

1) Peterson Littenberg competition plan

# AIMS AND MEANS OF URBAN DESIGN

## STEVEN PETERSON

The essay, *Aims and Means of Urban Design* was first published in *Architectural Design Magazine*, issue #9/10, 1980, which was dedicated to the *Les Halles Design Competition* entries of 1979. This version of the original article was revised in 2017.



2) COMPETITION SITE: Empty site in 1979 after destruction of "Les Halles" located between the Louvre to the left and the Pompidou Center to the right.

### THE BACKGROUND - The Design Competition for the Les Halles Market Site, Paris, 1979

Victor Baltard's *Les Halles*, Paris' central market from 1867 to 1969, ordered by the decree of Napoleon III in 1861 to modernize the ancient medieval market structures existing at the site to better serve a rapidly urbanizing Paris, praised by Mies van der Rohe as the "symbol of the golden age of French building techniques", called a masterpiece by Walter Gropius, and immortalized as the metaphorical protagonist of Emile Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris - The Belly of Paris* (1873), was condemned in 1968 for demolition. The market was relocated from the city center to the suburb of Rungis.

Presented with a unique historic opportunity to repurpose a large area in the heart of Paris, the City proposed a major infrastructure project at the site: a highway underpass, a connecting hub for metro and suburban transit lines (RER), and a retail development under a public park that incorporated a shopping/entertainment "forum" oriented more to the transit system rather than the Parisian street. It was rightly received with approbation when presented to the public as a *fait accompli*. Furthermore, it was deemed necessary to remove all 12 of Baltard's beloved glass and iron pavilions to expedite construction.



3) AERIAL PHOTO: the site still empty and under reconstruction - looking for a solution in 2014 - 35 years later.



4) PETERSON/LITTENBERG PLAN - an urban reconstruction of multiple public spaces.

By 1978, anger at the official project had coalesced around a group of leading intellectuals, neighborhood associations, professional journals, and architects and planners, who initiated a competition - the *Consultation Internationale Pour L'Aménagement du Quartier des Halles* - to counter the official government project with design proposals to remediate the results as constructed. The highly detailed "brief" issued as part of the competition incorporated affordable housing, retail, public open space, sports facilities, and theaters.

The significance of this "open" international competition to the architectural discourse is emblematic of the renewed interest in the design of the city taking place at that time. The project illustrated in the following article was authored by Steven Peterson and Barbara Littenberg, with David Cohn. It was one of three *Projets Laureates* awarded from among the 650 worldwide submissions to the competition. This project was the only *Les Halles* design to be selected for exhibition at the first *Biennale de Paris* held at the Centre Pompidou in 1980.

### THE COMPETITION PROJECT - Peterson/Littenberg's Competition Statement:

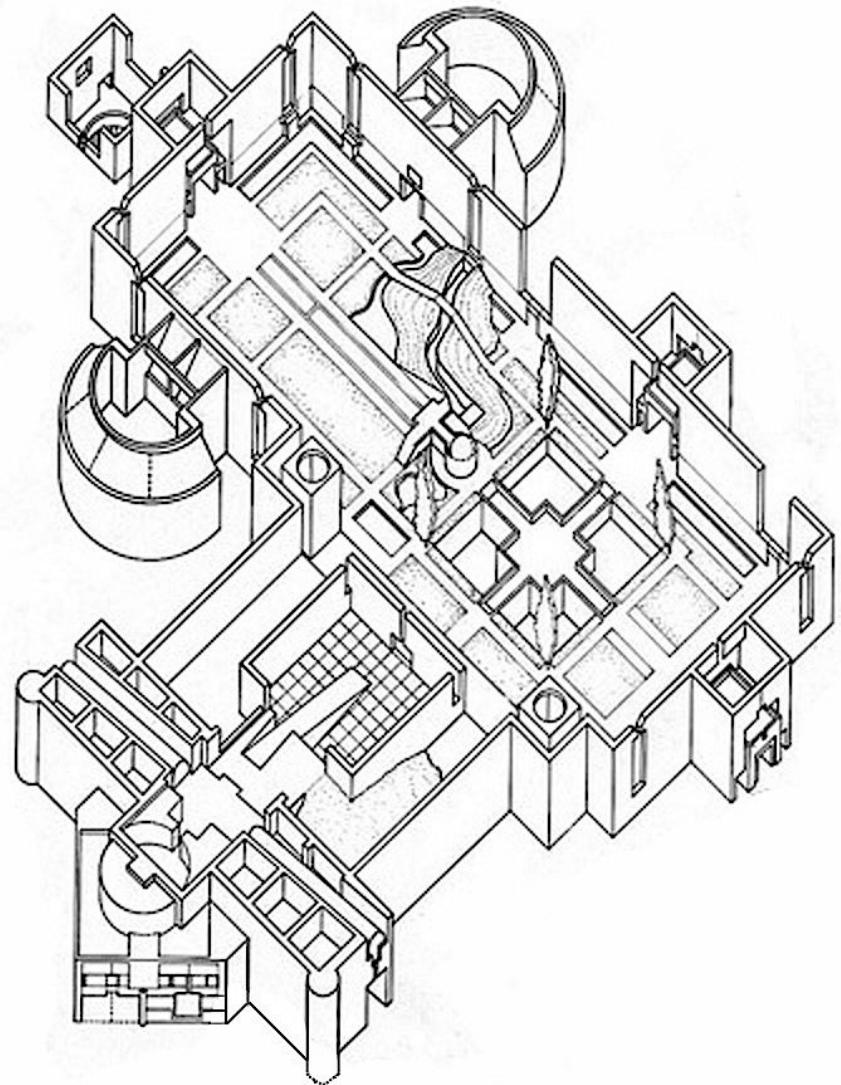
*We should like the main space to be a quiet public place, belonging to the entire City of Paris, and representing the idea of city itself:*

