

Paris, city of the future

There's a decidedly optimistic air in the French capital

Simon Kuper DECEMBER 7 2023

Paris, where I live, is a mess right now. Roads are being pulled up and renovated ahead of next summer's Olympics. Schools, airports and museums have been disrupted by bomb threats, as Europe's largest Muslim and Jewish city lives in fear of importing the Gazan conflict. And we've just entered the annual five-month sunless stretch.

But here's something few Parisians will admit: the city is approaching a new zenith of glorious liveability. This is part of the trans-western urban renaissance, which is overcoming the brief setback of the pandemic. (Commercial real estate is another matter.) Paris even has a plan to solve the modern problem of urban success: how not to become a fortress for rich people.

Anyone who hasn't been here lately might struggle to appreciate the transformation. For one, the economy is booming. Regional unemployment is 6.7 per cent, around a 15-year low. Paris is becoming even more of a luxury city, the home of Louis Vuitton (fittingly, the [latest Olympic sponsor](#)), with a few select drinking fountains that spout sparkling water. But the boom is broad-based. Even in mainland France's poorest department, Seine-Saint-Denis, just north of Paris, most jobs are now hard to fill. That helps explain why last June's overhyped suburban riots fizzled.

Region-wide, this is a rare moment in history where employers are struggling to recruit artistic performers, and butchers are becoming overpriced superstars. I was offered a retail job by automated text message; my 15-year-old son was, illegally, offered work as a security guard.

Paris is becoming a bilingual business city almost like Copenhagen. On a side street near my office, a new sign above a drab entryway proclaims, in English: “Paris School of Technology & Business”. Similar outfits have popped up around town. Meanwhile, Parisian investment banks are swelling with post-Brexit refugees from London. Valérie Pécresse, the Paris region’s president, boasts: “For the first time, the region is number one in Europe, ahead of London, in new foreign investment . . . The Paris region is number one in the world for R&D investments.”

Paris is also becoming more liveable — if you don’t drive. Expelling lots of cars has created space for cyclists and café terraces, but above all for pedestrians: 65 per cent of journeys are now on foot. Many streets around schools have been pedestrianised. The Seine’s Right Bank has transformed from highway into the world’s best urban walk. All this has made the Parisian air less foul.

The Olympics will, eventually, improve the city. Hosting the games is like hosting a wedding in the family home. The preparations are stressful; everything broken or outdated needs fixing. The event itself is stressful, too. Paris’s games could be wrecked by terrorism, strikes or both. But once the guests leave, you have a renovated home — with a pool, given that the city is doing its best to [clean up the Seine](#) for swimming for the first time since 1923.

The biggest transformation will be in transport. Several of the 68 new metro stations being built in the suburbs — Europe’s largest transport project — will open for the Olympics.

The Seine’s Right Bank has transformed from highway into the world’s best urban walk

There’s one downside to creating a wonderful city: it becomes so desirable that almost everyone is priced out. Parisian apartment prices have nearly quadrupled since 2000. The city risks becoming a dreamscape for the wealthy, à la the Netflix series *Emily in Paris*.

To avoid this, Paris is taking a lead from Vienna, where over 60 per cent of inhabitants live in subsidised housing. Nearly one-quarter of Parisian homes inside the Périphérique ring road are now social housing, up from 13 per cent in 2001. The mayoralty aims to reach 30 per cent by 2035, plus another 10 per cent of “affordable” homes, meaning one-fifth below market prices. Some of social-democratic Europe’s other successful cities are making similar pushes: a third of Zürich’s housing is supposed to be not-for-profit by 2050.

Paris, unlike certain cities one could mention, is also building many homes, including thousands above and around each new metro station. Then there's the Olympic Village, several blocks of airy apartment buildings by the river in Seine-Saint-Denis. They'll be shrouded in trees and plants, in line with the new Parisian ideology of "végétalisation". Post-Olympics, the buildings will become social and market-priced housing, offices, shops and cafés. Visiting the village one recent morning, I was blown away. I left imbued with that most un-Parisian of feelings: optimism.

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