

Paris: The City I Grew Up In

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father who was an unredeemable Francophile

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With my sister and a little French girl in that park, in 1960, right after having purchased some books from the ambulatory book sellers along the Quais.

[The city] is the place where a small boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life. (Louis Kahn, in Lobell, *Between Silence and Light*)

If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast. (Ernest Hemingway, epigraph to *A Moveable Feast*)

Such a pity that both these great men only talk of "a small boy" and "a young man" for as a little girl, I grew up in Paris, and then as a young woman, I lived in Paris again, and I could not agree more with their sayings, for I totally experienced them.

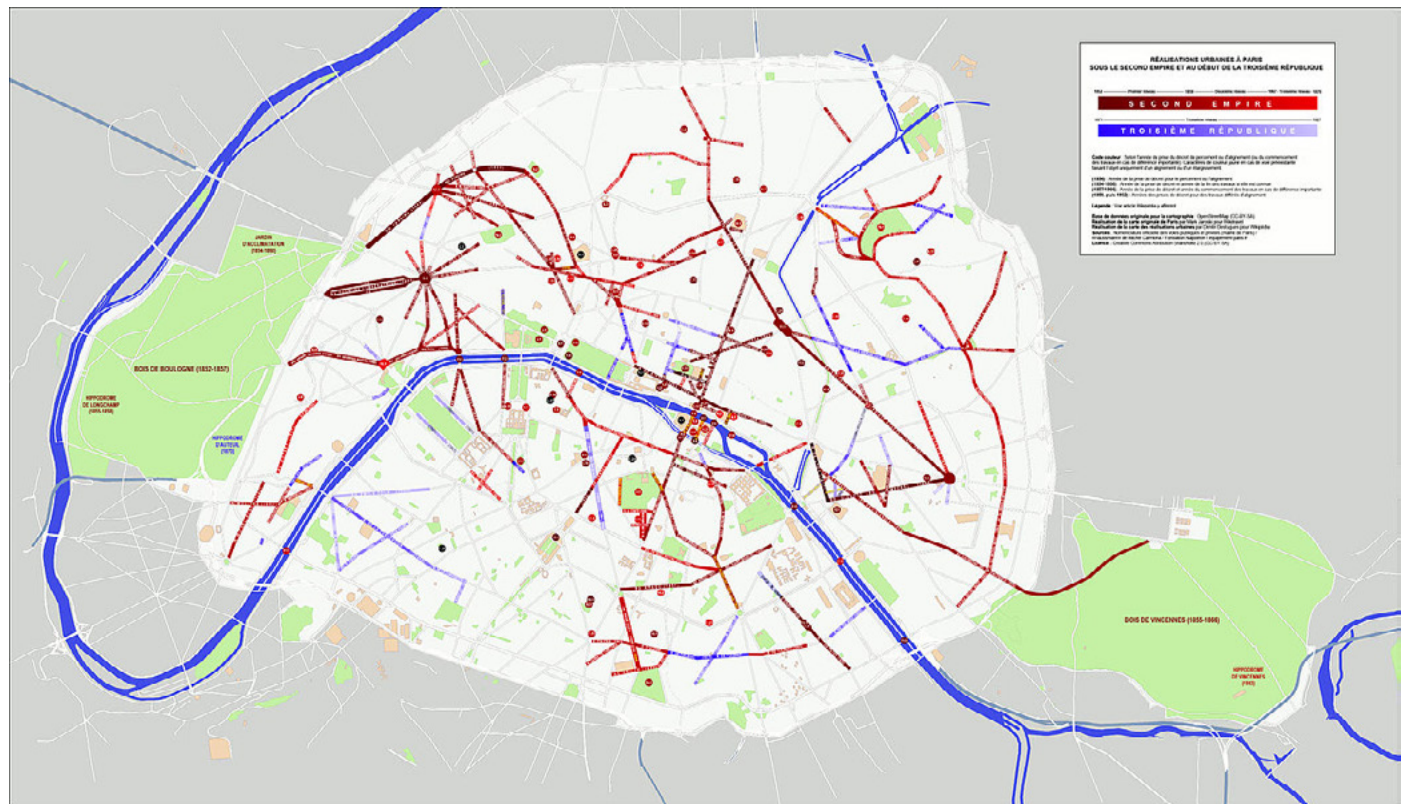
We arrived in Paris in early September of 1960 when Paris was very much a gloomy city with memories of war and occupation still imprinted on the faces of its inhabitants, her buildings mostly black with soot. I was barely eight years old and for the first six months we lived in the Hotel du Chatelet, at the corner of the Place du Chatelet and the Quai de la Megisserie. Paris was not yet a crowded city and the Voie Georges Pompidou had not been built on the lower level of this great avenue bordering the Seine, so that from the hotel we could easily cross it and walk onto the bridge. Our windows looked on the Seine River which was filled with black waters in those days and many coal-carrying boats coursed it on a daily basis, emitting big stacks of fumes in the air. We often crossed the river, walking on the Pont au Change into the Ile de la Cite to go to the triangular park at the Western edge of the Island because this was the closest park to where we lived.

