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# What time are Paris arcades?

**EURAU'12**

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*ABSTRACT. Paris arcades are places which may belong to a previous time, society and city scale and that have been inherited by the contemporary city in an apparent state of disrepair. The aim of this paper is to reveal the qualities and possibilities of these sites as containers of memory and diversity, understanding the deterioration as freedom, opportunity and possibility of development.*

*KEYWORDS. Arcade, Paris, strata, transformation, memory, street*

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## 1. *Magasin de nouveautés*

### 1.1. Cult of the commodity

The first commercial arcade arises in Paris in the late eighteenth century with the public opening of *Palais Royal* gardens by the Duke of Orleans, who used this strategy to pay off the debts he had contracted. Series of covered arcades were built on all four sides of the garden, where different shops were located.



Fig. 1. Palais Royal arcades. 1790

The success of this initiative, along with the status of Paris as a candidate to be capital of luxury leads to the construction of multiple arcades by entrepreneurs, who buy entire blocks for rebuilding them or small strategic properties to locate groups of stores.

Paris retains its medieval structure, with large masses of people running through the streets wildly. It's hard to take a walk, to stop by. All social classes living in the capital mix themselves in the narrow streets of downtown.

When the city becomes one of the most important capitals of Europe and luxury shops begin to arise, it is difficult for the bourgeoisie, as a potential buyer, to conduct such activity on the existing streets. They are not safe, there are hardly

any sidewalks to separate the pedestrian traffic from carriages and crime levels are high. This, together with the dark weather and lack of cleanliness of the streets, does not invite people to stop and look at showcases. Arcades, however, offer the possibility of walking through a safe place, protected from inclement weather, which benefits both merchants and customers.

A more intimate space is created, where it becomes possible to look and to be looked at, where the bourgeoisie is comfortable because it is considered exclusive. The arcades are likely to become the focus of social and cultural life of Paris.

According to Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>, these places pretend to give people, to one of each other, a joyful image. However, they are recognized as debtors and creditors, vendors and customers, and above all, they are recognized as competitors. Paris Arcades are a reflection of a consumer society, a symbol of industrial luxury.

The eighteenth-century bourgeois enlightenment promotes creating the town of "here and now", a paradise that impose new things and break with tradition. The industrial revolution allows making this material paradise city real.

In those days, arcades seem to have been assumed by Parisians as their own, both by those who use it as a vehicle for the objects of desire and for those who can only admire them, or even for those using it as a street to shorten distances or as a place where to shelter from the rain. It plays a very important role in the Paris, making citizens consider it an unforgettable event of its urban structure and memory. They are part of the collective memory of our society; many of us have an image of how they are and we visit them in our tours.

However, fashion is ephemeral and the arcades, as a direct and instantaneous materialization of one, probably did not have enough time to adapt to changing times, new audiences and events, so that the same people that had made them possible, left them looking for a space that suited their desires better.

## **1.2. Sphere of influence**

Commercial arcades may be the scenes of the most improbable, as well as daily, scenes. Buyers and merchandise, the flâneur, cocottes, lovers, princes and thieves meet here.

It is part of the daily life of many people who read at the literary cafes, do business, make their future guessed, buy the latest fashion objects or pass the day immersed in a place that contains many different places.

Arcades can be considered a representation of the traditional street on which some control (atmospheric, opening hours...) is applied establishing new relationships with the merchandise, exhibited on a showcase capturing the gaze and curiosity of the stroller. This model is soon exported to other European capitals during the nineteenth century, achieving a similar success.

Cities can be understood as the structure of relationships spontaneously generated between the entities that comprise it. The arcades may no longer be part of the city in this regard, as they may have lost their urban meaning. This probably happened when they became passive objects, being abandoned by stores and theatres, instead of active entities of the city, a part of its living structure.

The value of the arcades may reside in memory, as they are like fossils that tell the story of the times to which they belonged.

Their appearance could be framed in the destruction and construction of dreamy urban spaces in all the capitals of the world during the nineteenth century (capitalism, industrial revolution...), which would create series of ghostly ruins, as predicted by Walter Benjamin.

