

Place de l'Homme de Fer

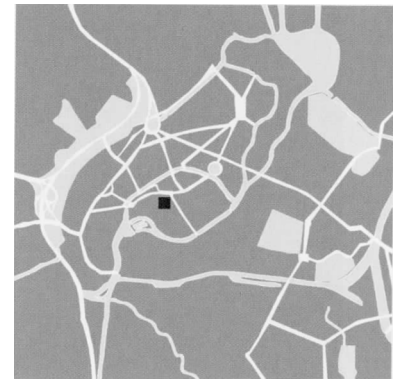
Guy Clapot

Strasbourg, France

prepared by Bo Zhang and Rie Shintani



Left: Homme de Fer on a busy day.
(Source: decoder72 on flickr.com)



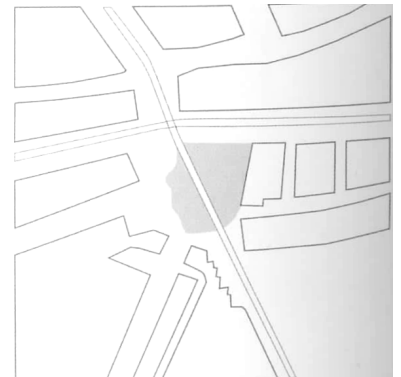
Strasbourg 1:100,000

Strasbourg is a metropolitan city with approximately 700,000 inhabitants, located on the eastern France. In 1989, the city's newly elected mayor, Catherine Trautman, made it her goal to improve public transportation and to curb road traffic in the city. Beginning in 1992, traffic was increasingly restricted through the historic city center, which encompasses the region of Place de l'Homme.

After extensive public debate, trams were chosen over subways as the public transportation system to build: with their big glass windows at street level, trams allow people to be part of the street scene. The first tramway, passing through Place de l'Homme de Fer, was completed in 1994.

Place de l'Homme de Fer is located in the city center and serves four of the five existing tram lines. It is sited in the middle of a triangular shaped, pedestrian-oriented square, the design of which was left to a competition and won by architect Guy Clapot. (Diedrich 113)

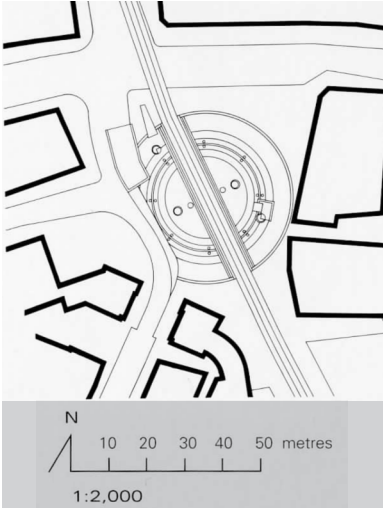
In Clapot's design, a circular glass roof unifies the complexity of the site. The roof rises 7.5m (24.5') from a pedestrian plateau and defines the public space. The outer diameter of the glass roof is 35m (115') while the inner diameter is 20m (66'). Ten sets of double columns support the glass roof structure. The dominant circular shape marks the importance of the tram stop and of the tram system. At the same time, it helps to lower the scale of the square, acting as a canopy amidst the surrounding six-story buildings.



Place de l'Homme de Fer
Pedestrian zone, 2000m²
1:5,000

(Source: Gehl and Gemzøe p. 152)

"As the tram in Strasbourg had been decided upon, we made use of it to recreate the urban landscape." —Alfred Peter, landscape architect



Above: Site plan (Source: Gehl and Gemzøe p. 152)



Above: Aerial photograph of Place de l'Homme de Fer, with Place Kléber, the old historic center, in the southeast. Place Kléber was traversed by 50,000 cars per day in 1988. Four years later, after the renovation, it was closed to traffic, with the underground parking ramp diverted to Place de l'Homme de Fer. (Source: Google Maps)



Two tram lines running north-south pass through the center of the circle, while two more running east-west pass through the intersection just north of the circle. Traffic is restricted to one lane passing through one side of the square. The square interfaces with bus routes, taxi central point, and an underground parking. (Gehl and Gemzøe 152)



Above: Before and after construction.

The old historic center, Place Kléber, can be seen in the background.

The ramp to underground parking was moved from Place Kléber to Place de l'Homme de Fer as part of the renovation of the two squares.

(Source: Gehl and Gemzøe p. 154)



Above: Bird's-eye view looking northwest, showing the intersection of the two tram lines. (Source: mamzelle fce on flickr.com)

Place de l'Homme de Fer



Above: Public seating, and paving coordinated with the façades of the surrounding buildings. (Source: Jasperdo on flickr.com)

The square provides a mix of public and café seating. Furniture and paving on the square is pink, white, and gray to coordinate with the façades of surrounding buildings.



Above: Bird's-eye view looking northwest, showing the intersection of the two tram lines. (Source: mamzelle fçe on flickr.com)



Above: Place de l'Homme de Fer is a transit hub at the intersection of Strasbourg's red, green, blue, and yellow lines.

"I see the tram as a vehicle for designing public places. We would of course be designing all these urban space projects without the tram. But we would not be building one. Look at how many competitions were held in France for approaches to cities and the like—they all remained paper tigers. But as the tram in Strasbourg had been decided upon, we made use of it to recreate the urban landscape."

— Alfred Peter, landscape architect for tramways

(Source: Diedrich p. 113)

"We must do everything to design the city to be complex. Cars surely have a point there too, but we have to help find it again." —Alfred Peter

"The tram [is] the pivot of the policy of re-establishing the balance between the means of transport ... it also provides an ideal opportunity of changing the layout of the city and urban spaces."

— Strasbourg City Council, 1999

Support for public transportation

Since 1992, when the traffic-free zone of Strasbourg was extended, traffic can no longer transit through Strasbourg's city center. While it is possible to access city center districts and parking through a number of "loops", it is not possible to pass between these districts. This decision immediately reduced city center traffic by 40%. (European Commission 35)

The city does not aim to ban cars altogether in the city center. In the words of Alfred Peter, the landscape architect for the original tramways, "we must do everything to design the city to be complex. Cars surely have a point there too, but we have to help find it again." (Diedrich 113)

Ticketing for the tram system is therefore well integrated with bus routes, national rail, and with park-and-ride sites. A tariff of €2.70 covers a round-trip ticket on the tram, as well as parking for the day.

Critique

As a gathering space: The plaza seems to encourage gathering, hosting impromptu celebrations following some sporting events. There is also plenty of foot traffic on the plaza, even in the rain. However, while the plaza seems to be a perfect venue for impromptu or scheduled performances, it does not seem to host buskers or similar activities. More could be done to encourage passive street life like sitting and watching, aside from the sidewalk cafes in one corner.

As a transit hub: Although the circular glass awning may have been more effective if it covered the tram stop entirely to keep passengers out of the rain, its hollow circle also serves as a powerful iconic design element that defines the space. It was interesting that the intersecting east-west tram has a separate set of tram stops. By not having a plaza squarely at the intersection of the two tram lines, the Place de l'Homme de Fer manages to remain simple and legible.

References

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