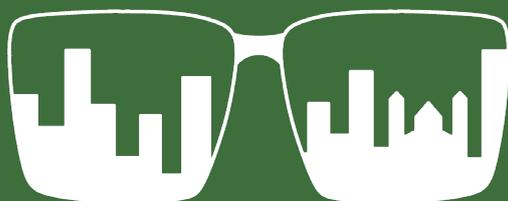


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BLOCK 3: THE NEW FACES THE OLD

METAMORPHOSES IN PARIS: THE FATE OF SAMARITAINE AMONG PRESERVATION AND INNOVATION

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ABSTRACT

In our times, cities regenerate by not only welcoming new and unprecedented activities but also reorganizing themselves from the morphological and social points of view. For a long time, the historic centre has wrongfully been considered as a space crystallized over time - implemented through integral conservation - that has transformed the urban fabric into an enormous museum that is not coherent and no longer meets the needs of the contemporaneity. Today, finding a dialogue, however difficult, between tradition and innovation is essential to implement renewal actions that inevitably must and must increasingly involve the built heritage. A complex palimpsest in which traces of the history and life of man are imprinted and deserve to be read and respected within inescapable mutative processes. However, these processes should be implemented without violence or cancellation, in a planning vision, not limited to the achievement of economic well-being but also to the reinforcement of the cultural dimension of development. Focusing on the transformations that involve the very heart of Paris and, in particular, an iconic place of commerce such as *La Samaritaine*, this essay aims to analyze the complexity of planning strategies in which specific actions of restoration, renewal and reuse involve the entire city to reconfigure new images and urban spaces.

KEYWORDS

Urban transformation; commerce; cultural heritage; architectural design; Paris.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'innovative' city refers to an archetype of technologically advanced and particularly characterized urban space. However, towns to regenerate need not only to welcome innovative activities but also to reorganize themselves from a morphological and social point of view.

For a long time, the idea of the historic centre has wrongly given back an image of space crystallized over time - implemented through integral conservation - which has transformed the urban area into a huge museum that no longer fits the demands of the contemporaneity. Today, having overcome this concept, to find a dialogue, however difficult, between tradition and innovation is indispensable given the implementation of renewal activities that inevitably will increasingly involve the built (Purini 2008). A complex palimpsest where the traces of human history and life are imprinted, which deserves to be read and respected within inevitable changes. Metamorphoses that should, however, be implemented without violence or cancellation, following a strategic vision, not limited to the achievement of economic well-being but also aimed at strengthening the cultural dimension of development.

In this sense, emblematic is the city of Paris. Its evolution is, in fact, the result of a continuous

process of adaptation and transformation - obviously not free from contradictions - regulated by debates, challenges, negotiations and crossed by a contextual and progressive change in the conceptions and forms of planning. The latter was first understood as a general instrument and then as a strategic tool, based on long-term choices and applied through timely interventions.

If a radical urban reorganization commissioned by Napoleon III and the prefect Georges Eugène Haussmann was carried out between 1852 and 1870, it was from the second half of the 20th century that the greatest and most traumatic changes occurred (Fumagalli 2008). In the thirty years that followed the end of the Second World War - the so-called *Trente Glorieuses* - French territories were affected by countless operations centred on the merciless operating practice of the *renovation urbaine*. A concept with a vague and unclear meaning that was essentially translated into modernization - or demolition/ replacement - operations. Especially in Paris, it was materialized in a series of exemplary initiatives aimed at 'revisiting' the city. Although already in 1962, the Malraux law introduced provisions concerning the safeguarding of historic centres, the first decade of application of this instrument - innovative and courageous but extremely rigid and problematic - was still essentially based on the praxis of renewal (Versaci, 2012). This led to the erection of towers, slats and other rationalist buildings in the core of the cities (Nigrelli 1999).

However, new concerns regarding the conservation and recovery of the existing urban and building heritage gradually emerge. By showing all its limitations and contradictions, the practice of renewal, therefore, opens the door to the formulation of new urban theories more attentive to the quality of the city and the life of its inhabitants. With the election to the presidency of the Republic of Valéry Giscard

d'Estaing, the thinking of the institutions on the urban transformations hitherto accomplished changes. The excesses of a certain 'quantitative urbanism' are criticized, also thanks to some vehement debates conducted by intellectuals and to a population more sensitive to the fate of their towns (Pinon 2011).

