

The Pleasure of Architecture and the Tenderness of the Landscape

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After a first failed attempt in 1976, in May 1982, within the *Grands Projets* program promoted by François Mitterrand, a competition was announced for the Parc de la Villette on an area of 50 ha in a working-class neighborhood in the north-east of Paris that had hosted the slaughterhouses.

The competition notice was drawn up by François Barré, who since 1981 had been in charge, for the *Etablissement Public du Parc de La Villette*, of following the redevelopment process of the area and who would manage its activities for years, including the initiation and supervision of the design competition. The request is very specific: not a garden, nor a natural enclave, but “an urban park of the 21st century”, in which a dense list of services and facilities would have to be able to interpret the dynamics and flows of urban sociality and express the ways of pluralist and popular cultural production of the metropolitan condition.

It is a season of great hopes placed in the ability of the project to have a concrete impact on the processes of urban transformation and, in fact, the projects presented in the first phase are 472. Only 9 groups of designers pass to the second phase [1] among which, in addition to the winner Bernard Tschumi, there is also Rem Koolhaas with OMA - Office for Metropolitan Architecture [2] whose project, although not winning,

is destined to remain impressed for its scope of theoretical *manifesto* marking a turning point in landscape design that thus bursts into the debate on the contemporary city.

The competition was in fact the first opportunity for OMA to concretely experiment with the reflections on the contemporary city that it has been working on for years, condensed in *Delirious New York. A retroactive manifesto of the city of Manhattan*, published by Koolhaas just 4 years earlier [Koolhaas 1978] [3]. OMA will thus challenge the open space of the Villette by addressing the issue of the landscape with the same strategy with which it had addressed the metropolitan condition, equal in nature but different in degree [4].

The project –or rather program [5]– presented in the first phase interprets the park as an expression of the social dimension and metropolitan lifestyle, declining it with a proposed method that aims to put the culture of congestion into practice by means of the utopian device of the skyscraper [OMA, Koolhaas, Mau 1995, p. 937] [6].

From the model of the skyscraper, deprived of the third dimension, comes the “tactic of horizontal stratification” with which the area is divided into parallel bands that run from east to west. In each of these is allocated one of the approximately fifty activities envisaged by the program which,

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although autonomous, are characterized by permeability and the reciprocal interference relationships that they trigger. The distribution of the smaller elements, which in turn will interfere with the character of the bands in which they are allocated, is instead regulated by grids with variable intervals defined mathematically on the basis of the desired frequency. Finally, there is the system of main paths with the straight line of the *Boulevard*, which crosses the bands perpendicularly, and the broken line of the *Promenade*, which winds sinuously throughout the area.

In the first phase of the competition, the OMA program is essentially aimed at explaining 'how the park/machine works'. Thus the 'tactic' of metropolitan stratification is demonstrated by means of a non-hierarchical and flexible framework capable of holding together architectural specificity and programmatic indeterminacy, of incorporating the mutations resulting from interferences between the elements without producing upheavals of the initial hypothesis of the program [OMA, Koolhaas, Mau 1995, p. 921].

A geography of points, lines and surfaces that prefigures the 'park/machine' through the only possible figuration, the diagram, an abstract machine capable of guiding and anticipating the process towards "a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality" [Deleuze, Guattari 1987, p. 142] [7], which although already a figure is, so to speak, a threshold figure, that has not yet become a representation. The diagrammatic figuration allows us to grasp and highlight the relationships –functional, logical, temporal– of a system, bringing the non-visible into the field of the perceptive-visual and where it is the contextual reference, that is the assignment of a position in space, that conveys the substance of the message and gives coherence to the entire system [Anceschi 1992, p. 103].

Once the strategy has been established and the functioning clarified, in the second phase of the competition OMA instead focuses on deepening the 'how it appears', that is, the perceptive qualities or the aesthetic experience of the landscape. The phase therefore marks the transformation of the 'machine/park' into a 'landscape/organism' and the definitive transition from metropolitan architecture to that of Arcadia [8]. For this purpose, three different categories of 'nature' are 'staged': regions in which the vegetal dominates (surfaces), screens of trees parallel to the bands (lines), geometries of vegetal elements designed as architectures (geometric shapes - the Linear forest and the Circular forest). Such a geography could not be represented through one of the 'oblique' drawings [9] that already characterized the production of the OMA studio, with artificial constructions suspended in

a territory that, although drawn, is absent so as to invert the perception of the figure/background relationship.

