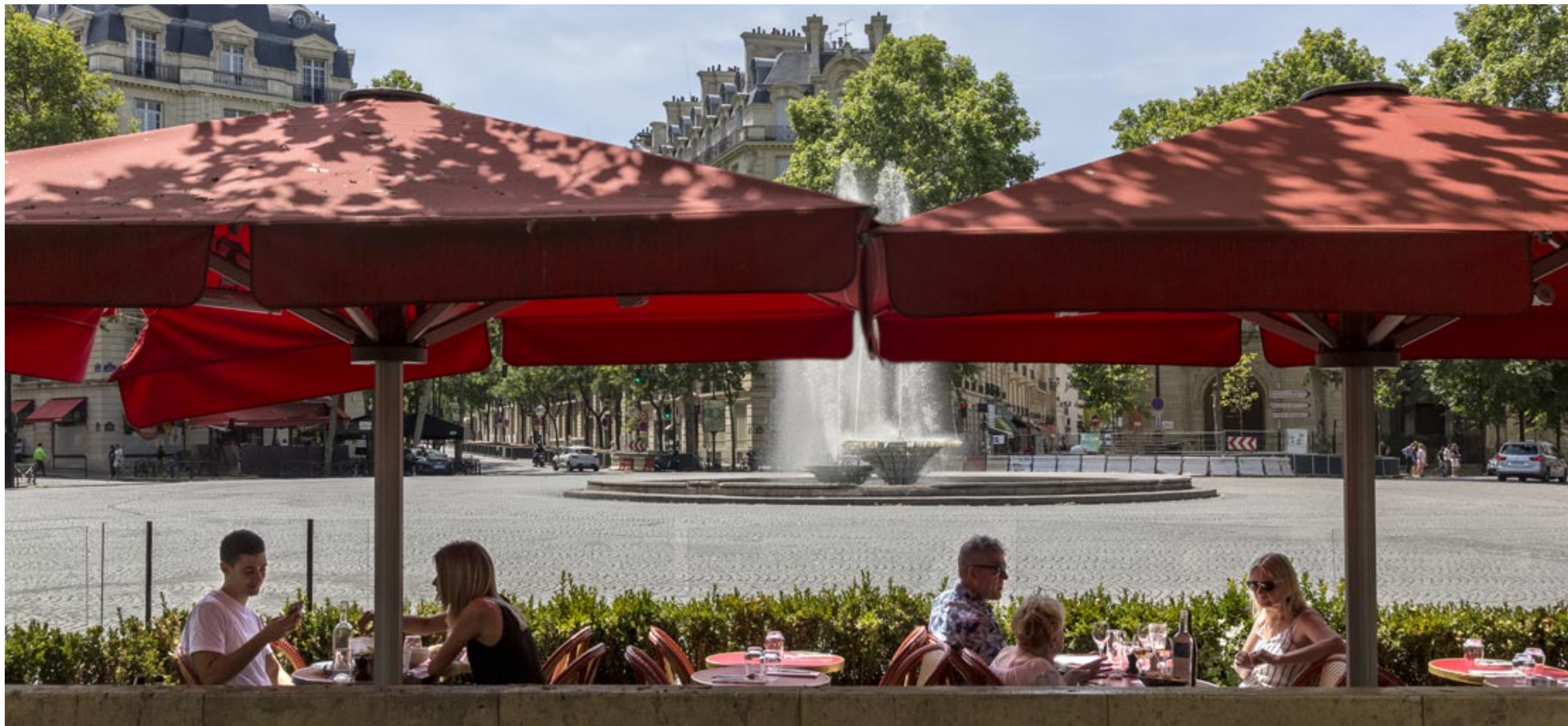
Thorns pricking the soft body. Is it the circle (regularity) or the star (fragmentation) that determines the character of place Victor-Hugo? The constant breaks weaken the curve, and the new shape makes a complex space. The star both vitiates and enhances the circle, and the eye appreciates the new experience.

On the island in the centre stands a fountain. This is the fourth ring, and it does not run around us; we look on it from outside. The fountain fulfils its function of organizing the space. Everything is referred to that point, the cars go round it, and the buildings all face in its direction. The water is launched from three funnels of different sizes, no more than two metres high, and the jets are pointed at the features around it. The fountain has a hard part to play, fighting alone to coordinate the many contradictory components of the space. It is a creditable performance rather than a glorious victory. Our eyes are drawn to the exclamation mark of the jets of water, a refreshing sight, but the task is hopeless. Three water spouts are not enough to impose authority and concentrate attention. The fountain relieves the view, and the water spray casts a veil over the view behind and brings in an element of warmth. The triple jets help pull everything together, but do not have a sufficiently emphatic presence.

<div align="center">✳</div>

Visitors from outside the area are often drawn to squares by their long history. The older the better. Place Victor-Hugo is a hundred and fifty years old, a late arrival compared with the famous squares of Paris. It lacks historical weight. (But the recent past is still the past, and however short a time it has been on the scene, it has left its traces. Come to that, even an empty, architecturally untouched area has an identity, a special condition that makes possible something radically new.) Two hundred years ago, what is now the 16th arondissement was an area of forest, vineyards and a few hundred inhabitants in three villages. Urbanization of the agricultural land of the Chaillot plateau started in the early nineteenth century, and the fields gave way to a geometric street grid.

The street plan, laid out in military order to a strictly geometric scheme was a projection of centralized state thinking. Accordingly, the district was laid out around circular nodes. Radial streets crossed by straight streets created a polygonal pattern. These transverse streets "revolved" around the centre. Thus, the regular urban fabric created its own opposite, order begetting disorder.

The radial system necessarily broke down the street grid of the neighbourhood into segments.[7] This urban structure determined the location and architectural constraints of place Victor-Hugo. In 1826, the few remaining old buildings were swept away and a single-centre grid was laid out on the empty ground.

Place Victor-Hugo was built at the same time as the rest of the quarter, taking the name of writer only in 1855. The city of Paris absorbed the whole area in 1860. The flats on the circus were built after the church, in the 1870s and 1880s, and are typical examples of the Haussmann era. Today, place Victor-Hugo lets us experience is the post-1850 atmosphere that was immortalized by the Impressionists. The formation of the area also gave rise to a special social milieu that has persisted ever since.

In reality, there is no dearth of history in place Victor-Hugo. The last century and a half has left is mark in buildings, customs and lifestyles. The defining phenomena of recent decades, notably vehicle traffic, are also perceptible here. Like bees escaped from a hive, the din of cars is unsettling. People come to squares from the vicinity or from further afield in search of a break, a bit of peace. In place Victor-Hugo, you have to judge according to your own values whether the chaotic spectacle is outweighed by the trees, the refreshing water, the delicately-drawn circles, the coordinated façades and the café terraces.
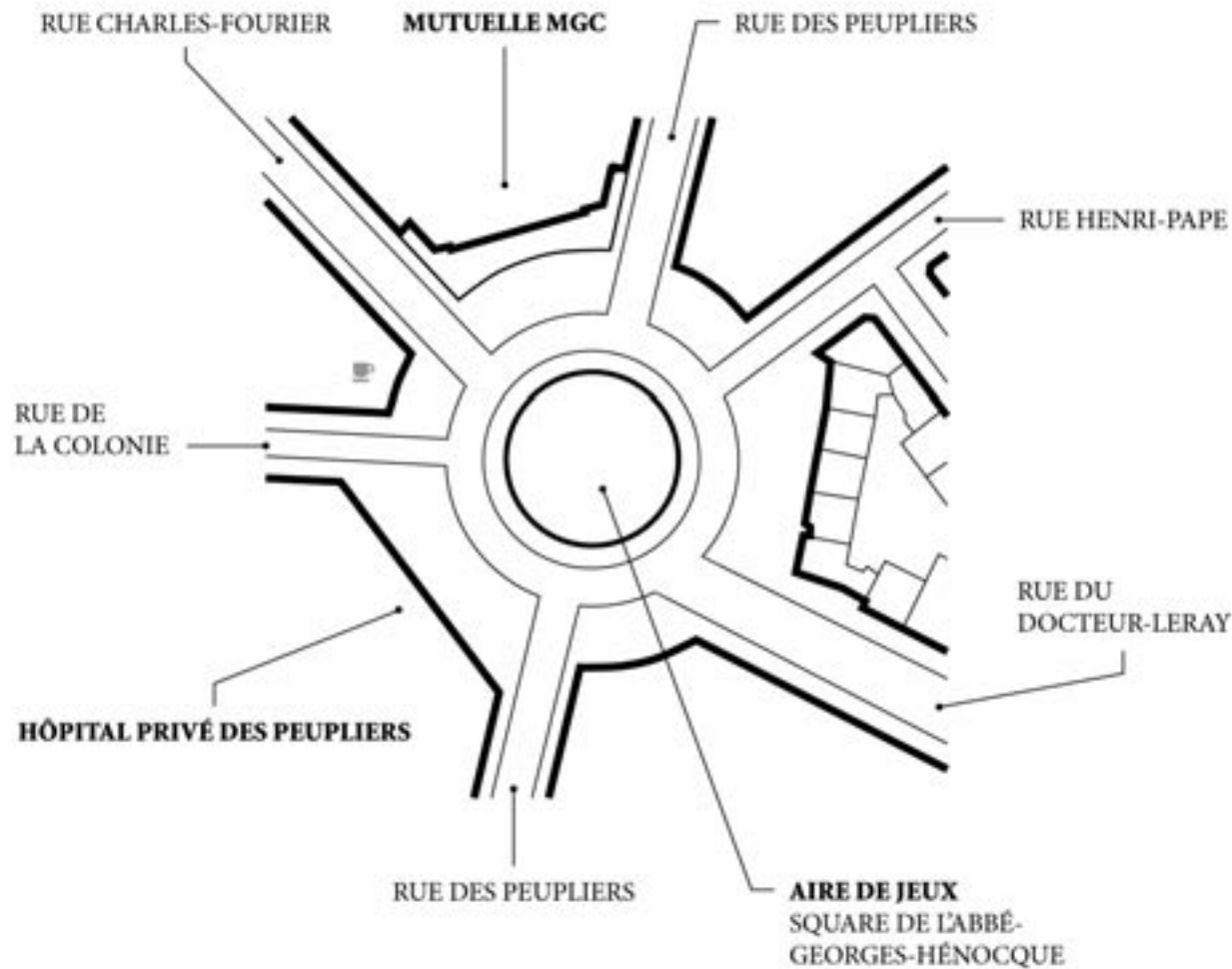
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[5] Washington D.C. and Barcelona were laid out in similar fashion during the same period.

