



The negotiated urbanism of Grand Paris Express

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In the fragmented context of Paris's metropolitan and regional politics, the Grand Pari(s) design consultation and subsequent public process demonstrate that the Grand Paris Express project, a major new orbital metro line, can become a form of emergent governance and negotiated planning.

Although the Grand Pari(s) design consultation can be interpreted as a strategy through which the state regained control of the metropolitan narrative, this does not signal a return to the centralized planning of the 1960s. Instead, it makes apparent new political strategies required to operate in the fragmented, pluralist context of a complex metropolis. Within this setting, an infrastructure project itself can become a form of emergent governance and negotiated planning. This appears to be the case of the Grand Paris Express, the dominant project to issue from the Grand Paris initiative.¹

The evolution of the Grand Paris Express proposal for a rapid regional rail network has revealed two aspects of the shifting politics of infrastructure. First, the initial conflict between the state and the region's visions for the project highlighted the contrasting narratives of spatial mobility (social versus economic) underlying this conflict. Narratives of mobility and of networks are employed both by proponents of economic development and by proponents of social justice. However, the strategies each proposes to achieve mobility goals are often directly in opposition.

Second, in the midst of this debate, the state instrumentalized architects to more effectively promote its economic development agenda for Grand Paris Express. France's mayors and presidents have long employed architecture as a tool of urban politics, but the political role for architecture is changing as Paris is reframed as a networked, polycentric metropolis. This reframing is in part aspirational – the multipolar city has become an economic development paradigm for achieving global competitiveness. Meanwhile, under globalization pressures, decentralization policies and the reorientation of national planning towards competitiveness rather than spatial fairness, the governance of greater Paris has become fragmented and exceedingly complex. The infrastructure that enables this complex metropolis is increasingly a focal point of its conflicts. In this particularly challenging metropolitan context, the media role played by architecture is key to shaping public opinion and directing urban development.

An analysis of the proceedings of two interrelated public processes that took place between 2007 and 2011 illustrates this discussion. The first is the “Grand Pari de l'agglomération parisienne” international design consultation to envision the future of Greater Paris, which culminated in the *Grand Pari(s)* exhibition at the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine in 2009. Following the consultation, the “Débat public sur le projet de Réseau de transport du Grand Paris”, the largest participatory planning process in France's history, was launched in late 2010. Its mission was to contrast and debate the merits of the region's Arc Express versus the state's Grand Huit regional rail proposals. The former favored serving existing areas of population density, particularly the disadvantaged communities impacted by the riots of 2005, while the latter emphasized establishing and reinforcing economic clusters in the far periphery linked to airports and high-speed TGV lines.

¹ This analysis is adapted from the author's PhD dissertation, in progress at Harvard University.

Narratives of Mobility: the Global City versus the Just City

Paris faces a conundrum. In the abstract, the city is confronting discourses of decline and fears it may be losing rank in a global hierarchy of cities. It also faces more concrete signs of trouble: the slowing of economic growth compared to other French regions, a housing shortage, a strained transport system, high unemployment and growing social inequality (Chemetov and Gilli 2006; Gilli and Offner 2009). Ostensibly to address these concerns about Paris's future, President Sarkozy initiated the sweeping Grand Pari(s) design and planning consultation in 2007, of which the results were exhibited to the public for seven months in 2009.

Coming somewhat as a surprise at his inauguration of this exhibition, Sarkozy announced a plan for a regional rail network and multipolar development scheme that had quietly been formulated under the direction of his *secrétaire d'État* (junior minister) for the development of the capital region, Christian Blanc, while the design consultation was in progress. This scheme, dubbed "Le Grand Huit",² was in stark contrast to the existing Arc Express rail proposal being advanced by the regional council and STIF, the metropolitan transportation authority.

Whereas the state's proposal aimed to enhance Paris's position as a global economic center and to catalyze new real-estate development, the region's scheme was committed to connecting communities isolated by inadequate public transport. This included areas of the north-east, where geographic stigmatization emerged as a central theme in 2005. Physical mobility and the right to equal transportation access were central to this discussion. They are essential to reaching employment, training and other opportunities in an increasingly fluid metropolis. Indeed, physical mobility is directly linked to social mobility, particularly in a context where jobs have become transitory and regionally dispersed. Eric Le Breton, for example, has documented the "dual fragmentation of work and territory" in the Paris region (Le Breton 2005).

