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Nathalie Roseau

From articulating the issues to formulating the project

The Words of the City-Territory

Abstract

During the 1990s, a certain number of notions were formulated in an attempt to conceptualize the territorial forms of the city emerging in Europe at the time, that is to say, the continuous constellation of urban layers that was spreading over hundreds of kilometers and reinterrogating the notion of the city and dwelling. The *Città diffusa*, the *city-territory*, the *emerging city*, the *generic city*, *Metapolis*, the *hyperville*, the *Zwischenstadt*: while the Pompidou Center put on a major exhibition about *La ville, art et architecture*, (The City, Art and Architecture), the journal *Le Visiteur* contributed to this debate by publishing texts on the contemporary city by Melvin Webber, André Corboz, Bernardo Secchi and Rem Koolhaas. Starting from the principle that the context was not the expansion of cities but a “deepening” of territories, there was a profusion of new terms for the urban phenomenon that sought to capture what the old words could no longer grasp. The birth and dissemination of the vocabulary of the urban must be related to the appearance in the 2000s of a certain number of approaches to large-scale projects that were diverse in nature, and that in turn reinterrogated the contours of the city-territory in which they were inscribed, while operationalizing reflection. From observation to action: after the high points where interests converged; divergences came to the fore and shattered the basis of representation, revealing ambiguities, eliciting controversies, while more discreet trajectories were taking shape. What do these discrepancies and these frictions that are shaping the urban tell us? Formulating the project: along what paths can collective action direct itself in order to define an ecology of the city-territory?

Don't be too hasty in trying to find a definition of the town; it's far too big, and there's every chance of getting it wrong. First, make an inventory of what you can see.
Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 1974.¹

In the “landscape of competing words”² which describes the city, we struggle to name the phenomena that roil it, to identify their causalities, and to lay out the paths to understanding them. As historian Rosalind Williams says, Through the appearance and disappearance of words, the emergence of new words, we see the emergence of attempts and movements that are seeking to characterize events, transformations.³ During the 1990s, a certain number of notions appeared as part of the effort to characterize the forms of urbanization that were occurring in Europe, that is to say, the continuous constellation of urban layers spreading over hundreds of miles which re-interrogated the notion of the city and dwelling, at the time when a “rurban” or “suburban” way of living was spreading. *La Città diffusa*, the *city-territory*, the *emergent city*, the *generic city*, *Metapolis*, the *hypercity*, the *Zwischenstadt*: after the major exhibition on *La Ville, art et architecture* (The City, art and architecture) at the Centre Pompidou in 1994, and the publication in 1996 of the French translation of *L'urbain sans lieu ni bornes*, prefaced by Françoise Choay, the journal *Le Visiteur* was born in the same year with a founding text by Sébastien Marot, affirming “the alternative of landscape.”⁴ The journal contributed to the debate with texts by Gaston Bardet, Marcel Poëte, and Pierre Lavedan, and then Melvin Webber, André Corboz, Bernardo Secchi and Rem Koolhaas.

Working from the principle that the context is no longer the expansion of cities but more a “deepening” of territories, new words for urban realities proliferated in the attempt to capture what the old words could not describe. Verbal images or neologisms: as André Corboz puts it, “contrary to certain common expressions, such as the *mitage* (eating-away) of the territory, these new words are neutral. They make it possible to respect a positivist rule which remains totally valid: to observe is not to judge in advance.”⁵ Nourished by these descriptive analyses, this newly invented language aspired to reflect, by means of inventory, the nature of the territorial processes, urban forms and social conditions shaping the spaces in European regions that, according to the hypotheses of researchers, have become *cities*: Veneto (Bernardo Secchi), Wallonia (Marcel Smets), the Ruhr (Thomas Sieverts), the whole of Switzerland (André Corboz), the Paris region (François Ascher). The article that follows proposes to go back over these notions in order to grasp what they tell us about the questioning of the notions of the project at a time when urban regions are engaging with prospective large-scale developments.