PLACE DE L'ABBÉ-GEORGES-HÉNOCQUE

RUE CHARLES-FOURIER

MUTUELLE MGC

RUE DES PEUPLIERS

RUE HENRI-PAPE

RUE DE
LA COLONIE

RUE DU
DOCTEUR-LERAY

HÔPITAL PRIVÉ DES PEUPLIERS

RUE DES PEUPLIERS

AIRE DE JEUX
SQUARE DE L'ABBÉ-
GEORGES-HÉNOCQUE

PLACE DE L'ABBÉ-GEORGES-HÉNOCQUE

Workers' quarters in Paris, like the Quartier des Peupliers, sprang up one after another in the early nineteenth century. Most of their characteristic two-storey houses, side by side, resolutely remain today, radiating a quiet, rural atmosphere. A small town in the big city. There are several dozen almost identical houses in the direct neighbourhood of place de l'Abbé-Georges-Hénocque, in a spiders' web-like street grid with this circus at the centre. The whole neighbourhood was laid out and built by the railway company to house its workers. Other kinds of buildings went up in the centre, notably the headquarters of the railway workers' mutual aid society (MGC), and beside it, a hospital and two blocks of flats. Opposite these large masses of ochre and red brick are small houses painted in light colours.

The circus was built up in 1910. In front of it lay the Bièvre stream and a parallel backwater, which had previously defined where and how the inhabitants had lived. The women washed by its banks, and dyers, tanners and all trades needing water for their trade worked beside it. After 1826, the Bièvre was gradually diverted into a regulated course and covered over. This transformed the world above it, although the area remained inhabited by working people. The circus was initially called place des Peupliers, in memory of the poplars that had stood there, but in 1968 was given the name of a mendicant-order monk, Georges Hénocque,[1] who was active in the Resistance during the Second World War.

The all-pervading circle concept is obvious as soon as we enter.. The road, the kerb and the wrought-iron fence in front of some buildings all describe arcs of a circle. Even the straight building frontages are manifestly tangents to the circle. The road is the usual roundabout for vehicles. At the centre is a circular pavement and kerb around an island, within it a fence, and a playground. Six streets[2] run radially into the circus, drawing a star on the ground. The buildings leave roughly equal gaps for the street openings.

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[1] Georges Hénocque (1870–1959), French monk.
[2] Rue de la Colonie, rue Charles-Fourier, rue des Peupliers (twice), rue Henri-Pape and rue du Docteur-Leray.

We find some exceptions to this systematic regularity, notably the dimensions of the housefronts and their distance from the centre. All different. This spoils the circle concept, but not disturbingly so. But the irregularities do not stop there. The buildings differ in purpose, size, facing material, colour and pattern. The two halves of the circus are of completely contrasting character. On the west side are six- to eight-storey brick-faced residential blocks, with a lower red-brick hospital set among them.[3] On the north side is the mutual aid society building, with similar facing. Opposite these, on the east arc, is a row of two-storey houses painted in light colours, and with front gardens. The large blocks stand in solitude between two streets, whereas the private houses on the other side are joined up in a long row. The verticality of the tall blocks is set off by the horizontality of the terraced row. A double contrast of size and colour.

These differences lends the square a see-saw look, with one end up in the air and the other rooted in the ground. The visual tension is heightened by the inability to see the two parts of the square at the same time.

The narrow field of view means that either one or other monopolizes the view from any one place. Adding to the one-sidedness is the inability to get a broad view because of the playground fixtures and the trees in the centre. Another contributor to the imbalance is the unequal distribution of people. There is more coming and going on the red-brick side. There are constant arrivals and departures through the hospital entrance. There is also a taxi rank there, and cars are constantly bringing in patients. The local inhabitants come and go, more visibly from the blocks of flats than from the individual houses. As we might expect, there is also more bustle around the café, but the relaxed conversation of guests on the terrace exudes serenity. And on the other side, the calm is complete, with few people walking in front of the houses. Thus are the two sides divided: bustle and blankness.

Vehicles leave the circus soon just after they arrive, and there is no parking there except for delivery vans and taxis. The traffic is relaxed and unhurried. There is nothing to remind us of the rush on place Victor-Hugo and certainly not of the chaos on the Étoile. Even in front of the hospital, cars and people go carefully with regard for the sick. Even ambulance sirens are rarely heard.

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[3] Hôpital privé des Peupliers.

The pavilions of place de l'Abbé.Georges_Hénocque.

Café and Mutuelle MGC (top)
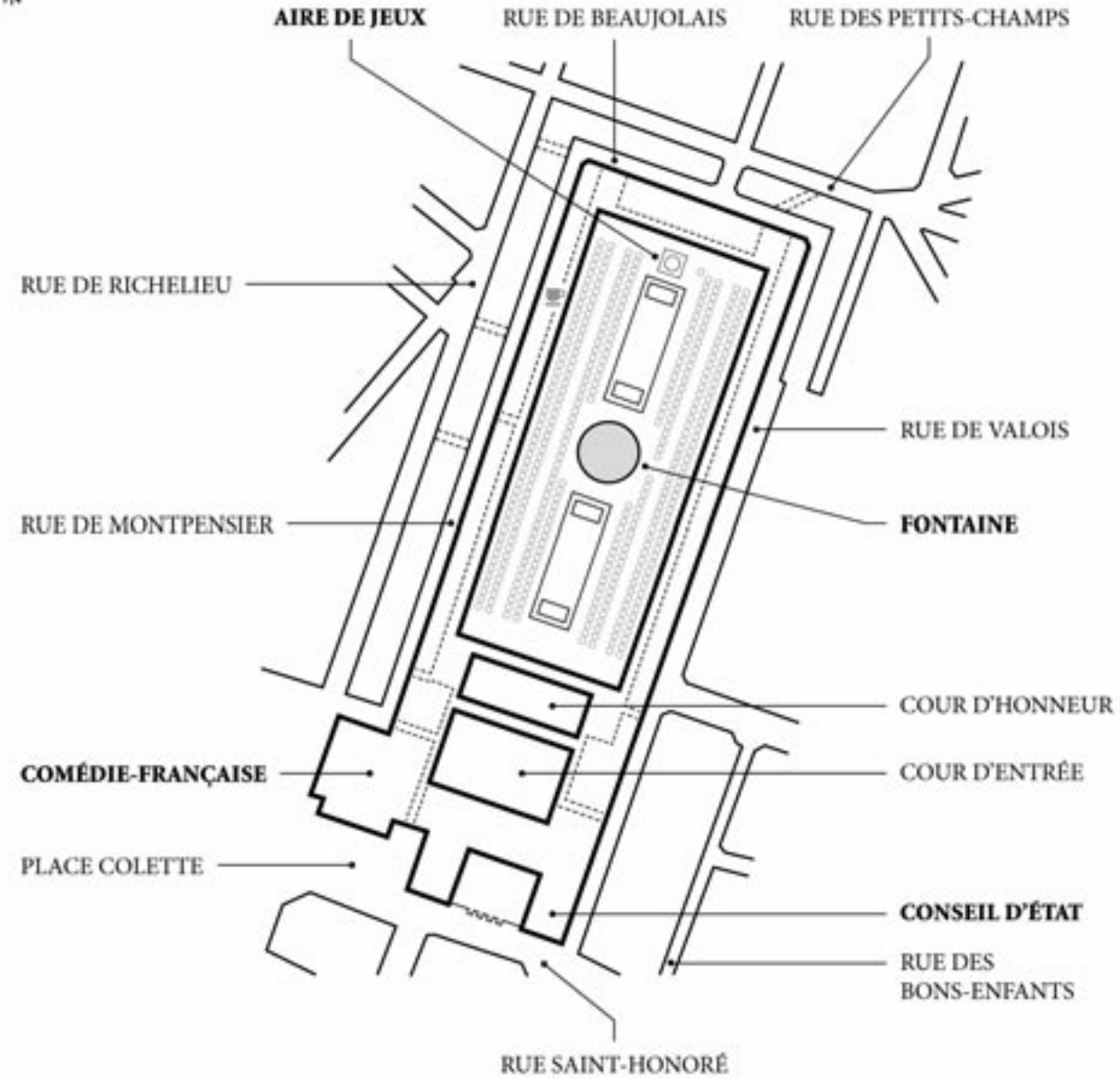Hôpital privé des Peupliers (bottom).

