

# Temporality of Physical and Political Liminal Spaces in the Urban Transformations of the Greater Paris

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## 1 ABSTRACT

Since the last decade, the city of Paris underwent through an important urban renovation related to the process of metropolization called Greater Paris. This operation relies on two elements: (i) the redefinition of the relation between the central municipality and its periphery and (ii) the increase of the city's international competitiveness by creating new economic clusters and public transports. The northern east part of the city is one of the most emblematic areas of this political and spatial intervention, in the frame of a typical process of deindustrialization of historical popular districts. This area is today one of the largest metropolitan building sites in which all the temporalities of this long transformation process can be observed.

This article proposes a comparison among different kinds of “historicity systems” (Hartog, 2003) coexisting in this portion of the city. The meantime of the planning process will be considered as the fertile uncertain temporal space that creates new forms of power negotiations between the institutions and the civic society.

Which is the role of the inhabitants in the large scale development planning? Which are the new forms of urban conflict and negotiation?

Through the analysis of the “non-formal political actors” (Sassen, 2008) in the Parisian context, this paper will address the role of temporality in the planning process and the creation of new forms of urban engagement. From squats to community gardens, from participatory design processes to urban walks, the aim will be to describe which are the bottom-up practices and strategies that react or participate to the top-down projects. Those collective actions open the issue of the inhabitants' empowerment in the social and physical management of the public space and highlight the non-hierarchic relations between local actors and global politics at different scales. Through the analysis of conflictive discourses on the right to the city (Lefebvre 1968, Harvey 2008) in the French context, I aim to understand the new forms of urban development that are proposed by those new processes of negotiation.

Which is the role played by the image of a future project in the transformation of the city? Which is the temporality of the civic resilience?

## 2 THE TIME OF PLANNING

### 2.1 Present utopias

For Leon Battista Alberti, building was to be defined as a “body” made of “form” coming from “intelligence” and of “material” coming from the “nature”. This assumption, that Françoise Choay calls “the axiom edifice-body” (Choay, 1980), is one of the most founding concepts of humanist architecture. Urbanism is a discipline deeply rooted in this tradition. It conceives the built environment not just as the reproduction of an organic body but, as a product of the man's “intelligence”, a perfect and reproducible model of a body. According to Francesco Ventura, “utopia is constitutive of urbanism” (Ventura, 2006). In the utopia, as originally conceived by Thomas More, the model of space is intimately related to the model of society. Thereby the city is more than a single body, it is the expression of the union and relations of a community of perfect entities. It is upon this idea of the perfect society that the utopia builds a peculiar temporality. In order to design the idea of a perfect future as a *skopós*<sup>1</sup>, as an aim to be reached in an unlimited time, the past has to become a disease to heal, an “imperfection that needs a radical correction” (Ventura, 2006). In this register, the future absorbs the present completely thus rendering it an irrelevant point of the tension towards the *skopós*. Likewise, the present and past societies need to be sacrificed to reach the never-coming utopia.

<sup>1</sup> In ancient Greek the word means target, goal. It defines a future that is searched and depicted starting from the analysis of the present conditions (Ventura, 2006).

However, the history of urbanism is not only made of utopias. I would like to consider here how the capitalist model of city is deeply based on the construction of a distorted utopian time. According to David Harvey, the capitalist urban model is meant to absorb the crisis of the surplus system (Harvey, 2012). In a moment in which surplus product cannot be absorbed and produce new surplus profit, urbanism comes in help by enlarging the scale of the city. This enlargement has two main goals: creating new infrastructures and proposing a new model of citizen. The first one responds to the need of new natural resources, labour forces and technology; the second provides the formation of new needs (consumptions) through the creation of a new way of life. This never ending process of market expansion projects the city in a continuous linear growth grounded on the imperative of technological and social innovation. This deletion of the past reproduces the same utopian idea of a society and a space that are stuck in a “messianic present” “anxious of predictions” (Hartog, 2003).

In European cities, the futurist attitude of the capitalist model finds today an evolution in terms of construction of time and creates new forms of presentism (Hartog, 2003). In the time of the crisis of the neo-liberal city – in which the future becomes “uncertain” and “threatening” (Hartog, 2003) – the present has to take the burden of the innovation and depict itself as an already-realized future. This is translated also in the tendency, produced by the media, to historicize the present and substitute the “presence” of the real human dialogue with the “present” of the image (Lefebvre, 1992). At the same time, the society is led to look at herself pretending to have an historical distance and hoping to embody all the possibilities of the future. In terms of urbanism the linear growth of the capitalist city has to be reinvented in a new form of accessible utopia. The future city is too uncertain to be depicted in a convincing *skopós* and in consequence becomes an image that needs to invade the present. In this sense, this image of the future city needs to be constantly reinvented and translated in order to become a consumer good. The idea of an accessible future is also modifying the place of the society concerned by the urban transformation. The “right to change the city” (Harvey, 2012) is translated in new forms of participation and governance that pretend to open the access to a more democratic control of the planning process. The civil society is then invited to “take part” of this present utopia.