¹ Paris, Médiations/Denoël, 1974, p.89. Trans, “The Town,” *Species of Spaces*, Penguin Classics, 2008, p.60

² The expression is by Olivier Ratouis in “[La fabrique du Grand Paris au prisme des catégories urbaines, Des années 1930 aux années 1960](#),” *Inventer le Grand Paris, 1940's-1960's, Regards croisés sur les métropoles*, 2021.

³ Rosalind Williams, “Infrastructure as Lived Experience,” in Pierre Bélanger, *Landscape as infrastructure*, Routledge, 2017, pp.6-7.

⁴ *Le Visiteur*, no. 1, pp.54-80.

⁵ André Corboz, “La description : entre lecture et écriture”(1995) in André Corboz, *Le territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais* (introduction by Sébastien Marot), Besançon: Éditions de l'Imprimeur, 2001, p.255.

Scrutineers of the urban: analysis as project

Over the Atlantic, Melvin Webber had already established the terms of the aporia eating at the disciplines of urbanism. Observing the deployment of the spatial forms of North American conurbations, which were more dispersed, more varied and more space-consuming, Webber identified “disparate spatial dispersion as a built-in feature of the future – the complement of the increasing diversity that is coming to mark the processes of the nation’s economy, its politics and its social life. In addition, it seems to be the counterpart of a chain of technological developments that permit separation of closely related people.”⁶ In making this observation, Webber adds that everything is a matter of the gaze and that the “gaps and distensions” between the territory and its representations are the cause of uncertainties and dissonances between models and situations, which can lead to erroneous or negative interpretations.

In 1970, professors at the IUAV in Venice,⁷ among them Francesco Indovina and Bernardo Secchi, created the faculty of urban and territorial planning, separately from the architecture faculty, with the principal aim of training new urbanists for local government contexts. Francesco Indovina coined the expression *La Città diffusa* which Bernardo Secchi would help disseminate in Europe.⁸ Published in 1990, their researches bore on the fast and intensive changes that had been affecting the Veneto for decades. While Indovina explored the socioeconomic dimension, Secchi concentrated on the transformation of the physical forms of the territory. [Figure 1]

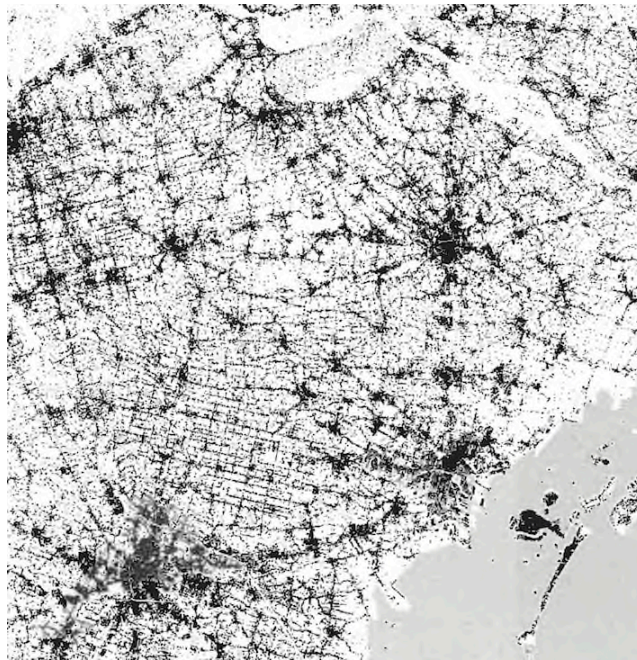


Figure 1 : Studio Secchi-Vigano, Veneto, The diffuse city

⁶ Melvin M. Webber, “L’ordre dans la diversité ou la communauté sans proximité,” followed by “La suburbanisation phénomène mondial,” *Le Visiteur*, no. 3, 1997, pp.123-165. Source. Melvin M. Webber, « Order in diversity community without propriquity » in Lowdon Wingo, Jr, *Cities and space : The future use of urban land*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1963, pp.23-56.

⁷ Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia.

⁸ Francesco Indovina (ed.), *La Città diffusa*, Venice: Quaderno Iuav/DAEST, 1990. Chiara Barattucci, “La naissance et la portée de l’expression Città diffusa. Entretien avec l’urbaniste italien Francesco Indovina,” *Les Cahiers de la recherche architecturale, urbaine et paysagère*, 2020.

