PARIS notes

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Grand Reopening

By Maisie Wilhelm

The first renovation phase is finished and the Grand Palais is grander than ever

The Grand Palais has been asleep for years, slumbering under a blanket of construction scaffolding and French bureaucracy. This September, it finally woke up.

"One goes to see the Eiffel Tower, the Pompidou; one never goes to see the Grand Palais; one only goes to see the shows inside it." So says Jean-Loup Roubert, the head architect-"conservateur" for the Grand Palais. He astutely recognized in Gilles Plum's "Le Grand Palais: l'Aventure du Palais des Beaux-Arts" that after getting used to the initial shock of the edifice when it was built in 1900, people went there primarily for the events showcased within. But for the first time in years, late one weeknight during a sneak preview of the renovated Palais, the main atrium was packed with hundreds of curious Parisians, there for the extraordinary: simply to admire the building.

Identifiable from its silhouette upriver from the Trocadéro at the base of the Champs-Elysées, the pillow-like glass roof of the Grand Palais perches atop a massive stone structure that contains a grandiose atrium. To call it an atrium is to do little justice to the majestic space under the curved, glass ceiling. The French call it "la nef," but there is nothing cathedral-like about the nave of the Grand Palais, perhaps other than the reverent silence that fills you when you step inside.

You'll recognize the building, but probably haven't been inside since before 1993, when it was declared unsound. EMOC, the state's agency that maintains cultural works, closed the Grand Palais and its adjoining Galeries Nationales and Palais de la Découverte until it could decide on a plan for a building owned by the state but sitting on city property and in dire need of expensive repairs.

This September, coinciding with the National Heritage weekend, Les Journées du Patrimoine (special buildings all over the country were opened to the public), the Grand Palais opened its doors for two weeks, from noon to midnight. Lines of eager people stretched around the block. Some waited three hours. "It doesn't seem that long to wait," one woman said, "considering the building has been closed for the last twelve years." The first day of the preview drew 13,000 visitors and tens of thousands more visited each day after (70,000 people alone came for Nuit Blanche, when the city celebrated summer's end with twilight festivities).

Spectators enjoyed the arched Art Nouveau

curled ironwork in the darkened hall illuminated in the evening by celebratory red and blue spotlights. A temporary sound and light display, "Visible Waves," conceived by Thierry Dreyfus and Frédéric Sanchez, helped add to the drama. The exhibit consisted of two massive wood and plaster globes, forty feet in circumference and weighing two tons each, which hung from cranes. The globes, crafted by Venetian Vincenzo Coronelli in the early 1680s and commissioned by Louis XIV, were on display before being transferred to their new, permanent home at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Bluish-hued and hand-painted (one terrestrial, one celestial), the globes had been seen by the public only one other time during the 20th century.

For the lucky few in Paris attending this reopening, it was a truly splendid occasion. Inside, the pervasive excitement among visitors was palpable. Most people stood with craned necks, or reclined on slanted platforms, captivated by the magnificence and grandeur of the space. Others looked downwards into giant tilted mirrors that lined the floor, reflecting and magnifying the intricately ribbed rooftop. Strange music clattered around the refinished walls and the still-uneven concrete floors. People had come to see what the state had spent so much money restoring—and they weren't disappointed.

To the ecstatic public's dismay, the Grand Palais was then closed again until renovations to the decorations are completed.

The Grand Palais was originally built as part of the 1900 World's Fair (a building called the Palais de l'Industrie had to be razed to make way for it). It was an enormous addition to the cityscape, designed to function as a permanent exhibition hall to host cultural and art exhibitions. Following in the footsteps of the Eiffel Tower (built for the 1889 World's Fair), the massive Grand Palais was a big hit and it became the focal point of the 1900 fair.

