

ON SEEING PARIS →



ERIC UHLFELDER

Preface by Paul Goldberger

AUTHOR

Eric Uhlfelder has written books on urban design, architectural history and photography. He has been photographing Europe for more than thirty years, and has traveled to Paris 21 times. His images are part of the permanent collections of the Musée Carnavalet in Paris and the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris. And they have been published in The New York Times, Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Editions Flammarion, and Eric Hazen. His work has been exhibited in Venice, Paris, and in New York, where he is based.

DETAILS

FORMAT

21 × 19 cm

PAGES

128

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS

5,000 characters

ILLUSTRATIONS

70 in duotone/tritone

BINDING

Hardcover

PUBLICATION

Autumn 2015

RETAIL PRICE

Euro 30,00

PREFACE

by Paul Goldberger

Is it new and old in Paris? Or new vs. old?

Eric Uhlfelder's photographs inquire into the difference and they lead us to believe that now, more than in previous generations, the reality of Paris is more truly the latter. Today, Paris seems less a seamless web than ever before. The architecture that we have always identified as Paris exists in awkward cohabitation with new construction: the gracious and relaxed communication across time that has forever been an essential part of this city's nature now seems hard to find, sometimes almost nonexistent, replaced by a jarring discontinuity. The ages seem almost to compete with one another, not to blend together in the civilized dialogue that, more than anything else, has traditionally defined Parisian urbanism.

One's first instinct, then, is to think of this book as yet another cry in the wilderness, yet another lament of lost architectural glories. To a certain extent it is so: Eric Uhlfelder's photographs are a plea to honor and preserve the city that was. Yet at the same time they are an inquiry, as honest and unsentimental an inquiry as one could ask for, into the nature of urbanism in our time.

These photographs are essays on the theme of con-

tinuity, ruminations on the idea of connection and wholeness in a city. The real gift Eric Uhlfelder gives us is to remind us that the essential fact of Paris is its fabric, not its individual buildings. Here, surely more than in any of the other great cities of the world, the whole is truly more than the sum of its parts. To turn these pages is to sense this, to realize that Paris is a flowing fabric, not a set of monuments for tourists.

How did this idea get lost in our time?

In part it was due to the good intentions, architecturally at least, of Francois Mitterand, who sought, more earnestly than any head of state in the 20th century, to evolve a modernist monumentality capable of holding its own with the monumental architectural statements of centuries past. President Mitterand's so called Grands Projets, from I.M. Pei's glass pyramid at the Louvre to Gae Aulenti's remake of the Gare d'Orsay into the Musee d'Orsay, have all been attempts to build for the public realm at both a scale and seriousness of conception nearly unheard of in our time.

At their best, the Grands Projets have been powerful, even stirring, architectural presences. Yet the projects, which have also included Bernard Tschumi's

Parc de la Villette, Jean Nouvel's Arab World Institute and Carlos Ott's new Opera at the Bastille, have been objects first and parts of the Parisian cityscape second. Their contribution has not been to enhance the traditional urbanistic image, but to transcend it.

Of course it is more than a little disingenuous to pretend that Paris's extraordinary physical qualities are a matter of fabric alone, or that the city is only a continuous pattern of similar buildings. Paris has always been a city of great monuments, set off against the powerful and subtle background of the urban fabric. The balance between the two, the balance between the foreground monuments and the background fabric is nearly perfect, and it is in the exemplary nature of that balance that the genius of Paris, if one can speak of the evolution of a city's physical form over epochs as genius, lies. The Grands Projets aim to continue and extend the tradition of foreground monuments into our time and into the language of modernism an ambition that has to be considered noble, whatever the results.

The real problem, the true villain of these photographs, if there is one is not in the aspirations of the Grands Projets, but in the other new architecture in Paris, begun before Mitterand and continued through

his time: the architecture of the everyday buildings, the apartment blocks and office buildings that have filled so much of the 15th arrondissement and the outskirts of the city on all sides. Here is ordinary modern Paris, the buildings that are our age's equivalent of the great six and eight story buildings of the 18th and 19th centuries that make up the city's beloved urban fabric. In the making of these buildings, put up in greater and greater quantities in recent years, was the chance to form a new kind of fabric that would be as hospitable a background to the monuments of our age as the buildings of the Avenue de l'Opera served as a chorus to Garnier's Opera House.

And the chance was missed altogether. There is no fabric, not even an understanding of what it means to make buildings defer to one another, of what it means to make buildings that are parts of a larger whole that gives everyday architecture coherence and meaning. There is only a kind of chaos in these new buildings, a harsh and often crude abstraction that defies the notion of urban continuity, a sense of disconnected boxes that defies the greatest element of Parisian urbanism, the sanctity of the street.