### **1.3. Characters**

There is abundant literature on these places. The most important ones are *The Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin and the novel *Nana*<sup>2</sup> by Emile Zola. Other authors such as Victor Hugo, Honore de Balzac or Julio Cortázar also helped to raise awareness of these shopping streets that arouse the curiosity of visitors from all around the world, occupying a privileged place in travel guides.

Walter Benjamin explains how everything he wrote in his essay *The Arcades Project* was found in the Paris of his time. All he needed to perform the reconstruction of the lost Paris was in two places: the national library, a place of inspiration, remembrance and research about what he was not able to see in the city, and the city itself as an environment of thought.

In a letter to Theodor W. Adorno in 1934, Benjamin encourages his friend to visit the city and the national library, where he had seen the arcades come back to life through the stories and old maps found in the archive. He was a virtual flâneur. In one of his visits to an arcade he wrote: "Here resides the last dinosaur of Europe, the consumer. On the walls of these caves, their immemorial flora, the commodity, luxuriates and enters, like cancerous tissue, into the most irregular combinations. A world of secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hair dyer and Venus de Milo, prosthesis and letter-writing manual come together here as after a long separation"<sup>3</sup>

The identification of the stores that formerly existed in the Passage des Panoramas has been done through the characters of the novel *Nana*, which takes place in 1880, when a new exit for artists is built on the *Galerie des Variétés*. The protagonist works in the theatre with the same name, so she walks through the arcade daily. In one chapter Count Muffat is impatiently waiting for Nana, visiting galleries again and again, making a very detailed description of them allowing us to do like Walter Benjamin, imagining its performance more than 200 years ago.

Julio Cortázar also made numerous visits to the arcades, considering himself not a visitor but an explorer of objects that he would have never imagined, of the strangest businesses. His records of findings in his journeys through Paris have been also very useful to understand these places.

### **1.4. Haussmann and the uncertainty**

The renovation of Paris conducted by Haussmann between 1852 and 1870 resulted in large changes in the city, not just physically but also socially.

The system worked so that the changes were decided by the state, implemented by private entrepreneurs and financed by loans. The land affected by the plan was expropriated, buildings were destroyed and new axes were built. To recover the money invested the land was resold, divided into lots, to developers who made new buildings according to precise specifications.

This process, in addition to the removal of blocks that contained arcades, completely changed the structure of the city so that they become cramped and stuffy. The wide boulevards pushed bourgeoisie to new department stores. Traders and buyers moved to big shopping malls and left the arcades, starting their degradation.

These hard and permanent changes may have influenced the loss of identity and disorientation experienced by the city and the citizens that inspired Baudelaire to write that the form of the city changes faster than human hearts. Few Paris Arcades survived the excessive order imposed.

A strict order means low entropy, low transformation capacity, and therefore evolution. The high degree of certainty produced by this operation may have limited the possible futures of the city and may have anticipated its possible developments. The fact that states are predictable has to do with the loss of complexity, or the probability to get to it, since the structure of interdependence between elements of the city, which exists but cannot be seen, begins its construction from zero. From this operation very few new arcades are enabled, always in tissues not affected by it.



Fig. 2. Map of Paris showing existing and disappeared arcades

### 1.5. Survival of the arcades

Each arcade is different depending on its vocation, the social dynamics of the neighbourhood in which it is inserted, the time and the transformations carried out.

The two of them best preserved today, are the two oldest ones, both dating from 1799. In contrast to the *Passage des Panoramas*, to be studied in depth below, which is the protagonist of the first gas light illumination and sale of luxury merchandise, there is the *Passage du Caire*. This arcade is one of the few that still works as a commercial and meeting space, perhaps because it was progressively occupied by local businesses in response to the needs of the people living in the neighbourhood and not under the culture of luxury. This area was known as the *Court of Miracles* because there was a convent of great importance (in whose cloister the arcade was built) and because when the homeless gathered here at the end of the day they forgot about all the ills of whose they were complaining.

It has had a very high changing and adapting capacity from the origin. It started printing and selling lithography items and evolved with the needs and wishes of the people who frequented it. In fact, at this moment it has been invaded by workshops and stores of mannequins that are sold to other stores in Paris.

