LANDSCAPE-INDUCED METROPOLIZATION: REVEALING THE FORGOTTEN GEOGRAPHY OF PARIS' NORTH-EASTERN SUBURBS

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In the field of urbanism, landscaping is commonly considered as the main tool to link chaotic urban fabrics together and to restore a sense of place in metropolitan areas obscured by infrastructures. Furthermore, parks and promenades have played an integrative role for urban societies, melding different communities together and offering them an opportunity to develop a common identity. I therefore propose examining the planning of park systems and green corridors in the surburbs north-east of Paris, all the way through the 20th century and up to the present. This suburban area has suffered from a lack of comprehensive neighborhood planning and has been scarred by infrastructures which obliterate its geomorphology. Its revitalization represents a major challenge to re-balance the eastern section of Greater Paris, which suffers from social and ethnic segregation as shown by the riots of 2005. Moreover, the Paris attacks of 2015 stressed the fading sense of a common destiny between Paris itself and underserved suburbs.

Today's discussions on Greater Paris overlook the lessons of planning history. This historical survey is a brief in favour of an urban history that incorporates geomorphology and field survey.

Keywords

planning history, landscaping, greater Paris, metropolization, urban revitalization

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

The word "Resilience" was first used in material sciences to qualify a kind of elasticity. It migrated to psychology and later to environmental studies, with the same meaning of recovery from a traumatic situation. This linguistic transposition may be explained by the metaphor, recurring since Antiquity, which links urban form with the human body and mind. In the field of urbanism, landscaping is commonly considered as the main tool to link chaotic urban fabrics together and to restore a sense of place in metropolitan areas obscured by infrastructures. By reinforcing environmental qualities it helps generate urban biodiversity and offers opportunities for outdoor leisure activities. Furthermore, by revealing a forgotten geography, landscaping may help people of fragmented origins and classes to develop a feeling of belonging to a larger community.

The following historical survey will examine the planning initiatives of park systems and green corridors in the surburbs north-east of Paris, all the way through the 20th century and up to the present, most of which never came to fruition. It will emphasize the forgotten geographic contributions to the planning of Greater Paris and will refer to the corpus of official reports, competitions and master plans prepared by the City of Paris, the Departement de la Seine, the French State, and the Ile-de France region, including recent reports of today's Greater Paris authorities in favour of landscaped corridors.

This suburban area of the departement Seine-St-Denis (93) has suffered from a lack of comprehensive neighborhood planning and has been scarred by infrastructures which obliterate its geomorphology. Its revitalization represents a major challenge to re-balance the eastern section of Greater Paris, which suffers from social and ethnic segregation as shown by the riots of 2005. Moreover, the Paris attacks of 2015 stressed the fading sense of a common destiny between Paris itself and underserved suburbs. Furthermore, it is still instructive to study the historical process of landscape-induced metropolization, given current legislation concerning the new "Métropole du Grand Paris".

Indeed the consultation for Greater Paris 2009 set an impulse to renew landscape design theories¹. The landscape architect Michel Desvigne proposed the metaphor of "le paysage augmenté" to enhance geomorphology by renaturation. The architect Antoine Grumbach summarized the need for citizen symbols by declaring the Seine and its landscape as the real monuments for Greater Paris². Grumbach and Devigne recall the tradition of geohistory, previously initiated by Elysée Reclus and Vidal de la Blache. They both occupy a field neglected by today's geography which focuses on mobility and flows, overshadowing space as a physical experiment.

Landscapes also challenge the methods of urban history, because of their scale, their living biology, and their support for human practices. Therefore, field surveys should constantly interact with archives and cartography analysis. This historical contribution applies a basic method – studying relevant texts and superimposing historical maps – but was complemented by a hike carried out in the spring of 2016 with students from the Paris-Belleville architecture school. By examining the current landscape, the success or failure of planning initiatives could be identified on the spot, as well as interactions between "vernacular" and "political" landscapes – according to J.B. Jackson's categories of human settlements³. Besides, testing the walkability of contemporary spaces helps to measure the gap between former suburban "arcadias" or utopias and what the cityscapes actually became.

A COMMON LANDSCAPE, A FRAGMENTED TERRITORY

The area under study forms a huge plateau extending eastwards from inner Paris and is characterized by a natural fold caused by the Seine and Marne rivers in a soil mostly composed of limestone and gypsum, which were later quarried and might have created artificial depressions. At the time of Haussmann, one of them was transformed into the famous Buttes Chaumont park by the landscape architect Barillet-Deschamps.

