Tracing the development of contemporary park-city relationships: Parc de La Villette and Parc André Citroën

René van der Velde
PhD researcher Urban Landscape Architecture research programme
Department of Urbanism
Faculty of Architecture
Delft University of Technology

Abstract

Since the late post-war period the relationship between park and city has significantly altered. Parks established between 1980 and 2000 in Paris - in particular Parc de La Villette and Parc André Citroën – exemplify developments in park design and the park-city relationship in this period and form precedents for many subsequent parks worldwide. Park designation in this period was related to the reform of public (open) space policy by urban administrations in many European cities in the early 1980s. Parc de La Villette and Parc André Citroën were also seen as tools for spatial, economic and social urban regeneration, and as vehicles for political expression. Developments in the park-city relationship in Parc de La Villette and Parc André Citroën were influenced by their location on former industrial sites; obsolete urban territories were designated as sites for green space, nature and landscape. They necessitated the translation of urban artifacts into landscape space. In these parks there was little 'former' landscape to work with and the importance of the natural and cultural landscape as a basis for place-making diminished. At the same time layers of urban history were integrated into designs. La Villette demonstrates a new and extensive interrelationship between park and city on a spatial-morphological level with the integration of canals, squares and threshold buildings in the design. Moreover, a folie grid was superimposed over the park as an urban layer. The result is a fundamental shift in the distinction between city and park. Site conditions and compositional schemes in both parks resulted in the blurring of the park 'edge' and its extension into the city. City form thus became a landscape architectonic problem again – as city form in Paris was historically a landscape architectonic activity.

Introduction

No park without a city, no city without a park. The *raison d'être* of any park is its urban context: the park as notion and form originated in urban societies and continues to be conceived and constructed in cities around the world. Whether historical or contemporary, urban parks are integral to the formal and spatial organization of cities, to their functioning and programming, to their social and cultural identity and to their ecological value. The makeup of each park forms the starting point for its relationship with the city: its structure, identity and use impact on the formal, spatial and functional makeup of its urban context. Parks also influence the social, cultural and economic attributes of their larger urban context and even that of entire cities. Moreover, approaches to nature and landscape inherent to park planning and design, have an effect on cities and the way we understand, order and act within them. At the same time, the formal, spatial, social, cultural, political and economic urban context impacts on a park. And as with a park's influence on cities, the dominant notions and approaches in city planning and design in a certain period influence park form and the park-city relationship. "How the city is viewed – as a formal and spatial organization, as an array of programs and events, as a set of problems and opportunities, as a metabolic organism, or as a political and administrative body – is crucial to understanding the shifting relationships of parks to them". [1]

Public (open) space reform and new public parks

This research focuses on contemporary park-city relationships in European and North American cities between 1970 and 2010. Major developments in park designation and design occurred in European and North American cities from the late 1970s onwards. Initial developments in the shifting relationship between park and city can be traced to shifts in design thinking and in approaches to park planning and public (open) space policy by urban administrations in European cities arising in the 1970s. In the first

instance, these shifts were caused by reflection and discussion among academics and built environment practitioners on the legacy of the modernist movement and widespread debate on the future direction of planning and design disciplines. In regard to public open space planning and park design, criticism focused among other things, on the decline of landscape architectonic form and the increasingly generic nature of urban green spaces in twentieth century cities.[2] In Paris, the uncertainty within the spatial planning and design disciplines was acted on early by the atelier parisien d'urbanisme (APUR), set up in 1974 by the recently elected mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac. This organization rapidly replaced modernist planning dogmas with a new urban architecture paradigm and the return of centralist thinking.[3] Parks and public open spaces featured prominently in the APUR's vision. A review of public open spaces of the city of Paris drawn up by the APUR in 1981, criticized the technocratic nature of green space and the lack of identifiable, culturally relevant urban parks and gardens.[4] In the report, the APUR proposed the creation of three new urban parks in derelict industrial sites on the edges of the city: Parc de La Villette, Parc André Citroën and Parc de Bercy. (see figure 1)

