



# Sub-Urbanism / Super-Urbanism: From Central Park to La Villette

Sébastien Marot

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# Afiles 53

THE JOURNAL OF THE ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

## 07. Dark, intense [ $\text{♩} = 52$ ]

dual change to  
eathy tone

whispered:

don-desu-fre el tiem-po  
al niente

apid gliss.  
r strings  
ne sopra)

actual sound:

on the  
keys

(lasc. vibr.)

ouch strings  
5th partial  
node  
(sempre) - - -

Quasi meccanico [ $\text{♩} = 146$ ]  
Begin circle at cue (v) in Clarinet cadenza  
(sempre sim.)

Alto Flute  
actual  
Sound Bva

(on keys)

N.B. Alto Fl. and Piano in canon (not unison!)  
touch strings  
lightly at center  
PI. (sempre) - - -

pp subito

pp subito

attacca  
subito l'eco

Pianist N.B. - There  
should be absolutely  
break between Eco 7  
Eco 8! The 32nd no  
figure should be rega  
as an upbeat to the  
chord of Eco 8.

Piano  
(touch strings  
at 5th partial  
node)  
PI. (sempre)

Vivace [ $\text{♩} = 208$ ] (quasi tamburi)  
actual sound:  
(on keys)  
(Bva sempre)

Take repeat only if Clarinetist  
has not completed Cadenza III

cresc.  
(sempre)

poco



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#### COVER

George Crumb  
*Eleven Echoes of Autumn*,  
Echoes 6 and 7  
© 1972 by C.F. Peters Corporation  
See pp. 38–47

#### INSIDE FRONT COVER

Hoi Chi Ng  
Access movement diagram,  
analogous Nakameguro  
See pp. 62–5



# Sub-Urbanism / Super-Urbanism

From Central Park to La Villette

*Sébastien Marot*



For almost three decades now, the ways and methods of conventional or compositional urbanism (a postmodern blend of problem-solving and contextualism) have been challenged on their margins by two significant and strictly parallel subversions, which I propose to name sub-urbanism and super-urbanism. To put things in very simple terms, sub-urbanism is an approach to design where the hierarchy established by modern urbanism between programme and site ('from the inside outwards', from programme to site, from the city to the territory) is overturned, such that the site becomes the regulatory idea of the project and almost the *subject* in which the programme has to be deciphered.<sup>1</sup> Super-urbanism is just the opposite: not a simple re-affirmation, but a super-version or 'radicalisation' of the way of modern urbanism, a discipline of design applied to producing and literally inventing a site (or *scape*) through the reading, analysis and manipulation of the programme.

Although opposed in their movements, these two subversions may be seen as complementary in the way they both address and emphasise the depth of *situations* as opposed to the extension of spaces. My hypothesis is that they represent two genuine and parallel approaches to landscape and urban design in the twenty-first century, where the agenda is no longer the expansion of cities (for which the very concept of urbanism was coined 150 years ago) but the deepening of territories.

Super-urbanism, even if it assumes all sorts of other names and labels, is today a relatively well known and quite identifiable trend in contemporary architecture: its main poet and inspirer (or 'ghost-writer', as he once called himself) is Rem Koolhaas, and *Delirious New York* its undisputed manifesto. For some reason, no book has yet been written for sub-urbanism that would have the power to challenge Koolhaas's exhilarating tale. My intention here is to prepare the ground for such a relative manifesto by illustrating, in the field of landscape architecture, the strong contrast between those two design poetics.<sup>2</sup>

To do so I will go through two successive comparisons. In the first I will look at the writings of Robert Smithson and Rem Koolhaas on Central Park, itself one of the greatest built manifestos in the history of landscape design. Then, in the second, I will translate the debate into the field of practical design, contrasting not two texts written in the 1970s but two projects from the 80s: one by OMA, the other by Alexandre Chemetoff, and both developed for Parc de la Villette, in Paris.

\*

It is in itself a pretty interesting coincidence that both Smithson and Koolhaas wrote substantially about Central Park, Smithson in the early 70s, in *Artforum*, and Koolhaas five years later, in *Delirious New York*.<sup>3</sup> Both, by the way, were 34 when their respective texts came

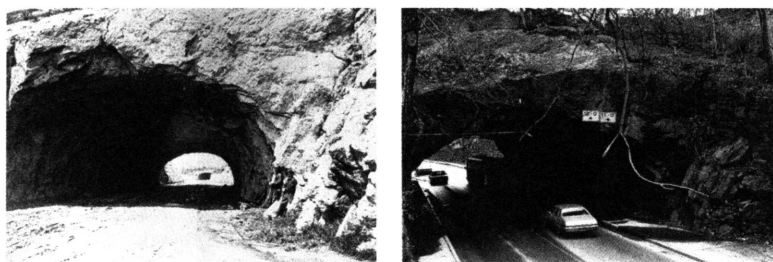
out, but Smithson's piece was to be his last (it was published just weeks before his death), while Koolhaas's book, his first, was to launch the career of a preeminent figure of contemporary architecture. In a way, we could say that both Smithson's sunset and Koolhaas's sunrise are marked by a reverence for Central Park and its amazing artificiality. But the differences between the two pieces are certainly no less striking than their resemblances.

## Central Park Revisited I: Dialectical Landscape

To begin with, Smithson's 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape' is a stand-alone text, and was published as such in *Artforum*. Although it amounts to much more than a simple review, there is something circumstantial about the piece, which Smithson wrote as a response to – or prolongation of – an exhibition ('Frederick Law Olmsted's New York') presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in late autumn 1972. 'This important book was very helpful in assembling this essay', acknowledges Smithson in a footnote, referring to the exhibition catalogue.<sup>4</sup> An impressive portfolio of maps, photographs and documents gathered by William Alex, with an essay by Elizabeth Barlow, the exhibition publication is indeed abundantly paraphrased by Smithson, who reproduces in his piece, together with his own snapshots, several photographs borrowed from the book.

The 11 photographs thus included in the essay show the park before construction, the site under construction and details of the park either 'before 1900' or in 1972 (these last taken by the author on a walk in the park, which he narrates in the final part of the essay). The obvious subject of this collection or confrontation of images (on two occasions Smithson displays pairs of photos showing the same place at a distance of a hundred years) is clearly the transformation, the ongoing process of mutation staged by the park and perceived by Smithson as its identity. Smithson explains his notion of the 'dialectical landscape':

The maps, photographs, and documents in catalogue form and recently on exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art are as much part of Olmsted Art as the art itself. The catalogue ... makes one aware of the ongoing development of Central Park as a dialectical landscape. Here, the documentary power of the photograph discloses a succession of changing landmasses within the park's limits. The notion of the park as a static entity is questioned by the camera's eye. The portfolio brings to mind Dziga Vertov's documentary montages, and suggests that certain still photographs are related to the dialectic of film. For example, a photograph on page 78, 'Tunnel carved out through Vista Rock for Transverse Road N°2 at 79th Street', could be a still from a



From top: The Vista Rock Tunnel in 1862 and 1972; Gaptow Bridge with mud slough, 1972; Central Park, 1972, construction site with graffiti behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art (all 1972 photographs Robert Smithson and Robert Fiore © Estate of Robert Smithson/VAGA, New York/DACS, London 2006)

hypothetical film by Vertov on the building process of Central Park. In the photograph, there is no evidence of the trees that would in the future screen the sunken roadway from the park proper. The photograph has the rawness of an instant out of the continuous growth and construction of the park, and indicates a break in continuity that serves to reinforce a sense of transformation rather than any isolated formation. We notice in this photograph that nature's development is grounded in the dialectical, and not the metaphysical.<sup>5</sup>

The photographs themselves show less the trees, lawns, lakes and sceneries of the park than their substrate or substructure: earth, rocks, tunnels, boulders, mud. Alongside this idea of change and mutability, they also convey a feeling of immersion, thickness, materiality, almost of shortsightedness, as if the near ground, and the changing states and textures of this magma, had magnetised Smithson's eye and camera. In their saturation, they have a quality more tactile than visual, and nearly all are rather unusual and hardly recognisable images of the park. Some, like the one showing a mundane, graffiti-covered retaining wall along a construction site behind the Met, remind one of the photostats included in 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', which the artist had published exactly five years earlier, also in *Artforum*.<sup>6</sup> In 'Tour' Smithson had presented and described the trivial and idle scars, the leftovers and lonely machines, of a suburban river landscape disfigured by highway construction as if they were 'monuments' (or 'ruins in reverse', *fabriques* in a picturesque park). The piece on Central Park somehow repeats the demonstration, but the other way round. A highly urban landscape or nature monument (the park), unduly celebrated as a piece of static formal nature boosted to resist its digestion by the metropolis, is described as a continuous construction site on which the plasticity of nature is endlessly staged and engaged: a 'site of time' rather than a 'garden of history'.

Smithson's paradoxical view of Central Park was that of a suburban site, or to put it in other words, an *inner suburbia*. The emphasis on the ground, earth and mud, but also on the holes, caves and tunnels either built or dug in the mass of the park, translates and amplifies this sub-urban bent, aided by a quote from Olmsted which Smithson significantly features right in the middle of his descriptive tour: 'The reservoirs and the museum are not part of the Park proper: they are deductions from it. The *Subways* [our emphasis] are not deductions because their effect, on the whole, is to enlarge, not lessen, the opportunities of escape from buildings.'<sup>7</sup> Could we dream of a clearer indication that the park is more infrastructure than representation, more a real than a mental travelling machine? It must be said, though, that Smithson's own concept of suburbia ('city below') is not one he actually uses in this essay when contrasting the park with its urban environment. Evoking the aesthetic ambitions of Olmsted, Smithson writes that the situation of Central Park is 'like having an orchid garden in a steel mill, or a factory where palm trees would be lit by the fire of blast furnaces'. And, he adds a little further on, praising the reality of Olmsted's undertaking: 'In comparison to Thoreau's mental contrasts ("Walden Pond became a small ocean"), Olmsted's physical contrasts brought a Jeffersonian rural reality into the metropolis. Olmsted made Ponds, he didn't just conceptualize about them.'

But what truly interested Smithson about Central Park is not so much this Jeffersonian rural aesthetic, the formal outcome aimed at



by the landscape architects, their aesthetic syntax, as it is the very reality and physicality of the undertaking, the fact that it addressed and engaged the infrastructure (the sub-urb) of the city, its *subscape*, its mine, its geology.

Smithson's piece on Central Park can be considered an official act of reconciliation between earth art and landscape architecture, whereby those two undertakings are put into perspective, each casting a new light on the other. On the one hand the essay clearly takes a place alongside Smithson's previous 'site-seeing' writings ('A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic', 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan'), but on the other, its tone is significantly different from almost everything Smithson had previously written, and marked by a strong empathy, indeed a genuine identification, not only with a site or landscape (the park) but with the ambitions of the man and artist whom history has retained as its undertaker. Jumping back over several decades of modernism, and aside in a field considered relatively marginal to art proper, Smithson celebrates in Olmsted an unsuspected ally and source of inspiration for his own artistic enterprise. In so doing, he clearly opens, broadens and empowers the future of earth art by providing it with a past and with a genealogy. Against the disabling idealism and self-satisfied abstraction of modernism, against the moralistic and metaphysical *conscience malheureuse* of modern ecology (which Smithson holds largely responsible for the 'cosmic doom' that it deplures), Central Park stands as proof that nature only exists as a dialectical process, i.e., as far as it is physically and continually undertaken, and not merely contemplated as a thing in itself.

