



Wiki 101: Parc de La Villette

APH 515: Current Issues and Topics

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Outline

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History and Context:

During the 19th century the area of La Villette transformed from a small commercial town at the outskirts of Paris to a major merchant intersection due to the development of the Ourcq and St. Denis canals. In 1860 La Villette was absorbed by the city of Paris. This area was popular for its markets, slaughter houses, and ports. However with the continuing development of the region, La Villette was no longer an entrance to the city, but an important international transportation and commercial link. In other words, La Villette transformed from suburban to urban environment. Therefore when plans for a park in La Villette started in 1980, it was certain that the park needed to address issues of urban scale and culture.

Aspirations for the Park:

The EEPV (Etablissement Public du Parc de La Villette) considered that most parks were not adapted to their time, thus they wanted the park to include symbols of modernity and innovation. The EEPV envisioned the park as a bridge between the science museum and the music centre.

The park also needed to reflect its new relationship with the region. Therefore it should express that it is no longer an entrance or passage to the city, but part of the core of the larger metropolitan area.

It was also desired to design a park that was flexible and diverse. To achieve diversity, participants needed to consider two extremes: the garden city and the garden in the city. One concentrated around the Grande Halle, the center for many activities, and the other as thematic gardens for visitors to improve their well being. Besides the park needed to be active, experimental, and manifest the way of life of the city by means of constant renewal of activities.

Another important issue was that of pluralism and unity. The park should be a meeting point of cultures.

For the EEPV this could be achieved through three main concepts:

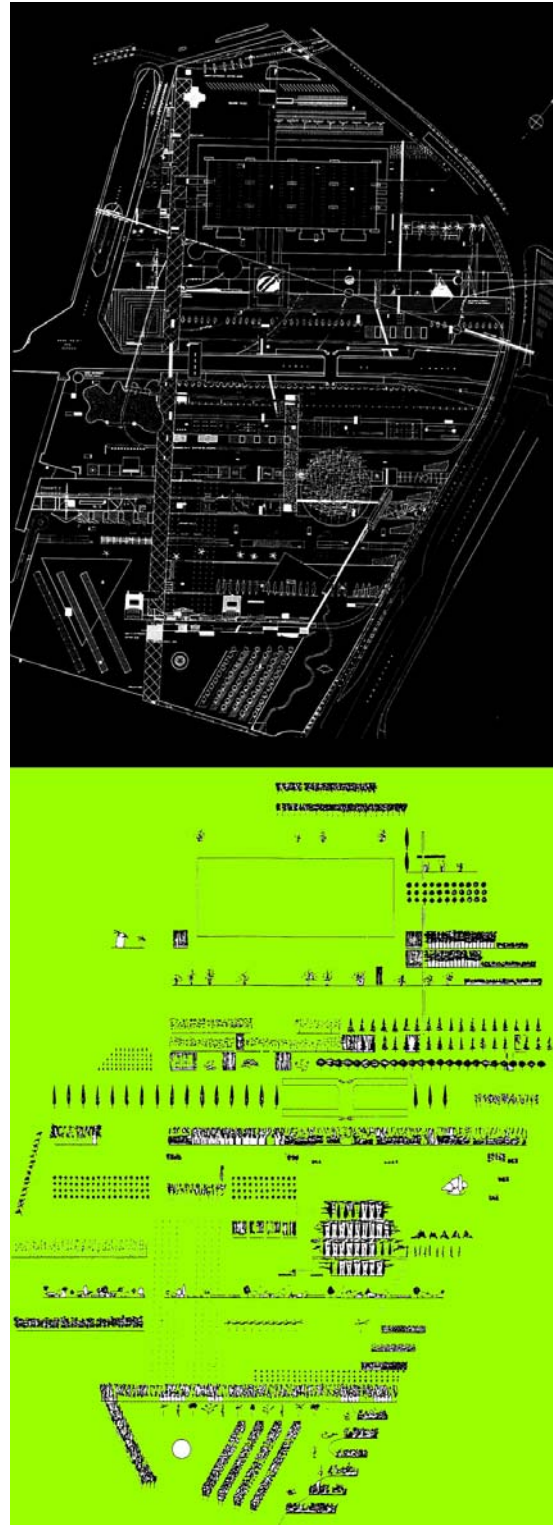
- Urbanism: Man and the city, social interaction, no one should feel excluded
- Pleasure: well being of body and mind, appreciation of the everyday life and exceptional
- Experimentation: Knowledge and action, living active culture.¹

¹ Lodewijk Baljon, *Designing Parks* (Amsterdam: Architecture and Natura Press, 1992), 39.

