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Author

Cann, Betsy

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The Park of La Villette: Urban Park as Building

Betsy Cann

Until recently the descriptive phrase *around buildings* would not have been adequate to describe an urban park. A park, according to dictionary definitions and common usage, is an enclosed piece of ground, reserved from settlement, and usually kept in a natural state; that is, as a landscape. Thus, the conventional usage of the term *park* describes a landscape with grass and trees or other natural elements. Because such land is reserved from settlement and maintained in a “natural” condition, it is by definition distinct from the city in which it exists.

But the idea of *park* seems to be moving away from this definition. In recent urban theory and design, the urban park is not always considered a place fundamentally *different* from the city, able to provide a change in experience and perception. Rather, it is considered *part* of the city, not merely spatially continuous with it but an arena for further expressing the ideological structures that underlie the city as a whole. Of course, *park* may also identify an enclosed space that is not a landscape, such as an amusement park, a car park, or a ball park; nonetheless, there seems to be a shift in the dominant meaning of the term.

The most significant recent park demonstrating this shift is the Park of La Villette in Paris. Bernard Tschumi’s plan was chosen in an international competition and is currently under construction. This project has been well publicized and eventually may have

tremendous influence on the design of future urban parks. It has even been described as the “Park of the Twenty-First Century.” But the innovations promoted by the competition and the winning design must be carefully investigated before they are adopted uncritically as the new model for urban park design.

The program for the competition filled two volumes and included detailed descriptions of the elements and functions to be accommodated on the 55-hectare site.¹ The sponsors of the competition requested a huge number and variety of activities distributed across the site within both a “garden city” and a “garden-in-the-city.” The “garden city” was intended to be “the center of activity, shows and experimentation” and would include facilities for sports, exhibits, clubs, workshops, schools, and even housing.² In addition, numerous buildings on the site were to be retained, the two largest of these to be renovated as a museum of science and technology and a “Music City.”

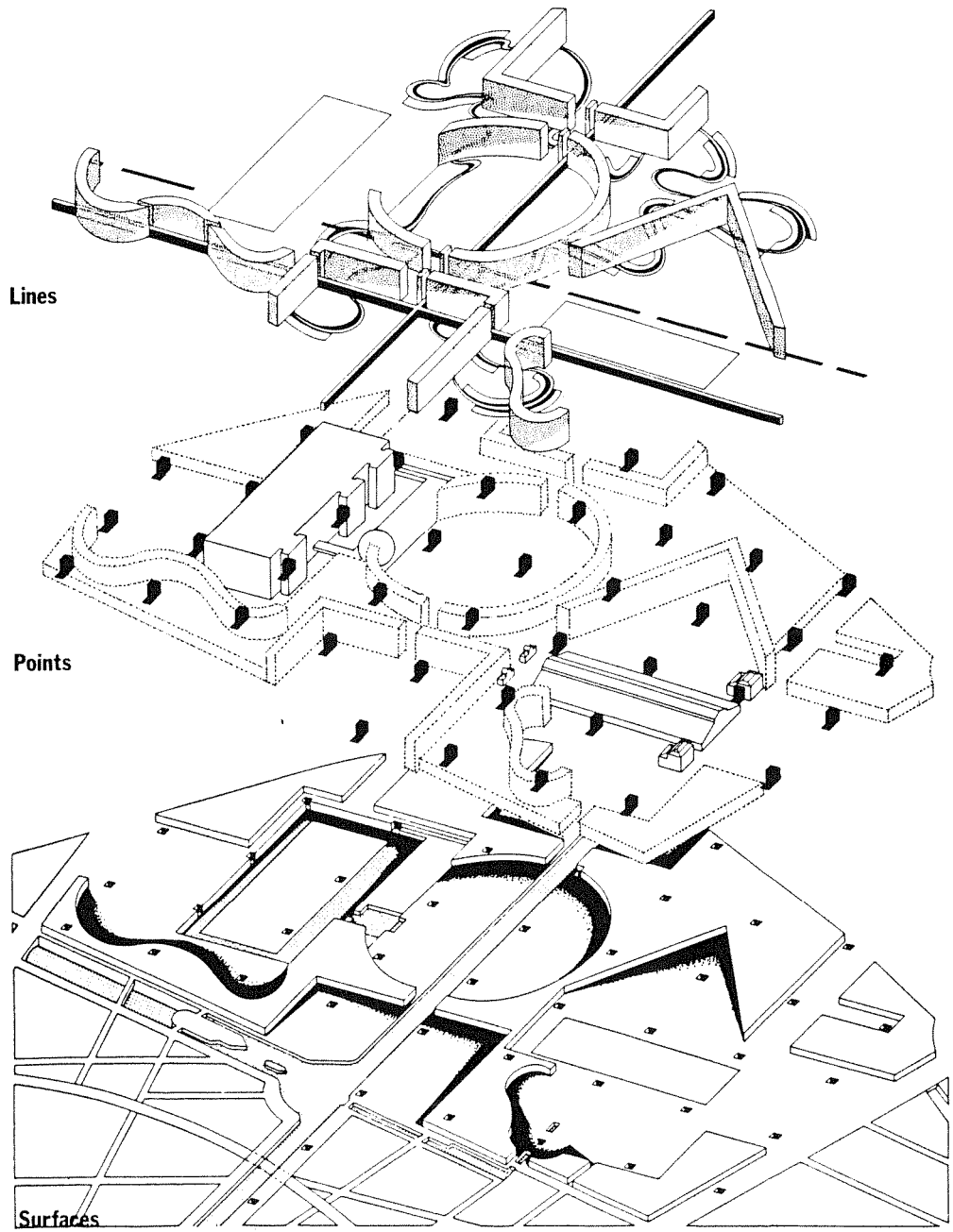
The “garden-in-the-city” was intended to be the center of “relaxation, of well-being of both body and mind,” in which Nature would be the “guiding force.”³ It was suggested that it contain a “subtle series of gardens that would abnegate the nature-culture relation.” The sponsors of the competition explicitly rejected the model of the nineteenth-century Parisian park as “exclusive and