The account of the solitary walk in the park weaves all these themes and views into a single narrative (the sense of 'remoteness' and deepening 'engulfment', of a 'phantom world') and stages the dialectical landscape of Central Park as the theatre of an ongoing mutation of species: the few living creatures mentioned in the text are saunterers haunting the labyrinth and 'urban jungle' of the Ramble, 'hoods, hobos, hustlers, homosexuals' and, on Bank Rock Bridge, 'a sinister looking character, who looked like the type who would rip off cameras'. But while 'in the Old Zoo some caged workmen were installing an artificial habitat', Smithson also meets 'packs of wild dogs' and 'aggressive' squirrels described as 'fat dynamos rather than suburban scrawnies'.

Tracing a sort of diagonal section through the park, from northwest to southeast, Smithson's walk (and essay) ends in the thick mud of the Pond:

In the spillway that pours out of the Wollman Memorial Ice Rink, I noticed a metal grocery cart and a trash basket half-submerged in the water. Further down, the spillway becomes a brook choked with mud and tin cans. The mud then spews under the Gapstow Bridge to become a muddy slough that inundates a good part of The Pond, leaving the rest of The Pond aswirl with oil slicks, sludge, and dixie cups. Maintenance on The Pond seems long overdue. The mud should be dredged out. This maintenance operation could be treated in terms of art, as a 'mud extraction sculpture'. A documentary treatment with the aid of film or photographs would turn the maintenance into a physical dialectic. The mud could be deposited on a site in the city that needs 'fill'. The transportation of mud would be followed from point of

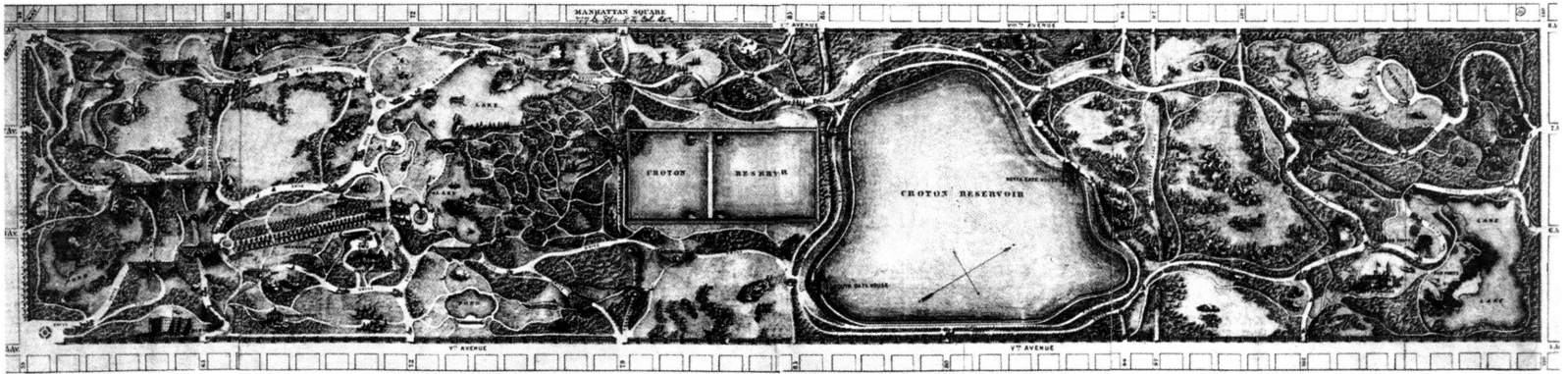
extraction to point of deposition. A consciousness of mud and the realms of sedimentation is necessary in order to understand the landscape as it exists.

This final zooming in on the mud of the Pond, which literally overspreads the surface of the last photograph, is typical of Smithson's poetics and strikingly analogous to the conclusion of the piece on Passaic. There Smithson's suburban stroll sank and faded into an overexposed still showing the 'sand-box monument (also called the desert)', which stood as a kind of concrete metaphor (both an 'involute' and acceleration) for the whole entropic landscape just traversed. The mud in the Pond, glowing under a blank sky almost invisible on the photograph, somehow recapitulates the mutations, earth moves, fluctuations and transformations, all the 'general rubble' displayed in the previous illustrations showing the construction site and the literally sub-urban wasteland (or desert) in which the park was initially planned and 'completed'.<sup>8</sup> Thus featured as both the malleable substance of the landscape and the most available resource of art, the mud in the Pond, thick allegory of Smithson's sub-urbanist notion of the park, absorbs the walk and the text. Therein lies the substantial lesson of Central Park: 'the magnitude of geological change is still with us, just as it was millions of years ago. Olmsted, a great artist who contended with such magnitudes, sets an example which throws a whole new light on the nature of American art.'

## Central Park Revisited II: Synthetic Arcadia

Koolhaas's notion of Central Park, of its place, role and function, as we shall now see, is of a rather different kind. First, his text on the subject does not exactly stand as a piece in itself, or if it does, it is as one individual block (or building) in the textual structure of *Delirious New York*, explicitly devised to simulate the grid of Manhattan. It appears in the first part of the book, where Koolhaas surveys the 'prehistory' of Manhattanism: the most significant steps, decisions and strategic moves which (consciously or not) prepared the ground for the amazing culture of congestion that would eventually shape New York, and which it is the book's ambition to celebrate and promote. In Koolhaas's view, the conception of Central Park, together with the 1811 project of the grid itself ('the most courageous act of prediction in Western Civilization') and the International World Fair of 1853 (where all the main ingredients and tools of Manhattanism, the tower, the sphere, the elevator, were already on display), is one of those fundamental moves (or bets) whereby the subsequent urban history of the city is anticipated and plotted. 'Like the Grid, Central Park is a colossal leap of faith; the contrast it describes – between the built and the unbuilt – hardly exists at the time of its creation.' In other words, the project is conceived and implemented, over its 600 acres of suburban, almost exurban wasteland, so as to emulate a yet phantom city, a grid of tightly packed buildings which, when built, will manifest and reveal, by contrast, the real meaning and signification of the park: 'Central Park is not only the major recreational facility of Manhattan but also a record of its progress: a taxidermist preservation of nature that exhibits forever the drama of culture outdistancing nature.'

Indeed, the concept of Manhattanism coined by Koolhaas stands for 'a collective experiment in which the entire city became a factory



Louis Prang map of Central Park c. 1865,  
as reproduced by Rem Koolhaas in  
*Delirious New York*

of man-made experience, where the real and the natural ceased to exist'. As stated in the introduction of the book, 'its programme – to exist in a world totally fabricated by man, i.e., to live *inside* fantasy – was so ambitious that to be realized, it could never be openly stated'.

Although Koolhaas cites a quote attributed to Olmsted in John Reys's *The Making of Urban America* (one of his main references in the first part of *Delirious New York*) which seems to illustrate an artificialist understanding of the park, it is remarkable that the name of the landscape architect is never mentioned, either in this paragraph or anywhere else in the book. For Koolhaas the author, the keeper of the real – if not avowed – function of the park is less Olmsted than the Commission of Estimate and Assessment which hired him. Whether Olmsted really thought of Central Park as an elaborate alternative to – or escape from – the metropolis does not much matter; the real and expected outcome of his efforts was to achieve an elaborate *faux-valoir*, a colossal foil to the upcoming congestion.

Here is the quote from the anonymous Olmsted, featured by Koolhaas as revealing the true meaning of the park:

The time will come when New York will be built up, when all the grading and filling will be done, and the picturesquely-varied, rocky formation of the island will have been converted into formations of rows and rows of monotonous straight streets, and piles of erect buildings. There will be no suggestion left of its present varied surface, with the exception of a few acres contained in the park. Then, the priceless value of the present picturesque outlines of the ground will be distinctly perceived, and its adaptability for its purpose more fully recognized. It therefore seems desirable to interfere with its easy, undulating outlines, and picturesque, rocky scenery as little as possible, and, on the other hand, to endeavor rapidly, and by every legitimate means, to increase and judiciously develop these particularly individual and characteristic sources of landscape effects....

This last sentence, pivoting around its 'on the other hand', could be considered pretty clear testimony of the 'dialectical' ambition of Central Park's project. And Koolhaas, underlining this rhetorical balance, translates it into a statement that Smithsonian could *almost* have written: 'If Central Park can be read as an operation of preservation, it is, *even more* [our emphasis], a series of manipulations and transformations performed on the nature "saved" by its designers. Its lakes are

artificial, its trees (trans)planted, its accidents engineered, all its incidents supported by an invisible infrastructure that controls their assembly. A catalogue of natural elements is taken from its original context, reconstituted and compressed into a *system of nature* that makes the rectilinearity of the Mall no more formal than the planned informality of the Ramble.' The matter being so perfectly rounded up, Koolhaas can bring his paragraph to a close by compressing, into four words, the real concept of the Park: 'a synthetic Arcadian Carpet'.<sup>9</sup>

The two documents carefully chosen by Koolhaas to illustrate his record of the park act almost as a mental rebus of this formula. The first – a c. 1865 plan of the park as it was roughly completed at that time – is laid out full width over the two pages of the book, exactly as the Manhattan Grid Proposal of 1811 reproduced on the two preceding pages: 'a synthetic Arcadian Carpet grafted onto the Grid plan', the caption reads. As for the second illustration – a vignette of a 'tree moving machine' that permitted the transplanting of mature trees in order to reduce 'the lag between planting and finished appearance' – it stands as obvious testimony (the roots float above the ground) to the artificial and synthetic nature of the whole operation.

What the superimposition of the two plans (of the park and of the grid) somehow suggests is that Central Park can be read as a meta-carpet (or should we say 'infra-carpet?'): a carpet within a carpet. Indeed, the grid itself is a carpet covering the entire topography of the island so as to maximise the potential for building and congestion. But its reality as a carpet is meant to be overcome through the realisation of this potential, i.e., the vertical multiplication of the block surfaces that it defines. The park itself is a large central area not so much subtracted from the grid as 'grafted' onto it, and where the initial 'ground floor', elsewhere covered by the grid, is reinforced, compressed, rearranged, frozen and celebrated as pure potential. This synthetic consubstantiality of the park and the grid is not only suggested by Koolhaas through the superimposition of the two plans in the layout of the book but clearly stated on its very cover jacket, where Central Park features as the central motif in the grid carpet laid under the bed in which two of the greatest symbols of Manhattanism are caught in *flagrant délit* by a third.

