

Orangerie Reopens
 Le Temps au Temps
 Back to Versailles
 Musée du Montparnasse
 La Roseraie
 Josephine's 100th

JUNE 2006

Euro May 12: .773
 Euro April 13: .825
 Rain Days: 12
 High Temp: 73°F/23°C
 Low Temp: 55°F/13°C
 Nat'l Holidays: June 4

PARIS

n o t e s

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BELLEVILLE BY NAME

By Amanda MacKenzie

Done the walk, got the T-shirt—head east to discover the flip side of Haussmann's Paris

Words can be misleading, can't they? Seven days a week, the Place de la Concorde is a tumult of traffic and egos. There are no fields (heavenly or otherwise) along the Champs-Élysées; the Château d'Eau falls short on both counts. And, let's be frank, a first glimpse of the towering concrete at the Place des Fêtes is sure to put you in mind of many things, but colored bunting and popping corks probably aren't among them.

So what should we make of Belleville? For many Parisians, the area stretching eastwards beyond République has long stood for everything urban and un-lovely. It's an area of high immigration and, despite the affectionate lens of Willy Ronis, decades of neglect and bad planning have taken their toll.

By now, no doubt, your imagination will have painted in a few details of its own. Perhaps you're already concluding that "Belle" "ville" may be an accident of double-speak worthy of George Orwell. If so, prepare to be pleasantly surprised.

That's the message behind A Bientôt à Belleville, an association set up by and for locals to preserve the distinctive heritage and character of their neighborhood. Not just a catchy name, it's a project that has all the evidence of being backed up by imagination and energy. Arguably, too, it has been mobilized in the nick of time. Within the past couple of years or so, investors have started taking notice of the neighborhood's potential for redevelopment. As change blows in, the association is there to bat for Belleville and for the "Bellevillois" in one of the last remaining "quartiers populaires" of Paris.

Among the association's boldest ambitions is to put Belleville on the tourist map. On a bright spring day, I join five other people to check out "Belleville, Yesterday and Today," part of a new program of guided walks recently launched under the name of Ça-Se-Visite! "Don't expect 'un guideage classique,'" warns Angénic Agnero, one of three full-time staff, and our guide for the next two and a half hours. Relief flickers across six faces. "Guideage classique?" Got the T-shirt,

thanks: unconventional sounds good to us.

Our starting point is outside Métro Jourdain, at a busy, workaday junction remarkable only for its air of provincial ordinariness. Across from the church, there's the usual sprinkling of shops, including a promising-looking boulangerie, which Angénic points out as the best in the city. Did I say provincial? Well, yes, though



clearly it's an illusion. Yet, somehow, it makes perfect sense when Angénic tells us that the locals still say they're "going into Paris," when they're referring to a Métro-hop of only four or five stops.

Fittingly, there's little of the "classique" about our guide. Hobbling gamely (a karate accident, it seems), Angénic's gutsy humor and opinionated delivery are a breath of fresh air. She tells it like it is. "No, not one of the best," she insists when someone challenges her about the supremacy of Mme Demoncey's baguettes. "The best. She supplies the best places. It's in the statistics. We don't just tell you anything on Ça-Se-Visite. You get the facts."

The facts are that, until it was annexed in 1860, Belleville was a hinterland of Paris. Under the ancien régime, it was on the wrong side of the Farmers General Wall, under which goods and people entering the city were subject to a hefty tax. In the nineteenth century, as the modern city of broad boulevards and "étoiles"

took shape, Belleville became the first immigrant quarter, the refuge of the petty craftsmen and workers too poor to buy into the Haussmannian dream. In the following century, pogroms brought in the waves of Polish, Lithuanian and Russian refugees, followed by the Armenians, the Greeks and the Turks. Since then, Senegalis, Togolese, Algerians and Vietnamese—you name it—have continued to come. At the latest tally, Planet Belleville numbered over sixty nationalities.

As you stand by the traffic lights on Rue de Belleville, it takes a leap of imagination to picture the area as it was before the population soared and diversified. Up the gentle slopes once stretched vineyards, source of a strong, affordable, local tippie known as "guinges"—the origin, so they say, of "guinguette." And Belleville, like Montmartre, was famous for its guinguettes. Before we get too carried away by images of dappled light playing on apple-cheeked, Renoiresque beauties, Angénic evokes the watering hole that once stood a little way from where we're gathered. The "Cour de la Troisième Dimension" was a place where working men could drink themselves senseless—until their womenfolk arrived, sleeves rolled up and ready to haul them back into the here-and-now.

No, as we begin to walk, it's the industrial heritage that is more in evidence. While each wave of immigrants brought along their native trades, leatherwork dominated, explains Angénic. We view an old sign overhead advertising custom shoes made by one of Belleville's original manufacturing families. Italian in origin, the company is still in business today. Shoe factories called for nimble fingers. Not far away, we find ourselves in what appears to be a courtyard of modern, lock-up garages. A telltale sign gives the game away; these were once the communal laundry houses, where female factory workers organized themselves into collectives to enable each other to work their shifts.

Our route meanders purposefully around Haute Belleville before (continued on page 7)