## 2.2 The Greater Paris

Based on an ongoing research in urban anthropology, this article questions the relations between the official processes of urban development of Paris and the inhabitant’s informal actions of space transformation in the popular districts invested by the renovation projects.

Paris faces, since the last ten years, a complete renovation of its urban structure that was explicitly compared by the former right wing president Nicolas Sarkozy, to the Haussmanian renovation projects. This operation is based on redefining of the relation between the central municipality and its periphery and on increasing the international competitiveness of the city through the creation of new economic clusters and public transports. Since the launch in 2007 of the international competition “Le Grand Pari(s) de l’agglomération parisienne” – the great bet <sup>2</sup> of the Parisian agglomeration – this process adopts the name of Greater Paris. This competition invited ten famous international teams of architects to produce a future vision of Paris as a larger metropolis. The guiding principle was mainly the “post-Kyoto” sustainable development and the need of a more global international competitiveness of Paris. This competition started a process of redefinition of the city’s limits carrying on the classical model of concentric expansion and definition of what should be “inside” and “outside” the territory (Sotgia, 2011). This process is translated in a project of a new circular subway defining at the same time the new limits of the city and the emplacement of new clusters of economic development. The result of this politics is also a debate on the governance of the city and the emersion of new political actors competing for the management of the metropolis <sup>3</sup>.

This redefinition of the limits of the city started more locally in 2002 with the election of the socialist Bertrand Delanöe as mayor of Paris. One of his most important actions in terms of urban development is the

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<sup>2</sup> The title is a play between the word bet, pari, and the name of the French capital.

<sup>3</sup> The municipality of Paris is really small (105 Km<sup>2</sup>) compared to the metropolitan area that affects the city (almost two thirds of the Île-de-France region, about 8.000 Km<sup>2</sup>). Nowadays there isn’t an official government that manages the politics of the peripherals and the central municipalities. The most important emerging actor is the syndicate Paris Métropole that tries to work as coordination of the about 150 municipalities taking part to this association.

definition of eleven Greats Projects of Urban Renewal<sup>4</sup> implanted on the peripheral highroad, the boulevard périphérique<sup>5</sup>, which corresponds to the limit of Paris. The goal of these projects is the “urban reinsertion” (TVK, 2008) of the boulevard. This domestication of the limit is meant as the symbolic start of a new dialogue between Paris and the surrounding municipalities.



Fig. 1: Image created by the architect Christian de Portzamparc for the international competition « Le Grands Pari de l'agglomération parisienne » in 2007. This image has become an icon of the futuristic visions of the architects of the Greater Paris. (© Atelier Christian de Portzamparc)

To go back to the initial reflection on the future, it is clear we are in a classical model of capitalistic expansion of the city in search of new forms of economic competitiveness and producing new ways of life. But which is the model of society that is designed behind those actions? In other terms, this paper addresses the “historicity system” (Hartog, 2003) that those official projects produce, in comparison to the idea of future led by the inhabitants of the districts in renovation. What seems to be clear is that Paris is building a future based on a modernist idea of an ineluctable future of the expansion of the city. But, looking closer, those magnificent projects are far from being unavoidable as they seem to be. The budget of the new circular subway is of about 30 milliards of euro of which only 5 milliards will be given by the State. This gap produces a big margin of uncertainty on those projects that should be balanced by the valorisation of the urban areas surrounding the future stations of the metro. Looking at the eleven great areas of renovation of the périphérique, only about 19 % are being realized since 2002 and there is a margin of uncertainty on the possibility of realizing the remaining projects, mostly those envisaging a covering of the highroad. Some of those projects were in fact inserted in the areas for the candidacy to the Olympic Games that Paris tried last time in 2005, the hope was of course to realize them with the income given by the international event.

This way, I underpin that those projects, which are strongly occupying the media since ten years, have also an influence that is completely virtual on the present of the city. Nevertheless, inhabitants look with strong concern to discourses that project the city to the horizon of the next thirty years and that are already defining who will be inside and who will be pushed outside the city.

