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THE URBAN FRINCE: Postcards from Paris

Editor's Note: *The Berkeley Planning Journal sent its special correspondent to Paris to see "what was cooking up there." Taking this directive all too literally, Raphaël Fischler agreed, very reluctantly, to gather some impressions of things urban in between two good meals. Especially for the Journal's readers, here are a few of his spring-time observations.*

Raphaël Fischler

April 10

After a sleepless night in the plane, I arrive at Charles de Gaulle airport. The terminal building is a monument to the French state, imposing from the outside, labyrinthine inside, an ode to technocracy, its belief in bold solutions, and its disregard for the small details that make life nice and easy. Where the hell are the bathrooms? I meet my cousins M. and E. We find the car (sheer luck) and proceed to the *sortie*. Pretty straightforward: first go to the very top of the building, to pay, and then go back down all the way. Out we go. So, where do we eat?

April 11

Into the *métro*. You know, the good old Parisian metro; you know, Paris, France. Well, not exactly. On the walls, huge placards for Burger King and for EuroDisney. Burger King executives are not only changing French food habits, they are changing French policy. Their new slogan: "*Politique sociale: 10 francs pour 2 hamburgers*" (pronounced "amburgairs"). EuroDisney, too, participates in French social policy: the new theme park provided for half of all the job-growth in France in 1991 and the placards call for more applications. But watch out, there are jobs and there are jobs. Disney employees are not workers, they are "cast-members"; one's job title is not janitor, cook, or film-projector but "entertainment professional." I'll have to go and see this latest product of American entrepreneurship for myself. I hear Disney planners made some concessions to French culinary tastes in their food outlets.

April 16

I have a meeting at the Institut Français d'Urbanisme. To get there: take the RER (the local BART) toward EuroDisney. Is that where French city planning is heading? The institute is located in some kind of low-density business park on the outskirts of a new town, itself on the periphery of Paris. Who is it who said that distance from the core reflected lack of social importance? Walking to my meeting, I pass the bland headquarters of a high-tech company and the hyper-modernist space-ship of an engineering school. On my way back to the RER station, I find a *café* on the ground-floor of a vaguely post-modern apartment building; at least there is good coffee and pastry.

April 26

Riding into Paris, back from Antwerp, Belgium. I enjoyed walking in the old streets of my hometown. The restoration work in the gothic cathedral is still

not over, fifteen years after it started; but, hey, it took nearly a century to build the thing. The train slowly rides toward the Gare du Nord. Paris isn't pretty, seen from the tracks – a bad effect on travellers and commuters. In a rush of civic-mindedness, taggers have tried to embellish the view with colorful American-style graffiti on walls and fences. I'm not sure that it's what mayor Jacques Chirac had in mind when he called for urban beautification. The key to his program: cleanliness. Green cans, green trucks, green men are everywhere, contributing to the public hygiene. Will Euro Disneyland be as clean? I must find out.

May 5

The planning theorist in me did not stay behind in the U.S. I go to the Centre Foucault, located in the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, a Franciscan library where Foucault worked on his last books. There I sit, at one of the long tables, listening to his voice on the tape recorder. Am I sitting on the chair where he himself once sat? I can already see it: pilgrimages of the devout followers, to this and other places where Saint Foucault dwelt. I leave to find a bite to eat, back in the realm of the mortals, in the arena of power, the space of uncritical acceptance of what is. I sit down and wait, and wait. The *garçon* could use some discipline in his work; I don't have all day!

May 8

I go to visit D., another cousin of mine. She lives in the 19th *arrondissement*, in the north-east of the city, one of the last places where one can see what the popular Paris was like before wholesale gentrification and retail development. She and her husband bought a small house that once used to be company housing for a miner's family. Dad didn't have to go far to work: he was digging right under his own living room. Decades later, the double rows of houses, nearly back to back, with their small front gardens, blooming rose-bushes, and sloping pedestrian alleys, offer a haven of peace and quiet in the city. Not always quiet, however, not today. The underground galleries are threatening to collapse and they are being filled with concrete. The guys working right in front of the house are very nice, but their heavy machinery isn't. The noise drives us away, into the neighborhood. Some of it would be called a slum in the U.S., but it is so enjoyable. To appreciate it, adopt the "French restaurant" attitude: don't try and find out if all official standards are being met in the kitchen, just sit back and enjoy your meal.

May 10, 9 a.m.

