Still under construction, Docks en Seine is already a dramatic presence on the Paris waterfront. A floating terrace and rooftop garden will complete the structure.
Rive Gauche Revival

The New Docks En Seine is the latest chapter in the Renaissance of Eastern Paris—

The Biggest Urban Renewal Project Since Baron Haussmann Reshaped the City

By Heather Stimmler-Hall
No visit to Paris would be quite the same without a sightseeing cruise on the Seine, with its unparalleled views of the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, the Musée d'Orsay, the turreted Conciergerie, the ancient Pont Neuf.... But Paris has always been more than just a city of stunning monuments, and the Seine more than a picturesque waterway for sightseeing. Now, an urban revival upriver is bringing new attention to a long-forgotten part of the city, one that played a key role in shaping the French capital.

Settled more than 2,000 years ago by Celtic fishing tribes, Paris grew in size and importance chiefly because of its strategic location on the river. Everything from people and livestock to crops and building materials arrived in Paris on the westward-flowing Seine, which divided the city into the northern Rive Droite (on the right as you face downriver) and the southern Rive Gauche. The river was the lifeblood of the city, a thriving traffic artery dense with fishermen, laundry houses (the famous bateaux-lavoirs), passenger boats and cargo barges.

Until 1860, the city's eastern border ended at the edges of the 4th and 5th arrondissements, just past the Pont d'Austerlitz. It was here, along the quais, that all of the commercial goods entering Paris by boat had to pass through toll gates. This naturally gave birth to riverside warehouse districts such as the Halles de Bercy, a bustling village where wines from throughout France arrived on barges in huge oak barrels, then were stored and bottled before being sold in Paris shops and wine bars. Across the Seine, the countryside and vineyards beyond the Salpêtrière Hospital were slowly replaced by tanneries, fabric dyers and flour mills, all of which used the river to receive raw materials and ship their finished products.

Much changed for these villages in the mid-19th century with the arrival of the railroad, the Industrial Revolution and the final, significant expansion of the Paris city limits under the Second Empire. Now known as the 12th and 13th arrondissements, these rapidly industrializing districts welcomed the Gare d'Austerlitz (1840), the Gare de Lyon (1900), shipping ports, textile factories, chemical plants, car manufacturers, metal refineries and electrical plants. The Seine still played a dominant role in commercial shipping at the start of the 20th century, and even as central Paris was adorning itself with Art Nouveau buildings for the 1900 Exposition Universelle (the Grand Palais, the Petit Palais, the Pont Alexandre III), a more practical style of architecture was emerging farther east along the river.

In 1907, the City of Paris asked architect Georges Morin-Goustiaux to design a structure to serve as the transfer point for cargo moving between the barges of the Seine and the trains at the Gare d'Austerlitz. The resulting five pavilions, together called the Magasins Généraux, featured the most innovative architecture of the day. They were built of a revolutionary new material known as reinforced concrete, which was cheaper than stone yet could resist the fires and floods that had often ravaged warehouses on the river's
Local groups wary of losing every trace of their neighborhood’s history lobbied tirelessly to save vestiges of its industrial past.

edge. And their simple, rectangula gridlike skeleton, resembling a contemporary parking garage, allowed for a completely modular use of the interior space—something unheard of at the time. The more photogenic monuments of central Paris may have represented the city’s enduring superiority in the world of art and culture, but the industrial development taking place upriver represented its confident march toward a prosperous, modernized economy.

Unfortunately, this bright new future would not need the Magasins Généraux. With the continued growth of the railroad network throughout the early 20th century and the completion of the first French autoroutes by 1950, river barges were no longer seen as the most efficient way of transporting goods within Europe. In 1915, the Magasins Généraux were transformed into customs offices; in the 1980s, they became warehouses for a large carpet manufacturer and an examination center for students.

But it would be too simplistic to blame the decline of activity along these riverbanks on the growing dominance of ground transport alone. The once-thriving wine district in Bercy, notorious for mixing “plonk” into fine wines during the bottling process, became obsolete by the 1960s as savvy winemakers began to bottle their wines “au château.” Bercy was soon nothing more than a ghost town of abandoned warehouses and rusting machines.

The industrial Left Bank didn’t fare much better. Although manufacturing was strong, the polluting factories and the poor working class shantytowns that grew up around them made living conditions unbearable. After World War II, the 13th arrondissement was rezoned, its factories banished to new industrial centers outside the city limits. Whole neighborhoods of derelict homes were replaced with public housing and, by the 1970s, the modern high-rise apartments that make up the Chinatown district. But the banks of the Seine remained hemmed in by the train tracks of the Gare de Lyon and the Gare d’Austerlitz, effectively turning this industrial wasteland into an impenetrable barrier between the local residents and the riverfront. As surrounding neighborhoods were razed and rebuilt in the corporate development zeal of the 1980s, the city turned its back on this stretch of the Seine, which slowly sank into decay.