These two arcades, making a comparison that may explain the different character of them and the other 31 that remain in Paris, are subject to different rules. Rules that sometimes are not written.



Fig. 3. *Passage des Panoramas* and *Passage du Caire* nowadays

When a business closes in the *Passage du Caire*, showcases are painted white, as in any business of the city at street level. However, when a business closes in the *Passage des Panoramas*, they simply close the door and leave it as it is, accumulating layers of dust, making it possible to intuit when each store has been closed.

From the arcades that have survived, marked on the previous map, most of them are in disrepair, with very few shops remaining.

The two examples proposed, the *Passage du Caire* and the *Passage des Panoramas*,

are arcades open nowadays; in the case of the first one as a commercial infrastructure and in the other because of the memory it holds. The *Passage des Panoramas* has been the scene of multiple events for over 200 years, events that can be read now, which is of great interest for both tourists and Parisians themselves, who can make a trip back in time in Paris through this device.

## **2. PAST OR PRESENT**

### **2.1. Frozen time**

When you go into an arcade you may feel as if time would stop. The romantic vision of these areas has led to the desire of maintaining a frozen time within its walls and glass roofs. Arcades are preserved in most cases as a monument, but unlike the other monuments of the city they cannot be understood or admired only by being observed. These places cannot be understood without the merchant, the buyer, theatres, academies of magic, naturalists, speculators, improbable conspirators and literary cafés. It is difficult, in most cases, perceiving them as dream scenario, emblems of leisure and curiosity, where gas was first sold in one day dose on luxury containers

But to which time/s do the arcades belong?

### **2.2. Now-time**

Arcades have been studied from the perspective of time-now that Walter Benjamin states in his book *On the concept of history*<sup>4</sup>, a present time that tells us about the past of a place and offers the possibility of re-reading it, as well as its projection to the future; because the future is not closed if the past remains open.

The now-time is the present time as the moment of selection of the possible past times offering a reopening and reinterpretation of them. The revolutionary action of the past is to introduce time-now and configure the future by a continuous updating of the present.

This way it is possible to deepen into this place, to understand it at the present time visualizing the relationship between what it used to be and what it is now over a dialectical relationship different from the one between the present and the past, which is continuous and temporary.

The arcades, as objects belonging to an ephemeral fashion, could be considered as an alienated place today, as in some cases they have been stripped of their activity and to some extent, of their urban identity and value. But because of this feature, they have the ability of acquiring new meanings, making things faded into memory reappear.

### **2.3. Degradation and potential**

Arcades can be considered as places that belong to a specific era, society, activity and city scale and in some cases have been inherited by the modern city as static and passive elements that have lost their ability to relate to urban life.

Such places, which appear in various forms and conditions, are characterized by their state of deterioration due to the cessation of the activity, its physical destruction or the restriction of access for security reasons, changes in ownership or transformations of urban structure.

It is usually tried to reintegrate these spaces in the productive logic of the city, recycling their architecture or infrastructure to accommodate other activities.

There are certain places linked to memory and identity of the people who have lived them, where they are able to reunite with their memories, and are even capable of making visitors relive the past contained in its stratigraphy. These areas of our cities may be in decline but full of potential, and can be understood as fossils that tell the story of the time to which they belonged.

### **2.4. The entropic ruin**

Robert Smithson, in *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*<sup>5</sup> differentiates two types of ruin: a ruin from an obsolete object and a ruin that has never been anything else. An example of the former would be the Roman Coliseum, "waste" of a large infrastructure of leisure in the most splendid period of Rome, and an example of the second, any of the industrial infrastructure shown in the photographs of the artist in his tour of Passaic.

The Coliseum, once it was decided that it was going to be a monument, a ruin frozen in a particular time, became a place with no capacity of transformation and evolution, and therefore, of production of entropy.

The monument of the great pipes of Passaic, however, is pure entropy, understanding this concept as a process of changing, tendency to disorder and multiplicity of probabilities; pure evolvability and opportunity. When it was photographed by Robert Smithson, it told the story of what had happened in the previous years, and since then it was able to continue storing information, because it is an entropic ruin, in process, that has the ability to accumulate layers, overlapping them to the ones that have already been stored, so that it is an area capable of recording time, where each visit will be somewhat different and revealing.