Surprisingly Hemingway writes about this park:

"At the head of the Ile de la Cite below the Pont Neuf where there was a statue of Henri Quatre, the island ended in a point like the sharp bow of a ship and there was a small park at the water's edge with fine chestnut trees, huge and spreading, and in the currents and back waters that the Seine made flowing past, there were excellent places to fish. You went down a stairway to the park and watched the fishermen there and under the great bridge." (*A Moveable Feast*, pp.24-25)

Hemingway was interested in the fishing – understandably – but I was fascinated by the river itself. I had only lived in Mashhad and Tehran, both river-less cities, and now I discovered what it meant to live in a city with a river. Rivers are the main arteries of cities and most cities naturally developed at strategic points along major rivers. In Isfahan, the beauty of the city is proportional to the amount of water there is in the Zayendehroud. When I went to Isfahan recently and the Zayendehroud was utterly dry, I could not help feeling the city is almost dead without its river flowing. But the Seine is never threatened by dryness, and watching it from our windows, crossing it and then playing in the pointed park between her two arms, it became for me the main attraction of the city, even though when it was dark, it became alarmingly threatening.

I went to a public elementary school near our hotel. The first few days my mother accompanied me to school and then she judged it was safe enough for me to go to school by myself. I walked by the Quai de la Megisserie, passing all the plants and birds shops along it, then turned



Map of Haussmann's Interventions – in red—in Paris

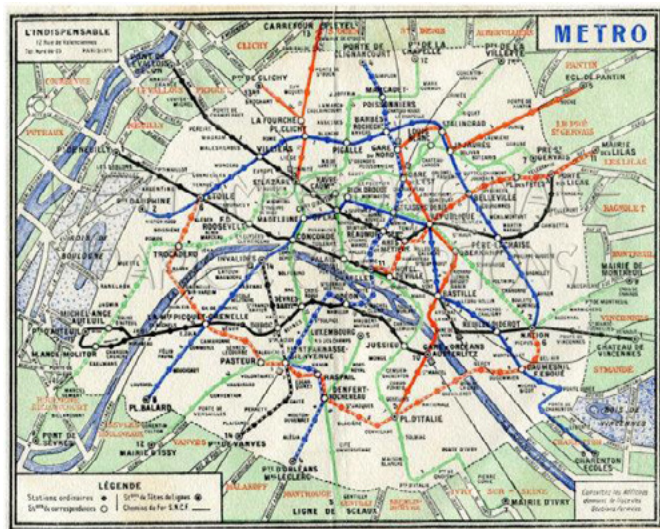
on the first corner at a street called Rue des Lavandieres Sainte-Opportune, then crossed the Rue de Rivoli, which is one of the longest streets of Paris – the longest one is the Rue Vaugirard – and my school was right behind, at the edge of the Rue Saint-Denis which was the red-light district of Paris. It was not a dangerous walk because I only had one crossing at the Rue de Rivoli, which was and still is a one-way street, but which in those days had very little traffic. I remember how little by little I got to know each shop, each building on my way, and each stone on the pavement which was also amply covered with dog litter... One of the games I used to play while walking to school was to avoid walking on the bonding of the big stone coursing of the pavement, while at the same time jumping over the dog litters. As I became more and more familiar with all the details of this walk, I developed a feeling that this whole stretch of buildings belonged to me. It was at this age that I thought of making models of buildings with my mother's shoe boxes cardboard.

The rue de Rivoli was totally reconstructed during Haussmann's life and would serve as the model for all the other buildings later to be built on all the boulevards and larger streets which opened up during that time. But what distinguishes the rue de Rivoli from all other streets in Paris, is her arcades which begin at the Louvre, which of course was only a few minutes' walk from our hotel.

