

## **Letter From Paris: The Merits Of Hubris And Humility**

When it comes to urban design, the French have a unique ability to use heavy-handed state authority to produce systems that are technologically and aesthetically advanced. When successful, their state-trained engineers and civil servants produce stunning urban systems, like the TGV high-speed train network, that combine high technology, artistic elegance and coordinated efficiency. This can be seen not only in the TGV system, which has helped keep Paris a center of Europe and thus economically vital, but also in the country's state-run nuclear power system, and its phone and electrical systems. Even the arching brick tunnels of the city's 19<sup>th</sup> century sewer system are elegant.

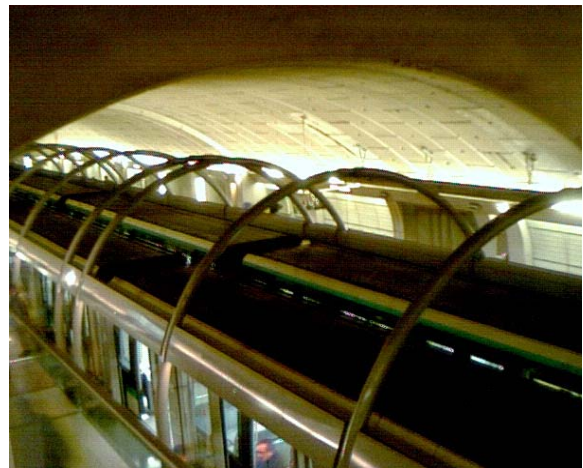
When unsuccessful, however, the French way can produce grotesque white elephants that seem to emerge unchanged from the heads of their designers, and then lay flat upon the earth, unloved and unlovable. The modern La Defense office district outside the central city illustrates this possibility, an immense complex devoid of urban energy.

A recent visit to Paris confirmed all of this, again. As New York moves forward with the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site, as well as the continual renewal of the city itself, both examples are good to keep in mind.

**The new Meteor subway line** and the surrounding development districts show French urban design at its best. This number 14 line runs from the heart of old Paris on the Right Bank to the new Bercy office district, then under the Seine to the "Bibliotheque Nationale Francois Mitterrand," the new national library built on the Left Bank.

The French have not only designed a great subway line but have used it as an instrument of urban development.

The Meteor trains are completely automated and operate without drivers, probably one reason the line has the lowest operating costs in the system. The individual cars of a train are linked by rubber gaskets, like the long accordion-style buses in New York. The entire train is open to walk through, which distributes riders more efficiently and provides a feeling of openness. The train whooshes into stations behind a glass wall that protects those on the platform from the open pit of the tracks. Once in the station, the doors and the glass wall magically open in unison to allow riders to enter or exit. The stations are architecturally ambitious. The Gare de Lyon station includes a jungle-like garden that blooms behind glass directly behind the platform.



A Train on the New Meteor Subway Line in Paris Entering The Gare De Lyon Metro Station. Photo by Alex Marshall

I was impressed by all of this, although not as much as I was three years ago, when I rode the Meteor shortly after it opened. Since then, the New

York subway has been improved with new trains and ongoing station renovations, and so the contrast between the systems this time was not as great. Still, the new Meteor line, and the Paris metro system as a whole, has an elegance and verve that New York doesn't match.

**Alan Cayre, supervisor of the Meteor line** at the French transportation authority RATP, said his agency gives architects more authority than is typical, and that his office keeps aesthetics in mind from the beginning. Even the pylons on the elevated portion of a new light rail line, he noted, were designed by architects.

The Meteor has two goals, Cayre said: "To ease congestion on the number one line, [the city's oldest line which runs directly through central Paris], and to be an instrument of development for the new Bercy district and around the Biblioteque Nationale."

I interviewed Cayre in his elegant office in the Bercy district overlooking the Seine river, with the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame visible in the distance, as well as the new glass-fronted offices beside the Austerlitz train station directly across the river. Like many French officials, Cayre spoke little English and I stretched my uneven French around the subject of urban design.

