

Le Halles of Paris: a case of urban complexity

by Elena Vigna

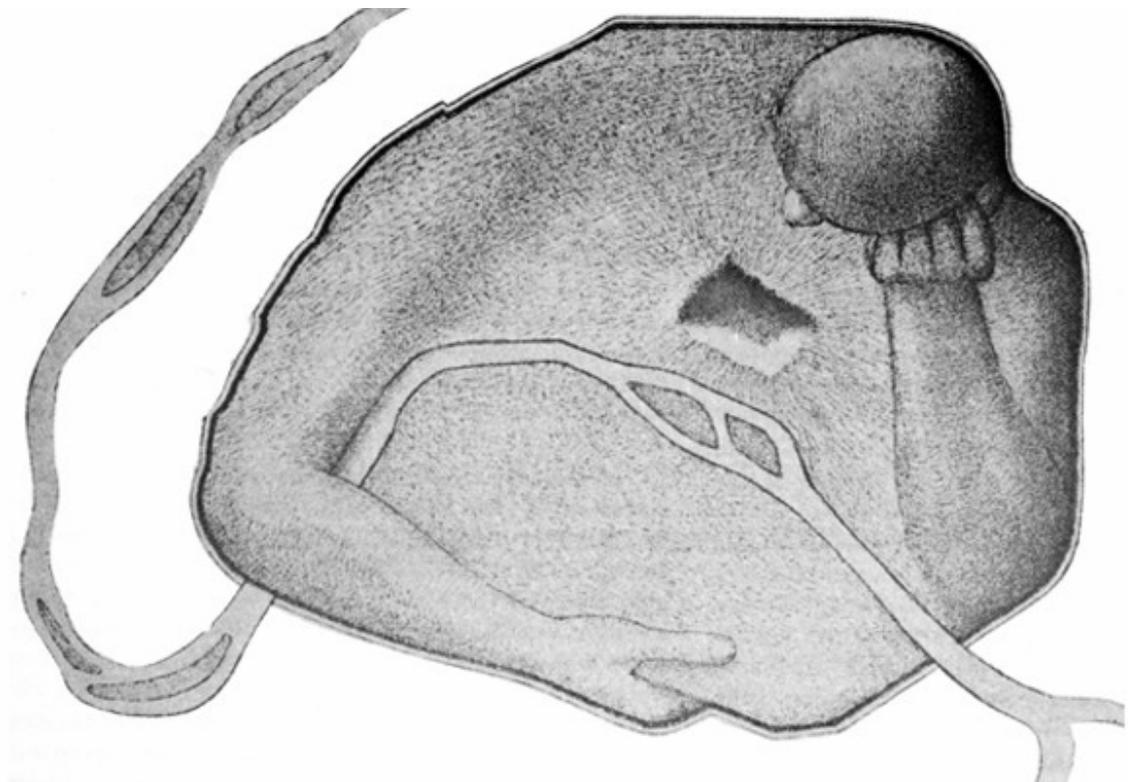
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Bordering to south with *Rue de Rivoli*, to east with *Boulevard de Sébastopol*, to north with *Rue Etienne Marcel* and to west with *Rue du Louvre*, today the district of the *Halles* is the centre of gravity of the Parisian's metropolitan area. An exceptional connection that combines the net of suburban transport (*RER*), the system of the subway, the buses and the underground roads, is one of the most great points of access of the city for the population from the whole *Ile-de-France*.

Studying the architectural history of the "Halles Centrales" of Paris means to face with a theme that is recognized as complex and multi-dimension.

A first dimension of this complexity is certainly the one, considered in time and space, of the political and cultural history. The area contains a strong presence of a central function (commercial and infrastructural) and this seems incompatible with the organization of a "Metropoli"; the contradictory and convulsive chasing of projects officiated and immediately after denied by the same producer.



The hole of the *Halles* in the city center of Paris. The image has been the symbol of the *International Consultation for the Reconstruction of the Halles (1979)*

A second dimension is the one that came after the demolition of *Baltard's pavilions*: how and with which elements of certainty *Les Halles* become a concrete theme for the intervention in the urban environment? Finally, not less important, the dimension of the architecture that in this case, gathering the occasion of comparison among "poetics" and the suggestion of the hole, becomes of time in time gym of hasty gestures, building a panorama in which it is possible to read convergences and divergences.