Beside the mediocrity of the everyday architecture of the new Paris, even the most disappointing of the

Grands Projets rises to noble stature. And when there is no architectural fabric of value, no everyday buildings of quality, the exquisite balance that characterizes Parisian urbanism cannot exist.

Of course, to give them their due, these new buildings provide Eric Uhlfelder with plenty of material: his camera moves continually up and around this new architecture, plucking its abstraction, dissecting its shapes. There are some splendid images of new buildings here, and they make it clear that the photographer was gripped by a lot of the new work he saw. Yet, it is hard not to sense that Uhlfelder can never quite bring himself to caress the new as he does the old, and the polite distance he keeps, however slight, tells us much. The Grands Projets and other new works are studied clinically: the old Paris is wallowed in.

This difference in style within these images is not hard to perceive: the emotion in this book is all in the photographs of traditional Paris, where Eric Uhlfelder allows himself to let go, and we can feel it. The view of 42, rue de Seine in the 6th arrondissement, for example, a Latin Quarter intersection, is sensual and full of depth and movement. So, too, with the exquisite courtyard of 171, rue St. Jacques in the 5th arrondissement, or the alleyway at 21, rue Ramponeau in the

20th: the buildings are deep and rich, and we feel the space around them.

Space is what Uhlfelder is photographing, as much as buildings: we can see it in the view of the bending rue Bievre in the 5th arrondissement, where we literally feel the tight walls of the space of the street, and watch it curve away from us, or the alleyway of the rue des Chantres in the 4th arrondissement, tighter still, the distant vista at the end punctuated by the Gothic spire of Notre Dame. If Uhlfelder sometimes seems to be following a bit too closely in the shadow of Atget, he knows how to make compositions.

The sensuality all disappears in the images of contemporary architecture: suddenly it is all surface, shape, mass and shadow. Perhaps not in the work of Ricardo Bofill, which after all is about the bringing of classical texture to modern buildings, but almost everywhere else Uhlfelder photographs contemporary architecture. I.M. Pei's pyramid at the Louvre is viewed respectfully, but without passion, which in this book is the most damning thing of all. The photographer flatters the Opera Bastille a bit, trying perhaps to find in that banal building a bit more two dimensional compositional strength than it really has, but his message still gets through: to Uhlfelder, this is all hard, tough, sleek

geometries, as devoid of human use as the modern Paris of Jacques Tati.

There is inventive wit in some of the images in this book: the view of workmen on scaffolding at the Quai des Grands Augustins in the 6th arrondissement is marvelous, as if the men had been placed there by a choreographer: it is at once a loving homage to the sensuality of the building they are restoring and a gentle admission that even the most loved architecture of Paris is, in one way or another, a stage set.

Another image, the cluster of people waiting for a bus on the Avenue de l'Opéra, has an almost haunting, yet utterly un sentimental, kind of nostalgia to it those faces look as if they could have been photographed in the 1950s.

But my favorite image moves away from the everyday urban fabric altogether, and looks anew at the most famous monument of all, the Eiffel Tower. Uhlfelder has photographed the base of the tower through the sprawling branches of a nearby tree, the tree's convoluted form playing off against the leaping arches and graceful curves of the tower itself. We don't see all of the tower, but only a section, and what is outside the frame both energizes this composition and saves it from cliché.

Suddenly the most common icon of Paris is rendered fresh and new, full of soaring energy and yet contained and controlled. The tower here is strong, yet gentle; exhilarating, yet intimate; powerful, yet delicate, and ever so slightly mysterious like the city itself never fully to be known.

Paul Goldberger, a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, was the architectural critic of *The New Yorker Magazine* and formerly the architectural critic of *The New York Times*, where he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Architectural Criticism*. In 1996, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani presented him with the city's Preservation Achievement Award in recognition of the impact of his work on historic preservation. He is the author of the book *Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York*. And Mr. Goldberger was Dean of Parsons: *The New School for Design in New York*.

THE LAST TIME I SAW PARIS

By Eric Uhlfelder

“We walked along under the trees that grew out over the river on the Quai d’Orléans side of the island. Across the river were broken walls of old houses that were being tworn down....We walked on and circled the island. The river was dark and a bateau mouche went by, all bright with lights, going fast and quiet up and out of sight under the bridge....We crossed to the left bank of the Seine by the wooden footbridge from the Quai de Bethune, and stopped on the bridge and looked down the river at Notre Dame. The island looked dark, the houses were high against the sky, and trees were shadows.”