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FIGURE 1 Louis Bonnier, "Map of Paris under 30 metres of water", Conférences et écrits, février 1930.

The northern border of the plateau is bounded by the geological depression of the plaine *de* France, occupied in ancient time by a untidy hydrological network which was dried up by the canal de l'Ourcq and pumped for industrial use. The south end of the plateau falls gradually towards the banks of the Marne. In fact, this plateau is cut by two little valleys, formed by the former riverbed of the Marne. The current toponomy now refers to three entities, from west to east:

- Extending from the park of Buttes Chaumont, "Le plateau de Romainville" offers a mosaic of urban and social textures. It landscape still bears the imprint of military fortresses.
- "Le plateau d'Avron" is a quiet urban island, occupied by woods and villages.
- Once covered by the legendary Bondy forest, "Le plateau de Montfermeil" hosts not only single-family houses, but also one of the major "grands-ensembles" of eastern Paris.

Most people are not aware of this topography linking Paris to the eastern banlieue. But through the 20th century it has been a key point for planners. One of the first, Louis Bonnier (1856-1946), chief architect for Paris, took into account the geological history of the plateaus surrounding Paris by mapping the predictable floods of the Seine and the long-term changes in its river bed⁴.

Later, Gerard Hanning (1919-1980) studied the morphology of the historical rural fabric (*trame* foncière) within the framework of the first regional Ile-De-France master plan in 1976. He intended to guide the planning process in respect to the topography and the natural hydrological networks, preserving panoramas and enhancing cityscapes seen from a distance. His studies with his own drawings, cross-sections and diagrams were recently published⁵. His work reflected two trends in urban projects of his time, mixing scientific analysis with aesthetic concerns: that is, the Italian urban morphology and on the British townscape studies⁶.

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LANDSCAPED AND UN-LANDSCAPED INFRASTRUCTURES

The northern edge of the plateau can be identified from a distance thanks to a cityscape crowned by the radio tower of Romainville. On the other hand, several panoramas have been established on the plateaus, providing views down to the northern plaine *de* France, with the wooded hills of Montmorency in the distance and even to La Défense westwards. This gives a sense of the finite quality of the metropolis. To the south, the view from the plateau to the Marne is mostly hidden. But the new town of Marne-La-Vallée can be seen on the top of the opposite hillside from a few viewpoints.

Since ancient times the plaine de France has been a major route for mobility, welcoming the so-called "route d'Allemagne" and then the canal de l'Ourcq initiated by Napoléon 1st. In the mid 19th century came train tracks starting at the Gare de l'Est. During the industry aera the narrow Marne valley lost in importance for mobility. It still includes a huge switchyard located in the city of Chelles. The little plateau of Avron is yet surrounded by major infrastructures: on the west side the A86 motorway circles Paris; on the east side the rail network links Chelles to the Canal de l'Ourcq.

Built in the early 1960's, the Parisian "périphérique" ring road replaced a green belt that had been gradually built since the 1920's⁷. On this eastern section, panoramic views and scenic landscaping could have been disturbed by sound-walls. Recently, playgrounds have been built on artificial structures covering the motorway.

On the plateaus, minor engineered structures could be taken into account as landscaped infrastructures:

- Built under Haussmann's administration to supply Paris with drinking water, the viaduc de la Dhuys descends slowly from its original sources to the plateau of Montfermeil. It was covered and landscaped with a green lawn to give it a serpentine aspect, probably in the 1970's. It offers a pleasant promenade through areas of single-family dwellings and public housing complexes up to Bondy forest. Both this surface and underlying land are owned by the city of Paris.
- On the plateau of Romainville, three military fortresses still belong to the army. They were the outer part of an ineffective defense system built in the mid 19th with the inner "fortifications" wall surrounding Paris. Since the early 20th century, planners have wanted to landscape the "Corniche des Forts", the military road that linked the Forts. In the meantime, the open spaces existing for this parkway were drastically reduced, but the idea is still alive today.

A MOSAIC OF URBAN, SOCIAL AND ETHNIC FABRICS

The aera was long ago dedicated to truck and sheep-farming, orchards and quarries, supplying Parisians with fresh fruits, vegetables and building materials. A collection of urban typologies reflects the transition from a rural society, along with imported architectural forms from the upper class or the welfare state. Here we can see old settlement villages surrounding a church, often enlarged along a main road; ancient farms or plaster factories whose former existence is preserved in the toponymy; several aristocratic or ecclesiastical estates that have been divided into plots in the 19th century. The ciy of Montreuil still publicizes its "walls-grown peaches" (Murs à pêches) cultivated by associations, but neglects their maintenance.

