

The Improvised Versus the Planned: In Search of Public Space in Parisian Suburbs

PARI RIAHI

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

The paper looks into the disjointed body of the suburbs that surround the city of Paris in search of markers of public life. Contrasted to a city well known for its public spaces, the Parisian Suburbs are notorious for their ubiquitous social housing projects, clustered around and dotted along transportation circuits, without much else to offer. Lacking multi-layered hierarchies of space between that of the individual dwelling units and the city, the open spaces that surround the suburbs are often under-used stretches of land. The paper catalogues the five elements that form the built environment of the suburbs: towers, grounds, terrains-vagues, facades, and graffiti. It then focuses on the notion of ground, by suggesting hypothetical projects to be installed in specific sites in three adjacent suburbs in the North and Northeast of Paris. The paper presents a hybrid model of research and design that aims at creating better public spaces in those areas through careful, phased operations.

INTRODUCTION

In Mathieu Kassovitz's seminal movie, *La Haine*¹ the life of three young people from the projects in a suburb of Paris is depicted over the span of a day in the aftermath of a riot. As the movie traces the step of its three characters, their body language, movements, and speech change significantly as they cross over from their derelict cité to the confines of the city. Their discomfort in the city contrasted to their confidence and ease in their own environment is striking. The questions that come to mind are the following: how is it that a city like Paris, whose claim to public spaces is only as enunciated as its longevity, becomes so inhospitable for the inhabitants of the suburbs that surround it? What form of public spaces do these cités possess? What are the manifestations of public life in those cités that are so different from Paris? How is public space defined within these suburban clusters of housing projects, schools, minimal services, and not much else? As part of a larger research project that looks into the possibilities of fostering connections between urban and suburban landscapes of the Parisian metropolis, the present paper aims

at identifying markers of public life within the suburbs and point to the disjunction between private and public life that is symptomatic of such places. By elaborating on the visible manifestations of public life, publicness and public space through cataloguing the already existing markers in the environment that indicate inclinations - of many forms including protestations - in engaging with the public sphere of life, the paper explores the theme of public spaces in the suburbs further by focusing on three specific sites.

In contrast to the well-formed city of Paris, les banlieues surrounding the city are worlds apart from it. A majority of the Metropolitan Parisian population is housed here in tall towers that shadow over vast stretches of flat land. Subway and rapid train transit run throughout these suburbs, while sparse commercial centers draw individuals in. The large populations of people who live in 'les banlieues' tend to gravitate around Paris or work within it; yet, they are segregated economically, socially, and culturally from the center. The built environments of the suburbs are recognizable as areas with numerous towers and undefined grounds. Pierre Bourdieu's characterization of these spaces as "places that bring together people who have nothing in common and force them to live together" points to the complexity of an environment that fosters either "mutual ignorance and incomprehension or else latent or open conflict".

ⁱⁱ The recent events of January and November 2015 are only instances of a polarized situation in which many years of sociopolitical decisions, as well as architectural and urban decisions have lead to creating a society that dwells upon shifting cultural, political, and economical realities. The eruption of violence, the rise of inequality and the dramatic changes in lifestyle in Paris are not isolated measures. As seen most recently with events in Nice, Normandy and Strasbourg just to name a few, the unrest and violence show deep traces of all encompassing inequalities and segregation and epitomize the current European dilemma of grappling with the disparities that are manifest between different groups of citizens.

The present work does not theorize on Parisian suburban life, nor does it believe that architectural projects or urban strategies would be able to single-handedly appease the rising crisis that is currently affecting a large number of Europe's population - and the Globe. However, while the core of the current crisis is not 'caused' by architecture, it remains to dwell within the body of a built environment that is markedly distinct. Aiming at conducting an open-minded research project that involves



Figure 1: The Périphérique distinguishes the old and the new by creating a barrier. The peripheral zone has a distinct aura and scale in comparison with that of the defined city.

close observation and mapping strategies, as the basis for potential interventions and possible projects within some of those suburbs, the paper looks into the possibility of targeting changes in the built environment by engaging with the public spaces and improving them in the hopes of bringing change without transforming the environment as a whole.

GENERAL CONTEXT

Few cities present such a rich array of an urban imaginary as Paris does. The city, though in constant transformation, offers certain forms of publicness that are known and appreciated by its resident and the millions of people who visit the city. Just beyond the limits of Paris, lie the suburbs, where over four million HLMs- Habitation à Loyer Modéré, or rent controlled housing projects- are situated. The HLMs house about one-fifth of France's population. Most of these large complexes were built in the second half of the 20th century as subsidized housing after the wars. Some were intended to provide temporary housing and were consequently built without intention for long-term dwelling. Throughout the decades the HLMs have stood through social, cultural, and economic change in the suburbs, remaining largely untouched and they still provide housing to lower income inhabitants who cannot afford to live in the city center. At the time of their construction, large waves of Portuguese, Italian and Polish immigrants populated these housing structures. Today people of African, Arab and Asian descent largely inhabit them.