I adore the way Hemingway wrote of Paris. Reading him, more than anything else, attracted me to the city. And as I search through *The Sun Also Rises*, trying to select a passage that conveys the city, I realize how little Hemingway actually told of Paris. But if you’ve been there, his focus and simple descriptions take you back completely. It is with a similar vision that I photograph the city, looking at the textures, forms, and spac-

es to convey what Paris feels like and to reveal how much it is changing.

Photographing thoroughfares and monuments like the Champs-Elysses or the Eiffel Tower can serve to symbolize Paris, but these images do not describe the city. Pictures depicting the character of the large boulevards, small back streets, interior courtyards, and winding wooden staircases--ingredients of every arrondissement--do. And these elements begin to describe the city’s most engaging and descriptive feature: the hierarchy of space.

Paris is an arterial network of boulevards, radiating from étoiles that resolve into local streets and interior courts around which much of the town has been built. This order sets up a diversity of visual and spatial contrasts that makes walking the city a definitively Parisian experience.

(From the opening 3,000 words essay)



PLACE DES ABBESSES



16, RUE CHANNOINESSE

Paris... is the most extraordinary place in the world!
Charles Dickens



PLACE JUSSIEU



RUE DE SEINE



ENTREPÔTS DE BERCY

“You can’t escape the past in Paris, and yet what’s so wonderful about it is that the past and present intermingle so intangibly that it doesn’t seem to burden.”

Allen Ginsberg



RUE ST. JULIEN-LE-PAUVRE



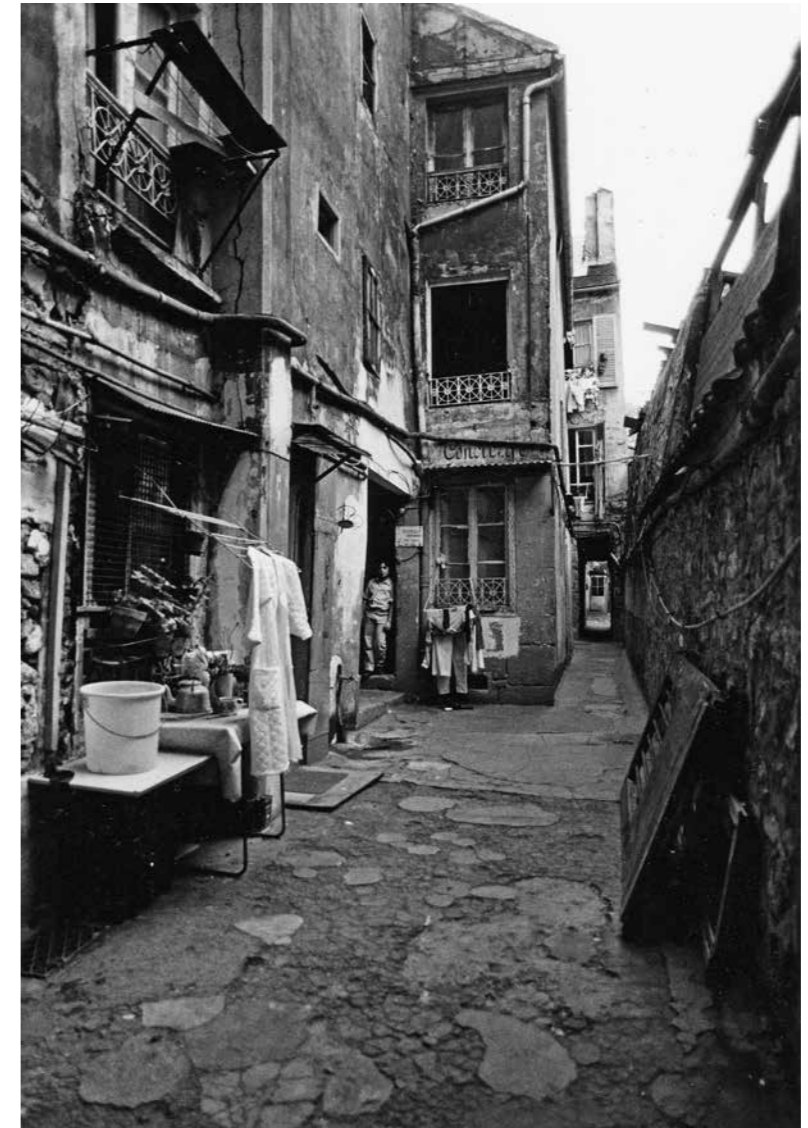
RUE DES CHANTRES



Ile St. Louis



BISTRO DE LA GARE



RUE RAMPONEAU



AVENUE DE L'OPÉRA



PONT NEUF

*Paris... is a world meant for the walker alone, for only the pace of strolling
can take in all the rich (if muted) detail.*

