

Weekender Feature | Photographer David Pendery explores unknown side of Paris

Parisian arcades elegantly showcased at Back Bay exhibit through end of February

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Visitors generally arrive in Paris with a list of must-see attractions: the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, Notre Dame, etc. The city's covered arcades generally do not end up on these lists, and even some Parisians are unaware of their existence. But these unique and unusual spaces — wide, glass-covered walkways lined with boutiques — are a marvelous relic of centuries past and continue to be an important part of Parisian life.

These arcades, or “passages couverts,” are the subject of a photography exhibition, “The Covered Arcades of Paris,” which features the work of David Pendery, at the French Cultural Center in Boston's Back Bay. The show, which is on view until Feb. 29, offers a comprehensive introduction to these distinctive structures that forever changed city life for Parisians.

Covered Arcades in Paris

The arcade as a structure was born in Paris. The first examples were constructed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and boasted amenities that at the time were quite rare in the city: good lighting, heat, protection from the elements and a wide range of shops in a contained area.

These elegant commercial spaces — arguably the precursors of the modern-day shopping mall — became showcases for some of the most luxurious and unusual goods on the market in Paris, and were very fashionable. Parisians came to the arcades to leisurely stroll through the passageways and marvel at the wares on display.

And as is often the case in Paris — where people watching is less of a guilty pleasure than an Olympic sport — many came to the arcades as



Passage des Princes, Paris

much to look at those around them as they did to shop. Indeed, whole cultures developed around the arcades, and important literary figures including Charles Baudelaire and Honoré de Balzac even wrote about these unique cross sections of Parisian life.

The concept of the arcade eventually spread throughout Europe — well known examples can be found in London, Milan and Brussels — and continued all the way to the United States.

In the late 19th century, Baron Haussmann oversaw a dramatic reconstruction of Paris. This eliminated many of the city's old narrow streets and created



Galerie Vivienne, Paris

the wide boulevards for which it is so well known today.

These boulevards quickly became the new commercial centers, and many of the arcades were destroyed or fell out of fashion.

However, the structures continued to be an important aspect of city life, and writer Walter Benjamin discussed them at great length in the mid 20th century. Additionally, within the past several decades, they have enjoyed a renewed interest and several have been completely restored.

An American in Paris

David Pendery, 61, has had a long relationship with Parisian arcades. He lived in Paris as a teenager and first encountered the structures nearly fifty years ago:

“[I] stepped out into the passage and I remember still to this day the feeling of being in this covered arcade — skylights, lots of people, lots of little stores, no cars, of course — and being able to just walk up and down the passage and window-shop ... I was really taken with them and I’ve been strolling the passages ever since,” he said.

Pendery’s family purchased an apartment in a neighborhood with a number of arcades, and he returns to them regularly. He also advises friends to visit the arcades when they are in Paris:

“For the first or second time tourist, they’re not on the A-list of the things to go see,” he said.

“But I always send off friends of mine with various recommendations about what to do in Paris ... [and] I always give them detailed information about going through the passages and everybody seems to really love them ... They are not particularly full of tourists ever during the year,” he added.

Pendery worked with a number of architectural firms in the Boston area as a Computer-Aided Design specialist, creating 3D renderings of buildings that had yet to be constructed. This knowledge of computer programming and manipulation of images would later influence his photographs of the arcades.

The 18 photographs by Pendery in the show portray a number of the remaining arcades in Paris including the Galerie Vivienne, the Galerie Colbert and the Passage du Grand-Cerf.

One remarkable photograph, “Galerie Vivienne” (2009), captures the arcade’s long passageway from its light-filled ceiling to its intricate mosaic floor. The image makes very effective use of plunging angles and dramatic lighting to highlight the virtuoso design and intricate architectural details that make the Galerie Vivienne one of the most beautiful arcades ever constructed in Paris.

In addition, the photograph successfully conveys the quiet elegance that fills this urban space.

The Galerie Vivienne is one of the best preserved and most frequented arcades in Paris, but not all of the structures have fared so well. While all arcades in the exhibition are still in use, some clearly show the signs of their age and are rather decrepit. Arcades like the Passage Brady are not as attractive at face value as the Galerie Vivienne, but Pendery’s photographs offer a compelling and realistic window into their present state.

Old Structures, New Technologies

Pendery explained that he uses a number of technologies to show the arcades as a pedestrian experiences them. These include panoramic stitching, which permits him to combine a number of photographs into one wide-angled image, and high dynamic range, which infuses his images with high contrasts and vibrant colors.