Another important element highlighting how the actual project of renovation is inserted in the presentism of the neo-liberal European city model is the juridical and practical context of the “urban participation” in France. The process of citizens’ participation to the urban projects is becoming a new important element of governance of the cities since the proclamation in 2000 of the law Solidarity and Urban Renewal that reshapes the frame of the city politics and defines the concertation<sup>6</sup> as a mandatory practice for the public projects. But participation, in official processes, is still reduced to information meetings or workshops that

<sup>4</sup> GPRU. Grands Projets de Renouvellement Urbain. [http://www.paris.fr/politiques/vie-de-quartier/grand-projet-de-renouvellement-urbain-g-p-r-u/rub\\_6144\\_stand\\_612\\_port\\_13817](http://www.paris.fr/politiques/vie-de-quartier/grand-projet-de-renouvellement-urbain-g-p-r-u/rub_6144_stand_612_port_13817)

<sup>5</sup> The boulevard périphérique was built between 1960 and 1973 on the emplacement of the latest fortifications of Paris, the Thiers walls.

<sup>6</sup> Concertation is the French name for the institutional process of negotiation between different actors of a public project. Since the last ten years the word denotes principally the devices of information and participation of the inhabitants.

concern basically the architectural form of the projects and rarely his functional program. On the plan of the participation at a larger scale, the Parisian territory has recently tried to set up new forms of metropolitan concertation such as the public debate on the new metropolitan subway: this debate compared the project of the region with the one proposed by the state <sup>7</sup> and involved about 15000 participants in 55 meetings held in all the metropolis. But those remain as isolated events “which don’t open a real debate articulating local and metropolitan issues” (Bacqué and Gauthier, 2011). We can also say that the format of those metropolitan meetings is based on a media model with showmen managing the debate and web-tv companies making the synthesis of the inhabitants’ words. Looking to a series of devices which are recently used for the participation such as social networks and online forums that should “collect the words of inhabitants”, we realize how this future that invades the present as an intrusive image don’t produce a real dialogue between institutions and civil society. The words of people facing this far future, which is more concrete in terms of global economy than in terms of new ways of life, becomes a collection of atomized opinions that are impossible to translate in a collective voice. Those devices don’t give in fact space to collective opinions or controversy actions but only to a series of individual conflictive stories. As a consequence, the discourses of the politicians can remain in the register of populism because their actions are not really questioned by the “inhabitants’ words”. In this sense we see how this fake accessibility of the future transformation of the city is only working as a form of virtual consensus within a society that still doesn’t see clearly which is the social utopia that should follow through the urban projects.

### 3 THE TIMES OF TRANSFORMATION

#### 3.1 Meantime and liminality

This current research’s ethnographic entry is the limit of the northern east area of Paris. This is a classical frame of post-industrial city that is representing the new horizon of the metropolitan projects. What we find here is a context whose transformation is more and more related to a large scale with an over-planning and over-regulation structure conceived to build a global metropolitan strategy of action. Projects are based on the rehabilitation of “unsanitary” buildings, creation of new public transports and building of new housing and activities. This does not induce massive evictions and renovations, but more a slow process of gentrification in which sparse operations engendering population displacement are accompanied by massive rehabilitation of ex-industrial buildings. The northern east of Paris is an emblematic territory of this obliteration of the city’s limits and of the research of a new metropolitan identity. At the same time this territory is increasingly attracting new citizen’s actions that are linked not only to the local context of transformation but also to the global diffusion of alternative urban practices. The presence of urban interstices together with the process of renovation, seem to create the perfect frame for informal experiments.