From the windows of our hotel rooms we could also see a good part of the diamond-shaped land caught between the two branches of the Seine. This is where the Romans established a camp which later developed into a village called Lutece. The name of Paris comes from the Parisii Celtic Tribe which lived in the area and established a trading settlement in the island between the two branches of the Seine. In the Eastern part of the island was the Notre Dame Cathedral which took 200 years to be completed (1160-1350), but it was not in our

view from the Chatelet Hotel. By and large, it can be said that Paris began as a small island around the building of a cathedral. The buildings we could see were those black Palaces of Justice and Police and other eminent buildings which are on the western side of the island. In those days most of Paris was dark and gloomy, except for a few streets, like the Champs Elysees where all the buildings had been sand-blasted and cleaned because they represented the "vitrine" of the city to the outside world.

As most medieval cities, Paris grew slowly with successive walls being built around and enclosing the city, the remnants of some still visible today. Under Louis XIV Paris had a population of 500,000 in 1650, and it reached one million in 1850, at which time the French railroads were built and growth took on a more rapid pace. The Paris that we know and see today is still very much the same Paris Haussmann built in 17 years, from 1850 on. Baron Haussmann was the Prefet de Seine which was tantamount to being the Mayor of Paris at the time of Napoleon III. He carved wide boulevards into the intricate small street pattern of Paris, thus creating major axes throughout the city, allowing police forces to quickly contain demonstrations, but also giving the opportunity to future generations to build monuments at the crossings of these axes, and creating incredibly long and beautiful vistas. Just think that standing at the Louvre Carousel, you can see the Concord Obelisk and then the arc de Triomphe at the Etoile, a feat which is only repeated in Washington DC, where L'Enfant also had the same kind of geometric layout as we see in Versailles. As an Iranian I am proud to say that Le Notre had seen the layout of at least one Persian Garden – The Farahabad plan had somehow traveled to Paris and was in the Bibliotheque Nationale -- when he designed Versailles, where he added diagonal lanes to the strict orthogonal lines of the Persian Garden, and this is the only difference between



Plan of Paris Metro in 1930 when the Chatelet station was at the intersection of 4 lines



Plan of Paris Metro in 1930 when the Chatelet station was at the intersection of 4 lines

the geometries of the Persian and French Gardens. In the French layout the diagonals create a star-pattern which we find in Paris and many other cities. So all in all, there is something of a Persian Garden in the layout of Haussmann's Paris because of all its main axes, cross axes and elongated vistas.

He made strict building codes which dictated the height of buildings, the materials of their facades, and even stricter codes for the ground floors, so that the homogeneity we witness in Paris today is due to these regulations. He commissioned many monuments to the talented architects of his time, the Opera building to Garnier namely, and had two theatres built in the Place du Chatelet: the Theatre du Chatelet and the Theatre Sarah Bernhart.

Haussmann is also responsible for building the sewers of Paris, and all the other city utilities, extensive waterworks to bring potable water inside buildings. One of his main achievements is that his architects or engineers calculated precisely the ratio of building heights to street width so that there would be enough light even in the narrowest streets. In 17 years he had 600,000 trees planted in Paris and added 2000 hectares of parks to Paris. He envisaged four extensive parks at the four cardinal points of Paris: the Buttes Chaumont in the north, the Montsouris in the south, the Bois de Vincennes on the eastern edge of town and the Bois de Boulogne on the western edge, and these two last ones were actually more like small forests with

lakes and clearings and many winding paths rather than parks. In the following six years, my family lived in both of these forest-like areas of Paris which had become integral parts of the city of Paris although jurisdictionally they were not part of the twenty arrondissements, or districts, into which Haussmann divided Paris.

In early 1961 we moved to the rue de l'Est in Boulogne-Billancourt and I switched to a public school which was much more modern and better equipped than the one in the Chatelet area, which in those days was a poor neighborhood. It is with the Pompidou era that all those arrondissements – 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th – became gentrified after the building of the Centre Pompidou and the renovation of the Place des Vosges. It is most interesting to follow how through various decades different arrondissements of Paris went up the scale of popularity after extensive renovations.

But of all of Haussmann's contributions I favor the new scenario he envisaged for the city: with the wide streets and boulevards and the new commercial land use on the ground floor, he allowed cafes to develop along the sidewalks. What would Paris be without its sidewalk cafes, its most characteristic institution?

