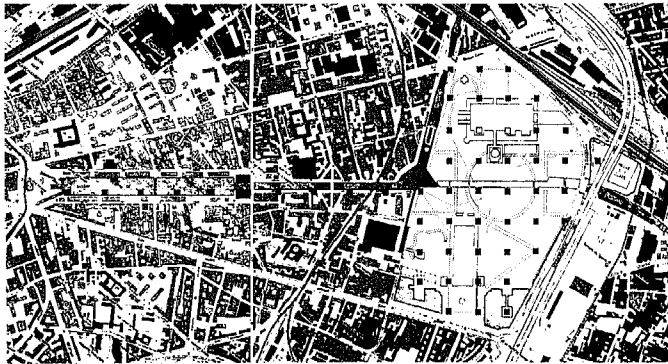


Parc de la Villette, point grids.



Abstract Mediation and Strategy

When confronted with an urbanistic program, an architect may either:

- a. Design a masterly construction, an inspired architectural gesture (a composition)
- b. Take what exists, fill in the gaps, complete the text, scribble in the margins (a complement)
- c. Deconstruct what exists by critically analyzing the historical layers that preceded it, even adding other layers

derived from elsewhere—from other cities, other parks (a palimpsest)

- d. Search for an intermediary—an abstract system to mediate between the site (as well as all given constraints) and some other concept, beyond city or program (a mediation)

During the Parc de la Villette competition, thought had been given to employing as a methodology either the palimpsest or the abstract mediation. The composition and complement were rejected outright, the one for its subscription to old architectural myths, the other for its limiting pragmatism. Yet the palimpsest (which had been explored in the 1976 *Screenplays*) was not pursued, for its inevitably figurative or representational components were incompatible with the complexity of the programmatic, technical, and political constraints that could be foreseen. Furthermore, the object of the competition was both to select a chief architect who would be in charge of the master plan as well as of construction of the park's key elements, and to suggest, coordinate, and supervise possible contributions by other artists, landscape designers, and architects. The numerous unknowns governing the general economic and ideological context suggested that much of the chief architect's role would depend on a strategy of substitution. It was clear that the elements of the program were interchangeable and that budgets and priorities could be altered, even reversed, at least over the course of one generation.

Hence the concern, reinforced by recent developments in philosophy, art, and literature, that the park propose a strong conceptual framework while simultaneously suggesting multiple combinations and substitutions. One part could replace another, or a building's program be revised, changing (to use an actual example) from restaurant to gardening center to arts workshop. In this manner, the park's identity could be maintained, while the circumstantial logics of state or institutional politics could pursue their own independent scenarios. Moreover, our objective was also to act upon a strategy of differences: if other designers were to intervene, their projects' difference from the *Folies* or divergence from the continuity of the cinematic promenade would become the condition of their contributions. The general circumstances of the project, then, were to find an organizing structure that could exist independent of use, a structure without center or hierarchy, a structure that would negate the simplistic assumption of a causal relationship between a program and the resulting architecture.

Recourse to the point grid as an organizing structure was hardly without precedent. The concept of an abstract mediation had been researched earlier in *Joyce's Garden* (1977), in which a literary text, *Finnegans Wake*, was used as the program for a project involving a dozen contributions by different students on a "real" site, London's Covent Garden. The intersections of an ordinance survey grid became the locations of each architectural intervention, thereby accommodating a heterogeneous selection of build-

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ings through the regular spacing of points. Moreover (and perhaps more important), the point grid functioned as a mediator between two mutually exclusive systems of words and stones, between the literary program (James Joyce's book) and the architectural text. *Joyce's Garden* in no way attempted to reconcile the disparities resulting from the superimposition of one text on another; it avoided synthesis, encouraging, instead, the opposed and often conflicting logics of the different systems. Indeed, the abstraction of the grid as an organizing device suggested the disjunction between an architectural signifier and its programmatic signified, between space and the use that is made of it. The point grid became the tool of an approach that argued, against functionalist doctrines, that there is no cause-and-effect relationship between the two terms of program and architecture.

