Exposing urban utopias based on transport systems: a retrospective analysis of the Grand Paris Pavilion for the Architecture and Landscape Biennial in Versailles

Arnaud Passalacqua

Exposing urban utopias based on transport systems: a retrospective analysis of the Grand Paris Pavilion for the Architecture and Landscape Biennial in Versailles

Arnaud Passalacqua (Paris University ICT/LIED)

Abstract

This paper proposes to come back on the process that led to the opening of a Grand Paris Pavilion during the Architecture and Landscape Biennial in Versailles (May-July 2019). The installation of this exhibition in an ancient post office temporarily available, in proximity to the Château de Versailles, has become one of the main points of this new event. The choice has been made to focus on utopias, specially those based on transport systems in the Paris area, and on the Grand Paris circle underground project, with the installation of 68 models of the new stations due to be realised during the 2020s. This configuration opens to various questions that are addressed by the paper: the differences of perceptions between car-based utopias and railway-based ones, the way history can be used by the actors of the contemporary project, the differences between the exhibition of authentic mobility systems and the choice, made in Versailles, to propose only reproductions of drawings and planning documents… Another interesting point lies in the interaction between historians, responsible for the choice of utopias and the elaboration of narratives, and architects and designers, who proposed the spatial organization of the exhibition, in a place with its own constraints.

Paper

1. Crossing the ephemeral nature of the event and the long time of a transport project

The event that is the subject of this article is the Architecture and Landscape Biennial in Versailles. The first edition of this event took place during the Spring 2019. It is intended to be a regular event that addresses these issues from the perspective of urban ecology, a theme renewed by the importance of climate issues. The event is funded by the Region, whose new president, a conservative, entrusted the organization to a political ally, the Mayor of Versailles, a traditional right-wing city. The choice of this city, which aims to be both one of the jewels of the world heritage and one of the natural poles within the Paris region, is therefore also the result of political proximity. This project therefore wanted to illustrate the ecological will of the head of the Region. The idea of basing this will on an exhibition, in a city that is very touristy because of its palace, was intended to give it a major impact.

This event was combined with a project of a completely different origin: the construction of a metro circle line around Paris, known as Grand Paris Express (GPE). This project, which is part of a very long period of time, is supported by the State and has suspected strong tensions with the Region, while it was socialist. But the President of the Region, like the Mayor of Versailles, were part of the presidential team that, around Nicolas Sarkozy, launched this project in 2009. This project should make it possible to significantly improve the mobility of the urban area by allowing direct suburban journeys in a city that suffers from a very strong imbalance between a very dense and well-served centre and a more diffuse periphery with radial links. The lines are expected to open gradually during the 2020s and 2030s, depending on construction hazards and financial availability, since the probable cost of the project is 40 to 50 billion euros.

The state structure behind the project, the Société du Grand Paris (SGP), has chosen to conduct it by developing many forms of territorial consultation, partly to reduce its image of national level imposing its will. Events are very regularly organised, from debates on the choice of the lines to cultural happenings on the works sites. The SGP therefore wants to be present in this territory, which it intend to dynamise by the metro. In the same way that it aims to be a company that conducts its projects in the most ecological spirit possible.

As a result, the crossing of the Biennials in Versailles and this dynamic of the new metro was somehow expected, especially since the metro will have one of its stations in Versailles, which was then a subject of hard discussions. The SGP therefore wished to participate in the event through a pavilion, which became one of the places of this exhibition whose poles were disseminated throughout the city (palace, school of architecture, king's vegetable garden...).

Since I already had relations with the SGP, I had the opportunity to participate in the setting up of the programme of this Grand Paris Pavillon, hosted in a large former post office, before its transformation into a luxury hotel by a real estate transaction.

2. From the pavilion program to the historical mission

The project's guideline aimed to show that the GPE is part of the logic of urbanization and network deployment in the Paris region, both in terms of time and in terms of the contemporary challenges of building a more ecological city. The latter aspect is essentially driven by the idea that the development of a new public transit offer is a way to reduce car use. This reflection does not address the debate on this issue, that has developed since the beginning of the project.

My mission was to feed the project with long-term elements. For this purpose, I was helped by a very precious assistant, thanks to the SGP. The main guideline was to work on the utopias related to transport on the territory. We had to reflect on the intellectual origins of the GPE project, and then, more broadly, on the origins of the development of mobility in the Paris region. We quickly focused on the idea that the current state of mobility in the urban area is the result of the superposition of multiple projects, some of which have been successful and many of which have not been implemented. We have thus explored the proposals that have marked this history since the beginning of the 19th century. I already had many classic references in mind, but we looked for other projects, some of which were unknown to me.

