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LANDSCAPE AS A MEANS OF QUESTIONING THE TEMPORAL FRAMES OF URBAN PLANNING

Thoughts on the city developed in the practice of landscape design have in recent years offered a new perspective on the temporal dimension inherent to any urban transformation. Our starting hypothesis is that the way landscape architects think about time provides significant food for thought with respect to urban planning. Landscape designers are not usually the most involved in the design of cities, more traditionally carried out by urban planners trained as architects.[1] However, comparing the results of various studies we have conducted over the past decade show that their approach helps emphasize in a critical and comprehensive way the current limits of large-scale planning.[2] One of the issues often missed by urban planners are the perceptions and experiences of the people living on land undergoing long-term transformation. Can they be considered as a part of the project?

The increased scale of metropolitan projects today, and the dilation of their implementation over time, raise concern among residents and are prompted as much by the expectations and hopes inspired by the project as by fears for the future of their everyday lives once the project is completed. The results of our research show a correlation between the temporal experience of landscape architects and that of residents. The operational time of the urban project is in strong contrast to both. In other words, the temporal frame in which a landscape starts making sense, in the residents' perception for instance, is not confined to the time of the project. Out of these different "times," distinct positions appear, especially in regard to the relationship between the "time of the project," the "time of construction," and the "time of maintenance." Most of the fieldwork interviews conducted with residents of Grand Paris—the name of a metropolitan area but also of an urban project with 2030 as a temporal horizon—point out the superposition and coexistence of these times. Their daily experience of this transformation has a thickness that reflects the forces at play on the territory. It follows a different logic from that imposed by budgetary constraints and administrative protocols. These two different logics, or conceptions of time, are at play: the time of the residents and landscape architects could be described as poly-chronic, and the time of urban planners and administrators could be seen as relatively more "linear" and "one-dimensional." Without ignoring the very real pressures of budgeting and administrative supervision, how can large scale planning take into account the residents' way of living through this specific period of time?

In this article, we will examine how the dialectical dimension inherent to the landscape approach mobilizes a knowledge and expertise able to probe this question. This quality of the landscape project was first discussed by Robert Smithson in "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape"[3] in the context of Central Park in New York. For him, the park "can no longer be seen as 'a-thing-in-itself', but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical

1 In the current context, this is an emerging trend among landscape practitioners responsible for the design of master plans and large territorial projects, such as with James Corner in New York and Qianhai, Latz + Partner in Tel Aviv, West 8 Urban Design and Architecture in Guangzhou, and Michel Corajoud and Michel Desvigne in Lyon.

2 The research studies conducted at the Architecture and Anthropology Lab at Lavue UMR 7218 CNRS, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre to which we refer are: Alessia de Biase, Nancy Ottaviano, Piero Zanini, *Qualifying Transformation or How Is Quality of Life Designed as an Idea in the Future of the Grand Paris Project?* (Paris: Urban D/FEDER-EU, 2010–12); Sandra Parvu, *Landscape Project and Visual Culture* (post-doctorate thesis, ENSP Versailles); Alessia de Biase, Cristina Rossi, Alice Sotgia, Piero Zanini with Sandra Parvu, *Tales from a Landscape: An Anthropological Approach to the Landscape Atlas of the Seine-Saint-Denis* (DRIIE, UT93-DRIEA, CG93, 2014–16; Paris: éditions Laa Recherche, 2016).

3 Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," *Artforum*, February 1973.

region—the park becomes a 'thing-for-us.'" The question we address is how the potential of this manifold of ongoing relationships, as unexpected and contradictory as they may appear, can be taken into account "at all levels of human activity, be it social, political or natural" in the large-scale urban project.

Several studies and social-science conferences have highlighted the various temporal horizons of expectation and logic of the actors involved in the urban project.[4] They do not however specifically explore the differences between each design discipline, and more particularly, that of landscape architecture. What is the latter made of? What does it reveal about time as an opportunity and project tool? Conversely, how does it apprehend the time constraints, often divergent, that accompany any urban project? Traditionally speaking, projects have had the purpose of "arresting time," of imposing one form, one point of view upon many, thus producing a common object of knowledge shared by a community. How do landscape architects who have the knowledge, among other things, to work with live materials, question this static dimension of form? How does that impact the understanding of urban transformation at large?

