

Loitering Parisian Journey

Stefania Kenley

A regular Parisian journey seems to be perfect; so, why loiter ?

Loitering is a designed waste of time during travelling, a deliberate slowing down movement, which may also be seen as an intentional error, or indolence. Yet, a site perceived at a slow pace may allow an alternative subject perception. That is neither at eye level (as in a regular promenade), nor a bird's eye view. It is linked neither to the architect's nor to the planner's representation, but related to the experience of a potential wanderer. It has a possible reference to the French word "flanèrie" or to the notion of "dérive" understood as "a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances." . Yet, the loitering described here does not necessarily mean drifting, but a slow process of revealing through visual means and historical facts an urban detail that although isolated, can trigger changes in a much larger area than its own surroundings.

While loitering between the river Seine and the undeveloped land occupied by the railway tracks arriving to the Austerlitz Main Line Station, I was intrigued by one particular situation occurred in this vast space attracting a large public and political attention. The site has been the subject of a 15 year-long project, financed and supported by the City of Paris, the French Government, the Parisian Region, the National Railway Company - SNCF, etc. This project is managed by SEMAPA - the company set up for planning, co-ordinating and constructing the entire operation

In 1980, in Masséna - one of the three quarters of the zone under the jurisdiction of ZAC Paris Rive Gauche, the SNCF company started renting space in its cold storage plant that had been left in abandonment since 1965. This building known as "Les Frigos" (the refrigerators), had been built by the railway company Paris - Orleans, between 1919 and 1921 for storing at a temperature between - 18C and - 22C certain foods like fruits, meat, fish, cheese, etc. After becoming disused, a space of about 9000m² had been gradually rented to individual artists who subsequently formed the association "91 Quai de la Gare".

The issue that I bring for discussion in the conference Waterfront of Art is not the various artistic production of this Association, but the artists' presence in this disused building left on site. As a result of this occupancy, the building not only survived the demolition authorised in the first plan of development in the early '90s, but proved to have had some unexpected consequences on the future development of the zone.

In this sense, the building's conversion and inhabitation process, cannot be dissociated from the transformation programme of Paris Rive Gauche; there, the "Frigos" building played a significant role, not only as place for creation and communication but also as an alternative aesthetic generator on site. Through the present paper, I suggest that

sometimes artistic and cultural evidence can be more relevant for an understanding of complex urban change, than a traditional site analysis.

This premise can be questioned at the level of both image and reactions provoked; in other words, if this transformed cold storage plant had until now an impact on the development of the site, it is not only because of its aspect - no matter how intriguing it might appear to us today - but also due to the 15 years debate created around it.

In order to unravel this process, I proceed with an inside out loitering on an imaginary spiral having the centre inside the “Frigos” building and unwinding towards the visible edge of the quarter. Thus, loitering on the inner surface, through the walls, across industrial chambers, around the building, and finally around the quarter, might lead us slowly from a marginal detail into the heartbeat of Paris.

...on the inner surface

The space was rented as it was at the time of its total abandonment: without any partitioning, windows (except at the 6th floor), without connections either to the water and electricity supply or to the sewage system. Since the beginning of the conversion, random layers of graffiti have been covering all walls inside the first four floors. Once arrived in the partly obscure space inside the building, one is surrounded by a continuous interlacing of coloured graffiti shapes, running vertically, curving on piping, twisting on the technical equipment, turning around the spiral staircase ... finally, the building itself might be taken for an art object.

This ‘tensed-up’ surface had maybe an accidental influence on the intuitive way new buildings were engaging a dialogue between flatness and illusory depth. In the Tolbiac quarter, also part of the ZAC Paris Rive Gauche, in some areas facing the river Seine and the BNF (The French National Library), the public housing proposals had been granted with a privileged regime of facade treatment . Two hundred metres away from the cold-storage plant, a block developed on the East Side of the National Library, proposed a façade planned to fully expose repetitive details of Baroque paintings engraved on the acid treated glass . This experimental glass panels proposing a direct engagement of a culturally loaded surface with the street level was tested and accomplished in the workshops of Saint Gobain glass manufacturers.

The example of subtle degrees of transparency is of course, at the opposite end from the thick walls covered by graffiti, causing gloomy and rather uncanny feelings. Yet, there is a level of engaging with representational issues in an abstract built environment, where surface tension achieved through image distortion becomes part of a post-modern discourse.