At the same time, a variety of factors contribute to a perception of inherent discrimination within the transit system. Among these are a large number of unrealized station projects at suburban social housing sites, distance-based fares which burden residents of the *banlieue*, and ethnic profiling by transit police. Limited access to the collective infrastructure network is experienced as a denial of urban and even national citizenship (Lagrange and Oberti 2006).

Le Grand Huit versus Arc Express

The "Débat public sur le projet de Réseau de transport du Grand Paris" took place from September 2010 through January 2011. Its 55 meetings were attended by approximately 15,000 people, who considered arguments for the region's and for the state's proposals. At the core of this debate, embodied by each scheme, were the two conflicting narratives of mobility – the "global city" versus the "just city." And indeed, themes which arose in the debate illustrate many of the dilemmas of the network city and its difficulty reconciling economic growth priorities and social fairness.

On the one hand, remarks by officials including Patrick Braouezec, then a deputy for the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*,³ highlighted this dilemma. Braouezec somewhat hopefully asserted that the attractiveness and competitiveness of the Paris region depends upon reducing social and territorial inequality, and that public transport is crucial to achieving this.⁴ In reality, the difficulty in finding a nexus between global competitiveness and social justice has proved the greatest challenge

² A play on words combining "rollercoaster" and "figure of eight", in reference to its proposed configuration of lines.

³ The *département* (subregional administrative area) of Seine-Saint-Denis lies immediately to the north-east of the city of Paris and includes a number of particularly underprivileged inner suburbs.

⁴ Patrick Braouezec, deputy for the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*, remarks at a "Débat public sur le projet de Réseau de transport du Grand Paris" meeting in Saint-Denis, October 13, 2010. Documented in a video recording by the Commission nationale du débat public, *Réunion commune Arc Express/RTGP, Stade de France – Saint Denis, 13 octobre 2010*.

of contemporary urban development trends. Urban theorists Gabriel Dupuy (Dupuy 2008) and Pierre Veltz, for example, have both addressed the inequalities of what Veltz terms the networked and increasingly transnational “archipelago economy” (Veltz 2000). Other officials echoed concerns about what theorists Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin refer to as the “bypass” and “splintering” effects of contemporary infrastructure development, and what Manuel Castells calls the “favored spaces” of networked urbanization (Castells 1996). Claude Bartolone, for example, then president of Seine-Saint-Denis Departmental Council, feared that residents of the *banlieue* with the greatest need of transport were destined to see high-quality infrastructure traverse their neighborhoods without stations to serve them and/or priced beyond their means.⁵ Many residents themselves stressed their apprehension that new transit plans focused on serving new globally oriented economic “poles” while ignoring longstanding transport inadequacies in existing communities.⁶

Design as Politics: from *Grands Projets* to Grand Pari(s)

The fundamental transformation of the city into a networked territory is not only shaping urbanization patterns and mobility conflicts but also radically altering how design is instrumentalized as a tool in metropolitan politics. It is changing the way that politicians and other urban actors employ architects in political maneuvers, and also how architects themselves approach metropolitan projects.

Within the fragmented political context of the Paris agglomeration, architecture is playing a strategic role in helping politicians and other stakeholders (such as the region’s transit authorities) create media interest and build public support for their proposed approach, even without control of institutional mechanisms necessary to implement it. For example, the Grand Pari(s) design consultation and exhibition allowed the state to gain control of the narrative about greater Paris’s future, despite the fact that real institutional power had largely been transferred to regional and local authorities under decentralization policies first initiated in 1982. This strategic role of architecture marks a shift away from its more symbolic function in politics – for example, during the era of President François Mitterrand’s *Grands Projets*, when both Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac, then Mayor of Paris, deployed architectural symbols in the struggle between socialists and neo-Gaullists to control national politics.

From Architecture to Infrastructure

Also of interest is how the networked complexity of Greater Paris has influenced the work of the Grand Pari(s) architecture teams themselves. Architect Lars Lerup, for one, believes that, in addressing a metropolitan context, “architecture as a static enterprise has been displaced by architecture as a form of software” – where systems thinking has taken primacy over the urban object (Lerup 2000). Stephen Graham surveys the work and writings of contemporary architectural theorists and concludes that, in the contemporary city, flows, infrastructure, architecture, and landscape are now considered together by designers as a single complex or field in which to intervene (Graham and Marvin 2001).