*The space is walled like the ancient city, but with a reversed significance. Urban activity occurs outside the walled precinct rather than within it. The internal space serves both as a garden and a public courtyard, hidden within the city and accessed by its attached external squares. Its function is different from that of the typical activities of the boulevards and squares. There are no shops, no cars, and no private approaches to the surrounding houses. The proposed residential spaces have their own separate squares, rooted in the urban context. There are only four gateways into the new internal precinct and no direct access from the precinct to the underground Forum.*

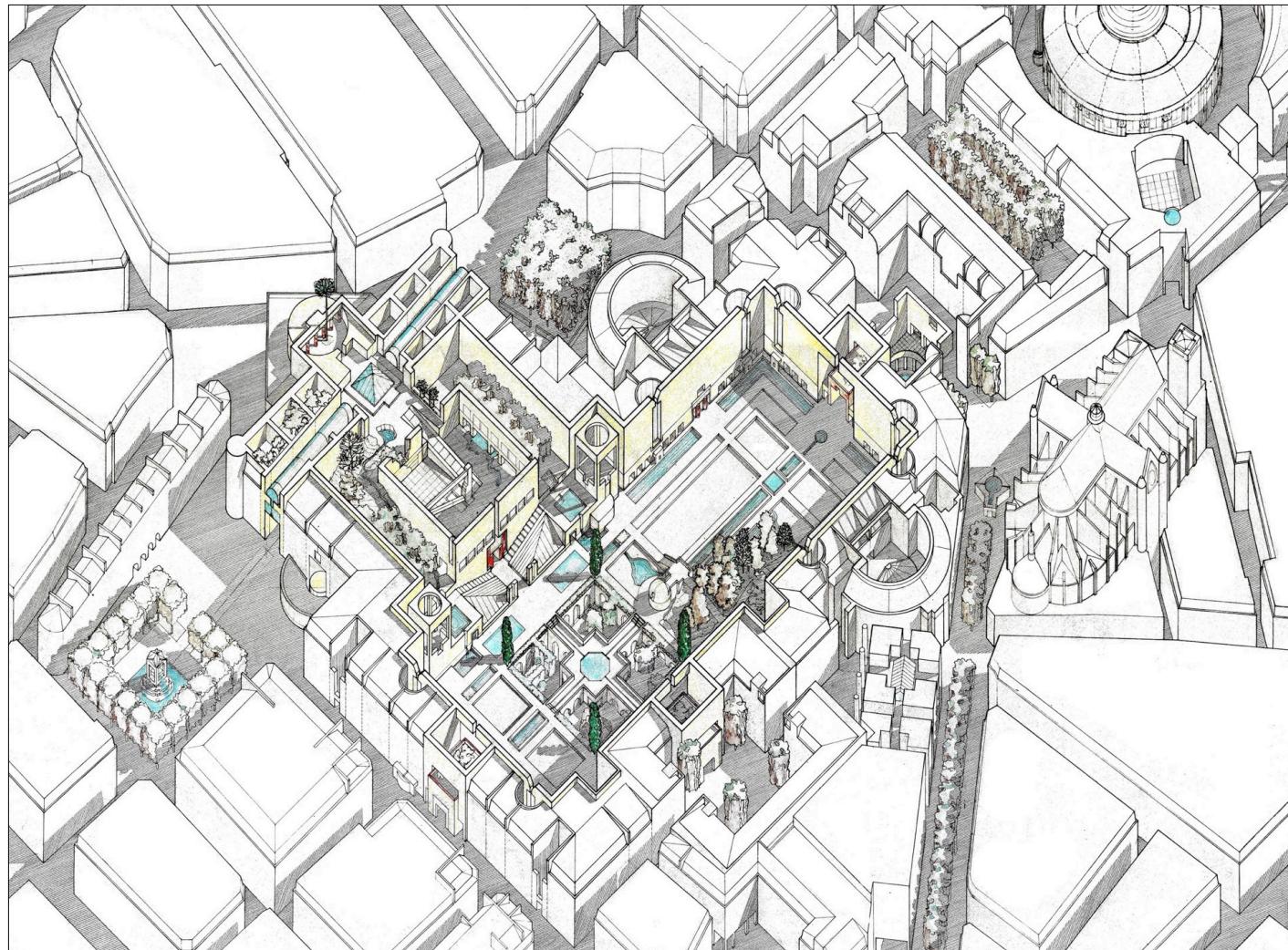
*The actual sunken "forum" has been modified: one part has become a four square grotto, visible from above but inaccessible at street level. Another part is a sky-lit covered market.*

*The architecture of the plan is affected by the idea of a public wall, with private elements added to its exterior. The wall exists to define the volume of the precinct garden space. It is treated as an ordinary party wall, an "objet trouvé" and not as a facade. It is finished in simple stucco, with wells of light and separate niches which serve as benches sculpted into the base.*

