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Time aspects in the design of Les Halles in Paris

Alain Guez

The new government of the city of Paris decided at the beginning of its period in office (2000) to turn the Les Halles district into the centre of the city. The RATP, the Paris transport operator and manager of the interchange node Châtelet-Les Halles, started some preliminary studies (2001) on this sector of the French capital. It consequently commissioned the *Urban Time and Mobility Planning Research Area* of the Politecnico di Milan to study time aspects of the district and its process of transformation. In this context this article extends the thinking of the research team by looking at the time regimes of the urban and architectural design currently being defined today. The Council of the City of Paris decided in December 2002 to start a study of Les Halles employing a definition study planning procedure. This procedure allows the design process to be conducted by using several design teams (four teams in this case: AJN, Jean Nouvel; MVRDV, Winy Maas; Oma, Rem Koolhaas; Seura, David Mangin) in two planning stages; an initial 'open' or 'collective' stage to draw up a programme and a second 'closed' or 'individual' stage for the project team to make planning and architectural proposals. A complex time architecture emerged for the Les Halles project from an analysis of the process definition and design documents. Piloting of the design is developing as the team goes along, thanks to the procedure chosen. A huge debate animated the Parisian scene after the designers presented their proposals (June 2004). The City of Paris had announced from the very

beginning that it wished to construct the project using a democratic process of dialogue with the actors involved and with citizens. The proposals acted, very probably far beyond the City's expectations, as catalysts for public debate, opening up the public space of the design beyond the confines of the formal consultation piloted by the City and involving citizens in the future design of this area.

This process aspect is very closely connected with the time architecture of the project and is an integral part of the demands put to the designers. The hypothesis formulated here is that the City of Paris, probably without being fully aware of it, brought up the issue of time as an urban planning and architecture matter. The set of proposals is today developing in the direction of a mutual redefinition of the contents of the demands and the proposals. The City had actually asked for solutions to the functional problems of the area, but the problem was put only partially, according to the interpretation of some of the designers. Urban planning and architectural design act here not only as a solution, but also as the implementation of the problem expressed. In this context the demands made on the designers appear in a new form and in time complexities which some had anticipated and others today are trying to demonstrate, by changing the shape of their proposals presented today as 'flexible' and 'strategic', rather than as formal and complete. The designers have added to the questions put initially by the client and the actors. We will focus on the time aspects that appear central to the designs and the process as a whole. The transformation of the Les Halles district is a project

with a strong symbolic content because the successive transformations of the area have fuelled debate on the city, not just locally but also at international level.

The desire of the current City government to act on this strategic place has taken on particular importance because the Les Halles project poses questions for contemporary modernity. In effect, the urban planning issues of Les Halles have helped transform the public's awareness of its heritage in France in particular. According to the historian François Hartog, the 1970's Les Halles project was set at a turning point in the evolution of the relationship between urban planning and time in France. The architectural design proposals seem to have a short memory. They make no reference to the geographical origins of this gateway to Paris; they rather propose interpretations of history in relation to both the ambitious 1970's project and the trauma caused by the construction site and by the famous "Les Halles hole". There is a historical vision at work in the designs which reactivates the memory of the construction site for the Parisian designers (Nouvel and Mangin) and the memory of the modern design at the origin of the transformation in the 1970's for the Dutch designers (Koolhaas and Maas). It is therefore a question of recovering, revealing, extending or inventing depending on the designer. The concept of in-between times may be useful for interpreting the time regime of a project. Jean Nouvel proposes "putting the construction site on the scene" by organising cultural and artistic events, taking the life of the construction site as an integral part of the project. For the Maas team, which takes the extension of

the 1970's project as its starting point, the proposal of a horizontal window which illuminates the underground floors figures in the discourse as a "pedestal" waiting for a "design to come" and which would express its uncertainty over the present. What is more, following an idea expressed in the first stage of the design, the proposal of the Maas team was conceived to be able to house a central High Speed Train station in Paris. While Koolhaas's proposal does not have a fixed time horizon, its project is presented as a complex open time architecture, more of a planning instrument than a finished proposal. The proposals as a whole express this motivation seen in the visual representation which suggests a strong but not a final image, because the construction details are not given. Acknowledgement of the multi-rhythm use of the area appear in the Nouvel proposal which outlines a 'night place', interpreting a characteristic of the 24 hour round the clock area as it was in the old Les Halles that disappeared.