Cayre's offices, with their blond wood walls, and the building itself, which is the new home of the RATP, are themselves examples of the French inclination toward bold urban design. I complimented Cayre on his wristwatch, which had a gray face on which simple black strokes marked the hours.

"Oh this," he said. "This is no big thing. It was done by one of the designer of the Meteor line, someone who has unfortunately passed away."

Clearly, Cayre cared about design. I felt like I could draw a line from his watch to the sleek hallways of the building, to the high-tech glass walls of the Meteor line which his office supervised and constructed. It was hard not to compare Cayre's offices with some of those of the

New York City Transit I had seen, which were standard, uninspired office cubicles.

The French have poured billions of dollars into the districts connected by the new transit line, in addition to what was spent on the Meteor itself. It is their effort to jump-start development in the areas that their planners believe are ideally suited for Paris' future growth.

Contemplating these development districts, I wondered how New York would change if it conducted urban design in the French manner. Consider Long Island City in Queens. For decades, the state and city have talked about developing this district that lies directly across the East River from Midtown Manhattan. But apart from some modest design improvements, the authorities have done little more than rezone property, which in itself took years. Under the French model, the state and the city would have already poured billions into designing and implementing a master plan.

Of course all this costs tax money. In fact, the French could only build the new Meteor line because there is a payroll tax that funds transportation, as well as national financial support for the regional entity that runs the metro system.

**The pitfalls of French urban design can be seen in the rapidly aging La Defense office complex** on the outskirts of Paris. Completed in the late 1980s under Mitterrand, the complex is a stunning example of architectural purity and efficient urban design. The complex's imaginative hollow-cored, rectangular office tower, the Grande Arche, lines up with the axis of the Arc de Triomphe and the Champs Elysees. Every aspect of the French transportation system, from highways to subway to bus to intercity rail, connects underground beneath this complex. Above ground, ambitiously-conceived office towers sprout from a wide plaza, as well as new residential towers. Its development was a 40-year story, and its roots are in the Le Corbusier inspired ideal of towers on a park or plaza. As a watercolor drawing, or a model in Styrofoam, the complex is

breathtaking, its ambition laudable.

But in person, this complex is stunningly dead. “I come here only to work,” said Claude, a well-dressed man I talked with as he walked across the plaza. “To get together with friends, I go to Central Paris. This is only to work.”

Ant-like people make their way across vast plazas. Below ground, people listlessly shop at a central shopping mall. “Feels like Albany,” to paraphrase a remark about the initial WTC site designs, could not be more accurate. Where is the “energized crowding” that defines great urbanism? Traditionally, this has taken the form of great restaurants, stores and cafes along sidewalks on traditional streets. I have no problem with abandoning these old forms, as long as some successful new forms can be found to take their place. Are there any?

With about 20 million square feet of office space, 140,000 workers and 33,000 residents, the La Defense district is larger in size than the former World Trade Center complex, but in the same ball park. The French claim it is the largest office district in Europe.

It’s difficult not to see La Defense as a giant warning sign to the designers sketching visions for the WTC site. If built, would any of the designs presented at the Winter Garden in December produce “energized crowding?” It is hard to keep this in mind as one reacts viscerally to the imaginative forms seen in the scale models now on display. I instinctively loved Daniel Libeskind’s proposal. But what would it feel like to walk across his plaza built below grade as part of a memorial complex? Would it not swallow up any single person or even groups of people? The Corbusier ideal of towers in the park has supposedly been discredited, but most designs for the WTC site have their roots there. The one exception, the Peterson/Littenberg plan that reinstalls the old streets on the site, may be condemned as “traditional.” But does any other plan address the site on the finer-grained level necessary to produce vital urban space, as well as a great skyline?

The old World Trade Center, despite having some merit as a pair of skyscrapers, lacked energy as an urban space. We appear to be on our way to building a new one that may be equally antithetical to vibrant city life.

