

STILL VIABLE VIADUCT

Fifty unique shops and ateliers are still thriving after 15 years

Anyone meandering the streets between the Opéra Bastille and the Gare de Lyon in the 12th arrondissement will inevitably stumble upon the commanding brick and stone construction resembling an ancient Roman aqueduct along Avenue Daumesnil. This structure, the only one of its kind in Paris, is perhaps the most prominent vestige of the capital's industrial heritage. Since the 1980s, however, it has come to symbolize the countless inventive restoration projects that have reinvigorated local neighborhoods across the modern metropolis.

The Viaduc de Paris, as this edifice initially was known, was erected in 1858. It served as the platform for elevated trains that chugged back and forth between the Gare de la Bastille (where the opera house now stands) and the city's southeastern suburbs, beginning with Vincennes. The railroad line blossomed and expanded through the 19th century, eventually extending 54 kilometers to Verneuil-l'Étang. As the population in and around Paris increased, numerous similar lines opened. Congestion, noise and space restraints, however, obliged local authorities to rethink their approach to urban transport in the first half of the 20th century. Emulating the example of the Métro, subterranean commuter trains became increasingly prevalent. The development of the RER in the late 1950s ultimately led to the demise of the antiquated rail that had barreled along the Viaduc de Paris for a century. It took its final voyage on December 14, 1969. That same year, the Gare de la Bastille was abandoned. The ramshackle station was razed 25 years later.

Thanks to its sheer bulk, the Viaduc de Paris survived. It stood derelict until 1990, when the municipal government recognized its potential as a catalyst for rehabilitating the quarter. The idea was to restore the overpass and deploy it as a backdrop for reintroducing into the urban fabric the idea of storefronts and studios for artisans and their handiwork. While increasingly rare, such craftsmen had once comprised the economic backbone of Paris.

To achieve its objective, the city organized an architectural contest, which the Frenchman Patrick Berger won. His project was twofold in scope: clear and renovate all 64 brick-and-stone archways along the 1.5-kilometer-long viaduct (many were filled with detritus or inhabited by squatters), and then transform them into ateliers, galleries and boutiques where artisans could work and display their wares to potential customers. Berger's intervention was simple yet elegant. The stone and brick of each towering archway were left exposed. The openings on both ends subsequently were outfitted with modest

wooden frames, including an entrance, and glazed from top to bottom. The first six spaces opened to the public in October 1994, and the rest followed between 1995 and 2000. This new hub of French arts and crafts was rechristened the Viaduc des Arts.

Today over 50 shops, exhibition spaces and ateliers thrive beneath the vaults of the Viaduc des Arts. Each offers highly specialized goods and services. A walk along Avenue Daumesnil is unlike anything you'll experience elsewhere in Paris. As you gaze through the many windows and poke your head inside certain establishments, you'll encounter astonishing treasures, some of which you won't be able to resist for yourself or loved ones. Warning: These are not souvenir outlets adorned to ensnare tourists.



At the southeastern end of the viaduct (toward the Gare de Lyon), you'll find Chevalier Conservation (no. 1). Experts in restoring and cleaning tapestries and textiles (clients include the Louvre and the presidential palace), they also offer a line of handsome modern rugs. Next door is Maison Guillet (no. 1bis), a florist that composes elaborate arrangements for the fashion and theater circuits. The Atelier du Temps Perdu (no. 5) restores paintings and other polychrome objects, conducting on its premises classes in various techniques.

The Viaduc des Arts promises delights for those who appreciate modern furniture and accessories. Créations Cherif (no. 13) proposes funky contemporary pieces in offbeat colors. Yamakado (no. 65) has a collection of edgy minimalist furnishings, while Cyrille Varet (no. 67) presents hand-tooled confections in iron and steel. Dazzling chandeliers and wall sconces are the order of the day at Baguès (no. 73). Further afield, Série Rare (no. 121) fabricates unusual and unexpected door handles and lamps in natural or gilt bronze.

Speaking of gold, Maison Fey (no. 15) is one of three gilders in the Viaduc des Arts. Their

forte is gilt leather, from book bindings to chair coverings. They sell a range of amusing storage boxes, the fronts of which are decorated to resemble the spines of old books, for everything from CDs to magazines.

Fashion, both haute couture and prêt-à-porter, has its place along the avenue. Malhia Kenty (no. 19) stocks lush fabrics and sewing accoutrements for those handy with a needle. (Numerous designers shop here.) Aurélie Cherell (no. 27) designs women's clothing, including wedding gowns. Down the block, Cécile & Jeanne (no. 49) sells a variety of jewelry and handbags for her. At no. 129—the viaduct's final boutique—both sexes can sample the secretly mixed scents of the perfumer Jean-Charles Brosseau.

For those interested in the odd and original, the Viaduc des Arts won't disappoint. Atelier N'O (no. 21) is a self-described curiosity shop. Vertical (no. 63) displays unusual sculptures fashioned solely from parts of plants and trees. Heurtault (no. 91) creates retro parasols with a contemporary twist. Its neighbor, Automates & Poupées (no. 97), is piled high with collector dolls, music boxes, mechanical toys and singing birds that will captivate the young and young at heart.

Last but not far from least, you'll witness a host of artisans plying their trades. At Ateliers Robin Tourenne (no. 71), craftspeople restore posters, maps and other priceless works on paper. The repair of flutes is the domain of Allain Cadinot (no. 99), whereas violins and cellos are imbued with new life and given new voices at Roger Lanne (no. 103). Finally, Atelier Le Tallec (no. 95) and the Académie du Viaduc des Arts (no. 119) program courses for those with a creative touch. The former concentrates on porcelain painting. Students work in the window, and the fruits of their labor are for sale next door. With classes in painting, sculpture and drawing for adults and children, the latter is a mini art school.

Should the feast for the eyes along the Viaduc des Arts make your stomach growl, the Café Viaduc (no. 43) and L'Arrosoir (no. 77) will sate it. When you're replenished, consider climbing the viaduct and visiting the Promenade Plantée. Jacques Vergely and Philippe Mathieu conceived this wonderfully varied public garden in conjunction with the viaduct's rehabilitation. Planted over the old rail line, it is a favorite with Parisians, who proudly proclaim it as the world's only elevated park.

The success and uniqueness of both the Viaduc des Arts and the Promenade Plantée laid the groundwork in this corner of the 12th arrondissement for a renaissance that continues to endure. (The plethora of new and refurbished apartment buildings in the vicinity is proof of this.) With its scores of craftspeople, the archways animating Avenue Daumesnil are a vital link to many of the coveted traditions that have come to define French artisanship.

—By Paul B. Franklin