Today, the municipalities bordering Paris (Les Lilas, Bobigny, Montreuil) are proud to be characterized as "faubourgs de la capitale". These former "main road villages" were soon densified by a heterogenous residential and industrial fabric. They never benefited from an extensive haussmannization as bourgeois suburbs did in the west (Neuilly or Boulogne) and in the south-east (Vincennes, St-Mandé). Certain roads were enlarged, but the most remained narrow.

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FIGURE 2 Gérald Hanning, "The Parisian space: the fundamental agrarian order" (1973);



FIGURE 3 "Paris overseas its river site and establishes itself on the surrounding plateaus" (1973)



FIGURE 4 The East-Ensemble agglomeration, 2014, map of the plateau of Romainville

An important aspect of the pre-metropolization of the Romainville/Montfermeil plateau was the "villégiatures" built by Parisian bourgeois from the mid-19th century who chose unpolluted and panoramic sites close to the train stations. Spending Sundays and holidays with family, they were looking for social life as well, so they tended to settle in new communities. Set on a hillside, Le Raincy started its urbanization as a pittoresque settlement, becoming a main residence by the next generations of inhabitants. Montfermeil includes another of these typical villégiature-settlements, but of a lower standard, "Franceville". Around 1900 the idea of spending "le dimanche à la campagne" democratized and more modest communities could be found.⁸

Except for the genuine garden-city of Les Lilas, no major social housing projects on the plateau were recorded in the period between the two world wars. Instead, as elsewhere around Paris, a national housing policy encouraged more modest homeowners. These urban extensions, drawn up by promoters, were known as "lotissements défectueux" because of their bad sewage and road networks, until the Loi Sarrault (1928) offered improvement-subsidies to the settlers who had organized associations and the Loi Loucheur (1928) opened credit terms to a lower-income population⁹.

During the post-WWII period, the so-called "red belt" (ceinture rouge) around Paris was governed by communist councils. They orignally welcomed middle-class populations thanks to major public housing projects that over the years tended to concentrate ethnic minorities. Because of real estate considerations, the "grands ensembles", defined as ZUP (zone d'urbanisme prioritaire), often occupied large areas with insufficient transport facilities. This is the case of the so-called "Chêne pointu" at Clichy-sous-Bois which was at the origins of the riots in 2005. Set next to a very ancient place of pilgrimage, the center of the ghetto confronts its memory with neolotic times.

From the mid-1970's onwards, housing policies changed again in favour of single-family houses that sprawled around urbanized zones. The term "pavillonaire" yet includes all kinds of urban fabrics, new and old, dedicated to family houses with garden.

This contrast of urban and social situations was reinforced by residential mobility. Once a charming villégiature, Le Raincy preserved its upper middle-class character and was long the only island of conservatives in this area. It's only a couple of kilometers from Clichy-sous-Bois. With very few exceptions in the suburbs close to Paris, the social structure of the pavillonaire is increasingly distinguished from that of the *grands ensembles* by the fact that it attracts higher earning families. The phenomenon of gentrification and social clivage is specially acute in the *faubourgs*, like Montreuil, which is depicted as the largest Malian city outside Africa, but also as a new home for former Parisians in the creative economy.

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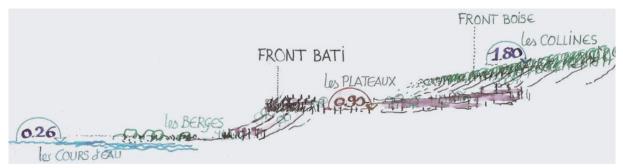


FIGURE 5 APUR, La fabrique du paysage métropolitain, 2012, a theoretical landscape cross-section

OVERLAPPING GOVERNANCES

The lack of interrelated open spaces has historical causes, mainly administrative divisions and erratic land purchase strategies at a time when it would have been possible to preserve natural spaces as a whole¹⁰. Nowadays, green spaces, parks and former quarries depend on different public ownerships (municipalities, departement Seine-St-Denis, region Ile-de-France, the State for the military aeras, and even the City of Paris).

In recent time some municipal associations (Communautés d'agglomération) were founded. The State and the region then encouraged the creation of so-called CDT (Contrat de Développement territorial) to award subsidies on the basis of improvement projects developed by cooperating municipalities. The scope of the CDT may or may not match that of the Communautés d'agglomération.