Given the financial resources being made available to the WTC redevelopment, New York should be able to emulate French urban design at its best, rather than its worst. I see a great new transportation hub, architecturally ambitious, that links to vital new urban spaces featuring the best of contemporary architecture. Can anyone get us there?

--Alex Marshall, Senior Editor, RPA

## A Robust Public Process?

With two public hearings scheduled by LMDC for next week, it’s a good time to reevaluate the role of public input in the rebuilding process Downtown. The media attention surrounding the unveiling of the nine new designs for the WTC site last month reminded everyone that the public remains interested at an unprecedented level. Because of this interest, public opinion has been solicited on a grand scale throughout the process, and some of that input has even been incorporated into official planning. Once government’s domain alone, the civic community has championed and hosted successful public dialogues, seen most notably by the success of last year’s *Listening to the City* and *Imagine New York*.

But now that we’ve moved to the next phase of the process – and seem rapidly headed for a master plan – the public agencies are reverting to business as usual. The two official hearings scheduled at press time are both of the conventional variety, with participants allowed a minute or two to express their opinion but no time scheduled for public officials to respond, and no mechanism provided for dialogue between members of the public. Simulcasting the hearings to remote locations is laudable, but no substitute for holding separate hearings throughout the region.

Is it possible that the rebuilding agencies heard

all they need to hear from the public over the summer, and needn't make more of an effort? A quick look at the nine designs shows that some public input has been included – the restoration of the skyline and street grid, innovative design ideas and sacred memorial space. Still, the public's overwhelming demand for a decrease in commercial and retail space on the site has been all but ignored.

What is needed is for the public agencies to engage the public in a two-way dialogue addressing the best use and program for the WTC site, and how it fits in the context of Lower Manhattan. Mayor Bloomberg sketched out one vision in his speech last month. The state authorities should directly encourage discussions along these lines before proceeding to a master plan. Right now, discussions of architectural aesthetics are being used to divert attention from such questions.

So far, the government agencies have failed to take the initiative, and it's difficult not to conclude they are consciously avoiding such a discussion. *Imagine New York* has stepped in to fill part of the void with another round of forums, but still needed is an outlet for engaging a larger, representative sample of the region's residents in a way that ensures their opinions cannot be ignored by public officials. The beauty of *Listening to the City* was that it sought – and found – consensus, and presented it immediately to the media for easy consumption. Rebuilding officials had no choice but to acknowledge the will of the public, and scrap their plans.

So where does that leave us? It's possible that public input might be more constructive once the public can focus on a single plan. But this will mean putting the architecture of the site aside, and talking about larger urban visions. The public should understand how early decisions impact what can eventually be built on the site. At that point the public will be ready to really weigh in on the big issues and determine if the master plan is the right vision for the site, Lower Manhattan and the region.

--Jeremy Soffin, Dir. Public Affairs, RPA

#### Calendar

**Jan. 15** -- 5:30-7:00PM. *New York City: The Ice Age Stopped Here*. Historian Fred Hadley's slide show and talk on the city's geologic roots. At the library, 188 Madison Ave. 212 592-7000.

**Jan. 21** -- 6:00-8:00PM. *How to Revive the Retail Sector in Lower Manhattan?* The Center for an Urban Future. Pace University, Multipurpose Room, 1 Pace Plaza. (Use Spruce Street Entrance.) Contact Margaret Curtin at 212-346-1020

**Jan. 22** -- 8:30AM. Sector-Based Approaches to Economic Revitalization. Moderated by Fiscal Policy Institute economist James Parrott. At the Urban Center, 457 Madison Ave. RSVP: 212 935-3960.

**Through Feb. 23** -- *Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting & Photography, 1907-1922*. At the Bard Graduate Center, 18 W 86th St. \$3/\$2 seniors & students w/ID. Q? 212 501-3011 or [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

**April 25** – Regional Plan Association's *Regional Assembly* at Marriott Marquis in Midtown Manhattan.

## Regional Plan Association

#### Spotlight on The Region

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