...through the walls

The thick sandwich walls covered by graffiti, are made of layers of concrete, brick and cork separated by air, forming the right mixture

for the necessary performance of the cold storage plant. The conversion to artists studios, implied cutting windows in these walls. The erratic renting process and the threat of demolition did not create conditions for any overall aesthetic considerations. As a consequence, the walls were pierced in order to form windows where and when each studio area required it for its own use. Having exclusively functional motivations, all the new openings form a fairly random pattern of the façade.

The image of the transformed plant appears to be created according to the internal use of the building and not in relation to the outside world. Yet, there are several instances where the artists seemed to have been aware of the impact of this building on site. Their decision to ignore the façade and to be exclusively concerned with their studios' performance, was in fact expressing a contemporary way of operating in disused industrial buildings.

This randomly pierced façade has established a formal precedent and provoked a sort of formal trigger for the new buildings proposed for this area. In the north-eastern vicinity of the "Frigos", the development of mixed housing and artists studios - now under construction, is playing in the façade the random game of solid and void. In the new building, the ratio of windows to the wall surface is obviously larger and the random position of windows represents the architect's choice and not an internal distribution necessity.

In the 'Frigos', the artists were cutting only the minimum number of windows needed for their studios. Although what seems to have mattered at the time was solely the good exploitation of the existing structural qualities of the building, an unconscious desire might have appealed to some - an expressed anxiety provoked by a series of random building works and intentional 'poor-design' appearance, that has urged the public eye to engage with the unprivileged condition of claimed studios space.

...across industrial chambers

The space was rented by the SNCF, as it was found at the time of its total abandonment; therefore, the efforts of the association were already considerable. The interest in good performance responding to the specific requirements of individual artists have revealed a surprising potential of simultaneous activities across the building. At the beginning of 1997, this capacity was underlined in the report of the inquiry commission for the ZAC, that anticipated the building's survival.

" Although the big cold storage plant is of a questionable value, it has exceptional structural and functional qualities. With slabs that can support 7 tones on the square meter, its thick sandwich walls and impressive doors, this building can receive side by side a locomotive, a jazz orchestra of 40 musicians and a ultramodern recording studio requiring the total absence of noise and vibrations.

In this respect, we can compare it with the purpose built artists' studios located also in ZAC, conceived in a pure and transparent

crystalline parallelepiped placed on his site, but where no artist or craftsman can find the structural qualities specific to his or her activity”

This comparison underlines the misleading association of the modernist image of continuous window and open plan with the physical requirements of artistic production. The success of the ‘Frigos’ is probably explained precisely through the literal interpretation of the modernist slogan “form follows function” and arriving quite far from the formal language proposed by L’Esprit Nouveau periodical in the early 20’s. The aesthetic statement made by the building is more than an ‘honest’ façade expression of internal action whatever that might be, instead, it is expressing and living in honest creative conditions beyond any aesthetic evaluation.

... around the building

Sometimes ephemeral gestures bring to light fears and darker sides of rather uneasy conditions of inhabitation. On the main façade of the ‘Frigos’, above the front entrance and on the thin ledge separating the ground floor from the first floor, a dog in a watching position is painted at a rather monumental scale. Beyond the rather humorous side of this manifestation of popular art, one can register residents’ vulnerability due to the relative lack of safety on site .

This seems to be a common denominator of any zone formed by disused industrial estates after the second world war. The functional association of railway, warehouses, storage, manufacturing plants, compressed air generators left in dereliction in post-war metropolitan ellipses often creates a rather sinister environment. On the fence of the next building site, five hundred metres further away from the ‘Frigos’, commemorative inscriptions were fixed by the General Confederation of the Deported and Victims of Oppression and Racism, acknowledging the existence on that site of a concentration camp during the second World War.

This inscription refers to site situated between the Mills of Paris - planned to be converted for the University Paris 7, and the main building of the SUDAC Plant where the installations of compressed air have been already dismantled. This could have been a political move, but it might well represent a genuine sign of an unsettled past. A development plan erasing all remains and memories of historical sweat and misfortune would have removed life itself and created instead a septic but rather dead environment.

... around the quarter

The new plan of development - the PAZ approved in 1997, for the zone called Paris Rive Gauche cancelled all previous decisions that approved the demolition of the existing industrial buildings including the ‘Frigos’. By the decision taken in the latest development plan, the industrial buildings are to be converted and incorporated in the new plan of the Massena quarter.

