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SACRÉ BLEU! PARISIAN CULTURAL ELITE SHOCKED BY PLANS TO MODERNISE HISTORIC MANSION

Anger at Qatar owner's refurbishment of £70m Hôtel Lambert that was once owned by Voltaire's mistress.A French court will rule this week on the fate of one of Paris's most illustrious stately homes, whose planned modernization on behalf of its new Arab owners has caused uproar among the city's cultural elite.

The Hôtel Lambert, which faces onto the River Seine at the eastern tip of the Île Saint-Louis, has been described as the most beautiful building in the most beautiful city in the world. The 17th century mansion was built by the man who designed Versailles, and its residents have included Voltaire, Chopin and the late aesthete Alexis von Rosenberg.

However, Hôtel Lambert's acquisition in 2007 by the brother of the Emir of Qatar caused much irritation among many neighbours, and now his proposed refurbishment has lead to a court case, letters to the government and a bitter row over the aesthetics of architectural preservation in France. Behind the affair lies a deeper political controversy, with enemies of the project accusing President Nicolas Sarkozy's government of succumbing to the Gulf Arab interests, and themselves then accused of supporting xenophobic cultural chauvinism. The building – which includes a courtyard, garden and the renowned semi-circular Galerie d'Hercule – was in disrepair when it was sold by Baron Guy de Rothschild for around £70 million. Renovation designs were approved by the French culture ministry in June, but by then the protest campaign had moved into top gear.

Denouncing what it calls "this imminent disaster", the association Paris Historique collected more than 8000 signatures for a petition, and two weeks ago its lawyers were in court in order to try and stop the project from going ahead. The court will deliver its decision on Wednesday. "There is still time to dispel this atmosphere of blind servility that has led the project managers to respond uncritically to demands for the most stereotypical form of conventional luxury," the association said in a letter to the newly-appointed culture minister Frédéric Mitterand. Although the original designs have been considerably altered over recent months, they still include plans to destroy a staircase, install three lifts and create an underground car park beneath the courtyard. Among the signatories are several well-known residents of Île Saint-Louis, which is a Unesco-protected heritage site and contains some of the most expensive and sought-after properties in the French capital.

The singer and song-writer Georges Moustaki said: "The Hôtel is the jewel of the island. We absolutely must preserve it." Composer Henri Dutilleux, who has lived on the island for more than 50 years, warned that the proposed

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renovation would "alter the mansion's exceptional architectural singularity." However, the most glittering name on the list of opponents is that of the legendary French film actress Michèle Morgan, who made her name with Jean Gabin in the pre-war classic Le Quai des Brumes and who herself lived for 20 years in Hôtel Lambert when it was split up into apartments. "They (the Qataris) are used to big, open spaces. But when they buy a Hôtel on the Île Saint-Louis, they forget that now they are in Paris. What snobbery – this idea of buying a place here! They should have built something outside of Paris – they could have had all the space they wanted," Morgan told Prestigium magazine.

The Qataris' architect, Alain-Charles Perrot, who has a distinguished track record restoring Paris monuments, argues that the changes will not affect the mansion's essential structure. "The emir is passionate about art and asked me to restore the mansion as faithfully as possible," he said. Perrot said he wants to restore the Hôtel as close as possible to its original 17th century state, removing many more recent additions. But this approach has itself raised objections from many in the arts establishment who say historic buildings should also reflect the aesthetic input of succeeding generations.

Hôtel Lambert was built for a rich banker in the 1640s by Louis Le Vau, who went on to construct much of the palace of Versailles for the Sun King, Louis XIV. The mansion's interior was decorated by Charles Le Brun who also worked on Versailles.

In the 1700s it was owned by the Marquise de Châtelet, who was Voltaire's mistress, and later the mansion was acquired by a wealthy Polish family – the Czartoryskis – who were the centre of a dynamic political and cultural scene. Chopin composed there and the Hôtel Lambert faction features in histories of 18th century Poland. The Rothschilds bought the mansion in 1975, gladly renewing the lease of Alexis von Rosenberg (aka Baron de Redé) whose costume balls had put the Hôtel firmly back on the social map.

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0. The French cultural establishment criticizes the fact that...

a. a building belonging to French cultural heritage has been sold to foreigners.
b. a historic building will be modernized and changes to its structure undergone.
c. the Arabs will not invest in the maintenance and the upkeep of French cultural heritage buildings.

1. The Hôtel Lambert...

a. faces east.

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b. overlooks the Île Saint-Louis.
c. provides views of the River Seine.

2. The inhabitants of the Île Saint-Louis...

a. applauded the purchase of the Hôtel by the Qataris.
b. did not mind selling the Hôtel to the Qataris as long as it did not have to undergo any changes.
c. were furious the Hôtel had been bought by the Qataris.

3. The cultural establishment blames President Sarkozy for...

a. allowing a historic building to be modified.
b. being xenophobic and chauvinistic.
c. giving in to the Arabs.

4. The protest campaign started...

a. after the renovation approval by the Ministry of Culture.
b. before the renovation approval by the Ministry of culture.
c. when the Minister of Culture approved the renovation plans.

5. The association Paris Historique will go to court...

a. before the renovations start.
b. to appeal against the decision to sell the building to foreigners.
c. to stop the renovations currently being carried out.

6. The Île Saint-Louis is considered...

a. as being one of the least exclusive neighbourhood of Paris.
b. is just one of many cultural sites impossible to protect and preserve despite the United Nations.
c. to be of outstanding cultural importance by the United Nations regarding its preservation.

7. Michèle Morgan thought the Qataris...

a. should not divide the Hôtel into any more apartments.
b. were being arrogant about their desire to live in such a secluded place.
c. were very open-minded people and would take up residence on the outskirts.

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8. Alain-Charles Perrot claims that the emir only wishes to...

a. restore the building and at the same time make it more modern.
b. restore the building to its original state.
c. restore the building without doing away with the modern features of the building.

9. Art critics differ since they think that a building...

a. changes through the ages.
b. should express the intentions of its architects.
c. should reflect the passage of time through the addition of features.

10. The Hôtel Lambert...

a. has always been a social, cultural and political centre.
b. has changed hands several times since its construction.
c. used to belong to Polish expatriates until Baron de Rothschild acquired it.

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