What time is the Coliseum? What time are the monuments of Passaic? What time are the arcades?



## **2.5. Construction of the complex city**

Paris is not constituted by individual elements but by the relation between them. These are relations of complementarity, which make the city a communicative structure.

Cities, as open systems, are able to generate negative entropy through the exchange of both energy and information with the environment. When a living being (another open system) is isolated from its environment, it becomes a closed system and begins a process of inexorable degradation. So would occur to these seemingly obsolete and residual spaces: they have been outside the urban routes, as inner islands empty of activity, neglected and unproductive areas, which are in an inevitable process of deterioration that could lead to their complete disappearance.

But damage can mean freedom, opportunity and possibility of development. It is a biological process of degradation, of constant movement of matter and energy that carries a slow growth of information.

The geographer and urban planner Peter Hall states that there are cities that can die of success, which turned into showcases live only of tourism. This situation can be avoided just from the preservation, allowing them the freedom they need to continue their entropic process and achieve opportunities for development and construction of the complex city.

## **2.6. Construction of collective memory**

One of the potential aspects of the arcades is that they can be considered as a set of abandoned futures.

In some cases there is a tendency to musealization of such places in a romantic and nostalgic vision of the past, and they get frozen in another time and subjected to a maintenance that could lead to their perception as decontextualized objects, more and more alienated from memory and the qualities that might had once had.

With respect to the memory, their value has to do with the process of accumulation of information that they have been subjected to for some time. The cessation of this accumulation through a freezing process could deny their potential and therefore their existence or comprehensibility in times to come.

This freezing of time could lead to a distorted perception of the past as belonging to prosperous classes in prosperous times, which usually pass quickly. Perhaps the most favourable in this respect are those arcades discussed above, in which the contemporary city has continued providing strata, constructing itself in a consistent manner over time.

## **2.7. Activation of the passage**

The patina of time can be preserved, copied or deleted. Kevin Lynch<sup>6</sup> invites us to ask ourselves the following questions: "Should things be saved because they were associated with important persons or events? Because they are unique or nearly so or, quite the contrary, because they were most typical of their time? Because of their importance as a group symbol? Because of their intrinsic qualities in the present? Because of their special usefulness as sources of intellectual information about the past? Or should we simply (as we most often do) let chance select for us and preserve for a second century everything that has happened to survive the first?" It seems that the arcades respond to each one of these cases.

The studied arcades may have a high evolving capacity and levels of entropy, even though their construction was an operation of order in a disordered tissue, the capacity of recording time and evolving in multiple and unimaginable directions. The activation strategy of these places may be waiting hidden in one of their layers, past, present or future ones.

## **2.8. Accumulation of strata**

According to Robert Smithson, history is a material waste, a reminder of time in continuous accumulation. In certain places it is not possible to make any recycling operation but maybe one that could keep its condition of shelter of memory and diversity.

Territory, cities and architecture can be understood as a superposition of layers that store biological, social and infrastructural memory. Thus, any intervention should be considered as a generation of events that may produce spatial and temporal continuities that contribute to the preservation and maintenance of existing networks (natural, social and physical), and in turn make new areas of opportunity arise.

## **2.9. Case study. Passage des Panoramas.**

The *Passage des Panoramas* has a special magic, perceived as we cross the threshold that separates it from the street. Probably its value lies in the fact that it makes people travel in time, because some times are frozen inside and stored in its stratigraphy.