The three architects who designed the Palais, Henri Deglane, Albert Thomas and Albert Louvet, made use of the modern materials available during the burgeoning iron-and-glass era. Their collaborative design featured a delicate glass roof stretching over an atrium 600 feet long. Inside, spanning two stories, iron beams twisted and reached up to support a vaulted roof. Rectangular glass slats created an enormous skylight that allowed sunlight to showcase paintings (exhibition spaces at the time relied on natural light to illuminate their artworks). Externally, the facade is trimmed with sculptures and colorful mosaics in homage to important epochs of art. The two eastern corners of the building are punctuated with bronze quadrigae statues—horse-drawn chariots—sculpted by Georges Récipon. They rear in midair atop their pedestals, frozen in triumphant poses.

The architects faced many challenges. Because the existing avenues that framed the building site were not parallel, the design had to fit within an irregular plot; a neighborhood re-design encouraged an aesthetic coherence. Across the street the Petit Pal- (continued on page 7)

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ais was going up under the aegis of Charles Girault, a fourth architect who oversaw the Grand Palais designs. Récipon was creating sculptures for the new Pont Alexandre III, which would reach between quays on the Right and Left banks. Together with their counterparts atop the Grand Palais, the sculptures created a harmonious dialogue.

But building at the site meant interrupting a prized view between the Hôtel des Invalides, south across the river, and the Champs-Elysées. The public was wary. Richard Morris Hunt, a famous American architect and graduate of Paris' Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, wrote in his book, "The General Scheme for the Exhibition of 1900": "From the very day it began to rise above the ground, the critics cried against the destruction of one of the finest perspective views that Paris afforded, and condemned this heavy and compact mask...."

The design was received with mixed feelings. Like the innovative Eiffel Tower built eleven years earlier, the Grand Palais' architecture was disconcerting to the public's eye. Strong iron allowed for skeletal supports, but they looked perilously thin. A stone facade would cover the thin beams. Albert Chandler, a writer for "World's Fair Magazine," wrote in his article, "Culmination: The Paris Exposition Universelle 1900": "A bizarre contrast of materials! It is as if a giant were flexing his muscles, stiffening his arms and making a tremendous effort to raise a simple head-dress of lace!"

But the Grand Palais was also praised. Writer Herbert E. Butler wrote in a 1901 article in "Art Journal" that "beauty is the first thing to arrest the attention with its marvelous effect of distance and perspective and exquisite taste and judgment in details of decoration and color."

The Grand Palais, containing 6,000 square yards of empty space and little more, was used for myriad cultural expositions and occasions, from automobile salons to salons for the "art of housework." It was coveted for its voluminous capacity—the first aeronautic salons were held here, filling the atrium with blimps and hot air balloons. For the 1900 World's Fair, the venue showcased works of sculpture, but in its more eccentric uses, the Grand Palais hosted agricultural and botanical fairs, and even horse jumping competitions. During World War I it was used as a military hospital, and in World War II, the Germans used it as a parking lot for trucks.

As early as 1910, the Grand Palais was structurally threatened. Flood waters from the Seine put the foundation at risk. Minor renovations were made in the early 1940s. For decades, Parisians, inured to the building's once-shocking aesthetic, flocked there for popular annual salons. But, by the 1960s, Parisians began to think of the Grand Palais as a dinosaur.

Le Corbusier thought the building was an eyesore, and tried to convince André Malraux, then minister of culture, to tear it down. Rather than condemn it to a Les Halles-like fate, where the iron pavilions were demolished and sold for scrap metal, Malraux took a gamble that breathed new life into the Grand Palais.

In 1962, Malraux created the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, in the western extension of the Grand Palais, to house art exhibitions. There, in 1966, he organized the largest exposition ever for a living artist, "Hommage à Picasso." The gamble paid off—the exhibition was an immense success, attracting hundreds of thousands of people.

After the triumph of the Picasso show, the government came to understand the financial power of the Grand Palais and began to exploit it. Huge crowds came to chic events like Yann Kersalé's light show in 1987, when lights pulsated rhythmically through the glass roof at night, which evoked a beating heart of the city; the highly popular International Fair of Contemporary Art, or FIAC, was held at the Grand Palais for many years, to name a few. Since the 1960s, any event considered major in the city took place at the Grand Palais. Popular art exhibits there today can draw as many as 800,000 visitors.