OMA's Proposal:

OMA's proposal for Parc de La Villette has been studied to a great extent because of its clever manifestation of Rem Koolhaas' theories, particularly those explored in his book *Delirious New York*. In this book Koolhaas is fascinated with the idea of congestion. For him the skyscraper, particularly the Downtown Athletic Club, encapsulates the Culture of Congestion. He argues that the American skyscraper works as a Social Condenser: "A machine to generate and intensify desirable forms of human intercourse."² This idea is translated into Parc de La Villette almost literally. Koolhaas aims at producing a Social Condenser by organizing the floor plan of the park basically as that of the section of a skyscraper. He describes it as "a catalog of 40 or 50 different activities, arranged like floors... In this way we could realize the congestion or density of the skyscraper without referring to building or to architecture in any way."³

Congestion is important to Koolhaas because it describes the contemporary metropolitan lifestyle. Urban activities are unstable, uncertain, they overlap and mutate. Therefore to provide potential space for ever-changing and unprecedented activities Koolhaas strategy is to "combine architectural specificity with programmatic indeterminacy."⁴ By juxtaposing and superimposing different layers of the composition, programs exchange and extend creating a horizontal congestion.



² Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 152.

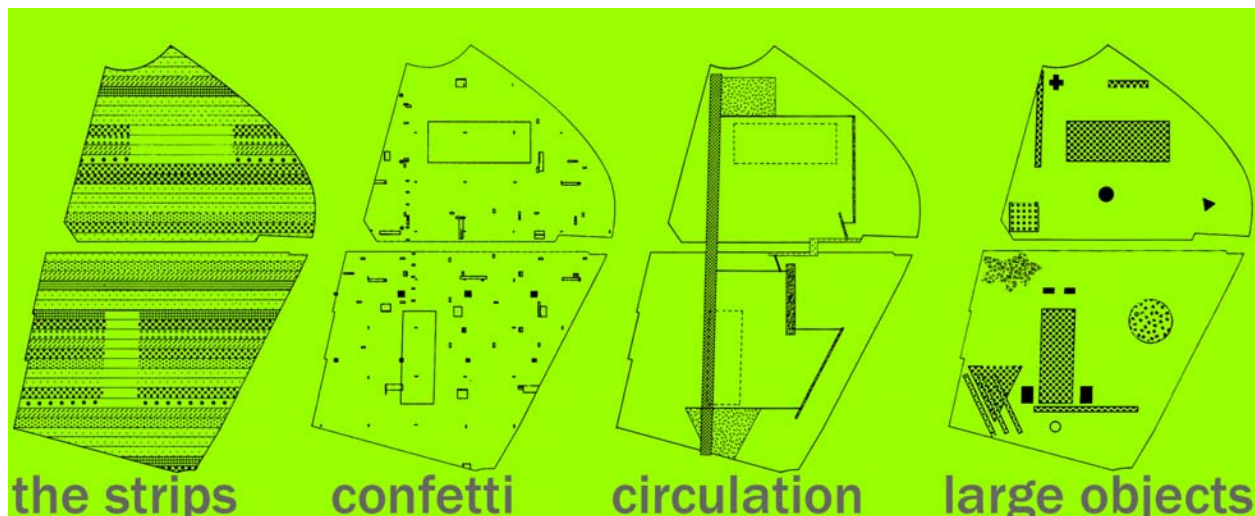
³ Rem Koolhaas, *Conversation with Students* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 14.

⁴ Rem Koolhaas, *SMLXL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 921.

Composition:

Layers:

1. The Strips: Parallel strips running east to west contain different programmatic categories, such as thematic gardens, play areas, discovery gardens, etc. Also nature is treated as a program. This arrangement makes the strips permeable allowing easy program mutation. Besides, “the dialogue among the strips’ play with the depth of the activities.”⁵ The proximity and relationship between these strips facilitate the diversity and scale of activities.
2. Point grids or confetti: small elements such as kiosks, play areas, concession stands, and ticket sales are placed on the site to optimized the amount of points required for the site. The following formula is used: $A-a/x$ where A=area of zone. a=area required for installations, x the number of points to be distributed. These elements create unity through fragmentation. However the points appear in different zones and take part of the character of the host zone. Their form and color are prominent; they are *tectonic confetti*.