The Boulevard Périphérique traces a definitive line between Paris and its suburbs. The road acts as a 15 km long barrier between the city center and its neighboring suburbs and is both a literal and metaphorical barrier. Different gates along the ring allow for access to both sides.

The conditions around the inner and outer edges vary widely. The most important difference between the Paris intramuros and the suburbs is the transformation of the Haussmannian city into a vast land of modern formal, sociological and architectural experimentations that form the fragmented body of the suburbs.

The project builds upon a previous step, which looked into transforming certain features of the housing projects, by focusing on six suburbs, through a collective research platform of an option design studio.ⁱⁱⁱ The general premise of that phase was that in order to bring in change without destroying the majority of the public housing projects, investigating the possibility of strategic changes had to be thoroughly investigated. The Six selected suburbs in North and Northeast were then analyzed, going from the larger scale to that of certain specific housing projects, which were then investigated for possible reconfigurations of their shared and individual spaces. The findings from those studies and projects indicated the lack of intermediary or connecting spaces between that of the individual (apartments) and that the multiple layers of social interaction that happened to and fro, from the scale of the suburb as a whole to that of the living unit. The lack of truly integrated 'public' spaces manifested itself as a recurrent theme that seemed to be consistently present in each of the study cases. While there were a number of planned open spaces present for each of the housing projects, rarely any seemed to lend themselves to engage, support or encourage any form of public encounter, exchange or leisure.

CATALOGUING MANIFESTATIONS OF PUBLIC LIFE, PUBLICNESS AND PUBLIC SPACES

In a first attempt at understanding the built environment of the suburbs, it became apparent that identifying the markers of public life, publicness and public space were critical, since the contrast with the built form of the city is clear. By visiting different suburbs around Paris, it became

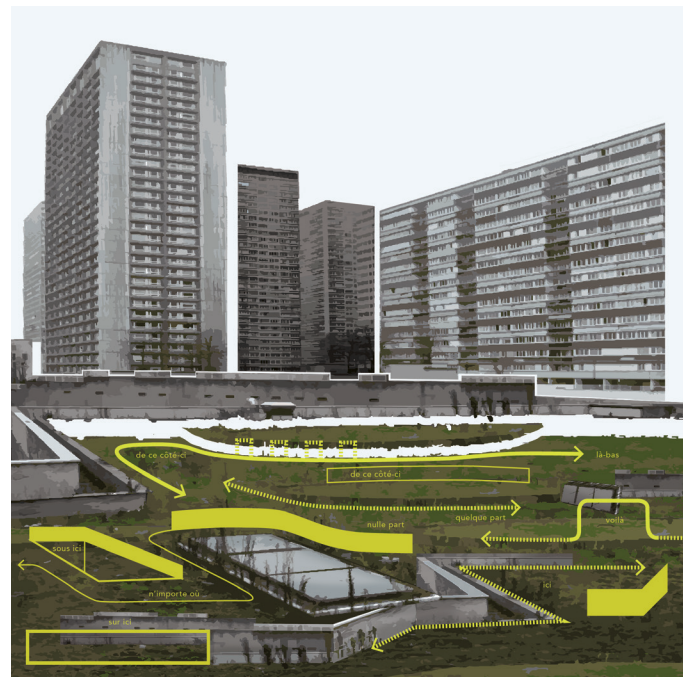
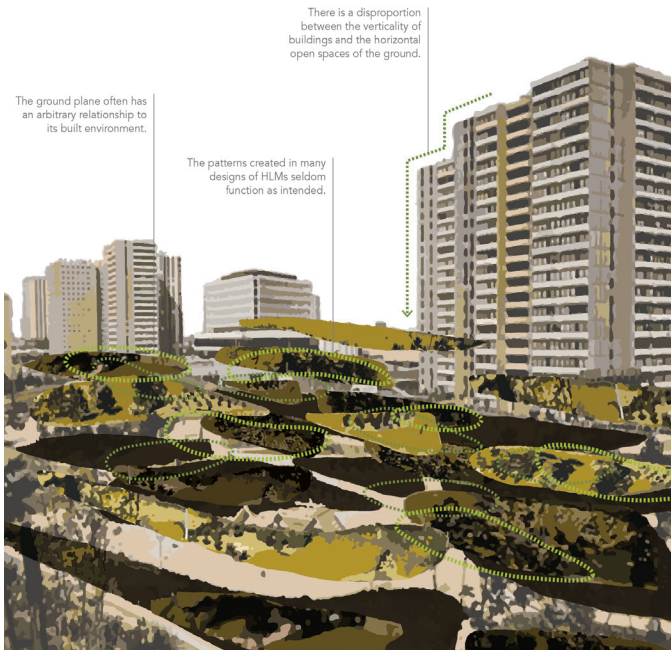