In the process of its dissemination and appropriation, the expression *La Città diffusa* has taken on a variety of meanings that go beyond the original one assigned by its creators. It has been accused of championing dispersion, when used or diverted into a metaphorical sense, but the expression was intended above all to capture the reality of a phenomenon, that of an extended and diffuse “urbanized countryside” transformed into residential zones, subject to the decline of agriculture and the correlative development of other productive activities, with private and public services becoming more scant, and new ways of life expressing not just an aspiration but a way of escaping the crushing weight of urban costs. By scrupulously and indissociably observing spatial forms and social conditions, these researchers inverted the gaze by showing a territory that functioned as a city albeit without the form of a city: dense, intense, continuous.

As historians of Flemish territories have shown,⁹ the processes observed by the Italians occurred—well before this formulation—in other European regions, as described by Marcel Smets and Thomas Sieverts in Flanders and the Ruhr, respectively, under the terms *Banlieue radieuse* (radiant suburb, 1986) and *Zwischenstadt* (between-town, 1990).¹⁰ Sieverts describes the latter as an international phenomenon. *Zwischen Ort und Welt, Raum und Zeit, Stadt und Land*: more than the title term itself, it is the intertitles of Sieverts’ book that more fully convey what he observed: the emergence of an unplanned urban form that, on the macroscopic level, displays common features across Europe, while on a smaller scale specificities become evident, in the same way as they do with historic cities.

These “fractal structures, similar and characteristic” are described as the product of individual decisions, guided by closeness to nature, the proximity of services meeting everyday needs, and connection to the regional communications network. Sieverts, who developed his analysis at the Internationale Bauausstellung in Emscher Park, encourages us to look attentively and with interest at these cities of a new kind which are still young and transitory and consist in the interpenetration of built space and open landscape, a coexistence of economies acting locally and operating at a global level. Like Secchi, Sieverts proposes a shifting of the gaze, erasing the opposition between city and countryside, highlighting the free surfaces inserted between built surfaces, identifying architectures and infrastructures as “bits of nature.” [Figure 2]

⁹ Bénédicte Grosjean, “Généalogie urbaine d’un village du Brabant : pour une histoire diffuse de la grande ville,” *Le Visiteur*, no. 10, 2005, pp. 68-97.

¹⁰ Marcel Smets, “La Belgique ou la banlieue radieuse,” in *Paysage d’architectures* (exhib. cat.), Brussels, Fondation de l’Architecture, 1986, pp.33-35. Thomas Sieverts, *Zwischenstadt. Zwischen Ort und Welt, Raum und Zeit, Stadt und Land*, Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1997, translated into English in 2003 (*Cities without cities, An interpretation of the Zwischenstadt*, Routledge).



Figure 2: Top: Thomas Sieverts and Partners, IBA Project West Park Bochum. Below: Ruhrregion, 1970

“The fourth phase will be that of the *city-territory*, that of the urbanism of the *territory urbanized throughout*.”¹¹ The city studied by historian André Corboz is also without clear frontiers, nebulous and territorial. Drawing on personal research ranging from the study of an 18th-century Sardinian city to European representations of the American city, he spent several decades studying the dynamics that led to the generalized urbanization appearing to affect Switzerland. Sébastien Marot has brought together a set of his texts in a book titled “Le territoire comme palimpseste” (The Territory as Palimpsest). To this powerful metaphor Corboz adds that of the *hyperville*, “by analogy with hypertext. [...] A text” he says, “it is a linear, hierarchized structure that

¹¹ André Corboz, “L’urbanisme du XXème siècle, Esquisse d’un profil” (1992) in *Le territoire comme palimpseste, op.cit.*, p.204.

can be perceived by the senses as a whole [...]. Hypertext, in contrast, cannot be grasped by the senses, does not have a unidirectional or imperative structure; it can be explored *ad libitum* and consulted selectively; you enter it anywhere.”¹² In likening the territory to a matrix of places, strata and devices, Corboz calls on us to “emerge from the impasse by carrying out a Copernican revolution.”¹³ He affirms the complete crisis of planning, even though this is absolutely necessary in order to deal with the critical issues facing the city.

