

# Au Revoir Paris!

## The “Grand Nation” in search of a “Grand Paris”

“We live in an era of completions, not new beginnings.  
The World is running out of places where it can start over”  
- Rem Koolhaas, 2007<sup>1</sup>

“Paris !! Tu trouveras tout c’que tu veux dans les assiettes il y en a trop, c’que tu peux Paris!”  
- TTC, 2003<sup>2</sup>



### Planet of the Cities

Last year, for the first time in human history, more than 50% of the world's population was living in cities. By the beginning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century it will be more than 70%. More than half of them will live in cities that are not yet built - future metropolises under construction along the old silk route from the Persian Gulf to China. It is in the hands of architects and planners what will become of modern urban living. There is not much they have to take into consideration before they start drawing their future versions for the new metropolises. New infrastructure systems, energy concepts and shopping worlds can easily be integrated into the little that already exists. Many of these new cities will become important metropolitan centres of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century while the old major cities in Europe and USA will have to struggle to retain their roles as centres for finance, fashion and culture.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of the old European cities date back to the Middle Ages. Their golden time was the heyday of industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which shaped much of their urban fabric. They continued to grow during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were capable of absorbing most major developments: the end of industrialisation, the rise of mass mobilisation and housing as well as the beginning of the information era. However today with the growing competition from Asia, changing financial systems, the restrictions on carbon dioxide emissions of the Kyoto protocol and aging societies, these cities are facing new major changes that are not so easy to adapt to. They fear losing their status as important centres on the global market in the world of tomorrow. Visions for future development are desperately needed. Paris is one of them, an old European city - the most glamorous metropolis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is struggling. Because of and despite its image Paris is now facing growing economic, ecological and social pressure.

A major competition, initiated in 2008 by none other than the French president himself, Nicolas Sarkozy, is now searching for visions for a “Greater Paris”, the true metropolitan area of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, shaped by the conditions of the Kyoto protocol.<sup>4</sup> A better Paris would also include the Banlieue, the suburban area around Paris. The plan is to transform both the inner city and the surrounding districts into a new metropolitan area. A difficult task when taking into consideration that Paris and its Banlieue are two separate worlds that were never meant to be together. Paris, with its grand boulevards is not only the capital, but also the heart of the French state and was conceived as a singular city. It was and still is separated from its surrounding structures, first by city walls and today by their contemporary expression - the city highway ring “Boulevard Périphérique”. The Banlieue begins behind the boulevard. It is a chaotic field divided in 60 small independent communities, providing Paris with important facilities. The lack of larger plans for the development for the heterogeneous Paris created a state of stagnation and formed a highly problematic co-dependency between Paris and its Banlieue. The teams that participate in the competition don't only have to come up with new visions to ensure Paris a place

on the future map of global cities but they also have to define what the Paris of tomorrow will be.

### „La Ville du Future“

The last architect who came up with a major vision of Paris' future was Le Corbusier. In 1925 he declared that 19<sup>th</sup> century structures in Paris were not fit for the challenges of 20<sup>th</sup> century life. The plan he presented to save the city intended to demolish most of the old city centre with its small alleys and picturesque houses and replace it with a new one that would absorb the developing suburb structures around Paris and densify its centre. His "Plan Voisin"<sup>5</sup> proposed to implant a new city into the existing one, with gigantic 60 storey skyscrapers, large green areas between them and new highways connecting Paris to the ocean and the other important cities in France.<sup>5</sup> Those were the visions of modern 20<sup>th</sup> century urban city planning, promoting the separation of functions. His plan for Paris stayed a vision and is known today as one of the big utopias of modern city planning. Instead of following his advice to demolish the centre it was carefully preserved and renovated and became one of the major attractions for tourists.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the city continued to grow while preserving its image as a glamorous metropolis with a coherent European city space, so everything that did not fit into the Haussmannian structures had to stay outside, in the Banlieue. Shopping malls, cemeteries, industrial areas, parks, forests, bungalows, single-family housing areas, airports and the large-scale housing projects from the 60s and 70s were placed between existing villages, fields and forests. Together they are housing the missing supplies for Paris, making life in the dense city fabric affordable and comfortable.

