

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Paris's New Look

**THE SOURCE:** "Looming Debate" by Véronique Vienne, in *Metropolis*, June 2008.

GREAT CITIES DON'T STAY THAT way by standing pat, and Paris is no exception. But existing regulations limit building heights in the center of the City of Light to 82 feet, and they relax to just 121 feet near the *périph*, the 22-mile-long concrete beltway that, Véronique Vienne says, "chokes the 41-square-mile capital inside city limits that have been set in stone for more than 150 years." With many of the six million people who live in the Paris metropolitan area commuting daily from homes beyond the *périph*, pressure has been growing on the city proper to provide more housing, and at affordable prices. The only place to go is up.

Since 2000, when architect Yves Lion proposed building 20-to-40-story towers in a no man's land at the edge of the beltway, a building height debate has raged in the city. The most prominent figure in this debate, says Vienne, an author of many books on art and architecture, is the city's popular mayor, Bertrand Delanoë. A "prominent Socialist and a likely candidate in the next presidential election," Delanoë has "imposed on private developers the same time-consuming competition-and-jury review procedure foisted on public projects." In the city center, the measure has encouraged builders to renovate and recondition older buildings rather than replace them with new ones, and the height restrictions have remained in place.

According to Vienne, there are

two reasons for the Paris height restrictions, one physical, one cultural. The City of Light is "built atop a city of shadows . . . laid over a subterranean limestone quarry, its huge system of ancient tunnels weakening the ground." But Parisians are "an unruly bunch," and the city's most typical architectural form is "not the mansard roofline or the Haussmann façade but the barricade." Parisians like low structures.

Delanoë has also undertaken to "blur the line separating affluent Parisians from their often less privileged neighbors," most of whom live beyond the *périph*. As part of this effort, the city is building a concrete canopy over sections of the beltway to buffer noise and reduce pollution but also to "create a series of attractive meeting grounds over the dividing line." The mayor has also enticed prominent architects, such as Christian de Portzamparc, to design low-income housing near the city's edge.

Many aspects of Delanoë's vision are not popular, especially among the more affluent, Vienne says. Some sneer at innovations such as self-service citywide bike rentals and dedicated bus lanes to ease commuter congestion. Many would like to see Paris undertake buildings on a grander scale, as has become common practice in Barcelona, Berlin, and other European cities. But some local architects, such as Antoine Grumback, are "very happy that Paris is not a design museum" and that Delanoë has, for the most part, eschewed blockbuster public buildings. As long as he is mayor, the city is likely to avoid the spectacular and focus on creating a more livable urbanity, Vienne says. Delanoë

"knows that living well is the most effective business incentive and the reason everyone wants to come to Paris."

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## Mesopotamian Treasures

**THE SOURCE:** "Archaeological Sites in South Iraq Have Not Been Looted, Say Experts" by Martin Bailey, in *The Art Newspaper*, July 1, 2008.

RARELY HAVE SO MANY PEOPLE been so mistaken about a country as have been wrong on Iraq: Wrong about weapons of mass destruction. Wrong about mobile weapons labs. Wrong about the plundering of the National Museum. And now, wrong again about the ongoing destruction of the nation's most celebrated archaeological sites.

An international team of archaeologists helicoptered into eight of the country's ancient settlements this past June to check out reports of illegal digging. They found exactly zero evidence of looting, writes Martin Bailey, a correspondent for *The Art Newspaper*. Touching down for visits of between 40 minutes and two hours per excavation, they failed to find "a single recent dig hole." The archaeologists picked the sites to visit, surveyed the terrain, and were allowed to move freely around the areas under the armed protection of British guards.

The threat of looting was no small one. Among the excavations, the Iraq experts visited Ur, reputed birthplace of the Biblical patriarch Abraham, site of the best-preserved ancient ziggurat and location of a royal graveyard replete with gold and silver. They checked out Eridu, which contains 18

levels of building, the first possibly antedating the great flood recounted in ancient religious texts, and the last built a few years after the likely invention of writing. And they landed in Ubaid, cradle of a culture that thrived from about 5000 to 4000 BC, and Lagash, the original abode of some of the most spectacular artifacts now in the Louvre in Paris.

The experts toured only in the south, and visited only a tiny fraction of Iraq's thousands of archaeological

sites. They did find some damage. The worst instances were a dozen trenches dug in the mound at Ubaid by Saddam Hussein's forces in 2003 to disguise tanks and armored personnel carriers. The archaeologists also spied a few paper food wrappers that American troops had left behind at Tell el Lahm, and they found that the landscape of Ur had been marred by large numbers of troops tramping over the site in desert boots.

The team leader, John Curtis of

the British Museum's Middle East department, told Bailey that greater damage may have been forestalled by several watchtowers built with Italian assistance in 2003, roving police teams, and the continuing vigilance of local guards. Perhaps equally important was economics. With art dealers and customs inspectors around the world on the lookout for the contents of the National Museum, the international market for Mesopotamian antiquities has almost dried up.

## OTHER NATIONS

# The Battle of the Caspian Sea

**THE SOURCES:** "The Caspian Sea: Rivalry and Cooperation" by Mahmoud Ghafouri, in *Middle East Policy*, Summer 2008, and "The Iraq War, Turkey, and Renewed Caspian Energy Prospects" by Paul A. Williams and Ali Tekin, in *The Middle East Journal*, Summer 2008.

THE WELLHEAD OF THE OIL INDUSTRY in 1900 was not the Middle East but the Caspian Sea. Half of the world's oil came from Baku, Azerbaijan, where "liquid black gold" brought wealth in the 19th century and war in the 20th. In 1942, the German Army was lunging for Caspian oil when Hitler launched the Battle of Stalingrad, which cost as many as two million Soviet and German lives.

The area still contains one of the world's largest reservoirs of oil and natural gas, most of it beneath the 640-mile-long Caspian seabed. About 90 feet below sea level and

less than 16 feet deep in much of its northern basin, the Caspian is an icy, stormy body of water. Development has been hindered because the five riparian nations, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, can't agree, among other things, on whether it is a lake or a sea.

As a sea, it would be subject to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which allows states to extend mineral claims to the edge of their continental shelves. If the Caspian were a lake, the seabed could be divided up, with

Kazakhstan claiming the largest portion because of its longer coastline. Russia and Iran, whose predecessor states agreed that the Caspian would be a Soviet-Iranian sea, no longer share that view. Russia—worried about Western petroleum giants muscling in on its oil flanks—is looking out for itself and some of its former Soviet republics. Iran, with the shortest coastline, wants mineral resources to be prorated, like the costs in a condominium building, or doled out equally, 20 percent to each state.

Such differences are blocking the full development of oil resources just as potential returns are growing more lucrative. The region now produces roughly 2.3 million barrels of oil a day, and it has reserves that may be as great as 257 billion barrels. Development, however, will need unanimous consent, asserts Mahmoud Ghafouri, an assistant professor at Shahid Bahonar University in Kerman, Iran. And before the "Caspian five" nations can truly capitalize on their reserves, the poisonous relationship between Iran and the

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