In 1977, the appointment of Jacques Chirac as the mayor of Paris, initiates a substantial review of the ongoing renovation operations, thus helping to define the guidelines of a new French urban planning more prone to the requalification of built heritage and conceived to both respond to the deep aspirations of the community and foster social relations. In 1978, the *Paris Projet* magazine focuses on the description of the objectives of this new policy. This latter proposes a return to volumes coherent with the peculiarities of the context, greater respect for the urban fabric, the protection and improvement of some elements of the existing habitat, the maintenance of traditional craft and industrial activities, the development of gardens and public spaces. In these years, France thus discovers the 'urban form', long denied by a technical approach to development.

An attempt will, thus, be made to achieve the 'active' preservation of the architectural and urban heritage of Paris - carried out through new constructions in the historic centre and its main sites (APUR 1985) - however not free from demolition activities and as many disputes.

Architectural heritage protection that in Paris takes on the forms of the urban project and which is expressed as a series of important operations, such as the remake of the old central food market *Les Halles* that opens in 1979, while devoted to other commercial function. A 'serious' mistake that Paris will never forget without ever stopping 'reinventing' itself, often at the expense of the Paris skyline¹:

¹ The offence deriving from the suppression of the Baltard pavilions, a now universally recognized masterpiece of industrial archaeology, or the quality of the architectural organisms then made in replacement, globally devoid of character, banal, often ugly, will never be forgiven. At least according to contemporary perception. Above all, architecture is a clear expression of an ephemeral and technologically constantly evolving world, which has inevitably collided without ever reconcile with the values of permanence and immutability of the historical context.

Paris is a fragile beauty. No city has captivated the imagination or inspired like Paris. It is a beauty different from any other city in the world. And the skyline is integral to that beauty. Like a subtle membrane containing the city in its most delicate aspects, this skyline defines the city. Destroy this, and you destroy Paris. The city will go on standing, and people will come, of course, but the city will be diminished (Pitt 2016, 119).

Today's Paris presents a succession of modern additions that help to define its image of charm, well-known and appreciated all over the world. Works of architecture, which nevertheless at the time of their creation created doubts and malaise: from Beaubourg (1977) to the Grande Arche in the La Défense district (1989) via the Arab World Institute (1987) and the Pei's Pyramid at the Louvre (1988).

Still, in the last decade, numerous experiences of transformation of the urban space have been planned in the French metropolis. Many of them are summarized in iconic projects - often huge skyscrapers - unfortunately inevitably associated with the negative image of a liberal and globalized economy that seems to contradict sustainable and lasting choices regarding plans, materials and construction techniques used (Mercuriali 2018). From the project for the new Forum des Halles (2018) to the various modernization and conversion programs of the Gare du Nord and the Maine-Montparnasse district currently underway, up to the project concerning the Samaritaine, numerous are the demolition/reconstruction actions and extensive changes that affect the commercial sector. They call for some reflections on the scope and quality of these interventions.

In particular, the case of the La Samaritaine - a historical department store among the most representative of early 20th-century

architecture and dear to Parisians because it conveys to them, in a contemporary context, the spirit of the *Belle Époque* - is of great interest. The complex has for some years been affected by a vast campaign of works aimed at its renovation. A bold operation that has sparked numerous controversies and that deserves further study, especially for an overall evaluation of the activities that include new grafts in the existing fabric.

1. THE SAMARITAINE AS THE ARCHETYPE OF TRANSFORMATION

The witness of a historical period marked by significant changes impressed, first of all, by the industrial revolution, the department stores appear in the Parisian landscape, along the course of the second half of the 19th century. The great success of Universal exhibitions², the new policies of centralization of the railway sector and, within the cities of Paris, the spread of horse-drawn omnibuses that transport a large clientele in the centre, favour an ever-greater development. The introduction of new sales methods (free admission, fixed prices, a wide range of goods) and, at the same time, the possibility of growing - also in a colossal way on the internal courtyards, where it is possible, thanks to the use of the iron and glass, providing lighting through the establishment of zenithal windows - are elements that will facilitate their quick expansion.

In the new Parisian districts resulting from Baron Haussmann's *Grands travaux* and, in particular, in the transit and high-traffic areas, firms are confronted to find strategic planting opportunities. New imposing buildings replace old ones - picturesque but unhealthy - that persist in the heart of the city: the department store is a "modern, solid and light cathedral of commerce, created for a people of customers" - as Émile Zola claimed (Zola

² After those of 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, that of 1900 was the triumph of iron architecture and Art nouveau.