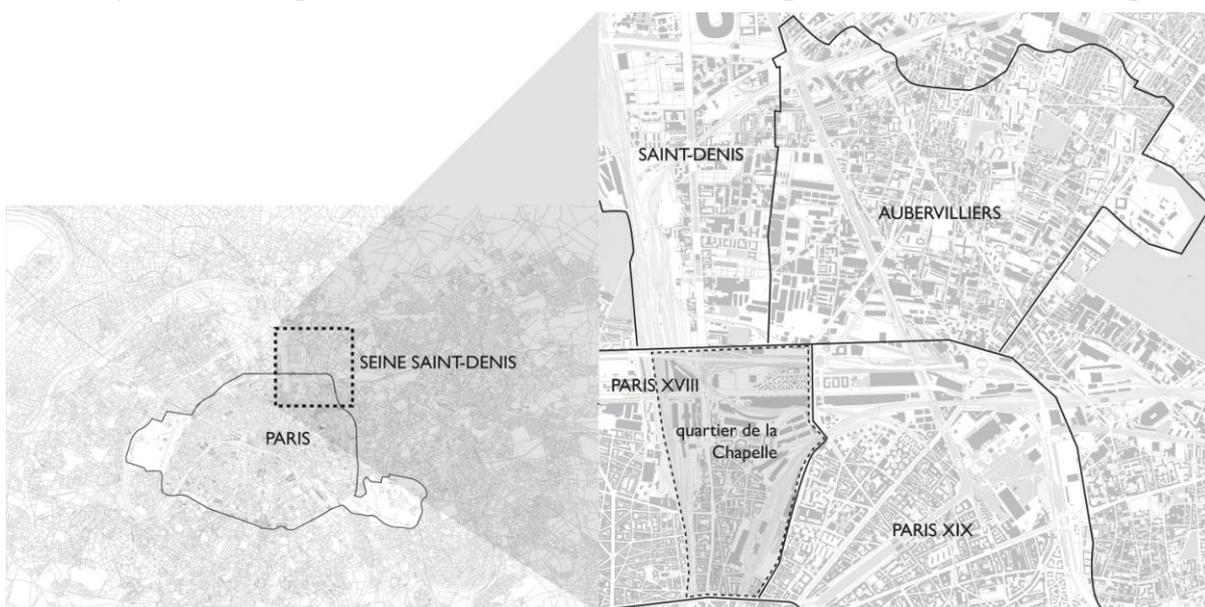


Fig. 2: The Northern-East of Paris as framed by the research.

<sup>7</sup> The National Commission of Public Debate held those meetings between October 2010 and January 2011.

The fieldwork elements presented in this paper come from an approach based on a situational analysis applied to the context of an anthropology of the city (Agier, 2009), taking the space not only as the setting of social relations but as a product of a relational process. Several associations<sup>8</sup> working in the North-Eastern Paris, principally in the Chapelle district in the 18th arrondissement<sup>9</sup>, have been approached since November 2011 in order to see and follow their social network and to analyse their discourses and repertoires of contention. This ongoing observation takes place basically in everyday and ritual situation, involving the internal organization, the building of consensual relations, the public performance and the collective action. The definition of ritual situations (Agier, 2009) is chosen in reference to the particular status of those actors which represents a sort of political and physical liminality linked both to their ephemeral condition in terms of space and action and to their positioning regarding the institutions. An interesting argument to this liminality is in part given by the different biographical trajectories observed in the interviewed associative actors: from professionalisation (for instance subjects starting their political career in the voluntary work), to redefinition of identity (retirees investing in new kind of activities or rediscovering a political activism), to the expression of an alternative political point of view (anarchist, self-management, radical ecology). Associations seem to serve as a kind of passage through different social position or as a “limbo” that permits unconventional social organizations. At the same time those actions are often taking place in the “lost spaces” of the city: abandoned plots or buildings that are waiting to be renovated that can be defined as a margin between the city and its future. This physical and political liminality is also an expression of a more global phenomenon.

In the last twenty years, we can in fact observe a global proliferation of new kind of citizens’ “non-formal” actions (Sassen, 2004) linked to a post-global and anti-liberal political vision. From the occupation of terrain vagues with ecological projects, to the new forms of urban art and artistic engagement in the popular district, to the different variations of sustainable tourism, we see spaces and practices that seem to propose a new management of the social conflict. In the Parisian region since the last ten years those initiatives are mushrooming in particular next to the “sensible” areas in renovation, i.e. the areas of the former industrial part of the city situated in the northern east. Nowadays we can count ninety urban gardens, twenty official artists squats, an increasing number of associations of urban walks (organised by independent architects or inhabitants), and at least four big areas of renovation in which inhabitants or collectives of architects are working for participatory processes.

In this sense we would like to highlight another important form of temporality of the city in transformation. If we consider the project not as a result but as a complex process opening a tension between the “field of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (Hartog, 2003), we can consider it also as the in-between time that can give new meanings to the future visions of the city and to their relation with the society. The meantime of the project<sup>10</sup>, if lived and filled of sense, is actually the time that permits the birth of new actors and of new power relations. The acceptance of this gap between the present and the future as a thick temporality can create a fertile state of uncertainty. We intend here uncertainty as a concept that can reveal all the possible solutions and open up fertile controversies (Callon, Lascoumes, Barthes, 2001). The hypothesis presented here is that the informal actions reveal the need of conceiving the urban transformation as a continuous uncertain process and not as an event that belongs to the future.