THE FORGOTTEN FRAME

Any large-scale transformation planned in the densely built and inhabited territories of the Grand Paris region entails major changes for the lives of many residents. By definition, a *project* forcefully thrusts a "vision" inscribed in the present forward into the future. The degree of violence of the jump between what exists and what is planned depends on its scale and the proportional effort of abstraction required to comprehend its proposal: the more the potential charge of the project is moved to a distant future, the higher the tension between the proposed horizon and the day-to-day lives of the residents. This tension is related to the length of time dedicated to construction, but also to the possibility of new economic and political realities generated by the project. In seeking to initiate a leap forward, planners tend to ignore the conditions of the present. This oversight coincides with a failure to integrate the current residents into the process, thus leading to unease among the latter and a lack of understanding regarding the rhythms and the periods of activity and idleness that characterize construction. Residents often express the feeling of a time that is not going anywhere, a time suspended and spent in an often incomprehensible wait.

Landscape designers are aware of what waiting means. If they are designing a garden, they know it may take years for the trees and other plants to grow and for the reality to catch up with their design. Gilles Vexlard[5] recalls that one of his concerns is

4 In the recent "temporal turn" taken by social sciences, and the interest in having it contribute to the development of architectural and urban research, quite a few publications and lectures address the question of time, temporality, and rhythm in urban design as an aesthetic quality or an experience to reach, but little has been said about time as a project tool. In France, a few publications and conferences have addressed the topic. Publications include: Yannis Tsiomis, *Échelles et temporalités des projets urbains* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2007); Sandra Mallet, "Aménager les rythmes: politiques temporelles et urbanisme," *EspacesTemps.net*, March 14, 2013, https://www.espacestemps.net/en/articles/amenager-les-rythmes-politiques-temporelles-et-urbanisme/; *Echelles et temporalités des projets urbains: Un enjeu pluriel entre conception et perception* (PUCA, Paris, May 22–23, 2007); *Quelle(s) temporalité(s) prendre en compte dans un projet urbain durable?* (PUCA, Paris, June 10, 2013).

5 Gilles Vexlard was a cofounder in 1976 with Laurence Vacherot of the French landscape architecture practice Latitude Nord in Paris. He has received numerous awards for his work in France and Germany, including first prize from the Bund Deutscher Landschaftsarchitekten (2005), and the Topos International Urban Landscape Award (2006) for the Riemer Park in Munich, and the Grand prix national du paysage (2009).

to rapidly provide playgrounds and parks to avoid always having to tell the incoming residents that they must wait another three decades to enjoy the spaces he designs.[6] The landscape architect is thus de facto in the position of having to think about all the time frames relevant to the project. If the promise implicit in every project sets in motion the imaginary, the performative dimension of its utterance is however not enough. Even when the promise is kept, the problem arises not so much from the gap created by the promise between a present and a future, but in the fact that this envisioned leap sets aside the continuity of an existence and the time in which lives are spent.

When this happens, feelings of uncertainty and economic insecurity increase. A recurring semantic field in the residents' testimonies emphasizes "the destabilizing character of construction works and the interim period they represent," "the feeling of insecurity," "the difficulty of finding an anchor," and the question of knowing whether "things will change or will stay like they are."[7] For the residents subject to urban projects, it is difficult to navigate between the things that change, the time in which the change occurs, and the permanence of the structural problems that touch their everyday lives. The present becomes a temporality in which the inertia and stability of daily routines are constantly shaken by surprises, good and bad, related to programmatic changes characteristic of long-term projects. In the case of the Grand Paris project, administrators (and sometimes practitioners too) stamp their plans with dates such as 2025 for the extension of a subway line, or 2030 for the construction of the Grand Paris Express. While that does not pose any problem to them, residents do not even know whether they will be able to continue living where they are because of the rent and local tax increase connected precisely to these infrastructural developments and the logic of concentric growth specific to Paris.

