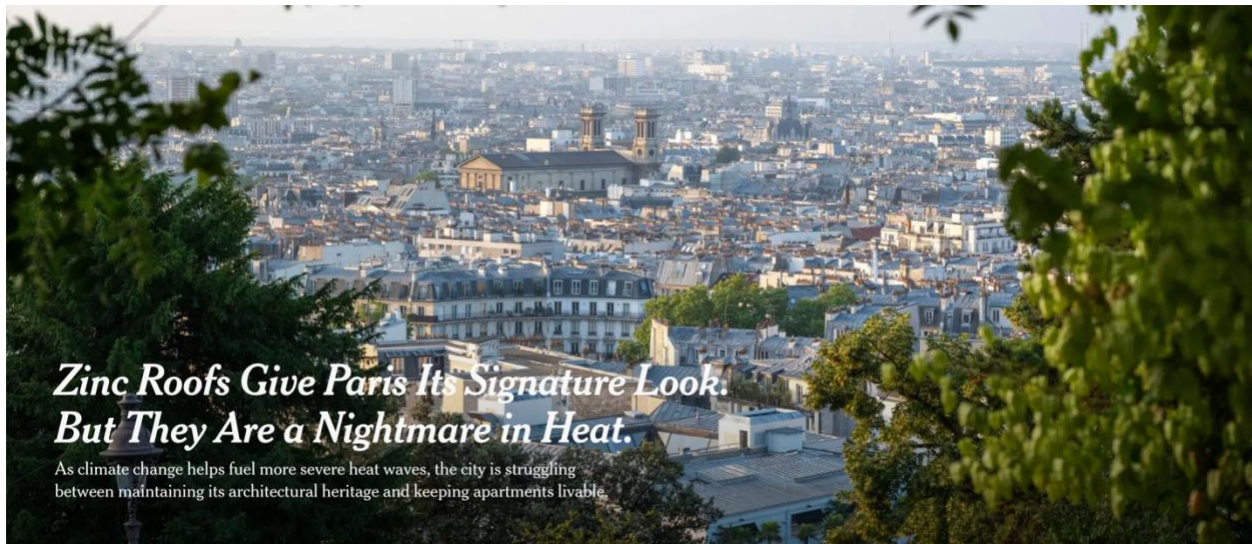


Zinc Roofs Give Paris Its Signature Look. But They Are a Nightmare in Heat.

As climate change helps fuel more severe heat waves, the city is struggling between maintaining its architectural heritage and keeping apartments livable.



A view of Paris and its zinc-roofed buildings from the Sacré-Coeur in July. Credit...James Hill for *The New York Times*

By [Catherine Porter](#)

Reporting from Paris

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They are an essential part of Paris, like the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame.

The city's blue-gray rooftops that gleam like a sun-battered ocean have inspired Impressionist painters, novelists, filmmakers and selfie-taking tourists.

The secret to their uniformity is zinc, which covers almost four-fifths of the city's rooftops.

But during heat waves, increasingly common in Paris as the earth warms, those zinc roofs become sizzling frying pans, exceeding 158 degrees Fahrenheit (70 degrees Celsius). For people living directly under, they become suffocating heat blankets.

“All of these apartments, especially on the top floors, will become uninhabitable in the coming years,” said Dan Lert, deputy mayor in charge of the city's ecological transition and its climate change plan.



Workers placed a panel of zinc on the roof of an apartment building in central Paris being restored in the traditional manner in July. Credit...James Hill for The New York Times

The problem, he said, is not the roofs but the decision to put apartments directly under them. But since people live there, any protection, like insulation to protect from the heat, should be installed from the inside of buildings, he said. The office is open to experimentation, but none that is visible from the street or changes the “panorama of the roofs.”

That position has made the heritage architects unpopular, he said, but they are the ones who protect against what he called “ugly France.”

Mr. Lert, the deputy mayor pushing for climate-change adaptations, said the office blocked or restrained one-third of proposed projects to protect buildings from heat waves in the city. Mr. Hébert said that was exaggerated, but that the office does not have statistics on this.

As of 2024, only 26 buildings in Paris won approval to insulate from the outside, according to [a fact-finding report by French lawmakers](#). (They did not say how many applied.)

The problem, several experts said, is that insulating from the inside is not always feasible, nor is it the most effective way to combat the radiating heat of the sun-baked roofs. And, according to Mr. Lert, the case-by-case deliberations on projects by the heritage architects are too slow given the pace of climate change in Europe, which scientists warn is warming faster than the global average.



Zinc-roofed buildings are visible in the distance as runners scale a steep set of stairs near the Sacré-Coeur. Credit...James Hill for *The New York Times*

He added, “We will have to accept that the Parisian landscape needs to change.”