Figure 2: The image on the left depicts the vastness of the ground at the foot of the towers, and the one on the right emphasizes the potential of these large grounds for turning into terrains vagues of all forms. In both cases the size of the open spaces are very large and the types of activities they are able to foster are very few.

apparent that despite site-specific attributes that are unique to each department, cité, neighborhood, even down to the clusters within each of the neighborhoods, there are a number of elements (some built and some open) that demonstrate proclivities to publicness in forms that are unique to the suburbs. These thematic elements are present in almost any community and form the land/ cityscape. The research collected a series of images that relate to each theme and expanded on them within the large territory of the Parisian banlieues. By scouring through visual sources of all kinds, a range for what constitutes the built environment of the suburbs was established in order to then identify different manifestation of publicness on each of the elements. Five particular categories were defined as essential components of the built environment: Tower, Ground, Terrain vague, Façade, and Graffiti. Each category is explained briefly below. Each series were classified by creating matrices to attest to the generic nature of each element and their widespread repetition through the landscape of the suburbs.

Tower: The housing complexes, known commonly as HLM are almost always associated with high to mid-rise towers, populating the landscape of the suburbs. These housing clusters around are often located within the vicinity of transportation stations: metro, REER, or bus and make up the major percentage of the built environment in the suburbs. Prominent verticality - occasionally there are long linear bars, which act the horizontal towers- and uniform façades are characteristic attributes of these structures. Some times larger complexes are built to house a complex made of varying heights and forms as part of the same complexes. Contrary to the continuous upkeep of the well-formed cities and in particular Paris, the towers of the Suburbs exhibit experimentations of

form, material, and socio-cultural and manifest a varied canvas. Maligned by the media over the years the towers are nonetheless the epicenter of what constitutes the heart of the suburbs.

Ground: As opposed to the city, where even small stretches of ground are accounted for, the suburbs have large areas of ground lying around or at the foot of the housing projects. Parking lots, playgrounds, plazas, outdoors amphitheatres, and landscaped areas foregrounding the housing towers are all forms that the grounds take on. Unlike the city, where the programmed and the improvised coincide in structured networks of boulevards, streets, sidewalks, alleys, parks, plazas and squares, the grounds of the suburbs oftentimes fail to offer multiple scales and functions at once. The mono lateral use is often indicative of generic designations with little room for real interaction. Although at times the ground may take on well-maintained and elaborately designed forms, they lack in properly supporting the needs of their inhabitants. Contrasted to the multi-layered and often complex nature of open spaces of the city (the boulevard space activated through a day market, a quiet street doubling as a temporary playground on weekends and holidays, the suburban grounds in their different forms fail to play multiple and engaging roles.

Terrain Vague: There are areas of undefined land in the suburbs where people often hang around, drift and wander about. Defying the over-determined precision of planned spaces, the terrains vagues of the suburbs offer a place to counter the order and pressure, and the inescapable tightness of the space. Places to hang out, hide, protest or simply be away from the multitude of the gazing eyes (of authority, of the inhabitants, of anything that represents power and defies a sense of personal freedom, they represent a counterpart to the order and pressure of modern city life, and the boundaries between defined and undefined ground in the suburbs oftentimes blur into gray.

Façade: One of the most prominent visual features of housing towers are their faces. They are characterized by frequent repetition and