When we lived in the Place du Chatelet, we practically went everywhere on foot. My father was then attending the School of Medicine of Paris which was also within walking distance. Rarely did we take the bus to go to the Galeries Lafayette and Printemps – my mother's favorite

outing. As a child I had seen the Ferdowsi Big Store and ridden on an escalator for the first time in my life, but the Galeries Lafayette and Printemps were something else. They were like cities onto themselves: the big cupola at the top of the void of the Galeries Lafayette and all the balconies looking onto it looked like a magical place to me, a palace worthy of One Thousand and One Nights; as for the quantity of goods that were for sale, it was a real Ali Baba's cave... it was just dizzying. One of my favorite activities when my mother was busy for a long time in a certain spot was to take rides on the escalators and watch the activities from changing angles.

On the other hand, when we moved to Boulogne, we were far away from most of the places we liked to go to. So we had to learn how to take the Metro. My father brought us a Metro Map, explained how we were on Line No1, going from Neuilly to Vincennes, and how most of the places we would need to go would mean that we changed at Chatelet, which was on four different metro lines. The Metro plan of Paris is so easy that, as children we learnt how to use it very quickly and most of the changes were also quite easily made. The Paris Metropolitan was built in 1900 and was one of the first underground railways built in the world, and yet I think it is still the most logical, the simplest and best built transportation system that I have seen in most big cities I have visited: London's Tube is a nightmare, and New York Underground just a bit less complicated and not as well serving all areas of the city as Paris. You see, in Paris the Metro Stations are very close to each other and the main lines are "shadowds" of the streets above.

With the plan of the Metro, we learnt how to read maps and this is when I discovered Paris' plan, a perfect spider web – or zoulbia as I like to call it. In the *Spleen de Paris* Beaudelaire says that this text is without head or tail because the city of Paris itself is without head or tail! Of course cities which are planned on a grid are much more legible than the complex patterns of medieval spiderwebs, but somehow Paris manages to achieve legibility and orientation because of its landmarks and topography and the wide axes which Haussmann opened up in it.

Each arrondissement of Paris has its own landmark, some of them on hills, most of them visible from a long distance because they are located at the crossing of two axes, and because of them you can always orient yourself in Paris.

Since 1919, many more landmarks have been built, making Paris even easier to orient oneself in the city, like the Montparnasse Tower, the Palais des Congres, the Arch of La Defense, the Villette Center... but all in all the number is very insignificant and most of Paris' Landmarks are still the historical ones which existed at the beginning of the 20th century. Because each arrondissement of Paris has its own landmark, and sometimes several landmarks, it also developed a special character of its own. In general the Left Bank of the Seine is more geared to the young and all the universities and the student district – the Famous Latin Quarter – are located there, while the Right Bank is more conservative and wealthier. The bridges on the Seine are also landmarks onto themselves because each one of them has a unique design and history. The oldest bridge of Paris, still standing today, is the Pont Saint-Michel, built at the end of the 14th century, renovated under Haussmann. The second oldest one is the Pont Neuf, built under Henri IV – therefore his statue

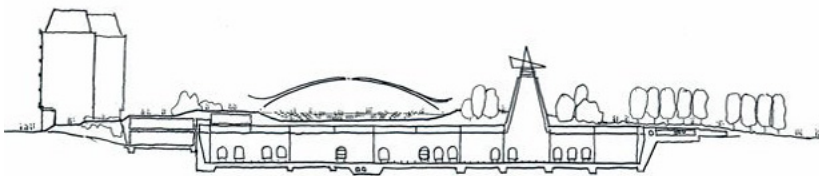
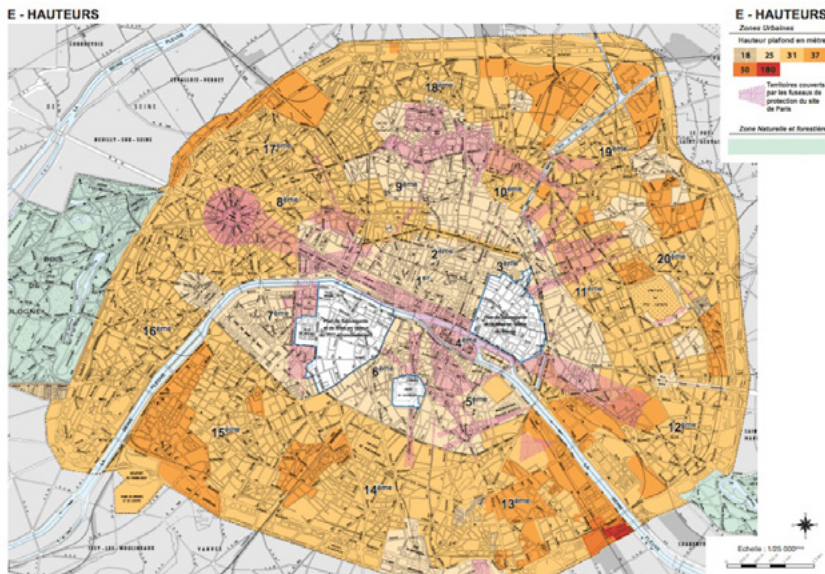
on a horse as noted by Hemingway, at the end of the 16th century. Before that most of the medieval bridges of Paris also had houses all along them, but by the 14th century all of them were demolished. The Pont Alexandre III is the most beautiful bridge of Paris, a gift of Tsar Nicholas on the signing of the France-Prussia Treaty.