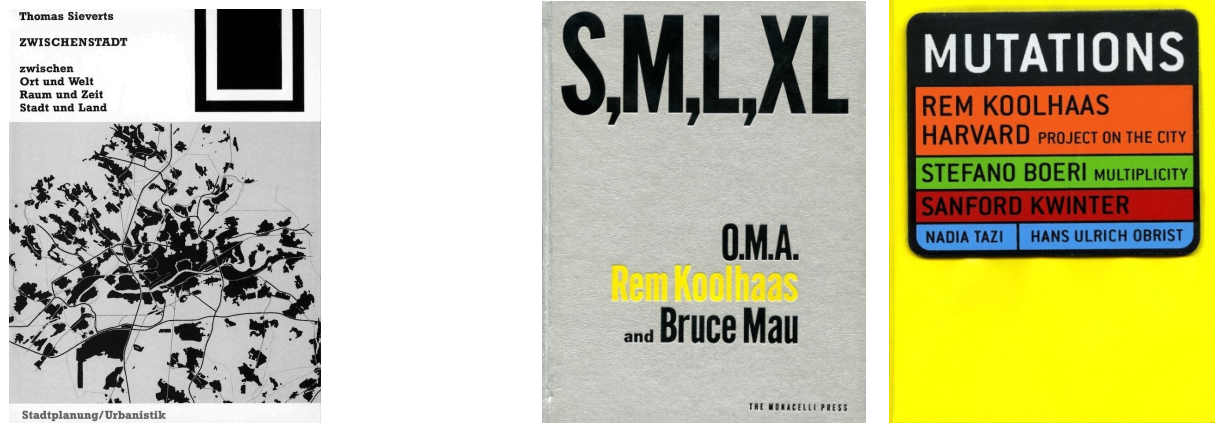


Figure 3: Thomas Sieverts, *Zwischenstadt*, 1997; OMA, *S,M,L,XL*, 1995, et *Mutations*, 2000.

In between times, Rem Koolhaas published his text on the “generic city” in 1994, which became the pendant to another text, published in 1995, “Bigness or the Problem of Large.” The two were then published in the volumes *SMLXL* and *Mutations*, which analyze the accelerated urban growth then being undergone in places like Lagos and the Pearl River Delta in China.¹⁴ At the same time OMA was working on metropolitan urban perspectives in Lille, in that liberal moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s, articulating a new way of seeing the relation between the city and the territory, putting the periphery at the center, making architecture with exceptional programs, reversing the logics of plan and operation, context and project.¹⁵ [Figure 3]

While the region became the center of attention for urbanists examining the *emerging city* (1997), newly developing processes of metropolization prompted other readings, notably Saskia Sassen’s *Global City* and François Ascher’s *Metapolis*, shaped by dynamics of stocks and flux, concentration and deterritorialization. If, on the scale of countries and continents, the city was a gravitational pole that attracted populations and activities, on the scale of everyday life it was a centrifuge, in which gentrification was widening the gap in property values. For Ascher, the metapolis is at once compact and distended, agglomerated and discontinuous, constantly extending further and further, absorbing increasingly remote zones, combining eclectic forms

¹² André Corboz, “La description”(1995), *op. cit.*, p.255 ; “Le territoire comme palimpseste” published in *Diogenes*, no. 121, January–March 1983, pp.14-35 ; “La Suisse comme hyperville”(1997), *Le Visiteur*, no. 6, 2001, pp.112-129.

¹³ André Corboz, “L’urbanisme du XXème siècle,” *op.cit.*, p.204.

¹⁴ OMA, Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, The Monacelli Press, 1995 ; Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Stanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Mutations*, Actar, 2000.