### 3.2 Times of informal actions

The analysis that we sketch here is not based on the difference between different kinds of associations working in the districts. Rather, I propose the idea that those actors constitute a complex system of interconnections that creates an homogeneous context regarding the urban transformation. It is not then the difference between the actions of a squat and of an urban garden that I will highlight, but more the circulation of practices between those places. This idea of an homogeneous system is particularly clear in the

<sup>8</sup> We use here the definition of association referring to the French context. In French culture those citizens’ organizations represent one of the highest form of the civil society’s right of expression. The so-called 1901 law defines the associations system through the right to civic organization and the non-profit activity contracts. In this flexible frame, the forms of associationism are quite diversified.

<sup>9</sup> The Chapelle district is a sort of triangle framed by the railroads of the East and North stations and by the boulevard périphérique.

<sup>10</sup> For the notion of meantime we refer to the researches of the Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie of the School of Architecture of la Villette in Paris ([www.laa.archi.fr](http://www.laa.archi.fr)).

Chapelle district in the 18th arrondissement. This district hosts a large number of associations that are linked to common interests and actions. In terms of urban transformation there are two big organizations that are extremely interesting.

The first one is an association working within the official concertation process, the Association for the Monitoring of Paris Nord-East Urban Development (ASA PNE18) <sup>11</sup>. The actions of this group of citizens started with the mobilization against a project of densification in the 1990s. After this experience they decided to become institutionally involved in the urban transformations of the Paris Nord-Est project, the biggest (200 hectares) of the eleven Great Project of Urban Renewal that touches this area of the périphérique highroad. At the present time they are involved in the official consultation committees. Their contribution includes the organization of public information meetings in the district and the participation to specific reunions with the architects and the institutional actors. In the ASAPNE18 the presence of architects and city planners, and the organisation of self-trainings are fundamental in order to “push” the limits of the institutional participation defined by the law. Moreover the association has the character of a coordination of different associations. What is important in their activities is not only the capacity of dealing with the most technical issues, but also their ability of being connected with both the political and the associative net of the district and of the city. In this sense it is evident how the role of this actors is not only of the defence of their own micro-local interest but it is a political action which goes beyond a NIMBY logic.

The second organization is the Collective of Chapelle Open Day (POLC) <sup>12</sup>, a collective of three community gardens and three artistic squats that work as a federation. These associations organise festive weekends proposing a common program of artistic performances and concerts, based on an increasingly common model of the artists’ open days in the eastern districts of Paris. The reasons that they give for the birth of this federation is the awareness that all the places were individually dealing with the same institutional process through negotiations and collaboration with public landowners and City Policy actors. As a reaction to the institutionalisation and social service demand <sup>13</sup> of the public powers, they claim for recognition of their precarious existence opposing their gradual space transformation to the renovation of the new development projects. The production of texts, graphic documents and exhibition of pictures showing the close relationship between urban development and ephemeral initiatives, becomes an information device that is exposed to inhabitants in order to draw the public attention to a larger spatial consciousness. This call for the public interest is not presented, then, as direct support of the single initiatives, but as a reflection to an alternative way of intervening on the deindustrialisation process.

This district is also the set of many urban walks organized by diverse actors <sup>14</sup>, from independent inhabitants to architects that work for the metropolitan participatory actions. This practice can be seen as a symbolic valorisation of space through its physical crossing. It is based on the principle of visiting less known districts that are undergoing a process of urban transformation. The “tourists” usually meet the guide and follow an itinerary that is punctuated by a series of stops in specific places in order to discover some activities, projects or meet other inhabitants. The performance of those “situational sequences” (Palumbo, 2009) is meant to disclose the social life of the place or to explain its recent past and its near future. Unlike classical architectural sightseeing, which illustrates what is visible in urban space through a set of notions, the urban walks organized by the inhabitants want to reveal the invisible reality of the city through the concrete experience of social interactions.

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<sup>11</sup> Association du Suivi de l’Aménagement Paris Nord-Est 18e (<http://asa-pne.over-blog.com/>). The objective of the association is the promotion of a participatory design process for the Paris Nord-Est project sector in the 18th arrondissement.

<sup>12</sup> Portes Ouvertes de La Chapelle. All the components of the collective are associations recently established in the district. “The Collectif Portes Ouvertes La Chapelle federates a group of associations concerned by urban transformation and renovation of the district. Their initiatives took root in inhabitants’ life.” (<http://portesouverteslachapelle.blogspot.fr/>).

<sup>13</sup> This demand is both defined by the informal negotiation for occupation and by the contractual definition of public founding given to the association that imposes the declaration of a public interest of the structure in the context of a “sensible district”.

<sup>14</sup> One of the first and most known example of this practice is the one of the “Global Greeter Network” (<http://www.globalgreeternetwork.info/>) started in New York in 1998. The Parisian version of the movement is the “Parisien d’un Jour” (One day Parisian) association (<http://www.parisiendunjour.fr/>) promoted by the Municipality of Paris and the Parisian Tourist Office.