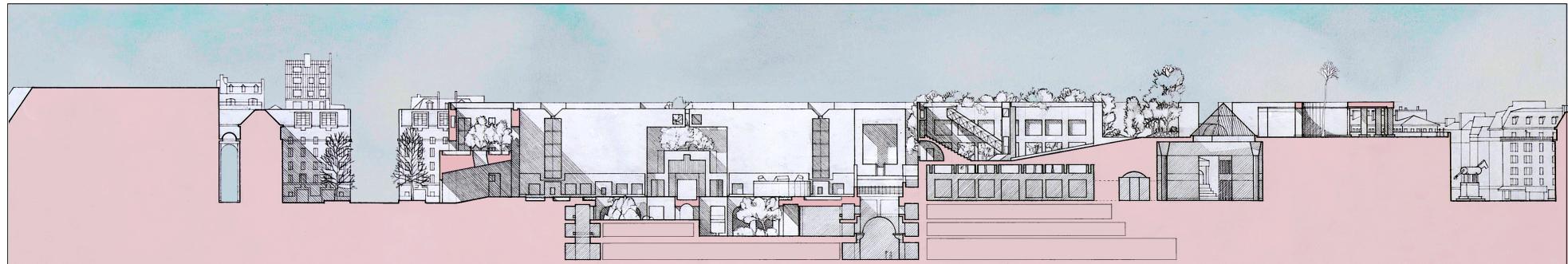
*This city party wall is situated beyond a moat into which a spring of water flows down from the terraces that enclose the exhibition center. The exhibition space should be a museum dedicated to the City, so that the entire project represents the history of urbanism and the garden. The place should be unique and innovative: a metropolitan place. We have taken this as an opportunity to create something special out of the vast emptiness in the center of Paris, and to find a way to reconstruct the city around this new inner precinct of space (see plan figure 1, axonometric figure 6, and diagram figure 5).*



5) *The Public walls form an armature of Space, a quiet "internal garden precinct". The Museum of the City is to the lower left attached to a galleria.*



6) Axonometric looking southwest; the quiet inner garden precinct with the variety of attached urban spaces, overlooked by the Museum of the City.



7) N/S cross section

Residential square

Gate

Sunken "Forum" grotto and view of east gate

Rooftop - Museum of the City overlooking inner garden precinct

## THE ESSAY - AIMS AND MEANS OF URBAN DESIGN

There is a general agreement that the modern idea of city has proved unsatisfactory in application because it has destroyed the elements of the city itself - street, block, discrete space and differentiated private place. But the mental process of modernism has still not been completely displaced in proposals for the city's reconstruction. This mental process results in the architectural objectification of urbanism: the design of the city continues to be evaluated as a composition of discrete, rationalized elements. The slab for example, has been substituted for the block, without a critical reevaluation of the spatial framework that must accompany it. The full catalogue of urban elements must be reinstated.

However, modern architecture's prejudice against the existing city is still retained. The ever-new modern city of distinct imagery is apparently still required to overcome the imagined wilderness of congestion, poverty, financial bankruptcy, and pollution. Although the traditional city is vaguely advocated, in some way it continues to be seen as the problem rather than the solution.

The design competition for Les Halles Quarter of Paris of 1979 is a confrontation of these fundamental dilemmas of methodology and value. What are the objectives of urban design and the criteria that may be used to evaluate it? What general ideas can govern the choice and configuration of urban form while also measuring and confirming the success of a solution?

To answer these questions one must first distinguish between architecture and urban design in order to illustrate the difficulty of extending architectural conventions to the urban scale. Architecture aims at a self-contained unity and comprehensibility of form, while urban design is inherently more diverse. As a matter of scale, a large section of a city should not be defined as a single formal thesis to be seen as a comprehensible entity. However, there is still a tendency to address the problems of large urban areas by conventional architectural means - to envision sites as single identifiable entities, to define clear and fixed programmatic uses, or to apply a specific stylistic convention or a series of unified compositional images throughout. Each choice merely limits the solution to being an autonomous "project" on an arbitrarily determined site.

Part of the problem with this process of architectural objectification is the implicit assignment of a singular use or meaning to a whole district. However, there seem to be no appropriate choices: there are no significant institutions that justify a grand Beaux - Arts program, no egalitarian palaces that manifest order as a single organism. Conversely, the unification of a whole district, as a kind of hierarchically differentiated campus imbedded in the city, either implies an authoritative central order or implicitly proscribes social enclaves. The modern alternative to this dilemma of content is the insistence on the autonomy of each building, ordered through regularity and repetition. This apparent neutrality attempts to avoid the implications of an arbitrary formalism, but in fact the uniformity of the resulting space merely diminishes its capacity to ascribe meanings to public place.

Even those analytical processes that are intended to rationally determine urban form are surprisingly anti-urban. City planning methods analytically separate activities and uses, to make each part more manageable and comprehensible: the result is to support discrete architectural components more than complex urban elements.

The functional program as a determinant is invariably too inflexible because it fixes identities and relationships in precise building form, thus limiting the interpretations of an urban design by restricting change, alternatives, and re-use. Both the program and technical analysis encourage the divisive extrapolation of those elements that once formed a cohesive, traditional urbanism.

The first step toward defining the objective of urbanism is to differentiate between the appropriate methods of architecture and those of urban design. It is necessary to recognize that the familiar frameworks that stress architectural unity, singular imagery and comprehensive identity are contrary to reconstructing the city fabric. Urbanism assumes architecture within it and attempts to transcend the problems of unified meaning and a singular methodology.

The second step is to accept the beneficial characteristics of the existing city. The objective of a continuing urbanism is simply to reconstruct the historical city, while extending and elaborating its configurations and density. But one must be aware that this is a city with implicit complexity and even unpredictability. Its design depends on the invention of context, the construction of an urban texture that establishes a variety of places in continuous proximity, providing simultaneously for both autonomous pieces and an aggregate pattern.

This city of a continuing urbanism can be designed on principles appropriate to group form; it involves both the idea of area and the techniques of field and mapping. This process cannot be completely rationalized or determined by analysis. Its intention is a synthetic construction that will always contain aspects of accident and disorder within its framework. This city is valid as an objective precisely because it becomes a mosaic for problem solving.

It is not necessary to decide where to build a community center or how much commercial space to provide on a street. A compound urban fabric needs no program or functional analysis ("universal" diversity can be substituted for "universal" space). The complexity of a multi-use texture provides the capacity to satisfy itself in this respect. Alternative interpretations are sponsored by mere proximity of form and variety of place. Congestion is part of the solution, providing spontaneous multiple connections and real simultaneity through an aggregate possibility of mixed uses.