The most charming component of place de l'Abbé-Georges-Hénocque is the playground in the middle,[4] although the fence and the trees prevent the children, their carers and the equipment from making much of a visual impression. There is only a blur of objects and people. Overall, we hardly see the playground except to the extent that it blocks our view of the other side. Even so, its presence, however vague, attracts attention and gives the place meaning.

Because the playground's positioning prevents us from taking in the whole circus while sitting in one place, we have to walk round to discover the details. We see only a very small part of the buildings on the far side, and have to rely on our imagination to fill the gaps. Another feature of life on the circus is the sight of mothers, grandmothers or baby-sitters pushing their buggies over to the island, stopping the traffic on the road. The operation is so relaxed, it is like watching a film in slow motion. The babble of children hardly comes through, only a few screeches filtering through the screen of trees and bushes. A soundless scene. The playground dominates. Under its influence, the big buildings dwarf the others into toy houses that seem to have stepped out of a storybook.

UNORTHODOX SQUARES
JARDIN DU PALAIS-ROYAL

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[4] The playground is called Square de l'Abbé-Georges-Hénocque.

Labels on diagram:
- AIRE DE JEUX
- RUE DE BEAUJOLAIS
- RUE DES PETITS-CHAMPS
- RUE DE RICHELIEU
- RUE DE VALOIS
- RUE DE MONTPENSIER
- FONTAINE
- COUR D'HONNEUR
- COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE
- COUR D'ENTRÉE
- PLACE COLETTE
- CONSEIL D'ÉTAT
- RUE DES BONS-ENFANTS
- RUE SAINT-HONORÉ

JARDIN DU PALAIS-ROYAL

Is the Jardin du Palais-Royal[1] – the ornamental garden of a palace built between 1633 and 1639 - really a square? Can an area closed on all sides be a square? If the square is defined in terms of the urban structure and requires a connection with streets, then the answer is no. But an urban area surrounded by buildings and offering a place for anybody to meet surely deserves to be called a square.

The attractions of the Jardin du Palais-Royal are the well-tended flower beds, the trees lined up like soldiers, and the fountain. It is a place of silence, insulated from the noise of surrounding streets. The specialness of this "palace garden" arises from the circumstances of its birth. Unusually, it was created by contraction rather than expansion. Squares are usually laid out at street intersections to loosen up the dense urban fabric, as places to take a breath and relax. By contrast, the Jardin du Palais-Royal was made by taking broad strips of a large area surrounded by buildings and making it smaller. Then it was broken off by walling in the remaining area, keeping out all traffic. New streets were made behind the new buildings it was surrounded with. All this was at the expense of the original park. Nowadays, there is not a single street that connects with the square. It is difficult to assign it to any of the usual types of square.

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The historical sources tell us that in Gallo-Roman times, the area was an oak forest. Over the centuries, the forest was periodically renewed and the area gradually inhabited, and eventually some notable houses stood there.

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[1] Here, the meaning of jardin is closer to "park" than "garden". In the Larousse dictionary, jardin is an area with walkways, trees, lawns, flower beds and shrubs, best understood as an "ornamental garden".

The garden of Palais Royal seen from the *cour d'honneur*.

More radical changes started in the seventeenth century. After 1624, Cardinal Richelieu[2] gradually bought up the land between what is now rue de Richelieu, rue des Petits-Champs, rue des Bons-Enfants and rue Saint-Honoré, complete with the great houses and city fortifications. Shortly after acquiring these buildings, he had them demolished, and he also drained a large reservoir[3] on the area. With the removal of Charles V's city wall,[4] the whole area laid at the cardinal's disposal. Between 1634 and 1639, he built a palace for himself[5], later called Palais-Cardinal, in place of the demolished houses. The area around it was made into a park that from the outset was open to everyone.

The first palace was built around two courtyards. The *cour d'entrée* lay on the rue Saint-Honoré side, and the *cour d'honneur* towards the park. A portico resting on Tuscan columns looked on to the newly laid-out place du Palais-Royal. The cour d'honneur adjoined to the north and was surrounded by the palace on three sides (now disappeared)[6], the north side being closed off by a large temporary wooden building.[7] That wooden building was eventually replaced by the stone arcade and iron railings we see today, separating the cour d'honneur from the park, which had two pools and was planted out with flower beds and trees.

After Richelieu's death, the palace and its garden came into the possession of the Orléans family (in 1642), who held on to it for several centuries. It was thus often referred to as the Orléans' palace. In 1643, Anne of Austria, widow of the king[8] took it over as regent and raised the future king, Louis XIV. This endowed the palace with its later name, Palais Royal, although after he became king, Louis XIV gave it to his younger brother, Philippe, Duke of Orléans, known as "Monsieur".[9] Before that, the regent had the park turned into one of the finest ornamental gardens in Paris. The palace and the gardens became a fashionable meeting place for the French elite. In 1730, the park was altered, the two pools being replaced by a fountain in a pool twenty-five metres in diameter. In 1752, an avenue was added, beside which booksellers sold their wares.

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[2] Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642), chief minister of Louis XIII.
[3] Smaller ones, with fountains, were laid out in its place.
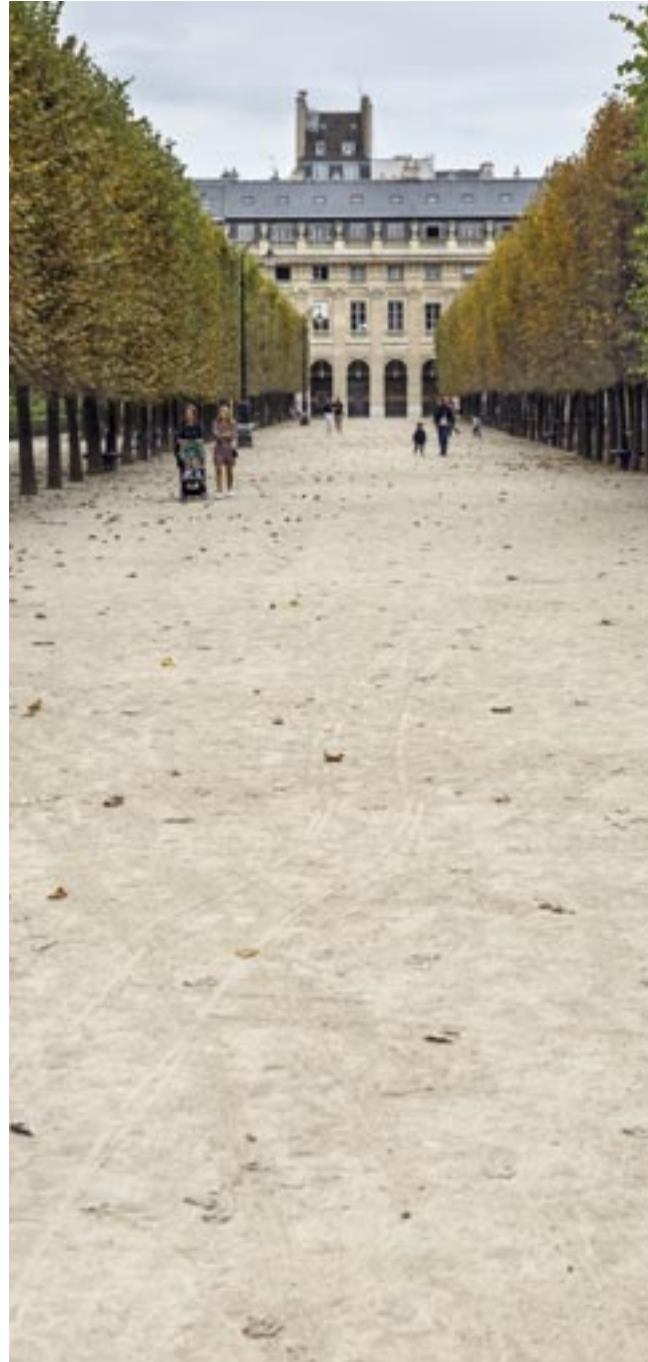[4] Charles V, king of France (1364–1380).
[5] The south frontage of the palace lay beside rue Saint-Honoré and the new area, place du Palais-Royal (1648).
[6] Except for part of the east side of the courtyard, which has been built into the Galerie des Proues, named after ships' bows
[7] Galerie de Bois.
[8] Louis XIII, lived 1601–1643.
[9] Philippe I (1640–1701), Duke of Orléans and Chartres.

