

The Island. 16/03/2009

Grand Paris: Architects reveal plans to transform French capital

Ten of the world's leading architects on Thursday detailed their plans to dramatically transform the French capital into a Grand Paris, in what has been described as the most complex city project ever.

By Henry Samuel in Paris

Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, asked the architects, including Britain's Richard Rogers, to project 20 years into the future and dream up the world's most sustainable post-Kyoto metropolis.

Among the more outlandish plans is Antoine Grumbach's proposal to extend the city all the way to the Channel port of Le Havre via Rouen along the Seine, maximising the green possibilities of the river. The idea was already mooted by Napoleon Bonaparte, who said: "Paris-Rouen-Le Havre: one single city with the Seine as its main road."

Christophe de Portzamparc, the prize-winning French architect, has proposed building four economic "buds" in an "archipelago" around the capital and transferring a huge European train station to Aubervilliers, north of Paris, modelled on London's St Pancras.

Roland Castro, the prominent 1968 Leftist who suggested moving the Elysée

Palace to the tough northeastern suburbs, has proposed injecting "beauty" into a "Grand Paris of poets", which would include new cultural landmarks in a capital shaped like a huge eight-petal flower and with a New York-style Central Park on the grim housing project of La Courneuve.

The Italian architects Bernardo Secchi and Paola Vigano have proposed enlarging the city and laying it out as a "porous sponge", where waterways are given pride of place.

Yves Liot would like to create 20 "sustainable towns" of 500,000 within the Paris area. He would also double the number of forests and bring fields to Paris' outskirts so the urban dwellers could cultivate their own fruit and vegetables.

Many thought that Mr Sarkozy would follow his predecessors' lead and bequeath one or two magnificent monuments, such as François Mitterrand's Louvre pyramid, Georges Pompidou's Centre or Jacques Chirac's Quai Branly museum.

However, the president has set his sights much higher, asking the architects to re-imagine the entire city and its surroundings with concrete proposals but "the absolute freedom to dream".

One crucial aim is to end the isolation of central Paris, with its two million inhabitants, which is currently cut off from the six million living in suburbs just outside its ring road, known as "le périphérique".

As Rogers, the London-based co-designer of the Pompidou centre,



A computer image of a project for a bigger and greener Paris, in La Courneuve, by French architect Roland Castro

observed: "I know no other big city where the heart is so detached from its arms and legs".

His team, working with the London School of Economics and French sociologists, has proposed uniting cut-off communities, notably by covering up railway lines that dissect the city and placing huge green spaces and networks above them. One such green line would stretch all the way from central Paris to the run-down southeastern outskirts, mirroring the line from the Louvre to La Defense to

the west of the city. Paris would be stuffed with renewable technologies and rethought to reduce city dweller's travelling time to no more than 30 minutes per day.

His project aims to end the "monoculture" of Paris' suburbs by overhauling high-immigrant enclaves like Clichy-sous-Bois, where urban riots erupted in 2005. Office and living space would be mixed with rich and poor and high-speed train lines extended.

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