The interweaving of existing and new fields of urban texture requires deployment of conscious urban design tactics that are not strictly architectural. It depends fundamentally on self-conscious choices - the use of discontinuous figural space, not continuous voids; the design of dwellings as part of complex blocks, not as objectified housing; the consciousness of walls as thickness, not slabs as lines, or blocks as free standing objects; and the establishment of alternative design fields, deliberately smaller or larger than the available sites. This will produce a series of combined, overlapping solutions appropriate to themselves yet conscious of the continuities beyond. The density of texture will provide linkages and separations of space that are more flexible than the naked continuity of a single open area.

## LES HALLES, The Site in Particular

The specific problem at Les Halles however, is not entirely generic. It requires not only a reweaving of the city texture but also the introduction of major public space of metropolitan scale. This is justified by the area's history, its central location (in correspondence with the Ile de la Cité) and its compounded transportation connections.

It is a symbolic place and a singular destination that warrants a unique formal identity. These two objectives, the general reconstruction of the city fabric and a major public space, are potentially contradictory on a site of this size and proportion. It is the accomplishment of both which seems to be the unique challenge of Les Halles. The following description outlines the objectives and intentions of this particular scheme.

The empty site is 1,000 feet long and 500 feet wide at its narrow end.

### a. Reinforcement of the continuities beyond the site

The surrounding rectangular district is actually the enlarged field of composition for the Les Halles site ([figure 8](#)). Its boundaries are emphasized by the solidification of the center, eliminating through connections and reinforcing local ones. The diagonal streets are not connected to each other or conventionally resolved but are individually terminated and diffused. This contributes to the impression that perhaps the new Center Precinct may have been the generator of influences rather than the receiver ([figure 8a](#)).

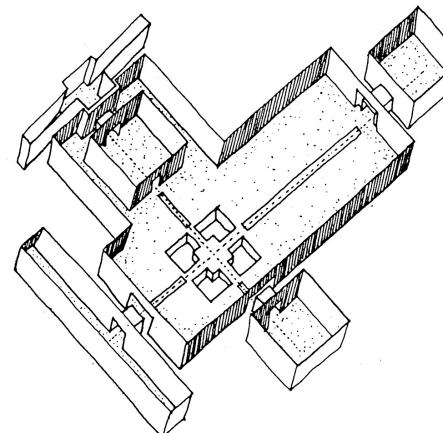
### b. The suppression of the existing site boundaries

The existing north and south boundaries of the site are eliminated as through connections so that the continuous linkage of spaces along Rue St Honoré becomes primary. A new sequence is emphasized in the blocks above the Rue de Rivoli. The Rue St Honoré is continued from the front of the Palais Royale through the proposed galleria/exhibition building into the Place des Innocents, where it continues to the Rue Berger and the Centre Pompidou ([figure 11](#), [figure 13](#)).

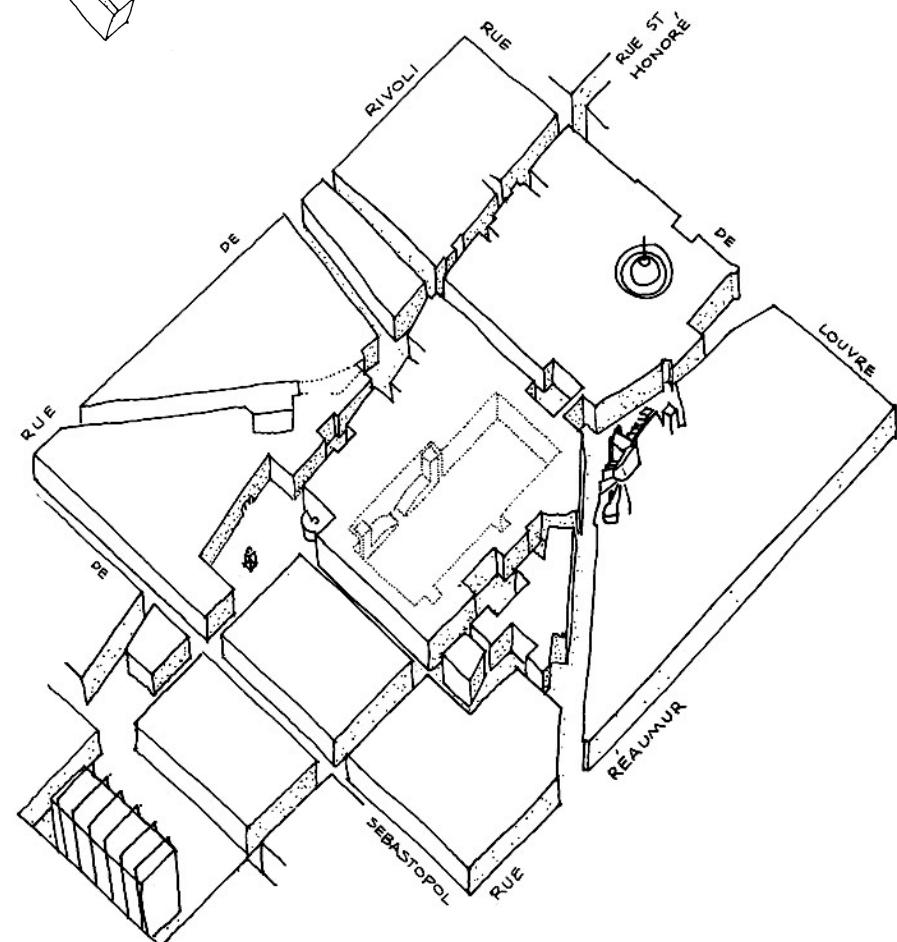
### c. Continuity of texture

The discontinuity of these boundaries (Rue Rambuteau and the Rue Berger) also facilitates a more complex north/south continuity of new textures. At the western end, a new field of blocks and spaces join the areas below and above the site through the creation of new residential neighborhood. At the eastern end, a new street forms a clear boundary to the existing blocks.