The situation has been reversed during the last four years and what was considered embarrassing industrial remains is now preserved and protected as part of the Parisian heritage and becoming strong centres of interest for Massena. Their random positions on site can give a spatial scope and orientation to the proposed master plan and suggest a pace of fragmentation for the abstract pattern of the open-block system proposed by in the Master Plan. Yet, the precise way this place will finally relate to the space around the 'Frigos' building, is still under question, and the manner in which the urban continuity and programmatic coexistence are going to open choices and respond to a swarm of voices, is still to be found.

For the moment we only know that, unlike most of contemporary cities, the new plan is going to spread over blank zones reiterating the old street pattern and extending it smoothly over an urban void. This way it can create a grid that through a variable pace and open block sequence, is different from the traditional gridiron.

The block size doesn't follow the scale of the industrial site but that of the existing city. The 'open' condition would apply only to the block size, without being extrapolated under the generic name of *open plan*, to the quarter size. This way it can avoid the error of closed urban systems usually limiting "urban choices by enforcing movement into strict hierarchical spines or roots" Despite its apparent ordering system, the Massena quarter, as well as the entire Master Plan for Paris Rive Gauche, promises to allow a multiplicity of circuits along or across its grid, allowing errand lingering, play of chance, or loitering, as well as purposeful trajectories.

... conclusion

In the end, this paradox would be better described by the end of a manuscript called *The Contemporary Irrationalism: the Arts and Dada* and oddly enough sent by the author to L'Esprit Nouveau, at the time when the editor was no longer Paul Dermée, but Le Corbusier. "Applying a principle to an unsuitable thing, means escaping that principle. At the outbreak of the war, I've seen a town constable taking to the Police Station a ten year-old child who took a picture of the Eiffel Tower. Why Dada makes us inevitably think of this constable.?"

Applying the principles of Modern Movement to an industrial wreck meant overthrowing those principle. Consequently, preserving the converted 'Frigos' on a site proposed for a major Development Plan, meant going over erasures of historical traces.

Admitted or not, for the shift of attitude from the tabula rasa, to a post-modern acceptance of a complex urban condition, we can 'blame' among others, the artists and their active use of the disused 'Frigos' building.

Some roots of this shift can be traced back in the Parisian culture of "flanerie", avant-garde events and performances. The first Dada journey of the 14th April 1921 taking place in front of the church Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, was "investigating new interpretations of nature, related more to urban life than specifically to art". After the improvised

discourses of Breton and Tzara under a torrential rain that happened to fall that day, the most intriguing guided tour took place around the church St Julien. In front of different features and artworks, instead of providing historical explanations Raymond Duncan was loitering with a big dictionary and opening it randomly, he was reading different entries coming to hand as explanations for the historical remains. In that context, loitering was no longer a verb, but a new representation of old situations during a lapsed Parisian journey.

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that urban change can be sometimes anticipated or even provoked by a particular artistic or cultural evidence. As we have seen until now, this premise might have been true, but it was definitely not used as an objective analytical tool. As the subconscious was exploited by surrealists without ever pretending of bringing any “true” evidence, the slow collective conversion of the “Frigos” was a rational, yet random process, engaging political moves only by accident, without any initial intent.

Loitering used here as representation technique of temporal dimensions has been unwinding a series of historical links between urban form and its surrounding space. Proposed as a spiral, it refers to the dialectic engaged between the building conversion and use of the “Frigos” as it is found today, and the residuum space that is going to be articulated and possibly integrated in the interstitial “open” space of the Massena Quarter. The possible result can be imagined in several ways:

- one would be a docile image, where the “Frigos’ would become a ‘museum’ piece, or a tourist attraction in a landscaped garden;
- an opposite one may be an isolated space “designed” to preserve the image of dereliction.

Beyond their positive and negative appearance, both scenarios seem to be faces of the same coin - a well known commodity likely to be produced by a design practitioner. They may represent “an explosion of beige” in the Generic City “built at incredible speed, and conceived at even more incredible pace” or the results of a “Strip Beautification Committee”, where “total Design comes to mean ‘total control’”. However, both options are very far from the daily critical input engaged in the inhabitation process of the “Frigos”.

In the near future, fragile as life itself, the original contest of the “Frigos” inhabitants may find different reasons of resistance and take different forms of critique; but while changing, it might just manage to stay away from two lethal options: gentrification and dereliction!