Parc de la Villette, realized between 1985 and 1995 in Paris' nineteenth arrondissement, was a fifty-five hectare site and the largest public park in central Paris. Its design was the result of an international design competition held in 1982, which attracted 472 entries from thirty-seven countries. The project was won by a team lead by the architect Bernard Tschumi, after a second round submission by nine shortlisted teams. The competition brief drawn up for the competition, reiterated the critique of the mismatch between parks and contemporary urban society. In the briefing documents the Etablissement Public du Parc de la Villette (EPPV) set up to organize the competition, criticized the functioning of modern parks. The authors took a disapproving view of the evolution of the modern urban park. It described the historical decline of Parisian parks, from the vital, social and cultural hubs of the seventeenth and eighteenth century to their current state, which it claimed had become impoverished green spaces with little or no social relevance and a lack of creative consideration. The report lamented the rise of a generic *espace vert* at the cost of identifiable urban landscape typologies such as gardens and parks in the city. In their view parks had lost their importance as centres of activity for a broad spectrum of the urban population and had nothing of the richness and diversity of functions and activities of historic parks and gardens. ''Whole sectors of Paris grow and live around parks, but people no longer venture into them. Distant from the spatial and temporal rhythm of the city, they are bereft both of ritual and of all relevance to daily life.'[5]

Parks and urban regeneration
The initiative for Parc de la Villette however, came about through more than dissatisfaction with the direction of contemporary park design and park use. A revival of interest in the socio-spatial potential of parks for urban renewal developed towards the end of 1970s in a number of European cities.[6] The brief for Parc de la Villette posited the park as a catalyst for urban renewal in the area. At local level, the role of the park in relation to its socio-spatial context was ambitious: it was deemed a critical instrument for the re-animation of the surrounding neighbourhoods of La Villette, Aubervilliers, Pantin and Le Pré Saint-Gervais. 'A study of this district reveals its domination by many industrial and railway sites, which have created as many divisions. The parc de la Villette will not be an island contributing a new element to this isolation. On the contrary, it will actively participate in the revival of the district. The park will accommodate facilities and activities linked to local life.' On a district level, the park was also seen as a new centrality in a proposed institutional development of the north-Eastern and Eastern suburbs. The symbolic character of the Portes Des Flandres and the Porte d'Allemagne, which form the northern and southern boundaries of the site, were targeted. 'The "Portes" (gates) of Paris evoke a powerful symbol of an opening, ...they will concretise the desire to create a "centre" oriented towards the future in the heart of the working-class area of Paris – indicative of a new centrality.'[7] On a larger scale, the park was also envisaged as an important impulse for the whole of Paris and the country, with the establishment of a national museum of science and technology (Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie) and a national centre for education and productions of music and dance

(Cité de la Musique) on the site. Three principles were outlined in the brief for the realisation of these goals: 'the creation of a complex', 'an original cultural project' and 'an urban decision.' The first principle was based on the importance of a "critical mass" of important and varying facilitates, the second on the mix of high and low culture and the third on the creation of a new urban centre for the eastern suburbs. Ostensibly, the brief proposed all of the functions of a thriving city quarter, except housing.[8]

Parks as political projects
The relationship between parks and cities in this period was also influenced by the ambitions of public administrators. The revival of interest in the public space and parks by planners and designers in European cities in the late 1970s was matched by their popularity with politicians. Schemes for parks were increasingly seen as tools to increase the attractiveness of neighbourhoods and in promoting and profiling cities. In the Netherlands, administrators in the cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, Groningen, Rotterdam and Almere began initiatives for the redesign of public spaces and new city parks in the early 1980s. Similar developments occurred in Barcelona in the period 1980-1984. After years of dormancy under the Franco rule, the new socialist administration set out to demonstrate that a new urban society could develop in a new city, starting with interventions and improvements in the city's public space. Lead by urbanist-architect Oriol Bohegas, the city undertook the renovation and construction of a series of parks and squares in the old city and in the periphery of the Cerda 'Ensanche'. Vacant land, infrastructural remnants and abandoned industrial sites were transformed into parks and squares with distinctive programmes and expressive designs. In these projects, parks were posited as centres of civic life and urban culture, providing infrastructures for social and cultural interaction for new urban communities.[9]