1883, 282) - intended to revolutionize retail and city lifestyles (Leveau 2006).

Five department stores overlook the Parisian market during this period, transforming its landscape: Le Petit Saint-Thomas and Au Bon Marché³, the oldest *grand magasin* created in 1852 in rue de Sèvres (7th arrondissement), Les Grands Magasins du Louvre⁴, in rue de Rivoli, built in 1855 and definitively closed in 1974, the Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville (known as BHV)⁵ opened to the public in 1856 at No. 52 of the rue de Rivoli right in front of the town hall, the Printemps Haussmann built in 1865 in the Opéra district, at No. 64 of boulevard Haussmann, La Samaritaine founded in 1869 facing the Seine, near Pont Neuf and, finally, Les Galeries Lafayette opened in 1894 in the Opéra district, at No. 40 of boulevard Haussmann (Fig. 1).

For these private companies, the role played by architectural design in the conquest of customers is very important (Vayron 2015). The architects in charge of their realization define a style that becomes specific to the department stores, characterized by

spectacular codes inherited from the great noble palaces: a classic style chosen to impress passers-by and elevate buildings to contemporary monuments. Extremely attractive features distinguish the façades, the layout and ornamentation of the roofs, the height of the buildings often established in derogation of municipal regulations (Cantelli, 1991). They also concern the interiors, which are sumptuous, true and own triumphs of frescoes, iron's florilegia and stained-glass windows, to adequately serve the flourishing bourgeoisie of both the Second Empire and the Third Republic. In the context of this Parisian transfiguration, the case of the Samaritaine is representative, also for the more recent evolutions that make it one of the most interesting cases of contemporary transformation.

1.1. La Samaritaine, a monument of Modernism

The history of the department store is linked to the lives of Ernest Cognacq - a self-



Figure 1. Construction phases of La Samaritaine. Source: (La Samaritaine, 2015)

³ In 1989, the name changed to the current Le Bon Marché.

⁴ Today on the same site is the Louvre des Antiquaires.

⁵ Since 2013, renamed Le BHV Marais.

made man - and his wife Marie-Louise Jay, a first salesperson at Bon Marché). This extraordinary entrepreneurial activity started, in 1870, in a commercial space of just 48 square meters located on the corner of rue du Pont Neuf and rue de la Monnaie, in the Parisian 1st arrondissement. Their small boutique was called La Samaritaine after the old 17th bas-relief representing Jesus with the Samaritan woman placed on the nearby Seine water pumping station. The shop, thanks to the low price policy and the choice of goods suitable for multiple customer groups - but above all because it allowed small producers to have a space to sell their items directly - soon began to grow by acquiring the nearby shops, remodelling at the same time the whole district. The success of this epic commercial adventure is due to the visionary and utopian spirit of its owners and at the same time "to the conscious effort of some French architects towards new forms and towards adapting architecture to the needs of modern life" (Cognat 1930, 1). First of all, the Belgian Frantz Jourdain, a proponent of Viollet-le-Duc structural rationalism, a trenchant critic of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and ardent supporter of Modernism. He was hired in 1883, later helped, and gradually replaced by the pupil Henri Sauvage, a renowned protagonist of *Art nouveau* and later of *Art déco*. Jourdain and Sauvage together will dare systematise the use of iron and glass to build quickly without ever stopping the sale:

Tempting facades, dizzying halls, exuberant and offbeat advertisements ... sometimes at the risk of shocking good taste, nothing is daring enough to seduce a clientele that attracts the decor, the profusion of goods and affordable prices (Cabestan 2015, 5).

From the first nucleus, *Magasin* No. 1 extends along the whole lot. To establish a constant relationship between artistic production and daily life is the goal that governs Jourdain's activity for the Samaritaine. Following the thought of the philosopher Hippolyte Taine,

he believes that works of art are the reflection of the social moment and civilization (Barré-Despond 1988). He is sure that the artist has a leading role in modern life - "talent has always adorned with magnificence or grace the flattest, brutal requirements of existence" (Jourdain 1909) - and then entrusts in 1891 to the painter and decorator Charles Toch , the realization of a fresco on the fa ade on what will become the *Magasin* No. 2. Jourdain is then called to unify the neighbouring buildings acquired over time through a series of important internal structural modifications and some specific modifications on the external fronts.