In the following passages I would like to question the different “historicity systems” that are acted by those practices and their relation to the official time of planning. In opening the reflection on those temporalities I will refer to what could be defined as “performed discourses”, in the sense of narrations that come out mainly from the direct action.

### 3.2.1 Futures

Speaking of future we find two different ideas that coexist in the informal actions.

The first one is what could be seen as an apocalyptic and nostalgic future. This kind of vision is mostly related to the ecologist visions that can be shared by the actions of urban gardens and artists’ squats, and that finds its roots in the precautionary principle of environmental movements. According to some of those discourses the “possible” future is seen as fearful because it is putting in danger the next generations through environmental problems. In reaction, this form of temporality is constructing an ideal future that evokes a mythic past in which the man was living in a greater balance with the nature. In some ways this future reproduces the idea of a present that has to be sacrificed for the wealth of a *skopós*. Those discourses are performed through urban agriculture, both in the sense of farming and in the sharing of ecological knowledge. The understood goal is that people must learn how to live in self-sufficiency and outside the capitalist production system.

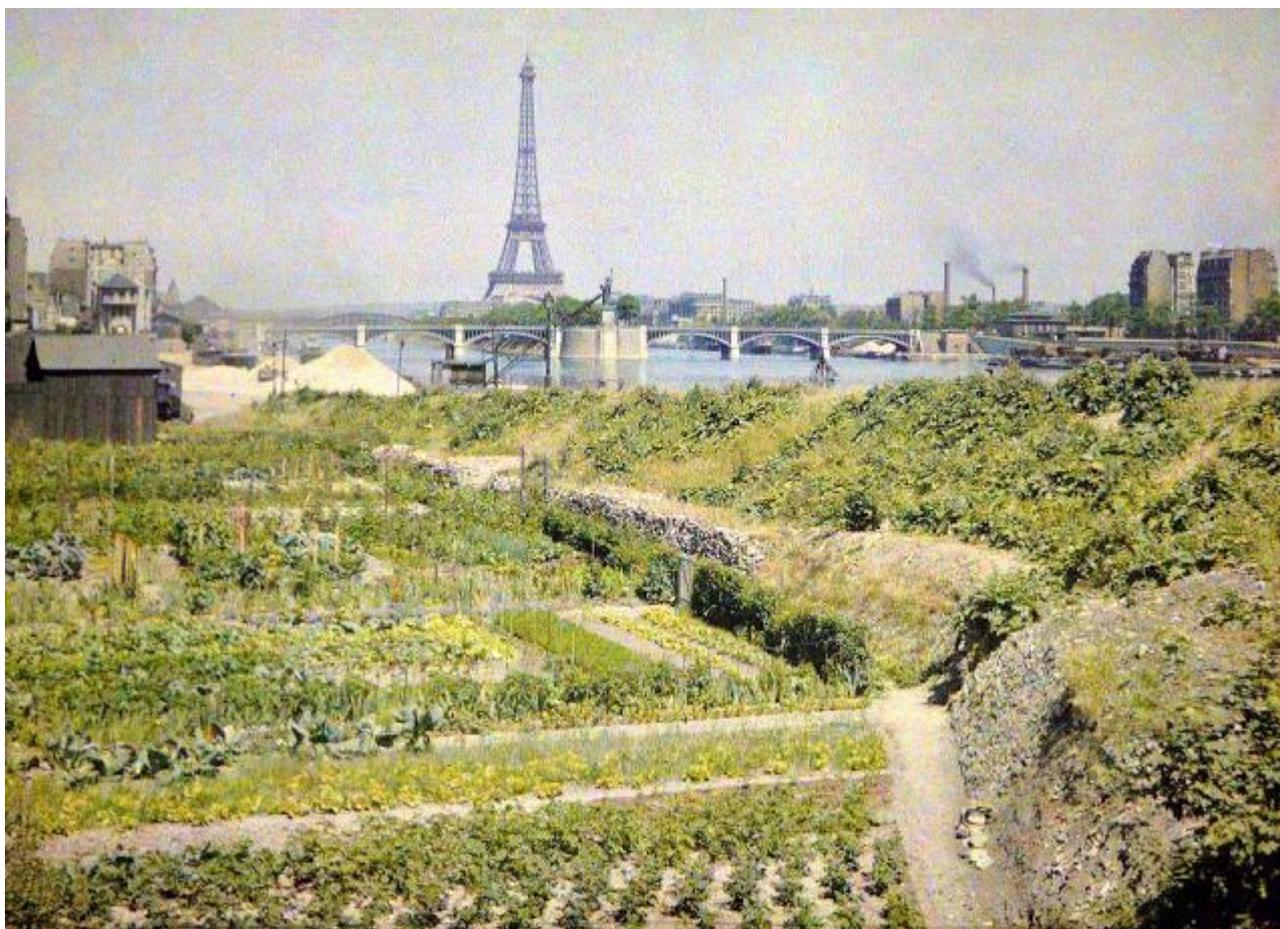


Fig. 2: Quai Louis Blériot, Paris 1918 (source: [www.paris1914.com](http://www.paris1914.com)). This image was sent in February 2013 on the mailing list of a community garden of the Chapelle district with the title: “With (just) a little bit of chance, this is what we’re going to have”. The utopia proposed is the return to a post-war condition in which urban land is exploited for feeding the population.