Most of the Grand Pari(s) architects did indeed opt to study urban systems and infrastructure rather than buildings, but approached these systems very differently. First, the team led by British

⁵ Claude Bartolone, leader of the Seine-Saint-Denis Departmental Council, remarks at a “Débat public sur le projet de Réseau de transport du Grand Paris” meeting in Saint-Denis, October 13, 2010. Documented in a video recording by the Commission nationale du débat public, *Réunion commune Arc Express/RTGP, Stade de France – Saint Denis, 13 octobre 2010*.

⁶ Valérie Grémont, resident of La Plaine Saint-Denis, remarks at a “Débat public sur le projet de Réseau de transport du Grand Paris” meeting in Saint-Denis, October 27, 2010. Documented by the Commission nationale du débat public in *Verbatim de la Réunion publique thématique “urbanisme et quartier”, La Plaine Saint-Denis, 27 octobre 2010*.

architect Richard Rogers offered a techno-utopian vision of Paris's green future with the transformation of the city's major rail corridors into a self-contained armature of the sustainable city. Antoine Grumbach was also interested in territorial-scale armature, reading the existing landscape of the Seine River Basin as an infrastructural system jointly engineered by man and nature. Other architectural teams similarly read the city as a complex system. Their objective was to study the internal rules of this system in order to appropriate them and intervene. The Nouvel–Duthilleul partnership, for instance, devised an elegant solution of extreme pragmatism: a micro-weaving of the region's existing rail lines and a unified ticket for a merged metro, commuter rail and TGV system that could reduce all trips across Paris to a half-hour or less.

Closely related was a parallel interest in the emergent metropolis – the city as a set of fragments and situations, unique or typological, with the seeds of a larger metropolitan order contained within them – a sort of metropolitan “DNA” that directs a self-organizing larger whole. The AUC team, for example, refused what Michel de Certeau would term a “strategic” representation of Greater Paris in its entirety, but depicted it rather as a matrix – an accumulated series of “tactics” and micro-situations. Similarly, viewing the metropolis as a vast aggregate of local negotiations between specific conditions were Studio LIN, as well as Secchi and Vigano.

The Negotiated Network

From its inception, Grand Paris Express embodied a very different approach to regional planning from the RER and the *villes nouvelles*, realized during France's most technocratic era. First, the outlines of the early Grand Huit traced a set of political deals struck by the *secrétaire d'État* and regional mayors – a map of politics more than of engineering. Its next phase incorporated the vast Débat Public, which coaxed a negotiation between the state and the region. Feeling pressure from the debate's exposure of a political impasse between the *secrétaire d'État* and the regional council, they arrived at a compromise and issued a new plan.

The most significant innovation in the process has been the creation of the *contrat de développement territorial* (CDT) mechanism which, in effect, locally distributes development responsibility. The CDTs invite local authorities and private-sector partners to self-organize and collectively propose urban development plans along the proposed Grand Paris Express route. Although still in an experimental stage, the CDTs may create an opening for what Science Technology and Society (STS) scholars Olivier Coutard and Simon Guy describe as a “politics of hope” – or the possibility that new infrastructure networks may incorporate micro-struggles into urban planning processes, helping to combat systemic inequalities (Coutard and Guy 2007). Other theorists, including Dominique Lorrain and Paul Kantor, assert that infrastructure projects engender indirect forms of governance in large, highly fragmented urban agglomerations both by shaping space and by offering an opportunity easily recognized as extraordinary (Kanton *et al.* 2012; Lorrain 2011; Le Galès and Lorrain 2003).⁷ Finally, Bruno Latour deploys actor-network theory to describe how objects themselves – such as infrastructure proposals and new technologies – become powerful actors in processes of metropolitan democracy, yet must respond to local political cultures to be successful (Latour 1996, 2005).

In the context of greater Paris, the Grand Paris Express proposal is indeed an actor – an agent that is inducing negotiation between disparate parties in a complex and multilayered metropolis. A proposed new network, a “super metro” recognized as a singular opportunity, is coaxing an incremental plan for the metropolis that is developing piece by piece, negotiation by negotiation.

⁷ Paul Kantor, presentation to workshop on “Governance Players” at the *Paris, métropoles, le défi de la gouvernance* international seminar at Paris City Hall, December 1, 2011.

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