

New WCs
 La Tour d'Argent
 An Unlikely Empress
 Les Parfums de Rosine
 Ecole Alain Ducasse
 What a Hoot

PARIS

n o t e s

Euro June 29: .710
 Euro May 26: .715
 Rain Days: 12
 High Temp: 76°F/24°C
 Low Temp: 58°F/14°C
 Nat'l Holidays: July 14, Aug 15

JULY / AUGUST 2009

VOLUME 18 ISSUE 6

GRAND STANDING

By Amanda MacKenzie

The Grand Palais is once again flexing its muscles and reasserting itself as an icon for the city

For you and me, it's a Right-Bank icon, and Paris just wouldn't be Paris without it. For Yves Saint-Geours, President of the Etablissement Public du Grand Palais, it's an island. Rising above the swell of traffic along the Champs-Élysées, it has its inlets, coves and ports, all of them fascinating, some still a little uncharted and unfamiliar. And, Saint-Geours' job is to make sure that we drop anchor and explore.

Which, it seems, is precisely what we're doing. After an 11-year closure prompted by serious structural problems, the Grand Palais re-opened for good just over two years ago. Since then, the great glasshouse alone has drawn in well over a million people to exhibitions and events. Three hundred percent more people visited the Grand Palais during the last six months of 2008 than during those same months in 2007. As an innovative venue for the arts and technology, the Grand Palais is already flexing its muscles and reasserting itself as an icon for the city—and for France. Yet, in a remarkably un-French development, its new management structure now must pay its own way. It gets little help from state grants or patronage. "The Minister of Finance likes us quite a lot," observes Saint-Geours dryly (he and his 23-strong team are private-sector employees in all but name). Can this be the same Grand Palais that was once thought to be such a lost cause that it came within a hair of being demolished?

More on that sacrilege later. The question worth asking is this: Why did France build such a behemoth in the first place? Surely it was not just to astound those visiting the 1900 Exposition Universelle? It's true that the Grand Palais was a French riposte to the Crystal Palaces of London (1851) and New York (1858), both of which have long since vanished. It's also true that it took more metal to build the Grand Palais than the Eiffel Tower, which was meant to eventually be dismantled. But the Grand Palais was never intended to be a fly-by-night showcase—a half-mile stroll around its monu-

mental masonry should put that myth to bed. Along with the Petit Palais across the street and the Pont Alexandre III to the south, the Grand Palais connected Les Invalides with the Champs-Élysées along the so-called "Republican Axis" and opened up a completely new perspective within the city. It was the cornerstone of the "new" Paris, at the dawn of a new century. And,



as a hymn to the glory of the Republic, it was built to last—well, if not forever, at least until the sun set on the Colonial Empire. In this goal it has succeeded rather well.

The Grand Palais was astounding on every front. Bristling with columns and decorously draped statuary, the building's neo-classical exterior was calculated to stir the heart of every patriot. But it was the nave, that stupendous 656-foot-long hangar crowned with glass, whose technological prowess and stylistic daring really set pulses racing. Its sinuous steel pillars were at the cutting edge of modernity at a moment when art nouveau was just hitting its stride; some point out that the pillars even anticipated art deco. Undoubtedly, during the seven-month run of the World's Fair, it was the Grand Palais as much as any of the fair's attractions that brought 50 million people flocking to Paris.

From its inception, the Grand Palais had an ambitious dual mission. On the one hand, the contemporary art and design shows the Grand

Palais would host were to be "out there" at the forefront of modern trends; on the other, it was to provide the public with spectacle on an epic scale. Sometimes it managed both simultaneously. Barely had the lights gone out on the World's Fair before the Grand Palais was putting on the world's first motor show, the Salon de l'Auto, the first of many auto shows held under the great "coupole" of the Grand Palais. (This show is now the Mondiale de l'Automobile, or Paris Motor Show, currently held at Paris Expo.) When not sending shock waves through the art world (Matisse and the Fauvistes made their debut here in 1905), the Grand Palais was rolling out huge commercial crowd-magnet events, ranging from aviation and radio-telegraphy shows to equestrian and "ideal home" shows. In those early years, the Grand Palais dazzled, inspired and challenged with its many offerings, and Parisians couldn't get enough of it.