Added to this is the more concrete disjunction "between the time of decision and the time of construction which often incomprehensibly extends already distant time limits."[8] For designers, this disjunction leads to a questioning of the purpose and intentions of a project: the time span between the design of a program and its actual implementation, according to Nicolas Bonnenfant,[9] creates obsolescence, since buildings become available ten years after they were needed for a population which may have since changed.[10]

CHECKING TIME

Although city planning is a discipline intended to organize the temporal aspects of urban transformation, today these times are subject to factors and changing speeds whose political dimension goes beyond the competences and authority of designers. This limitation becomes manifest in the increasing gap between the discourse of city planners, its ideals, and the ambivalent effects of their actual projects on the lives of residents. The first-hand experience of landscape architects and inhabitants alike highlight the magnitude of the gap and reveal the challenge of mastering a project on a formal as well as an economic level (as

6 Vexlard, interview in Parvu, *Landscape Project and Visual Culture*.

7 Interview excerpt with a resident, in de Biase et al., *Tales from a Landscape*.

8 Interview excerpt with a resident, in de Biase et al., *Qualifying Transformation*.

9 Nicolas Bonnenfant was a cofounder in 1999, with Pablo and Miguel Georgieff, of *Coloco*, a collective of landscape architects, urbanists, botanists, and gardeners based in Paris whose main specificity is to invest and accompany their projects by physical realization in situ.

10 Nicolas Bonnenfant, excerpt from an interview in Parvu, *Landscape Project and Visual Culture*.

with the dynamic evolution of incomes, land prices, and costs of living). Faced with too many uncontrollable budgetary, political, and formal changes due to the extension of projects over several years, some landscape designers have chosen to prioritize certain elements of their project, starting from the idea that everything drawn does not have the same value. To make sense of their project in the context of so many contingencies, they put in place a strategic phasing of the different stages of the worksite not so much as a means of following a construction rationale, but as a necessary tool to ensure the readability of the project in time. This position is however subject to critique by other practitioners in the landscape discipline as they find this form of planning problematic in that it continues to presuppose an unrealistic degree of control over the situation.

This is Gilles Clément's point of view. For him, in order to plan, the idea that planners make the presumption that everything between the moment they finalize their drawings and the point when they materialize is under control, and the idea that nothing will escape their intentions is an illusion. Projects are constantly derailed by unforeseen events.[11] In spite of the awareness that numerous accidents shape the transformation process, large-scale and long-term urban projects continue to be solidly anchored on this presupposition. From the opposite perspective, quite a few landscape designers think their current contribution to planning could be their capacity to drop the pretense of control in favor of the capacity to navigate between the day-to-day evolution of a situation and a longer-term intentional project. Clément's view of urban design critiques the limitations produced by the temporal organization of space within a plan. The illusion of control over the reality that emerges from the drawing board results in a belittling of the contribution of other design disciplines. In contrast to a vision of transformation he describes as technocratic, his landscape practice highlights a more tentative approach which assumes inaccuracies between what is represented and the reality on the ground.

Two positions can be therefore identified on how to conceive of time as a project tool: if in one case time is mobilized as an operational tool, in the other its purpose consists of making us take stock of the limits of any planning. The lives of residents touched by urban transformation are shaped by this tension between the mastery of time and acceptance of the diversions it produces. Faced with the unpredictable and uncertain effects brought about by radical changes of their environment, some people point to the difficulty, if not refusal, to project themselves even into the near future. To control the situation in this case means to know whether one can continue to live in one's house in the neighborhood where social ties and habits are woven.[12] As underlined by various testimonies, renovation comes at a cost and often leads to population change. While land prices rise, people fear they will be forced to move out. Thus, the apprehension is not related to urban projects as such, but given their scale and the phenomena they trigger, rather to the feeling of dispossession felt by residents and designers alike in regard to the control and monitoring of the new reality drawn by the project.

THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS

If landscape designers are sensitive to this "meanwhile"—this continuous present—how

11 Bonnenfant, excerpt from an interview, in Parvu, *Landscape Project and Visual Culture*.

12 Points of view expressed by various residents in interviews conducted during research, in de Biase et al., *Qualifying Transformation*.

do they attempt to position time as a way of problematizing urban planning rather than as a dimension with which one has to put up? In other words, are there ways to represent and visualize time in order to give it a consistency and materiality that enables inhabitants to work with it? Since planners and residents do not share the same temporal framework, the challenge consists not only in how to give a presence to the residents on the horizon of a long-term project but also how to make them feel part of it. In the case of the Grand Paris research, residents are not a priori against urban transformation. However, they pay attention to what they perceive of as a repetition of something already experienced in their recent past and, as a consequence, whose effects they can already predict. In this sense, they oftentimes perceive the transformations carried out by the project as a "sterile future." This perception of sterility is largely the result of the linear approach to time on the part of administrators and designers, who inevitably oversimplify reality in order to erase certain problems they do not know how to face.

One aspect of the problem of reconciling different horizons and orders of time is the unacknowledged distance between an existing reality and the project of transforming it. As discussed previously, urban projects by definition must necessarily distinguish themselves from what is there. If not, they would not be called a project and would not call for a prospective transformation. This is our architectural tradition. However, certain landscape practitioners have opted to jettison this tradition in favor of an attempt to blur the boundary between "what is" and "what will be." The shuffling of temporal frameworks is best synthesized in the following statement by Clément: "I often wondered whether I should draw my projects before or after I have built them."[13] Since most urban planners are trained architects, the relation to the existing environment is one of receiving an object that has a relation to the context, but that is distinguished from it. Most architectural curricula are based upon a distinction between process and form, place and program, context and object. Clément's statement makes these distinctions problematic insofar as they do not draw a line between what exists (the context) and the changes he wants to bring (the project).

In linguistic and cognitive sciences, context[14] is not characterized by its capacity to receive something (object or subject alike), but for its interactive dimension.[15] The context is not the site, but the project and the site growing together. The context comes out of making a project with and during the site, so to speak. Therefore a conversation can take place between forces, forms, appearances, relations, and also, times. In this sense, the idea of '"context'" acquires a generative dimension. For some landscape designers, this dimension is pushed to an extreme, as it materializes in their on-site practices through gestures such as drawings made without the mediation of scale or other support than the ground.[16] Over long periods of time, the process of thinking, designing, and drawing is intrinsically part of a dialogue with the site, because it is in its presence that all these actions are conducted and acquire their meaning. In this process, site and project literally coexist in time and space. The designer becomes one of the many

13 Gilles Clément, "Le geste et le jardin," *Paysage & Aménagement*, no. 7 (1986): 8–15.

14 Alessandro Duranti, and Charles Goodwin, eds., *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

15 Duranti and Goodwin, *Rethinking Context*.

16 Alain Freytet is a French landscape architect whose practice is based in the Limousin region, 150 km south of Paris. His practice crosses a large spectrum of scales spanning the realization of landscape atlases to the design and mapping of protected areas on the Atlantic coast and the Mediterranean.

agents contributing to the continuous dynamics of transformation that are at work in a context. For instance, Pablo Georgieff[17] describes the construction of calendars in which time becomes a tool "to provoke, build, bring into resonance, and make visible, things that can be shared."[18] The effort to visualize time in a synchronic way opens up the project to the possibility of seizing opportunities and entering into a dialogue with multiple layers and temporal registers.