A confluence of political and spatial developments in Paris had a similar effect on the designation of - and briefing for - Parc de la Villette. After an failed initiative to develop low-income housing and public open space on the La Villette site after the closure of the cattle market and abattoir in 1974, the French government, which had formally taken over control of the site from the city of Paris in 1970, announced a decision to designate it as a public park in 1979. Under president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a series of projects was initiated around Paris. His successor, François Mitterand (1916-96) amalgamated the projects initiated by d'Estaing into a new initiative, the *Grands Projets*, timed for the celebrations of the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989. The park ideally suited the cultural and political aspirations Mitterand had for the *Grands Projets*, intended to re-affirm the technological, cultural and political pre-eminence of the French nation in the run-up to bicentennial. Deyan Sudjic describes the projects as 'a highly self-conscious attempt to remodel the fundamental character of Paris, a mixture of hubris and cultural ambition that could only be French.' [10] The la Villette site was seen as a key location in the *Grands Projets* initiative, and lead to the proposal for a national museum of science and a music centre to be incorporated into the park. The decision to incorporate the museum of science and the music centre into the scheme had an unmistakable impact on the programme of the park, and on its design. Integrating two large cultural institutions into a park set a new precedent for urban parks after la Villette. The choice of organization for la Villette was also indicative of the heightened political focus on the park's designation and design: the EPPV was set up and funded by the French government in 1979 to develop the projects as a joint initiative.. Terms such as 'pluralism' and 'innovation' were used to illustrate the way the park was intended to make Paris once more to the cultural centre of the world. In the process of reinventing itself as a centre for cultural and technological innovation, La Villette illustrates how an urban park was seen as a key factor in increasing the attraction and identity of cities, with calculated economic and cultural spinoffs.

Brownfield Parks
The formal and spatial relationship between park and city at la Villette contrasts to earlier park-city relationships in various ways. In the first place, the history of the location of the park prior to its designation impacted on the formal and spatial park-city relationship in a very literal sense: the basis for the park was

determined by multiple layers of urban history. Repeated urban transformations from various historical periods occurred on and around the park site over the course of three centuries leading up to the park's designation. Between 1700 and 1975, at least five urban transformations of the territory are apparent. The first period (1700-1795) saw the construction of two arterial roads leading out of the city towards Flanders – the Rue de Flandre, and Germany – the Rue d'Allemagne, which formed a catalyst for urban development in and around a village known as La Villette. A second wave of development occurred in the early nineteenth century, with the construction of a sixty-kilometre long diversion canal for fresh water supply, the Canal de l'Ourcq, in the La Villette depression, and the Canal St-Martin, connecting the La Villette basin to the Seine in the south via the Arsenal basin. A third canal was dug between a meander of the Seine in the north to the l'Ourcq canal system: the Canal St-Denis. The development of transport over these canals catalysed industrial and warehouse development along the canal routes including in the area of the park. In this period the park context was progressively sub-urbanized in so-called 'faubourgs'. A third period of transformation occurred in the late eighteenth century, when la Villette area underwent further transformations during the reign of Napoleon III. In 1860 the village of La Villette was annexed in the expansion of the city from twelve to twenty arrondissements. In the same period a new military defence wall, the Ramparts of Thiers, was constructed around the city, on the site of the existing Boulevard Périphérique. The site itself underwent a radical transformation in 1867 when George-Eugéne Haussmann presided over the construction of a 40-hectare cattle market and abattoir complex on the site of the present-day park. Three large halls, constructed under the direction of the architect Janvier, held and livestock during sales. The largest of these, the Grande Halle, was 240 metres long and 87 metres wide. The fourth period of transformation occurred in the early twentieth century. The ramparts of Thiers had become obsolete and were dismantled in 1919, and were replaced by a ring road around the city: the 'boulevard militaire'. Métro lines seven and five were also constructed in this period. In the last transformation before the park's construction, a new abattoir was constructed on the site of the old abattoir building (the Grande Salle) and operated until 1974, when it was converted to the Cité des Sciences. The Boulevard Périphérique was completed in 1973 on the site of the 'boulevard militaire'. (see figure 2)