Requisitioned as a military hospital during World War I, the Grand Palais served with honor. But things were never quite the same after the Nazis rolled in and parked their trucks in the nave. After a couple of lackluster attempts at pushing propaganda shows on the public, they gave up and shelled it instead. There was serious damage, especially when the straw from a circus menagerie being sheltered inside the building caught fire.

By the early 60s, the Grand Palais' future looked increasingly doubtful. The building had lacked unity ever since its west wing was converted in 1938 into the Palais de la Découverte, a science museum. Thereafter, a sense of drift set in. Immense as it was, the Grand Palais' nave had become a tight squeeze for burgeoning modern motor shows, and fielding replacement events became a challenge. Its art-nouveau arabesques and curlicues became unfashionable, almost to the point of absurdity.

Who could blame Minister of Cultural Affairs André Malraux if he began to seriously consider demolishing the Grand Palais? (He even drafted the great (continued on page 7)

Le Corbusier to design a replacement.) In the end, however, state procrastination set in, which did more to spare the monument from demolition than did public protest. And so, the Grand Palais might have limped on indefinitely as a second-tier exhibition space. That is, if it hadn't been for that rivet, the one that in 1993 popped off and dropped 148 feet from the nave's glass-and-structural-steel roof onto a Jean-Paul Gaultier snuff box being exhibited. Other rivets dangerously followed suit, and the building was unceremoniously closed. Government studies revealed serious structural problems. The Grand Palais' oak foundation piles were rotting. Groundwater had drained away over the years (the nearby Seine's water level had lowered) and exposed the piles to air. The "island" was sinking under its 9,400-ton metal weight.

"It was the times that saved the Grand Palais," says Saint-Geours, the man appointed in 2007 to take charge of its renaissance. "I firmly believe if all this had happened 30 years earlier, the building would have been demolished. You couldn't say it became fashionable again—that would be stretching it—but there came to be an appreciation of it. People rediscovered it, began to see it as interesting, emblematic. The fact is you just don't bulldoze something like this anymore."

Saint-Geours does not govern the "island" alone; he shares the H-shaped structure with two neighbors. The north wing is home to the Galeries Nationaux, an expansive exhibition space designated by Minister Malraux in 1962. The galleries are run by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (the French museum board), the cultural dynamo behind dozens of world-class art exhibitions on subjects as diverse as Picasso and Andy Warhol. The Palais d'Antin still houses the Palais de la Découverte, an aging yet vigorous science museum whose future is currently the subject of much speculation. As for Saint-Geours' preserve, it now boasts stable foundations, thanks to the application of high-pressure grouting, which cost millions. Fifteen thousand steel rivets have been renewed, along with some 172,000 square feet of glass roof over the nave. It's resplendent once more in its original shade of "mignonette" green, and it all adds up to a colossal chunk of heritage. But "patrimoine" alone certainly doesn't explain the monument's rising fortunes.

For Saint-Geours, restoring the Grand Palais to its former glory has meant going back to first principles. "My goal is for the Grand Palais to be faithful to its dual tradition," he explains. "The great artistic movements of the avant garde were expressed here, but it was also purpose-built for the 'grand nombre.' Where a standard exhibition hall can take 500 people, here it's 5,000. It's about people, about society itself. And so we've had to manage something extremely difficult—to find ways of bringing together the innovative, the extraordinary, at the same time as drawing in

the public at large. And we have to do that in a building that has a certain age."

