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► **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Roseau. Metropolitan projects as narratives. *Le visiteur*, 2012, 18, pp.174-176. hal-04683329

HAL Id: hal-04683329

<https://hal.science/hal-04683329v1>

Submitted on 1 Sep 2024

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REVUE CRITIQUE D'ARCHITECTURE
N° 78 / NOV. 2012 - BILINGUAL EDITION

le visiteur

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Metropolitan Projects as Narrative

In launching the metropolitan planning program, the Consultation Internationale du Grand Paris (a consultative call for development schemes for Greater Paris) naturally led to a rethinking of the question of the project's various scales. In the course of this event, specialists in the materialization of cities – architects, landscape architects and urban planners – were confronted by issues beyond the normal reach of simple project design: tensions between center and outskirts, friction between form and flow, the obsolescence or durability of urban installations, the polarization and atomization of power, and the sturdiness and resilience of local structures. Thus the enthusiasm of the contributing teams did not merely result from the totally demiurgic nature of the undertaking nor from the hope of handsome commissions afterward. Once reflection upon metropolitan planning was initiated, the perspective of modifying the outlines of project implementation became possible.

PICTURING THE METROPOLIS

In exploring the roles of early twentieth-century panoramic and aerial views in his book *Skyline*, Hubert Damisch pointed out the narcissistic structure of the urban environment, which constantly seeks ways to depict itself as a representable whole. "It is as though, at the moment when the great city, the metropolis, the *Großstadt*, was beginning to call for an image of agglomeration other than a strictly architectural one, it seemed indispensable to preserve its visibility or, to evoke a Freudian problematic, its *representability*."¹

To see what can no longer be seen or even perceived: this question of the representation of the metropolis played a leading role in the consultative process. The teams were constantly trying to grasp its outlines by playing on the inventiveness of urban vocabulary through words such as mega-

polis, metapolis, hypercity, mega-region, and post-metropolis.² This dense repertoire was enriched by the terminology used by architects – *Zwischenstadt* (in-between city), *città porosa* (porous city), *ville légère* (light-weight city).³ The narratives of constructive epics were joined by evocations of contrasting urban practices. This polysemic discourse on the metropolis was as concerned with these multiple representations down through the years as it was with the phenomena and policies impacting on the city.

In order to *visualize* the metropolis, the teams contributing to the consultation made abundant use of aerial, satellite, and cartographic views, seeking to recover the legibility of the metropolis through those globalizing representations. However, although they convey the scope of changes in scale, aerial pictures offer only an imperfect grasp of how those same scales interact, and of the bumps they create on the ground. A flat depiction of a megalopolis as fluid and practical on foot as Tokyo is hard to read for Westerners; the map of its public transportation is no clearer, while an aerial view of its endless, continuous urban expanse, interrupted here and there by clusters and spires of skyscrapers is no more explicit in explaining the main forms and structures of the city. Yet the effect of chaos sparked by an aerial view of the Japanese capital should not make us overlook its intrinsic urbanity – "apparent disorder, hidden order."⁴ Given this situation, the structural vagueness of aerial views led the teams, in their concern to elaborate a didactic approach to contemporary cities, to suggest other modes of representation. High-angle views were thus complemented, amplified, or even replaced by various registers of imagery. The Italian team of Studio 09 employed *sampling* to free itself from the collective imagination of Paris as a city ringed by outskirts with its poles and fringes, and thus to convey a geography of porousness that can, above all, be *paced out*. Rejecting the illusion of a plan seen

1. Hubert Damisch, *Skyline: The Narcissistic City*, trans. John Goodman, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 12.

2. Lewis Mumford, "The Myth of Megalopolis," *The City in History*, New York, Harcourt, 1989 [1961], pp. 525-627; Jean Gottmann, *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*, New York, The Twentieth Century Fund, 1961; François Ascher, *Metapolis ou l'avenir des villes*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1995; Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Region*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2000; André Corboz, "La Suisse comme hyperville," *Le Visiteur* no. 6, autumn 2000, Paris.