What's more, says Dietrich Neumann, professor of architecture at Brown University, the reputation of the Grand Palais as an architectural jewel began improving. "After being shunned as the last gasp of historicist Beaux-Arts architecture that would hide its steel construction behind a facade, it now becomes more and more clear what a masterpiece it is."

But on November, 22, 1993, the Grand Palais' fortune turned. During an exhibition, an iron rivet suddenly popped off a beam and plummeted 148 feet to the floor. No one was injured, but everyone was worried.

Minister of Culture Jacques Toubon declared that the building presented "grave risks," and immediately closed the Grand Palais and the adjoining Galeries Nationales. At the time, the closure was estimated to last twenty-four months. A show of painters closed early and twenty other shows scheduled for 1994 were cancelled. No one imagined that the Grand Palais would remain closed for twelve years.

Given the desirable location of the real estate—anchoring one of the world's most expensive streets, the Champs-Elysées—the government spent eight years carefully examining its options. After nearly a century, the Grand Palais' foundation was sinking: the ground at the site, situated just off the Seine, was silty and soft. Originally, the Grand Palais had been secured by subterranean oak pylons. Over time, the water table dropped, exposing the wood to open air, which weakened the foundation. To restore it would cost many millions.

In a March 1999 press release, the minister of culture announced the immediate reopening of the adjoining galleries but the main atrium of the Grand Palais would remain closed to the public for renovations. Over $60 million was set aside for the urgent structural renovations needed; and in 2000, the Grand Palais was classified an historic monument to keep it safe from demolition.

Two stages of renovations were decided upon. The first stage, to last three years and cost at least an estimated $65 million, would reinforce the interior structure. The second stage, to last another three years and cost at least $25 million, would restore the facades. During this six-year period, the southern wing and the main atrium would remain closed to the public.

Mind-boggling renovations began in 2001. Alain-Charles Perrot, chief architect for the renovations, raised the entire iron roof a mere seven millimeters in order to replace the glass and stabilize the foundation. Workers re-anchored the building to the bedrock forty feet underground, using nearly 2,000 pylons. Clouded, dirty panes of glass were replaced rather than cleaned. One hundred and seventy-two thousand square feet of exact-reproduction laminated glass panes were fitted into the canopy. Workers replaced torqued iron beams and girders, and changed over 15,000 iron rivets. The original paint color was uncovered, and matched with a fresh coat of "vert réséda," a pale celadon. The renovations were painstaking. Workers were sentimental; they said they fell in love with the Palais, and it had become a part of them.

While the first stage of renovations is now complete, the nave of the Grand Palais remains closed to the public. The second stage is underway, and the mosaics and sculptures are being restored. No date of completion has been fixed beyond the estimate of "late 2007." Until then, the facade will remain under wraps. In total, renovating the Grand Palais has cost over 101 million euros (about $121 million)—well over the original figures.

Minister of Culture Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres remains vague about how the Grand Palais will be used. In Expressmag, he said, "I am eager that the Grand Palais maintain its original function for cultural and commercial exhibitions, as well as for prestigious uses."

Jean-Loup Roubert had it right—Paris is abuzz about the upcoming events to be held inside, but few will appreciate the building. Days after the preview closed, the Grand Palais was back to work housing the spring fashion shows of couturiers such as Chanel, Dior and Yves Saint-Laurent.

At the YSL show, a runway was set up in the northern end, occupying a tiny fraction of the atrium. For a few seconds as people entered, they glanced around the vast space dwarfing them, noticed the fresh green paint on prettily arching beams, and took their seats. Eerie Spanish piano music ricocheted around the atrium and the show started. Interest in the Palais as architecture vanished. Maybe Parisians were missing the point. It was business as usual in the Grand Palais: no one had come to look at the building, but at the spectacle within.