All of that began to change 20 years ago, when Paris embarked on one of the most ambitious urban renewal programs since Baron Haussmann’s widespread reconstruction of the city under the
"WE ARE WINNING BACK THE BANKS OF THE SEINE, ONE OF THE MOST MAGICAL PLACES IN THE WORLD, FOR THE PEOPLE OF PARIS."

Second Empire. Between 1988 and 2005, Bercy underwent a complete transformation into a public park, with a pedestrian-only shopping village, a sports stadium, a cinema museum and contemporary residences. Although slow to take root, it's now as lively as any central Paris district.

The future of the much larger Left Bank industrial district was mapped out with the creation of the ZAC Paris Rive Gauche in 1991 ("ZAC" stands for zone d'aménagement concerté or "planned development zone"). This renewal project encompasses the five 13th arrondissement neighborhoods bordering the Seine, from the Gare d'Austerlitz down to the Boulevard Masséna, just short of the périphérique, or Paris beltway.

After more than a decade of construction, the contemporary character of this revamped district is starting to take shape. At its center are the monumental towers of the Bibliotheque Nationale François Mitterrand (national library), completed in 1996. These were soon joined by the MK2 Cinéplex, new restaurants, shops and gardens. New offices and residential apartments, many with enviable views over the Seine, were quickly snapped up by Parisians. It doesn't hurt that Ménilot, the driverless metro, shares a station with the RER C train at the heart of the new neighborhood.

But not all here is brand new. Many of the old buildings were in derelict condition, but local groups wary of losing every trace of their neighborhood's history still lobbied tirelessly to save vestiges of its industrial past. Les Frigos, a refrigerated warehouse from the 1920s, has become an official artists' residence after being squatted for nearly 15 years. And the historic Halle aux Farines and Grands Moulins flour mill have been transformed into a new branch of the University of Paris.

As for the dilapidated Magasins Généraux, they were originally slated to be torn down in favor of a new public park. In 1993, two of the pavilions were demolished to make room for the Pont Charles-de-Gaulle, which now connects the two train stations. But despite their somewhat humble appearance, the remaining pavilions were saved from the wrecking ball. "These buildings constructed at the beginning of the 20th century bear witness to an exceptional moment in
ONE OF THE BIGGEST challenges of the project was to make the building, which sits right on the water's edge, not only accessible to the public (a minimum requirement of the jury) but also as welcoming as any other waterfront promenade in Paris. To this end, Jakob + MacFarlane's design incorporated breezeways that pass through the ground level. Along with the exterior staircases, they will allow people to circulate freely, 24/7, between the riverside terrace (to be built on a floating dock), the street and the rooftop garden. “You'll be able to arrive at Les Docks by boat, by bike or on foot,” explains MacFarlane. “And you can pass right through the building, even when businesses inside are closed.”

When the building opens in early 2009, most visitors will probably head directly to the 21,000-square-foot rooftop garden, not just to enjoy panoramic views of this rapidly changing part of the city but also for the chance to look directly down on the river, enjoying the delightful impression of being on a boat. The architects used wooden decking here and throughout Les Docks to add warmth to the concrete, steel and glass structure, while also echoing the vast wooden esplanade of the neighboring Bibliothèque Nationale. Down at the river level, the vast open terrace will have outdoor cafés and will serve as a stop for both the new Voguéo river shuttle, in operation since July 2008, and the popular Batobus.

Inside, the three levels of Les Docks en Seine are collectively called “La Cité de la Mode et du Design.” The most prominent resident will be the Institut Français de la Mode. Established in 1986, the illustrious fashion school is relocating from its posh Right Bank location in the 8th arrondissement to these more spacious quarters. The Cité's first floor will be devoted to showrooms, design events and fashion shows, many of which will be open to the public. There will also be a dozen or so retail outlets related to fashion and design—a furniture store, up-and-coming fashion labels, a specialized design bookstore, a parfumerie, an eyewear boutique—as well as a chic brasserie and a sandwich shop.

During the groundbreaking ceremonies in October 2007, a delighted Mayor Bertrand Delanoë declared, “We are winning back the banks of the Seine, one of the most magical places in the world, for the people of Paris. This place was pretty ugly before, and now it will become very beautiful, while serving both cultural and economic development.” His vision is still incomplete, but Les Docks, which cost some €40 million, represent significant progress.

The next phase will involve renovating the two remaining pavilions of the Magasins Généraux and covering train tracks to create space for parks and new residences. More dramatic changes will include Rudy Ricciotti’s “imaginary Eden” design for Building T8, a sprawling mixed-used structure that will be anything but Haussmannian. Also coming soon: an overhaul of the 19th-century Gare d’Austerlitz by Pritzker Prize-winner Jean Nouvel. Slated for completion in 2015, the project includes restoring the beautiful glass and iron arrivals hall as well as creating an interior garden and a pedestrian bridge that will connect the station to the Pont Charles-de-Gaulle and the quay.

Once the dust has settled and the construction cranes have moved out, Parisians will no doubt embrace the Paris Rive Gauche district with the same enthusiasm they've shown for Bercy. In the meantime, visitors can enjoy a bird’s-eye view of this neighborhood renewal—in-progress from the rooftop garden of the Les Docks en Seine.