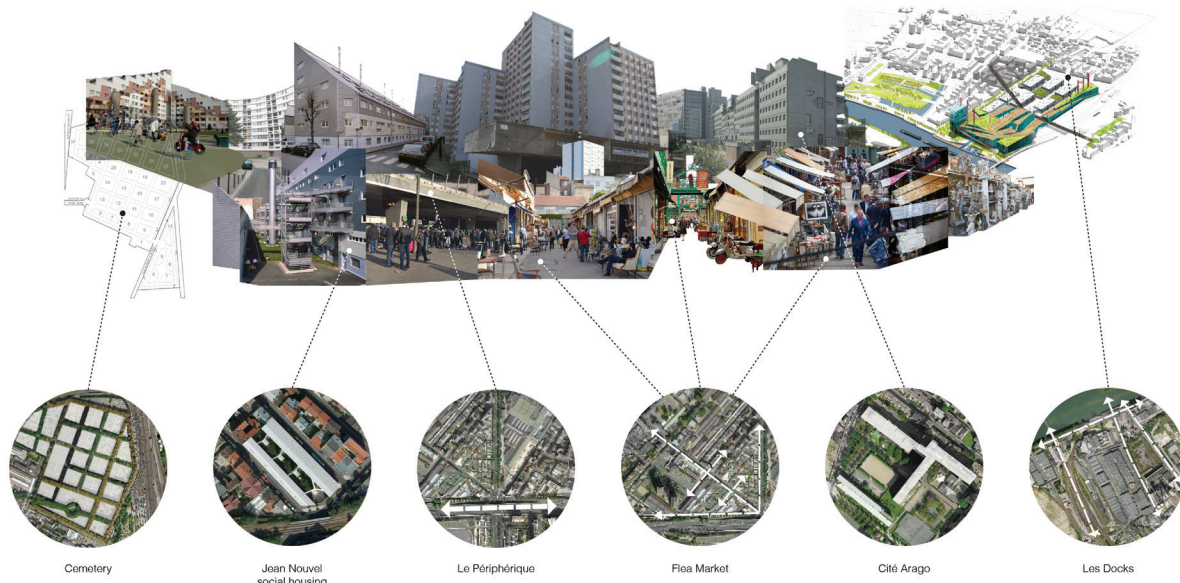


Figure 3: Transforming the grounds of the housing project in Saint Ouen by installing a series of luminous agents.

redundancy and consequently a lack of individuality. The façades divide the horizons to vertical and horizontal lines and points. The gridded thresholds are deprived of the possibility of offering proper buffers and layering between the inside and the outside, they magnify the isolation of the inhabitants. Largely present on Graffiti: Graffiti has become a fairly well-known marker of creativity, individuality and defiance in the contemporary city. The use of Graffiti is by no means limited to suburbs, however its existence and its potential role in adding a layer to the public life is noteworthy. At odds with the ubiquity of the suburban landscape, and the repetitiveness of the built environment, the prominence of graffiti covered wall, structures and even entire buildings, indicate a need and an interest in trying to come to terms with the built environment as a mark of creativity and individuality, is prominent throughout Paris center and especially in the suburbs. The attempt to come to terms with, make a protestation against or simply express oneself through leaving

a trace on the skin of the suburbs, the graffiti acts as a tool and a mode of expression simultaneously and is omnipresent on the planes of the built environment. While the identification of these five preliminary elements was important, nuances and possible shifts in hierarchy or importance were present on each of the different neighborhood. For the present study, three particular suburbs, adjacent to each other were examined more in detail, with the goal of identifying possible sites for further analysis and projection.

OPEN, PUBLIC AND COMMON GROUND

Having studied the built environments of the suburbs through devising a collective platform for a design studio, which foresaw the possibility of making changes to the housing projects and realizing the challenges, difficulties and potentials of that particular approach, and keeping in mind projects such as the Tour Bois-le Prêtre,¹⁴ the present work focuses on the notion of ground. The ground, crucial as it is in defining and sustaining the built environment, is one that appears more nuanced and seems

