

Champs-Élysées: Green Grandeur



Mayor Anne Hidalgo has given the green light to the first section of the renovation plans and the transformation of the Champs-Élysées.

A private association which brings together the main economic players responsible for Paris's most famous avenue has been campaigning for years for the transformation of the Champs-Élysées. Its project, designed by the local firm PCA-Stream, aims to turn the legendary avenue into a monumental garden. Mayor Anne Hidalgo has given the green light to the first section of the renovation plans. While the quality of the design may seem beyond question, important issues concerning the implementation of the project and the use of the future public spaces and facilities remain to be addressed.

It took five years and an investment of 1 million euros for the Comité Champs-Élysées to achieve its objective. A large urban development project, a symposium, a publication and an exhibition were the milestones of the remarkable lobbying work carried out by this association, which brings together the main economic players responsible for the most famous avenue of Paris. Since 2015, they have been campaigning for the makeover of the street once known as the "world's most beautiful avenue". The historic axis that links the Tuileries Garden to the Arc de Triomphe, passing through the Place de la Concorde and the Grand Palais, has indeed lost much of its sheen. Parisians have abandoned it to such an extent that they now account for only 5 per cent of its frequentation. The reasons for this are excessive car traffic, pollution, lack of public facilities and ageing of the street furniture.

The Transformation of Champs-Élysées

In order to convince the municipality of the need for a major renovation project for the area, the powerful association - which includes companies such as Louis Vuitton, Nike, Apple, Tiffany, McDonald's, BNPParibas and Zara - has spared no expense. In 2018, it entrusted the local firm PCA-Stream, led by architect Philippe Chiambaretta, with a prospective study and a renovation project to "re-enchant" the thoroughfare. The chosen verb obviously refers to the attraction that this monumental 70-metre-wide avenue has historically played in the collective consciousness of French people and of foreigners visiting Paris. Lined with luxury boutiques, banks, corporate headquarters, theatres and cinemas, the avenue provides the backdrop for power representations, such as the 14 July military parade, as well as for large popular gatherings, such as the ones to mark victory in a sports championship, the end of election campaigns or protests against new reforms.

A political issue

The choice of the architect Chiambaretta for this major urban development project is, for instance, anything but fortuitous. Coming from the world of management and finance, this businessman-architect directed the Paris branch of Ricardo Bofill's Taller de Arquitectura for ten years, before opening his own firm in the capital, which works mainly for large private companies. One of his last projects was the renovation of the former Parisian Virgin Megastore, which was run at that time by Jean-Noël Reinhardt, now president of the Comité Champs-Élysées. The latter personally presented the project last year to the various candidates for the post of mayor, including Anne Hidalgo, who was re-elected last June. Hidalgo has always been in favor of a policy of greening the city, and at the beginning of the year she officially announced the financing of the first part of the project, from the Place de la Concorde to the Grand Palais, so that it will be completed in time for the 2024 Summer Olympic Games.

In just a few years, the greening of cities indeed has become one of the main topics of the French political debate. During last year's election campaign, candidates from different cities vied over the number of trees to be planted: 170,000 in Paris, 500,000 in Lyon, 100,000 in Nantes. Faced with this sort of bidding war, the appeals of various architects and landscape designers, who tried to demonstrate that the quality of the plantings was much more important than their quantity, were useless. Promoting the establishment of "urban forests" in the heart of Paris, Hidalgo has included the Champs-Élysées project in her broader policy of greening and pedestrianizing the city's public spaces. This is all the more important as the French capital is currently one of the least green large cities in the world, with only 10.6 m² of green space per inhabitant, compared with 31.7 m² in London and 88 m² in Berlin.



● ○ ○ ○

A marker of modernity

Based on the hypothesis that the Champs-Élysées is a marker of modernity, the study by PCA-Stream suggests that the legendary thoroughfare would embody, if not prefigure, the changes of our world. Since its inauguration in the 17th century by André Le Nôtre, in order to open up the perspective of the Tuileries Garden beyond the walls of the capital, the avenue has always been the Mecca of modernity - in terms of architectural and urban considerations as well as those of lifestyle and consumption. From this point of view, it is high time that it was brought into line with the Anthropocene. To achieve this, the architect proposes to reconnect the top and bottom of the avenue in a coherent "ecosystem". The upper part, from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place Franklin D. Roosevelt, would be, according to him, a "planetary hyperplace", a concept borrowed from the French geographer Michel Lussault, who defines it as a territory where the tensions of contemporary globalization are expressed. The lower part, characterized by gardens laid out in the time of the prefect Baron Haussmann, is rather a "hypervoid", a dull space that no longer attracts anyone.

