

# Paris Revisited

BY ELLEN LAMPERT

**H**eads rolling from the guillotine. A courtesan's bedroom. The storming of the Bastille. Barricaded streets. Napoleon triumphant. German troops marching through an occupied city. These are among the classic Parisian images created by a team of architects, set designers, and filmmakers for *La Traversée de Paris*, a tri-level, walk-through environmental exhibition that traces five centuries in the history of Paris.

*La Traversée de Paris* was conceived by Patrice Noviant, a 44-year-old Paris-born architect, who designs large-scale exhibitions rather than buildings. But his most recent effort, *La Traversée de Paris* is nestled in 7,000 square meters of space on three subterranean floors of the Grande Arche, a 36-story white marble arch-shaped building, the newest architectural monument in the French capital.

Completed for the July 1989 bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution, the Grande Arche at La Défense intrigued Noviant, who watched the construction from a nearby university where he teaches the history of architecture. He had long considered a historical exhibition looking at Paris from an architectural standpoint, with the Grand Palais Museum or the Tuileries Gardens as possible locations. Not originally thought of as a bicentennial project, *La Traversée de Paris* became one of the highlights of the summer of 1989.

"For centuries Paris has developed along an axis toward the west, with the Grande Arche now at the furthest boundary," says Noviant, who has a keen sense of his city's geography. "The choice of a site is important, as certain things happened in certain places, giving them symbolic and political importance. The Arche links the past with 1989," he explains, "and provides a place to leave the city in order to look at it."

Once the site was chosen, Noviant worked on the design of the exhibit with François Barré, Chairman of La Grande Halle at La Villette, producer of the highly successful 1987 *Cités-Cinés* exhibition. Like for *Cités-Cinés*, set designers were called upon to create the decor for *La Traversée de Paris*, using styles Noviant calls from "torrid realism to the abstract." *La Traversée de Paris* was designed and built in record time. Only nine months separated the initial study done in the fall of 1988 to the approval of the final budget in



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**FRENCH ARCHITECT PATRICE NOVIANT TRACES THE HISTORY OF THE CITY IN *LA TRAVERSEE DE PARIS***