3. Thomas Sieverts, *L'entre-ville*, Marseille, Editions Parenthèses, 2004; Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò, *La Ville poreuse: Un projet pour le Grand Paris et la métropole de l'après-Kyoto*, Geneva, Métispresses, 2011; Finn Geipel and Giulia Andi, Lin Team, *Grand Paris Métropole Douce, Hypothèses sur le paysage Post-Kyoto*, Nouvelles Editions/Jean Michel Place, May 2009.

4. Emille Aillaud, *Désordre apparent, ordre caché*, Paris, Fayard, 1975. This title was used by Paul Chemetov and Michel Lussault, chairs of the advisory board to the consultative project, in an article that appeared in *Le Monde*, 11 April 2009.

from above, Christian de Portzamparc's metaphor of *rhizome* presented the city as a multiple organism whose development needed stimulating. The *matrix* developed by the AUC team stressed the metropolitan potential of local perspectives, proposing a non-hierarchical organization whose ordinary components would provide the basis of its transformation. The *calculator* devised by the Dutch agency MVRDV, meanwhile, modeled the metropolis by working on potential paths to compactness.

EXPRESSING POLYCENTRALITY

These images – tools of discussion, provocation, and consensus – served as the means to project a transformation of the reality they sought to reflect. The globalizing approaches cast the future of the metropolis around bold visions designed to counteract the radial-concentric trend inherited from the historic narrative of greater Paris. Whether polycentric or linear, polarized or more diffuse, the proposed urban “networks” were designed to break with the logic of upward and downward pressure-points that shape metropolis. The emergence of this simultaneously discrete⁵ and global network-city was accompanied by an enlargement of either the physical extent of the metropolis or the size of the buildings comprising it. The transition from urban to metropolitan was materialized here by changes in dimension, the most emblematic ones being a conquest of the west as far as the sea (proposed by the Seine Métropole scheme) and a metabolic resurgence of mega-objects in urban architecture embodied by *hyperstations* and *nodal clusters*.

Oblique aerial views, based on these spectacular representations, attempted to convey the proposed processes of change. However, sensing the limitations of a vision reduced to the emergence of a multipolar structure, the teams sought to explore other forms of locality that were more specifically contextualized if less immediately graspable. Some of them asserted the crucial nature of the “in-between city” – what Thomas Sieverts called *Zwischenstadt* – as a city in itself, which Bernard Secchi and Paola Viganò viewed as a *città diffusa* until it explicitly evolved into the project of a *città porosa*. From this perspective, a local, narrow, sampled, and deliberately non-hierarchical representation likened the metropolis to something nebulous, whose situation and projection could not be reduced to a single system of rationalization. The resulting acceptance of complexity as a given condition allowed the teams who treated it as an intrinsic factor of the metropolis to envisage a city that differed from the one constituted by a system of dominant poles. In a turning of the tables, the interstitial city here became the very essence of the metropolis, thereby reformulating the potential meanings of the notion of polycentrality. Several voices made themselves heard during this debate. Some people wished to favor specific site-centered programs that function as locomotives or beacons incarnating the efficiency of a large city. Others felt that the metropolis could not be exteriorized at a given scale but rather spread itself throughout the very core of the urban environment, a view that called for a projection of urban space as the locus of a hybridization of scales. In order to get a better grasp of how this dialectics of metro-

politan development has altered the meanings of the notion of project, this article will now discuss two experiments that came in the wake of the Consultation Internationale du Grand Paris, first the Grand Paris Express project and then the development of the Saclay area.

SYSTEMS OF OBJECTS

The question of urban mobility was crucial to the consultative deliberations. The architects made it one of the central themes of their proposals, not only because of its important role in social cohesion but also because it crystallizes the inherent paradoxes of public policies on today's cities. Given the crisis in planning programs now subject to uncertain financing and unforeseeable future, infrastructure has emerged as one of the last ramparts of large-scale urban development once it is viewed not just as a technical object for easing urban flow but is conceived in a more general way as construction project, inhabited building, urban system, indeed regional structure.

