

## **The Seine: A Survey of Riverfront Uses in Modern-Day Paris**

### ***Historical impact of the Seine on Paris***

Every city must satisfy the needs of a dense area of population, such as food, water, access to trade, transportation, etc.; hence, our ancestors built our oldest cities along coastlines and major rivers. It is no accident that Paris lays along the banks of the river Seine, near two of the river's tributaries and centered on the island Ile de la Cité. Paris' founders, the Celtic tribe known as the Parisii, chose to settle on the Ile de la Cité because of its strategic location; from their fishing village they could control shipping in both directions along the Seine. This economic advantage attracted the attention of the Romans, the Vikings, and a long succession of medieval kings, and centuries of invasions taught the Parisians to use the river as a defensive measure by building walls on the banks. The forces of conflict and commerce, brought to bear because of the Seine's accessibility, shaped the contrasting characters of parts of the city. The easily defended Ile de la Cité and Left Bank became the seat of government and church, while upstream, the Right Bank attracted commercial and financial activity.

By the reign of Napoleon I, Paris was a bustling port city, but the Seine was a jumbled mess of boat traffic, warehouses, and windmills. To restore order, Napoleon regulated traffic and built stone quays along the banks, which separated buildings from the river's edge and acted as wharves for boats. Later, Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann constructed a port in the southeast region of Ivry-sur-Seine and a railway, which greatly reduced traffic on the Seine. The Suresnes dam in 1867 ensured that the

Seine would have a minimum water level of 1.6 meters, enabling bateaux-mouches (flat, shallow-water boats popular for sight-seeing) to operate since.<sup>1</sup>



The riverfront highway on the Right Bank today.

In the 1970's, Georges Pompidou sought to adjust Paris to the primacy of the automobile by building a highway across Paris along the quays. This project got further on the Right Bank, now mostly a two-lane highway between the surface streets and what is left of the quays, than the Left Bank, where the highway only exists west of the bridge Pont Alexandre III. Since then, however, Paris has returned to public transportation as the solution for alleviating slow traffic.

Thus, the Seine has greatly influenced the development of Paris' urban landscape. For centuries it was the economic lifeline to the city, and served the city's transportation needs in several ways. However, is the Seine still a crucial part of Parisian life? How is the river used in modern day Paris, and does it still exert considerable economic influence on the city? What project and movements are shaping the river's future? These questions are important because nearly every city must deal with similar issues: how best

<sup>1</sup> Lemaître, Pascal. "Paris - The Banks of the Seine," *World Heritage Review* Vol. 15. UNESCO.

to utilize its natural features to improve the quality of life of its citizens. The Parisian approach serves as both a case study of urban riverfront usage and a model for other cities to emulate.

### ***Commercial/industrial uses***

Today, Paris is a major tourist attraction, and the entire city is considered a historical district. Because many famous and impressive buildings (the Louvre, Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, etc) were built near the banks, the Seine plays an important role in the tourist industry. The bateaux-mouches introduced in 1867 provide the best view of many Parisian landmarks, and are the most common boat seen on the Seine today. Some of these boats also contain restaurants and clubs, effectively making the banks a commercial district in certain areas (parts of the Left Bank, near the Eiffel Tower). The stone quays and open-air bookstalls lining the riverfront also draw plenty of visitors, and UNESCO recognized the Seine's historic value by naming its banks a World Heritage site in 1991.



Tourists move from their bus onto one of many bateaux-mouches at a landing.

Two million metric tons of merchandise arrive in Paris annually by barge, an amount that would take 100,000 light trucks to transport by land (which would no doubt create serious traffic problems). The city is researching ways to streamline water transport even further. Meanwhile, the city is also planning to build a vast leisure complex on the quay d'Austerlitz, based on the model of docks in San Francisco, CA. This planned district would include restaurants, shops, and sports arenas, and would be the most commercial use of riverfront property, most of which is owned by the city and kept clear of development. Twenty private companies are vying to develop this complex with the city, in an effort similar to Faneuil Hall in Boston, MA.<sup>2</sup>

Industries in and near Paris continue to use the Seine in a variety of ways. Power plants, both thermal and nuclear, draw water from the Seine for use in reactors, while manufacturing plants clustered along the banks east of Bercy also consume river water. These plants also receive raw materials from the rest of France by barge transport on the Seine. Barges also deliver building materials directly to construction projects in Paris; supplies arrive and are stored in facilities on the river's edge west of the Eiffel Tower.