Interestingly enough, Koolhaas also uses *carpet* to characterise another 'park', thoroughly different, which *Delirious New York* stages not just as one chapter in the 'prehistory' of Manhattanism, but



literally as its laboratory or even as its 'prototype': Coney Island. Referring to the 'technology of the fantastic' that covered this peninsula with machines of mass entertainment (Luna Park, Steeplechase Park, Dreamland...), Koolhaas explains that its developers 'have in fact alienated a part of the earth's surface further from nature than architecture has ever succeeded in doing before, and turned it into a magic carpet'.

In other words, both Central Park and Coney Island are artificial grounds, programmed surfaces laid against nature and reality. Their difference is that while Central Park imitates, reinforces and compresses in its fabric the very patterns of the ground on which it is laid, Coney Island 'reproduces experience', 'fabricates almost any sensation' and 'sustains any number of ritualistic performances' borrowed from all kinds of remote sites and cultures (Venice, Switzerland...), and particularly from the metropolitan condition. Coney Island, therefore, is something of a flying carpet, a preparatory ground for a congestion of worlds that will find its formula in the skyscraper read as a *site multiplier* (or *world reproducer*).

\*

If Smithson's and Koolhaas's respective understandings of Central Park are not absolutely incompatible, at least in terms of logic, they are nevertheless very far apart in terms of their aesthetic approaches. The difference between their individual formulas – 'dialectical landscape' on the one hand, and 'synthetic Arcadian Carpet' on the other – sums up the matter. But the way each documents the subject – mundane, saturated photographs versus flat, bird's-eye view plan – is no less eloquent.

In order to explore the poetics and potentials of these two approaches, their respective consequences in terms of landscape design and urbanism, we will now transport the discussion to another site and set of circumstances. The scene is Paris in the early 1980s, and the site is La Villette, a 33-hectare terrain located in the northeast part of the city and adjacent to the boulevard périphérique. Following the decision to dismantle a slaughterhouse newly built on the site and remove it to a far suburb, a big architectural competition was launched in 1981 for a new and dense urban *parc des sciences et de l'industrie* incorporating a museum on these themes, a nineteenth-century Grande Halle, itself displaced 10 years earlier from the former central Paris market, and a few other *objets trouvés*. La Villette, one of the first *grands projets* endorsed by the just-elected François Mitterand, was to completely recast the very idea of a metropolitan park. The competition's thick brief listed an impressive amount of programmes and activities, a whole catalogue of more or less contradictory qualities and performances that the project was to accommodate or integrate. Almost 500 architecture and landscape architecture firms entered the competition. Nine were selected for a second round, and in a climate of heated debate Bernard Tschumi's project was chosen over that of OMA.<sup>10</sup>

## La Villette I: Programmatic Tapestry

Even though its subject was a park, OMA's project for La Villette (1982–3) surely represents Koolhaas's clearest, deepest and most consistent architectural move after *Delirious New York*. Indeed, it stands

as an almost literal *translation* of the culture of congestion advocated in the book, a translation from unconscious to conscious production, from America to Europe and from building to landscape. As an architectural translation, this project can be read as a proactive manifesto 'for a second coming of Manhattanism, this time as an explicit doctrine that can transcend the island of its origins to claim its place among contemporary urbanisms'.<sup>11</sup>

With its voluminous brief, already a perfect expression of programmatic congestion, the competition seemed almost ideally tailored for such a demonstration.<sup>12</sup> The first merit of OMA's initial proposal, almost entirely diagrammatic, was to clearly frame the problem: 'the site of la Villette is too small, and ... the Park de la Villette too large, to create a park in the recognizable sense of the word'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, instead of just another synthetic arcadia, the proposed concept was that of a 'social condenser', a term that Koolhaas, unsurprisingly, had already used in *Delirious New York* to describe the Downtown Athletic Club, but also, for instance, to characterise one of the ultimate, unbuilt, projects for Coney Island: 'The Palace of Joy is a pier, modified to become a *condenser of social intercourse* [our emphasis]: two parallel walls contain an endless number of rooms and other private accommodations that define a *linear public realm* [our emphasis]'.<sup>14</sup> But despite the linearity of its diagrammatic bands, which could also be described, in a way, as a series of juxtaposed piers, the project for La Villette is not a pre-Manhattanist leisure or theme park, definitively combining specific and interrelated programmes, solidified in a half-infrastructure/half-architectural frame. Rather, it is a post-Manhattanist diagram: an apparatus for accommodating not only a series of given programmes but the numerous programmatic mutations, the 'constant change and adjustment' which will inevitably take place in a successful metropolitan park of the twenty-first century. Rather than a 'design', it is therefore 'the proposition of a "method" that combines architectural specificity with programmatic indeterminacy ... a tactical proposal to derive maximum benefit from the implantation of a number of activities on the site – incorporating the use of nature – in the most efficient and explosive manner, while at the same time offering a (relatively) stable aesthetic experience'.<sup>15</sup> The proposal is meta-programmatic: it is a statement about the way programmes will appear, disappear, mutate and interrelate, a statement of programmatic chemistry, a theatre for the most productive struggle and evolution of programmatic species.

The essence of the competition becomes ... how to orchestrate on a metropolitan field the most dynamic coexistence of x, y and z activities and to generate through their mutual interference a chain reaction of new, unprecedented events; or, how to design a Social Condenser, based on *horizontal congestion*, that is the size of a park.<sup>16</sup>

As stated in the introductory paragraph of the second-phase entry, the La Villette proposal is that of a (meta) 'programmatic two dimensional tapestry', a scheme whose post-Manhattanist nature had already been clearly suggested in the first phase: the 'primordial gesture' of the project (the layering of parallel programmatic bands across the whole site) is a literal translation of the skyscraper, whereby the architectural section of the latter becomes the plan of the metropolitan field. 'The layering is not unlike the experience of a high-rise building, with its superimposed floors all capable of supporting

different programmatic events, yet all contributing to a summation that is more than the accumulation of parts.'

Metaphors, even when suggested in passing, must be taken very seriously. Didn't Koolhaas evoke, in *Delirious New York*, this 'new discipline of metaphoric planning' that the theoretician of Manhattanism devised in order 'to deal with a metropolitan situation fundamentally beyond the quantifiable'? Metaphor implies analogy, and it is tempting to read the different diagrammatic projections that constitute OMA's scheme for La Villette as transpositions of the different ingredients of the skyscraper: Can't we see the straight boulevard that was supposed to 'run north-south, intersecting all the bands at right angles' as an equivalent of the elevator? And the tectonic confetti of the point grids that littered the site as the plumbing facilities servicing and irrigating the building?

But metaphor also implies transfer, treason and transformation. Writing on his own project three years after having lost the competition, Koolhaas made the nature of this transfer particularly clear:

If the essence of *Delirious New York* was the section of the Downtown Athletic Club – a turbulent stacking of metropolitan life in ever-changing configurations; a machine that offered redemption through a surfeit of hedonism, a conventional, even boring, skyscraper, and a program as daring as ever imagined in this century, La Villette could be still more radical by reducing the three dimensional aspect almost completely and proposing pure program instead, unfettered by any containment.

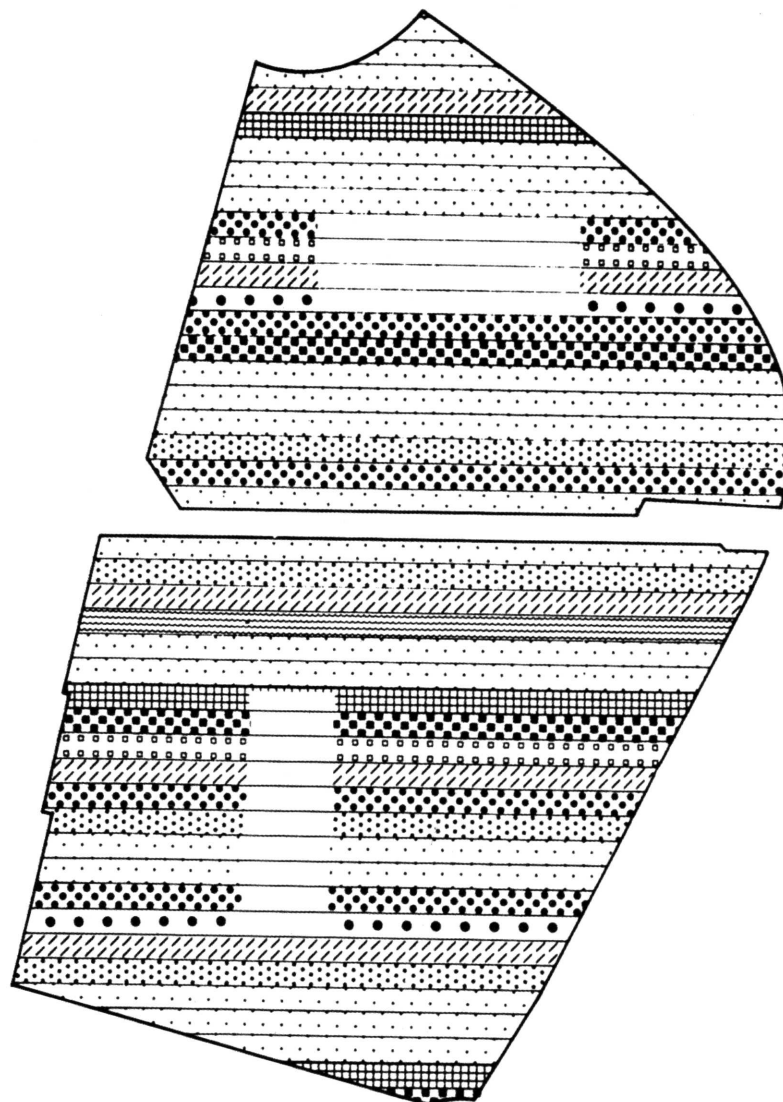
In this analogy, the bands across the site were like the floors of the tower, each program different and autonomous, but modified and 'polluted' through the proximity of all others. Their existence was as unstable as any regime would want to make them. The only 'stability' was offered by the natural elements – the rows of trees and the round forest – whose instability was ensured simply through growth.

What La Villette finally suggested was the pure exploitation of the metropolitan condition: density without architecture, a culture of 'invisible' congestion.<sup>17</sup>

For Koolhaas, the transfer from New York to La Villette, from the skyscraper to the 'vacant lot', amounts to a radicalisation, a way of boiling the culture of congestion down to its essence (or theorem), as if, by laying the skyscraper, by folding its section on the ground, by mapping its architectural superimposition down onto the flat surface of the site, we could not only preserve its density but demultiply its effects.