Beyond such personal precedents, the point grid was also one of the few modes of spatial organization that vigorously resisted the stamp of the individual author: its historical multiplicity made it a sign without origin, an image without "first image" or inaugurating mark. Nevertheless, the grid's serial repetitions and seeming anonymity made it a paradigmatic twentieth-century form. And just as it resisted the humanist claim to authorship, so it opposed the closure of ideal compositions and geometric dispositions. Through its regular and repetitive markings, the grid defined a potentially infinite field of points of intensity: an incomplete, infinite extension, lacking center or hierarchy.

The grid, then, presented the project team with a series of dynamic oppositions. We had to design a park: the grid was antinature. We had to fulfill a number of functions: the grid was antifunctional. We had to be realists: the grid was abstract. We had to respect the local context: the grid was anticontextual. We had to be sensitive to site boundaries: the grid was infinite. We had to take into account political and economic indetermination: the grid was determinate. We had to acknowledge garden precedents: the grid had no origin, it opened onto an endless recession into prior images and earlier signs.

Superimposition

It should be noted that the point grid of La Villette could just as well have taken the form of a random distribution of points throughout the site. Only for strategic, rather than conceptual, reasons was the regular point grid selected. It is also important to recall that the point grid of *Folies* (the "system of points") constitutes only one of the project's components; the "system of lines" and the "system of surfaces" are as fundamental as the "system of points."

Each represents a different and autonomous system (a text), whose superimposition on another makes impossible any "composition," maintaining differences and refusing ascendancy of any privileged system or organizing element. Although each is determined by the architect as "subject," when one system is superimposed on another, the

subject—the architect—is erased. While one could object that the same architect continues his controlling authority by staging the superimposition (and hence that the park remains the product of his individual intentions), the competition requirements provided a means to relativize the presence of such a masterminding subject by stipulating, as in any large-scale urban project, that other professionals intervene. Another layer, another system could then be interposed among the preceding three layers in the form of occasional constructions juxtaposed to several *Folies*, or of experimental gardens by different designers, inserted into the sequences of the cinematic promenade. Such juxtapositions would be successful only insofar as they injected discordant notes into the system, hence reinforcing a specific aspect of the Park theory. The principle of heterogeneity—of multiple, dissociated, and inherently confrontational elements—is aimed at disrupting the smooth coherence and reassuring stability of composition, promoting instability and programmatic madness (“a Folie”). Other existing constructions (e.g., the Museum of Science and Industry, the Grande Halle) add further to the calculated discontinuity.

Cinegram

To the notion of composition, which implies a reading of urbanism on the basis of the *plan*, the La Villette project substitutes an idea comparable to montage (which presupposes autonomous parts or fragments). Film analogies are convenient, since the world of the cinema was the first to

introduce discontinuity—a segmented world in which each fragment maintains its own independence, thereby permitting a multiplicity of combinations. In film, each frame (or photogram) is placed in continuous movement. Inscribing movement through the rapid succession of photograms constitutes the cinegram.

The Park is a series of cinegrams, each of which is based on a precise set of architectonic, spatial, or programmatic transformations. Contiguity and superimposition of cinegrams are two aspects of montage. Montage, as a technique, includes such other devices as repetition, inversion, substitution, and insertion. These devices suggest an art of rupture, whereby invention resides in contrast—even in contradiction.

Deconstruction

Is the Parc de la Villette a built theory or a theoretical building? Can the pragmatism of building practice be allied with the analytic rigor of concepts?

An earlier series of projects, published as *The Manhattan Transcripts*, was aimed at achieving a displacement of conventional architectural categories through a theoretical argument. La Villette was the built extension of a comparable method; it was impelled by the desire to move “from pure mathematics to applied mathematics.” In its case, the constraints of the built realization both expanded and restricted the research. They expanded it, insofar as the very real economic, political, and technical constraints of

the operation demanded an ever increasing sharpening of the theoretical argumentation: the project became better as difficulties increased. But they restricted it insofar as La Villette had to be *built*: the intention was never merely to publish books or mount exhibitions; the finality of each drawing was building: except in the book entitled *La Case Vide*, there were no theoretical drawings for La Villette.

