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Le Carnet de France: Le Havre

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The city of Le Havre is located at the mouth of the river Seine in Normandy, about 200 km (125 miles) from Paris, serving as the second largest port in France for container ships but largest berth for luxurious transatlantic liners. The lucky passengers who sailed Le Normandie (1935-1942) or the Queen Mary between 1936 and 1940 and those who sailed on France between 1960 to 1974 to or from Le Havre to New York would not have seen the city as it is today.

World War II

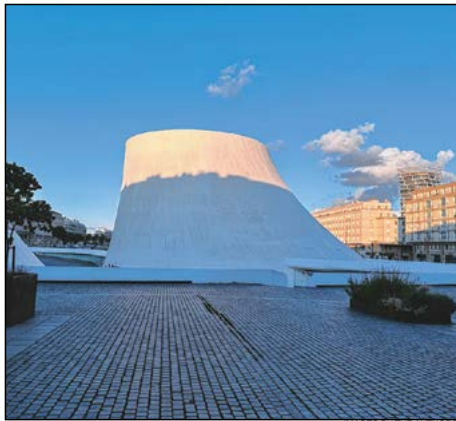
Le Havre suffered greatly during World War II: On May 9, 1940, the German General Rommel led his 7th Panzer Division into the city. The Luftwaffe then bombed it and on June 9 the French authorities ordered the destruction of the harbor petroleum reserves. The Germans took full control of Le Havre on June 22, 1940, planning to use it as a major base for the invasion of Great Britain. As the war evolved, Le Havre became a defensive port, and it was one of the most fortified ports of the German Atlantic Wall.

In 1944, there were numerous bombing raids by the British Royal Air Force. The British General John Crocker in command of capturing Le Havre had recommended surgical bombing of important military targets, such as the German command post that was located on the top of the cliffs to the north, not in the center of the city. However, the British high command in London ordered carpet bombing, which was done on September 10-12, 1944. This resulted in 82 percent of the city being destroyed with 2,000 civilians killed and 12,000 civilians losing property. The Allies expected to use Le Havre as a major port to replenish supplies of their forces, but the destruction of the port facilities rendered them almost unusable. When the American forces arrived on September 19, 1944, they themselves faced with the monumental task of restoring the port.

Post-War restoration

What remained? The Cathedral Notre-Dame and the nearby Maison de l'Armateur. (more later) — but very damaged. So, the city had to be rebuilt very quickly. The French government appointed renowned architect and professor of architecture Auguste Perret (1874-1954) to design a plan. He had designed many other sites in Paris including the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* built in 1913. The project started in 1945, and it took 19 years and 18 collaborating architects to achieve it. Auguste Perret was a forerunner and many of the ideas he had are still very contemporary. He used reinforced concrete called *béton armé* to construct the buildings, which is quick to make and very strong. He also designed St Joseph Church, built from 1951 to 1957 to a height of 107 meters (350 feet).

The city's wide streets are laid out in an orthogonal plan (i.e., parallel and perpendicular at right angles, like New York City streets) and the buildings are all the same height: five-stories high with the ground floor used for retail stores and arcades to protect from the rain. (They say it rains a lot in Normandy, which is not quite true, anyway no more than in Paris!) The tops of the buildings are flat and used either as terraces or today as gardens. The buildings



The cultural center built by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer from 1978-1982 as well as typical Auguste Perret's buildings.

are not wide, and as the windows are almost floor to ceiling, the light is intense inside. The rooms are not big, but within the apartments, the interior walls are moveable partitions. The kitchen was delivered fully equipped with cupboards, stove, refrigerator and more. A model flat has been refurbished as it was in the 1940s, and it is very interesting to visit.

Auguste Perret's architecture was very controversial and disliked for many years, but today, with greenery around the buildings and its functionality, people are admiring it. In 2005, the UNESCO inscribed it on the World Heritage List.

Another site to visit, from the 18th century, is *La Maison de l'Armateur*. It is located near the harbor with a lovely view of the sea and was built around 1790 by the architect and first owner Paul Michel Thibault (1735-1799), who was born into a very wealthy family.

It does not seem to be a very special house at first glance, but the façade's fluted columns and doric capitals indicate that no expense was spared. Upon entering, you arrive in an octagonal space open all the way to the top on the fifth floor which is covered by a glass dome, giving plenty of natural light. Each floor also has inside windows to allow indirect light to penetrate the rooms. The walls are paneled; the floors are decorated with rare exotic woods laid in ornate geometric decorations.

This house has a long and fascinating history: The house was bombed during World War II and an entire outside wall was demolished. Fortunately in 1950, the house was classified as a historic building (*monument historique*) and was bought by the city five years later. Thanks to detailed documents, professional restorers have been able to recreate the atmosphere of the 18th century with furniture, paintings and other period objects. It is simply magnificent.

MuMa

One cannot write about Le Havre without mentioning its striking museum, the André Malraux Museum of Modern Art (known as the MuMa), the first museum built after the war, located by the sea at the end of the harbor. In June of 1961 the newly rebuilt museum was inaugurated by André Malraux,



St. Joseph's church in Le Havre was designed by Auguste Perret and built between 1951-1961.

Général de Gaulle's minister of culture from 1959 to 1969.

Its collection is very rich, with 300 paintings by Eugène Boudin (1824-1898), the Impressionist painter who was born just across the Seine in Honfleur. Many of them are small, representing cows in the beautiful Norman meadows or boats from the small ports nearby. They are all hung on a long wall — a most impressive display. The MuMa also owns paintings by many other Impressionist painters including Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Courbet and Fauvists such as van Dongen, Marquet and Matisse. The painter Raoul Dufy was born in Le Havre in 1877 and died there in 1953. In 1963, his widow donated 70 pieces to the city for the MuMa.

In addition to admiring the intriguing permanent collection, temporary exhibits are organized. The next will be held from November 16 of this year until February 24, 2025, entitled *Senn, Collector and Patron of The Art, 20th Anniversary Of Senn-Foulds Donation*. The collector, Olivier Senn (1864-1959) was a Le Havre native and his granddaughter, Hélène Senn-Foulds, gave 205 paintings of his collection to the museum and later she donated 67 works gathered by her father, Edouard Senn (1901-1992). Thanks to these donations, MuMa claims that it owns one of the wealthiest collections of Impressionist paintings in the world — truly a "must-see" exhibit.

If you sail on the Queen Mary 2, you'll arrive near the Museum and be able to admire its building right away. But if you fly to Paris instead, the train from the Gare St Lazare to Le Havre is a two-hour ride. After all, it's Normandy and the food is also worth the visit!

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