irrelevant to the city and city life.”⁴ At the same time they attempted, perhaps futilely, to retain certain aspects of the traditional landscape park. The extensive list of gardens and other outdoor spaces indicates their continuing desire for the park to provide an experience of nature in the city.

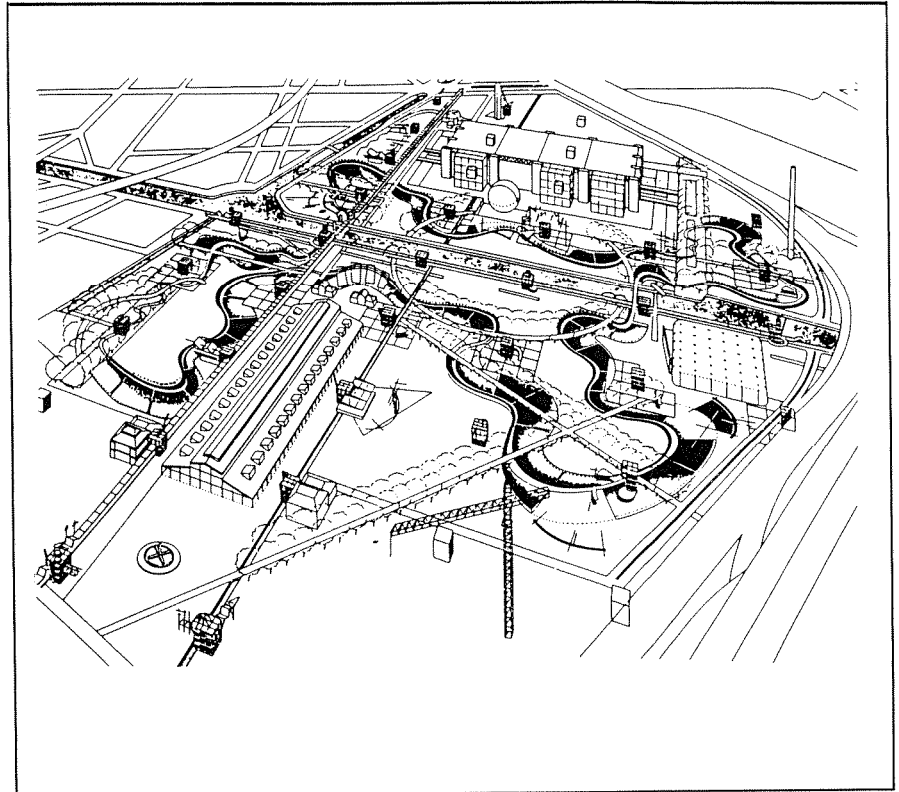
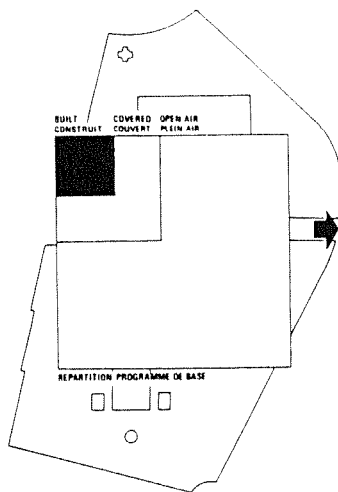
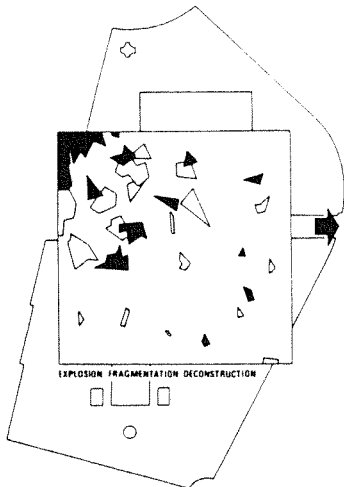
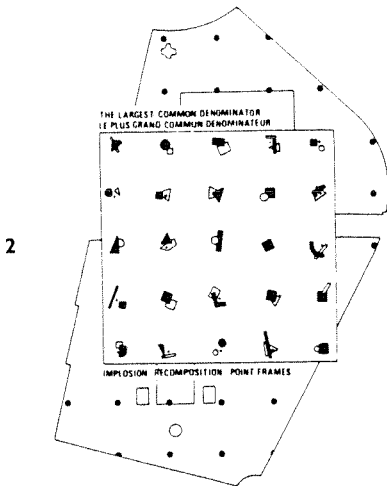
Tschumi’s scheme, however, does not respond equally to both parts of this agenda. While it does address the sponsors’ desire to include a huge variety of cultural activities, it is less successful at creating the experience of nature within the city. Bernard Tschumi’s critical stance relative to the conventional idea of park was to reject the notion of the park as a landscape at all. “The inadequacy of the civilization *vs.* nature polarity under modern city conditions has invalidated the time-honored prototype of the park as image of nature,” he wrote. “It can no longer be thought of as an undefiled utopian world-in-miniature. . . .”⁵ Instead, he completely subordinated the landscape elements of the park to the architectural elements of the design.

