

# The Versatile Monument Question: Parc de la Villette as Managed Reality

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## PROJECT NAME

Parc de la Villette

## LOCATION

Paris, 19th district

## CLIENT

French national government (presidency)

## DATES OF STUDY

Idea competition in 1976;  
International Building competition in 1982–1983

## DATES OF CONSTRUCTION

1983 until 1998  
Several projects have been constructed in the park since 1998. The latest building to be realized is the Philharmonie de Paris, inaugurated in January 2015.

## SURFACE AREA

50 ha

## TOTAL COST

€ 848 million

## Abstract

This essay examines Parc de la Villette through what will be defined as the ‘versatile monument’ question, in order to discuss a nonlinear—in other words, a dynamic—relationship between the processes of project commission, design and implementation, and site management. The first part elaborates on what is at stake in the ‘versatile monument’ and how this problematic was clearly embodied in the Parc de La Villette competition brief. The second and third segments describe how the park is used today, through observations about its various spaces and buildings, and explain the managerial mechanisms that invisibly steer this daily public theater. The two descriptions are then brought back to the question of how could one achieve, or sustain, versatility and durability in La Villette. The proposed perspective is to bring design and management into a learning feedback loop as is occurring, even if only nominally, in a very different district of Paris that is worth comparing here: the business hub of La Défense.

*Adaptative strategies / appropriation of public space /  
everyday urbanism / park management / versatility*



Figure 1 The three stages of the park:

1976: B. Tschumi entry for the Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (APUR) idea competition, with housing unit on the east side along the Boulevard Périphérique and an open park on the west side towards the city center.

1982–1983: B. Tschumi winning scheme for Parc de la Villette competition with the main built elements: the existing Grande Halle, Cité des sciences, Cité de la musique, and the grid of follies.

2015: Current state with new built elements including Zenith and the recently opened Philharmonie de Paris.

To consider Parc de la Villette as a 'versatile monument' in the making opens up a line of thinking that places commission, design, and subsequent site management, normally considered sequentially, into a dynamic relational field. 'Versatile' is used here as the capability of adapting to different activities, not only to their simple rotation but also to changing and unforeseeable demands of the site; a 'monument' signifies an edifice marked by endurance that carries a collective meaning. [1] The 'versatile monument' question finds a resonance today in our daily professional challenges to deliver flexible, yet fixed and enduring solutions for qualitative open space in uncertain climates of weakened planning institutions, which are subject to quickly changing economical, political, even societal circumstances. [2] This question of building in, or for, uncertainty was very consciously addressed as a modern problem at the time of the competition and was thereby incorporated into the La Villette competition brief, creating a precedent for competitions. [3] François Barré (who, in 1981, was put in charge of the redevelopment of La Villette and who would continue for years to manage its activities, including initiating and overseeing the design competition) wrote a text for the 1982 Venice biennale catalogue, *Fréquence modernité*, on the Zeitgeist of 1980's. In it, he advocates that modernity *per se* is elusive; that it cannot be understood without considering notions such as impermanence, movement, people flow, networks, and information. Even an iconic building of mod-

ern times like the Centre Pompidou cannot be granted a status of permanent monumentality. It is only the immense flow of visitors and the structure's consecutive 'violent deterioration' that are signs, in equal measure, of its modern nature (*Biennale de Paris section architecture: 1982*).

There was a long period of debates and public decisions before the brief itself progressed. In the beginning, it was the intention only to implement the Cité des sciences; later, this was extended to include the Cité de la musique. In the 1976 ideas competition, organized by the Atelier Parisien d'urbanisme (APUR) to redevelop the site of the former slaughterhouse district, all the proposals resembled collages of a city in miniature (*Paris-Projet 1976: 60*), with a large number of housing and office units, and a large hospital that would have significantly reduced the potential that this become the largest park within the Périphérique, which today counts 55 ha, including 33,5 ha of open spaces (Fig. 1). In the initial competition, the park would have amounted to 15 ha. That La Villette should become a park was secondary (Orlandini 2004: 32); however, it is clearly this identity that lends the site its monumentality today, by unifying all of the other content within its 'park' surface. The idea that the park would constitute the central and binding element linking nature and culture (unified by the two poles of science and art) had matured by the time of the official launch of the decisive competition in 1982.