¹⁵ In one of his most recent, paradoxically titled publications, *Studies on (what was called at the time) the city*, Rem Koolhaas goes back over current research on the “smart city” and the “countryside” whose correlations he elucidates, despite the fact that they may seem antithetical: “Consequently, the country seems to be becoming less and less natural; new technologies are increasingly prominent there and are surreptitiously taking root there – better, it seems, than in urban environments.” Manuel Orazi, preface to Koolhaas, *Studies*, *op. cit.*, p.26.

and landscapes, all of which are inseparable parts of a whole. For the geographer Eric Charmes, the great question is not so much extension as distancing, a question that is as social as it is environmental, and has to do with the fragmentation of forms in rurbanization.¹⁶

Bigness and its protagonists: project as reform

What is shown by the work discussed above is that there is no *theoria* without *empiria*. As explorers and researchers, the urbanists of the city-territory speak to us from places that they observe and analyze over an extended time scale, raising the question of the large-scale project in relation to the contexts they study.

The emergence and dissemination of the vocabulary of the urban must be seen in connection with the appearance at the turn of the 2000s of a certain number of methods of large-scale projection that in turn reinterrogated the meanings of the city-territory in which they were inscribed, while making operationalizing reflection. Consultation processes made it possible to discuss these notions within the context of the ambitious reflection around Grand Paris, Grand Brussels, and Greater Moscow.

As simple as it may sound, the word “grand” (or greater), when joined to that of “city,” opens up to complexity and heterogeneity, and to a whole field of interpretations and appropriations. Indeed, it reflects an ambiguity with regard to the nature of big city (*grande ville*), and its enlargement; in other words, between the actual city and the city as project. The arrival of a “Grand Paris” as a “grand project,” be it political (institutions), urban (production), or infrastructural (networks), is just as ambiguous in its definition. Must planning the greater city necessarily translate into major operations, big plans, big reforms, the cognitive shift of the “Big” from apprehension to projection, opposing a monolithic approach to a heterogeneous subject?

Following on from the culture ministry’s program of research into “large-scale architecture,” the international consultation “for the future of metropolitan Paris,” initiated in 2007 by the Nicolas Sarkozy administration, marks a key moment in this process. Indeed, whereas such deliberations were previously reserved for more restricted circles such as planning authorities, the context in which these debates took place was open to teams of architects and urbanists (some of them highly international), as well as to researchers from diverse backgrounds. Above all, this consultation brought ecological issues to the fore by insisting on respect for the Kyoto Protocol as the priority and raising three critical questions: the nature of the global, political, economic and environmental interdependencies that shape urban space; the uncertainties and ruptures produced there by crises and changes; the relations between projections, scales and temporalities.

The consultation process first enabled the creation of a space of reflection open to some hundred professionals who shared their ideas about the Paris region. With reports and exchanges, exhibitions and publications, presentations and public debates, reaching up to the highest level of the state and regional and urban government, a *scene* was opened up, making visible the subject of Grand Paris, while spectacularizing their protagonists.

¹⁶ Conversation Éric Charmes, Stéphane Füzesséry, Nathalie Roseau, “Faut-il lutter contre l’étalement urbain ?,” *La Vie des Idées*, 29 June 2010.

For professionals and researchers, this opened up a whole repertoire of different semantic and visual representations, with points of view mobilizing diverse mediations—words, images, discourses, utterances, visions, theories—in the attempt to capture the intelligibility of an elusive reality. The many aerial, satellite and cartographic views thus aspired to represent a totality that was both described and projected. To a metropolitan approach, intended to counter the radioconcentric history inherited from Parisian history, there responded a regionalist approach, privileging a more local viewpoint, in which detail is everything, having recourse not to views from above but to cutaway views: by transect, matrix, sample. Finally, all these visions reinterrogated the *global* nature of the large-scale, in a matrix of contrasting representations that still “held” the project in an imaginary space, a place of cooperation between heterogeneous worlds.¹⁷ [Figure 4]