The day to visit Euro Disneyland has arrived. K., B., R., and I take the A4 highway to the region of Brie, not to taste the creamy import that can be found at each and every Berkeley cheese-and-wine, but to visit the "cultural Tchernobyl" of France, as a well-known stage-director called it. Cast-members, entertainment professionals, here we come! To make a long story short, we have the feeling of spending a day in Anaheim, California. Same well-oiled attractions, same well-stocked stores, same well-shaven guys, same well-behaved girls. If the French could only get rid of that horrible accent when they try to speak "American" and if only they could let go of their surly skepticism when trying to entertain the crowd, we'd really think we were in Orange County.

May 10, 2 p.m.

In some ways, Euro Disneyland, this latest new-town of the Paris region, is everything the American city is not: clean (yes, even cleaner than Paris); efficient (reformers from the managerial class got their way, all the way); and free of poverty (simple: you don't pay, you don't get in). In other respects, it represents American planning at its best: a tip-top infrastructure, a perfect segregation of neighborhoods or "lands" (Adventureland, Fantasyland, etc.), and a superlative public-private partnership. Not stupid, the folks at Disney. According to French planning guru Pierre Merlin, they got some 13 billion French francs (more than 2.5 billion dollars) in various subsidies from different levels of government. These kinds of things are likely to happen when a private real-estate scheme is declared *programme d'intérêt général*. But then, this is not your average suburban development: 2,000 hectares that will ultimately house, besides the theme park itself, a Disney-MGM Studios complex, a marine park, a convention center, close to twenty thousand hotel rooms, over 7 million square feet of offices, about a million square feet of stores, and a couple of golf courses. We're talking the equivalent, in surface area, of one fifth of the city of Paris – though with far, far fewer restaurants.

May 10, 8 p.m.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch... My friends and I are having a good time in Frontierland, but we decide to check out the *cuisine* of this Magic Kingdom. We opt for the restaurant where Cinderella is supposed to dine, if she finds something pretty to wear. Not bad, these froglegs. I couldn't resist, I really couldn't – froglegs in Disneyland. So, indeed, they made an effort. But to speak of "concessions to French culture." No wine allowed! No wine with our meal, no wine with anybody's meal. How terrible. Were it not for the fireworks later in the evening, we would have left immediately.

May 13

Had a discussion with a specialist on French subdivisions and single-family housing. She shows me slides of a subdivision, taken in different years. Phase one: your typical American-style single-family housing development, with open lawns between the houses and the street. Phase two, a couple of years later: shrubs and flowers appear along the property lines, weakly demarcating one plot from the other and the garden from the sidewalk. Phase three: continuous hedges and light fences now make movement between gardens impossible. Phase four, still a few years later: three-foot high walls with cast-iron fences separate the private from the public sphere. This is what France is about: pride in the nation and in the city, together with a stubborn sense of independence. Thus the front garden, originally designed à l'américaine, as part of a flowing open space, has to be closed off to serve as a buffer zone to which entrance can be strictly controlled. A ferocious dog behind the iron fence often completes the scenery. But that's not where the future lies, at least not for a sector of the higher middle-class. Embracing the American way of life with both arms, they have started living in houses seeded on the edges of nice, green golf courses. Who knows, maybe French individualism will assert itself there, too. To make sure the development remains livable, planners should make sure each household can have at least one golf hole in its fenced-off area.

The Urban Fringe, Fischler

May 18

I've been spending quite a bit of time at the Ministère de l'Équipement these days. It is located in the Grande Arche, at the head of the area of La Défense, that offspring of Mr. Manhattan and Ms. Brasilia. Get there by metro or RER, emerge from one of the holes in the Grande Dalle, the huge esplanade that extends the axis through the Louvre and the Place de l'Étoile (renamed place du Général de Gaulle for the locals), and you are standing at the foot of this latest monument to the grandeur of France. Awesome. The huge, marble-clad empty cube, the view across the Seine to the Arc de Triomphe, the wind in your hair, the feeling of being, well, modern. While we're debating what relevance the epistemological foundations of our academic research have for the real world and arguing about what Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Derrida really said about the matter, a few compatriots of these four *mousquetaires* of philosophy put down an object that will cure you from all post-modernist self-questioning. McDonald's is not far away, in case you still have doubts.

May 28

I am writing from the airport. Sorry, no time for final thoughts and observations; got to try out this French fast-food place before boarding. An American idea with a French flavor. Seems like I saw a lot of that in the last few weeks.