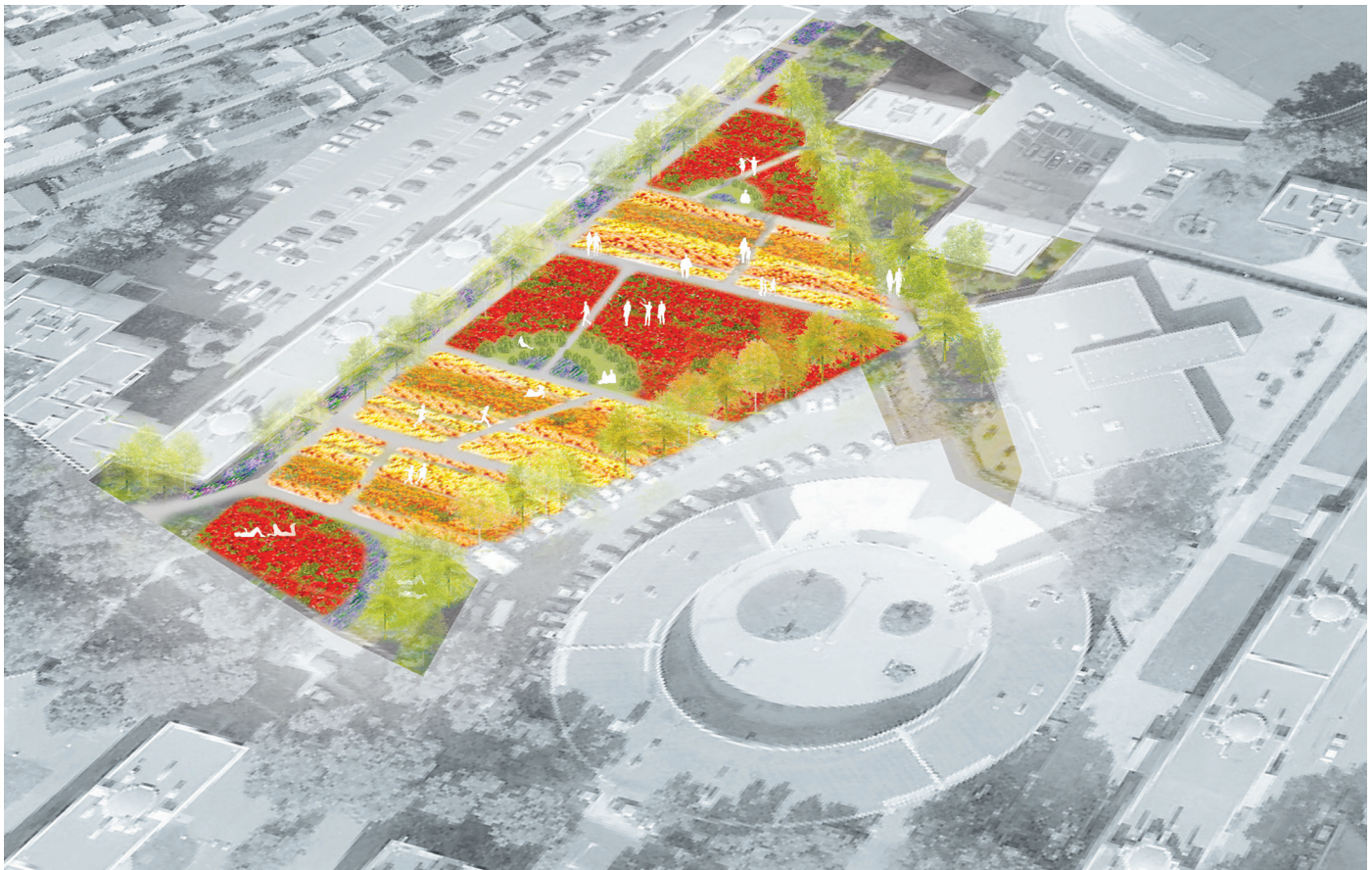
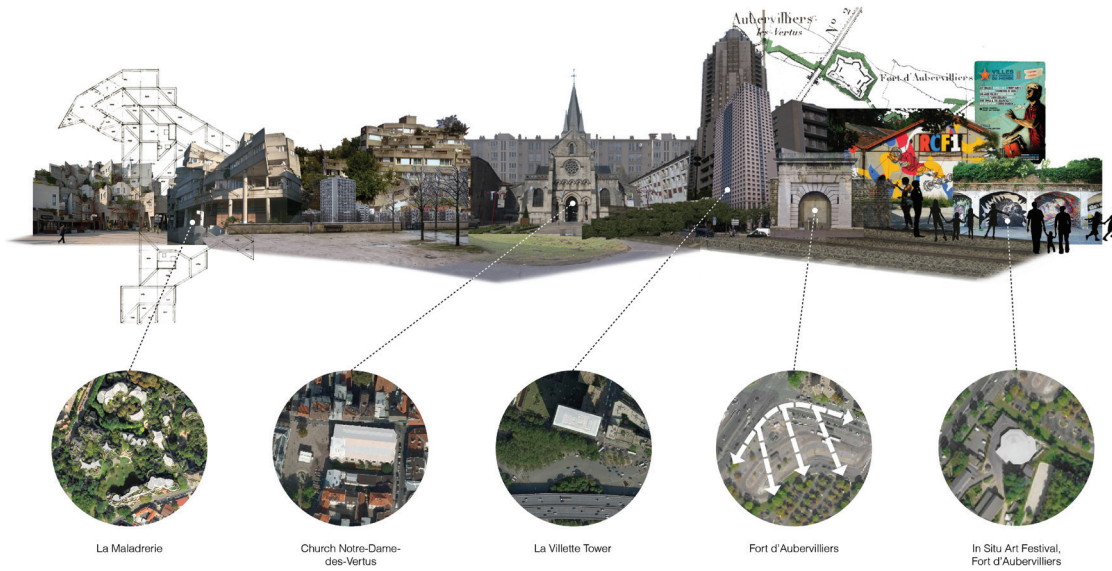