The palace went through a series of alterations. The most thorough started in 1752, during the time of Louis Philippe (Louis le Gros), Duke of Chartres and Orléans.[10] It had to be rebuilt again after a fire in 1763, resulting in the palace that has survived, with some alterations, to the present. The buildings (*galeries*)[11] surrounding the park date from between 1781 and 1784, and the theatre building at the south-west corner of the palace, connecting to the cour d'honneur, was built between 1786 and 1790. The theatre opened in 1799 with the name Théâtre-Française.[12]

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[10] Louis-Philippe "le Gros" (1725–1785), great-grandson of Philippe I.
[11] Here, *galerie* means both the arcade and the building it is part of.
[12] It is now called the Comédie-Française.

The buildings rest on 180 arches. The arcades are a big surprise for visitors. They span the two lower levels, the ground floor and mezzanine. The brightly-coloured arches stand out well against the shadowy walls behind the arcade vaults. Another contrast is the black of the iron railing spears between the light pilasters, with shining copper caps, lending a ceremonial aspect. The windows of the two floors above are of varying shape, tall underneath and square above. The façade is a the multiple repetition of a single vertical section framed by composite pilasters. A merry stucco design, if in a gloomy beige colour, surrounds the doors and windows like laurel leaves around a coin. The accentuated principal cornice divides these floors from the balustraded attic storey. Repetition: there is also a balustrade adorning the tall windows. The parapet seems very heavy and weighs down on the lower levels, but it is matched by the pressure from the other direction, the dark arcade that holds the building up.

The park was originally surrounded by three built-up streets – rue de Richelieu, rue des Petits-Champs and rue des Bons-Enfants. The Duke of Orléans' extravagant lifestyle brought him into financial difficulties, and he was obliged to sell part of the park. A strip was cut out of it on each of three sides. The duke later built four galleries around the reduced park: Galerie de Montpensier, Galerie de Beaujolais, Galerie de Valois and Galerie d'Orléans.[13] The remaining park, reduced from 333 x 143 to 275 x 100 metres.[14] Three new streets - rue Montpensier, rue Beaujolais and rue de Valois - were laid out around the new block. The galleries accommodated shops, cafés, restaurants, art galleries, bookshops and kiosks. The elite of Paris were to be seen strolling under the arcades, and the new buildings became central locations for high society and political life in Paris. However fashionable it was among the privileged, the park was still open to everyone. How many took up the opportunity? We might wonder.

The change started when the Revolution broke out. Visitors to the square were no longer from the privileged classes. Events that took place in the park map out the course of the Revolution. It was here that Camille Desmoulins, on 13 July 1789, incited the crowed to armed insurrection, and it was from here that the Duke of Orléans[15] was dragged off to be executed in 1793. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, the park went into decline, becoming den of prostitutes, tramps and drunks.

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13 The first three rows of buildings were named after the streets running parallel to them.
14 Less than 60% of the original area.
15 During the Revolution, the Duke assumed the name Philippe Égalité, but calling himself "equal" did not save him from the guillotine.

There are reports from even before the Revolution of how gambling was bringing down standards in the park. The ill-reputed Galerie de Bois was damaged by fire, and its eventual demolition in 1828 was the first sign that the area's downward slide was ending, although the park remained an abandoned wilderness for many years.

Today, we see the buildings in something like their old glory, the result of a renovation a few years ago that wiped away all traces of decay. The classical façade evokes the times it was built in. The renovation also extended to the park, with new trees and two square pools.

The main entrance of the palace no longer allows access to the park. There are two ways of reaching it.[16] One is from place Colette, along the street that continues under the palace and leads into the cour d'honneur. To arrive by this route is to be treated to a truly grand spectacle. Coming out of the cour d'honneur and standing on the raised podium of the Galerie d'Orléans, we can look between the columns of the Galerie de Chartres and get a glimpse of the gardens in their full pomp. Viewed from this raised vantage point, down the long axis, the park appears to be on an even grander scale than we might expect. Between the four parallel double rows of trees, looking across expanses of vegetation and gravel, our eyes come to rest in the centre of the field of view on a building that does indeed look like a royal palace. This prepares us for the next stage, when we proceed down a few steps and make our own grand arrival.

The other approach is from the narrow neighbouring streets through the colonnades under the buildings. It offers a somewhat different experience. The colonnades are broad, but the closely-packed columns and low ceiling make them dark and oppressive. These passages make the transition from confined to wide-open, from narrow side street to stunning park as we emerge from among the columns. There are also a few tawdry passages under the buildings, some more tunnel than passage, unbefitting for the palace gardens. Entrance to the park from the side streets is not direct. Once we have made it through another intermediate stretch, through the dim light of the arcade, we are suddenly liberated by the spectacle of the park.

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16 The only access to the park is through its side galleries. The main entrance from the place du Palais Royal is reserved for state institutions.

A place to sit among the green spaces

The park is enclosed by buildings all except the south side, where there is a row of columns. So the enclosure delimits rather encloses. Protects rather than imprisons. The buildings are perforated by the entrances. We are free to come and go under the buildings. Rather than a courtyard, the garden is a public space.

Laid out in a large rectangle, with rows of trees, flower beds and fountains, the park is broad, airy and bright. It divides into parallel longitudinal zones divided by rows of trees, with a broad, open, green central zone. The green area is divided into a succession of hedge-lined lawns and flower beds arranged around squares of gravel with park benches. Its dominating element is the pool and its fountain at the half way point. But what good is a lawn if it is closed off by a hedge? And what good are the flower beds if there are not enough benches for people to sit and appreciate them? The walkable parts of the imposing avenues that cover most of the area all have gravel surfaces. The park undoubtedly has visually attractive features, notably the avenues and the broad green expanses. The same is true for the area around the pool, with chairs to sit on. People frequently gather the chairs into a group for a chat. The chairs stay there when they leave, traces to remind us of what happened.

Rarely do we see trees lined up and cropped as they are here, along the two sides of the park. Planted close together with dense squared-off crowns, they stand as dour military columns, echoing the pilasters and iron spears of the arcades. A military parade. Keeping order, cold and indifferent. Looking from the cour d'honneur, the foliage of the eight rows of trees hide much of the buildings behind. Nonetheless, we get a good view of the upper storeys from autumn to spring, when the trees are bare. In summer we are glad of the shade they give, protecting us from the sun's rays. But a shady avenue is worth little as a refuge from the heatwave if there is nowhere to sit. There very few benches, spaced far apart. It is not a place to sit and rest. In such a promising place, which gives such a wonderful first impression, there is nothing to do, nothing to look at, no reason to walk around. Sometimes people hurry across the place on their way to something else. But nobody just strolls up and down for the sake of it. So bereft of activity is this place that the rare sound of footsteps on the gravel is almost startling. The walkways and the spaces beside them are dismally empty, wasted space. Once we get over our initial wonderment, we look around in vain for something to keep us here. A visitor stumbling on the place will quickly move on. The only time there is some activity is the middle of the day, when whatever benches there are fill up with workers from the area who come to eat their sandwiches. Then the place takes on some kind of life.

The only other disturbance to the sterile silence in these enormous gardens comes from children playing. They run about as if chasing pigeons (of which there are none). Their frolicking and screeching keeps at least one part of the square in motion. Parents push their buggies, and children are free to run about. As the children play in the sandpit, the adults sit at around pool with their feet dangling, feeling and hearing the spray of water from the fountain in the centre, a mermaid out of her element. In good weather, there is not a place to be had. This tiny section is the most refreshing spot of the park.

A section of the park is often closed off for a film or photo shoot. Visitors have to stay behind the tape while the army of invaders take their positions. Passers-by sometimes stop for a moment, in case something happens. But all they see is the long tedious work of preparation. Not much action. Most people move on. And some who have come to the park for peace and quiet are chased off by a security man with a megaphone. But even these "performances" make little impact in the wide expanses of the park.

The arcades are the preserve of shoppers. Every shop unit is occupied. The elegant clothes shops, antique dealers, art galleries and booksellers exclusively serve the wealthier sections of society. After closing, the arcades also go quiet, except for the coming and going of the waiters and guests of the arcade cafés and restaurants. In summer, they spill out into the open air. There are only half a dozen of them, but they bring a little life into the space under the buildings. Very little, in fact. Few people can afford to eat or drink there, and compared to what has been chronicled about past times, the mood is somewhat subdued. Workers from the nearby offices are rarely seen, even though the palace itself accommodates several public bodies – the Conseil d'État, the Conseil constitutionnel and the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication. Some just come at lunchtime.

