

Notre Dame

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'We want it to come alive': landscape architect's plan to transform Notre Dame area

Bas Smets' project, featuring trees and a cooling system, aims to create a more pedestrian-friendly space around Paris landmark



📷 The square in front of Notre Dame Cathedral will be surrounded by trees, giving shade to people queuing to visit in summer. Photograph: © Studio Alma pour le Groupement BBS

Kim Willsher *in Paris*

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For most of the last year, the Belgian landscape architect [Bas Smets](#) could be found walking purposefully around the Île de la Cité in central Paris staring at and thinking about Notre Dame Cathedral.

On a blazing hot day in the French capital he is back there, pointing at the landmark, still shrouded in scaffolding after it was ravaged by a devastating fire in April 2019.

“I’ve done this so often, she’s like an old friend,” Smets says. “This is the very cradle of [Paris](#), the heart of the city.”

All the staring and thinking has paid off now for Smets, who this week won an international competition to redesign the area around the cathedral.

His ambitious plan, which garnered the unanimous support of the jury, includes more trees, a clever cooling system for the large area in front of the cathedral during heatwaves and a new reception centre and archaeological museum in the now-abandoned car park underneath the main square opening on to the banks of the Seine.

“When they told me we’d won I couldn’t believe it. It was so



📷 Bas Smets at Notre Dame. Photograph: Kim Wilsher/The Guardian

Today, like the cathedral itself, most of the area to be “reinvented” is blocked off to the public for safety reasons: reconstruction work continues to the building and there are concerns about contamination after the cathedral’s lead roof was consumed by the flames that roared through it destroying La Forêt, the wooden roof structure and bringing down the 45m (150ft) tall spire.

emotional. It’s such an honour to be part of the rich history of this

place. Our aim is to try to glorify this wonderful monument,” Smets says.

“Before, my Paris friends would never come here and I wondered why. It’s a beautiful space on an island near water. We want to bring people back and make it come alive.”

His project to create a more open and pedestrian-friendly space in the 4,500 sq metres around [Notre Dame Cathedral](#), costing €50m (£34m) is being financed by Paris cityhall and was chosen from a shortlist of four.

The cause of the [blaze on 15 April 2019](#) that took firefighters 15 hours to control is still not known.

The conflagration spared the celebrated Gothic facade and twin towers containing bells that rang at the crowning of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and at the death of President Charles de Gaulle.

As a wave of public emotion swept [France](#) after the fire, President Emmanuel Macron vowed the cathedral would be restored to its former glory by 2024 when most of the major work on rebuilding the cathedral is scheduled to have finished and it will reopen. Smets' team will begin transforming the area around it in 2025 and he hopes it will be completed in 2027.



📷 A large continuous square will be created between the apse and the Seine around a generous lawn. Photograph: © Studio Alma pour le Groupement BBS

Smets says his relationship with Notre Dame goes back 40 years. He recalls seeing the monument for the first time when he was seven or eight years old and visiting Paris with his parents.

“I remember this moment of sweetness when I found myself in front of the facade that is imposing with its two towers but also on a human scale

... Notre Dame is not on a distant hill, it is close to the people and to the River Seine,” he says after his win was announced.

“We want to create different ways of seeing and exploring Notre Dame and were also inspired by the British way of having big lawns close to the church where people can sit and look at it and where children can play,” Smets adds.

Sitting in a local cafe, Smets flips through the winning plans on his tablet; his project, drawn up in conjunction with two French architect firms, was chosen after an international competition judged by a panel including city and church officials as well as those involved in the reconstruction of Notre Dame. Local residents and business owners were also consulted.

About 12 million tourists visited Notre Dame every year before the fire, posing a challenge to the landscape architect, who says he took a climate-centred approach to the project.

Smets says he saw the square in front of the cathedral as a kind of “clearing” surrounded by trees giving shade to those queueing to visit in summer and creating new views on to the River Seine. The idea is to repave the area with stones from a dozen French quarries cut to exactly the same size as the tiles inside the cathedral. A ground cooling system will then be installed that will send a 5mm sheet of water across the square in front of the cathedral during the summer. This will lower the temperature of the area by several degrees, produce a microclimate around the cathedral and create a shimmering and reflective foreground for tourists’ photographs.

Another challenge was to create a greener space and plant more trees without obstructing “protected” views of the cathedral, solved by planting new trees in a precise pattern behind existing ones.



📷 The gardens to the south of the cathedral. Photograph: © Studio Alma pour le Groupement BBS

He will also merge the current patchwork of parks, roads and riverside spaces surrounding the monument, planting 30% more trees and greenery. Fences around the park behind the cathedral will be removed with lawns flanking the Seine.

“We have to make the city ready for the changing climate. So we asked ourselves how can we make a public space that lowers the temperature

and produces a micro climate,” Smets says.

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Smets, 47, who divides his time between Paris and Brussels, and his team of 20 architects and landscapers have completed more than 50 projects in 12 countries. He is best known in France for developing the Ateliers Park around the Luma Tower at Arles designed by the American architect Frank Gehry. In London, he created a “jungle-effect courtyard for the Mandrake Hotel in Fitzrovia and also a sunken garden for the home of the art collector and philanthropist Maja Hoffmann, who financed the Luma.

“The cathedral has been a witness of change for 800 years. During that time you can see the island around it has changed, the buildings around it have changed, but Notre Dame has remained the same,” says Smet.

“By redesigning the area around it we are putting Notre Dame back at the heart of the whole city.”

This article’s headline was amended on 4 July 2022 to refer to a landscape architect, rather than to an architect as an earlier version said.

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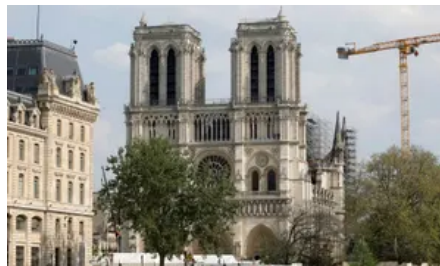
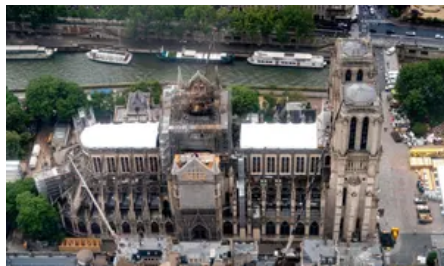
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