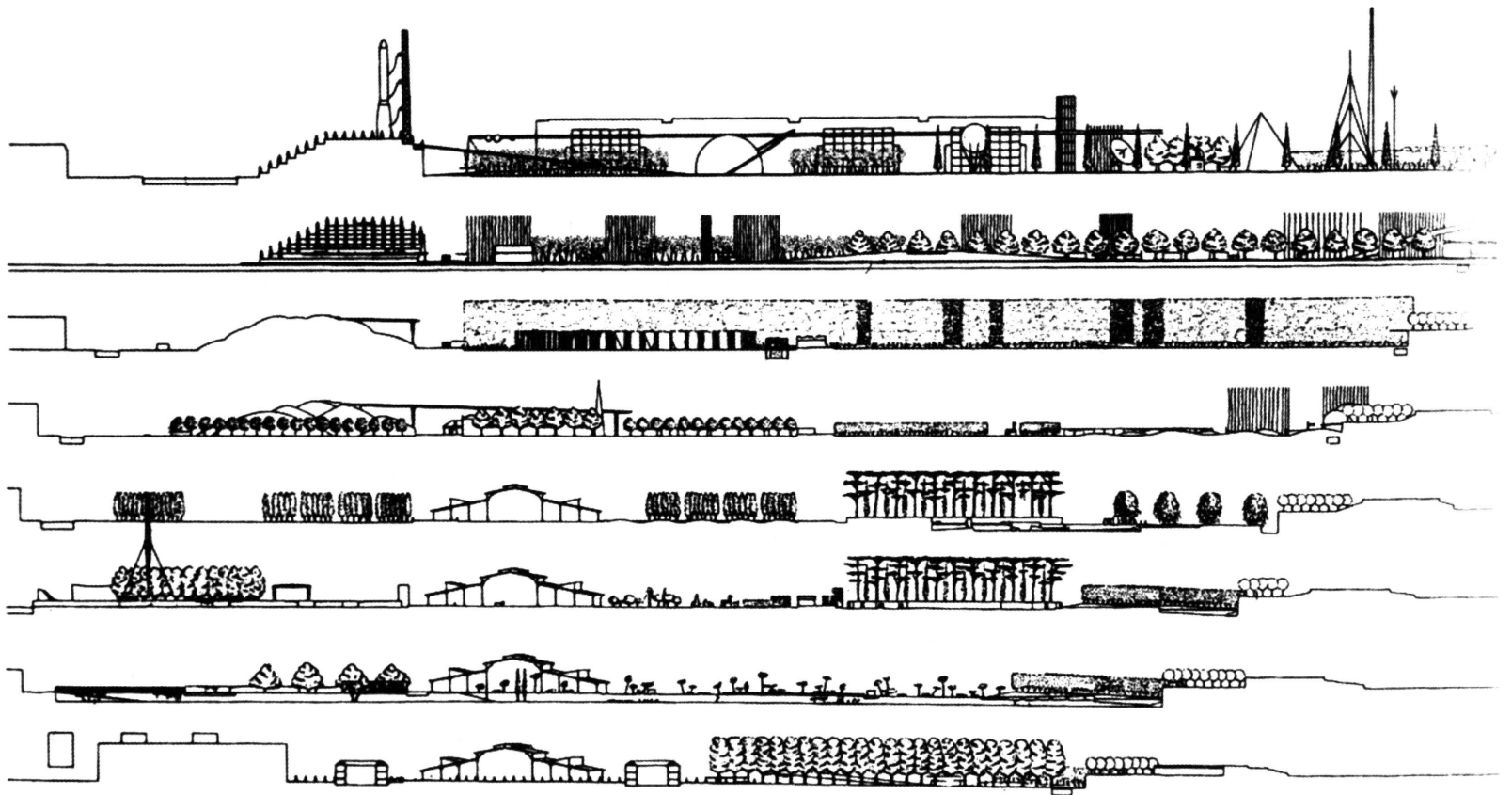
Let's examine this translation carefully:

- 1 Where the skyscraper produces congestion through a systematic reproduction of the world (the *multiplication* of the original site), the symmetric challenge of La Villette is that another but analogous congestion will be produced through a systematic *division* of the flat surface of this same initial site.
- 2 Where the skyscraper accommodates a whole array of completely different and ever-changing programmes through architectural severing of spatial connection between those programmes (*vertical schism*) and between inside and outside (*lobotomy*) – thereby ensuring an architectural specificity and a stable aesthetic experience – the project for La Villette seeks to obtain the same performances, but *in the open*, through maximising contact, permeability

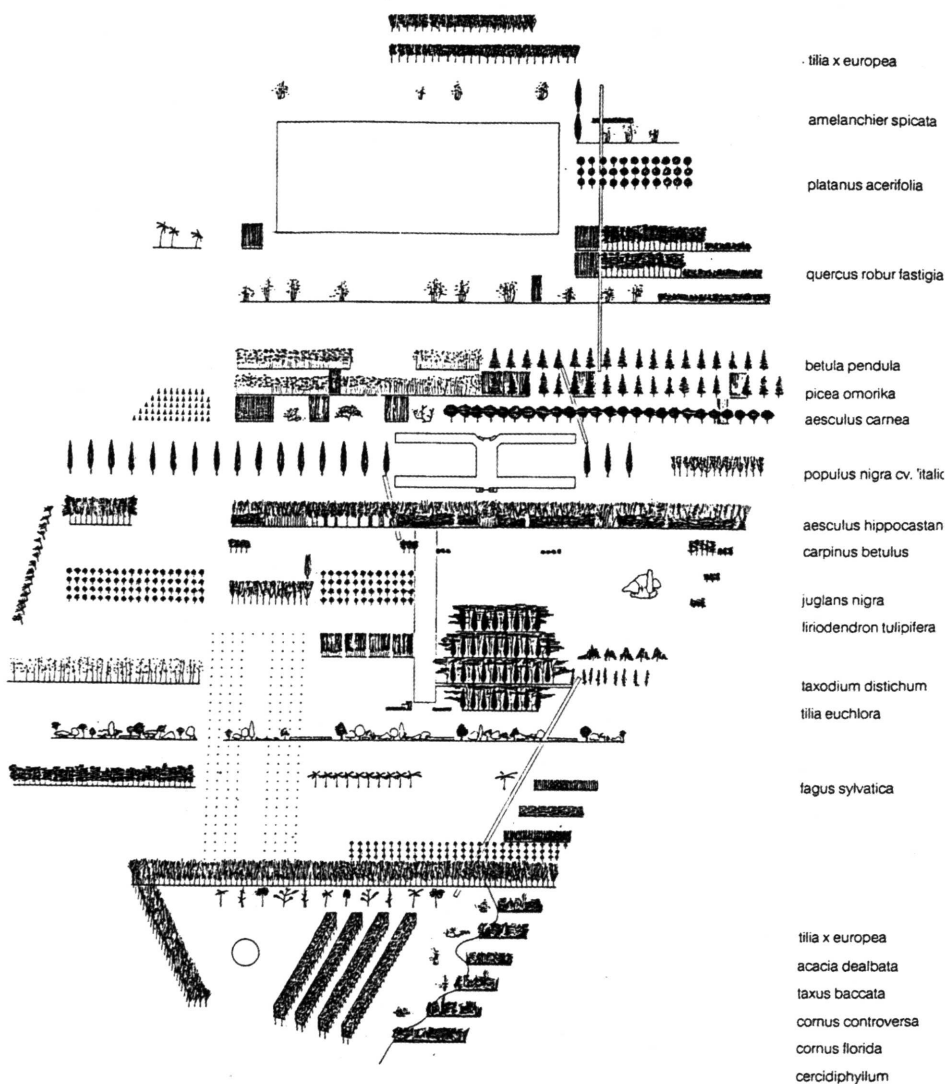


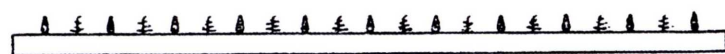
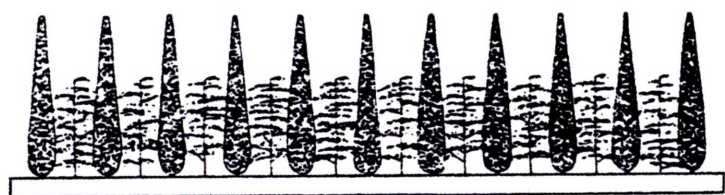
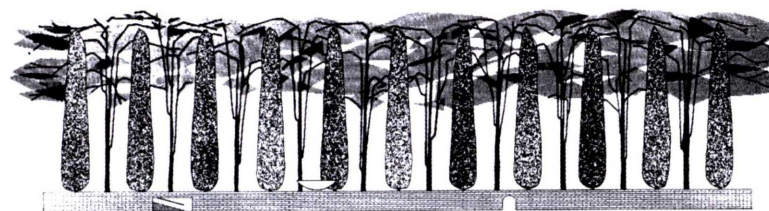
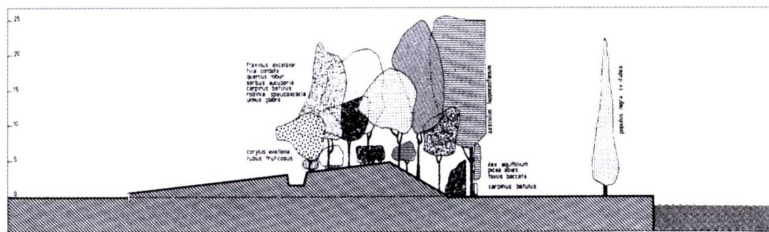
OMA's programmatic diagram for Parc de la Villette, with east-west parallel bands projected onto the site, 1982-3



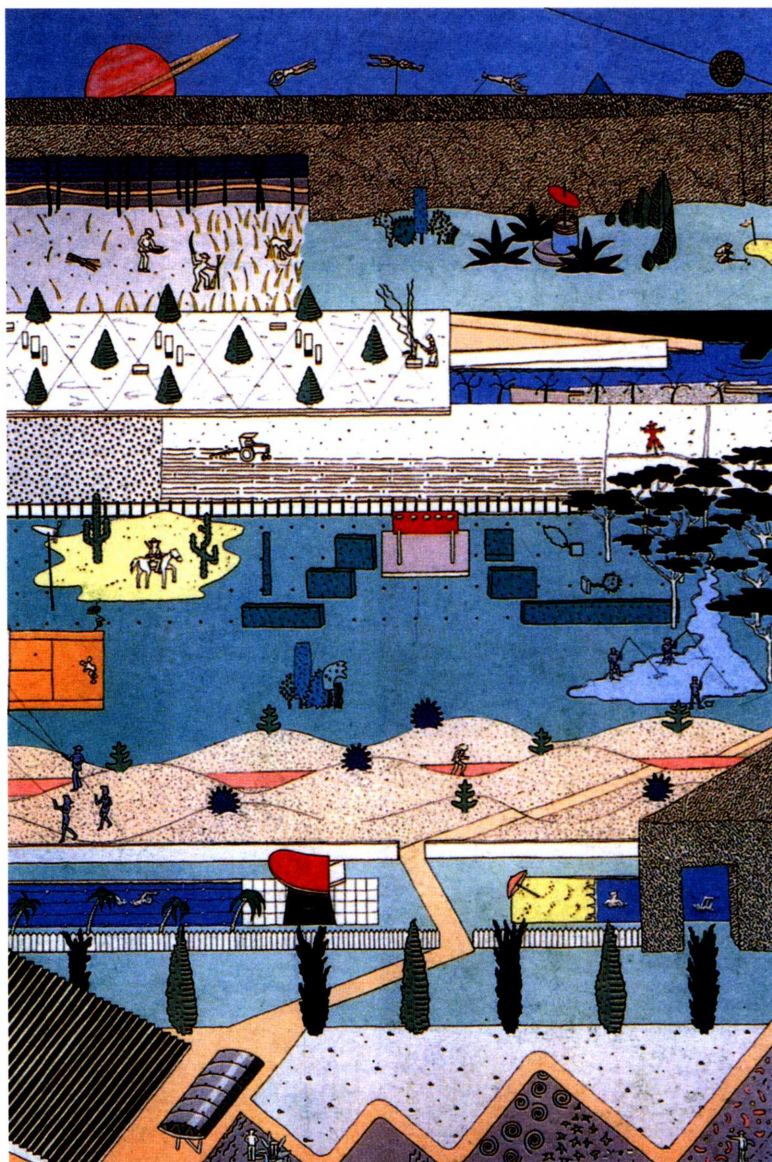


From top: Screens of trees defining the zones for Parc de la Villette; diagram of landscaping elements. Both from OMA's scheme for Parc de la Villette, 1982-3.