The reality today shows that Paris is a divided city, not like others in North or South, East and West or rich and poor, but in inside and outside. Inside is Paris, the capital of the centrally ruled French republic, site of large firms, administrations and ministries. Here two million people are living on 105 square kilometres. Outside is the Banlieue, an area 100 times larger than Paris, divided into five districts of which three form the first ring around Paris. Here live 9 million people, 1 million of whom travel each day to Paris to work. The collapsing traffic systems, due to the large amount of daily commuters, belong as much to the problems of today's Paris as do the missing leisure spaces for the innercity Parisians or the lack of integration due to the spatial segregation of different groups. These problems show, that underneath the glamorous marble facades of the Haussmann avenues there is a different world outside the city walls waiting to be integrated.<sup>6</sup>

### „Bonjour Tristesse“

Since the first garden cities of Paris were planned in the 30s, the Banlieue has become the refuge for the growing population of Paris. It experienced its largest

growth after the Second World War, between 1950 and 1970, when economic growth and the baby boom went hand in hand and led to an explosion in the number of inhabitants. Courageous housing programs in the Banlieue were supposed to balance the critical housing situation in Paris. The first programs included the construction of the "Grands Ensembles"<sup>7</sup> and later the construction of New Towns around Paris.<sup>8</sup>

The New Towns were built to become independent towns in the larger area of Paris. While they had all the necessary facilities for their inhabitants, the Grands Ensembles were not much more than large dormitory suburbs that were highly dependent on supplies from Paris and the little villages in the area. They were not only punished with a rather unambitious architecture but also poorly integrated in their direct surroundings. Paris did not want to provide space for large scale social housing constructions and at the same time the smaller communities surrounding the city were equally opposed to sharing their territory. Thus many of the Grands Ensembles were built on the cheapest building land in the Banlieue including the edges of communities, borderlands, along rails, highways, next to electricity plants, on the borders of woods, next to cemeteries and industrial areas. Directly after completion they became isolated although existing villages were not far away. The prime example of this management of



social housing can be found at the cité “La Grande Borne” near Grigny in the south of Paris. La Grande Borne was erected in an existing highway junction and could only be reached by car or bus. Spatially disconnected, these projects often made their inhabitants feel as if they were at the edge of society.<sup>9</sup>

The situation became worse in the 60s when immigration started from the former French colonies. Many aimed for the city centre attracted by the possibility of work but almost all became stranded at the city gates in the Grands Ensembles. The French who saw living conditions deteriorate and who could afford to move elsewhere simply abandoned these places. The double isolation of the Grands Ensembles and its inhabitants - in society and space - led to difficult living conditions for the inhabitants and in the long run to social tensions. Since housing was needed desperately this development, although commonly recognized as problematic, continued until the early 80s. Today the Banlieue consists of 650 so-called “quartiers sensibles”.<sup>10</sup> These are neighbourhoods with mostly social housing, high unemployment rates, bad housing conditions, high rates of immigration and high rates of criminality.

### **“Burning Desire”**

These tensions became visible in 2005. After the death of two teenagers in the Banlieue, massive riots broke out. The trigger for the riots was the discovery that behind the massive violence stood even more and it became quickly visible to those who looked carefully. Just like in 1993, during the Riots in Los Angeles, the target of the erupting violence was one’s own neighbourhood.<sup>11</sup> Cars, busses, street-signs, garbage cans, benches and public facilities were burning. The riots stayed in the suburbs but they addressed the state and its facilities that had done nothing for years to integrate the people, as well as nothing for the spatial integration of the cités, in the Banlieue.