Figure 2 The success of the park resides mainly in its big open lawns, where small groups and families gather on the weekends.

Furthermore, Parc de la Villette represented a site for the realization of the political ambitions of François Mitterrand, who was looking for an opportunity to reinvent Paris and, equally important, the cultural ambitions of François Barré. With his *grands travaux*, Mitterrand sought to form monuments, or symbols, of permanent modern Parisian identity (Adler, L. 2003). Barré was, in another respect, looking for a site able to host the multifaceted ways of producing and manifesting culture in a metropolitan context faced with a positive uncertainty and plurality (Barzilay, Hayward, Lombard-Valentino 1984: 17). The brief had asked for a totality: ‘an immense *Gesamtkunstwerk*’ that would place international cultural institutions in a working class district bordering the suburbs, and for a surface that would inspire multiple cultural productions on different scales, with a significant focus on alternative cultures not supported (enough or by their nature) by formal institutions (Orlandini 2004: 178). The idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was behind the times regarding the evolving debate on planning, which was most prominently forwarded by the Bauhaus and reflected rather well the *Zeitgeist* of the first wave of modernist constructions of the last century; for example, the wave of ‘grand plans’ (Gropius 1962).

On the topic of the demand to provide differentiated cultural content ‘within’ a park structure, Barré would later note in an interview: ‘[...] most [of the landscape architects] haven’t been able to consider both elements. The proposals [...] were not very convincing in general, and difficult to read. The proposal of [Bernard] Tschumi with the grid of follies was the perfect answer to the concept of *ville-jardin* described by the brief’ (Orlandini 2004: 183). The winning proposal had fulfilled the programmatic requests through a formal interplay of landscape and architectural elements, as well as structures that create complementarities, disruptions, and unexpected sequences throughout, producing what Jean Nouvel described as ‘a new poetry [...] born out of the unavoidable meeting of technology and nature: a poetry of reality’ (Barzilay, Hayward, Lombard-Valentino 1984: 81). [4] In this light, it is worthwhile for our frame of inquiry to compare how architecture and the landscape in La Villette have evolved differently under current management policies.





Figure 3 The promenade along the Canal de l'Ourcq is used extensively by a number of different groups—pedestrians, bicycle riders, and boat commuters—and on different levels via the street and elevated pathway.

### Parc de la Villette today

A crucial part of our analysis is based on the observation of La Villette today, in order to understand what the park really is and to take some distance from the professional rhetorical canon that surrounds it. The majority of the extensive written work on Parc de la Villette focuses on criticizing Tschumi's concept and overlooks the nature of what is happening on the site today, or ascribes it as a failure of his concept. [5] Our observations are framed by a line of thought that focuses on exactly those discrepancies that emerge between the initial design and the site's actuality such as, 'the cultural experience of sites through their use and modification which augments the potentialities and the original moment of creation' (Hunt 2004), but also the cultural modifications that digress from the initial project. Our *flânerie*, in the inquisitive spirit of Debord (1955), revealed some important complexities of how the park is appropriated by its users, providing a qualitative reading of its success.

There was a pleasing, busy animation of the park during a sunny Saturday in September. The generous open lawns were fully occupied by small groups (Fig. 2), while the promenade along the Canal de l'Ourcq was being used extensively (Fig. 3). The attraction of La Villette proves to reside pri-



Figure 4 The equestrian center is clearly cut off from its surroundings and is one of the many areas not accessible to the public without a membership / entrance fee.





Figure 5 A line of provisional playgrounds, including a merry go-round and a climbing tower, fence off the Galerie de la Villette's open plaza.