So we ask again, is the Jardin du Palais-Royal a square? It is certainly enclosed by walls, but not closed off. Vehicles are excluded, but not pedestrians. Although there are no connecting streets, there is easy access from the neighbourhood through courtyards and passages. Since anybody can easily come into this large park and use it actively or passively, even this kind of "enclosed space" meets the criteria for a "square".

Terrace of the Villalys restaurant

The Jardin du Palais-Royal is one of the most attractive squares in Paris, but remains sadly barren. Its potential is unrealized. Not because it is enclosed, because there are ways through the walls. It is a public space. Neither is it segregated, although few people can afford the services available under the arcades. It is open to visitors from all sections of society. Few of them go there, despite the enormous space, because only a small part is useful. The palace and park make a dazzling spectacle, but there is little on offer for outdoor activity. By contrast, the opportunity to play among the stunted columns of the much smaller cour d'honneur attracts many more visitors than we see on the whole area of the Jardin du Palais-Royal. The assorted columns of the "Colonnes de Buren"[17] provide entertainment for young and old alike.

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[17] Daniel Buren (1938–), French artist.

QUAI DE L'ÎLE SAINT-LOUIS

SEINE

PLACE LOUIS-ARAGON

QUAI DE BOURBON
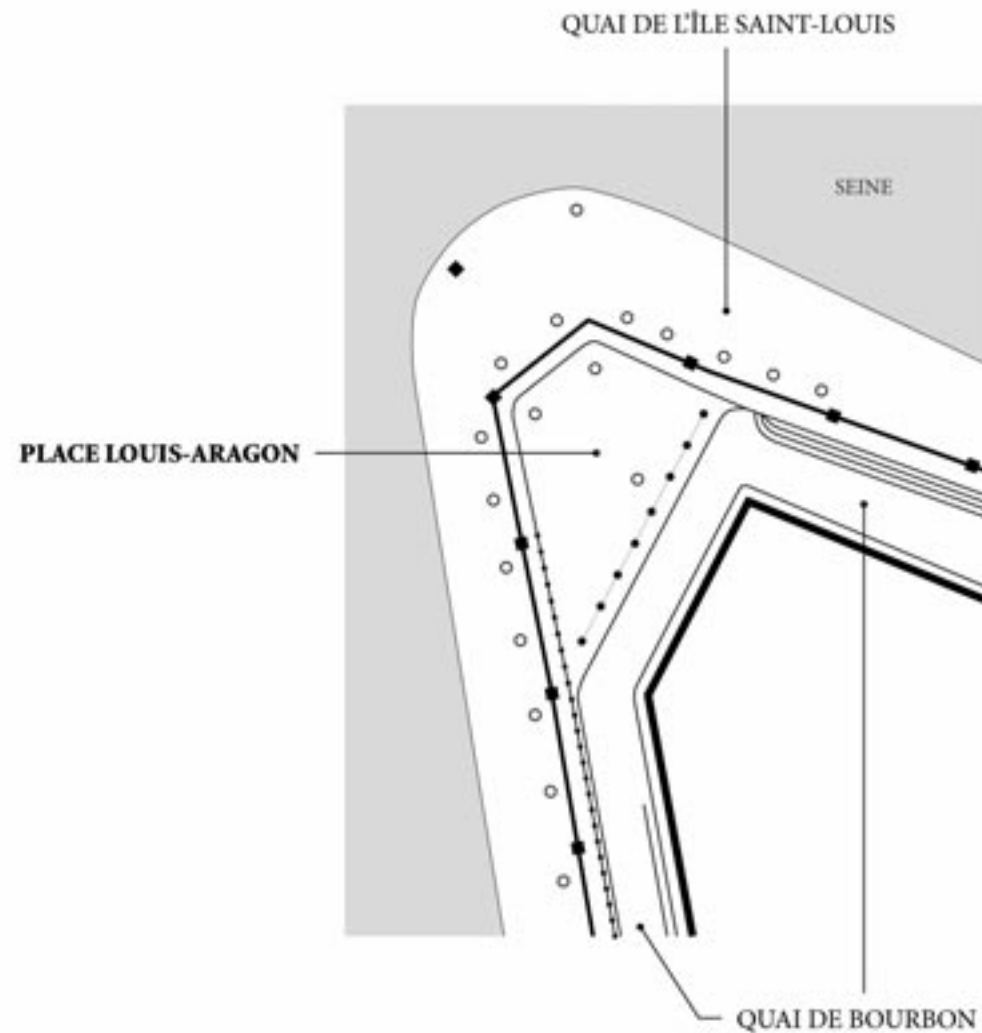
PLACE LOUIS-ARAGON[1]

"If I want to be sure I'm not dreaming and I really do live in Paris, I go down to the Seine." These are the words of an acquaintance who moved to the city. The two islands in the river are essential to the view there, symbols of the city. The elegant curve of the west end of Île Saint-Louis has a special place in the picture.

The silhouette of Île Saint-Louis clearly announces that this place - where the two branches of the Seine, having come together, divides again, where the water ripples up to the quayside and washes the bank into a hairpin, where the massive double wall of the quay rises like a bastion above the water, and where the centuries-old buildings tower above it and trees reach up from the lower quay. It is no less than a place of pilgrimage. Here, at the upper level of the two-step quai de Bourbon, named after the French royal family, lies the square named (in 2012) after Louis Aragon.

It is a very popular place. The upper and lower quays are usually both full of visitors, but for different reasons. Those who come for the view stop before the parapet of the upper quay and lean over to look at the Seine, the barges passing up and down, and the panoramic view of Paris. Then they move on. Those who come to sunbathe or just to stretch out and relax, settle down on the lower quay, which is wider and open to sunshine for most of the day. They enjoy the fresh air coming straight off the water. Up top, it is quieter, as people just stand and stare.

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There were no buildings here until the seventeenth century. That was when the two small islands, Île de Notre-Dame and Île aux Vaches, were joined together to make Île Saint-Louis. Building on the island started under the first large-scale plans for the city, ordered by Henry IV and Louis XIII. The first stage was to build bridges: the Saint-Louis Bridge joined Île Saint-Louis with Île de la Cité, which was joined to the banks by another two bridges.[2] The first of these, built of wood, went into use in 1627. It soon burned down, as did its successors. The steel structure that stands today was opened in 1940. The bridges have made Île Saint-Louis part of Paris.

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[1] Louis Aragon (1897–1982), French poet.
[2] Pont au Change and pont Saint-Michel.

Two-level square

In the distance, the Louis-Philippe bridge

The two islands: Île Saint-Louis with Île de la Cité

The first inhabitants of the island were aristocrats and haute-bourgeois. Many moved there from the crowded districts of the right bank, seeking a calmer and more elegant milieu. The oldest *hôtel particulier*, dating from 1600, still stands today, and a series of others were built in the following century. These houses were later joined by blocks of flats. The venerable island has preserved the mood of the time of its birth.

*

Officially, "Aragon Square" is confined to the upper quay. That area is too small to be anything but a kind of mini-square, but it does not stand alone, and the square may be considered a terraced composition of the upper and lower quays. The levels have a mutual affinity which is more than just visual. They have the same airspace, a theatre auditorium from balcony to proscenium, upper to lower quay. There are two sets of steps between them. The difference in level does not separate. The visitors can go up and down, experiencing them as a single space.

There is a difference in character, however, between the two levels. They have different shapes, are built of different materials, and offer enjoyment for different reasons. The upper quay stretches between multi-storey block of flats and a low parapet opposite. The concave outline of building on the east side, protruding into the square, is echoed by the parapet, which bulges out towards the lower level. This convex shape sets it apart from most squares. These two parallel polygonal structures form the enclosure of the square.

On the lower level, the outline at the west side is a gentle curve, where the quay meets the river. Water has a questionable ability to form the boundary of a space. The retaining wall, by contrast, is protective. But the people lying on the pavement are not in the least interested in that. They are marvelling at the silhouette of the city, or have given themselves over to the sun's rays. Water/stone, soft/hard, curve/polygonal – the characteristics of the lower level are in mutual opposition.

The framing of both levels is uncertain. The basic criterion for a square is that it clearly bounded by the buildings around it. This is only half true here, even if we accept that, at the lower level, the Seine makes an indisputable boundary that cannot be crossed. But that is only partially an obstacle, because the eye sees far beyond it. The boundary is uncertain. There is a danger of falling in the water.

Lower level and the "bastion"

That is less of a problem at the top, where the parapet is a waist-high barrier. The north and south boundaries of both quays are open, with nothing to hinder movement, and the square continues as a street in both directions.

The plateau of the upper quay is a place to rest. It is usually full of people, drawn by the feeling of intimacy. There are a few well-chosen features to take note of. Some trees, a few benches, two lamp posts ("growing out" of the parapet), kerbstones delimiting the roadway and a wrought iron fence lining the pavement. Many individual elements packed into a small space.