To date, the Grand Palais has pulled off some impressive coups. This February, the nave provided a fitting setting for the auction of the Yves Saint-Laurent/Pierre Bergé estate. For three days, the public thronged in free of charge to salivate over the beloved couturier's exquisite collection before the 700-odd treasures were turned over to Christie's for auction to the world's elite. The proceedings attracted international media coverage and put a spotlight on the Grand Palais. Though it was a one-time event, it was consistent with other regular big events that populate the Grand Palais' calendar: the Biennale des Antiquaires, the Antiquarian Book Fair, FIAC (Foire Internationale d'Art



Contemporain, Paris' most prestigious contemporary art fair) and La Force de l'Art (a triannual French art fest that recently ended). Far more controversial was the decision to stage an exhibition on tag and graffiti art this past spring at the Grand Palais. Happily, the venture paid off. In just over a month, the show drew 80,000 visitors—in a gallery that would otherwise have been lying idle, awaiting its turn for TLC.

An exhibition like that would have been unthinkable in the nave, of course. Graceful it may be, but the nave's sheer volume poses an incredible challenge. "Quite simply, it's a terrible monument—terrible!" says Saint-Geours, evidently enjoying my shocked reaction. "It exalts—or it kills. If you do something banal in the nave, the result will be even more banal than it would have been in the street. For art to work here, it needs to interact with the building, enter into dialogue with it."

He can afford to be a little bullish on that score. Recent triumphs have included American artist Richard Serra's "Promenade," an original installation commissioned for last year's annual event called Monumenta. Lyrical and edgy, the artist's steel landscape was a sensation with critics and drew almost twice as many visitors as the popular FIAC. Last year also marked the end of the French Presidency of the European Union, an occasion celebrated with a two-week-long spectacular devoted to digital technology. Dans la Nuit des Images saw the nave transformed into a vibrant jungle of screens featuring video,

film and interactive installations from all 27 EU nations, plus a long string of guest countries. For Saint-Geours, there is a certain neatness in the continuity of the Grand Palais' tradition. How fitting, after all, that the monument that ushered in the age of the motor car in 1901 should be making art from digital technology, the medium through which most of us, one way and another, now live out our lives?

On a more mundane level, the Grand Palais has also set a precedent by turning the renovation of its facades to commercial advantage. In 2008, it became the first historic monument in Paris to exploit its scaffolding screens for corporate advertising. Such revenue counts given that extensive renovations still lie ahead and that all the work is to be self-funded.

Think you know the Grand Palais? You've only scratched the surface. The building's intricate logic has come as a revelation even for the man in charge: "The moment you climb the great art-nouveau staircase and you discover that beyond there's an immense room—the natural conclusion of everything that's gone before it—that's when things begin to fall into place. The public hardly knows this monument," he concludes. "We're gradually re-conquering it and joining it up, so we can reveal the logic of its vision." (In the meantime, there's always the Grand Palais' award-winning virtual visit at www.grandpalais.fr, a slick and shiver-inducing swoop through the monument's highlights.)

Heading the to-do list is the Salon d'Honneur, an immense and rarely seen sequel to the nave. Originally leading directly into the Palais d'Antin, it could conceivably do so again when it is restored to its former glory as a VIP lounge. Then there is the 43,000-or-so-square-foot balcony that runs around the nave. The balcony is currently off-limits but its refurbishment will offer lofty prospects for guided visits and temporary exhibitions. All told, planned upgrades will add some 107,000 extra square feet by 2010, almost doubling the space that is currently accessible. While that is good news for heritage fans like you and me, it's also an essential part of the Grand Palais' long-term business plan—and its continued success. Only by being able to diversify its offerings can the monument hope to lock in current commercial clients, as well as generate new ones, all the while fulfilling its mission as purveyor of modernity and inspiration.

Island, icon—call it what you will. The allure of the Grand Palais is that it now points not just to the past but to the future. As more and more of us are tempted to tie up and come ashore, the monument is living up to its founding vision. And if that's the case, isn't it time for other French cultural institutions to start emulating it? Saint-Geours thinks not: "The Grand Palais is an aberration; it's a one-off. It's so specific that you couldn't expect another museum to do the same. I don't claim it as any kind of model. Just unique," he adds. "And amazing."