From top: Growth of the Linear Forest; drawing of Parc de la Villette, by Alex Wall. Both from OMA's scheme for Parc de la Villette, 1982–3.





and pollution between those distinct programmes.

- 3 Where the skyscraper provides an architectural solution to the culture of congestion (a set of heavy opaque material frames, planes and screens ensures maximum schizophrenia, proximity without community), the metropolitan field of La Villette presents itself as a dematerialised platform on which nature takes over the roles and functions of architecture.

In this translation from architecture to nature, the latter's status is interestingly ambiguous: 'Nature – whether the thematic/discovery gardens, or "real" nature – will also be treated as program. Blocks or screens of trees and the various gardens will act like different planes of a stage set: they will convey the illusion of different landscapes, of depth, without offering, in passing, the substance.' Those two sentences were clearly the key paragraph of OMA's initial proposal, the fundamental thesis which the entire text of the second phase would basically strive to develop and, literally, demonstrate.

In the first phase, we have stressed our interest in the program and the primacy of its social dimension. We have imagined, as a hypothesis, the coexistence on the site of La Villette of diverse human activities in a way that creates a park. We now want to describe in detail the landscape generated by this method of organization. Having explained 'how it works', we now want to show 'how it looks'.<sup>18</sup>

Landscape is the subject of OMA's second phase, entirely focused on clarifying the different statuses, roles and forms given to nature in the project, those statuses hovering dialectically between programme and meta-programme, content and infrastructure or quasi-architecture. Indeed, 'the park is a *mise-en-scène* of three categories of nature'.

The first category is dispatched in two sentences: it comprises all the regions (bands) of the park 'in which the program itself *is* nature, i.e., the expanses where the vegetal dominates (thematic gardens, didactic gardens, play-prairies, etc.)'. Those programmed natural surfaces being part of the mutating content the park is meant to accommodate, they do not need to be particularly described as such. The only generic thing the text has to say about their syntax is that 'often these have been regrouped to invest large aggregate areas with the *transposed image* of open fields'. The precision is interesting: it means that if nature is programmed, programmes, in turn, can be assimilated to natural or agricultural surfaces that are seeded, watered and harvested, and on which different kinds of culture may rotate. If programmes interpret nature, nature interprets programmes. The metaphor, or transposition, is reversible.

The second category of nature staged in the park is dealt with in much deeper detail: it comprises not the thick surfaces of the programmed gardens or prairies, but the planted walls that delimit the programmatic bands or fields: 'screens of trees parallel to the bands, which define the zones but at the same time create a series of successive landscapes'. We recognise here the 'different planes of a stage set' mentioned in the first phase, which are clearly the transposition, in the park, of the skyscraper's floors. As the different worlds contained in the high-rise building are all neatly boxed, 'without seepage' between two concrete horizontal slabs, the programmatic strips of the park are similarly seized or framed between those vertical alignments of trees. But the transposition is clearly a transformation.

Unlike the slabs of the skyscraper, which are all alike and neutral (a mere repetition of the same, except, perhaps, for a progressive diminution in size), as well as strictly impermeable (only the elevator perforates the vertical schism), the arboreal screens of the park are all genetically and formally distinct ('differing in height, species, transparency, density and homogeneity'), and essentially porous.

Two modes of perception are generated by this arrangement: together, seen in the layered north-south perspective, these screens interweave and suggest the presence of a mass (about 6,000 trees) covering the site. In the inverse east-west views, the screens frame open zones, like 'fields'.

Hence the assimilation of those screens to theatre curtains producing a *paysage à coulisses* which the actor/spectators can freely traverse, either by filtering through those screens or by travelling in their gaps: 'Occasional breaches open up vistas. This play of enclaves and connections produces the effect of contracting and expanding the apparent field of vision.' Moreover:

The opposition between these diverse perceptions is further exploited by the major circulation axes, the Promenade and the Boulevard, the secretive vs. the blatant. While the end of the Promenade is continually deflected, the course of the Boulevard unfolds without surprises – its progressive stages are always explicit. The Promenade is surprise, the Boulevard certainty.

In other words, this whole arrangement of parallel screens whose succession may be experienced in completely different ways, from the most straightforward to the most oblique, is a powerful accelerator of depth which functions on several levels: the physical, the perceptual, the social and the programmatic. While they channel the flow of programmes as a set of successive dams (like the canal itself, thus digested as one band of the programmatic carpet), those screens build up a dense stratification or sandwich of landscapes (anti-axial), which exacerbates the desire for penetration. Thus being divided in a sequence of linear elevations or backdrops sliding behind one another as the glass paintings of a cartoon, the park acts as a metropolitan transformer or incubator, a matrix on which to grow and cross-fertilise an ever-changing series of public programmes. Subdivision supersedes multiplication.

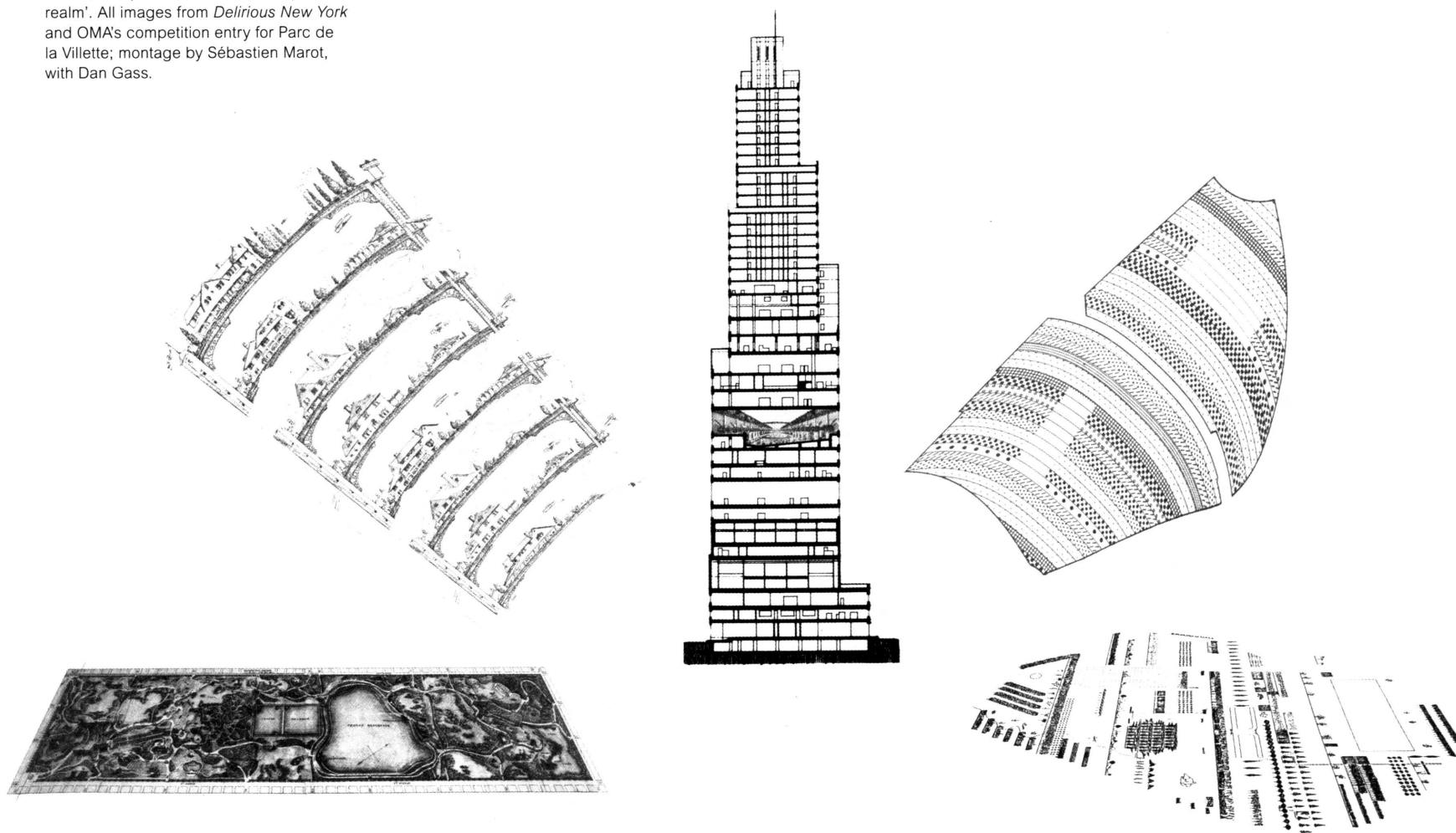
Beyond the programmed surfaces of the gardens and the vertical arboreal screens, the third category of nature displayed in the park comprises the two major instances where it is treated as mass or volume, and both as programme and building. The quasi-architectural nature of those two *forests* (a linear and a circular) is explicit: they are 'vegetal elements conceived at the scale of the major architectural elements on the site (the Grande Halle and the Museum), to which they form the counterpoint'. But within this role assigned to them, they stand, in relation to one another, as opposite poles (like the tower and the sphere in *Delirious New York*): 'The Linear Forest, south of the Canal de L'Ourcq, and the Circular Forest, at the center of the park, have a dialectic correspondence: from the natural to the artificial, solid to hollow, evergreen to deciduous. These oppositions provide the entire spectrum of possible variations on the theme "image of the forest".'