The second idea is the one of an imminent and pragmatic future. The action of visiting a building site with an urban walk or to claim for the needs of the present inhabitants in a project that will be built in thirty years, seem to be a desperate effort of translating the future of planning in a presence that will affect the life of the district tomorrow and not in dozens of years. The future here becomes less eschatological. The performed discourse is the one of a research of the physical traces of the announced future in order to understand it pragmatically. At the same time this action builds a temporality that works as a “counter-device” (Agamben,

2006) giving back the future to a real space of existence and claiming for taking in account its daily presence.

### 3.2.2 Pasts

The different ideas of the past can be also articulated in two categories.

On one hand we have a nostalgic past. This past is mostly set in urban walks, but is also linked to the actions of urban gardens. What we face is again the case of a mythic temporality linked to a past that is reinterpreted and exploited in order to construct a discourse on the present. We find here also a form of presentism that in facts uses the past in order to patrimonialize a present time. The performed discourse is meant to insert the built and green environment in a larger national history and preserved as it is. Associations occupy and valorise the terrain vagues and the former industrial buildings claiming to the recognition of their value in terms of biodiversity or architectural quality. The space is then used as the main pretext to defend the social practice that it hosts. This can be also seen as a form of “moderate resistance” to the transformation that works on the same register of the official transformation because tends to use the same type of arguments in order to be recognised.

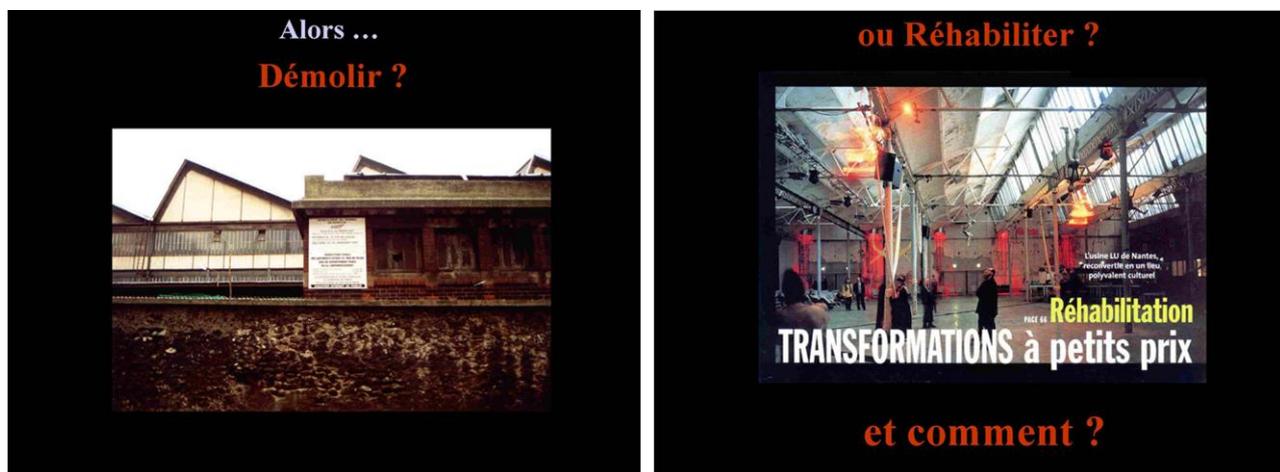


Fig. 3: Document produced by the ASA PNE18 (CEPA at that time) in December 2002 for a meeting with the municipality. The goal of the presentation was to convince the architects and politics to preserve an ancient industrial hall. The two slides question: “Then demolish? Or renovate? And how?” The image inside the second slide is taken by a magazine on renovations of industrial buildings and says: “To renovate at a small price”. In order to contest the project of demolition the association shows a typical example of patrimonialization of an industrial hall transformed into a museum. (© Coordination Espace Pajol)

