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A Green Transformation for the ‘World’s Most Beautiful Avenue’

By adding trees and taming traffic on the Champs-Élysées, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo promises a car-free makeover for the French capital’s iconic boulevard.

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This week, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo gave the green light to a dramatic makeover of the French capital’s most famous avenue, the Champs-Élysées. Promising to turn the 1.4-mile (2.3-kilometer) strip from the Place de La Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe into an “extraordinary garden,” the city’s [\\$305 million plan](#), envisioned by architects [PCA-Stream](#), will roughly halve the space allotted to cars, greatly increase the area’s tree cover and seek to encourage more small-scale shops along the avenue’s flanks.

The project, dubbed “Re-Enchanting the Champs-Élysées” and due for completion by 2030, is arguably overdue. While the street still largely retains its international tag as the “world’s most beautiful avenue,” the Champs-Élysées’ reputation among Parisians has been low for some time. Despite its grand buildings and dramatic vistas, the avenue has been widely criticized in France for being polluted, congested, pricey and – thanks to brand saturation and heavy tourism – even “[ringarde](#),” a term probably best translated as “passé.”

The current lack of love among locals for the Champs-Élysées is an open secret. A [2019 survey](#) found that 30% of Parisians disagreed with the “most beautiful” tag – a proportion that rose the closer respondents lived to the avenue itself – with 71% dismissing the street as “touristy.” Even the city, in its [proposals](#) for the renovation, acknowledged the street was currently known as an assembly point for “big international chains perceived as antiseptic and scarcely distinguishable.”

Most major cities have a bland-but-popular commercial hub with a similar function – New York’s Times Square or Amsterdam’s Leidseplein spring to mind. A specific problem of the Champs-Élysées, however, is that it is both [ringarde](#) and too expensive to be truly accessible. Even emporia for domestic brands, such as a huge Louis Vuitton flagship, make the street’s retail offerings feel like a very expensive airport. Strollers don’t come here just to shop, of course, but with heavy vehicle traffic and large expanses of heat-radiating asphalt, it isn’t an ideal spot for café terraces either.

As a result, locals are staying away. PCA-Stream’s investigations into flows of people in the area found that, once you discount people working in businesses along the street, only 15% of pedestrians on the Champs-Élysées came from Greater Paris.

The new makeover won’t automatically make the street hip, but will certainly make the avenue a more pleasant place to linger, much along the lines of other [greening](#), [car-calming](#) projects conducted already elsewhere in Paris. Current renderings (still potentially susceptible to later adaptation) show sidewalks roughly doubling in width while car lanes will be reduced to four – even around the Place de L’Étoile, a multi-spoked intersection connecting all the avenues essential for northwestern Paris’ circulation. Generous bike tracks will flank both sides, while the remaining vehicles are shown in renderings (somewhat optimistically) as mixing peacefully with pedestrians, suggesting an as-yet-unannounced reduction in speed will also be introduced. This pedestrian space will be shaded by a newly doubled line of trees, and the paving beneath them partly cleared to create a more rain-absorbent surface.

It’s at the avenue’s eastern end, at the Place de la Concorde, however, that the greatest change will be seen – a change that, unlike the rest of the project, should be in place before the 2024 Olympic Games. Here, the currently spectacular but rather arid plaza, marooned behind lines of traffic, will be visually reshaped by planting. What is now a vast tract of paving stones will be filled with tree-shaded lawns bracketing the square’s fountains like a pair of open lips. A major road on the square’s southern edge, meanwhile, will be buried, its surface planted with grass and bushes. Sweeping views across the square will likely be lost at several points, but the space stands to feel more accessible to pedestrians. By joining up existing gardens, it will eventually be possible to walk from the Louvre all the way to the Arc de Triomphe under leafy cover, breathing cleaner air in a green space strewn with benches and water fountains.

The businesses along the avenue should be due for some changes too. Public consultation found that citizens wanted a “more authentic and more French retail offer,” according to the city, one “emphasizing French art of living, *savoir-faire* and gastronomy”. Given the popularity of the street with visitors – and high commercial rents that oblige businesses to have a high turnover to survive – this guideline might risk creating a theme-park version of French culture that could itself still have [ringarde](#) aspects to it. A desire to make the avenue more of a monument and less of a mall nonetheless seems like a promising sign.

And yet a calmer, more car-free Champs-Élysées may still come as a shock. This is, after all, a multi-lane thoroughfare where traffic has long been part of the scene. Back in the days before cars were more widely acknowledged as harmful, the tangle of Citroëns and Renaults weaving around the Arc de Triomphe was considered a quintessentially Parisian spectacle – proof that city life was loud and dirty but also dynamic and vibrant. Few may want to preserve this scene, but a Champs-Élysées *sans* cars will be a notably different place – a great axial avenue no longer primarily dedicated to movement.

More than a decade ago, a somewhat similar transformation swept the crossroads of an American metropolis, [New York City’s partially pedestrianized Times Square](#). That still rankles some New Yorkers [nostalgic for bygone bustle](#), and Hidalgo may find certain Parisians likewise resistant to banishing cars along this boulevard; her multi-year campaign to rid the city of automotive domination has been marked by such [pushback in the past](#). But if the car-free wave continues – and developments in other European cities, including [Brussels](#) and [Madrid](#), suggest it can – more grand urban spaces could look forward to a less frenetic future.