The people charged with protecting Paris’s heritage do not agree, and they are in control. Overlapping heritage rules cover 97 percent of the city. Changes, even minor ones, need to be appraised by a small but powerful office inside the Ministry of Culture called the Building Architects of France, whose decisions in many cases are binding.

Though there is no campaign to do away with the zinc roofs, there have been many requests to make them less heat-absorbing.

The office’s position is that the zinc roofs of Paris should not change in structure, form or usage.

“When you’re on the roofs of Paris, there is this kind of gray sea that is absolutely sublime,” said Jean-François Hébert, who oversees the architects’ office as the ministry’s director of heritage and architecture. “It is obviously a very important and historical element for Paris.”

In 2019, Paris had a new high of 42.6 Celsius, or nearly 109 Fahrenheit, and city officials [have begun to prepare for](#) when it could hit 122.



A woman closes the windows of an apartment on the top floor of a building on the Île Saint-Louis in central Paris that has a zinc and slate roof. Credit...James Hill for The New York Times

“This is an emergency. It’s a major health issue,” said Mr. Lert, pointing to a recent study investigating the deadly 2003 heat wave, which revealed that living directly below rooftops multiplied the risk of death more than four times.

“It’s not about making Paris ugly,” Mr. Lert said. “It’s about protecting the health of its inhabitants.”

The roofs are relatively new to the city. Before the 1850s, many buildings in Paris had peaked roofs covered in slate and clay tile shingles, according to Julien Bigorgne, an engineer specializing in adaptation to climate change.

[Emperor Napoleon III](#) ordered a major renovation of the city overseen by his powerful prefect, Georges Eugène Haussmann. Medieval warrens were replaced by grand boulevards lined with uniform six-story apartment buildings that give modern Paris its signature look.

Zinc, relatively cheap, light and malleable, was the perfect roofing material, able to be folded into the [Mansard shape](#), which offered space for small, uninsulated rooms at the top, Mr. Bigorgne explained.



Julien Mellul in his top-floor apartment in the 17th arrondissement of Paris, in August.
Credit...James Hill for *The New York Times*

“They were always uncomfortable, but that wasn’t considered a problem,” he said. “Servants lived there.”

But since the 1970s, those maid’s rooms, known as *chambres de bonnes*, have increasingly been converted into apartments with cathedral ceilings and skylights, worsening the heat problem, Mr. Bigorgne said.

With no upstairs neighbors, and views across the city, they became prized real estate.

Until heat waves, that is, when the temperature under those roofs can rise above 104 degrees and remain high into the night.

Residents describe strategies like soaking in cold baths, eating only uncooked food to avoid using the stove, or simply escaping somewhere cooler. Few have air-conditioning units, which are uncommon in Paris and [the subject of much discord](#).

Evenings are the worst, said Julien Mellul, from his top-floor apartment in the 17th arrondissement. During a heat wave in early July, an indoor thermometer by his front door didn’t slip below 86 degrees until after 5 a.m.

“That’s what’s so miserable — you can never cool down,” said Mr. Mellul, 44, who runs an IT management company.



Eytan Levi, an architect and co-founder of Roofscapes, sits in a rooftop garden designed to provide shade over zinc roofs. Credit...James Hill for *The New York Times*

There is little question that the roofs are precious to many beauty-loving Parisians. In December, the profession of zinc roofer was named an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. But even the president of the union that includes roofers, Edouard Bastien, said something must be done, and said workers have already adapted by adding insulation beneath roofs during routine renovations.

“We are not dogmatic,” he said. “The question that lawmakers must resolve is what is it possible to do.”

One proposed solution sits atop the former town hall in the city’s center: a wooden deck lined with planters erupting with strawberries, thyme, rosemary and lavender. It’s the work of Roofscapes, a company formed in 2020 by three French architecture students at MIT.

They’ve set thermal sensors under the zinc roofs, and under their wooden decking that provides shade. On one day when Paris hit 96 degrees, the temperature under the wooden deck was 87, while below the exposed zinc it was 116.

The idea also offers something rare in Paris, green space for hanging out.

“We have an opportunity with all these untouched surfaces to do something that is virtually impossible anywhere else in a city like Paris,” said Eytan Levi, a co-founder of Roofscapes. “There’s a new way you can live.”

This summer, left-wing lawmakers proposed a law to include health issues and the comfort of housing into the mission of the country’s heritage architects, and to make their rulings on sun-protection proposals no longer binding. It has been sent to committee.

The city has issued an international call for innovative solutions to the roofing problem, and the heritage architects’ office is a partner in the experimental program.

Mr. Bigorgne, the adaptation engineer, says if people aren’t allowed to change the roofs from the outside, they will push to install air-conditioning. And that could cause a whole other set of heritage concerns, with vents emerging from facades or roofs.

“We just have to say it honestly,” he said. “We need to understand the consequences, because in essence, people can’t live under those roofs unless we’ve put in place solutions.”