As we moved forward, the historical contribution thus took the form of a large timeline presenting various projects that shaped Parisian mobility. We have also included some images to illustrate the configuration of mobility at this or that period, in order to recontextualize the projects presented.

The historical mission then turned into a search for the places where the images envisaged were kept and a legal and financial arrangement of partnerships to expose them, which I did not do myself but which represented the heaviest part of the work.

3. A loop out of the game

On the theoretical plan, the proposal I initially made was based on a small scheme that seemed quite simple to me. The idea was to question the notion of utopia in the world of transport based on a diagram entitled "from utopia to utopia" made of 4 circular steps:

- 1 The formulation of a transport project is a long-term process and involves several opposing projects.
- 2. The implementation of the project is based on the plans drawn up and evolves according to the hazards of the site, the availability of funding, the phasing of the project over time...
- 3. The operation of the transport service makes the project concrete, confronts it with everyday problems, the ageing of rolling stock and spaces, the image that can deteriorate…
- 4. A new urban utopia arises from dissatisfaction with the functioning of the city and its transport network in its current state.

The last stage generates the first, since this utopia ends up taking the form of new transport projects.

This small loop can be read as a cyclical evolution of the purity content of transport projects: while they have an ethereal or even sacred dimension when they are only paper projects, they are gradually confronted with the materiality of the site and then the daily operation, which contributes to a form of disenchantment. The re-enchantment therefore requires the formulation of another utopia, which thus relaunches the circular dynamic.

The whole exhibition project was based on the idea of a loop, since the GPE consists of creating a metro loop around Paris. In particular, a contemporary work of art in the form of a large double-revolution staircase welcomed visitors to the entrance of the Pavilion. Looking for the loop in history therefore seemed to me a way to echo this dynamic.

However, such a proposal did not appeal to the whole team of curators. It seemed to me to be a simple way of recontextualizing the historical moment we are currently experiencing in the Paris region, which my interlocutors understood well. But they found that this vision was too negative insofar as it locked the project into a form of fatality that would inexorably lead to disillusionment. My proposal was therefore rejected. The theoretical discussions therefore stopped there and it was the visual elements that caught the attention.

4. The visual empire

As the project progressed, the focus on images increased. This is linked to several dynamics.

First, the exhibition was intended to be accessible to all by offering above all an easily perceptible content. The texts have therefore been reduced to the essentials. Upstairs, the exhibition of 68 models of the GPE's new stations was the highlight of the pavilion. The objective was above all visual: at the top of the stairs, the visitor must have been impressed by the forest of models. Similarly, the ceiling of this level was covered by a series of large maps of the Paris region, of a very different nature and time period. Here too, it was not really a question of giving information carried by a map, but rather of playing on the visual effect of the proliferation of possible representations of the region, and on the colours, scales and graphic choices of the different supports placed on the ceiling. The visitor had to live above all a visual experience.

Secondly, the culture of the team of curators has had a very strong impact on this focus on the visual artefacts. Within this group were at my side architects, a designer and a scenographer, a specialist in contemporary art. Visual and space issues therefore occupied the main focus of our upstream discussions. The urgency of the project also led to the reuse of many existing elements, such as the models scattered in the various architectural firms responsible for building these stations. It was therefore first a question of knowing what objects and images would be available, before reflecting on the substance of the subject.

Thirdly, the orientation of the pavilion on the project's theme has also led to giving priority to graphic representations of the projects, as this is generally the main support that the actors themselves have used to implement their project. This was a form of coherence between the exhibition and the ways of acting of the actors in planning and transport.

The choice of historical images, after a large collection, was organized according to the importance of the projects, but also according to their impressive or aesthetic character. Thus, some images of poorly documented, little-known and marginal projects have played a more important role than others, which have been much more decisive in the region's transport history.

The general organisation of the exhibition was organised in 20-year periods, from 1830 to 2030, from the creation of urban public transport to the inauguration of the GPE. For each period, about ten images were used to illustrate both the state of transport systems at the time and the projects and utopias formulated by the same period. To accompany these images, I was asked to write very short texts, which turned out to be quite difficult to produce. How to give meaning in a few words? The difficulty was all the greater because these texts were taken up by a journalist who was not particularly familiar with the historical issues involved.