Figure 6 A provisional wooden buvette has emerged along the pedestrian north-south axis; it stands out from the park design by its provisional structure.



Figure 7 The environmental and educational garden Jardins Passagers was installed after the Gilles Clement exhibition Jardin Planetaire in 2001 and has recently been extended. It is the main biodiversity action taken by the park, on a surface of 3,000 m<sup>2</sup> (1 percent of the park's open space area).



Figure 8 The N5 folly is leased out to a physiotherapist center, which is disconnected from surrounding open space. The black curtain creates privacy and prevents the curious from seeing what is happening inside.



Figure 9 Poorly maintained, the N7 folly hosts a first aid station and is seldomly used for main outdoor events in the summer.

- CULTURAL
  1. Event space „Zénith“
  2. Event space „Trabendo“
  3. Event space „Cabaret sauvage“
  4. Paris Villette theater
  5. Hall de la chanson
  6. Cinéma boat
- COMMERCIAL
  7. Bookstore Actes Sud
  8. Parking Vinci
  9. Restaurant „My Boat“
  10. Restaurant „La Villette enchantée“
  11. Restaurant „Quick“
  12. Folie cafe La Villette
  13. Merry-go-round
  14. Skullys
  15. Poney club
  16. Dynamic cinema CINAXE
  17. Association “Jazz en orchestre national”
  18. Music observatory
  19. Physiotherapie center