The Greater Paris teams focused on one object in particular – stations. Faced with increasingly massive flows and increasingly individual habits, stations have become a key figure for projecting representations of the metropolis. The terms that have designated a station as a site of urban convergence – hub, nodal cluster, switch point, technopole – have also reformulated the question of its conception. A polycentric view of the metropolis favors stations that are monumental in form, incarnating the aspirations of the day. Alongside these heroic images, the defenders of the diffuse city focused on the interstices of the net. Beyond the debate that pitted subways (a rapid method of fueling the polycentric network) against trams (better suited to insertion in the simultaneously loose and dense links of suburban realms),⁶ the architects of the in-between city deliberately rejected the idea of monumental incarnations in favor of *distributing* the infrastructure and its points of convergence, as seen in the *micro-centralities* proposed by the Lin team.

Thus we can see that, when projected onto the conception of a large infrastructure, the expression of polycentrality produces different systems of objects depending on how it is defined. On one hand we may have a ring of monumental stations that assert their role as hypercenters along a multipolar archipelago. On the other hand there may be a more diffuse network of suitably sized facilities that seek to begin the process of redefining the suburban town. Each vision produces a global approach that lends forms to the world of infrastructure, endowing it with its own identificatory, formal, and functional vocabulary, thereby channeling the changes of the region it irrigates.

Can fifty-seven stations and an underground network fulfill the plan formulated by the consultative “deliberations” on Greater Paris? Such is the material incarnation now being presented by promoters of the capital's future supersubway system. How can this *magnet* project represent a concrete expression of the dialectics of “space of flow” versus “space of place” as underscored by Manuel Castells?⁷ Are allusions to Hector Guimard and to stations as “urban catalysts” sufficient to guarantee regional implantation?⁸ The danger of short-changing the stakes that originally

5. “Discrete” in the mathematical sense of the term.

6. This proposal was defended by Bernardo Secchi who, like Vincent Kaufmann, referred to a “right to mobility.” See Vincent Kaufmann, “Un droit au changement et à la diversité,” *Métropolitiques*, 16 November 2011.

7. Manuel Castells, “L'espace des flux,” *La société en réseaux, L'ère de l'information*, Paris, Fayard, 2001, pp. 473-530.

8. On the discourse on stations, see the special issue of *Urbanisme* devoted to stations, January-February 2012.

underpinned the legitimacy of the supersubway and triggered a convergence of interests among the various players in the metropolis has now come true. Cutting up the pie has stimulated appetites, while the ambiguous name of “Greater Paris Station” reinforces its rhetorical dimension as a gateway. But gateway to Paris or to the suburbs? Although the issues raised by metropolitan infrastructure have transformed the meaning of the project, which many designers now perceive as strategic, there is still the patent danger of it being instrumentalized as the sole showcase of the Greater Paris construction scheme.

LOCAL ON A GRAND SCALE

Other vast operations have been launched alongside the supersubway, including the development of the Saclay plateau as the capital’s future scientific “cluster.” Saclay currently hosts the largest concentration of researchers in the world,⁹ without however producing the anticipated impact in terms of renown. The contradictions are primarily spatial in nature. Seen from above, Saclay presents a dense concentration of resources and intellectual skills driven by high-speed links both terrestrial and virtual. Yet seen from ground-level, the area is a fragmented set of enclaves that seem oblivious to one another. This distended, splintered picture is all the more paradoxical in that the vivid setting offers grand landscapes such as the Yvette River Valley along which the suburban trains run, not to mention rural crop fields on the plateau of Saclay itself.

Subsequent to the government’s announcement of an “Operation of National Interest,” a public authority known as the *Établissement Public Paris-Saclay* launched an overall project in partnership with local municipalities and university officials (whose role has changed strikingly in recent years with the modernization and reorganization of higher education and research in France). As part of its task, the authority drew up a framework agreement with a team of urban and landscape designers led by landscape architect Michel Desvigne.¹⁰

Desvigne perceived the commission – with its extensive natural and urban zones, and the various pressures and broad expectations weighing on all those areas – as a rare opportunity to work locally on a large scale. It was a scale that allowed metropolitan planning (shaped by that duality between polarized and distended) to “descend” to the level of geography even as fragmented local geography “rose” to influence programs originating from above.