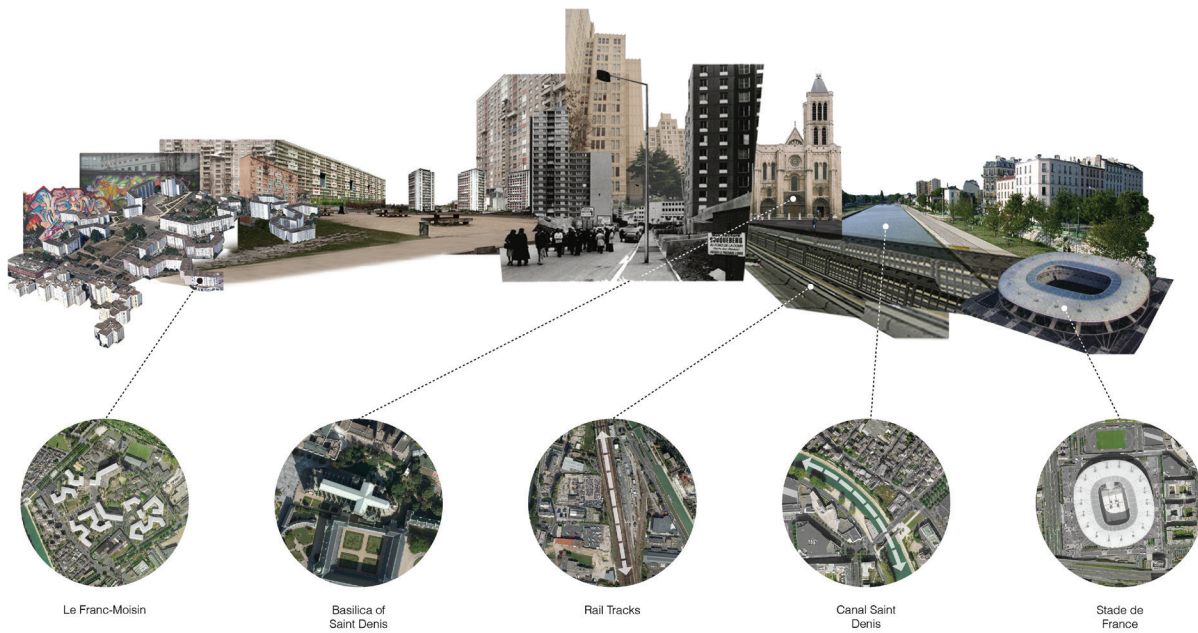