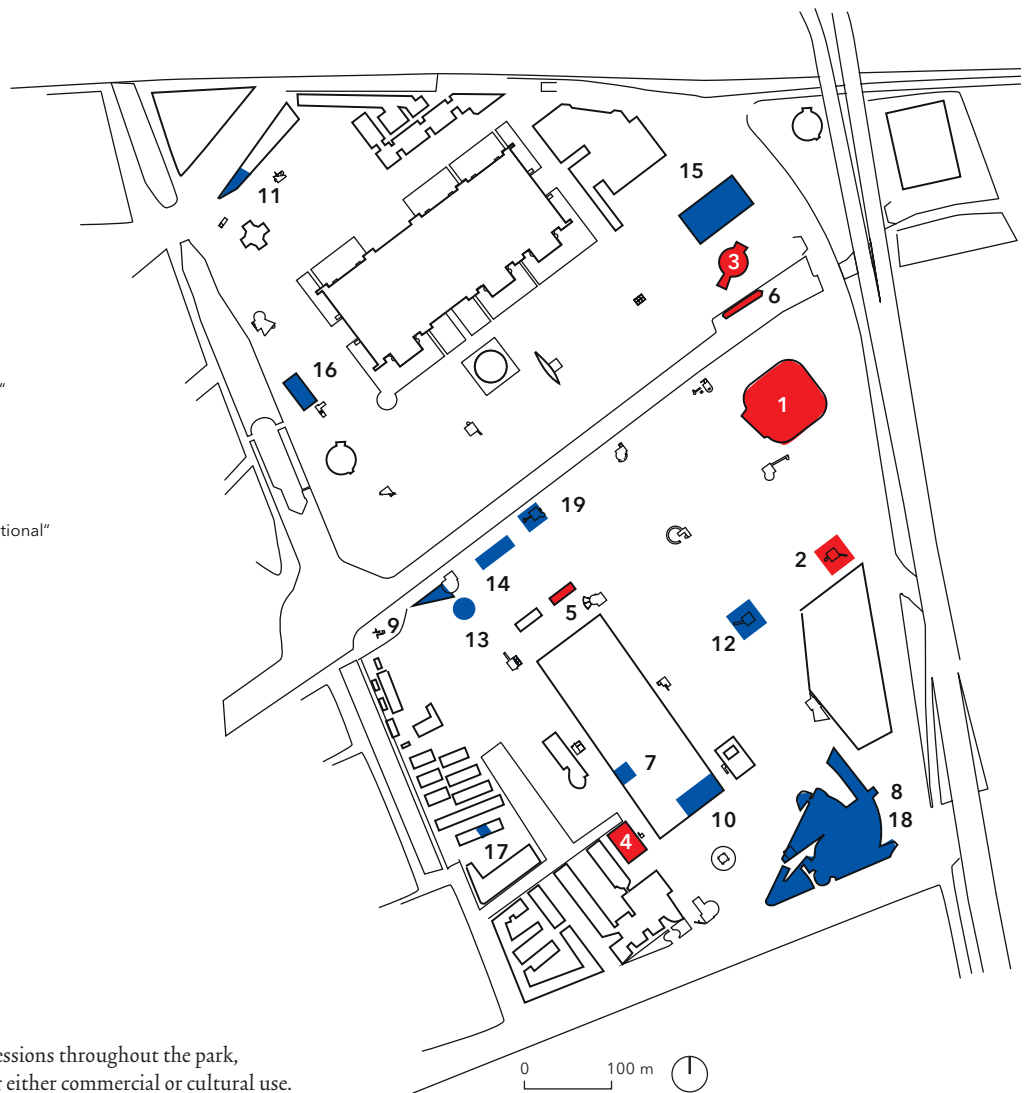


Figure 10 Map of the private concessions throughout the park, which are private or public and for either commercial or cultural use.

marily in its open structure because most of the buildings are closed or require an entrance fee, such as the equestrian center situated on the park's northeast side (Fig. 4). Curiously, our most important finding was the discovery of many interstitial 'accidents' housing a variety of activities, clearly observable as new additions to the original project. Along the main structural north-south axis, the Galerie de la Villette, the stroller is confronted with multiple fences surrounding a playground area, reclaiming an open plaza and obstructing the walkway (Fig. 5). Further south along the lane, a self-made buvette has emerged (Fig. 6). The provisional structure surprises by its generic aspect standing oddly apart from the park's design. A little further west, the garden area, Jardins passagers, is an ecological and educational urban farm with a provisional restaurant and gathering space (Fig. 7). The garden was neatly cut off from the rest of the park by a wooden fence, doubling as a hedge.

The chaotic structure of the park today, although intended by Tschumi to 'emphasize the urban quality of the park with density, heterogeneity, conflict, contradiction' (Tschumi,

B., Walker, E., 2006), is confronted by these modern additions that claim their own singularity: lying physically within the park limits, they are conceptually independent. This strange juxtaposition provokes curiosity about the management of La Villette. Why reclaim and transform a well-functioning open area, while other spaces, not to mention buildings, seem abandoned? During our visit, there were a lot of derelict or shut down follies (Figs. 8, 9), which begs the question why does the infrastructure of La Villette not absorb this inventory within its logics as was the project intent; in other words, could not a folly be easily turned into a play maze? [6]

### Management politics

The buvette, the pony circuit, and the temporary playgrounds are private concessionaires (Fig. 10)—new developments installed and leased out by the public management institution of the park, the Établissement Public du Parc et de la Grande Halle de la Villette (EPPGHV). Although it is a public institution with a public mandate, the leasing of the park's facilities and spaces is done discreetly. In 2013, concessions





Figure 11 The Zenith event space, originally intended as a temporary structure was the first concession implanted in the park. It opened in 1982, five years before the official park opening.



Figure 12 The P7 folly café was rehabilitated and reopened in 2014. It hosts a franchised catering facility.



Figure 13 Map of the biodiversity concessions throughout the park.

represented 22 percent of the park's self-generated turnover. Between 2008 and 2013, the EPPGHV has increased revenues coming from concessions by 86 percent (EPPGHV 2014), a figure representative of the growing pressure on the EPPGHV to seek out its own funding. The concept of *concessionnaires* has existed since the park's inception, the first of which was the Zenith (Fig. 11), which preceded the park's inauguration by three years. Today, there are many different forms of public-private partnerships that help the park function, from leasing out the park's infrastructure to providing space for commercial and cultural content, which is privately run, like the cafeteria that has been installed in one of the follies (Fig. 12).