In a way, the Linear Forest can be considered an arboreal screen, but blown up, three-dimensionally, to become a band. Although it constitutes a linear mass ('like a slice through a wild forest', assuming

‘a maximum impermeability’), it also acts as a screen, forming ‘a backdrop against which all vegetal and architectural components in the southern part of the park stand out’. Because of that role of foil to the other programmatic elements, because it advertises an ‘emblem of park’, it is tempting to compare the status of this Linear Forest in the programmatic tapestry of La Villette to that of Central Park in the grid of Manhattan: the illustration of a contrast. Indeed, the fact that the figure-ground relationship is here reversed (the mass of the Linear Forest standing as an extrusion in a sequence of programmatic bands treated as open fields) is just another confirmation of the translation operated from New York to La Villette. The Linear Forest, treated as a slice of thick wilderness, ‘a mixed assortment of trees, shrubs and evergreen climbers ... planted in a free, quasi-natural pattern’, is the zero-degree of programme: a band packed with the automatic programme of nature (boosted to an ideal climax), a background against which all the other bands stand out as invisible forests of social instruments, dense with possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

From the Synthetic Carpet to the Programmatic Tapestry: Plan of Central Park, the ‘1909 theorem’ of the skyscraper as site multiplier, section of the Downtown Athletic Club, and OMA’s diagram of the programmatic bands and plantation plan at La Villette. On the floor of the swimming pool in the DAC section: The 1919 Palace of Joy project for Coney Island, the quasi-band of ‘a linear public realm’. All images from *Delirious New York* and OMA’s competition entry for Parc de la Villette; montage by Sébastien Marot, with Dan Gass.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Circular Forest is literally a landscape *architecture*, or even a landscape building: ‘While the Linear Forest is a catalogue of natural features, the Circular Forest represents *the forest as programme*, compressing in an artificial way a maximum number of sensations and associations linked with the *idea* of forest. It is a Forest Machine, or at least a Forest Building. Where the Linear Forest acts like a dense mass, the circular forest is an *interior*.’ The opposition between the two forests is, as we see, absolute. While the one is a quasi-band, the other is a quasi-building which clearly acts as a ‘counterpoint’ to the major architectural elements of the site: the Grande Halle, which was to be literally traversed by the bands, and the museum, which could also have been organised as a series of successive band-like layers or coulisses. Raised on a 3-metre base, the Circular Forest proclaims its artificiality. Conceived at the beginning ‘as a spectacular raised garden *à la française*, with pruned trees – modern referents of classical parterres’, its adult stage is planned to ‘produce the effect of majestic rows of columns covered by a dark





green roof of vegetation, which during the day calibrates the rays of light penetrating from above, and at night is artificially illuminated from the ground'. With the ambulatory that circumscribes it like a fortification, the marble floor that traverses its base, the smoke wisps which rise 'from a number of campfires hollowed out randomly on this perfect surface', the Circular Forest definitely evokes a Baudelairean *temple of living pillars*. But its round shape, which projects out of the ground as the only element which cannot be assimilated by the stripes, also reminds one of Manhattan's recurrent obsession with the sphere, the irreconcilable opposite of the tower.<sup>20</sup> In flatland, a sphere *translates* as a circle.

That said, the Circular Forest's polar opposition to the Linear Forest is only relative. As in Central Park, where 'the rectilinearity of the Mall [is] no more formal than the planned informality of the Ramble', the artificiality of La Villette's Forest Machine does not really exceed, in fact, that of the slice of wilderness. As an *extrusion* from the metropolitan striped field, as a *compression* of the idea of forest and as a landscape *volume* or building, the Circular Forest is also, in its own way, a foil to the programmatic tapestry.

As we have seen, the translation from Manhattan to La Villette, which amounts to a radicalisation (through dematerialisation) of the culture of congestion – operated as a folding back of the skyscraper's section onto the flat ground of the city – implies a kind of inversion, or role permutation, between architecture and nature. 'If the framework of our project is assembled as a programmatic two-dimensional tapestry', explained OMA in the introduction to its second-phase entry, 'then its third (spatial) dimension is given by the component "nature"'. While the programmatic congestion was enacted in Manhattan through the architectural multiplication of the site's carpet (the infinite replication of a two-dimensional surface in the third one), it is obtained in La Villette through the vertical subdivision and marking (by 'natural' elements) of a two-dimensional field which is thus given the quality of a series of programmatic volumes, a forest of potentialities. La Villette is thus the result of a complete revolution, whereby the synthetic Arcadian Carpet of Central Park, screened (having been filtered) through the skyscraper's section, is laid back upside down, as a programmatic tapestry.

Now what exactly distinguishes the one from the other, the carpet from the tapestry? Aren't both laid upon the site itself? The fabric of Central Park, though, was described as a dialectic operation: 'a series of manipulations and transformations performed on the nature "saved" by its designers'. The original context largely informed or guided the design, providing the 'catalogue of natural elements' which the designers of the park 'reconstituted and compressed into a system of nature'. In La Villette, the original site is as dumb as a concrete slab. Only the infrastructure of the canal, by giving direction to the bands, translates into the syntax of the park: a piece of Netherlands laid out from above to redeem an essentially sterile platform. Like the golf course which occupied the 12th floor of the Downtown Athletic Club, La Villette's landscape is in fact a 'super-nature'. The landscaping strategy exposed by OMA is particularly explicit in this respect: 'At La Villette the soil is often sterile, and our vegetal strategy implies fertility. We take advantage of the need to transport new soil to the site, turning this importation into an additional theme: the differentiation of the nature of soil strata required

(healthy soil, peat, etc.) by juxtaposing natural and artificial vegetal sets and by clearly showing the diverse strata in elevation to accentuate further the third dimension of the landscape.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, the site is almost entirely *produced*, instead of deduced from its original situation. Its only archaeological depth will be given by the sectional stratification of 'the infrastructural interventions deemed necessary' for its transformation.

Interestingly enough, this relative abstraction from the context and the site's specificity was initially presented as a tactical and almost economical move in the circumstances of the competition: 'To insert the park in its urban environment requires extremely concrete data, and so we have abstained from elaborating on the interface of park and city. Instead we concentrate here on the most crucial element to the park's success: its central region or "torso" (which is also developed in the model).' In other words, the graft of the tapestry in its urban context certainly requires a precise negotiation with a series of local contingencies, and this process of adjustment would necessarily have a feedback on the design and programming of the park thus grafted. But all the same: the diagrammatic identification of the concept comes first. The conclusion of OMA's final proposal sharply reaffirmed this hierarchy:

Finally, we insist that at no time have we presumed to have produced a *designed* landscape. We have confined ourselves to devising a framework capable of absorbing an endless series of further meanings, extensions or intentions, without entailing compromises, redundancies or contradictions. Our strategy is to confer on the simple the dimension of adventure. The utilitarian coinciding with the poetic: the realization cannot but stick to the conceptual.

Before stepping off this magic carpet, let's briefly consider the striking images through which the proposal was conceived and advertised: the simple conceptual black-and-white diagrams of the first phase, the big plan sharply delineated in the pitch-black womb of the metropolis (a post-Manhattanist equivalent of Hugh Ferriss's renderings), the amazing cartoon-like drawing by Alex Wall, in which an ascending perspective through the programmatic bands is produced by sheer superimposition and, finally, the bird's-eye views on the surreal plasticity of the huge model, so large that the guys in the office had to be cantilevered on gliding platforms and floated like divers above its coloured surface. The third dimension of the tapestry emerges almost only through the mental layering of these planar diagrams or infra-thin surfaces. No photographs of the site itself, montaged or otherwise, are included.

In *S,M,L,XL* though, the whole section devoted to La Villette (where all those documents and texts, slightly edited, are reproduced) has been stacked between two full-page black-and-white photographs, the first showing a bird's-eye view of the site before the competition (with the slaughterhouses still in place), and the second, borrowed from Bernard Tschumi, a down-to-earth perspective in which an immaculate *folie* stands in the general rubble and mud of the construction site. In the overall structure of the book, in which each project, or even each double page, is the equivalent of a floor in a skyscraper that one could flip through, the floating carpet of Parc de la Villette is thus a slice of pure potential, of pure poetics, compressed between two slabs of reality, one past and one in the making.

## La Villette II: Underground Observatory

In 1997, the landscape architect Alexandre Chemetoff published *Le Jardin des Bambous au Parc de la Villette*. The book related, 10 years after completion, the construction of this famous thematic garden, realised within the overall plan developed by Bernard Tschumi. Chemetoff, like Koolhaas, had participated in the two rounds of the competition for the park, but had developed an entirely different approach to the problem. 'We had endeavoured to design a park proceeding from its frontiers with the city: subway, boulevard périphérique, exterior boulevards, avenue Jean-Jaurès; and proposed to model sections articulating the levels of the surrounding site with that of the park in such a way as to create different microclimates able to accommodate the multiple activities of a swarming programme.'<sup>22</sup> The whole design proceeded from the site rather than the programme itself: sub-urbanism, not super-urbanism. Indeed, the possibility of devising an exceptional landscape connection between city and suburb, and of overcoming the monumental barrier of the périphérique (both in terms of infrastructure and sound nuisance), was clearly one of the project's major ambitions. While the sectional works and the gradings would have performed a kind of fusion of the park with its surroundings, a series of sunken and elevated gardens would have secured its identity and intimacy as a 'theatre of climates', staging and transposing a whole culture of agricultural and horticultural technology.<sup>23</sup>

But let's not dwell on the proposal. If it was one of the most daring sub-urbanist schemes in the competition, it probably lacked the conceptual perfection and poetical consistency of OMA's super-urbanist manifesto.<sup>24</sup> Instead, let's consider the book, which stands as the retroactive account of a transformation. After the competition for the park, some of the young architects and landscape architects whose projects had been particularly praised were offered to conceive and realise a thematic garden along Tschumi's Cinematic Path – a kind of meandering and mellow version of Koolhaas's Promenade, supposed to function as a montage track. The 'sequence' thus allotted to Chemetoff's intervention, appropriately devoted to the theme of energy, was located right in the centre of the park, just south of the Canal. There, far from the actual limits of the park, Chemetoff engaged its substrate, the ground, so as to stage and activate the themes he had investigated in the two phases of the competition. The book is the careful and precise description of this landscape undertaking; not a publication of the finished Jardin des Bambous as it is now known, but a minute and didactic account of the process of its construction, the physical transformation of a given site: 'My interest goes to projects where the notion of building is not merely confined in the control and achievement of an image, but in the relation, the balance which is obtained between the means of the transformation, the existing site, the motivation for change and the result. What I find inspiring and innovating in garden art is precisely this tension between the project and the situation as given.'

The book, landscape format, consists in a collection of sharply contrasted black-and-white photographs – some subsequently colourised or painted – of invariable size, one per page. These images, all instructively captioned, are organised in seven sequences or chapters, each introduced and concluded with short texts, and sometimes illus-

trated with freehand sketches or diagrams. When the construction began, Chemetoff had asked photographer/artist Elizabeth Lennard to document its progress. The book is a selection and ordering operated (in past-anterior mode) on this bank of images, which had been left untouched for 10 years.

The overall optical effect produced by the book is an oblique plunge into a vast rut of earth and mud. A rather immediate confrontation with the substrate and stuff of a site literally excavated: a material struggle with matter. The photographs themselves have a physical quality, as if their crisp grain had captured the granulation of this pervasive matter dug, pushed back, retained, graded, strengthened and inseminated with bamboos. A strong impression of both mass and action, inertia and energy, emanates from those pictures as they document the progressive clearing and conformation of an arena of earth and work.