### **Last exit to Paris**

Burning cars don’t fit the picture of a flourishing metropolis just like burning bushes don’t fit in the empty desert. But both guarantee immediate attention by the spectator. And in the time of mass media - they guarantee television broadcast at prime time. After 10 days with pictures of burning cars, heavily armed police officers and slab high-rises flickering over the television sets in France and around the world, a dark notion came to the mind of the viewers that behind the polished glass windows and heavily decorated stone facades of the nation’s capital, there were a lot of people who could not afford its posh lifestyle. And they also could not participate in normal city life. Two worlds exist and are drifting further apart and there are few places where these two worlds actually meet. One of them is the main RER station in the centre of Paris Châtelet-Les Halles. Here on Saturdays the suburban trains drop off the young people from the Banlieue. In the large shopping centre with its rooftop garden surrounding the train station they meet with other people, drink coffee at chain stores like McDonald’s and Dunkin Donuts and are able to feel like real citizens. The glamour

world is just outside along the surrounding boulevards where cafés are only affordable to tourists and well-paid managers.

### **There is no business like show business**

It could be seen as irony that Nicolas Sarkozy is starting to address these problems and kicking off a discussion on the misbalanced situation of Paris and its Banlieue by addressing a “Greater Paris” which would include both. Sarkozy, before becoming President of the French republic, hit the headlines as the minister of interior affairs by offending young immigrants living in the Banlieue. During a visit in one of the hot spots of miserable housing conditions and criminality in the cité La Courneuve he suggested to “clean up ” the Banlieue with a high-pressure water blaster and get rid of the “racaille”. A storm of protest broke out and after even the former president Jacques Chirac criticised Sarkozy he apologized and made promises to start changing the bad conditions for the people living in the Banlieue. The hard words for the youth brought him the votes of the right wing people who later assured him his presidency. But for the people in the Banlieue nothing changed, the situation only got worse.<sup>12</sup>

### **All the Presidents Men**

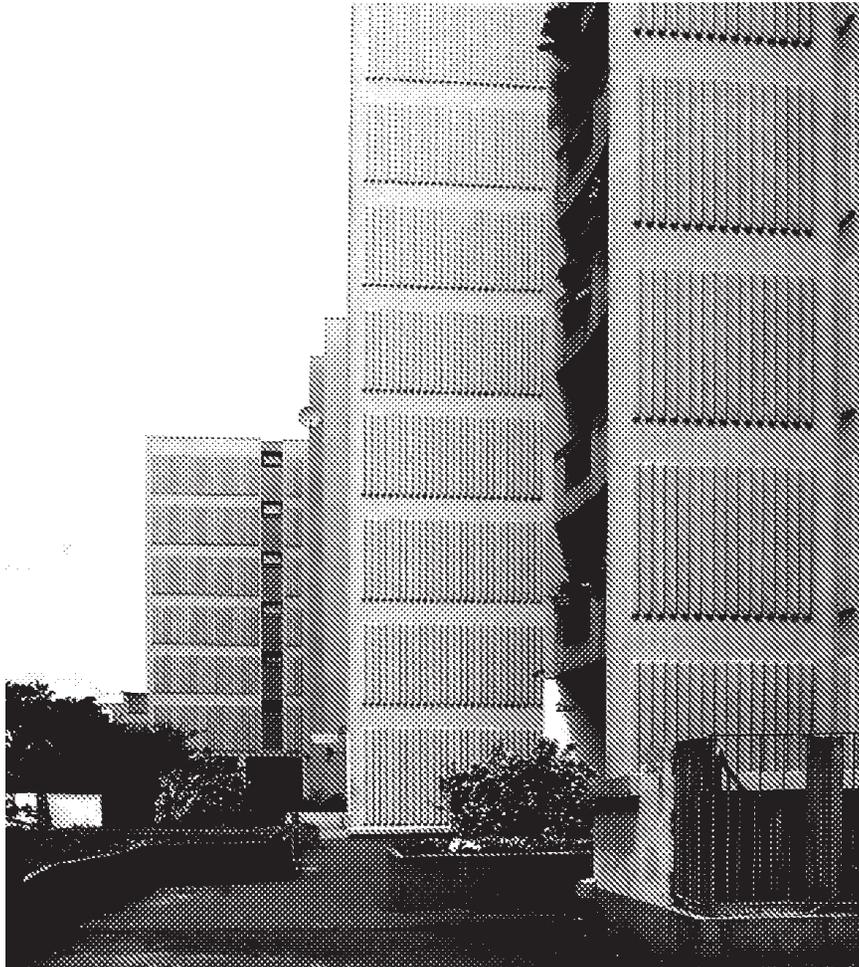
Now as president he is asking for a vision. Different from those who came before and commissioned big projects for Paris as an everlasting sign of their regency, such as the Centre Pompidou by Georges Pompidou or the Grand Bibliothèque by Francois Mitterrand, Nicolas Sarkozy is working on a project of quite a different size. After nearly one hundred years where there were no grand plans for Paris, it is Sarkozy who pushed the competition of ideas for the Greater Paris. Ten multidisciplinary teams with economists, sociologists and even philosophers were chosen to work under the guidance of an architect on the question of a “Grand Paris”. MVRDV, Richard Rogers, Christian de Pottamparc, LIN, Jean Nouvel, Roland Castro, Antoine Grumbach, Djamel Klouche, Yves Lion and Bernardo Secchi with Studio 8 have six months to come up with new visions.<sup>13</sup> Some of them have experience in the development of larger city regions such as Rogers who works with the Greater London authority or MVRDV who conducted studies on the network of cities in the Netherlands. Others already created scenarios for the development of Paris such as Antoine Grumbach, who developed in the 60s a plan to connect Paris with Le Havre and the ocean. Roland Castro created the vision of a grand boulevard for the Banlieue.<sup>14</sup> But for all of them the task is hard because the question is not to come up with new design ideas but to restructure the existing situation and to transform the city of Paris and its Banlieue into a larger functional structure, visibly identifiable as one metropolitan area of Paris.