Figure 4: The grounds are transformed by a meadow of varying size and colors, inviting residents and visitors to take a pause.



Le Franc-Moisin

Basilica of Saint Denis

Rail Tracks

Canal Saint Denis

Stade de France

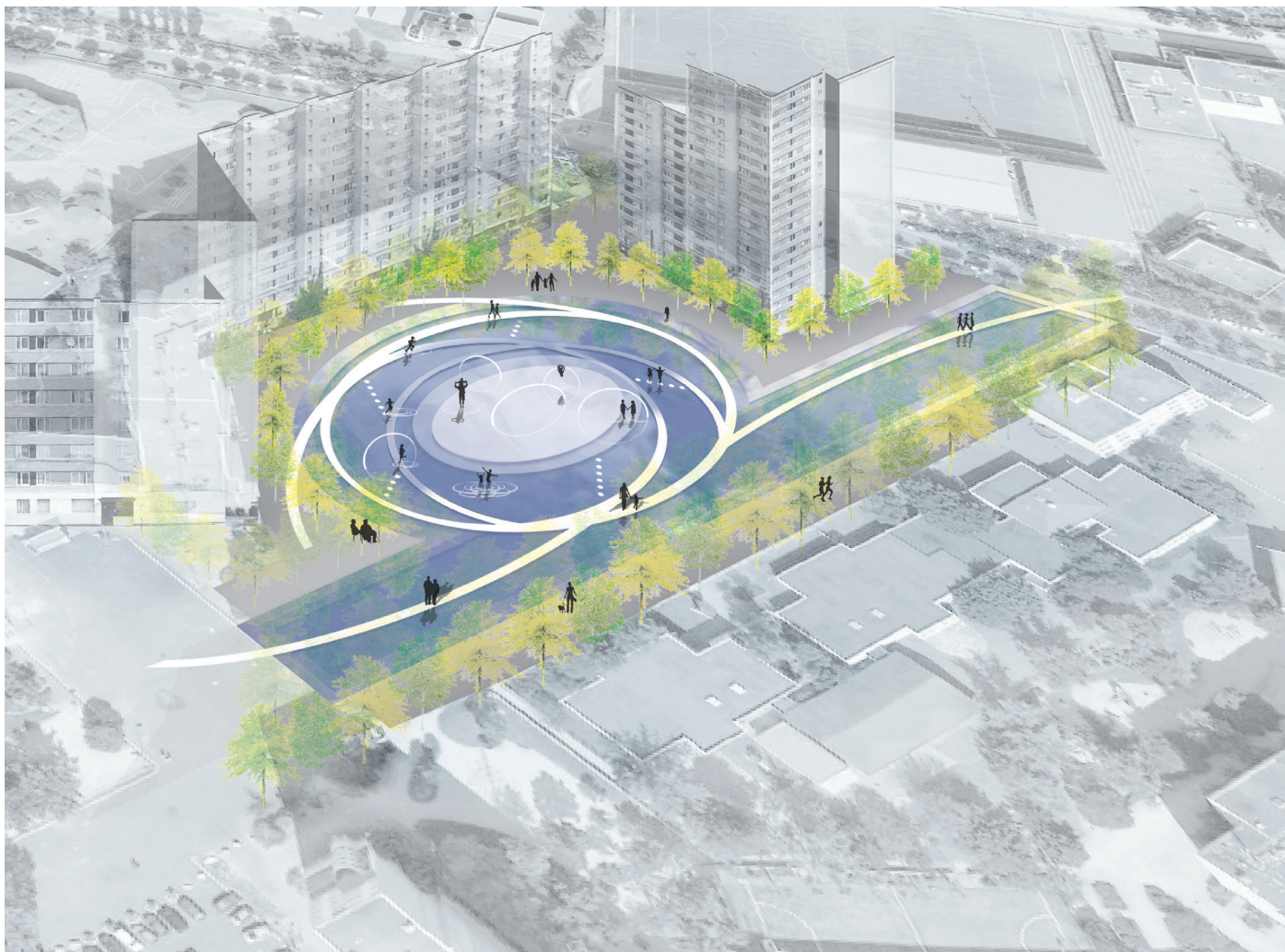


Figure 5: Creating a play space with water features transforms the central space at the Franc-moisins complex.

to offer more room for exploration. The reality of changing the environment of the suburbs by small interventions seems more plausible when considering temporal interventions as a first step and target to change something in the open space as a precursor to further transforming the built components that make the suburbs. In preliminary, on site observations, three definitions of ground became plausible: i) open: as pieces of land that are left for further projects, simply occupying the space, without any specific purpose bestowed on them. ii) common as designated for shared activities: such as passing through, play, rest or any other form of gathering. iii) public ground: the type of space that is really used for a series of public activities. The first two types of ground, the open and common are both extensively present. In terms of frequency and coverage they even offer much larger possibilities to that of the city. In fact there are currently landscape and urban projects that are at work to revitalize some of the sites within designated suburbs. However what seems to be lacking is the presence of multi-layered, more complex open spaces that bring together many forms of activities and create attuned environments that can foster short and long terms interactions and modes of occupying space that are amenable to a more synchronous and inclusive public life.

By narrowing down on three suburbs in the North and Northeast of Paris, which had been part of the previous studies related to the larger research project and were visited previously, the current project aimed at finding possible sites of different scales and stature. The structure was set up for further analysis and study of the potential sites of operations for these suburbs. The choice of sites was related to specific areas and neighborhoods and all three selected ones are surrounded by social housing projects and at different distances from the public transportation.

By Identifying sites within these areas, the project muses on different methods of appropriating these grounds so that they may be better inhabited and engaged with. The project muses on different methods of appropriating these grounds so that they may be better inhabited and engaged with. Also the project suggests focusing on one agent at each time to transform these environments. The work is still in progress and the projects act as agents of change, as much for the inhabitants to show them not to take the grounds upon which they walk for granted as they are ways to attract other visitors to those sites.

SAINT OUEN: WORKING WITH AIR

Area: 4.3 km² | Population: 46,510 | Density: 11,000/km². Saint Ouen is a suburb in North of Paris. Also a part of the Seine-Saint-Denis Department, it is located at about 6.6 kilometers from the center of Paris. Saint Ouen is the commune that houses Paris' Marché aux Puces (the flea market), the largest flea market in Europe. Two metro stations on Line 13 serve St-Ouen: Garibaldi and Porte-de-Saint-Ouen.

Here at the Cité Arago, the project aims to destabilize preconceptions about the ground. The complex, built by Paul Chemetov in 1975 features duplexes, triplexes and single units. While the design of the building is a fairly complex exercise in stacking and nesting different units and economizing in circulation space, there is still little interaction or spaces designated for public interaction in the project. The goal is to employ

strategies to coax people to become more aware of the ground and start using it in a different manner. A whimsical series of balloons, of varying sizes and heights will be installed by anchoring them to the ground. The constellation of the balloons, their movements, as well as their shifting position designate the ground with a light touch. The proximity of the Market, and the possibility of attracting crowds are yet other factors to make the grounds adjacent to Cité Arago into a temporary site that can be visited, explored and traversed by visitors.