Overall Paris is a homogeneous and historic city. Again Haussmann is responsible for some of this homogeneity because he did not consider buildings as single units but as part of a large block going from street to street, creating large masses of urban landscape. Compared to the other capitals of Europe, Paris had the luck of not getting bombed during World War II, like London or Berlin. But Parisians and city building codes also had a more unified attitude towards the preservation of historic buildings and districts. In Rome for instance, there are many modern districts juxtaposed to not well- preserved historic sites, creating a discontinuity in the fabric of the city. But Paris is all in one piece, the historic very well preserved, the new constructions very much in key with the historic, a continuous fabric all throughout. The height limit of 7 floors has been maintained through most of Paris, with some few exceptions, the Montparnasse Towers and the towers in the 15th arrondissement.

But Paris is a small city, about 100 km², and it is possible to walk from one side to the other side on foot. It still has a relatively small population, two and a half million and it extends smoothly into its greater area which is called the Ile de France. One cannot call the districts adjacent to Paris, suburbs, because the concept of American suburbs which this word conjures up in our mind is so far away from what the Ile de France really is, although in the last three decades a lot of high-rise low-income projects have been erected on the outskirts of Paris, creating those enclaves of social unrest we hear about in the news. But these suburban areas housing African minorities are the exception rather than the rule. Paris is still surrounded and joined to a series of small towns, each with its own historic character, like Versailles, or its own special geographic setting, like Nogent-sur-Marne. This greater Paris, or Ile de France, has a population of twelve million people, and when we talk of the Capital of France, we refer to this greater Paris, which has about one fifth of the total population of the country.

A capital city should be different from all other cities of the country, and Paris is really unique in France. Lyon, which was capital for four centuries, also has some specific characteristics which distinguish it from all the other cities of France, but is in no way comparable to Paris. Paris has 2000 years of history and has been the capital since 508. It is the number one tourist city of the world with 47 million tourists visiting it in 2014! It is the capital of the world for wine, cheese, food in general, fashion, perfume... and the French are indeed a hedonistic nation; but it is also the city of museums and great historic landmarks. When you see people queuing for hours in order to get into the Louvre or up the Eiffel Tower, you realize how these places are universally important. Parisians are also famous for being haughty and ill-tempered with tourists, but I understand their attitude because they are so proud of their city and they feel it is INVADED by strangers when tourists pour into Paris.

Parisians have this great sense of belonging to their city and likewise their city belongs to them. If you live in a great city and have this sense of belonging, you could say



Roger's main concept for Greater Paris in 2050

that you make the city what it is and the city makes you who you are. I always wondered what the real function of the Eiffel Tower was, why did the organizers of the 1890 Exhibition decide to keep it? The best answer I can find is that the bird's eye view they beheld once on top of the Tower simply took their breath away. Paris was always a coquettish city begging to be looked at, or as Lawrence Durrell puts it, Paris is saying "I am watching you – are you watching yourself in me?" (Spirit of Place, p.158)

Nowadays most big cities have a tall needle-building you can go up to and admire the landscape beneath you, but the Eiffel Tower was the first and in my mind the most poetic "needle." No other people on earth love their city as much as Parisians love Paris, and by "Parisians" I mean all people who have gone through it and fell in love with it. The fact that people love to walk through Paris, stroll around it, sit in its cafes for hours and watch people pass by, truly is the mark of a great city. Most of 20th century urban planning has tried to accommodate the automobile, but Paris was never geared to cars, it was always about small winding streets meant for pedestrians only – the flâneurs. However the new proposals for greater Paris in 2050 are again very much transportation-oriented. In 2007 President Sarkozy invited ten world-renowned architects to plan for Greater Paris in 2050. Two of the favorite proposals are about Transportation: Richard Rogers' main concept is to sink the Metro lines of the outskirts and create parks on the ground to uplift the less favored neighborhoods.