There is the strange kinship between these images and those published by Smithson in his essay on Central Park. Indeed, the first picture of the book, a colourised view of 'the field before the battle', showing a messy surface of ploughed and muddy earth, could almost be pasted next to Smithson's final zooming in on the silted Pond ('Gaptow Bridge with mud slough') or placed side by side with several other photographic documents used by him, particularly the 1858 view of the 'area of park before construction': same saturation with matter, same feeling of ground plasticity, mass and latent energy. The colours added by Lennard, particularly the uniform pale orange applied onto the earthy foreground, give the picture a kind of atmospheric sepia quality that accelerates its time depth, thus reinforcing the parallel with both the Olmsted and Smithson images. In a way, this colourised photograph of the murky ground of what would become the Bamboo Garden, just about to be excavated, operates a dialectical fusion between Olmsted's and Smithson's views of Central Park as a past-future/future-past undertaking. Recall Smithson's words on the Pond: 'Maintenance seems long overdue. The mud should be dredged out. This maintenance operation could be treated in terms of art, as a "mud extraction sculpture". A documentary treatment with the aid of film or photographs would turn the maintenance into a physical dialectic.' If Chemetoff's book does not recount the making of such an earth sculpture or filling but rather the obtainment of a garden out of the ground thus excavated, the kinship of the two undertakings is hard to miss.<sup>25</sup>

'Usually, you wait till the end of construction so that the photographs of the completed project may show an achieved realisation as close as possible to the initial idea of the intended result. But then you are often disappointed, and you have to wait a long time before the images of what is actually out there may coincide with your own expectations', Chemetoff writes in *Jardin des Bambous*. 'Here, on the contrary, we wanted to capture the passing moments of the different steps in the construction of the garden.... Those images reveal landscapes that are transformed through the combined efforts of earth workers, masons and gardeners, and we actually see how a flat and muddy terrain of 3,000 square metres acquires a topographic depth and is progressively organised and planted.'

But these images are not only the narrative of a construction. Chemetoff continues:

They reveal that the garden registers the different steps of its own



From top: First excavations of the Bamboo Garden; progressive construction of the garden's 'Parisian wall' (photos Elizabeth Lennard)



fabrication. The construction scenes build up a story, which time and weather take over and carry on the walls, partitions, columns, the ground surface of the alleys and the foliage of the bamboos.... By recording the transition between the site as given and the future state, they reveal what constitutes the very idea and matter of the project. When surveying the work on a construction site, surprises sometimes occur. One day a garden appears, and you start walking in it. The behaviour of the journeymen, workers and gardeners all changes: they now work in a garden, while the day before they were still on a construction site. The frontier is thin between site and garden. Our ambition in this book was to share those moving moments when you see things taking shape and acquiring some kind of independence ... a garden in the forming, the different steps of a translation from one stage to the next, the many faces of a same place. An elaborate metamorphosis where you discover the successive provisional gardens that led to the present one, as it appears today.

The sequences of images that constitute the seven chapters of the book are each devoted to a particular element or dimension of the garden. Arranged in chronological order, they register the progressive construction and development of these different elements or themes, as if the Bamboo Garden were just the result of their sum and combination: a particular atmosphere produced at the crossroads of those different sequences of decisions, actions and on-site experiments.<sup>26</sup>

These sequences constitute seven successive ways of revisiting the whole, seven different perspectives and mises-en-scène of this pond of atmosphere, seven narratives which, combined, start to release the concept of the garden. Indeed the garden is less shaped and informed by a preexisting scheme than undertaken as the laboratory of its own concept. Let's illustrate it by two examples.

The ambition to excavate the site, to address it as a volume rather than as a surface or tapestry, to transform 3,000 square metres into 10,000 cubic metres, stood as some sort of initial intention, but a rather 'dumb' one: more an intuitive reflex or, say, reaction, than a real 'concept'. The garden to come would be a volume: 'not a surface to which only trees, built works and earth moves would add a relief, not that play of points, lines and surfaces on the flat field, the blank canvas of a vacant lot, but a three-dimensional space carved in the thick substrate of an old territory'. But the situation did not lend itself easily to that intention. The budget had been based on the assumption that the project would basically make do with the original profile of the site, and thus took no account of the potential difficulties involved in hollowing a space in the muddy terrain adjacent to a canal. Those very circumstances and their associated constraints were to deeply inform the poetic of the garden.

The long 'Parisian wall' that defines its northern edge is a record of this process of digging and retaining earth in a soil soaked with different groundwater levels while avoiding the roots of an adjacent alley of majestic trees. The complex architecture, with its regular columns of concrete, its round holes and horizontal gutter channels, is both an expression of the way it was actually built (from top to bottom, the rows of poured concrete panels successively coffered from below) and of the functions it is meant to perform: retaining earth and heating the garden through light reflection, but also filtering, collecting and displaying the water sheets fed by the leaks



From top: One of the ovoid pipes of a former sewage system revealed during the Bamboo Garden's excavation; the ovoid pipes' translation in the syntax of the garden, with hints of the 4.2 m 'virtual' band which will pass through the garden visible in their exposed structure (photos Elizabeth Lennard)



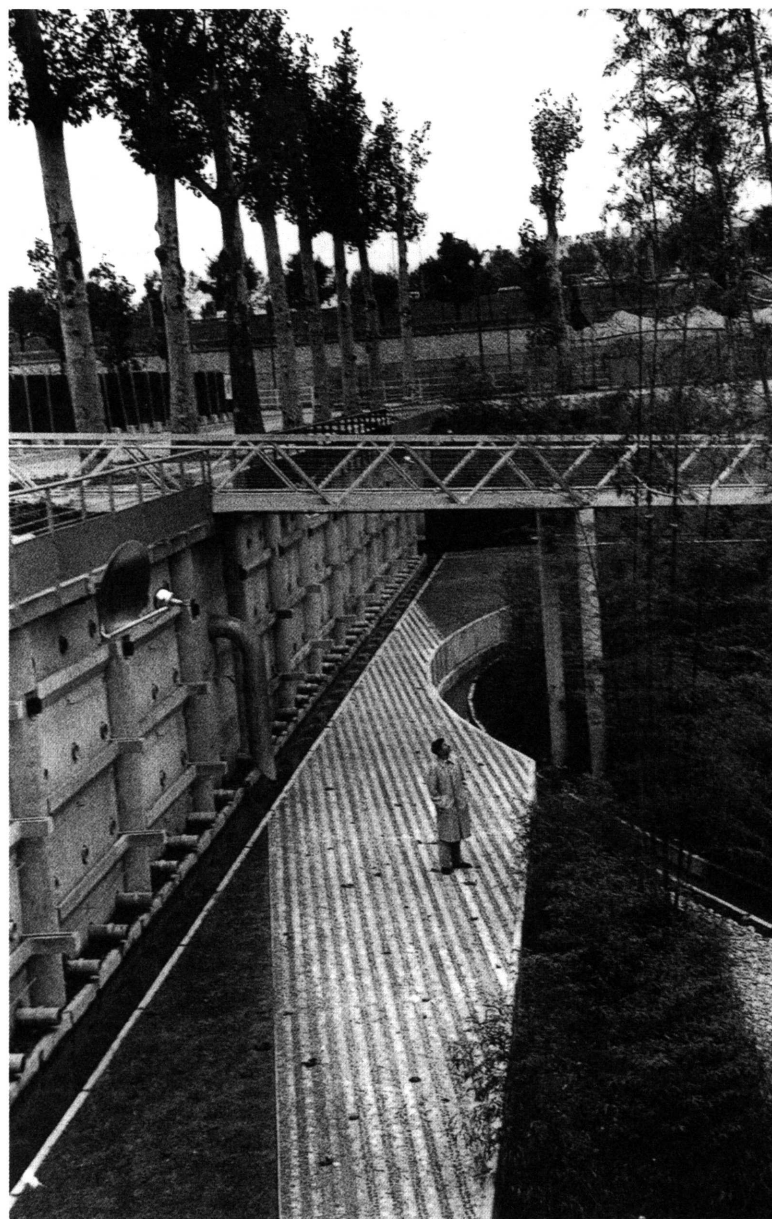
from the canal. The Parisian wall is thus a translation in itself, a thick and porous wall, a kind of vertical garden whose poetic depth lies in the consistency between building process and environmental performances: an elaborate filter or transformer from earth to space, and from nature to garden.

Also, urban grounds may reveal all kinds of surprises beyond earth and water, and it is up to the archaeologist to ignore them or, on the contrary, make sense of them. One of the most powerful features of the garden, the large and impressive pipes that pierce its sunken space across the bamboos, is the extrapolation of such a finding. The excavation had disclosed a series of ovoid concrete pipes that were identified as part of a disused sewer system for the slaughterhouses, in fact a rather experimental one, conceived here in the 1850s, long before it was finally adopted by the city of Paris.

'In this archaeological exploration of the modern world', Chemetoff writes, 'we decided to stage the traces of the diggings, as if this hidden stratification revealed an underground topography and produced an unexpected relief. The depth of the excavated terrain is not just physical, but primarily historical, even if this is only recent history.'

The trace, though, is merely the location and direction of those ovoid sewers, which were in fact replaced, in the garden, with modern pipe channels (a metal lattice structure protected with concrete layers), such as those used in contemporary civil engineering. Thus, the three impressive pipes that run across the garden and which have largely given it its label, are contemporary translations of their phantom ancestors. But as such, they lend to the footbridges of the cinematic path, which were meant to cross the garden at random, their direction, their foundations and a sectional presence (or consistency) in the garden itself. In this way, another poetic characteristic of the sunken garden, where the walkways are almost systematically aligned with the waterways, is extrapolated to those upper balconies, and through them, to the cinematic path itself. Of course, it could be objected that those designed 'technical' elements are not real but fake, that they do not perform as sewer 'anymore', and that their real function is to bring to the garden an image of urban underground, a paradoxical aesthetic of civil engineering. In this, though, they do translate, aesthetically, a fact, a condition and an approach to landscape design which has been consistently developed throughout the construction of a garden largely written in the material language of civil engineering.

For both economical and 'ecological' reasons, the garden's very architectural elements come more or less directly from the catalogue of civil engineering standards: L-shaped concrete modules for retaining earth (along the southern edge of the garden), basic elements used in the construction of underground channels or urban heating systems (for the open-air water channels), etc. What the garden thus operates, by bringing together these mundane infrastructural elements with rough river pebbles in the midst of a bamboo plantation, is a co-acclimatisation of nature and engineering that both evidences and stimulates their dialectical relationship in the 'suburban condition'. Instead of aiming directly at a programmatic congestion, the garden produces an atmosphere, a microclimate and an enjoyable milieu out of this unexpected encounter, which makes the most common most uncommon. Instead of bringing onto the site a new programmatic machinery, the project basically discloses the actual



The virtual band across the just-completed Bamboo Garden (photo Elizabeth Lennard)

machinery of the sub-urban, thus rendering it both accessible and inviting. In so doing, the undertaking of the Bamboo Garden revives in a striking way the classical concept of the garden as an on-site representation and laboratory of the world we live in, so powerfully transformed (particularly in our urban fringes, as the canal and the périphérique show in La Villette) by modern infrastructural networks. As the visitor to the park steps down into the atmospheric sub-urbia of the Bamboo Garden, or stares at the photographs recording the process of its construction, he is most likely to perceive the 'dialectical landscape' explored by Smithson in the 70s as both a fact and a project.