The overlapping of projects in the same territory is difficult to understand. The reports of each planning board (Communauté d'agglomération, CDT) are combined, along with those from other planning entities, such as the SGP (Société du Grans Paris), prime contractor for a future RER rapid transit line, and Paris-Aménagement, a state-owned real estate company. The two planning agencies of the Region (IAUîdF, Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région Île de France) and the City of Paris (APUR, Atelier parisien d'urbanisme) consider it their duty to collect data above and beyond administrative boundaries. Playing the role of think-tank, there is also the AIGP (Atelier international du Grand Paris) which was founded after the Grand Paris competition in 2009 and financed by the State and the Région which assigned international and national architects as experts. Aware of the process of densification within tiny urban fabrics, they promote a densification on so-called "foncier invisible", rather than an extensive real estate strategy. In fact, local authorities and planning institutes are all awaiting the upcoming "Métropole du Grand Paris"¹¹. The question is, will this new authority simplify things, or will it just enhance the bureaucratic "layer cake" ? This is a challenge for both citizens and planners.

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES AND QUOTATIONS ON LANDSCAPE

The AIGP considers the overall landscape (le grand paysage) an important topic and has introduced the concept of "landscape arches" (arcs paysagers) on a metropolitan scale. Concerning the CDTs "Est-ensemble" and "Paris Est entre Marne et Bois" AIGP's experts recommand to include the plateaus, the Canal de l'Ourcq and the Bondy forest in a broader vision for a "greater metropolitan landscape"; to enhance "the value of the Corniche des Forts" and to improve the ecological relationship down to the Marne and the Bois de Vincennes by restoring the small streams and rivers descending from the plateaus. The construction of highway and railroad bridges or passages are also considered as challenging¹².

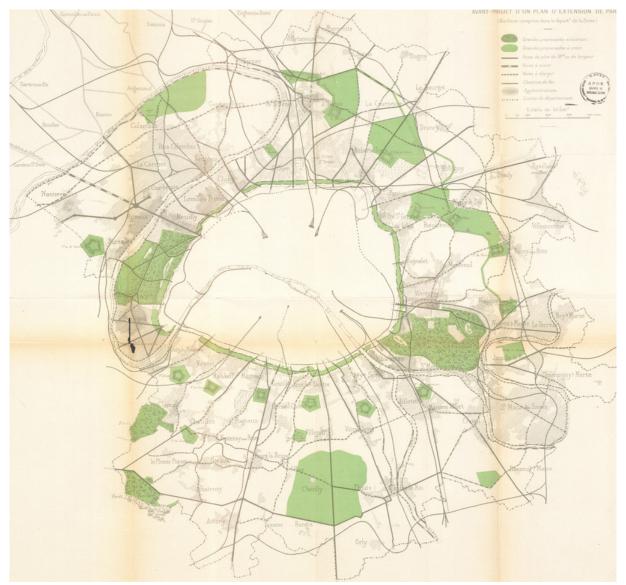


FIGURE 6 Louis Bonnier, preliminary project for Paris extension, 1913

The APUR – the planning agency for the city of Paris – is not commissioned to act for others municipalities, but clearly wants to revive comprehensive geographic analysis. It therefore published two booklets on "The making of the metropolitan landscape" which aims to identify "the fundamental elements of the greater landscape"; "to make the metropolitan landscape more readable" and to produce "tools of prefiguration and management of the impact of future projects on the landscape"¹³. Dealing with cityscapes and panoramas, urban layouts and topography, the hand-drawn maps and cross-sections of this brochure were obviously inspired by Gerald Hanning, even though he is not cited.

All of these studies seem to have developed amnesia: there is no reference to planning history.



FIGURE 7 Léon Jaussely, with Roger-Henri Expert and Louis Sollier, Greater Paris Competition, 1919, general plan in black and white: note the double-park system to the east

PREVIOUS PROJECTS OF PARKS SYSTEMS

The first comprehensive report connecting inner Paris with its surroundings dated from 1913 when the "Commission d'extension de Paris" – founded in 1911 by the City Council of Paris and the département de la Seine – published two booklets written by the historian Marcel Poëte and Louis Bonnier, who produced a schematic plan of a park system around Paris, linking historical parks, natural woods and urban parks¹⁴. On the plateau de Romainville he foresaw a green necklace whose backbone was the Corniche des Forts transformed into a parkway. This urban figure would remain a paradigm for planners till the present day.