Concerns over La Villette's public image have brought about another series of interventions intended to expand the biodiversity of the park by transforming parts of its landscape (Fig. 13). The previously described *Jardins passagers* was founded after awareness was raised about biology and ecological issues, having been provoked by the exhibition *Jardin planétaire*, curated by Gilles Clement in 1999 and held in the Grande Halle (Clement, G., Sarti, R., 1999). As of 2011, the park has its own Agenda 21 and is implementing numerous

projects to enrich biodiversity: the installation of bird and insect hotels and the sowing of flower meadows maintained by urban grazing (Fig. 14), plantation of a conservatory orchard, to name a few. These projects are widely publicized, although they lack importance in terms of size: the *jardins passagers* comprises 3,000 m<sup>2</sup> (1 percent of the total open park area), the conservatory orchard is planted with only 21 trees (the park count is 3,000 in total). They remain enclosed and independent within the park, again going against the grain of the park's initial concept of an absorptive infrastructure.

Over the years, a variety of buildings dedicated to different uses have emerged filling in the surfaces of La Villette (Figs. 1, 15), such as commercial lease for the Pavilion Paul Delouvrier, or an educational purpose for the Argonaut submarine (Fig. 16). The latest addition is the Philharmonie de Paris by Jean Nouvel (Fig. 17). In the concept elaboration phase, Tschumi responded to the question of whether the Zenith would 'damage' the overall concept by saying that





Figure 14 As part of the biodiversity politic of the park, sheep can be discovered grazing on ecological meadows, scattered around the park area.

the competition drawing was not to be understood as a blueprint, but rather as an illustration of a conceptual matrix for the park (Barzilay, Hayward, Lombard-Valentino 1984: 26). Tschumi supervised the park development until its official completion in 1998, but the concessions continued to extend after that date. The physical restriction in the modular architecture of the follies has certainly played a role in the opportunistic reclaiming of La Villette's open spaces—it is simply more functional and economic to reclaim the available open space rather than invest in the existing structures, albeit the follies were intended to be interchangeable in terms of names and uses (Tschumi, B., Walker, E., 2006: 21).

### The shape of things to come

As a built *Gesamtkunstwerk*, La Villette functions like a city, as was indeed intended: ephemeral, permanent, bustling with many silent pockets, with an incessant rotation of activities, and movement of different groups of people. Its development and open space management is conducted by a multiplicity of organizational structures steered by motivations of various stakeholders. This diversity is a quality, and can be used as a starting point for defining an integrated process of design and management. [7] The 'accidents' of La Villette are indicators of social vitality and demand, although

by being implemented opportunistically they risk partitioning the overall inclusive structure of the park. They should continue to evolve in response to a collected experience that identifies, maintains, and augments what La Villette is, allowing it to keep developing in concert with its 'everyday life' and without exposing the whole to a loss of its monumental character (Crawford 1999),.

For an answer as to what tools can help La Villette achieve being a 'versatile monument' in the long run, it is relevant to look at another important monumental city part in Paris and its recent transformation—La Défense, developed on a large site on the eastern periphery of central Paris as the city's primary business district. Similar to La Villette, it is a monumental site and forges a distinct image for Paris. La Défense has had a single managing entity overseeing its development since 1958: the *Établissement Public pour l'Aménagement de la Région de la Défense* (EPAD). EPAD expanded geographically [8]; and, in 2010 the *Établissement Public de Gestion du Quartier d'Affaires de la Défense* (Defacto) was born as an independent public institution with the charge to manage and optimize the existing open and underground space of the site, addressing increasing renovation problems that emerged due to the very particular condition that La Défense was built on a massive concrete infrastructural deck (the 30

