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**Les Halles. A time architecture workshop**  
Gian Piero Calza

Why Les Halles? What was the 'belly' and today would like to be the heart of Paris has hidden, as it were, the vital streams that animated it in the depths of that 'big hole', leaving only a few wrinkles on the stitches on the surface. And this is the point: can an urban place, part of a complete body, a syllable of an entire word continue its existence hidden from sight without any visible sign appearing in the light of day? Because a city is precisely that: the flow of life made visible by architecture. If this is missing there is no city. And if there is no city there is no architecture. Here then we have a possible answer to the first question: the city of Paris has realised that there is a scar in its body that has not fully healed. The vital streams inside have not been interrupted but the surface tissues are torn and the city no longer recognises itself in that place.

The problem seems clear then: to intervene in a part of the city where something has been lost or where something has not been fully completed.

**One initial time dimension: the history**

Why the history? When one speaks of urban time it is not the history that is referred to but the present of a city: its functioning and its use by those who live in it. However, aren't the ways in which it is used and the functioning of a city in the present to a certain extent conditioned by, and I would like to say have their origin in the spatial organisation within which these uses and functions occur? There doesn't seem to be any doubt to me over the reciprocal interrelations between spatial and time factors in the living of urban

life: it is sufficient to consider the different ways in which everyday activities are performed in a city centre or in a diffuse conurbation. These different ways of inhabiting a place are connected with the history itself of an inhabited space, with the formation and transformation of the organisation of a settlement by those who live in it. Inverting the arrow of time is meaningful for the research that was conducted on Halles, it sets the problem of its present and investigates it through its origins. This is not an option of a descriptive nature: it is instead a question of re-constructing something which is given but which is not known in terms of the process that constructed it; it is a question of interpreting the present in the different moments that constitute it; it is a question of conceptually reconnecting the times and Brownian movement of everyday life in the web of the persistent spaces and extremely long time spans of the city.

Things like words are involved in this operation of re-constructing the present. What meaning is attributed to the term forum in the urban history of Paris? This can only be understood by looking at the maps that show the topographical history of the city. They show us a first forum at the cross roads of two lines (pre-existing Celtic trails) marking the foundation of the Roman settlement Lutetia on the left bank of the Seine; a second forum the Port de Gréve (which became a square) on the right bank of the river, a new centre of city life for the entire High Middle Ages; a third forum at Champeaux, the urban edge of the ville that developed after 1000 AD on the right bank, where the main roads of the north-western urban quadrant converge: beyond the cardinal axes of St. Denis

and St. Honore, the spokes of Coquillière, Montmartre and Montorgueil-Poissonnière, the latter being the main routes of communication towards the new destinations of commercial traffic, the Channel and Flanders. It was this third urban judicial site that was to host the first Les Halles, where they would remain until they were ultimately transformed into the new forum.

The recurrence of the term indicates the permanence of an eminent urban function at different times and in different places: the function of centrality, of cross roads, of convergence, of radiating outwards, the mercantile and trade function, the economic and civil function, the symbolic and identity function, the function of mobility and meeting. They are all functions that mean urban times and spaces contracted or dilated according to the occasion, but always confirmed: the contracted time of the space of proximity and of neighbourhood; the dilated time of the vast dimension, of distant destinations.

The latter are performed in the present, in the historical city of the present, in the same spaces as in the city of the past; they are in fact determined by them. It is the strength of Les Halles' past that determines its location and the urban space of the current Forum des Halles. It is the centuries old streets that converge there that have made the present day urban and extra urban metro lines converge on the same hub; it is the accumulation of mountains of goods on that point over the centuries that has resulted in the formation of one of the largest shopping centres in the city; it is the centuries of people, present and resident, swarming at those cross roads that created the salle d'échange; it is the centuries of people and goods

entering Paris over that initial threshold that has conserved its function as the gate of the city. It is therefore the permanence of particular functions which makes an urban space a place: functions that therefore have the effect of giving an identity to the spaces that house them; the more the architecture tries and succeeds in resolving the effect into tangible forms, the more recognisable it is. If today Les Halles are again subject to question, it is not because of the function they perform and which urban history has assigned to them, but because of the forms that don't identify them: forms which do not complete the history.

**A second time dimension: urban**

Why urban? This term still has meaning if it refers to the terms that culture has conferred on the most completely resolved inhabited space: the city. It is not therefore intended, as Choay suggests, as a domain of non places. This new spatiality, "which frees us from local ties", is to be set in relation to the new time, "which frees us from duration to install us in the instantaneous. The organic time of re-evocation/remembering, of interrogation, of waiting, of journeys and of deviation is rejected".

This sort of reference to space and time together affects the inhabited city with regard to what is most precious to it: "the organisation of the constructed framework based on solidifying constructed elements together and also solidifying the same elements with their natural and cultural context". It is this point that we share with Choay. Drawing the conclusions, to reconsider Les Halles for what is incomplete in them today may mean an effort to

restore measure to new paradigms of space and time, by rooting them in an inhabited and consolidated urban dimension. The Baltard design of the new Les Halles complies with this supra-historical urban model. The composite structure of the ancient Champeaux forum with its different spaces is cancelled for ever: the site of the covered market, which stretched from the end of St. Eustache to the Rue de la Ferronnerie; the carreau which acted as a public square, flanked by the street which descended toward the Innocents in a broad curve; the wall of the Saints Innocents, an ancient cemetery, which supplemented the religious functions of St. Eustache. The relationship between the main road network (that of regional as well as urban importance) and the location of public and commercial facilities was determining for the siting of the first Les Halles. "These Les Halles find themselves in a lucky position; they are at the centre of the capital, right where the four most important streets in Paris end, those, that is, which cross the whole city". It was this circumstance, unchanging over the years, which kept the central Les Halles alive for centuries. Today its function has changed, not its location. At the end of their existence, the same urban planning circumstance will give rise to the present day forum, but projected underground. When the Council of the City of Paris, having abandoned all preceding programmes, decided in 1968 to proceed to the renewal of the Les Halles area, two main objectives were set: to create a station for the Réseau Express Régional (RER regional network) to connect this network to the city centre and to create a large underground forum, to avoid further functional

overcrowding on the surface. Ten years later both the RER station, Châtelet-Les-Halles, and the shopping precinct, the new Forum, were inaugurated. Once again the conditions were created in the heart of the city which in the previous stages of urban development had produced that mix of functions and those convergences of traffic and transport routes which each time had been given the name 'forum'. What is new today? It is that these conditions, all of them, have been created underground, in a certain way therefore, free from the influence of urban surface structures. How must we interpret this circumstance? As an absolutely exceptional fact which de facto and symbolically recreates the original conditions of every urban foundation: the crossing in one place of routes that start from the four cardinal directions and the meeting in that point of the most important functions of associative life. It seems almost the confirmation of an urban destiny for Paris which allowed the city to rediscover a central fulcrum, a constant point of reference as the urban structure evolves towards an indistinct and cloudy geography.