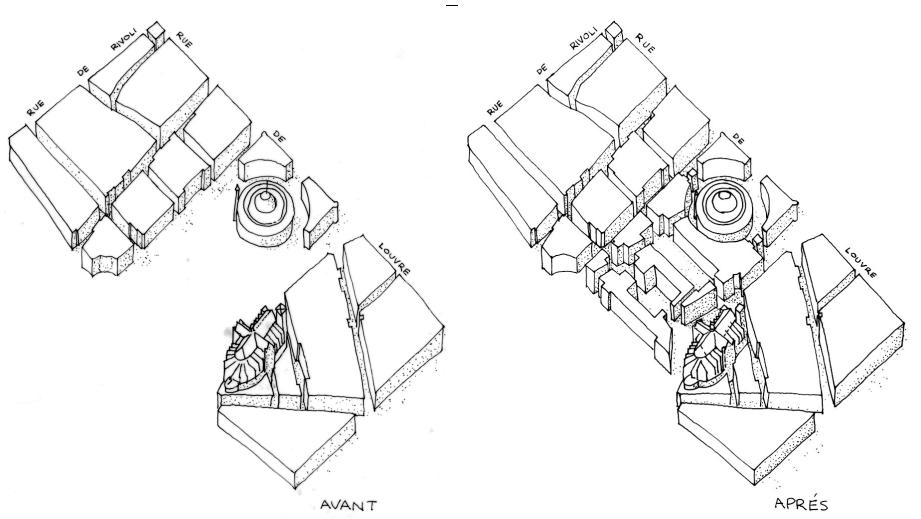
To the west, new urban texture is inserted to reconnect the city fabric from north to south that allowing separate treatments of the two a local monuments; a side space for St Eustache's transept tower and a circular completion around the Bourse ([figure 9](#)).



8) a. *The Center Precinct of Inner Public Garden with its four gateway entrances.*

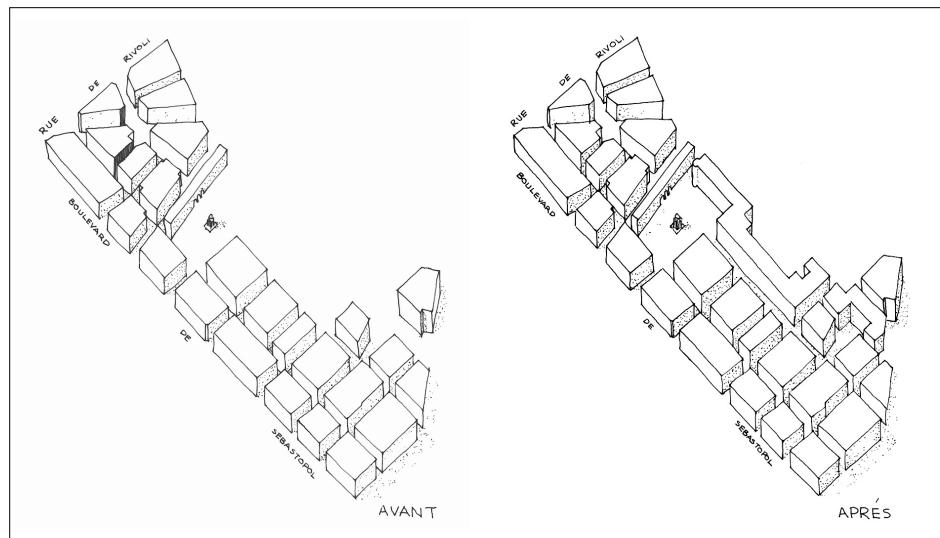


8) *Diagram of the rectangular district of Les Halles, illustrating the linkages into the city beyond the site.*



9) The round Bourse and St Eustache with no context. Appropriate settings provided for each.

To the east, the existing group of blocks is at present divided by the gap of the Place des Innocents. They are joined in a new field that establishes a broader boundary formed by a proposed bent wall of housing wrapping the inner precinct. The north and south groups of blocks thereby encompass the Place des Innocents that is restored to its original historic size. The Rue Lescot, formerly the eastern edge of the market site, can now be understood as a new center penetrating the middle of the Place des Innocents and linking a sequence of spaces running north from the Rue de Rivoli to the Rue Turbigo. In addition, the northern texture is expanded around the air conditioning plant serving the shopping center below, concealing it from within the site ([figure 10](#)).



10) The blocks flanking the Place des Innocents are joined in a restored space for the fountain.

In part, the location and size of the inner precinct space results from the specific requirements of completing these textures, but it is also a consequence of other site conditions. These suggest that the present site must be divided into several sub-compositions that limit the size and location of public spaces. Therefore, the solution for the major plan element must be smaller than the available site.

#### d. Existing axes

The existing axis between the Bourse and the Forum is in itself a dilemma. This arbitrary alignment is left over from the design of the Baltard's market halls and its continued accentuation produces a false emphasis between inappropriate things - the back of the Bourse and the light well for an underground shopping center. To emphasize this axis would make them dominant symbols.

To avoid extending the Bourse's influence, it is more appropriately confined to its own space and defined by a limited local context. This stabilizes its position and reinforces its frontal orientation toward the Rue de Louvre. Connections to the rear are deliberately made off axis, one extending obliquely from the column, the other connecting through the Hotel courtyard to the facade of St Eustache as an extension of the Rue de Jour. Similarly, this east/west axis is eliminated in the Forum light well. The Forum is remodeled into a series of grottoes that appear to be sunken parterres from the surrounding garden. Its visible dimensions are made to serve the space above, while a portion of it is enclosed under a skylight to form a central hall for the shopping levels below ([figure 18](#)).