1. Cite administrative - 1975
2. Zenith - 1984
3. Big top space - 1990
4. L'argonaute - 1991
5. Pavillon Paul Delouvier - 1991
6. Cabaret sauvage - 1997
7. Espace peripherique - 2009
8. Halle aux cuirs - 2002
10. Philharmonie de Paris - 2015

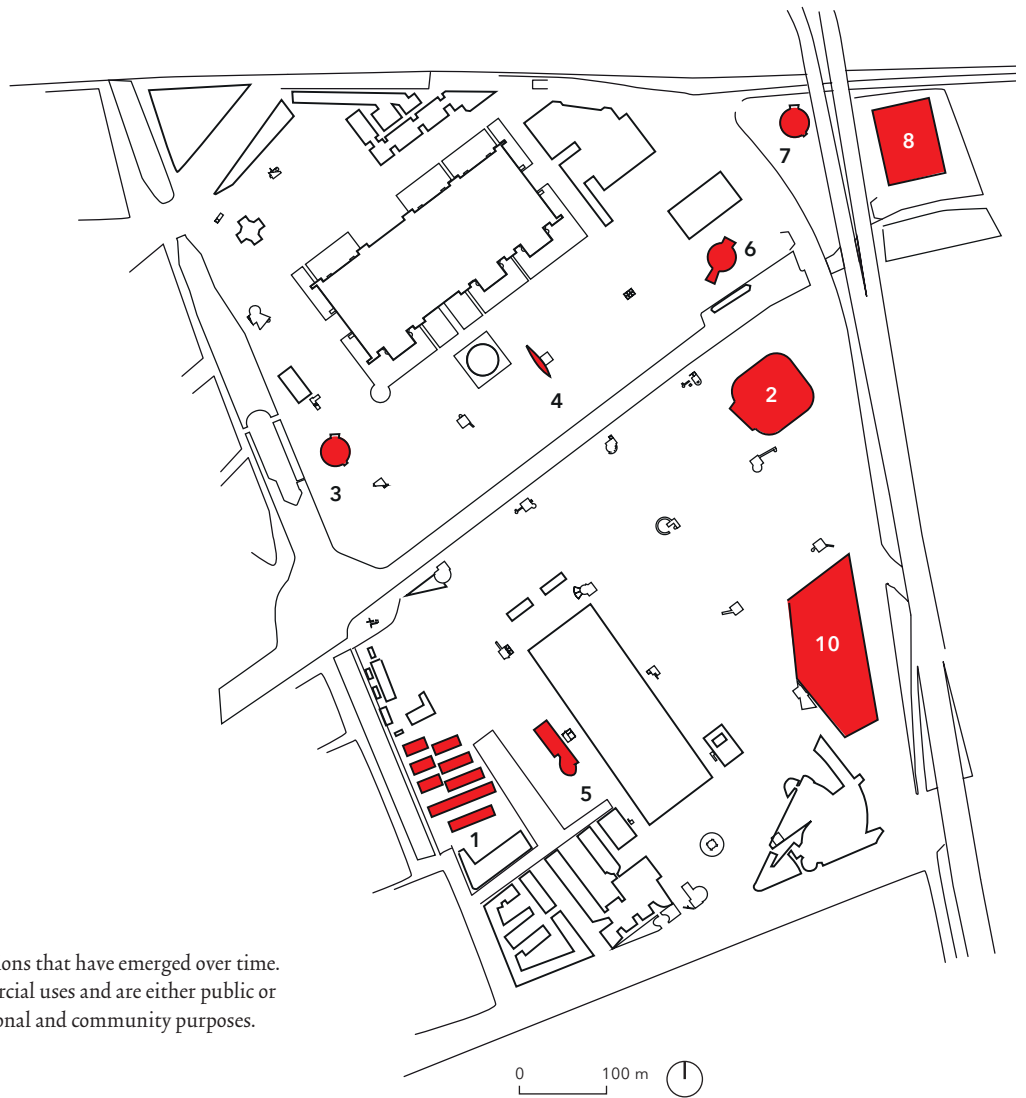


Figure 15 Map of the physical concessions that have emerged over time. The buildings host cultural or commercial uses and are either public or private. The open spaces serve educational and community purposes.