They do their job: people who wander in tend to linger. The roadways connecting the two upper quays have little traffic. The cars go slowly, without causing disturbance. People arriving on foot from the edge of the island often sit down on the benches. The trees cast a shadow, making a place to cool down on a hot day. Moving further along, the visitors come to the parapet and look out from the "theatre gallery". They notice the people stretched out below them on the lower quay. Looking out, around and down. The panorama holds their attention, and they take time to examine the buttresses of the apse of Notre-Dame[3] before taking in the outlines of Montmartre.

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[3] This was written before the cathedral burned down.

The lower quay could not be interpreted as a square without the upper quay. Even then, the uncertain boundary of the water puts its classification in doubt. It does, however, satisfy the second criterion of a square: enabling people to communicate. Here, even strangers get into conversation. Sunbathers with coloured swimming costumes and towels take possession of the square. But the picnickers take the palm. They spread their tablecloth on the ground, lay out their boxes of food and bottles of drink, and of course the cutlery. They also take their place in the tableau, laughing and marvelling at the view. They themselves are part of the view for those above. As they stare outwards, they too are stared at.

All kinds of people come here. Several years, a man sat down beside me on the lower quay and introduced himself. He was called Casquette, after his cap. He said he was an actor and that his company gave performances in a hollow of the quayside wall at the end of the bridge, the abandoned city archives. Indeed, there was a half-walled-in doorway there with the inscription "archive" above it. He then demonstrated his actor's skills, improvising. He jumped up, gesticulated, threw himself about, and bellowed. Finishing that performance, he sat down again and told me his life story. He had lost his wife and two children in a car accident. He had a shop, and lost it. I could almost believe him. Next day, we met again, waving an old copy of Le Monde. There was a full-page article about him. With a photograph. Everything in it matched what he had told me. Perhaps the reporter had also believed him? Then he showed me the "theatre". The airless cavern was lit with candles, and the only escape route was through the narrow opening above the incomplete brick wall. It was definitely unsafe. Going back to the bench, holding a bottle of wine, he introduced me to the other members of the company, clochards[4] recruited from the locality. Going back a year later, I found the opening completely walled up. Such encounters happen in this place.

Île Saint-Louis is a crowded urban space. You can walk its streets, but if you want to sit down, have to go into a café. Outdoors, the only places you can meet people and talk are at the two ends of the island. The east end is a relaxed park,[5] the west end, in front of the bridge, is a humming urban space, every square metre taken up by café terraces. There are lots of people loitering, some eating ice-cream, a constant throng, sitting, standing, walking about. People also have fun on the bridge, being entertained by a series of acrobats. As we turn round and set off along the quay towards Aragon Square, leaving the crowds behind us, we look forward with relish to the intimate atmosphere that awaits us there.
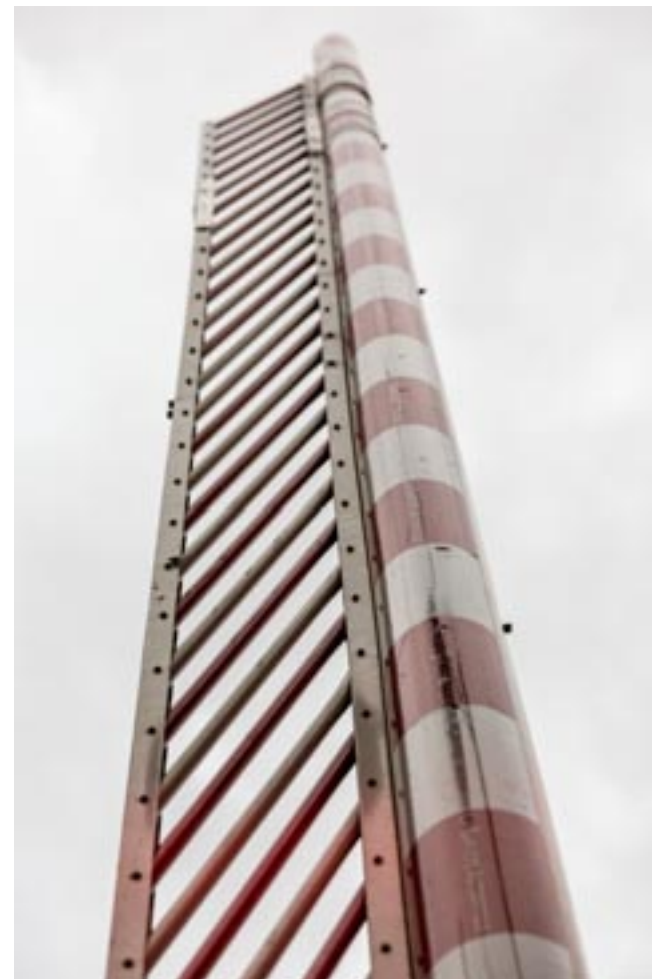

Place Louis-Aragon is not a typical square. It is only half enclosed. We could call it a "half-square", or a square of two joined-up half-squares. Whatever we call it,[6] it has a position in the urban fabric that perfectly qualifies it as a square: a meeting place, to where people frequently return, making contact with others and their own memories.
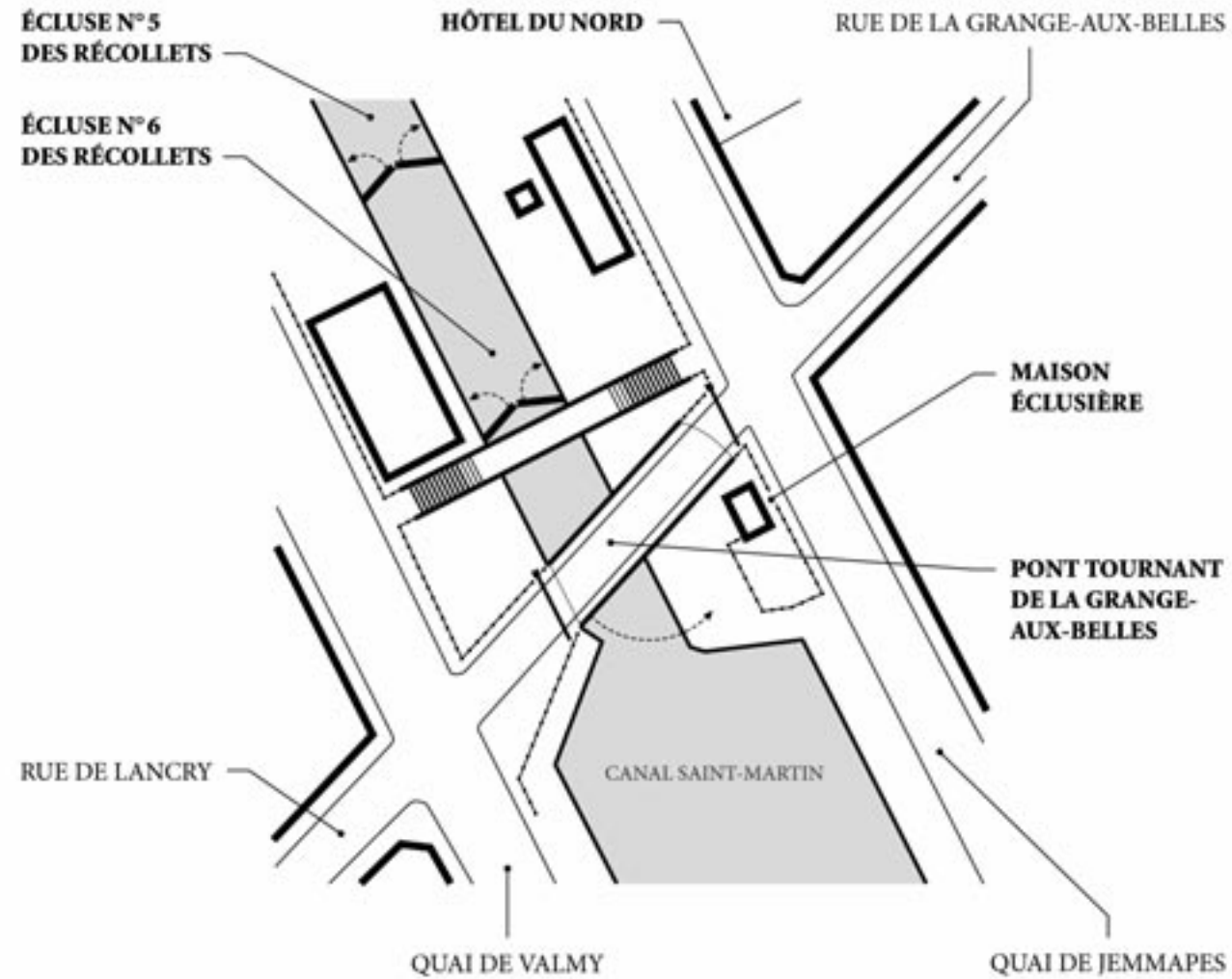
4 THomeless people.
5 Square Barye, named after a French sculptor.
6 The tip of the island had no name before 2012, when it was named after the poet.