Works of the *Magasin* No. 2 in rue de la Monnaie, in front of the first shop, essentially take place in two phases (1904-1910 and 1927-1929) and are marked by internal and external transformation, expansion campaigns, and later by bold reconstructions. A metal and glass architecture - technologically performing and long-lasting - gradually replaces the traditional construction, characterizing the identity of the department stores.

La Samaritaine - the Samar as it was named by the public - will, therefore, acquire a new 'trendy' look, so becoming one of the most sought-after stores in Paris. Two particularly 'exuberant' polychrome domes will close the building scandalizing and creating many moods in the town.

Soon, Ernest Cognacq imagines the extension of the second store enriching it with a new fa ade on the Seine. This involves the closure of the rue Pr tres-Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois, as well as the purchase and destruction of the buildings located between the road and the riverbank. The Paris municipality expresses a favourable opinion on this important transformation as long as the domes of Jourdain are demolished and the new fa ade is planted backwards from the road alignment, to widen the intersection at the Pont-Neuf.

In 1922, Frantz Jourdain defines a first project that is radically rejected; it is then joined in 1925 by Henri Sauvage, to whom the task of definitive is finally assigned. However, the second project

is also rejected due to the presence of an exposed metal frame, the polychromy of the facades, the effect - deemed unpleasant - of two bow-windows on the main front and a top lantern⁶. In May 1926, a third project is drafted by Sauvage which envisages a self-supporting counter-façade characterized by the presence of large stone blocks, the replacement of the lantern with a terrace accessible to all and the downsizing of the decoration. The new Samaritaine thus become a reference for Art Deco architecture:

emblematic, unitary and of immediate readability, the Senna side facade of the Magasin No. 2 thus conceals the backbone of a very complex reality (Cabestan 2013, 51)

The department store is again extended in the 1930s along the rue de Rivoli. At the request of Gabriel Cognacq, grandson of the founder, the *Magasin* No. 3, is built in the block placed between the Rivoli, Pont-Neuf and Boucher streets. The building permit is issued on 31 December 1929 and the construction site starts on 2 February 1930. The edifice, a masterpiece in terms of prefabrication and assembly, is carried out by the company Lange,

Escande et Cie which concludes the works in just eight months, without ever stopping retail. Designed once again by Henri Sauvage, the façades draw clear inspiration from those just built on the Seine but, free from the constraints imposed there, are characterized by lightness and elegance. They inaugurate an urban aesthetic that is no longer the Haussmannian one (Fig. 2). A colossal rewriting that marks the start of an urban sequence of imposing and authoritarian facades that would have been followed by the *Magasin* No. 4.

After Sauvage's death, the extensive building harmonization program continues. Jourdain starts the construction of the last tranche which foresees the rebuilding of the front built on the rue de Rivoli. After his death, his collaborators Louis d'Escrivan and Louis-Marie Charpentier conceive the project for the conversion of the complex consisting of a group of buildings of the 19th century. Alas, the onset of the economic crisis will put a brake on these intentions. The already advanced project of reconstruction of the façades is not realized and the *Magasin* No. 4 remains a succession of four *pre-Haussmannien immeubles de rapport* of a certain aesthetic interest, but certainly not a rarity in the capital.

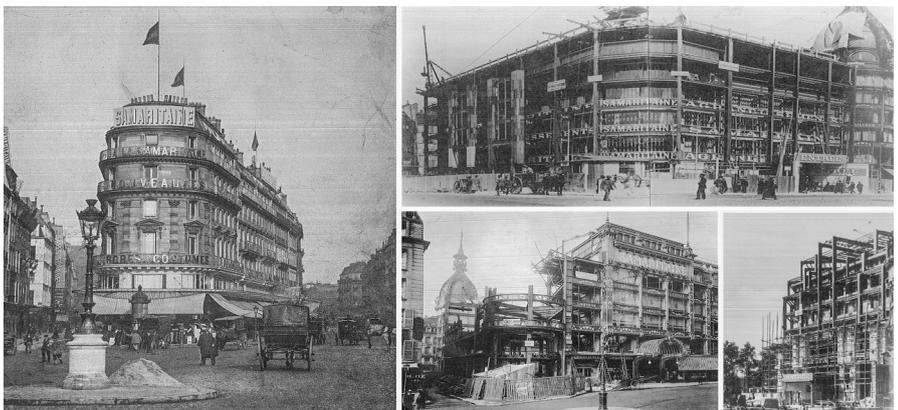


Figure 2. Construction phases of La Samaritaine. Source: (La Samaritaine, 2015)

⁶ The municipal authorities were concerned about the impact of this new building on the skyline of the right bank of the Seine and co-visibility with the Louvre.