A storage facility for construction materials, on the west end of the Left Bank.

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<sup>2</sup> Gairaud, Marie-Anne. "A la conquête de la Seine," *Le Parisien*. Paris, 3/27/2004.

## **Transportation**

Pompidou's highways still exist on the Right Bank and parts of the Left Bank, and are heavily used today. This is somewhat at odds with pedestrian and bicycle use on the banks. Numerous walks and bike paths exist along the Seine on stone quays, esplanades, and miniature parks, but these are fragmented and weave in and out with major streets. The Green Party in France has proposed that Paris reclaim the land near the river, converting it back to green space and creating natural banks. However, the loss of the highways would force traffic to the surface streets, severely increasing traffic. For practicality, the city cannot abandon its highways completely, but it is working on ways to improve pedestrian and bicycle thoroughfares along the Seine.

Inspired by the success of the bateaux-mouche industry, the city has also launched its own Batobus service; five bateaux-mouches shuttle passengers between eight stops, starting at the Eiffel Tower and ending at the Jardin de Plantes. While the service seems ostensibly to be aimed at tourists, Parisians make up a quarter of its clientele. This raises the prospect of whether river shuttles can alleviate automobile traffic, much as railways once alleviated boat traffic many years before.<sup>3</sup>



A Batobus station. There are eight stops along the Seine, including Notre-Dame, the Eiffel Tower, and the Hôtel de Ville.

<sup>3</sup> Gairaud, Marie-Anne. "A la conquête de la Seine," *Le Parisien*. Paris, 3/27/2004.

### ***Recreational uses***

The stone quay walkways, esplanades, and parks are popular places for recreation, attracting picnickers, runners, and romancing couples; yet, they are often separated from each other and from the rest of the city by highways and major roads. As mentioned before, the city is attempting to connect these fragmented walkways and reduce the impact of the automobile. One controversial but undeniably popular program is the Paris-Plage. During the August holiday period, the city transformed the Right Bank highway into a man-made beach, inviting residents to enjoy the imported white sands, recreational facilities (climbing wall, picnic tables, lending libraries), and musical performances dotting the bank. Although it was very expensive and required the contributions of private sponsors, the Paris-Plage attracted millions of visitors each year, and other French and European cities are copying its success with their own “urban beach” programs. The Paris-Plage is in part an experiment in democratization, by allowing every resident of Paris equal access to the beach’s facilities (normally the well-to-do would travel to the coastline in August). However, it also proved a political point: that there was demand for greater pedestrian access to the Seine and less dependence on automobiles. The “Paris Respire” campaign mirrored this demand, by closing off designated portions of the highway every Sunday throughout the year, and encouraging pedestrians to use the space for recreation (Cambridge, MA has a similar program, which closes off parts of Memorial Drive along the Charles River for recreation).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Horn, Christian. “Paris Plage 2003,” *a-matter*. Article URL: <http://www.a-matter.com/eng/projects/Paris-Plage-pr070-01-pr.htm>. Written on August 8, 2003. Accessed on January 17, 2005.



These barricades are used on Sundays and during the Paris-Plage period to reserve the highways for pedestrians.

### ***The future***

Thus, the Seine continues to have a major impact on the economic and social well-being of Paris. River transport is vital to both the tourism and manufacturing industries, as well as in transporting retail goods efficiently. Recent trends in transportation and recreational uses, and the success of the Paris-Plage and “Paris Respire” campaigns, indicate that the city is hoping to better accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists and improve general access to the riverfront. In the case of the Paris-Plage, Paris has invented a novel use for its underutilized Right Bank, while the new leisure complex at quay d’Austerlitz and “Paris Respire” are adapted from similar programs in San Francisco and Boston.

The next step of research is to determine how Paris can more efficiently utilize the Seine. If the city is hoping to reduce automobile traffic in the heart of the city, we should research the financial viability of expanding the Batobus service into a practical method of commuting. Further streamlining cargo transport on the Seine could also alleviate traffic in the city center. The Paris-Plage showed that eliminating the highways could be sound both environmentally and politically; while it seems unlikely to work right now, it

would be worthwhile to research long-term solutions for reclaiming the banks of the Seine. In any case, the question of what to do with the Seine will spur research and change the Paris landscape for many years to come.



A small bridge over the highway, connecting the riverfront with the city. Eventually, this may become obsolete.

*All photographs taken by David Lee on January 12, 2005.*