Figure 16 The Argonaute, a former military submarine, landed in the park in 1991 and is used as an educational facility.



Figure 17 The Philharmonie de Paris, under construction during our visit, opened in January 2015. It is the latest addition to the park's concessions.





Figure 18 The towering business district of La Défense rests upon a large infrastructural block, which has become the focus of conversion, renovation, and restructuring.

ha underground counts six levels of parking, commercial, and service space), which is now ageing (Fig. 18). In 2012, Defacto commissioned an innovative tool called ‘plan guide’—a guideline for a coherent management project for the open spaces of La Défense, addressing specific topics including functions, materiality, public image, ecology, soft mobility, lighting, and the like. [9] The management plan will then be used as a framework for launching a series of major implementation projects on the 160 ha territory over the next fifteen to twenty years.

In this instance, the plan guide serves to identify the resources (latent and used) of the site and elaborates therefrom a territorial reconfiguration as a new strategy of management that steers future design. It detaches itself from the more conventional masterplan by an extreme flexibility, able to adapt and embrace a diversity of new development potentialities. Essentially, it is a toolbox with a catalogue of implementable strategies—profiting from collected experience, over time, of the site itself—and of other similar project references. [10] The establishing of Defacto can be read as a way to give autonomy to the open spaces of La Défense. Compared to La Villette, it is almost an example in reverse: La Villette is a park, that is also a cultural hub of Paris, where the EPPGHV is literally giving a lot of ground in order to maintain its cultural programme, while La Défense is an economic hub whose rigid form collapses under a pressure to introduce ur-

ban complexity where before mono-functionality reigned.

La Villette is already seen at an advantage due to its urban complexity and flexible terrain. However, an observation of how the park functions and is managed today reveals that it would profit from the creation of strategic tools to identify and preserve its quality of openness, the giving of ground for more efficient and sustainable new developments, consideration of the qualities of its existing heritage, and investment in the renovation of its unoccupied structures. Such a framework would provide an opportunity for the park’s management to guide all new developments—whether they be monumental, like the Philharmonie or modest, like the educational garden, or whether be they private, public, or both—in order to ensure the best relationship with its direct surroundings, contextually as well as conceptually.

Guiding the development of a complex site with the double aim of a global coherence and an extreme heterogeneity is a highly ambitious challenge, as ambitious as the prescriptions of the 1980s competition brief were. La Villette had a leading role in the evolution of landscape architecture and with the appropriate tools, the park has the possibility of remaining a reference for future generations as an enduring and flexible monument.

## NOTES

All photographs and maps taken and produced by the authors

1 While the Latin *momentum* refers to 'remind' and the word finds its general use as a 'memorial', for us the understanding of the word implies the notion of becoming, for example that not every intended monument is by default vested with collective meaning (Rossi 1982). Furthermore, we understand the word as denoting a representative identity when it takes on an iconic value (Choay 1988).

2 The conditions of planning that we work in today result from two antagonizing forces that have transformed the planning profession in the twentieth century: on the one hand deregularization, on the other—and as a reaction to the consequences of 'free market' effects to city growth—a call for democratization and new participative models of planning that even today in most places are only beginning to form. For a brief yet concise overview of this evolution see, for instance, Fontenot, A. (2015) "Notes Toward A History of Non-Planning", *Places Journal*, January (<https://placesjournal.org/article/notes-toward-a-history-of-non-planning>); for a related overview of this debate in France see, for instance, Cupers, K. (2014) "The Social Project", *Places Journal*, April (<https://placesjournal.org/article/the-social-project>) or Tissot, S. (2007) *L'État et les quartiers: Genèse d'une catégorie de l'action publique* (Paris: Editions Seuil).