"WHAT PERISHED NEED NOT ALSO BE LOST."[19]

The articulation of multiple time frames manifests itself in the research *Paysage en récit: Pour une approche anthropologique de l'atlas des paysages de la Seine-Saint-Denis* (2014–16) in which we worked with Atelier de l'île, a team of Parisian landscape architects, to produce a landscape atlas for the Seine-Saint-Denis, a territory north of Paris. Conceived by the administration as a "knowledge tool" in contrast to more operational project tools such as landscape plans, landscape atlases have to be produced and updated every ten years by a multidisciplinary team under the supervision of a landscape architect. The official method supported by the French Ministry of Environment has been the object of some discussion precisely because it seeks to introduce a boundary between the production of knowledge and the production of the project: from the point of view of designers, projects also produce knowledge and hence this distinction cannot be made. Many have criticized the landscape atlases for failing to recognize this ambiguity, underlining the fact that traditional geographic atlases are commonly conceived of as a sum of "static" knowledge synthesized at one point in time, and maintaining that landscape dynamics cannot be addressed through this lens. Participating in the production of such an atlas was for us a means of critically reflecting upon the status and role atlases should fulfill.

In the case of the Seine-Saint-Denis, this point is even more relevant, since it is a densely populated urban territory undergoing a major transformation. It becomes therefore unclear what is to be put in the atlas. What is there now? What will be there in the future? Or should we be asking a different question altogether? In this respect, we see this research as an opportunity to study the temporal conjunctions at work between residents, landscape designers, and multi-level administrators. However, the local administration invited us to join this experimental team initially in order to investigate the perception of residents and experience of the landscape from an anthropological point of view. As expected, residents recurringly describe their landscape, or what they perceive as such, as a place that awaits a transformation. They are caught in an interstitial time which articulates what is there with a more or less defined future of what will be there. Due to continual changes, places are fragile, and familiar reference points mostly disappear. In the eyes of the residents, this fragility mirrors their own feelings of uncertainty and precariousness. The rapid-paced transformation also reduces these experiences as residents feel they are confronted with an out-of-reach temporal or spatial scale, including the public media projection of negative images on a historically industrial territory inhabited by working migrant classes, long sequences of building sites, and the dismissal of the day-to-day lives of the residents in administrative decisions. All

17 Pablo Georgieff is a cofounder of the multidisciplinary team Coloco.
18 Georgieff, interview in Parvu, *Landscape Project and Visual Culture*.
19 Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980).

these pragmatic constraints, but also the production of mental and physical images, create a relation to the surroundings that is hostile and that rejects the possibility of a landscape experience.

More interestingly, the residents sometimes describe the experience of landscape as something originating from an immersed corporeal presence in the surrounding reality. It becomes more intense via details, even though fragile, that act like "landscape metaphors" capable of opening up a path into a world of associations and memories: in an urban context, grass blades growing in the middle of a street may lead to a landscape experience. What comes out of the research is the capacity of residents to come to terms with extremely varied temporalities. More specifically, they define the landscape as a way of finding in their active horizon traces of what has disappeared and continues to contribute to the poetry of their everyday. In the words of a resident, when people at the end of their lives have the feeling that the landscape is the opposite of what it was at the beginning, remembered landscapes become an active part of what one actually sees.[20] Numerous residents describe their experience of the landscape as something informed by the history of the changes that occurred while they lived in the Seine-Saint-Denis and contrast it with the lack of such experiences for newcomers who only see what is there in the present.

CONCLUSION

Reading in parallel the testimonies of the residents, which constitutes a significant part of our fieldwork, with the approach of landscape designers proved fruitful insofar as the different experiences and critical-thought process they share problematize urban transformation.

More specifically, at the core of their concerns is the way in which time is invested, questioned, translated, and apprehended by the rhythms, temporalities, and timeframes of large urban projects. Our investigation has enabled the identification of two poles. On the one hand, not taking into account the day-to-day presence of residents experiencing the negative impact and constant changes of their environment over long periods affects the dynamics and future livability of the territories on which these changes take place. In other words, the financial consequences and political decisions that may lead to a radical displacement of the population contribute to maintaining a superficiality of the relation residents build to the place where they live and therefore weaken these territories. On the other hand, taking into account the present tense and the already existing living conditions should not lead to a reduction of the temporal horizon, but on the contrary, to opening it up to an awareness of the tensions that may arise between contradictory temporalities at work.

20 Interview excerpt with a resident, from de Biase et al., *Tales from a Landscape.*