3. Access and Circulation: Two major contrasting elements: the mall with north south orientation, crossing the strip at right angles, and complementary to the mall the promenade, formed by esplanades arranged as to include interesting groupings which result from the interaction of the bands. “Sites within the sites are equipped with such facilities as a small amphitheater, chess tables, puppet theaters, platforms, roller skating rinks, etc. The mall is to be a scene of permanent activities, 24 hours a day. Even when the rest of the park is closed the mall brightens

⁵ Marianne Barzilay, *L'invention du Parc: Parc de la Villete. Paris Concours International 1982-83*. (Paris: Graphite Editions, 1984), 38.

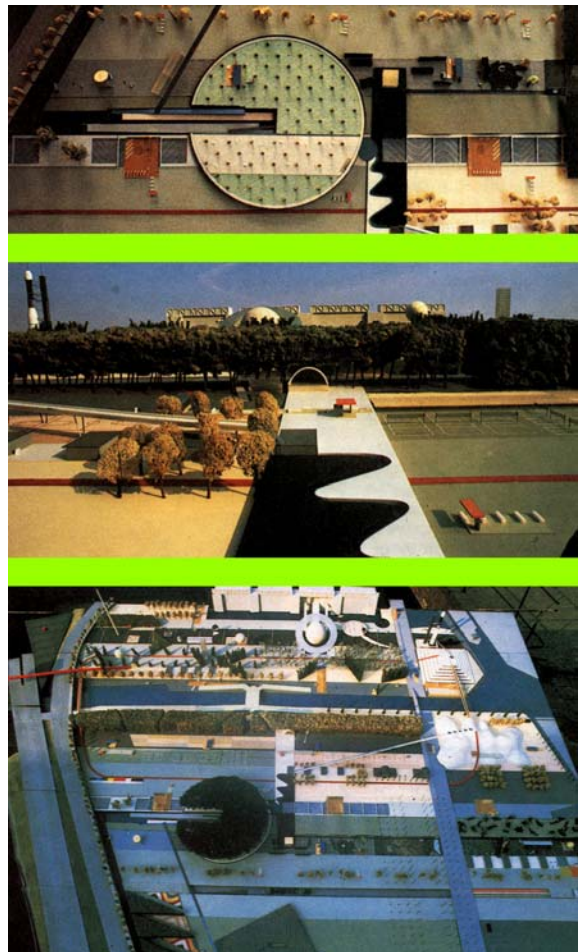
the park with neon lights. The mall is an exceptional metropolitan element.”⁶ For Koolhaas the circulation in the park needed to be an extension of the street. Fully accessible and public.

4. Large objects: too big or unique to fit in the system, for example the museum’s sphere, Ariane, and the veterinarian’s rotunda. These are located according to sight lines extrapolated from the setting or integrated to park through retroactive logic. This large objects help indicate the boundaries of the park. Although they not necessarily coincide with the perimeter of the site they counterbalance the predominance of the great hall and museum.

Nature:

There are three categories of nature in OMA’s proposal:

1. Where the program itself is nature. These take place at the bands or strips. These include thematic gardens, play-prairies, and educational gardens
2. The planted walls that function as the floor slabs in the skyscraper. However in La Villette like stage curtains with different height, density, and transparency, the landscape frames the urban spectacle
3. Linear versus the round forest: The linear forest represents the natural, the solid, and evergreen while the round forest represents the artificial, hallow, and deciduous. Moreover, the linear forest acts as a backdrop for most of the activities. Meanwhile the round forest is the forest machine to arouse sensations. It represents the forest as program and building.



⁶ Marianne Barzilay, *L'invention du Parc: Parc de la Villette*. (Paris: Graphite Editions, 1984), 39

Void:

Koolhaas describes void as opportunity. "It claims a kind of erasure from all the oppression, in which architecture plays an important part. Our profession is indoctrinated to never allow indetermination. Every design has hundreds of ideas, an ambition to express something. Great attention is given to the package of the space but not to the space itself."⁷ Koolhaas is concerned with the quality of space and its potential to generate new programs. In other words he believes that void could produce congestion. This is the strategy in Parc de La Villette. The open bands of landscape are the stage for innumerable type of performances.

Discussion:

Koolhaas proposal for Parc de La Villette not only clarifies Koolhaas theory of Congestion, but also it provides an exhaustive design solution of how to create a Social Condenser.

It is a constant challenge for architects to design flexible spaces that allow the *delirious* way of life we live in the cities. It is not sufficient to just provide open spaces. Through Parc de La Villette, Koolhaas shows us an alternative on how to tackle this problem. By shuffling and compressing program and void Koolhaas invites the public to design its own activities. Unfortunately Koolhaas proposal never materialized. One has to wonder, would Koolhaas' Parc de La Villette be able to successfully generate congestion and hence stimulate intense social interaction?

⁷ Rem Koolhaas, *Conversation with Students* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 63

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