When he discusses urban issues, Desvigne regularly – almost systematically – refers to the system of parks developed by the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, which form the backbone of several large American cities (including Boston, Chicago, and Washington, for example). This representation is rooted in the naturalist philosophy of American Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and in the posture adopted by America when, in the nineteenth century, it had to confront its own urban development while trying to ward off the specter of the industrial cities of Victorian England as de-

vised by Gustave Doré and Charles Dickens. The dream of the new world sought to embody itself in a different image of the city, one unconstrained by space and borne aloft by a pioneer spirit. Initiated by Olmsted, the concept of a system of parks as a natural yet urban framework for the land shaped its sites of predilection by adapting itself to local contexts and geography, demonstrating its malleability (*rus in urbs* on the east coast, *urbs in rus* on the west coast). It also yielded iconic locations (such as Central Park in New York) that forged one of the most brilliant chapters in American urban planning.¹¹

The image of a park system – as a narrative mechanism and a natural *infrastructure* – was the key reference in Desvigne’s plan for regional development. It allowed him to encompass apparent opposites in a single vision that embraced every scale: city versus beyond-the-city, urban development versus desire for nature, large links of major networks (infrastructures, universities) versus local geographic legacy, the fragmentation of decentralized government power versus the structure of the landscape. His work revealed potential *sites* of encounter between natural geography (hills, valleys, waterways) and urban landscape (poles, networks) with the programs to come. “The challenge is to grasp the parts *and* the whole. The great difficulty of a process on this scale is to find the right balance between a logic of integration (which goes with a notion of sustainable development, and which is inevitable from a practical standpoint) and an operational logic that requires identification of the ‘objects’ (not necessarily physical or limited) handled by a local manager.”¹² As a structural component of the commission, this insistence on remaining constantly on the dividing line between sticking to the fundamental long-term stakes versus pragmatically developing the region – between the strategic overall vision and the set of bricks with which to build it – magnified the cross-scale nature of the Saclay project.

Are the operations currently underway likely to result in the large-scale vision behind the Saclay project? Will they spawn the long-term approach planned by the heirs to Olmsted? While metropolitan planning projects have the great appeal of crystallizing major controversies, shedding new light on the debate over the social and political significance of the urban fabric, they cannot be reduced to a few spectacular icons or ambitious programs of suburban densification. The consultative process launched several years ago shows that urban planning is incarnated above all by an underlying narrative that it simultaneously helps to write: an open and multiple narrative of “images” that seeks to describe our metropolitan condition, a narrative of places and connections that singly and jointly make it inhabitable. If we manage to accept this narrative dimension of the project, the risks of rupture between representations of the contemporary city – abundantly cited and discussed by speakers at the consultative forum – and projects currently being carried out in an operational logic, will be that much clearer, perhaps sparing it from actually occurring.

Translated from the French by Deke Dusinberre

9. *Établissement Public Paris-Saclay, Schéma de Développement Territorial, Une ambition mondiale, un projet de territoire*, January 2012.

10. Notably including XDGA (Xaveer de Geyter), Floris Alkemade, and Arep Mobilité.

11. Catherine Maumi, *Usonia, ou le mythe de la ville nature américaine*, Editions de La Villette, 2009. Charles E. Beveridge and Carolyn R. Hoffman (eds.), *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems* (Supplementary Series, Volume I), The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

12. Michel Desvigne, “Note d’intention,” *Mission de préfiguration du futur établissement public de Paris Saclay, Accord-cadre de maîtrise d’œuvre paysagère et urbaine pour Paris Saclay*, 5 November 2009, p.4 ; See also Gilles Tiberghien and James Corner, *Natures Intermédiaires, Les paysages de Michel Desvigne*, Bâle, Birkhäuser, 2009.