Christian de Porzamparc has proposed to demolish two main train stations inside Paris and instead create new rail transportation over the Peripherique – the highway which circles all around Paris – and link it to the European rail system.

Another favorite plan for Paris 2050, judged poetic by many critics, is the scheme by Jean Nouvel who has proposed

a green belt all around Paris and new housing inside that ring of parks. Housing and Transportation are necessary components of a city, but not enough to create an alive urban fabric. In the 21st century, urban design should not concern itself with transportation and housing only, and instead of focusing and accommodating cars, it should first accommodate people. Louis Kahn most poetically defines what a real city should be: "The city, from a simple settlement, became the place of assembled institutions. The measure of its greatness as a place to live must come from the character of its institutions, sanctioned by their sensitivity to desire for new agreement, not by need, because need comes from what already is. Desire is the thing not made, the roots of the will to live." (Between Silence and Light, pp.44-45)

If a city entices you to have new desires, then it is a great city. The greatest city of all is one where you discover your vocation as a child, what you desire to become. Strolling in Paris, taking the metro and coming up to the smell of coffee spreading from a sidewalk café, looking at the intricate facades of its buildings, the fantastic taste with which the shop windows have been designed... everything about Paris makes you know what it is you want to do for the rest of your life. I lived in Paris for 14 years which were formative years of my life; French is my maternal language since I speak it much better than Farsi, and yet, after living another 7 years in the United States, the first day after my graduation, I returned to Iran. Maybe what I mostly learnt from the Parisians was that you have to return to your roots, for that is where you belong. The way the French venerate their history is quite visible in the manner they have preserved their historic buildings. In Paris you sometimes live in buildings which are a thousand years old, you go up wooden steps which have been threaded by human feet for over ten centuries, and this is what gives you a feeling of



Porzamparc's design for Greater Paris Euro-rail system

rootedness. There are many cities with antic buildings still half standing; Athens for instance and the 2500 year old Acropolis. But it stands all by itself, cut off from the rest of the city. Perhaps windows which have views of the Acropolis best integrate it into people's daily life. Or you walk through the Coliseum in Rome, and you imagine the gladiators 'fights... but all around it is like a no man's land, so it does not become part of your life. In Paris, History is for use on a daily basis, it is part of your life and you are submerged in it.

There is also a dark side to Paris, the underground clubs and discotheques, the red light districts, the cabarets which have made Paris famous for its lustful nightlife. I was too young to know this side of Paris and have only read about it in books, particularly Beaudelaire who writes about it most poetically, but also in the memoirs of the existentialist philosophers and writers who gathered in the Saint-Germain des Pres clubs where Juliette Greco, draped in black gowns, would sing. To me, this is not the interesting part of Paris, although I understand that many tourists are lured by it. Having lived in Paris for fourteen years in childhood and youth, I have an overall image of a puritan society, and not a decadent one. There are those for whom Paris is the city of pleasures, of vices, but for me Paris remains the City of Light, la ville lumiere, and the sense of place I have extracted from it always has dealt with Beauty, Harmony and Hegemony.

I have now lived in Tehran for 38 years, and have grown many roots in this city, but nowhere close to the way Parisians are connected to their city. Tehran has historic amnesia and easily demolishes any historic building or district which could bring considerable financial gains. In Tehran, almost everything is for sale. We are a short-term society living in a short-term city. We make the city; the city makes us. I would be a totally different person, had I grown up in Tehran...

As children we are definitely marked by the desires of our parents, they decide for us and by their decisions affect our lives in irreversible ways. My father was absolutely in love with France, and by taking us to live in Paris, he changed our destiny forever. As a little girl growing up in Paris, I decided I wanted to become an architect, and I now wonder if I had grown up in Mashhad, or Tehran, would I have discovered the same vocation in me. But



My father at the "feet" of the Eiffel Tower, 1962

of course Paris is inside my heart: once a Parisian, always a Parisian, and as Hemingway says, "it stays with you" for your whole life. I have so many memories attached to special locations of Paris and could write a whole book about it. The memories have staid because the locations are so very strongly imprinted in my mind. In the end, what makes a great city is it genius loci and Paris has the strongest spirit of place and is the "bride of all capitals" in my mind.