Finally, the north/south axis from the Pont Neuf to the transept tower of St Eustache must be maintained. This is the primary visual link beyond the site to the Seine. To intercept this sequence with a major destination before its logical termination at the church is difficult to justify - it seemed logical then to confine the sequestered space to one side of this important visual axis ([figure 14](#)).

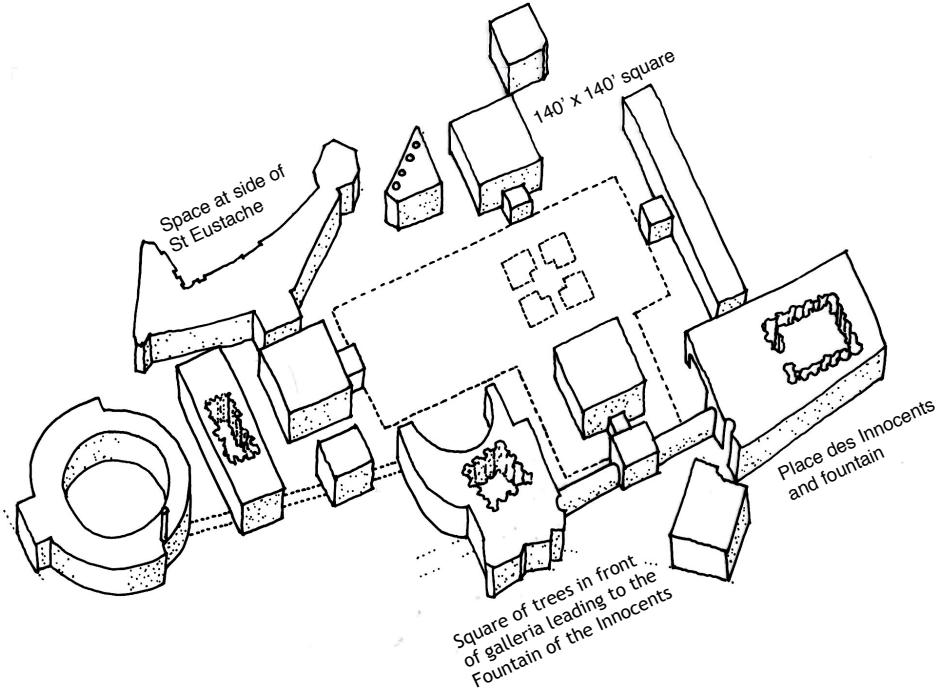
The location of the major new metropolitan space is derived in part from these considerations, but its particular characteristics and form are another matter. The solution seemed to lie beyond simple typological choices.

On the one hand, a space on this scale, opened in a conventional way to receive the principal surrounding streets, seemed to demand a more significant building or event than is available to justify it. On the other hand, a more secluded, residential square would bind the area too closely to its immediate surroundings, restricting broader interpretations for the entire city.

Our solution was to provide both; a series of peripheral local squares and a central main space ([figure 11](#)). In this case, the city walls contain the structured space of a protected garden, while the city appears to expand endlessly outside. This connotation of a historical or archaeological city, carved out of the interior of existing blocks, is amplified by restricting access to the garden to four gates located at the cardinal points. The garden is structured by this primary cross-axis like the original Roman town or Imperial Forum. It is both garden and urban space developed as a combination of flat parterres floating within a moat, and a series of terraces stepping up to the south eventually reaching the roof level of the external city and providing a view back to the Ile de la Cité and the tower of Notre Dame ([figure 6](#)).

### e. The surrounding urban spaces

There are ten new urban spaces and two restored ones around the perimeter of the main sequestered garden precinct (250 feet x 600 feet). They create a variety of places at differing scales and proportion that punctuate sequences of movement along the streets around the garden precinct ([figure 11](#)). There is a repetitive 140 feet x 140 feet module to the square vestibules with gates leading into the Precinct Garden ([figure 12](#)). Two are residential places, the third a room in the museum ground floor that emerges out on the roof as an object of 140 feet x 140 feet. The square of trees at the west of the Passage/Galleria is 140 feet x 140 feet and fits inside the ring of trees around the Fountain of the Innocents on the other side ([figure 13](#)).



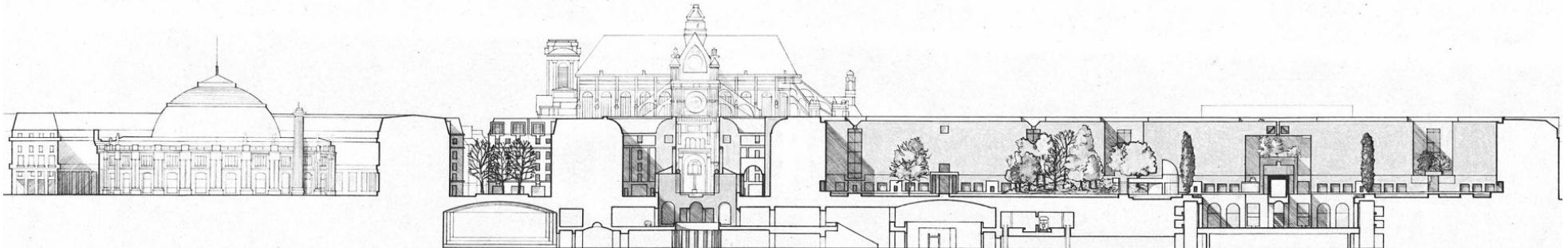
[11\) A variety of urban spaces surround the garden precinct \(dotted line\).](#)



[12\) 140' x 140' residential square forming north entrance to garden. Gate to the left and transept tower down the street in the distance.](#)



[13\) Square of pollarded Plane trees in front of the Museum of the City designed like a French Chateau Fort. The galleria penetrates through to the fountain on the other side. Note the exposed party wall on the right.](#)