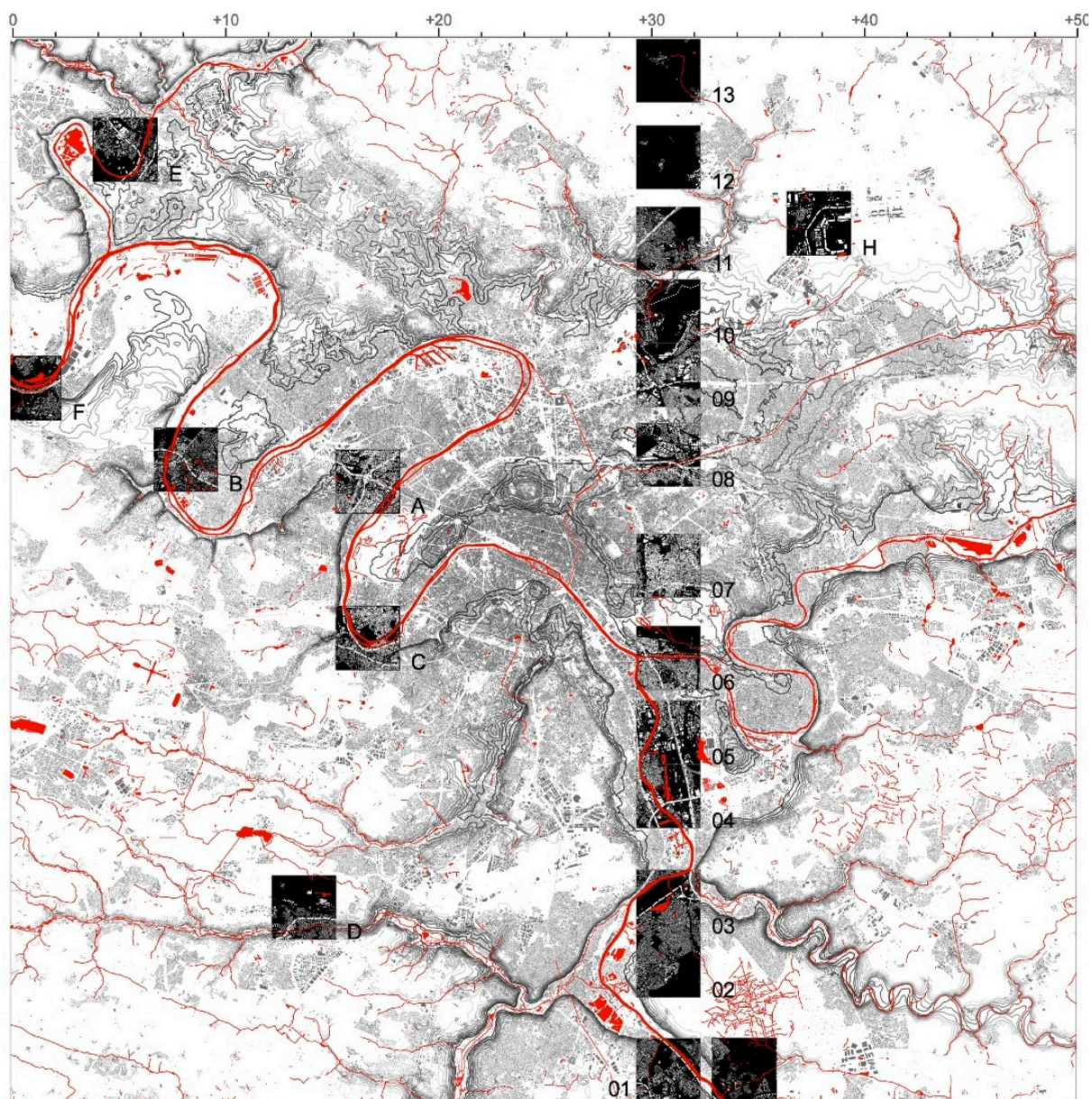


Figure 4 : Studio Secchi-Viganò, « Cas d'étude en région parisienne », consultation internationale du Grand Pari(s), 2009.

¹⁷ See Nathalie Roseau, “Le projet métropolitain comme récit,” *Le Visiteur*, no. 18, 2012, pp. 83-94.

In the process, the consultation was also conducive to an alignment of strategic and political interests in which opportunities and decisions could converge. The project of a peripheral super-metro, named the Grand Paris Express, is one of the concrete results. Nicolas Sarkozy used the consultation to promote this big plan for a circulation system that had been difficult to realize—the idea of a metro beltway around the suburbs had been the subject of discussion in the region for nearly twenty years. By resynchronizing contexts, projects and decisions, this acquired a metropolitan dimension.