However, the Parc de la Villette project had a specific aim: to prove that it was possible to construct a complex architectural organization without resorting to traditional rules of composition, hierarchy, and order. The principle of superimposition of three autonomous systems of points, lines, and surfaces was developed by rejecting the totalizing synthesis of objective constraints evident in the majority of large-scale projects. In fact, if historically architecture has always been defined as the "harmonious synthesis" of cost, structure, use, and formal constraints (*venustas, firmitas, utilitas*), the Park became architecture against itself: a dis-integration.

Our aims were to displace the traditional opposition between program and architecture, and to extend questioning of other architectural conventions through operations of superimposition, permutation, and substitution to achieve "a reversal of the classical oppositions and a general displacement of the system," as Jacques Derrida has written, in another context, in *Marges*.

Above all, the project directed an attack against cause-and-effect relationships, whether between form and function, structure and economics, or (of course)

form and program, replacing these oppositions by new concepts of contiguity and superimposition. "Deconstructing" a given program meant showing that the program could challenge the very ideology it implied. And deconstructing architecture involved dismantling its conventions, using concepts derived both from architecture and from elsewhere—from cinema, literary criticism, and other disciplines. For if the limits between different domains of thought have gradually vanished in the past twenty years, the same phenomenon applies to architecture, which now entertains relations with cinema, philosophy, and psychoanalysis (to cite only a few examples) in an intertextuality subversive of modernist autonomy. But it is above all the historical split between architecture and its theory that is eroded by the principles of deconstruction.

It is not by chance that the different systems of the Park negate one another as they are superimposed on the site. Much of my earlier theoretical work had questioned the very idea of structure, paralleling contemporary research on literary texts. One of the goals at La Villette was to pursue this investigation of the concept of structure, as expressed in the respective forms of the point grid, the coordinate axes (covered galleries) and the "random curve" (cinematic promenade). Superimposing these autonomous and completely logical structures meant questioning their conceptual status as ordering machines: the superimposition of three coherent structures can never result in a supercoherent megastructure, but in something undecidable, something that is the opposite of a totality. This device has been explored from

1976 onward in *The Manhattan Transcripts*, where the overlapping of abstract and figurative elements (based on "abstract" architectonic transformations as much as on "figurative" extracts from the selected site) coincided with a more general exploration of the ideas of program, scenario, and sequence.

The independence of the three superposed structures thus avoided all attempts to homogenize the Park into a totality. It eliminated the presumption of a preestablished causality between program, architecture, and signification. Moreover, the Park rejected context, encouraging intertextuality and the dispersion of meaning. It subverted context: La Villette is anticontextual. It has no relation to its surroundings. Its plan subverts the very notion of borders on which "context" depends.

Non-sense/No-meaning

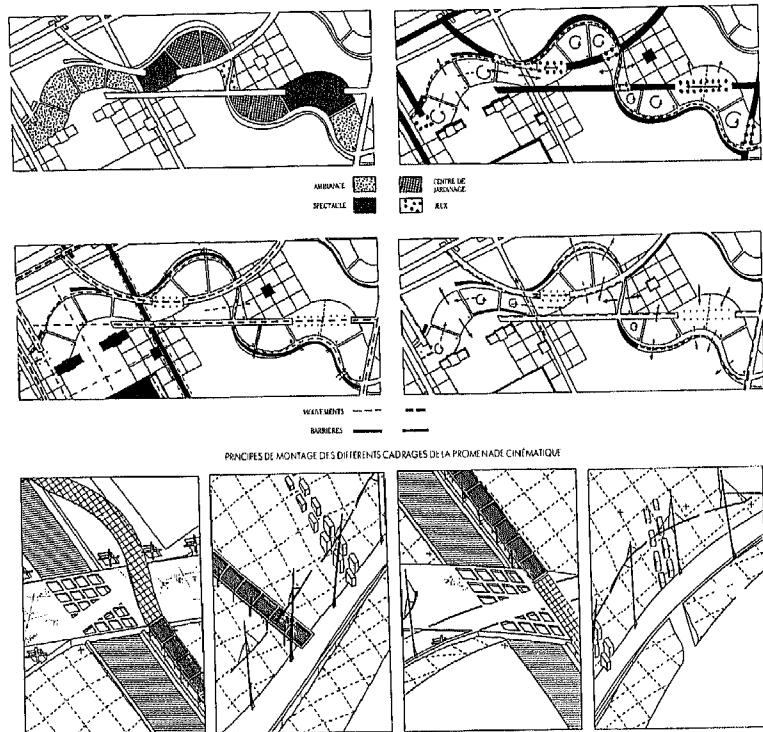
The Parc de la Villette project thus can be seen to encourage conflict over synthesis, fragmentation over unity, madness and play over careful management. It subverts a number of ideals that were sacrosanct to the modern period and, in this manner, it can be allied to a specific vision of postmodernity. But the project takes issue with a particular premise of architecture—namely, its obsession with presence, with the idea of a meaning immanent in architectural structures and forms that directs its signifying capacity. The latest resurgence of this myth has been the recuperation, by architects, of meaning, symbol, coding, and "double-coding," in an eclectic movement reminiscent of the long tradition of "re-

