

Redesign Around Notre-Dame to Keep Tourists Moving and Lower Temperatures

Plans call for more trees around the famed Paris cathedral, which is being rebuilt after a devastating 2019 fire, and for a cooling system in front of the building.



By Aurelien Breeden

June 27, 2022

PARIS — An overhaul of the area around Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris will open it up toward the Seine River and help millions of visitors flow through more easily while also mitigating the effects of climate change, city officials said on Monday.

Notre-Dame, which was ravaged by a devastating fire in 2019, is closed to visitors and is still being rebuilt, with plans to partially reopen in 2024, just in time for the Olympic Games in Paris.

The understated redesign of the area surrounding Notre-Dame, which leaves the long, rectangular stone square in front of the cathedral mostly intact, will not radically alter the neighborhood. But Paris officials said that the planned changes would improve visitors' experience and make the city more resilient in the face of rising temperatures.

Mayor Anne Hidalgo of Paris said at a news conference on Monday that Notre-Dame “had to be left in its beauty and have everything around it be a showcase for that beauty.”

But, she added, “a city like ours can no longer think outside of climate change.”

The redesign envisions removing fencing to extend and merge parks around Notre-Dame, making neighboring streets more pedestrian-friendly and planting over 30 percent more vegetation in the area, including trees to provide additional shade. Plans also call for transforming a parking lot that is currently underneath the cathedral's main square into an underground walkway that opens up onto the banks of the Seine and provides access to a welcome center and an archaeological museum, officials said.

The new design includes a cooling system that will send a five-millimeter-thin sheet of water (approximately one-fifth of an inch) streaming down the square in front of the cathedral during heat waves, enough to lower temperatures by several degrees without flooding the area — and to give tourists a shimmering backdrop for their photos, officials added.

Paris City Hall will pay for the project, with a budget of 50 million euros, or \$53 million.

The area would be reopened in 2024, when the bulk of the cathedral's reconstruction is scheduled to end, so worshipers can once again use the space. But the revamping of the cathedral's outskirts will not start in earnest until the site is free of scaffolding and construction bungalows, and it is not expected to be finished until 2027.



The new design of the area around the cathedral includes a cooling system and 30 percent more trees and other vegetation in the area. Studio Alma, via Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

The city had organized an international architecture and landscaping competition for the redesign, with officials from the city, the Paris diocese and the task force in charge of Notre-Dame's reconstruction acting as juries. The city also organized a six-month consultation with local residents and businesses, and a commission of 20 randomly selected citizens provided input.

The winning team is led by Bas Smets, a Belgian landscape architect, and includes GRAU, a French architecture and urbanism studio, and Neufville-Gayet, a French architecture agency.

Climate Forward There's an ongoing crisis — and tons of news. Our newsletter keeps you up to date. [Get it with a Times subscription.](#)

Mr. Smets said that the square in front of the cathedral was intended to be a “clearing” surrounded by trees, highlighting Notre-Dame’s famous western facade, creating new views onto the Seine, and offering respite from rising temperatures.

“By working on wind, shade and moisture, we can create a microclimate around the cathedral that increases the city’s resilience and prepares it for an uncertain climatic future,” he said.

Ms. Hidalgo, who was first elected in 2014, has vowed to transform Paris into a greener city by drastically reducing the number of cars circulating in the heart of the French capital and increasing the number of bike lanes.

The Jean XXIII Square, a park behind the cathedral that is currently fenced off, will be opened up, with new lawns extending to the edge of the Île de la Cité, the island on the Seine where the cathedral is. The park will also be merged with the gardens that run along the cathedral’s southern edge, creating a 1,300-foot-long green space where visitors will be able to admire the cathedral’s flying buttresses and stained-glass windows.

Roughly 13 million tourists visited Notre-Dame every year before the fire, snaking in long haphazard lines in front and crowding narrow streets around it.

The Rev. Gilles Drouin, an adviser to the Paris archbishop, said at the news conference on Monday that the goal was to “decompartmentalize spaces that were constraining it somewhat.”

“I am very pleased that the tragedy of the fire will enable us to recreate physical and symbolic ties between the capital and its urban environment,” Father Drouin said.

The 2019 blaze destroyed the latticework of huge, ancient timbers that made up Notre-Dame’s attic, where the fire started, melted the roof’s lead sheath and endangered the overall stability of the iconic stone structure that had stood for eight centuries. Molten metal, flaming beams and the spire fell into the cathedral’s interior, doing further damage.

A definitive cause of the fire may never be determined; the leading theories are an electrical short-circuit or a cigarette discarded by a worker in the attic.

Last year the building was stabilized, and restoration and reconstruction work is now underway, in keeping with President Emmanuel Macron’s ambitious vow to reopen the cathedral by 2024. The cathedral’s organ is being cleaned, and 1,000 oak trees have been felled around the country to rebuild the spire and the attic.

Mr. Macron had dropped the idea of replacing the cathedral’s 19th-century spire with a contemporary one, but plans to modernize the inside of the building were given a green light in December.

The fire also contaminated the cathedral site with clouds of toxic dust and exposed nearby schools, day care centers, public parks and other parts of Paris to alarming levels of lead, forcing French authorities to put in place decontamination measures at the construction site and to cordon off and clean the area several times.

Advocacy groups have filed lawsuits alleging that the authorities failed to address lead contamination risks, but those concerns have mostly receded from public view in recent months, and the cathedral’s roofing is expected to be rebuilt with lead.