We can also talk of an anecdotic past that sets the space in a local or biographical chain of events. This temporality tries to inscribe the territory in a smaller and more controllable scale of comprehension. In reaction to the politic and economic forces, which act to link the territory to a global scale, the narrative related to a recent past gives the possibility to focus on the needs and wills of the people that are living the place in the actual present. This temporality can be set up by urban walks through the construction of biographical sequences in which the visitor is led to experience the daily path of its guide. A similar interpretation of the past can be found in the reconstruction of the history of projects made by the inhabitants during the participatory processes, or in the reconstructions of the ephemeral spaces’ history in the district. In this sense the shift of point of view in the narration of the urban transformation can show how the space belongs to a plurality of temporalities.

### 3.2.3 Presents

The two last categories are based on rhythms that create two different articulations of the present.

One present can be the one of an intermittent but constant rhythm. This is specifically linked to the action of the ephemeral place as urban gardens and squats. Even in a context in which the municipality is in part institutionalizing those actions, the nomadic nature of some of these associations creates a form of constant presence within the city that escapes to a politics that would reduce them to a sort of short spectacular events in the future building sites of the cities. Some of the squats and urban gardens speak about a “nomadic strategy” that accepts to enter in negotiation with the municipality – that gives them a contract of temporary

occupation – but tend to exist beyond the single place that is occupied. This means that an urban garden can exist since ten years having occupied three different plots and that an association of artist can squat at the same time different places and be ready to move to new ones in a short time. This behaviour builds a present that is at the same time precarious and reproducible. The present time then is uncertain in terms of space but not in terms of action. This resistance can create also interesting situation in which those associations are finally taking part to the official projects by partially participating to the design or management of new spaces.



Fig. 2: Relation between the urban projects and the ephemeral spaces in the Chapelle district. The author has assembled the document in March 2012 for the POLC collective. It indicates: on the right side, the duration of the projects and the name of the developers; and on the left side, the start of the ephemeral activities and their date of convention.

The last form of temporality is the one of a constant and persisting rhythm of present. This temporality is built mainly by the associations working in the participatory process. The fact of acting in the district since even twenty years on one or more projects permits to inscribe the actions of this association in a stable present legitimating their action in the concertation. This rhythm is not based on a tactic of reaction to the politics like the previous one but is rather building a strategy of the “presence”. Their action is largely based on a form of insistence: claiming for having meetings with the municipality, asking a continuous control of the evolutions of a project, or simply being present in every possible occasion. This permits also the inscription of the future of the project in a present time in which a physical and political space has to be built in order to speak about its existence.

#### 4 GIVING BACK SHAPE TO THE PRESENT

Evidently, these temporalities are not completely separated and can be combined and overlapped in a continuous process of transformation and composition of the different actions of the associations. This short review would like to highlight how this diversity of temporalities, even with its inner critical points, makes possible the construction of a deeper temporality of the projects.

In terms of political discourse, those actions don't really seem to question the official urban development, but propose, as evoked, more a kind of "soft subversion". Differently from the claims of the 1970s, we observe here a more strict negotiation with the political powers and a direct management and control of the public space. In order to do that, the discourses tend to reproduce the same strategies of the official powers instead of opening a direct conflict with it. If on one hand we could ask if the social conflict is still possible in a context in which the State is abandoning his role of public guarantor, on the other hand the sphere of public informal actions seem to take a new relevant role. What appears is how the action is building a new temporal vision of the urban development. It is precisely through the action that the different "historicity systems" construct a present that finds its independence and emerges again as a positive element. Those performed discourses reclaim then the central importance of the present in the progressive construction of the future.

In conclusion, I would like to underpin how the contribution of these informal actions, based on this capacity of giving complexity to the temporality of the project, opens the idea of a project as a continuous and uncertain process. More than on the form of the city – which is questioned only partially –, the real debate seems to shift on the processes of empowerment and on the governance procedures. This way, those actions are questioning the definition of the project through an idea of future that should not only be concretized in a building site, but rather becomes an open debate that should release the citizens' imaginary on the possible and desirable models of society. In this sense, to release the imaginary is precisely "to think about what it would take to live in a world in which everyone really did have the power to decide for themselves, individually and collectively, what sort of communities they wished to belong to and what sort of identities they wanted to take on" (Graeber, 2004). If, as sustained by Immanuel Kant, time always needs a symbolization through the space and remember us that we need the space in order to know our existence, we should also realize how the space always need to be inscribed in a multiplicity of times to be our place of existence.

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