ÉCLUSE N°5 DES RÉCOLLETS

ÉCLUSE N°6 DES RÉCOLLETS

HÔTEL DU NORD

RUE DE LA GRANGE-AUX-BELLES

MAISON ÉCLUSIÈRE

PONT TOURNANT DE LA GRANGE-AUX-BELLES

RUE DE LANCRY

CANAL SAINT-MARTIN

QUAI DE VALMY

QUAI DE JEMMAPES

THE BRIDGE OVER THE CANAL SAINT-MARTIN[1]
(PONT TOURNANT DE LA GRANGE AUX BELLES)

Canal Saint-Martin is the final section of the canal system that links the river Ourcq with the Seine, stretching from place de la Bataille-de-Stalingrad to the Seine. It is the city's unique waterway, snaking through three arrondisements (10, 11 and 12), sometimes visible, sometimes hidden underground. Leaving Stalingrad Square, it flows above ground and then disappears at rue du Faubourg-du-Temple, before reappearing for a brief stretch up to the Seine. The canal describes an S figure. The canalside sights worth seeing come after the upper bend of the S, beside the park called square des Récollets, at the intersection of rue de la Grange-aux-Belles and rue de Lancry. That is where we are treated to a cavalcade of locks and their mechanisms. The operation attracts crowds of spectators.

The concentrated activity at this intersection makes it resemble a square. The lack of a perimeter formed out of buildings somewhat diminishes the similarity. Can this unbounded area be regarded as a square? Is it possible that the events concentrated on the place not only attracts visitors but also keeps them there for a while? Can it, like a magnet, prevent the energized atmosphere from dissipating even in the absence of walls? Or are the buildings too far off to define the area as a square?

*

After centuries of dreaming and planning, work on a full canal system for the Ourcq started in 1802. The Canal Saint-Martin section was built between 1822 and 1825. Its visible stretches are lined with trees, paths and canalside buildings. Its east bank is Quai de Jemmapes, its west bank Quai de Valmy. The lower stretch of the canal was covered over in 1859. Over its 4.6 kilometre route, the canal descends a height of 25 metres, and boats ascend and descend from one stretch to another through a series of nine locks. Of the nine bridges over the water, two are permanently open to vehicles and five to pedestrians. The other two are swing bridges.

[1] Revised version of an article in *Holmi* vol. VI no. 5 (May 1994)

At the Grange-aux-Belles swing bridge, a traffic intersection has taken shape. The water and surface traffic, which means the two quays, the canal and the bridges cross each other at three levels. The swing bridge is what enables this crossing above and below, by road and water. The bridge mostly keeps the road traffic flowing between the two banks, but when a boat comes along, the vehicles stop to give way to the water traffic. It enables transport of different kinds and in different directions, but not simultaneously.

The attractions are the turning of the bridge, the workings of the lock gates, the rise and fall of the water, and the coming and going of the boats. The action starts with the locks. They take the boats up and down from one water level to the next. The lock gates are crucial here, one damming up the water, the other releasing it together with the boat. This requires the lock keeper to stop the flow of water. Sometimes the water actually flows "upstream" by means of the locks. Even the water at the same level is not completely still: it flows through the lock system even in its quiescent state. The horizontal, vertical and inclined motions follow each other in rhythm. Working against gravitation, making water flow upwards – incomprehensible and entertaining. The challenge is temporary. The boat goes on its way, and the natural order is restored.

Interfering in this varying rhythm is the motion of the swing bridge. As its rotates, it modulates the other movements: it is a barrier to cars, making them stop or change direction; pedestrian movement transfers to the parallel hump bridge. Every movement is interrupted or continuous at different times.

Embedded in this choreography is the arched pedestrian bridge that rises steeply over the narrow channel of the lock. Originally, the bridges were built to take travellers over the water. But the curved bridges of Canal Saint-Martin are known for something else. The iron structures stand naked but nonetheless elegant. They look both strong and delicate, hard and dynamic, simple and bold. Triumphal arches over the canal.

The activity on the bridges is driven by human curiosity. People go up there for a good position to view the mechanical show. The bridges are theatre galleries. The stage action is down below: water buses, barges and yachts sail along the canal, locks and bridges perform their movements. Knots of people form to watch the plot developing, standing on what have become the symbols of the canal, the hump-backed bridges.

There is a little house beside the swing bridge. It belongs to the lock keeper, who operates the mechanism. He does his job with total ease. When a boat arrives, he comes out of the house, goes to the controls on the bank and starts puts the system into operation. He shuts the lower lock gate, lets the water rise, opens the top gate, lets the boat in, releases the water, lowers the barrier, diverts the traffic, opens the lock gate, lets the boat through, brings the bridge back into place, lifts the barrier and lets the cars go on their way. When his job is done, he goes back into the little house, does the administration, and sits back down to read his newspaper.

The mechanism operated by the lock keeper has a choreography that absorbs the onlooker. The changes in movement are not just a matter of machinery or the physical constraints. The inner motivation of pedestrians are as much a contribution to the life around the lock system as the actuation of the mechanism. People climb up to the bridge to see what is going on.

A square is part of the fabric of streets, giving it a special part to play. It stands out from other parts of the network, demanding a spatial enclosure that is different from the rows of buildings lining the streets. A square has special demands. If the watery boulevard is to fulfil the functions of a square, it must be given a suitable frame, and that means buildings to mark its limits. Are there such perimeter buildings in the case of Grange-aux-Belles? It seems like an unbounded piece of land. Do the buildings along the two quaysides sufficiently enclose the area to allow Grange-aux-Belles to manifest its identity? This is doubtful, the area being bounded only on two sides, like city boulevards. Boulevards are not squares. The buildings drawing the boundary are too far apart. They are hardly even visible through the trees. Consequently, the low buildings hardly have a presence, and the high ones have little more. The streets dividing the blocks further weaken the enclosure, making gaps. Finally, there is also an inadequate boundary to the north and south, because the traffic flows through two wide openings – on land and water, precluding any enclosure.

In exceptional cases, a square may be established on a stretch of road that widens out. Such are rue de Furstemberg and Cité de Trévise. There is no such widening in case of Grange-aux-Belles, unless we count the area in front, before we come to the square des Récollets park. The canalsides at Grange-aux-Belles draw closer together, so the "road" actually narrows here.

The narrowing is due to the lock system, and the canal widens again after it. It leaves some land on each side, and this has been laid out as a park. People walk under an arcade formed by the branches of trees arching above them. The sun's rays filtering through the thick foliage give little light. People under them do just what they do on a square. Some sit on benches to read, others to snooze. The walkway is full of strollers; the sandpit full of children digging. Along the bank of the canal, anglers wait, with little apparent hope, for a fish to bite. Beside them, people stretch out in the sun or dip their feet in the water. Around midday, many come to munch their sandwiches. All along the Canal Saint-Martin, Grange-aux-Belles throngs with people who come for active leisure or just to relax. Two parks/walkways surround the place on the sides and, in a sense, at one end. Do they substitute for a built enclosure? In the two rows of buildings parallel with the water, we find cafés and restaurants, which attract some life along the canal. Among the buildings along the edge is the Hôtel du Nord,[2] which became famous through the 1938 film of that name, and is still busy today.

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[2]   Although Marcel Carné's film was not made here but in a studio film set, the famous words of Arletty from the film – "Atmosphère! Atmosphère!" are always quoted by the tour guide on the water bus. Decades of protest against demolition have kept the rebuilt hotel in place.

This boosts the number of attractions, but the area still lacks a real perimeter, and remains lopsided. An accumulation of activities is not enough in itself for an area to really qualify as a square.

Nonetheless, this unusual diversity of attractions inspires the idea of putting Canal Saint-Martin forward as a candidate for the square category. The scattered elements of enclosure we have seen encouraged this idea, even if other, ambivalent features speak against it.

So if Grange-aux-Belles is not a square, what is it doing in a book on Paris squares? It would not be right to exclude ab ovo every ambivalent area. There is good reason for examining the borderline cases. We can learn from them, because rejected examples help us to refine the criteria.

PARK INSTEAD OF SQUARE

This book was originally intended to close with a square laid out since the Second World War. My research, however, did not bear fruit, and there is an empty space here. The modernist architecture of the new Paris quarters has not given rise to squares in the traditional sense. Only a creation of postmodern architecture, place de Catalogne, came up for consideration, but its bleakness put me off. The square lacks both natural elements and people. It has nothing but concrete and stone. The drawing boards of contemporary architecture do not permit the square to intrude. What there is instead, somewhat confusingly, is the *square*. In French, the word means something smaller than a park but bigger than an "urban square". Vegetation dominates, there is a different milieu, and it provides a different kind of experience.

Squares used to be points in the city where we could stop take a breath, but overload and the lack of fresh air have proved insurmountable problems. City-dwellers long for more space, better air, and quiet. They want nature to be built into the urban fabric, combining the quiet milieu of the countryside with the benefits of urban concentration. Efforts to address these demands have given birth to the *square*.