*Circular enclosure of Bourse*

*Axis through to transept of St Eustache  
with public athletic facilities below*

*Garden precinct*

*View of north gateway entrance with  
shopping "Forum" and train station below*

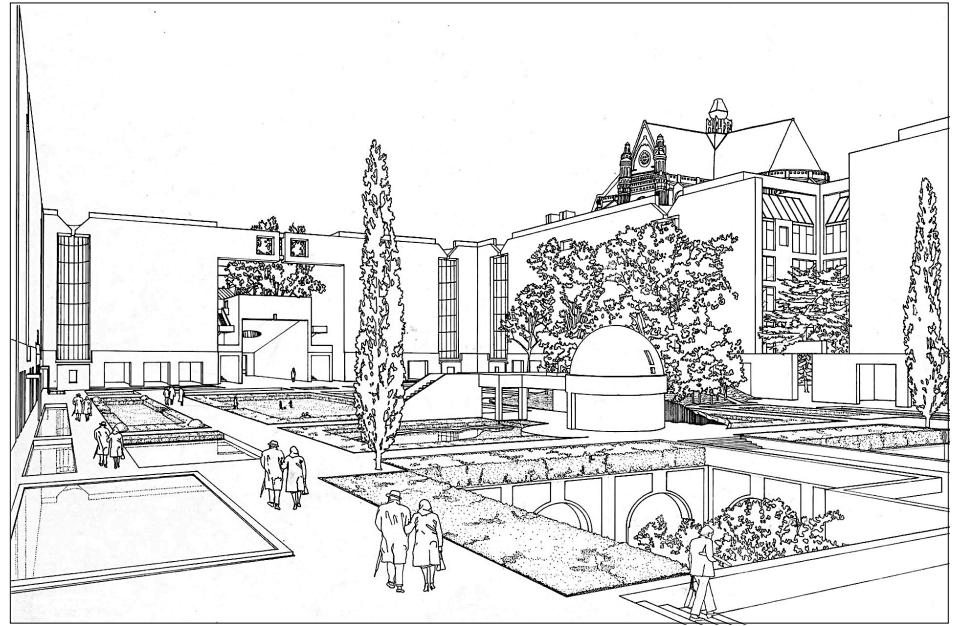
14) Long section looking north.

#### f. The form of the public precinct

The alternative strategy was to develop this whole area of the site as a composite precinct - an urban element that is characterized by its ability to perform in more complicated and deliberately ambiguous ways. Its interior is a figural armature of volumetric space manifested in different ways according to various peripheral conditions. To the south the exhibition building, which is part of the precinct, presents itself as a principal facade somewhat like the walls of an ancient Chateau Fort ([figure 13](#)). To the north and west, however, the precinct's object quality is suppressed to integrate it with the surrounding texture. Its walls become housing and its configuration is shaped to correspond with the form of adjacent streets and squares. The entire precinct is intended as a symbol for the idea of city, conceived as a traditional walled town, but in a reversed poetic conception. Historically the city was contained within its walls, while the garden and landscape were located outside.

The interior walls of this space are made like the exposed party walls on the edge of a construction site after demolition - blank, stucco, and with profiles of Mansard roofs in section ([figure 15](#), [figure 16](#)). Vertical slots for residential light wells provide collective windows for the surrounding buildings without being represented in the garden as individual facade elements. The elevation of these walls belongs only to the surface of the public space. It signifies the condition *in between* the actual elements of the city.

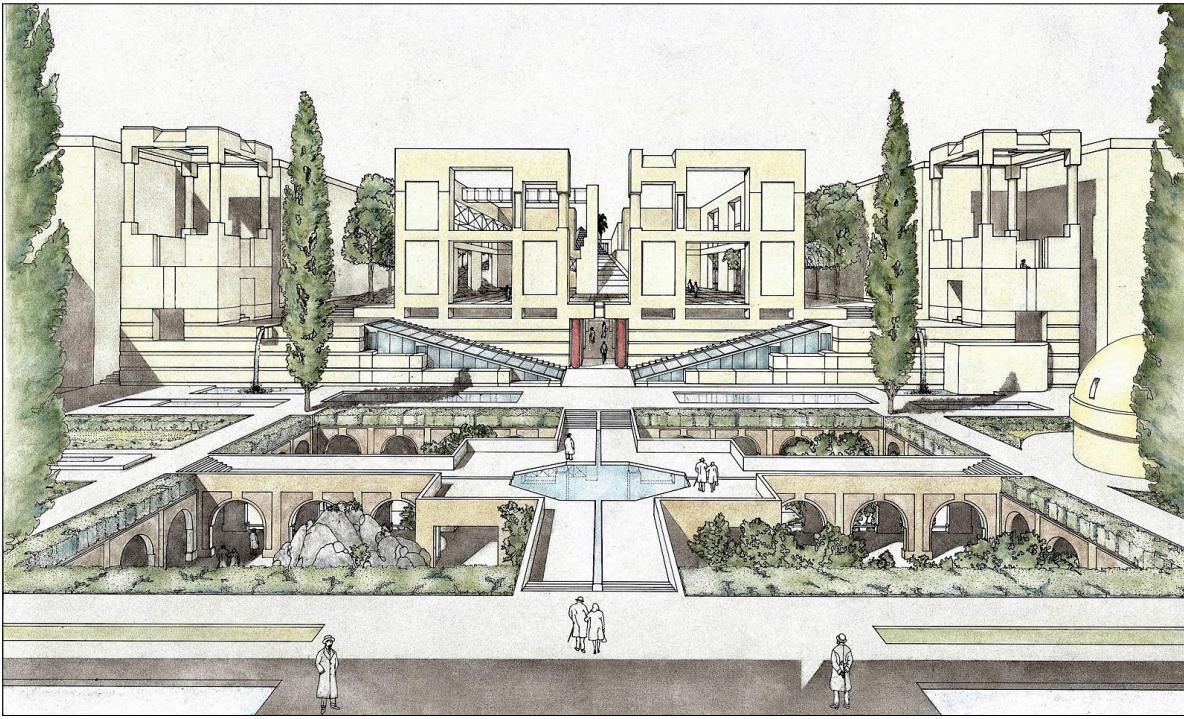
In this way the garden space remains generalized and does not assume a proprietary relationship to its immediate adjacencies. Access to these buildings is external to the garden via the street ([figure 12](#), [figure 14](#)). The experience of the public space becomes a radical juxtaposition - its form and definitive surfaces are composed of an ordinary element that is normally hidden between buildings. Its exposure suggests the events of transition and change.



