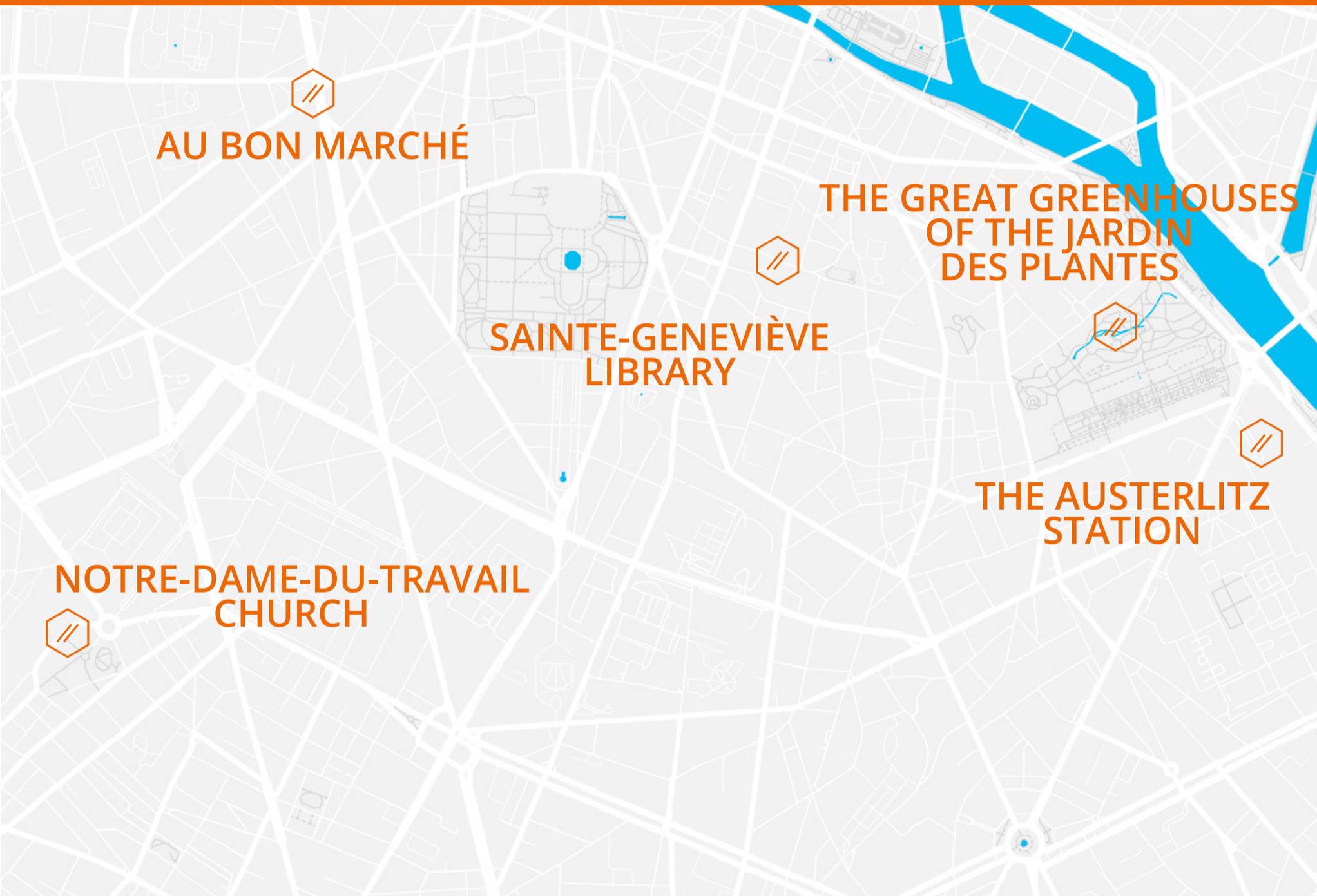


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Circuits
PARALLÈLES
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THE METAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE LEFT BANK
WHEN THE IRON BECOMES LACEWORK

THE TOUR: THE METAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE LEFT BANK



Length: 3H00

Public: all.

Means of transport: by foot or by bus

Access to Persons with Reduced

Mobility: none.

Total distance: 6 km for the walking part of the tour.



Starting point: Cours Seine de la gare Austerlitz, outside, in front of the main building where you can read "Départ" (departure) and "Chemin de fer d'Orléans" (Orléans' railway) on the frontage.

(Gare d'Austerlitz station of the metro lines 5 and 10 or the RER C)

The first Sainte-Geneviève library was founded in the 6th century by Clovis. It was situated on the location of the current lycée Henri IV, which was an abbey then. At its peak, from the 12th to the 16th century, it was an intellectual reference. Its main content was made up of important donations. It was looted several times and the collections were scattered.

In 1624, the cardinal de La Rochefoucauld gave life back to the library and bequeathed his whole personal collections and archives. Over time, the library kept being enriched with books and especially those which were seized from the clergy during the French Revolution and those from the spoils of imperial wars.