vivalisms" and "symbolisms" appearing throughout history. The architectural postmodernism contravenes the reading evident in other domains, where postmodernism involves an assault on meaning or, more precisely, a rejection of a well-defined signified that guarantees the authenticity of the work of art. To dismantle meaning, showing that it is never transparent, but socially produced, was a key objective in a new critical approach that questioned the humanist assumptions of style. Instead, architectural postmodernism opposed the style of the modern movement, offering as an alternative another, more palatable style. Its nostalgic pursuit of coherence, which ignores today's social, political, and cultural dissociations, is frequently the avatar of a particularly conservative architectural milieu.

The La Villette project, in contrast, attempts to dislocate and deregulate meaning, rejecting the symbolic repertory of architecture as a refuge of humanist thought. For today the term *park* (like *architecture*, *science*, or *literature*) has lost its universal meaning; it no longer refers to a fixed absolute nor to an ideal. Not the *hortus conclusus* and not the replica of Nature, La Villette is a term in constant production, in continuous change; its meaning is never fixed but is always deferred, differed, rendered irresolute by the multiplicity of meanings it inscribes. The project aims to unsettle both memory and context, opposing many contextualist and continualist ideals that imply that the architect's intervention necessarily refers to a typology, origin, or determining signified. Indeed, the Park's architecture refuses to operate as the expression of a preexisting content, whether

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Parc de la Villette, superpositions.



subjective, formal, or functional. Just as it does not answer to the demands of the self (the sovereign or "creative" architect), so it negates the immanent dialectic of the form, since the latter is displaced by superimpositions and transformations of elements that always exceed any given formal configuration. Presence is postponed and closure deferred as each permutation or combination of form shifts the image one step ahead. Most important, the Park calls into question the fundamental or primary signified of architecture—its tendency (as Derrida remarks in *La Case Vide*) to be "in service, and at service," obeying an economy of meaning premised on functional use. In contrast, La Villette promotes programmatic instability, functional *Folie*. Not a plenitude, but instead "empty" form: *les cases sont vides*.

La Villette, then, aims at an architecture that *means nothing*, an architecture of the signifier rather than the signified—one that is pure trace or play of language. In a Nietzschean manner, La Villette moves toward interpretive infinity, for the effect of refusing fixity is not insignificance but semantic plurality. The Park's three autonomous and superimposed systems and the endless combinatory possibilities of the *Folies* give way to a multiplicity of impressions. Each observer will project his own interpretation, resulting in an account that will again be interpreted (according to psychoanalytic, sociological, or other methodologies) and so on. In consequence, there is no absolute truth to the architectural project, for whatever meaning it may have is a function of interpretation: it is not resident in the object or in the object's materials. Hence, the truth of red *Folies* is not

the truth of Constructivism, just as the truth of the system of points is not the truth of the system of lines. The addition of the systems' internal coherences is not coherent. The excess of rationality is not rational. La Villette looks out on new social and historical circumstances: a dispersed and differentiated reality that marks an end to the utopia of unity.