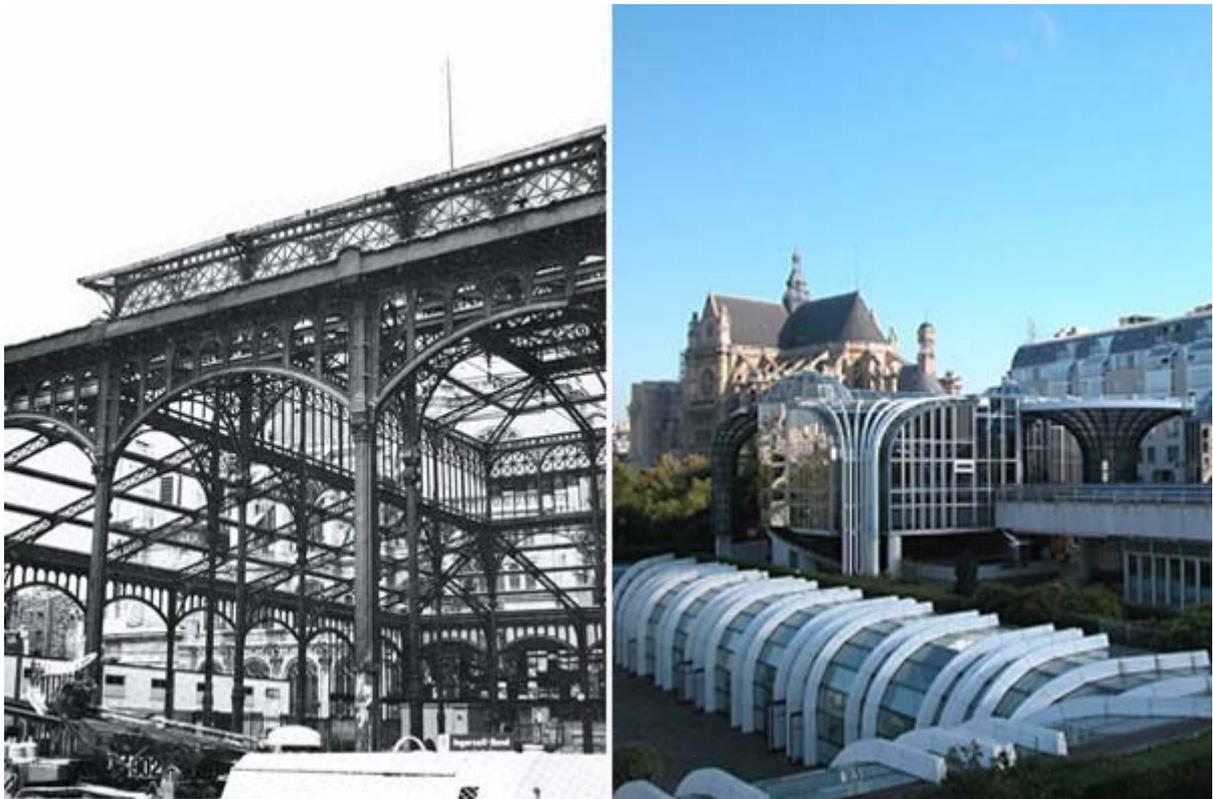
It is not possible to elude the architectural problem, particularly in this place, whose exceptionality is due to many reasons.

Exceptional is the place for its position: it is precisely in this point that the most important streets of communication that interest Paris and its agglomeration meet themselves and it's just here where hundreds of thousand of Parisians every day go out of the underground *Les Halles'* station.

Exceptional is the place for its history: from more than thousand years the district is the heart of Paris.

Exceptional is the place also for its historical-architectural story that saw it as a protagonist during the ultimate centuries. I have ideally divided the history in three moments, three different historical ages, three different *Halles*.

The first one, larger in time, is identified with the construction of *Victor Baltard's* iron pavilions, building at the end of a season of contests that have parallelly traveled with the French State's history.