“When I’m doing things like architectural subjects, I’m always trying to figure out how better to portray them, rather than straight shots,” he said. “All of the stuff really ties together; it’s all related to using technology to portray a space according to the way one wants the space to end up feeling.”

The exhibition also includes a number of explanatory panels and older images of the arcades. Pendery said that he sees a number of parallels between his own work and these older images.

“I’ve got several examples of 19th-century etchings in the exhibition ... and it’s funny to put them side by side,” he said. “In certain instances, as artist’s license, they will exaggerate the grandeur of the space ... But by the time I finish manipulating the image on the computer, I can on occasion take liberties to emphasize certain aspects of the space. But again, I’m not trying to distort them, I’m trying to portray them as closely as I can to what one experiences when one is in the space.”

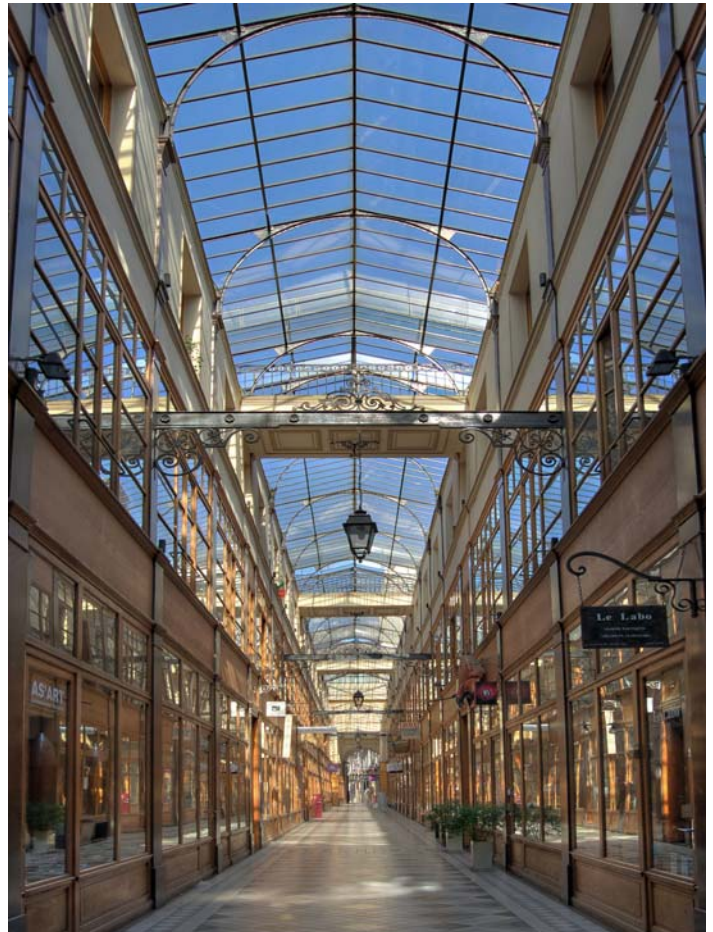
Of Paris and Boston

It’s no coincidence that Pendery’s photographs are on display at the French Cultural Center, an organization on Malborough Street in Boston’s Back Bay dedicated to promoting French language and culture. The center is home to the country’s second largest private collection of French books, and it also offers regular French courses.

Pierre Noinski, Cultural Programs Manager for the French Cultural Center, explained that they hold monthly exhibitions, and that Pendery’s photographs of arcades were of particular interest because they highlighted a relatively unknown aspect of the French capital .

“I’m tempted to call them hidden gems... I lived in the Paris area before coming to the U.S. for about a year, and I actually didn’t even know about these arcades,” Noinski said. “When you think Paris, you don’t think, ‘oh yeah, covered arcades’ ... So this exhibition is interesting in a sense that it gives people a very detailed report of what these covered arcades are, and they’re just amazing. It’s good to be able to bring this to people in Boston and show them that Paris is more than just the Eiffel Tower. And not to say that people don’t know anything about Paris, but I think it’s something that people don’t really know about .”

For Pendery, the appreciation is mutual: “I can think of no more appropriate place to show these,” he elaborated. Pendery hopes that through the exhibition, those with plans to visit the city of light will be inspired to stroll these distinctive arcades and experience their vibrant history and culture firsthand: “That’s my main point - to turn people on to these and to entice them to visit them.”



Passage du Grand-Cerf, Paris