Following the heat waves that hit the city hard in recent years and the growing attention paid by citizens to the issue of global warming, the project proposes nothing less than to transform the avenue into an "extraordinary garden". To achieve this, PCA-Stream's plan is based on three key concepts. The first is to shrink the space dedicated to cars by reducing the number of lanes from six to four and by pedestrianizing large parts of the surrounding streets. The second aims to restore coherence to the existing gardens, which are now largely dismembered, by developing an intense artistic, culinary, sports and leisure program. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the project plans to plant a large number of trees to fight against the urban heat island effect, absorb fine particles and improve the well-being of the people who walk along the avenue.



Champs-Élysées: the project sections

Starting from the Tuileries Garden, the project is divided into different sections. The Place de la Concorde, today a large, paved expanse serving as a crossroads for the major axes that converge there, is largely pedestrianized. At its corners, four small gardens are created, thus freeing up a vast paved square, which can be used for gatherings and public events. The new pavement, partially permeable to rain, is interrupted by the pre-existing monuments - the fountains, the obelisk and the urban furniture - to which are added two water mirrors which are supposed to refresh the square by nebulization. By linking the square directly to the Grand and to the Petit Palais, the Champs-Élysées gardens constitute the natural extension of the Tuileries Garden to the west. They are the result of the renovation of the various existing green spaces dating back to the time of Haussmann, redesigned to accommodate children's playgrounds, accessible lawns, sports fields and kiosks. The pedestrianization of the Avenue Winston Churchill and of the Pont Alexandre III allows for the creation of an entrance space for the museums and the various new public facilities. The reorganization of the banks of the Seine with the installation of a floating swimming pool and the extension of the existing car tunnel will finally allow these new green spaces to reach the water.

Along the whole avenue, the most spectacular part of the transformation is achieved by the replacement of the pavements, which extend from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe. They are made of light granite slabs with a high albedo and are shaded by two rows of existing plane trees, whose pits are enlarged to facilitate their growth. By considerably reducing the space devoted to car traffic, the project provides for the creation of a green promenade and a wide cycle path. These lead to the Place de l'Étoile, which is redesigned in a similar way to the Place de la Concorde. The Arc de Triomphe, now isolated in the middle of a noisy roundabout, is protected by a crown of vegetation. The concentric rows of trees that surround it are integrated into a continuous promenade that constitutes the western limit of the project.

Goals and open-ended questions

According to its initiators, the project aims to make Parisians rediscover the avenue by improving the quality of pedestrian spaces and significantly increasing the amount of green space. And yet, is this really the goal of a project carried out by a private association representing such considerable financial interests? It is impossible not to notice the fact that the spaces the project proposes to redevelop are mainly the entrances to the avenue's commercial spaces, which are among the most expensive in the world. In 2019, number 79 of the avenue was sold for 613 million euros, that means almost 80,000 euros per square meter. Faced with this speculative bubble, is it not rather to make these commercial spaces more attractive again that this project has been so strongly supported by the private sector?

Interestingly, the initiative is officially not only about the "sustainability" and "desirability" of the spaces. It also aims to be "inclusive", for example by increasing the number of benches, public toilets, accessible lawns, public facilities and kiosks with "affordable" prices. On an avenue that has been, certainly since the protests of the yellow vests movement in 2019, a symbol of the growing inequalities in French society, these "inclusive" interventions seem to want to defuse possible criticism. While there are some important aspects that still need to be solved - for instance how the new avenue with all its plants and flowerbeds will be used for military parades and big events - the quality of the proposed design seems beyond question. It remains to be seen how the mayor's office plans to carry out the project and what weight the powerful lobby will have in its implementation and in determining the use of the future public spaces.