From project to action: after the high point of the consultation, after the decisions that limited the field of possibilities, the foundation of representations formed by the consultation was shattered by new divergences. In an opinion piece in *Le Monde*, Jean Nouvel expressed his regret to see the “technostructure” come back and the corresponding lack of any attempt to knit together the ideas of the different teams of architects. When it came to the metro projects, the oppositions between different systems (metro vs tramway), locations (underground vs overhead), speeds (medium vs high-speed) were temporarily attenuated by the involvement of architects in the projects for railways stations, each of which was to have “its own personality.” But there was a clear break between the Grand Paris imagined by architects and the Grand Paris projected by politicians, a break that seems to result from two ambiguities:

The first concerns the role of infrastructure, and in particular the metro. Is this the instrument of the project or the vector of a reform? In the design of the super-metro presented at the Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine to celebrate “Le Grand Paris, 4 ans après,” the abstract figure of a network made up of lines (the tracks) and points (the station) was projected over the map of the conurbation. Suburbs disappeared, giving way, around the stations, to new urban ensembles whose outlines appeared in sketches placed all around the map. Augmented by its archipelago of quarters and stations, the figure of the metro here seems set to become the form of this Grand Paris, the magisterial point of a narrative that in turn reconfigures the perimeter of the enlarged metropolis. [Figure 5]



Figure 5 : « Le Grand Paris, quatre ans après. Les projets en cours », Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine, 2011.

The second ambiguity concerns the role of the project designers, in this instance the architects. In the eyes of the government, the involvement of architects served mainly to publicize a project that was still invisible. “They provided the images, the ideas that still inhabit our vision of the Paris of the future,” exclaimed Nicolas Sarkozy. “They fed our dream of Grand Paris, they imagined a shared future, they enabled us to construct this approach together.”¹⁸ Here, the “narrative” of Grand Paris can be seen as merely a way of “putting the spirit of convergence above particular and partisan considerations,” as Maurice Leroy, former minister “of the City and of Grand Paris,” points out, recognizing that “the Grand Paris which comes across here [is] a project that we do not control.”¹⁹

In parallel, other projects arose that did not come directly from the consultation but whose size or effects interrogated the changes occurring in the development of the metropolitan area. From the controversial renovation of Les Halles to the abortive Europacity project on the agricultural land of Gonesse, from the contested privatization of Aéroports de Paris to the turbulent enlargement of Gare du Nord where the project for a shopping mall has just been abandoned, mega-operations come up against opposition that reveal their underlying logics—privatization of the commons, artificialization of the ground, commodification of space, financialization of operators—in a way that is contrary to the attentions presiding over the beginnings of the consultation over Grand Paris as a “post-Kyoto metropolis.” [Figure 6]



Figure 6 : « Non à Europacity »

Formulating the project: towards an ecology of the city-territory

These dead ends were due to the discrepancies between visions and actions, between state and project. But, amidst the noise of mobilization, more discreet trajectories were emerging, revealing alternatives for the heterogeneous, diffuse and continuous city-territory. Situated, patrimonial, photographic—these gazes observe, rehabilitate, explore. By breaking with the supposed verticality

¹⁸ “Le Grand Paris, 4 ans après,” speech by the President of the Republic Nicolas Sarkozy, Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, October 10, 2011.

¹⁹ Maurice Leroy, Preface by Pascal Auzannet, *Les secrets du Grand Paris, Zoom sur un processus de décision publique*, Paris: Hermann, 2018, pp.11-12.

of supra-urban planning, these “alternative” visions of Grand Paris affirm the decentralization of the metropolis, melding with the complex reality of the city, contributing to its *density*.