## No Comment

In 'A Discreet Presence', the sixth chapter in his book, Chemetoff recounts the way the artist Daniel Buren contributed to the Bamboo Garden:

He proposed to 'lay' along a direction that corresponded to none of the geometric lines of the park nor of the garden a virtual band, 4.2 metres in width, whose passage through the garden would lightly disturb its order. The shift thus introduced in the arrangement and appearance of all things within this particular band would accentuate their singularities. I liked the idea because it introduced an opportunity to emphasise the differences, sometimes very subtle, which exist between materials, textures or colours. This 'foreign' motive would also make more legible those of the project itself. When we received the commission for the garden, we were asked to distinguish and compose different sequences within our terrain. I wondered what this meant and what those differences would actually be. My proposition was that the project for the garden should be as unitary as possible, so that the visitor's eye might be induced to perceive the tiniest differences that contrast and relate things to one another. Daniel Buren's intervention lent a new dimension to this idea by injecting an abstract and precise order: an arithmetic and geometry of differences. Our collaboration became a captivating game.

Within this virtual band shot through space, it is as if some sort of chemical reaction affected all the textures and elements of the garden. In the bamboo plantation, it translates as a band of black bamboos, whose dark poles stand in sharp contrast to the clearer species planted, on both sides, in a ground covered with white pebbles. Across the sewer channels, the corresponding segment of the pipe has been stripped of its outer concrete protection, thus exhibiting the grid metal structure. And further on, across the sand-covered walkway, the band registers as a beam of alternating black-and-white stripes, built with river pebbles, which also find a translation on the Parisian wall through a geometric dotting of its concrete surface.

Even though they clearly constitute and embody the well-identified signature of the artist (but translated into the realm of landscape architecture), I can't help considering these bands and stripes as the delicate imprint of OMA's unbuilt project on the site, as if the sub-urbanist garden, through a kind of atmospheric photosynthesis, had managed to capture the shadow of its super-urbanist brother. As a result, the only 'image' of Koolhaas's programmatic car-

pet to be found in La Villette lies there, underground, approximately where, in his scheme, the raised base of the Circular Forest would have broken the flat surface of his striped tapestry.

## Notes

1. For a more thorough presentation of this idea, see Sébastien Marot, *Sub-Urbanism and the Art of Memory* (London, 2003). The present essay was written in the winter of 2003/2004 as a contribution, eventually replaced by another, to a book on landscape architecture and contemporary urbanisation edited by James Corner. I dedicate it to Jim and to our past and future conversations, and to my former colleagues in the department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania.
2. By 'relative manifesto' I mean a manifesto that would be both a replica of and a replica to *Delirious New York*: a tale that would reverse the latter's demonstration and, in so doing, call for a site-related, and even a site-generated, design poetics. By its very nature, sub-urbanism (as in fact super-urbanism) can only be advocated *relatively* (and not absolutely).
3. Robert Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape', *Artforum*, February 1973, reprinted in Jack Flam (ed), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 157-71.; Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (London, 1978).
4. The other books which Smithson directly quotes on Olmsted's work, and which he seems to have explicitly studied for the purpose of his essay, are Albert Fein (ed), *Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape into Cityscape* (Ithaca, 1967), and the 'excellent' Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape* (New York, 1967).
5. Flam, op. cit. (see note 3), pp. 160-1.
6. *Artforum*, December 1967. Originally published as 'The Monuments of Passaic'.
7. Frederick Law Olmsted, 'Spoils of the Park' (1882), reprinted in Fein, op. cit. (see note 4).
8. Despite the reserves Smithson expressed about Duchamp, at about the period he was writing his piece on the Park, it is tempting to compare this last photograph, where the mud glows over the surface of the Pond, to that by Man Ray showing the 'breeding' of dust on the Large Glass.
9. Interestingly, Central Park is for Koolhaas not only a 'synthetic' nature but also a stage or facility where people may actually, through sport, artificially improve their own nature or bodies, as shown in this particularly tasty piece of an interview with Jennifer Sigler: 'JEN: Why do you swim? REM: It's about the relationship between your ideas and your body. It both evacuates and charges. You can influence your mind by being serious about your body - by knowing it very well. JEN: You also run. When did you start running? REM: '74. In America. I was the typical European. That means either you're perfect, or not. But you're not perfectible. In Europe, the authentic is foREMost and anything related to sports is suspect. So I was thirty, and in America, and I discovered for the first time the virtues and pleasures of synthetic materials instead of cotton. Sports, for me, are about artificiality. JEN: Were you trying to get in shape or did you just enjoy it? REM: I enjoyed the intellectual side of it. I enjoyed it as an alternative to letting nature take its course. JEN: That must have been the start of the running craze. Jim Fixx. REM: Jim Fixx - who died of a heart attack. And of course it was difficult because it was outside and I had never been outside. JEN: In New York, you ran in Central Park? REM: Yes. Around the reservoir, and Jackie Kennedy was there, and sometimes you were trailing Jackie and you would pass her and smell her ... JEN: Jackie was also running? REM: Yes. There are so many people I know as a kind of after-image of their smell. Seriously. An afterburn. You might not know who they are, but you know them incredibly well because you know how they move, and how they smell.' (Interview with Jennifer Sigler, 2000, [http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/rem\\_koolhaas.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/rem_koolhaas.shtml))
10. Introducing in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* a thorough presentation of the winning scheme as well as the runner-up, Patrice Goulet stated that the

La Villette competition had been as important and exceptional as that for Beaubourg 10 years earlier, except that, at the last moment, in choosing Tschumi's over Koolhaas's, the jury had failed to pick the right scheme. Unfortunately, Paris has since thoroughly confirmed, often at OMA's expense, its inability to follow through on the most poetically and theoretically challenging schemes produced for her. The Jussieu Library, and more recently OMA's project for Les Halles – both projects which re-explored and extrapolated, sectionally, the layered plot of La Villette – are thus some of the lampposts lighting up the city's ascension as the European capital of architectural abortion.

11. Koolhaas, op. cit., *Delirious New York*, p. 10.
12. Koolhaas has written: 'At La Villette, the second time around, the ingredients seemed there for a complete investigation of the potentialities of a metropolitan architecture in Europe: a *terrain vague* between the historical city – raped by the greedy needs of the twentieth century and the plankton of the *banlieue*. On this terrain, two pieces of history sat rusting like marooned spaceships: a sort of nothingness with still infinite potential, that in this case could be preserved since its programme could not be expressed in form, a programme that insisted on its own instability.' In Jacques Lucan, *OMA – Rem Koolhaas: Architecture 1970–1990* (New York, 1991), pp. 160–1.
13. Ibid., p. 86.
14. Koolhaas, op. cit., *Delirious New York*, p. 78.
15. Lucan, op. cit., p. 86.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 161.
18. It may be interesting to note that Koolhaas, who was probably looking for a productive contradiction, asked the landscape architects Michel and Claire Corajoud, whose project had been acknowledged but not retained for the second round, to collaborate with him on his second entry. Their contribution is, I think, quite readable in the emphasis put on the role and functions of the natural elements in the definition of the proposal. But it is also probable that this further translation of the idea was misunderstood as a stepping back from the initial concept, and lost Koolhaas the commission to the more obvious and self-advertised radicalism of his challenger.
19. It is interesting to remark that Koolhaas rediscovers and radicalises in his way a rather traditional concept in which the natural landscape stands as the background for 'history'.
20. The ultimate example of this obsession is, of course, Koolhaas's own fictional project 'The City of the Captive Globe' (1972), featured in the Appendix of *Delirious New York*.
21. Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam, 1995), p. 931. In Lucan, op. cit., p. 91, the text is even clearer: 'At La Villette the soil is often sterile, and our vegetal strategy asks for fertility. We shall take advantage of the necessity to transport new soil to the site, and turn this into a supplementary theme for our project. To this end we aim at two objectives: to differentiate the nature of the varied soil strata required (healthy soil, peat, etc.) by juxtaposing vegetal sets that would not be possible in a homogeneously fertile ground, and by raising or hollowing out the different layers of soil, to show clearly these diverse strata in elevation and so further accentuate the third dimension of the landscape.'
22. Alexandre Chemetoff, *Le Jardin des Bambous au Parc de la Villette* (Paris, 1997), p. 6. All translations by Sébastien Marot.
23. 'We had chosen to inscribe ourselves in the tradition of the productive gardens of the Paris region, thus designing the contours and earth forms of an urban park based on experiments generally related to the world of agriculture but which seemed to gain, here, a particular relevance. We had especially investigated the experiments made in environmental and climate control. What really enthralled us was to devise a park where there would be less noise, that would be warmer, where the air would be dryer or, on the contrary, more humid, where the temperature would be higher than in the surrounding neighbourhoods ... a park that would have staged simple and often cheap ways of modifying the conditions of a milieu in order to create a climate favourable to the development of

desirable events or activities.' Ibid. Referring to the achievements of Buffon at the Jardin des Plantes (which mixed the acclimatisation of new plants with technical innovation in buildings), Paxton at Chatsworth, Schumacher for the Stadtpark in Hamburg and La Quintinie, the Royal gardener and builder of the sunken kitchen garden in Versailles, the project aimed to create an urban park that would have functioned as both a theatre of climates and a 'theatre of the transforming city'. Besides its plant populations, the park would thus have accommodated a collection or nursery of experimental architectures.

24. I do not intend this remark as a criticism. Sub-urbanist projects, because they proceed from the site's particulars, can hardly achieve this conceptual perfection, at least 'on paper'. Their ambition to find the concept in the site itself does not allow them the same intellectual consistency or sophistication which their super-urbanist cousins often consider as the goal, and which sometimes ends up being the prison.
25. In fact, the idea to involve Elizabeth Lennard in documenting the garden's construction came from an earlier painted photograph of hers showing a construction site on a New York street: 'It showed workers with bright-coloured working outfits, barriers, signage, little trucks with flashing lights, and a thick cloud of steam coming from a hole in the pavement. This image came back to me when we started construction.' Chemetoff, op. cit., p. 5.
26. The titles of those chapters, as the general tone of the description – are matter-of-fact: 1) 'The "Parisian wall" and the earth retaining modules'; 2) 'The egg-shaped sewer system'; 3) 'Water channels and walkways'; 4) 'The sound cylinder'; 5) 'Stairs'; 6) 'A discreet presence' [the only, but meaningful, exception]; and 7) 'The bamboo grove'. And this is it: almost the Week of Creation, except that all those different processes of construction, roughly organised in chronological succession, largely overlapped in a kind of complex ballet.