In rejecting the notion of the park as a landscape, Tschumi has tried to confirm the concept of the park as a new type of urban creation. He has created instead a “cultural park” that will be “a distinctive and innovative kind of park embodying a change in social programme, physical form, and social context.”⁶ His park design includes an “open-air cultural center,” with space for “workshops, gymnasium and bath

1



1,2 The systems of surfaces, points, and lines are combined on the site to create the design of the park.



3

3 Only a small area of the park consists of "built" or "constructed" space, but this built space forms the primary system that organizes the remaining "covered" and "open air" portions of the park.

facilities, playgrounds, exhibitions, concerts, scientific experiments, games and competitions” in addition to the buildings already existing on the site.⁷ Tschumi accomplished this in his design by using abstract spatial devices to organize and distribute the required activities across the site: the systems of “Points, Lines, and Planes.” The most important of these were the “Points,” consisting of a grid of “Follies,” small cubical structures that can be transformed for a variety of uses. Not only are these built structures essential to his proposal; Tschumi expanded the idea of the buildings to the scale of the park itself. He has described this park design not as green space but as “one of the largest *buildings* ever constructed” and compared the grid of Follies to the “canonical modern spatial scheme, . . . the columnar grid of a modern building.”⁸

The enormous number of buildings, objects, and other functions required in the park certainly disallow the possibility of a “real” natural landscape at La Villette. In Tschumi’s scheme the landscape has been removed from the picture almost entirely. The landscape elements, formerly the most important aspect of an urban park, have suddenly become merely the infill between the built structures that organize the project spatially and functionally. The conventional idea of the park as a landscape has been subsumed into the supremely architectural notion of a *building*, the human creation out of which the city is constructed.

The dislocation of the landscape implicit in this conceptual framework transforms the conventional elements of the landscape park—those expressive of the forces of nature—into neutral space and objects organized by the same abstract systems that organize the rest of the city. The landscape elements—gardens, playgrounds, allées, fields—are relegated to the role of meaningless “stuff” that fills the space between the Follies and other buildings. The landscape of the park is no longer a positive, holistically conceived place in which to experience nature. It is merely that part left over around the buildings.