If in 1990 buildings Nos. 1, 2 and 3 are listed in the *inventaire supplémentaire des monuments historiques*, the intrinsic value of the edifices belonging to the *Magasin* No. 4 did not justify a priori any opposition in terms of new projects, moreover planned but interrupted since the crisis of 1929.

The continuous transformation that governed both the architectural life of the Samaritaine and the entire area, abruptly stopped for incidental causes, could no longer be delayed, especially because of an economic revitalization of the department store, long affected by a process of 'ageing' and decay.

2. RECENT METAMORPHOSIS AND NEW GRAFTS IN HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

In the 1990s, despite several attempts at renovation, the image of the department store is lowering and some financial difficulties arise. In the decade 1990-1999, the Samaritaine suffers a 6% decrease in its turnover while the four other Parisian department stores are up 9%. In 2001, the luxury group LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) already the owner of Bon Marché, purchases the Samaritaine and inaugurates a new stage in the history of the Parisian department store. Notwithstanding the decision to keep the commercial vocation unchanged, the retail business is shortly after suspended and stopped on 15 June 2005 following studies, which highlight the lack of security of buildings in the face of the risk of fire. At the time, La Samaritaine occupies 75,000 m² in the heart of Paris, employs 1,400 people and is visited by 10,000 to 20,000 customers per day.

Its sudden closure is a trauma, first for the employees but also for the surrounding neighbourhood, which loses much of its vitality (APUR, 2007). The objective of LVMH is then to renew the activities and change the image of the Samaritaine to attract the young and active clientele.

The department store's grip is further reduced. In 2002, the *Magasin* No. 1 (16,000 m²), long unoccupied, is rented to the Kenzo and Sephora brands (two subsidiaries of LVMH), the Zara group and to offices. The Samaritaine then focuses on its main stores: the *Magasins* No. 2 and No. 4, (75,000 m² in total).

A bold and innovative project is therefore conceived by the architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa of the Japanese studio SANAA, winners of the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2010. The program aims to increase and relaunch the image of Paris as the capital of luxury. The redevelopment of the facades and interior spaces, inspired by the original idea of the architects Jourdain and Sauvage, involves the modernization of the commercial spaces and the construction of offices, a luxury hotel (80 rooms), a restaurant with terrace, a nursery for 60 children 7,000 m² of social housing: (96 homes). A project based on the diversity of function, architectural forms and construction methods.

A conservative approach is followed for the historic façades of *Magasin* No. 2, the multicoloured glazed tiles of the interiors, the glass roof, the monumental staircase and the furnishings; while a contemporary project is conceived for the façades and buildings of Quai du Louvre and Rue de Rivoli, marked by the use of new materials and design elements. The SANAA project has sparked a series of controversies especially from various associations - in particular, the *Société pour la protection des paysages et de l'esthétique de la France* (SPPEF) and SOS Paris, who have appealed against the project. The latter was considered in contrast to the *plan local d'urbanisme* (PLU) which requires that each new construction would be integrated into the existing urban fabric, taking due account of the morphological and typological peculiarities of the neighbourhood, as well as that of the existing façades and roofs.

Can we destroy an almost whole block, in the heart of Paris, to build a private commercial building? (Gady 2014);

For LVMH, as for many industrialists and local authorities who are now playing the same game, starchitecture is a pretext as much as a tenure if not all-risk insurance. It thus relegates architecture to the rank of a consumer product (Chemetov 2014)

are just some of the criticisms brought to the project.

Indeed, the transformation of this important symbol of Paris had already foreseen numerous exchanges among the parties involved. Several meetings, conferences, studies were taken, to guarantee a broad debate on the changes that would take place. Also, in June 2011, two feasibility studies focusing on the compatibility of Sanaa's project with the requirements of urban architectural protection were carried out under the direction of eminent personalities. The one directed by Jean François Cabestan confirmed the validity of the design proposal, recognizing a particularly high historical and patrimonial awareness in support of the analysis of "what must be maintained, what could evolve and

what must change" (Cabestan 2011, 121). The logic of the conversion of the Samaritaine and the idea that its rebirth could be based on a contemporary contribution to the image of the old department store in the Parisian public space appeared more than legitimate. It was also added that the transformations were an integral part of the history of this building, as well as the 'transparent' solutions, already widely adopted in the recent architectural history of Paris, even in the historic centre.