Green areas were already important to life in the city, but they were the wrong size and the wrong kind. Big spaces were distant[1] from the crowded city, and small spaces were squeezed into accidentally unbuilt gaps. Nowadays, there is a different way of building nature into newly-built areas of Paris. Some parks spread out like creepers among, under and over the buildings (such as Jardin de Reuilly - Paul-Pernin,[2] which bulges out of allée Vivaldi). Then there are strictly bounded parks in spaces between buildings. Such is the Jardin James-Joyce (1996–1999), enclosed by fence, streets and buildings. And there are parks within a residential block, like Square Duranton (1973). which is surrounded by buildings of nine different styles.

The new *squares*, with their lush vegetation and broad spaces, provide fresh air, playgrounds, benches and shade for anybody who wishes to use them. But by their nature, these fenced-off places, open only for certain hours of the day, cannot provide the functions afforded by the concentratedness of city squares.

What are the differences and relative advantages of squares and *squares*? The grassy expanse of the park makes the most visible distinction from the hard surface of the square. They also differ in size. Parks are broader and more open to the sky than squares, closed in by buildings. Squares have the advantage of giving a closer look at the buildings. The short distances means we always have a complete overview of a square. Human activity, confined to the enclosed space, is more concentrated and lively. The architectural enclosure ensures that the mood generated in the square is not dissipated. There are other advantages of compactness: all the elements combine into a single image, the overall impression goes deeper. Since things are packed into a small space, we take better attention of some individual components. Squares, and the cafés around them, are much better suited as places to meet, start off a date, or just talk. There is still a demand for direct relations between people, despite all of the virtual channels. It seems that ecological considerations do not pose any threat to social relations. There is separation, and there are parallels, neither being able to satisfy all expectations of city inhabitants. There are now lots of different ways of maintaining relationships. The two complement each other, and the old spaces live on.

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[1] Such as the Bois de Boulogne.
[2] The "viaduct", built between 1992 and 1998, was named after the former mayor of the district in 2014.

ATTILA BATAR, architect, born Budapest, 1925

Attila Batar went to school in the Reformed Church College in Sárospatak and the Royal Catholic Gimnázium in District 2, Budapest. After leaving school, he joined the Hungarian Georgist circle. (Henry George was an American economist.) In 1944, he took active part in the illegal anti-fascist resistance. After the war, he did sociographic research and joined the Hungarian Communist Party in 1947. He started to study sociology and history in Eötvös Loránd University in 1946. He was a pupil of István Hajnal. He graduated in history. He then taught in the university for three years as a junior lecturer until he was expelled from the Communist Party.

In the following three years, he worked as a machinist in Ganz-MÁVAG. When the 1956 Revolution broke out in October 1956, he was an active participant and a member of the Revolutionary Committee of Hungarian Intellectuals. He was arrested in 1957 and held for six months.

In 1956, he matriculated in the Faculty of Architecture of Budapest University of Technology. He graduated in 1963. For five years, he worked at the state enterprise Középülettervező Vállalat (Public Building Design Company). His mentor was György Jánossy.

In 1968, after further police harassment, he escaped to the West via Yugoslavia. He was granted refugee status in France, where he lived for a year and a half working as an architect for architectural firms. In 1970, he resettled in the United States, where he worked as an architect in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and finally in New York. He obtained his licence to practise as an architect in 1980. He produced a wide variety of designs, from private houses to medium-height buildings, residential and public.

After his retirement in 1990, he moved to Paris, where he lives today. In the last thirty years, he has written books on architecture and town planning, and they have been published in Hungarian, French, English and German. For several decades, he has worked for the international architectural quarterly *le carré bleu*. In 2015, he was honoured with the Farkas Molnár Award.

Selected works:
Lucien Hervé, Héttorony Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1992
Die Geschichte als Architekt, Mölker Verlag, Vienna, 1999
Városaink az ezredfordulón, Új Világ Kiadó, Budapest, 2000
A történelem mint tervező, N&n, Budapest, 2001
Lucien Hervé, Szent István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár, 2002
A sokrétű Viziváros, Szent István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár, 2002
A láthatatlan építészet, Ab Ovo Kiadó, Budapest, 2005
"Du Son, du Bruit et du Silence", *le carré bleu*, Naples, 2007
Az emberi tér, TERC, Budapest, 2010
Home, elsewhere, FUGA, Budapest, 2019

© Blanche Pilven

ILLES SARKANTYU, photographer, born Budapest, 1977

In 1995, as a final year student of the Secondary School of Visual Arts in Budapest, he won the Károly Escher Award. He graduated from the University of Applied Arts (now the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design) in 2000, and worked there first as manager of the photo studio and laboratory and subsequently as junior lecturer.

In 2004, he came to Paris on a French government scholarship, and has been living in France ever since. His portraits of the circle of Hungarian intellectuals he met through the collector couple Szöllősi-Nagy and Nemes was exhibited in the French Institute in Budapest in 2006, under the title *Franco-hongrois*.

Since the exhibition commemorating his father, *Mihály* (French Institute, 2011), his interest has turned to the study of memory and heritage. His photographic exhibitions are typically accompanied by a film about these subjects.

In 2013, he was resident artist in the Domaine de Kerguéhennec. A photo-installation and film representing the spirit of the place, *Ombrées*, were exhibited in the library of the chateau in 2014.

In 2015, he produced photographic work recomposing the stained glass window made by Marc Chagall for the Chapelle des Cordeliers in Sarrebourg, exhibited in the Musée du Pays de Sarrebourg under the title *La Paix*. Accompanying the exhibition was work by the composer Jean-Baptiste Doulcet.

Since 2007, he has been involved in curating the photographic bequest of Lucien Hervé. Several of his solo exhibitions have featured Hervé's equipment and dossiers. One large-format photograph from the series, *Contacts*, was included in the *Dans l'atelier* exhibition in the Petit Palais in Paris in 2016.

Illes Sarkantyu is an artist of Galerie La Forest Divonne, Paris-Brussels. His principal solo exhibitions are: Less is more (Paris, 2014), Paraphrases (Paris, 2016) and Abstraction du concret (Brussels, 2018).

Sarkantyu has made nearly thirty films on artistic themes. A selection:
Anna Mark au Château de Ratilly, 2007. 21 minutes
Lucien Hervé, 2010. 26 minutes
Janos Ber: Faire Face, 2010. 52 minutes
Alexandre Hollan: Arbres, 2011. 30 minutes
Ricardo Cavallo au pays de Non-Où, 2013. 62 minutes
Dansaekhwa, a koreai monokróm a 70-es évektől máig (Interview with Park Seo-Bo), 2015. 24 minutes
Tal Coat, Le ciel n'est pas distinct de la terre, 2017. 52 minutes
Mur/Murs, la peinture au-delà du tableau (in the Gyeonggi Museum, South Korea), 2018. 26 minutes

Books: *Face au vif* (2016), *Gavrinis, une chambre* (2017), Jean-Pierre Vielfaure, Illés Sarkantyu, *Fragments d'une chronologie du hasard* (2018), published by Éditions Domaine de Kerguéhennec in association with Naima, *Mise en demeure* (2020), Presse de Cloitre Imprimeurs, Saint Thomas Thomam.

Created in 1958, Le Carré Bleu analyses the relations between architecture and contemporary art. Since 2006, Le Carré Bleu has also been a publishing house, proposing a collection of monographic works:

1. **MEMOIRE EN MOUVEMENT**
   par L. de Rosa, C.Younès, O. Cinqualbre, P. Fouquey, L. Kroll, M. Pica Ciamarra, G. Puglisi, M. Nicoletti, A. Schimmerling. n°1, 2007

2. **MULTIVERSES**
   par Francesco Fiotti, n°2, 2007

3. **DU SON, DU BRUIT ET DU SILENCE**
   par Attila Batar , n°3, 2007

4. **L'ARCHITECTURE DURABLE COMME PROJECT**
   par Bruno Vellut, n°4. 2007

5. **POLYCHROMIES**
   par Riccardo Dalisi, n°5, 2007

6. **LE SONGE D'UN JOUR D'ETE**
   par Georges Edery, n°6. 2008

7. **DIFFERENCE / DIFFERER / DIFFERANCE**
   par Patrizia Bottaro, n°7, 2008

8. **CIVILISER L'URBAIN**
   par Massimo Pica Ciamarra, n°8, 2018

9. **PORTRAITS DE PLACES à PARIS**
   par Attila Batar, n°9, 2020

The ambition of "La collection du Carré Bleu" is proposing works tackling common problems: this "Portraits of Squares" by Attila Batar - a contributor to Le Carré Bleu for more than thirty years - echoes also the work by Massimo Pica Ciamarra in "Civilizing the Urban": configuration, history, ambience of urban squares are as many emblematic parameters of the identity of European and Mediterranean cultures.

Since 2012, la Library of the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine and the Bibliothèque Nationale Francois Mitterand hav supervised the processing in digital form of all the issues of Le Carré Bleu - from 1958 to date - as well as of all the volumes of "La Collection du Carré Bleu". All the titles can be freely unloaded at the following address: **http://www.lecarrebleu.eu**

January 2021