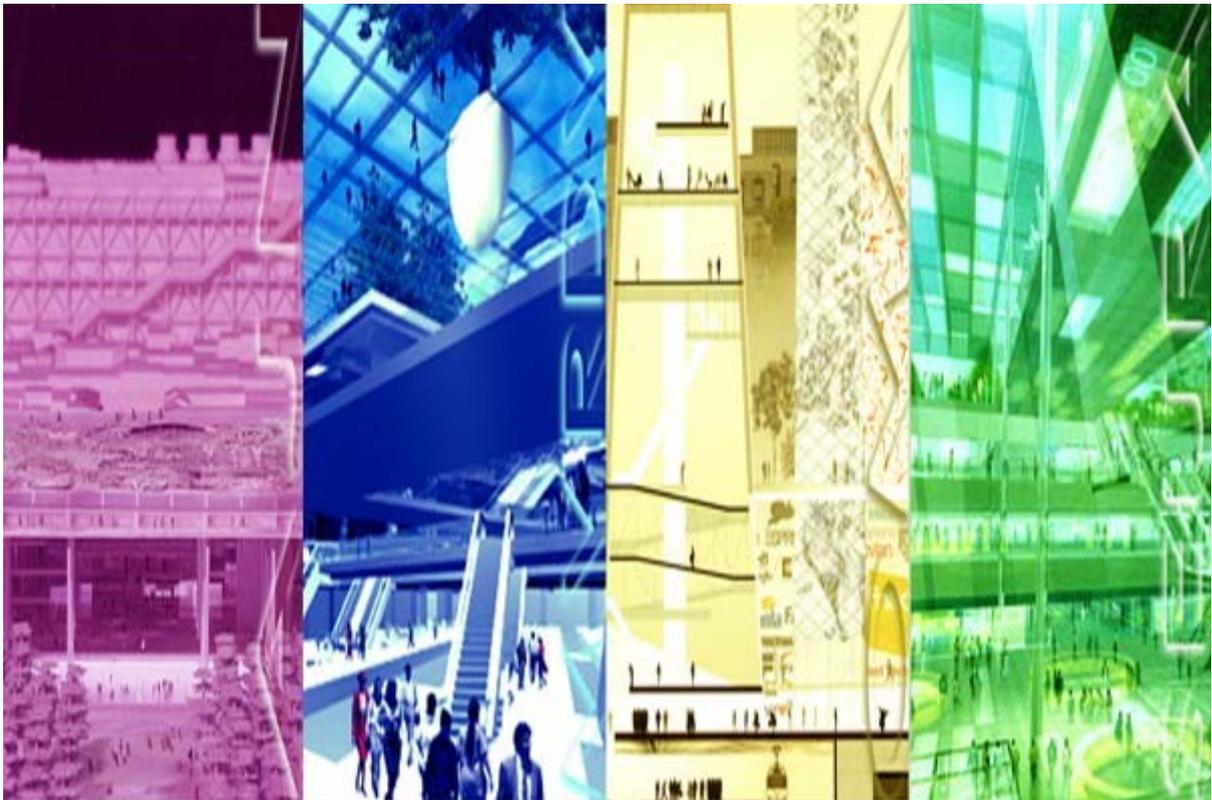


Les Halles in the past and nowadays

The second one had as paradoxical protagonist a hole: not a free space but a wound, not an occasion for a gesture of architecture, but an attempt of "to make up for" with something grandiose to a decision - perhaps - taken with lightness.

The third one, characterized by an international contest, puts in opposites decisions previously taken and it has as objective to bring the *Halles* at a European importance level.

My thesis analyzes every of these chapters of the "Halles story", with a particular reference to the city's image and how every change in the urban sketch has influenced both in the perception of the residents and the simple passers. Among its many roles, the urban landscape can be seen and remembered; now, we are in a decisive moment for the district: some projects are going to be proposed for completing an area so many times, perhaps too many, altered or completely convert. I propose to compile an analytical base that founds itself upon the relationship between city and society, and to delineate some interpretative guide lines for a possible transformation, focus on the small district of the *Halles* in the middle of a great history.



Four projects for *Halles's future*

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