Topics like sustainability, alternative energy, new ways of public transport, new schools, leisure zones, new housing areas and many more are named in the competition brief but it is not clearly stated which are more important and how to deal with them. So it might be that one team will focus on the restructuring of public transport while another team will develop scenarios for the development

of the river Seine or future growth poles. No matter which aspect the teams will focus on, they all have to make visible the new Grand Paris - the agglomeration that politicians, planners and architects before them tried to neglect in every possible way. That also means, that they have to think about a way of graphical representation, to communicate this new Grand Paris to people who have always looked on the map of Paris and whose nerves are trained to see it as an independent city. This image is important because it will serve as the foundation for the politicians to develop a new way of governance of the territory.

### **The Junkyard of Dreams**

New city quarters, even though they might present good ideas for new city life, are lost without a larger plan that integrates them into the existing city fabric. A number of projects in and around Paris exemplify this problem. The Centre Pompidou is probably the most spectacular example. Created as a new



kind of museum, it was also meant to suck up the city into the building. It's a culture machine, flexible enough to react on the always changing program of a constantly changing city. It could never fulfil this promise of flexibility because it immediately got its place in the static cultural life of the city and hosts a permanent exhibition of modern art.

The "dale" buildings of the 70s were facing a similar development. They proposed new living and working worlds on plateaus, lifted over the city, exclusively for pedestrians. But the large plateaus under which automobile traffic disappeared remained empty, because real city life stayed in the small alleys of the old city and people never got used to the large tiled spaces.<sup>15</sup>

In the Banlieue the Grands Ensembles of Renaudie and Emile Aillaude, two visionary, courageous French architects, shine out of the otherwise boring and ever same tristesse.<sup>16</sup> They wanted to create homey towns in the Banlieue by using extraordinary shapes, materials and colours but their icons were as badly connected to the rest of the region as the carelessly designed social housing slabs. Still these projects stand out against the uniformity of Paris and the chaos and anonymity of the Banlieue and provide a little structure and recognizable design.<sup>17</sup> But they are isolated islands of former dreams of a new city. They would have needed larger plans to realize their potential - but these plans were always missing. For future projects it is important to rely on a larger plan as to not produce more fragments, but to create projects that are integrated into larger systems.

### **Shift the Ground**

The results of the competition will be presented to the public in the Palais de Chaillot. The Palais is one of these very glamorous spots that Paris has to offer, located directly in the heart of the city at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. A historical place, monumentally designed for the World Fair in 1937, it hosts today the Museum for Architecture and Urbanism. It makes sense to show an exhibition on important urban developments in the thematically fitting museum. But given the idea of the competition: to create a new vision for a post Kyoto Paris that would include more than the actual city of Paris, it would have made more sense to choose a place that would have shown the will to overcome old structures and boundaries. A place that would speak to new will to integrate the city with its surrounding structures. A location in the Banlieue or on the outskirts of Paris would have been a better choice.