3 A good summary of the brief can be found in Barzilay, M., Hayward, C. and Lombard-Valentino, L. (1984) *L'invention du Parc, Parc de la Villette, Paris Concours International*, (Paris: Graphite Editions / E.P.P.V.).

4 For further reading on the winning concept refer to, for instance, Tschumi, B. (2014) *Tschumi Parc de la Villette* (London: Artifice Books on Architecture), or Tschumi, B. and Walker, E. (2006) *Tschumi on Architecture: Conversations with Enrique Walker* (New York NY: Monacelli Press).

5 Turner puts the ethical question clearly forward, but constructs his critique around the concept, only alluding to the fact that La Villette could also have a future as a real estate carpet. See [www.gardenvisit.com/history\\_theory/library\\_online\\_ebooks/architecture\\_city\\_as\\_landscape/parc\\_de\\_la\\_villette\\_real\\_estate\\_development](http://www.gardenvisit.com/history_theory/library_online_ebooks/architecture_city_as_landscape/parc_de_la_villette_real_estate_development)

6 The question of the use of the follies is not new and was already raised during the conception process, where the neighboring inhabitants showed their surprise regarding some of the pavilions planned without uses while, at the same time, they were requesting more local amenities, like children's day-care. See the caricature 'Occupons les follies vides!' in collectif La Villette, 1983, [www.des-gens.net/A-La-Villette-la-concertation-a-l](http://www.des-gens.net/A-La-Villette-la-concertation-a-l)

7 Many approaches to urban design and redefinitions of the role of the architect have emerged from the aforementioned debate surrounding democratization in planning. Perhaps it is central to indicate here Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, as one of the most clear attempts at theorizing the everyday rhythm and routine of the city, and Margaret Crawford's *Everyday Urbanism* as one of the classic examples of redefining the architect / urban planner as someone who takes the everyday as the starting point in design and who designs in a processual manner involving multiple stakeholders: 'As articulated by its practitioners, urban design requires a wide range of skills, including the ability to design environments that integrate nature into the city, to shape and enact ordinance-based design policies, to facilitate public debates, to serve as advocate for the disadvantaged and disgruntled, and to develop pattern languages of appropriate building typologies' (Crawford 1999: 103).

8 Transforming into EPADESA, *Établissement public d'aménagement de La Défense Seine Arche*.

9 The final delivery of the winning plan was in 2014, led by architectural team AWP (Marc Armengaud, Matthias Armengaud, and Alessandra Cianchetta) with the support of HHF (Basel), and sustainability / economy consultancies Grontmij, LEA, Jonction. The area of the project is 161 ha, and the overall cost of the study is €9 million.

10 To cite another example, in 2013 the city of Prague created a public space agency, *Kancelář veřejného prostoru*, and they have published a catalogue of successful 'accidents' in the city which are meant to become public space policies: a very real way of learning from the existing city (*Kancelář veřejného prostoru*: 2014).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Vesna Jovanovic is a practicing architect involved in urban research and has been teaching at ETH Studio Basel since 2011. She obtained her Master's degree from the University of Belgrade and a Postgraduate degree from the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam. There, she worked on several projects including a MATRA capacity building, a government collaboration between Holland and Turkey in Diyarbakir on the topic of restructuring the city, governmental housing, and the preservation of the historical city core. Subsequently, she has worked in Brussels for the office of 51N4E on large-scale urban growth studies for Istanbul and the Brussels Metropolitan Region.

Celine Baumann obtained her Master's degree in landscape architecture from the École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage de Versailles, where she graduated in 2010 with Honours and Distinction. She has been working intensively with the renowned landscape practice including Petra Blaisse (Inside-Outside) in the Netherlands and Atelier Le Balto in Germany, on a range of projects from gardens for cultural institutions to territorial masterplan. She moved to Berlin in 2012, where she is project leader for design department of Topotek 1. She is the initiator of fabland, a platform for contemporary landscape architecture design and research, since 2015. ([www.fab-land.com](http://www.fab-land.com))

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