Otherwise, the second report drawn up by Pierre Pinon and François Loyer, considered the proposal unacceptable, since it disregarded the characteristics of the urban fabric. Old edifices would be replaced by a new one characterized by a very long and high facade, so destroying the rhythm established by the parcel breaks (Pinon & Loyer 2015). The dimensions of the new building - 75 m in width and 25 m in height - differed substantially from those of an ordinary edifice - on average 15 m wide and about 17 m high - even though its function will be (offices, housing, shops, etc.).

The large undulating glass façade with serigraphies that stands today as a scenographic urban backdrop on the rue de Rivoli was at the core of the criticisms (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. The new Saana's project for Magasin No. 4. Source: (Author 2020)

The so-called 'shower curtain' was the cause of a long procedural battle. As a consequence, in May 2014, the building permit for this project was annulled. However, while legalities proceeded, the work continued and the original four buildings were torn down. The annulment went then to appeal, and in June 2015 LVMH won.

Ultimately, whatever was the purpose of these procedures, they raised many questions regarding the place of architecture contemporary in old centres. They brought out new blames around the forms of expression of contemporary architecture.

AS A 'TEMPORARY' CONCLUSION: CRITICISMS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE IN HISTORIC CENTRES

The case of La Samaritaine perfectly falls within the longstanding, rough and always open debate over the reconciliation of heritage conservation and development. A debate related to the quality and the character of the architectural insertions in historic areas, which especially in the last years - in parallel with the enlargement of heritage conservation significance, from the mere protection of the legacy of the past to the idea of sustainable management of urban growth - has become a timely research topic. However, the notion of quality of the architectural act is not easy to define, but certainly includes some essential requirements such those related to the prior analysis of evocative, cultural and formal values of the place, the concept of durability, objective aesthetic rules, as well as its relevance (i.e. cultural, economic) to be evaluated and assessed based on the most effective community-based decision-making. The definition of specific guidelines for a successful 'combination' of new constructions with the existing urban fabric, is unfortunately very problematic. Many authors agree that

criteria can be used as points of reference or as a reminder list for applicants and evaluators, but they cannot ensure good - or avoid bad - design. In general, the approaches followed in the insertion of the new in the old are varied and constantly evolving: about architecture, they can refer, according to Giovanni Carbonara, to the principles of autonomy/dissonance, assimilation/consonance or be based on the establishment of a dialectical relationship/reintegration of the images (Carbonara, 2011). All categories in which different worthy examples of design, showing a good equilibrium between the exigencies of modernity and that of the historicity, can be found. Besides, there are also special experiences, often aimed at the construction of an image useful to highlight the novelty of the place, turning it into a catalyst for people and activities to exploit in a commercial and marketing perspective.

Located in the centre of Paris - indeed in its hyper-centre, the rue de Rivoli - the Samaritaine, "last avatar of a brilliant, cheerful, somewhat carefree era [...] unquestionably the ancestor of today's functionalist constructions" (Barré-Despond 1988, 194) seems to embody all the concerns of a *social milieu* - even culturally high - wary of contemporary architecture. To the latter is attributed the danger of the loss of identity of a historic centre increasingly attacked by homologation processes and 'sold' to mass tourism and to commercial gentrification.

The lack of sympathy for contemporary architecture becomes dislike when the contemporary project 'affects' the historical heritage, a legacy that belongs to the community (local, firstly); that heritage "whose loss constitutes a sacrifice and whose conservation presupposes sacrifices" (Chastel 2008, 62). It turns into a real rejection when the architect is a star architect and the design seems to be so subordinated to technology, so much as to lose any reference to the past. When the architecture is so light and almost immaterial as to seem to have

no connection with the context and poor durability. When, in comparing it to historical architecture, it is judged superficial and without underlying codes.

In reality, the *Magasin* No. 4 project - although it has made *tabula rasa* of the past, perhaps not pushing research enough towards a rewriting of the existing, yet possible - is unquestionably extremely refined and elegant. Today, having removed every yard fence, it appears in the definitive version respectful of the alignments and elevations of the close buildings, without clashing with their materiality made up of stone facings. Its aesthetics may not appeal to everyone, but the final judgment will be that of those who will enjoy it every day or maybe a few minutes. In any case, the much-contested façade seems to fit perfectly in the continuity of that will of the invention that was inherent in both its creators and the first owners of the Samaritaine. A vision that allowed to enrich the neighbourhood, characterizing it with an originality that is today perpetuated.

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