At the time of the site's designation as a park in 1982, urban relics from all five periods remained on the site and its surrounds including an assortment of canals, boulevards, motorways and rail-lines, major buildings and structures including the Grand Halle and its accompanying pavilions and the converted 1960s abattoir building (the Cité des Sciences), which the competition brief required be incorporated into the design. The park therefore, was not so much about the translation of an existing landscape into an urban park, but rather the transformation of an existing urban area into an urban park. In North America, parks on former industrial sites later became known as brownfield parks. The development of parks on sites of former urban uses is not necessarily new; parks on 'brownfield' sites appeared sporadically throughout the history of public park designation. Parc des Buttes-Chaumont for instance, completed in 1869, lies on the site of a former quarry and refuse tip. These cases however, can be considered exceptions to the dominant form of park designation prior to la Villette. In contrast to the practice of laying out public parks on greenfield sites, or converting existing urban green areas such as hunting forests and palace gardens to parkland, la Villette marks the beginning of a fundamental shift in park designation in which defunct industrial complexes increasingly became designated and developed as public parks.

Layering and park-city composition
Another important shift in the formal and spatial relationship between park and city at la Villette lies in the integration of city form and park composition in the design scheme itself. Tschumi's scheme separated the park composition into the now well-known three-layer diagram of points, lines and planes. This scheme essentially proposed three contrasting form layers instead of one, each drawn from (and for) a different set of programmatic and spatial parameters. The scheme them juxtaposed each layer on top of each other, with the intention of generating unexpected confrontations and combinations between functions and spaces in

time and space. In terms of composition, this scheme broke with the prevailing approach to spatial organization of parks, which unvaryingly involved arrangement of spaces and programmes within a single composition, and invariably on a single plane. This approach stemmed from Tschumi's earlier theoretical work, which questioned the idea of structure and composition, in line with contemporary research on literary texts. '... the superimposition of three coherent structures can never result in a super-coherent mega-structure, but in something undecidable, something that is the opposite of a totality.' [11] A factor in the development of this approach was the size and complexity of the park brief. The park was expected to accommodate an unprecedented number of facilities whose area exceeded the physical area of the site. It also required a corresponding density of urban activity in the park. Tschumi's strategy was to divide the programme across different layers, making it possible to effectively accommodate the programmatic demands of the brief within the site boundaries. The ability to conceptualize such an approach is also linked to developments in the techniques and methods of architectural and landscape representation. Tschumi himself had a personal objective with the proposal: '... to prove that it was possible to construct a complex architectural organisation without resorting to traditional rules of composition, hierarchy and order'.[12] Clearly, it was also intended as a design strategy to create an alternative spatial schema, in order to subvert the spatial dominance of the giant *Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie* and the *Grande Halle*.

In physical terms, the result of this strategy is the distribution of built form throughout the park, as compared to concentrating it in one area or within one (landscape) composition; red and green, abiotic and biotic, city and landscape, occur together, and in unexpected combinations. As a design approach, the scheme experiments with a new relationship between building and garden, between park and city, and between landscape and the urban realm, unprecedented at this scale before. The result is a hybrid spatial tissue, which contests the notion of urban, landscape and architectonic typologies. Elements from traditional parks, such as the 'three natures' – garden, meadow and wilderness – are absent or supressed. At the same time, the composition makes no reference to established urban or architectonic typologies. In that sense, the Tschumi scheme can be said to be still grounded in the modernist rejection of typology. This contrasted with notions being developed by his contemporaries in which typology was making a reappearance. Another implication of the compositional layering approach is the transition from city to park. In contrast to the integration of the transition from park to city in the composition schemes of nineteenth and twentieth century city parks, the resolution of the transition from park to city at la Villette was largely ignored. According to Tschumi ' La Villette is anti-contextual, it has no relation to its surroundings. Its plan subverts the very notion of borders on which "context" depends.'[13] In the end however, the borders were resolved, albeit not in a consistent fashion and not as a product of the design concept. The threshold zones at la Villette differ markedly from each other and can be categorized into three sorts: the thresholds to the Avenue Corentin Cariou and the Avenue Jean Jaurés north and south of the park, the interface with the boulevard Périphérique, and the threshold to the west formed by the canal Saint Denis and the former dock: the Petit Darse.