As Eric Charmes and the political scientist Max Rousseau have shown, the pandemic that we are living through has materialized, through the intercrossed processes of contamination and confinement, the power and the flaws of what Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid have called “planetary urbanization.” They call for us to abandon the discreet for the continuous and to break free of a whole panoply of categories and concepts which as they see it are outmoded and above all detrimental, being very (too) performative for the techno-political sphere: rural/urban, center/periphery, city/metropolis.²⁰ By observing the urban forms that are appearing and the social conditions that are emerging for what they really are, the scrutineers of the city are able to reflect on interventions that might lead them to evolve. Based on scrupulous description, their position consists in acting with what is really there. Planning as they envision it, through “study-projects”, analyzes and interprets the reality in which it is called upon to operate, and the words/notions of the city-territory materialize the operational relations between descriptions, interpretations and strategies of intervention. This characteristic whereby analysis becomes a project, and vice versa, as project becomes knowledge, is common to the work of Secchi, Smets, and Sieverts, to which can be added Paola Viganò’s research on the “horizontal metropolis.”²¹ The urban and territorial transformations of both Emscher Park and Antwerp reflect this project-based approach which establishes a continuity between description and action, between empirics and theory. From articulating the issues to formulating the project, it is by following these paths that collective action can find its direction in order to define an ecology of the city-territory.

[Figure 7]

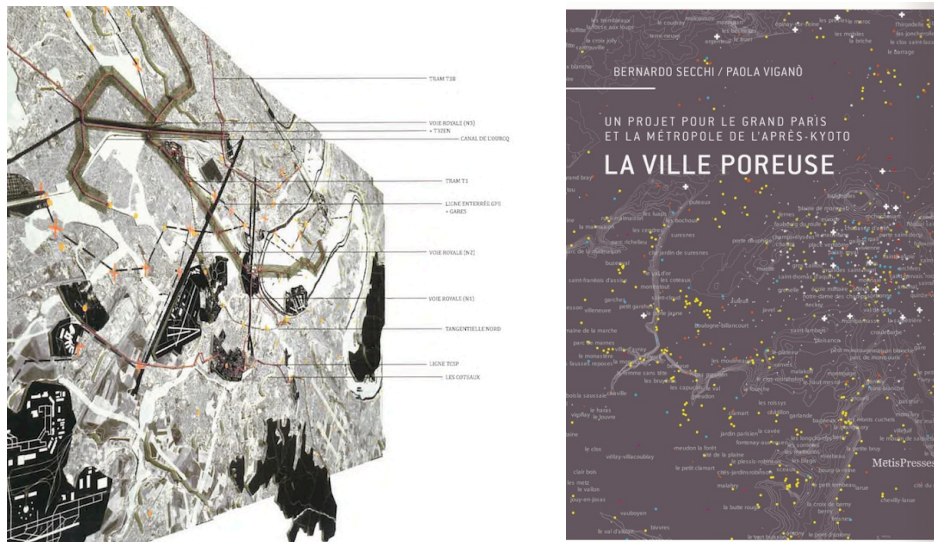


Figure 7 : Studio Secchi-Viganò, «Habiter le Grand Paris», étude sur la traversée du nord du Grand Paris, 2012-2013 ; Bernardo Secchi, Paola Viganò, *La Ville poreuse*, 2011.

²⁰ Neil Brenner (ed.), *Implosions/Explosions, Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, JOVIS Verlag, 2014; Eric Charmes, Max Rousseau, “La mondialisation du confinement, Une faille dans la planétarisation de l’urbain?,” *La Vie des Idées*, May 12, 2020, <https://lavedesidees.fr/La-mondialisation-du-confinement.html>

²¹ Chiara Cavalieri, Paola Viganò (eds.), *The Horizontal Metropolis: a Radical Project*. Zurich: Park Books, 2019.

Biography

Nathalie Roseau is a professor of urbanism at the École des Ponts ParisTech and a research director in the Laboratoire Techniques, Territoires et Sociétés (Umr CNRS). She is an architect-engineer and a doctor in urbanism. After ten years working in regional planning and architectural practices, she entered the École des Ponts to begin work on a doctoral thesis while preparing the reform of the Master's degree in Urban and Planning, which she directed for ten years. Her researches, which favor a historical perspective, focus on the dynamics of metropolitan transformation and the place of infrastructures, their temporalities and their representations. Her last book (*Le futur des métropoles, Temps et infrastructure*, Metispresses, 2022), focuses on the role of infrastructure in the processes of metropolitan expansion through three surveys conducted in New York, Paris and Hong Kong. She is co-founder and leader of the research project *Inventer le Grand Paris, Histoire croisée des métropoles*.