By this time the Parisian scene contained different opinions concerning the lay-out of parks. Some people, like Eugène Hénard, stood for a distribution of parks of different sizes all over Greater Paris, with very weak links. Others, like Bonnier and Claude Nicolas Forestier – the successor to Adolphe Alphand at the city board for parks

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– stood for park systems connected by generous parkways like those planned for American cities. In 1908, The Forestier's book published in 1908, "Grandes villes et systèmes de parcs", received full attention at the Musée social, a lobby for scientists that played a significant role in the Chamber of Deputies¹⁵.

The question of "green-fielding" the fortifications, which were supposed to be destroyed according to a pending law, led to a compromise with a project supported by the deputy Louis Dausset, consisting in the division of the military zone into two rings: an inner one for public housing programmes and an outer one devoted to a green belt composed of parks and playing fields. All protagonists called on comparative statistics from other big cities, such as London, New York, Vienna and Berlin, but none developed feasible proposals for an integrated parks policy for Greater Paris.

The questions of land purchase, and whether a contracting authority similar to the American Park Commissions should be established were barely addressed. Ignoring the popular "bals aux bords de Marne" and other outdoor practices, as shown in the paintings by neo-impressionnists, the French experts still supported the model of the bourgeois "promenade" and did not really investigate new recreation programs, such as playgrounds. Access by the Parisian masses to suburban parks by public transport was not even mentioned in Bonnier's report. This was very unlike Germany where theories flourished at that time in favor of "Volksparks", "Sozial Grün" and "Parkpolitik".

A competition for the plan "d'Aménagement and d'embellissement du Grand Paris" was started in 1919, at the initiative of the département de la Seine and the Council of Paris according to the law for the reclassification of the fortifications and the law Cornudet that obliged cities of more than 10.000 inhabitants to draw up extension plans (both 1919). Participants in this competition were asked to come up with proposals for public transport, park systems and types of housing extensions. The winner, the architect Léon Jaussely (with Roger-Henri Expert and Louis Sollier), was a self-taught urbanist who had been awarded the Grand Prix de Rome, like Tony Garnier and Henri Prost. After winning a competition for Barcelona in 1905, he had worked for its municipality on a improvement plan interconnecting the faubourgs and introducing zoning plan. In 1909-1910 he and Charles Nicod entered the Greater Berlin competition with a project noticed by the jury¹⁶.

His attitude to city extensions was comprehensive, structured by geography. According to a planning method, he first designed the infrastructures from the heaviest to the lightest, proposing a new canal linking the Marne river at Chelles to the Canal de l'Ourcq and Canal St-Denis to a new port in Genevilliers, on the Seine downstream. Between Chelles and Ourcq, the canal followed the existing railways eastward from the mound of Avron. All over the plateaus, he improved the main radial streets with greenery and, being familiar with Olmsted, he proposed a double green system. One crescent enclosed the first ring of suburbs, linking from north to south the Pantin cemetery to the Bois de Vincennes and the Marne river. About 15-20 km from Paris, he also planned an outer green system connecting the Bondy forest with natural spaces. Every 5 km was a concentric parkway called a "promenade touristique" (three in all, the first was the Corniche de Forts). Jaussely, like most of his competitors, intended to build new housing settlements, described as "cités-jardin" or "banlieues-jardin".

In 1934, the architect Henri Prost presented the first official plan for Greater Paris (PARP, Plan d'aménagement de la Région parisienne) ordered by the State and the Département de la Seine¹⁷. The plan extended in a circle of 40 km around Paris and was designed to limit urban growth, to modernize the road system and introduce new motorways. Without referring to Jaussely, Prost used some of his features, like the green circles, but reduced them in size. No new motorways were planned for the plateaus, but primary roads were distinguished in their existing street network. The archives from the public enquiry show that some municipalities were not so eager to preserve open spaces¹⁸. In the inter-war period the municipalities had limited resources to purchase or expropriate for this need¹⁹.

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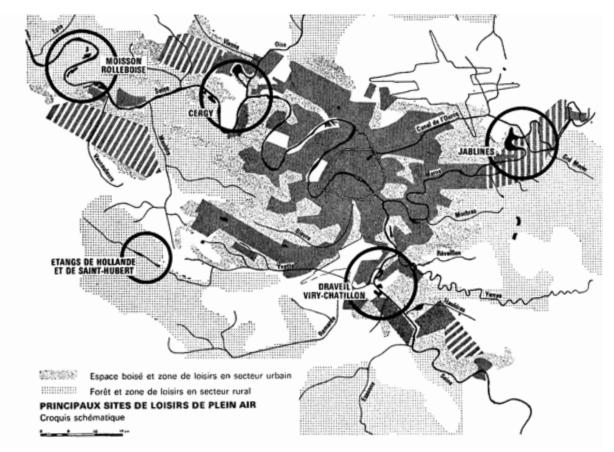


FIGURE 8 SDRAUP 1965 (Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la Région parisienne), Paris area urban development master plan: main recreation areas.