Composition of urban space as landscape
In its final form, the scheme turned out to be a less radical composition than it initially seemed. Elements from the three compositional layers – the *folie* grid (points), the *galeries* (lines) and the *Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie* (science museum) and *Grande Halle* from the planes layer - align neatly with each other. These elements in turn are aligned to the geometry of the Canal de l'Ourcq and the La Villette basin. Alan Tate reflected that Tschumi's first-stage entry '... was more adventurous than the second-stage entry, which was dominated by a regular, almost classical axiality.' [14] This observation however, is indicative not only of an evolution in the design process itself, but also of a larger shift in the way the city was being viewed and given form in Tschumi's park proposal. The alignment of the *folie* grid and *galeries* to the geometry of the Canal de l'Ourcq and the La Villette basin can be seen as much more than an adroit use of an existing feature; they indicate the reappearance of the assimilation of city and countryside via the axial organization of space and

the treatment of the horizon. The catalyst for this development is the presence of the Ourcq canal in the park, flowing east to the junction with the Saint-Denis canal and forming, with the La Villette basin, a continuous axis of water over 2 kilometres in length, stretching back to the Ledoux Rotunda. The brief underpinned this intention by requiring in the competition attention to this relationship. Tschumi's alignment of the *folie* grid on the canal axis integrated the park into the major urban axis of the la Villette basin, effectively extending its axiality by aligning built form along the axis the length of the park. The placement of the fifth row of follies together with the *galerie* de l'Ourq directly on the south bank of the canal, further reinforced the axis. This ensemble of canal-follies-galerie thus forms an architectonic complement to the existing La Villette basin ensemble.

The integration of the La Villette basin axis in Parc de la Villette is a return to a landscape architectonic technique developed in the seventeenth century residential landscape of Paris for the spatial unification of city and countryside via a coherent formal system, based on the axial organisation of space. Economic, technological, cultural and scientific advancements fuelled by the centralisation of political power in the French capital in the seventeenth century facilitated the development of this system, which originated in the Jardin des Tuileries. Between 1664 and 1680, André Le Nôtre converted Tuileries from a rational court garden into a three kilometre long axial ensemble of spaces extending west through the city walls and across the Seine to the Butte de Chaillot - the so-called *Coers-la-Rheine*. Beyond the horizon this axis turned into a regional thoroughfare connecting to other palaces outside the city. In the latter half of seventeenth century this technique was deployed for the layout of an extensive network of formal avenues, gardens and country estates developed around the city. Their component parts were geometry, architectonic objects and the morphology of the landscape.[15] The layout of the bassin de la Villette, constructed between 1802 and 1815, was also designed along these principles. In the design engineers transformed this technical feature into an urban project, creating an 800 metre long, six-hectare large basin on the axis of the - then rear of the - Ledoux Rotunda. The symmetrical composition was bolstered by the construction of the twin buildings of the Magasins Généraux at the eastern end of the basin.

Over time, this formal network of axis in Paris was subjected by urban growth and change. Steenbergen and Reh outline the strategic potential of the axis within the urban field: 'The "spatial telescope" from the old heart of Paris and the top of the Buttes de Chaillot that André Le Nôtre devised … was projected in the direction that the city was growing. The axis was an attempt to preserve the relationship with the open landscape, which had been contested for centuries already by the centre of the growing city. As the city grew out over the axis, the formal space was included in the urban morphology, step by step. Finally, the "spatial telescope" became an urban space.' They also argue that the axis functioned as a catalyst for urban development, by forming strategic lines of force in the city, embodying the city's dynamics and providing new stimulus for it. Tschumi's alignment of the park's geometries to the canal testifies to this catalytic attraction of the axis. In the original scheme, he proposed a continuation of folies the entire length of the basin – albeit only on one side. It also reveals a shift - arising in Tschumi's work and developed later in Parc André Citroën - towards a consideration of the city as a compositional problem for landscape architectonic techniques of spatial organization. The shift towards landscape – and the landscape architectonic repertoire - for understanding and giving form to cities is an important milestone of the la Villette project. (see figure 3)

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