16) Inside the Garden Precinct looking toward west gateway. A public space carved out of the inner city of party walls.



15) Existing party walls exposed near the Les Halles site.



18) View from the north gate overlooking the shopping Forum which has been remodeled into a grotto below the quiet, "hidden" public garden. In the background is the outdoor framed exhibition space of the Museum of the City

This composite garden precinct is in effect a hidden and perhaps mysterious place, meant to relate to the city as a whole. In a sense the form of the space is inconclusive - its axes are not resolved by monumental buildings or terminating facades but in gates, which are themselves thresholds locating the transition point between inside and out. It is an outdoor interior that requires a conscious choice to enter. The need for deliberate decision, the intended isolation from normal functions and activities and the ambiguity of external boundaries present a challenge to the experience. Perhaps a sense of speculation will be promoted about the larger question, the nature of urban form and the significance of public space.

### What are the Shapes of Urbanity - The Lessons of Paris

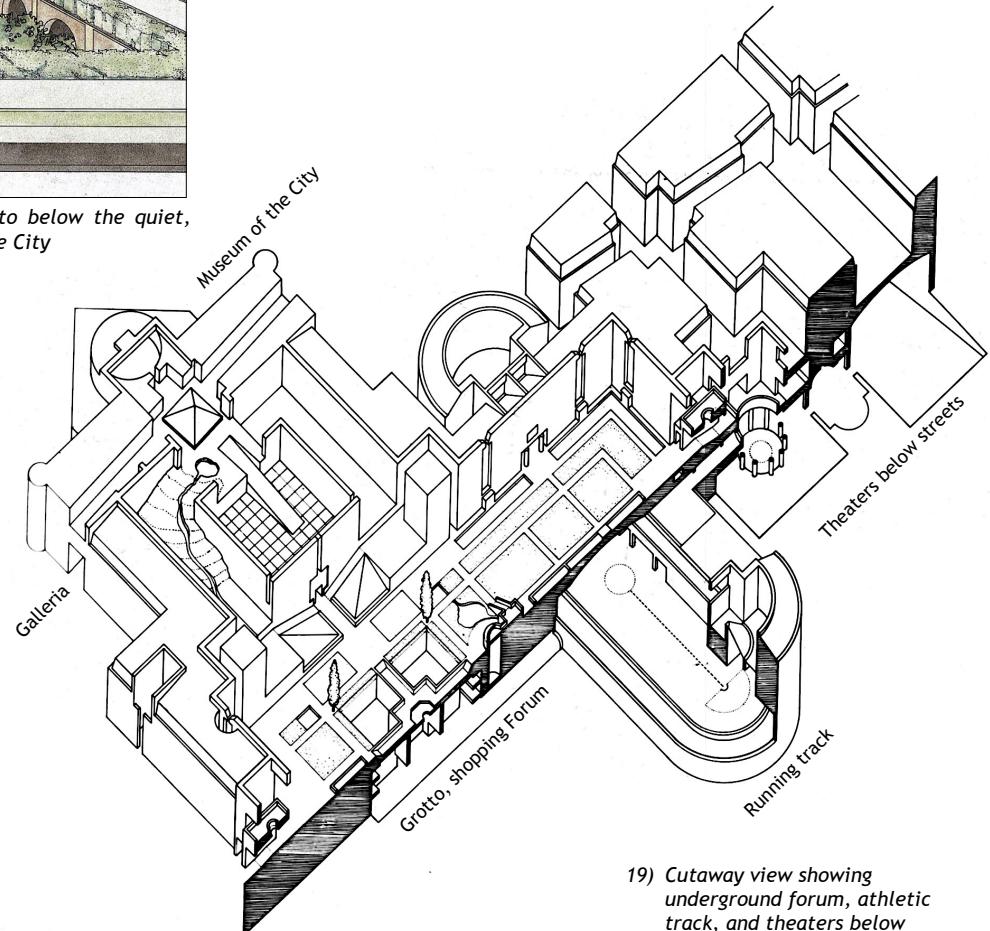
Although this article discusses our specific project for the *Les Halles* site in Paris, it is really about the general intentions and purposes of Urban Design. These are simple: the continued reconstruction and future building of the dense, diverse, *urban* city. This has proved harder to achieve than expected, as we can see in most of the new cities being built around the world today (2017). A human scaled urban fabric with proportional defined public space is difficult to find in the latest projects designed in an endless Anti-Space.

How to achieve the Aim of Urbanism? The *Les Halles* Project and this article were our own first attempts at articulating the "Means" toward this end.

### Postscript

The *Museum of the City* drawn by us in 1979 appears as a public building that protrudes south into the urban fabric. Its roof faces back becoming a terrace overlooking the interior garden precinct. It seemed an unlikely but symbolic program proposal for Paris at the time.

However, on a recent visit to China in 2012, we encountered newly built museum buildings of this scale in both Shanghai and Beijing that were dedicated to the promotion of urban design, history, and the planning of their cities. This seems to confirm the prescience of our proposal for a similar museum for *Les Halles*.



19) Cutaway view showing underground forum, athletic track, and theaters below