Published in 1934, approved in 1939, revised in 1956, the PARP remained the guidelines for the suburbs until the PADOG of 1960 (Plan d'aménagement et d'organisation générale de la Région parisienne). In August 1965 came the SDAURP (Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la Région parisienne), which was supervised by the District of the Région parisienne founded in 1961 and managed by Paul Delouvrier. Greater Paris was to be extended with four new towns set on both sides of the Seine valley, so that urban growth would stretch in two parallel bands. In addition, the master plan featured the development of the office district at La Défense, a new airport at Roissy and the construction of the RER, a rapid transport network for commuters. Nonetheless, by concentrating infrastructures in the outer belt of suburbs around Paris, the SDAURP restrained investements in the underserved inner belt, controlled at the time by entrenched communist administrations.

In the SDAURP, the crescent of the Forts was mapped as an island, while Bondy Forest merged into a huge park extending to the north (today parc forestier régional de Sevran). Five recreation areas with beaches – "bases de loisirs" – were considered at a much bigger scale²⁰. That of Jablines, located at the intersection of the Marne river and the canal de l'Ourcq, was indeed built (like others in Cergy, Draveil), but without the public transport that would benefit a broader population living in inner Paris. What had long become a standard in other countries (like the United States and Germany) – free metropolitan beaches – was delayed in France.

The regional master plans that followed – SDRIF (Schéma directeur de la région d'Île-de-France) of 1976, 1994, 2013 – were based on a number of preliminary studies, including Gerald Hanning's townscape studies for 1976. Environmental values got reinforced, while interest grew in agriculture, previously overlooked.

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CONCLUSION

By confronting academic knowledge with the terrain, planning history borrows from the fields of empirical sociology and landscape survey. Since, the usefulness of historical metropolitan studies is not yet obvious for contemporary issues. In the upcoming process of Métropole du Grand Paris, public authorities did not involve historian scholars, except for an overall study on the inheritage of Haussmann commissioned by an elected representative of the city of Paris²¹.

Nevertheless in 2013 some historians teaching in universities and schools for architecture merged together for an initiative called "Inventer le Grand Paris" – a yearly conference program that intend to renew the narrative of the Parisian metropolis in a comparative and international perspective. By relating the sense of place to long term history, this could modestly contribute to a public debate and benefit to suburban resilience and integration policies.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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She is a co-founder of "Inventer le Grand Paris", a group of urban historians who held since 1913 yearly conferences on the history of Greater Paris.

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- 9 Annie Fourcaut, La banlieue en morceaux: La crise des lotissements défectueux en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres (Paris: Créaphis, 2000).
- 10 From the Revolution up to the 1960's, this territory was divided into two circular administrative départements: the Seine and the Seine-et-Oise. Including the municipality of Paris, the Seine département had an administration which was quite effective compared to the rural Seine-et-Oise. Oise. In 1964 Seine and Seine-et-Oise merged and were redivided into 4 départements. All the municipalities of the plateau became part of the new département of Seine-St-Denis. See: Emmanuel Bellanger, "La traversée historique du Grand Paris", Mouvements, 74(2013/2): 52-62 ; Annie Fourcaut, Emmanuel Bellanger and Mathieu Flonneau, Paris/Banlieues, Conflits et solidarités, Historiographie, anthologie, chronologie, 1788-2006 (Paris: Créaphis, 2007).
- 11 According to the law of January 1, 2016, the authority of "Métropole du Grand Paris" will gradually replace the four départements of Paris, Seine St-Denis, Val-de-Marne and Haut-de-Seine, and supervise the urban projects developed by local entities.
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Figure 7: Léon Jaussely: 1919. Concours pour l'aménagement et extension de Paris (avec Roger-Henri Expert et Louis Sollier): plan général (LJ-PHO-019-01-01 1919) © "Fonds Jaussely. Académie d'architecture/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XXe siècle" Figure 8: SDRAUP 1965, Report (Paris: 1965), 229, http://www.driea.ile-de-france.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/presentation-du-sdaurp-de-1965-a970.html