In 1828, thanks to a royal decree, Sainte-Geneviève library became the legal deposit for the Ministry of the Interior, which means that it was given a copy of every book published in the subject in which it is specialised: law, medicine, philosophy, sciences and theology.

It is with this mind that the library had to leave the former abbey which had become too small for a new building built specifically for it.

This was a very innovative decision! Up to this moment, libraries were built in private buildings, palaces, castles, schools, monasteries... Public places designed to house collections of books did not exist.

The architect Henri Labrouste was chosen to build this library open to the public and to students.

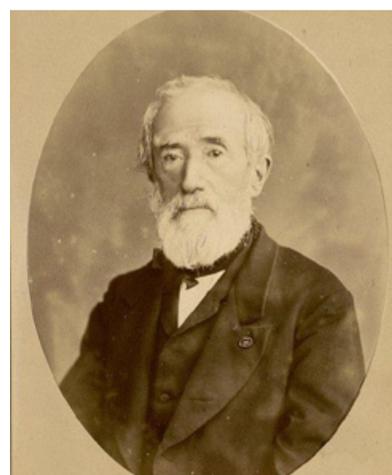
Winner of the prix de Rome in 1824, he opened an independent workshop for architects. He was convinced that architecture could improve society and especially public architecture. His first projects consisted of rational plans developed around a reflection on the use of places, a new way to see the notion of construction, structure and ornamentation of the buildings.

To break with the neoclassical architectural codes of the time, Henri Labrouste made what would rapidly become a model in France but also in other countries. He clearly assumed his choice and claimed it to his colleagues: use metal both for structure and ornamentation. Like all innovations, it was highly criticised...

He was present every day on the building site during the seven years it lasted. Henri Labrouste put so much into his project that he even drew the inkpots...



Sainte-Geneviève library in 1920



Henri Labrouste

Launched in 1851, nowadays it contains more than two thousand documents, divided into three sections. The reserved section (old, rare and precious books), the general section (books and documents published from 1811 to nowadays) and the Nordic library (a documentary section specialised in Scandinavian languages and works translated into French. It is the richest library in Nordic languages except for Scandinavian countries). **The library was listed historical monument in 1992.**

The entrance hall

Even though Henri Labrouste would have liked a garden laid out along the main frontage of the building to cut it off from the street noises, a garden has been painted on the upper part of the walls which welcome visitors. The bust of scientific personalities traditionally adorn the lower part.

On the left, old rooms were turned into offices and storage rooms. On the right, the « salles des Manuscrits et des Estampes » (The Manuscripts and Prints rooms), which is the original

name, housed precious documents. Nowadays, they are still used the same way, in other words, they house the reserved section and a beautiful reading room which woodworks and oak cupboards date back to the middle of the 19th century.

In front of you is the grand staircase. It leads to the relatively dark entrance hall to the luminous reading room located upstairs. This is clearly symbolic. It takes you from ignorance to knowledge.

The middle landings are decorated with the bust of the cardinal de La Rochefoucauld (founder of the monastic congregation of Sainte-Geneviève) and Henri Labrouste, paintings inspired by Italy and a copy of Raphaël's famous fresco, the School of Athens (symbol of philosophy).

In the reading room entrance airlock, admire the Gobelins's tapestry « l'Etude surprise par la nuit » (The Study surprised by the Night) woven in 1853. The size of the airlock was determined by the size of this work.





The Henri Labrouste reading room

This room is a wonder, nothing less! **This creation is also a wonderful demonstration of all the things which can be done with iron and cast-iron.** It was the first time those materials were let visible and used to build a building which was not industrial.

80 metres long, 17 metres wide and 15 metres high – those numbers give you an idea of the volume of this room.

A cast-iron structure on the columns supports two adjoining barrel vaults which accentuate the penetration of day light everywhere in the room. A row of eighteen small columns divides the room into two parts. Their basis is in masonry and they are topped by a cast-iron shaft. Above each shaft is a wrought iron arch. The whole room gives a surprising impression of lightness.

The whole hidden metal framework lies on the columns and the great arches. There were numerous technical problems when they were made. Before the definitive choice of the materials, several prototypes were made to test their resistance. Girders and an iron meshing enable the presence of the stucco decorations between the arches.

Iron had essential qualities required to carry out this program. First, it does not burn. As a result, the book would be protected from possible fires. It also enables to pierce the forty-one big and large windows. Finally, the contrast of colour between stone and iron, and the very finely sculpted drawing of the cast-iron capitals at more than 14 metres from the ground reveal the decorative potential of this material.

Now leave this timeless temple of knowledge for a totally different and more modern universe.

Sainte-Geneviève Library, Practical information

10, place du Panthéon – 75005 Paris.
Opening times: from Monday to Saturday – between 2pm and 6pm
For guided tours available by appointment call the 01 44 41 97 71.

Sainte-Geneviève Library

Its story in pictures

https://youtu.be/k1xn_83Tkn0

