

'I'm on equal footing with the Eiffel Tower': inside Paris' tallest new skyscraper

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Our roving reporter visits the construction site of volcano-inspired Tour Hekla



Photo: James Riding

I am looking down on Paris and feeling very exposed. Currently, the 42nd floor of the city's newest skyscraper is little more than a concrete core wrapped in a temporary metal barrier, and the wind is picking up. Even with the brittle winter weather and night descending, though, the view is undeniably impressive. Over on the other side of the Seine, smudged by rain, stands the Eiffel Tower; up here I feel, astonishingly, on an equal footing.

The name of this new skyscraper is Tour Hekla, and it is easily the most eye-catching of the new projects being developed in La Défense, Paris' business district. It is named after an Icelandic volcano and looks like it has been hewn out of rock: with intricate planes and colourful sunshades, it resembles a giant crystal necklace.



The Tour Hekla worksite. Photo: Thierry Lewenberg-Sturm

Developed by Hines and AG Real Estate, the tower was designed by Jean Nouvel, who is responsible for some of Paris' boldest-looking buildings including the Philharmonie concert hall and the gravity-defying Tours Duo. Those both appear close to bursting with movement but there is a sturdiness to Hekla, appropriate for what will become the second-tallest building in Paris when it tops out at 220m and 49 storeys next year.



Visualisation of the finished tower. Credit: L'Autre Image

Vincent Virlogeux, project manager at AG and my guide to the tower, tells me there are between 500 and 550 workers on the Hekla site at the moment. Gigantic cranes and concrete pumps are assembling the next storey above, while the floors below are outfitted and painted in a Farrow & Ball Elephant's Breath-type colour (a Jean Nouvel signature, Virlogeux says).

The office lifts haven't been put in yet, so we came up in a shuddering temporary lift made of corrugated iron and will go down via a vertiginous

stairwell.



Photo: James Riding

‘A giant’s toybox’

Londoners might be desensitised to the sight of vaulting glass offices but a new skyscraper is a big deal in Paris. Any proposal for a tall building in the city centre is met with a tidal wave of opposition. The 42-storey Tour Triangle, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, was given the green light a decade ago, but is only now set to break ground after languishing in planning purgatory and a quagmire of legal challenges. The monolithic Tour Montparnasse still provokes animosity from Parisians despite being completed nearly 40 years ago.

La Défense, however, has become the designated site for experimentation. From up here it looks like a giant's toybox, with spherical and semi-spherical structures scattered about the blocky Grande Arche. The cliché used to be that the district was a landscape of grey towers and bankers, but it is now in the middle of a fascinating regeneration. When I [spoke to the CEO of La Défense, Pierre-Yves Guice, in September](#), he described the need to pursue a greater mix of tenant types, “because it enables the district to be more resilient, more robust, in times of crisis like this one.”



La Défense as seen from Tour Hekla. Photo: James Riding

There is also a marked effort to make the place greener. A swath of unused land in the middle of the central street is set to become a park. “We’re pretty sure we’re not making a big historic mistake when we begin to turn public spaces into urban parks,” said Guice.

Hekla is a big part of La Défense’s proposed green reinvention. At the foot of the tower I can see an arc of road, the remains of an old highway interchange which is being converted into a 450m footbridge that will be planted with trees and connect the tower to another new park. There will also be a hanging garden on the roof, which could really enhance people’s experience in summer.



The highway interchange redevelopment is inspired by New York's High Line. Credit: L'Autre Image

Summer, however, feels very far off right now, so Virlogeux takes me and my fellow visitors down a few floors to see some finished office space. There will be 76,000 sq m of floor area, with balconies of alternating sizes. The team worked hard to give these terraces a breezy outdoor feel while making them feel safe rather than vertigo-inducing.



Finished office space. Photo: James Riding

Can an occupier be found?

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The big question, which would not have been nearly so existentially pressing when the tower was designed pre-pandemic, is can an occupier be found for all this space before the tower is completed next year? When I interviewed Virlogeux in September, he explained that the original ambition was to secure one or two major tenants. However, he was not worried about adapting these plans.

“We have a building that is just as well calibrated to accommodate 30 tenants as two or three,” he said. “Until now, we have focused our research towards the second category. As Covid has significantly lengthened the decision-making time for this type of large user, we are considering widening our target on smaller users, as a complement to our initial strategy.”

And as Patrick Bosque, deputy general manager at Hines France, pointed out to me, small tenants looking for 5,000-6,000 sq m can decide between six and 12 months before moving.



The second-floor auditorium. Photo: Thierry Lewenberg-Sturm

After a peek in the 250-seat auditorium (which is, unusually, on the second floor, to let more light in), we are back on the ground. I feel tiny. Will Tour Hekla fulfil its promise and become a bold symbol of the greener, brighter, more collaborative post-pandemic Parisian skyscraper? It won't be long before we find out.