Program and Distanciation

At La Villette (or anywhere else, for that matter) there is no longer any relationship possible between architecture and program, architecture and meaning. It has been suggested, in discussing La Villette, that architecture must produce a distance between itself and the program it fulfills. This is comparable to the effect of distanciation first elaborated in the performing arts as the principle of nonidentity between actor and character. In the same way, it could be said that *there must be no identification* between architecture and program: a bank must not look like a bank, nor an opera house like an opera house, nor a park like a park. This distanciation can be produced either through calculated shifts in programmatic expectations or through the use of some mediating agent—an abstract parameter that acts as a distancing agent between the built realm and the user's demands (at La Villette, this agent was the grid of *Folies*).

The concept of program, however, remains increasingly important. By no means should it be eliminated (a "pure" architecture) or reinjected at the end of the development of a "pure" architectonic elaboration. The program

plays the same role as narrative in other domains: it can and must be reinterpreted, rewritten, deconstructed by the architect. La Villette, in this sense, is dys-narrative or dys-programmatic: the programmatic content is filled with calculated distortions and interruptions, making for a city fragment in which each image, each event strives towards its very concept.

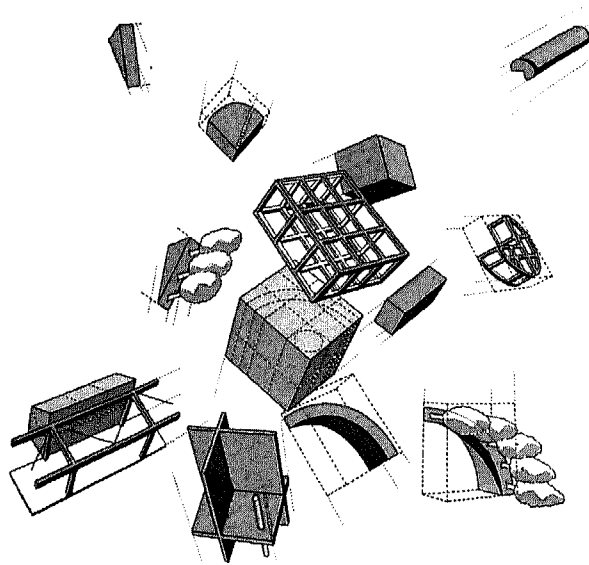
Of course, there are further ways to explore the impossible relation between architecture and program. The following examples are an indication of such a field of research.

Crossprogramming: Using a given spatial configuration for a program not intended for it, that is, using a church building for bowling. Similar to typological displacement: a town hall inside the spatial configuration of a prison or a museum inside a car park structure. Reference: crossdressing.

Transprogramming: Combining two programs, regardless of their incompatibilities, together with their respective spatial configurations. Reference: planetarium + rollercoaster.

Disprogramming: Combining two programs, whereby a required spatial configuration of program A contaminates program B and B's possible configuration. The new program B may be extracted from the inherent contradictions contained in program A, and B's required spatial configuration may be applied to A.

Bernard Tschumi, Exploded *Folie* 1984.



Disjunctions

1. Disjunction and Culture

The paradigm of the architect passed down to us through the modern period is that of the form-giver, the creator of hierarchical and symbolic structures characterized, on the one hand, by their unity of parts and, on the other, by the transparency of form to meaning. (The modern, rather than modernist, subject of architecture is referred to here so as to

Bernard Tschumi

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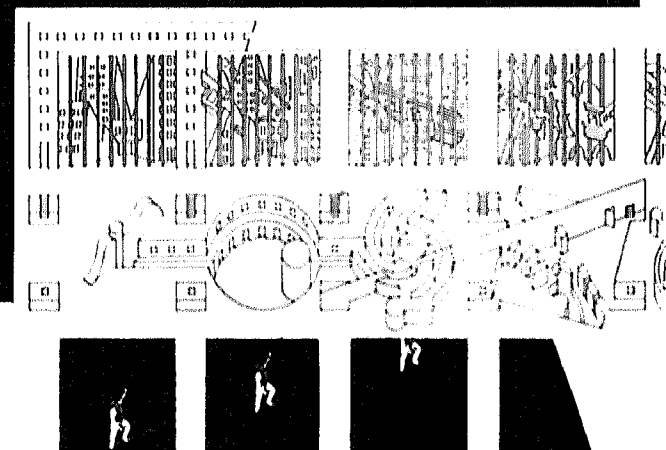
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Bernard Tschumi, from *The Manhattan Transcripts*, 1977–1981.