The exchanges made it possible to readjust certain elements, but these texts posed two difficulties for me. On the one hand, they were rewritten in a very teleological spirit, aiming to show that the GPE was a hoped-for, logical and successful form of solution to the mobility problems in the Paris region. On the other hand, they have focused very strongly on public transport, at the expense of a system that represents the majority of journeys in the Paris region, the automobile. Yet it is also the source of many utopias and projects.

One of my main contributions was finally to insist that the automobile dimension should not be ignored. I was helped in this by images of automobile projects that were either very aesthetic, such as those of the 1930s, or very striking, with Le Corbusier's Voisin plan and his project for a city of 3 million inhabitants. But I felt the less attractive character of the automobile object, which was generally relegated to smaller images, out of step with the role it plays in our mobility. The texts themselves were initially intended to be very anti-automobiles, as if this unique tension had fuelled the entire history of urban travel, which is in fact much more complex in the games between the different systems.

The last difficulty with the images is due to the less attractiveness of black and white images, those of the 19th century. The timeline was designed on a reverse pattern, beginning in 2030 and finishing in 1830, following a decreasing size of the 20-year period posters. So the last ones were far less attractive than the first ones and the images were of smaller size. Because most of them were projects of the 19th century, they were not easily accessible and should have been treated on a more equal basis. But this argument was not able to convince the other curators, seduced by the idea of a sense of progress which

was translated into the size of the timeline. Behind this choice, we can read the differences of practices that was a key point of the project.

5. One team, different practices

If the background was not at the heart of the project, it is mainly because the different actors involved in setting up this exhibition had quite different habits and interests.

Within the SGP itself, various speeches were made. His President wanted to illustrate that transport and urban project take time and evolve during their implementation, in order to better understand the difficulties of the GPE, faced with additional costs, delays and unavoidable route revisions. But the pilots of the operation for the SGP had a vision based on another logic: the project had to be carried out on time and become the support of multiple events, in order to feed a communication policy, towards the inhabitants, visitors and decision-makers. Two different ways of helping their project, not necessarily incompatible, but not always consistent.

For the Mayor, the project had to be part of the Versailles context, which presents many specificities. For him, it was also important that the whole project could be ready on time, so that the Biennial could be inaugurated by the President of the Region as well as by the former President of the Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy.

The scenographer and his team focused on the stakes of costs and deadlines for the material realization of the various supports.

For the architects, participation in this exhibition was only one aspect of the much broader contracts they have for the construction of one or more GPE stations. From then on, it was a matter of highlighting the main concepts that they wanted to place at the heart of their approach to the stations and which essentially revolve around ecological issues. Each of the teams thus remained in the conceptual area they forged themselves to obtain a station market and the exhibition juxtaposed these points of view more than it made them work together. In addition, since the architectural firms involved were large structures, the people attending the meetings were not always the same. The big names in architecture involved in the GPE only became visible when the decision-makers were present.

As a historian, I wanted to propose both an open view of the different transport systems and a problem based on the tension between existing networks and urban utopias. It was also an opportunity to highlight some documents considered original to present well-known projects, but whose iconography could be enriched.

Conclusion

This experience offered me the opportunity to play the role of the historian in a larger team, essentially oriented towards the timely implementation of an exhibition pressed by a timetable that was very narrow. In this sense, it showed me the mechanics of how this type of event works. But I still wonder about the fact that no one in the team has produced a global speech. The operation was conceived as a place of the visual, where visitors had to leave first and foremost by having lived a sensitive experience, the objective of which was to develop an interest for the GPE with the objects presented but also, probably, to impress by the abundance, the dimensions, the stakes... Such is the meaning of

the forest of models and the ceiling of maps, which found their meaning above all by the number. This is also the meaning of the accumulation of images of projects that I have proposed.

As a result, no one made a global statement or formulated a problematic line. The ones I proposed were erased by the fact that they offended the actors of the GPE, who often claim to draw historical parallels but have difficulty accepting to conceive themselves as actors of a moment in history. Each architect had its own line and probably did not want this exhibition to be a real place for discussing these choices, which govern the stations that are currently built. The designer was the most likely to unify all this, but he did so on his own issues: organization of space, signage...

Being part of an ongoing project has thus posed many difficulties for me: link to political decision-makers, interference with other professional logics, link to the temporality of the project... The most striking thing for me was the focus on the visual aspects. The exhibition was extended to include a small leaflet containing the historical timeline that SGP plans to distribute everywhere: it does not give meaning, but offers images.