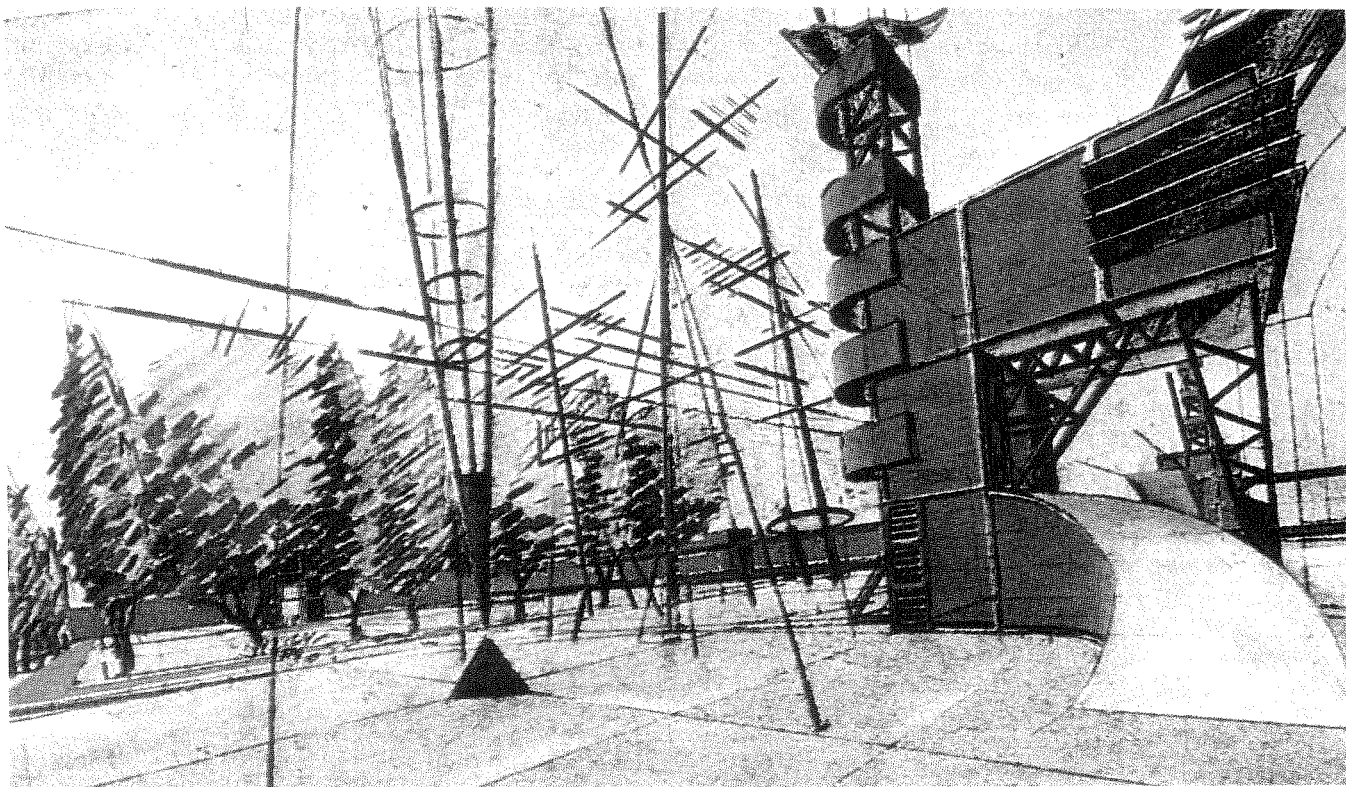
Designed landscapes always exist somewhere on the continuum between culture and nature, and the urban landscape is the place where nature and culture may interact most eloquently. The removal of nature from this relationship in Tschumi’s park polemic raises numerous questions about the continuing significance of the urban park as landscape. True, this was only one aspect of the original program for La Villette. And the program mentioned the amusement park Tivoli in Copenhagen as a possible model, so Tschumi’s park as urban generator is not without legitimate prototype. As a unique park designed and constructed under specific circumstances, the Parc de la Villette may be an excellent solution. But whether it should be promoted as the “Park of the Twenty-First Century” is another matter. The city is full of buildings; why should the park fit

another? This notion overlooks the aspect of the park as a bounded landscape, a monument to nature in the city. The complex relationship of humans to nature that occurs in the urban landscape may be difficult to describe, but perhaps it should not be exorcised from our notion of park so quickly. The urban park may still be more than just a parking lot for buildings.

Illustrations courtesy of Bernard Tschumi

Notes

- 1 The complete competition documents were issued by the Etablissement Public du Parc de la Villette in June 1982. I am grateful to Cherie Kluesing and Victor Walker for providing me with copies of these documents.
- 2 Etablissement Public du Parc de la Villette, “Rapport d’objectifs,” June 1983, p. 20.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 5 Bernard Tschumi, “An Urban Park for the 21st Century” *UIA/The International Architect* (1983) p. 27.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 28.



4

- 4 The park contains many built and vegetative elements, yet the conceptual system that holds it all together is the grid of follies. Each folly consists of a $10\text{m} \times 10\text{m} \times 10\text{m}$ cube of space that has been transformed to enclose a specific function.