

## DESIGN PARIS

## Fountains of light

Brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec have made their mark on the Champs-Élysées in spectacular fashion, writes **Stephen Todd**.



The Champs-Élysées is the main artery of Paris and the pulse point for measuring the city's mood – elation and triumph, anger and despair, all are registered here. It's down the two kilometres of this "most beautiful avenue in the world" that German troops paraded after the fall of France in 1940, to be followed by American forces marking the Allied liberation four years later. It's where the Tour de France finishes every July, last year's World Cup victory was fêted and Jean Seberg shall forever hawk the "New York Herald Tribune, New York Herald Tribune!" in Jean-Luc Godard's classic 1960 film, *Breathless*.

Since mid-November, *les Champs* ("the Fields"), as they are locally known, have been the stage for violent weekly protests by "Yellow Jackets" denouncing the widening gap between the Parisian elite and people struggling in the regions.

It's perhaps not the most propitious moment to install a new €6.3 million (\$10 million) fountain strung with garlands of bespoke Swarovski crystal. But for designer Ronan Bouroullec, "to be able to inscribe a new work on this avenue which is so often the place the French come to express their anger and their joy, is an incredible opportunity".

Ronan, who in partnership with his brother Erwan helms arguably the most important French design studio working today, spent three years developing the project that was unveiled last month. While conceived as a single work, the "fountain" is composed of six identical fountains arrayed around the historical Rond-Point (roundabout) of the Champs-Élysées, roughly halfway between the Place de la Concorde and the Arc de Triomphe.

Each fountain comprises three angled tubes – made of luminous, interlocking crystal segments – suspended four metres above the ground from a central bronze mast 13 metres high. Water pumped up through the mast pours down the tubes into the ponds below in clear, streaming jets – dignified, even stoic on a calm day; billowing dramatically when it's blustery.

Rotating on their axes at the rate of half a round per minute (that is, almost imperceptibly), the chunky crystal components glint discreetly. At night, illuminated from within, they emanate a gentle glimmer.

"It's almost like a mirage," says Ronan. "We wanted something that would be imposing, but also delicate. We had to take into account the historical context but also create something of its time."

We're seated at the Bouroullecs'

Above: two of the six fountains on the Champs-Élysées, looking toward the Arc de Triomphe. Right: Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec with a prototype. Below: Nadja Swarovski.



headquarters in the working-class 10th arrondissement, far from the glitz and glamour of the Champs-Élysées. While Erwan, the younger of the siblings, is evaluating prototypes at a nearby table, Ronan, the more gregarious of the pair, explains their process.

"The Champs-Élysées is not a place either Erwan or I exactly spend a lot of time strolling about, so we began to visit at various times of the day to see how people use the area. We also needed to go really deep into the research, to understand the history and significance of the place."

They delved back to the 17th century, when Louis XIV ordered his landscape architect André Le Nôtre (the mastermind behind the gardens of Versailles) to create a grand promenade, extending the gardens of the Tuileries from the Louvre Palace to what is now the Rond-Point.

That avenue was extended further after Napoléon I commissioned the Arc de Triomphe in 1806 to celebrate victory in the Battle of Austerlitz and commemorate his troops.

When Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann redesigned the entire city in the latter half of the 19th century, he transformed the Rond-Point into an elegant roundabout that included the first incarnation of six peripheral fountains. They marked a transition in the ascent of *les Champs* from the Tuileries to what was fast becoming the most bustling of fashionable avenues.

In the 1930s the fountains were ornamented with art deco squirrels and

birds created by master glass craftsman René Lalique; these were replaced in the '50s by more robust fittings that endured until 1998, when crowds of soccer fans celebrating France's World Cup win proved even more robust. The fountains were left in an advanced state of disrepair, which is how they remained until now.

As glaringly contemporary as they are, the Bouroullec fountains have their source in the rich and turbulent history of Paris. "It was important to express this continuity, in particular with Lalique's beautiful glass work," says Ronan. "To create something at once tough, monumental and romantic." He notes that their crystal designs have been stress-tested to endure "harsh winds and other disturbing elements".

That the fountains terminate four metres above the ground is not just for aesthetic reasons. The fountains, Ronan points out, are higher than the regulation lamp posts but shorter than the trees (which each year are trimmed to the same height). "We had to make life-size models in aluminium to be really certain of the dimensions. We'd been tempted to make the fountains 20 metres high but realised that would be over-scaled. As they are, they create a harmony with their surroundings."

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Commissioned by mayor Anne Hidalgo, they are part of an ambitious redevelopment of the Champs-Élysées, financed primarily by businesses with interests along the avenue. Galeries Lafayette, one of the donors, opened a store there last week. Dassault Aviation has also contributed since its HQ sits on the Rond-Point. The Qatari sovereign fund chipped in too: the owner of the celebrated Paris-Saint Germain soccer club holds real estate – most prominently, the PSG flagship – along the Champs-Élysées.

Ronan Bouroullec was born in Quimper, Brittany, in 1971 and studied at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris while his younger brother Erwan went to the École des Beaux-Arts of Cergy Pontoise. The pair has worked together since 1999, designing critically acclaimed and commercially successful collections for prestigious brands including Cappellini, Magis, Samsung and Vitra. They've been commissioned to design furniture for François Pinault's private museum near Les Halles, due to open this year, and have designed works for public spaces including a cloudlike canopy in the Miami Design District and park benches in Copenhagen.

They were the first contemporary designers to be invited to create a piece for permanent installation at the Château de Versailles. That chandelier is also constructed from bespoke Swarovski crystal components and can be considered the progenitor of the Champs-Élysées fountains.

"As with the Versailles project, these six fountains represented an incredible technical challenge," says Nadja Swarovski, member of the executive board.

"Realising Ronan and Erwan's amazing design truly pushed the limits of innovation. Our master cutters and engineers worked for over a year to develop the bespoke crystal cut and we designed a patented new component that allows us to install the crystal outdoors and resist the environment. We are delighted with the stunning result."

And, so it seems, is most of Paris – foot and car traffic has increased exponentially since the unveiling of the fountains. *Le Monde* newspaper called them "six joyous and surprising objects" reflecting "the lights of the city and the flash of selfies in action". **L&L**



Above: a craftsman works on a component at the Swarovski workshop in Austria. Left: Ronan Bouroullec handles a bespoke-cut crystal element.