AUBERVILLIERS: WORKING WITH VEGETATION

Area: 5.76 km², Population: 76,087, density: 13,000 /Km² Aubervilliers is located at 7.2 Km Northeast the center of Paris. The Canal Saint-Denis Traverses the commune on the western Side from North to South. Aubervilliers-Pantin-Quatre Chemins and Fort d'Aubervilliers on Line 7 serve Aubervilliers.

Having in mind the green nature of the commune, the proposal aims to bring nature back to the edge of the large artery and demarcate the edge of neighborhood. Placed next to a small commercial cluster, adjacent to metro station, the project proposes to plant a wild meadow in the large empty piece of land that is surrounded by the housing. The meadow, unexpected at that particular location, will transform the empty ground in the middle of low-rise housing projects. The meadow will engage the inhabitants and visitors at different degrees. While the residents will be able to witness the meadow's transformations over time (both in seasons and in the cycle of the 24 hours as well, the passer-byes will be taken by surprise and would want to go in and explore the area further. The operation will also serve as a more pleasant gathering space for the people who come to shop.

SAINT DENIS: WORKING WITH WATER

Area: 12.36km² | Population: 109,408 | Density: 8,900/km². Saint Denis is a suburb located at 9.4 km North of the center of Paris. It houses the Saint Denis Basilica as well as France's Football and Rugby Stadium: Stade de France. Canal Saint Denis traverses the commune. Saint Denis is served by four Metro stations on the Line 13: Carrefour Pleyel, Saint-Denis - Porte de Paris (closest Metro station to the Stade de France), Basilique de Saint-Denis, Saint-Denis – Université. The following Tramways also serve Saint Denis: T1: Asnières-Gennevilliers – Noisy-le-Sec, T5: Saint- Denis – Garges-Sarcelles, T8: Saint-Denis – Épinay-sur- Seine/Villetaneuse and by regional rail: La Plaine – Stade de France: RER line B, Stade de France – Saint- Denis: RER line D, Saint-Denis: Transilien Paris – Nord (Line H) suburban rail line, RER Line D.

The complex of Franc-moisins houses a large number of inhabitants. Pulled in between the fixity of the dwellings and the seemingly frozen landscape that defines the grounds, the inhabitants shuttle back and forth without the possibility of lingering outside. This proposal here is an invitation to negate that rigidity and work towards a livelier environment. The project proposes that certain designated areas are flooded at times, so that people will be changing their paths and alternating the known patterns of walking.

CONCLUSION

While the paper investigates the disjunction of the urban and suburban worlds in Paris, and takes upon demonstrating the complexities that arise from the abundance of homogenous spaces, the larger aim is to transcend specific geographical references, since the clustering of poor neighborhoods and the invisible walls that surround them are part of a global condition that resonate with numerous geographies and temporalities. Focusing on Paris epitomizes the visible and invisible barriers between the city and the suburbs through the delineated form of the Haussmannian city, the existence of the Périphérique, and the high concentration of social housing in different intensities around the well-formed center. The possible scenarios depicted are preliminary renditions of how the open spaces that surround the housing projects in the suburbs, can become areas of alternate modes of action and behavior, surpassing the planned aspirations of a by-gone era and aspiring to escape the rigidity of the environment by including possibilities for improvisation, play and interaction.

The paper opened with *La Haine*, as a visual reference that depicts the difficulties of the harsh environment that makes the suburbs. Abdellatif Kechiche's *Games of Love and Chance* depicts a gentler image of the same type of environment, where a group of pre-adolescents rehearse a play at the foot of the suburbs in a small amphitheater. As the ground fosters the interaction between Krime and Julie, the possibility of parallel and alternate stories come to the fore at the foot of the towers. Interacting with the ground, present abundantly at the foot of the projects and yet primarily inhospitable, might be an effective, accessible strategy in transforming the public spaces of the suburbs and opening those spaces to their inhabitants first and foremost.

ENDNOTES

1. Mathieu Cassovitz, *La Haine*, 1995. In the movie written and directed by Cassovitz, Vinz, Hubert and Saïd's life in one of the Parisian suburbs is depicted in the aftermath of a riot. The movie has been filmed mostly in the Parisian suburb of Chanteloup-les-Vignes.
2. Pierre Bourdieu, "The space of points of views" in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, ed. by Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 3.
3. The work from that phase of the project was discussed and expanded upon in a paper by the author. "Rising Measures: Drawing over the Cites HLM in Greater Paris", *Journal of Architectural Education*, 69.1, Spring 2015.
4. The renovation of *Tour Bois-le Prêtre* by Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal, transformed an already existing structure built in the 1960s into a contemporary tower by the addition of a series of additional spaces projecting out of the existing surface.
5. Abdellatif Kechiche, *L'Esquive*, translated in English to the *Games of Love and Chance*, 2002. The movie was filmed at the *cite des Franc-Moisins*, which is one of the sites chosen for the current paper as well.

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