It seems that the will is there on the side of politicians to see new visions for Paris - even to imagine a different Paris from the one we all like so much. But the crucial moment will follow the competition when the politicians are asked to transform the vision into reality. To change Paris into a Greater Paris means to change also a system of governance that is entrenched and that has shaped the planning of the region for decades. Politicians are asked to radically think anew about centrality and the networking of their communities when they address

questions of housing, working and traffic in the future.

Le Corbusier may have failed with his vision for Paris but he was right with his prognosis that as long as a city is willing to renew itself the old cities will be the cities of the future.<sup>18</sup> In that sense it would be good for the responsible persons to listen to the great master and start over anew. This time not by erasing what is there and replacing it with new structures, but by acting as if Paris and its Banlieue truly belong together.

**Vesta Nele Zareh** is an architect living and working in Berlin. She is currently teaching and conducting research at LIA - Laboratory for Integrative Architecture at the Technical University in Berlin. For further information please see: [www.zazazaza.eu](http://www.zazazaza.eu) or [www.lia.tu-berlin.de](http://www.lia.tu-berlin.de)

#### NOTES

- 1 Editor AMO; Global Agenda, Archis, Stichting "Al Manakh, Dubai Guide Mountamarant, Gulf Survey", Archis, Dubai, 2007, p. 7
- 2 Lyrics from the song „Paris, Paris“ by the French rap group TTC from the album „3615 TTC“, virgin records, Paris, 2003
- 3 Editor Worldwatch Institute, „Der Planet der Städte - Zur Lage der Welt 2007“, Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster, 2007, p. 57
- 4 The Ministry of Culture and communication (MCC) in partnership with the ministry of Ecology and sustainable Development and planning (MEDAD), General Presentation Document, „Designing the Future of the Paris Agglomeration“, Paris, 2008, p. 4
- 5 Le Corbusier, „Plan Voisin“, in „Architektur Theorie – Von der Renaissance bis zur Gegenwart“, Taschen, Köln, 2003, p. 710
- 6 Le Corbusier, „Grundfragen des Städtebaus“, 1945, Verlag Gerd Hatje, Stuttgart, p. 42
- 7 Klaus Schüle, „Paris – Vordergründe, Hintergründe, Abgründe“, Aries, München, 1997, p. 50
- 8 „Grands Ensembles“ is the French term for large - scale social housing projects, that were build since the 50s in the banlieues of French cities to relax the situation of the housing market. Another common terms for „Grands Ensemble“ is cité.
- 9 Klaus Schüle, op. cit., p. 45
- 10 „Quatier sensibles“ is a term used by politicians to describe certain areas

in cities that have a lot of problems with high criminality rates, high unemployment rates and provide bad housing conditions.

- 11 Rosemarie Gratz, „Freiheit, Gleichheit, Hass - die Iodernde Wut der Banlieue in Frankreich“, in Freitag – die Ost – West – Wochenzeitung, 11.11.2005, Berlin
- 12 Marcus Engler, „Ikonen eines Wahlkampfes – Nationale Identität und Einwanderung“, in Freitag – die Ost – West – Wochenzeitung, 11.11.2005, Berlin
- 13 Sibylle Vincendon, „Le «diagnostic» est confié à dix équipes“, Libération, 23.05 .08, Paris
- 14 Jannick Alimi, Marc Lomazzi, Frédéric Mouchon, „Un Grand Paris: pour quoi fair?“, in Le Parisien, 05.06.2008, Paris, France, p. 2-3
- 15 Steven Wassenar, „Coping with Slabs and Slums“, in Volume 16 – „Engineering Society“, Stichting Archis, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 101
- 16 Editor Nasrine Seraji, „Housing, Substance of our Cities“, Editions A. & J. Picard, Paris, 2007, p. 144
- 17 MCC, op. cit., p. 20
- 18 Le Corbusier, „Grundfragen des Städtebaus“, op. cit., p. 44