Edmund White



RUE ST. ANDRÉ DES ARTS



GARE DE LYONS

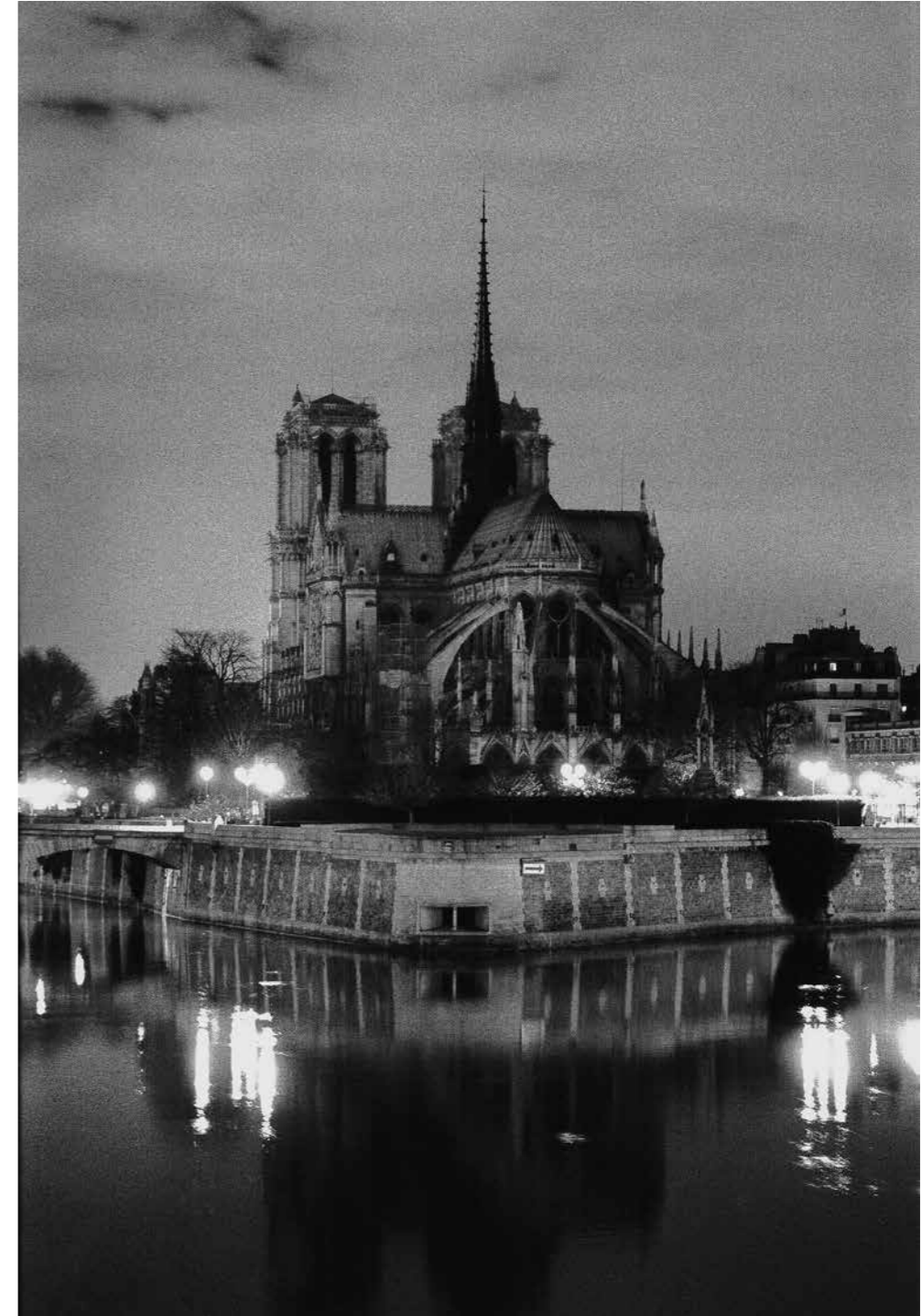


BOULEVARD DU CONVENTION

Down the river was Notre Dame squatting against the night sky. We crossed to the left bank of the Seine by the wooden foot bridge from the Quai de Bethune, and stopped on the bridge and looked down the river at Notre Dame. Standing on the bridge the island looked dark, the houses were high against the sky, and the trees were shadows.

Ernest Hemingway

FACING PAGE: NOTRE DAME





FACING PAGE: TOUR EIFFEL

“Paris is so very beautiful that it satisfies something in you that is always hungry in America.”

Ernest Hemingway



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