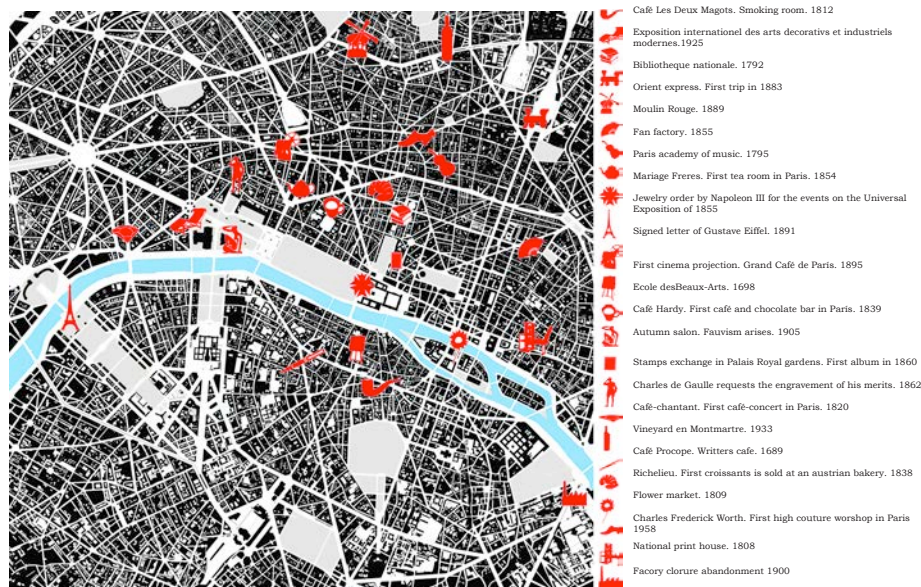


Fig. 4. Geolocation of the events of the arcades

Events that have been reflected in the arcade or even have sprung from it are shown on the map and explained below through the activities held on the *Pasage des Panoramas*.

-Theatre des Varietes. 1807. The first variety theatre that emerged in Paris. It is considered a forerunner of the *café chantant* and the first cabaret, *Le Chat Noir* (1881).

-Travel agency. 1804. Probably due to the invasions of Napoleon from 1789 and, therefore, the expansion of France

-Art Academy Julian. 1835. The foundation of this art academy for women may have to do with the opening of the art school in Paris, where they were not admitted for a long time.

-Florist. 1810. Coincides with the opening of the flower market in Paris in 1809

-Graveur Stern. 1834. Years after its opening, President Charles de Gaulle visited this business to order the engraving of their claims in metal plates, making it the most popular Paris and probably in Europe, achieving orders of Lenin or Stalin. It is open still today.

-Philately businesses. 1862. In 1862 the first album of stamps is sold in Paris.

-Luxury clothing store. 1862. In 1858 the first workshop of high couture is opened.

-Chinese shop. 1862. Installation of this business probably has a connection with the opening of trade with China by Napoleon in 1860

-Jewellery. Custom jewellery was ordered by Napoleon to show them off during his commitments due to the Universal Exposition.

-Art galleries. In 1905 the Paris Autumn Salon was held, considered the beginning of the Fauvism and the arising of Expressionism.

-Furniture stores. 1928. Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1925

-Photo and Video Store. 1910. The first film screening takes place in Paris in 1895 by the Lumiere brothers.

-Industrial treasures store. 1920. Closure of the factories of the city during the twentieth century.

A walk around the *pasagge des panoramas* is like strolling through Paris at different times. The geolocation of the activities of the arcade in Paris shows the displacement of events that occurs between the city and the arcade, the relationship between things arising in Paris and the arcade as the place where they materialize rather than anywhere else.

The arcade may then be considered as a showcase of the city, where every event is reflected. However, after Haussmann imposition of order, it becomes the place where the things that cannot happen in the city take place, where the citizen becomes an explorer, just like Julio Cortázar, an explorer of the past, the city and the collective memory, a time traveller.

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## Legends

Fig. 1. Palais Royal arcades. 1790

Fig. 2. Map of Paris showing existing and disappeared arcades

Fig. 3. *Passage des Panoramas* and *Passage du Caire* nowadays

Fig. 4. Geolocation of the events of the arcades

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## Biography

Juan Antonio Serrano Garcia and Paloma Baquero Masats are architects, graduated in the School of Architecture of Granada in 2009. They have a PhD in Advanced Architectural Design (School of Architecture of Madrid).

They have worked on several architectural offices during 2009 and 2010, when the office Serrano+Baquero was constituted, making urban, interiorism and architecture projects. The more outstanding ones may be *Rurban Geology* and *NewWaterGarden*, that resulted winning projects in European XI contest (2011), and *horizontal showcase*, a little store built in Granada in 2010.

At the moment, both architects are focusing on investigation, conducting several investigation projects on urban issues and working on their doctoral thesis, and assisting as teachers in the School of Architecture of Madrid.