From this necessity takes shape the serigraphy *The Pleasure of Architecture* [10] made in 1983 by Alex Wall [11]. An anti-architectural drawing par excellence, "a conscious opposition to the serious and often pretentious architectural drawings of that period that were mystifying architecture rather than communicating it", as told by Willem-Jan Neutelings to Matt Page [Neutelings, Page 2020], similar to what Willem-Jan Neutelings [12] experimented in 1982 in *Typological study of Scheveningen* who on that occasion defined a style a style of drawing inspired by that of cartoons more functional to the analytical method of OMA. As Wall himself explains [13], *The Pleasure of Architecture* also draws inspiration from the skyscrapers of Roger Brown [14], one of the leading exponents of the Chicago Imagists, where the sequential repetition of overlapping planes is the device for telling the narrative sequence of the intimate stories of its inhabitants who reconstitute themselves into a community thanks to the building-space of the skyscraper.

But there is more. Wall's frontal representation shows a new geography that, although still made of surfaces, lines, geometric shapes, this time suggests, through careful theatrical direction and accurate backstage work, different aesthetic perceptions of the landscape exalted in their diversity by the dissimilar characteristics of the *Promenade* and the *Boulevard*, 'the secretive vs. the blatant': the view occluded by the compact mass of the trees arranged between the bands, when observed in the north-south perspective, or when observed from east-west, the open view of the fields proposed by the aggregation of the various gardens; the backdrop of the linear forest against which all the plant and architectural components present in the southern part of the park stand out or the interior of the circular forest with column-like trees and roof-like foliage from which the light filters.

And there is no contradiction in the landscape inhabited by the figures busy with agricultural work, which remember rural landscapes, and by the figures engaged in swimming, running or playing tennis, to signify the recreational activities of the twentieth century, because such contradiction is resolved by the intimate formal-expressive coherence of the figural units and of the composition. Formal coherence which, in turn, harnesses experiential time in the space of the 'board' by mending spatial discontinuities and temporal leaps.

A figurative strategy, the one adopted by Wall, which has its roots in the tradition of the representation of inhabited space, in the 'portrait of the city' where the gaze is that of a

traveler; the spatiality is the plot of possible routes, the temporal dimension is introduced by the movement through space and in which the different points of view coexist without needing to be hierarchically arranged. A representation in which the linearity of the text and the organization according to the temporal sequence of the 'before and after' are undermined. A representation designed to 'stage' the spectator who, transformed into an actor, can set out on his exploration without following a pre-established path.

A particular 'feeling' sublimated by the *Carte du pays de Tendre*, the imaginary map that Madelaine de Scudery had François Chauveau engrave in 1654 to show the emotional itinerary of Clélie, the protagonist of her novel, in the form of a landscape. A map brought up to date in 1959 by the revolutionary exploration of the space of the city professed by the Situationist

International and by Guy Debord's psychogeography [15] and, later, by Giuliana Bruno in 2002 who, with her *Atlas of Emotion* [Bruno 2002], introduces us to 'emotional geography', or rather to that capacity of places—real or virtual—to be "tender images" [Mangani, Pasquinelli 2007], vehicles of emotions capable of activating a sentimental transport, and of soliciting the narrative dimension, that is, the movement in space and time, in a continuous reference between memory/emotion/journey. A 'tender feeling' proposed again by the reinterpretation of the landscape as a theatre, as an emotional support, witnessed by *The Pleasure of Architecture* which completes the multi-scalar path, between the urban-social dimension and the individual dimension, experimented by OMA in the landscape architecture laboratory set up on the occasion of the competition for the Parc de La Villette.

Notes

[1] The other groups invited to the second phase are: Andreu Arriola & Carmen Fiol, Elisabeth Gali and Marius Quintana; Bernard Lassus; Gilles Vexlard; Alexandre Chemetoff; Sven Ingvar Andersson; Bakker & Bleeker; Jacques Gourvenec and Jean-Pierre Raynaud.

[2] The Office for Metropolitan Architecture - OMA was founded in London in 1975 by Rem Koolhaas (Rotterdam, 1944), Elia Zenghelis (Athens, 1937), Zoe Zenghelis (Athens, 1938) and Madelon Vriesendorp (Bilthoven, 1945). In 1978 it expanded significantly and established its headquarters in Rotterdam. During the competition years, Stefano de Martino, Alex Wall, Kees Christiaanse, Willem-Jan Neutelings and Zaha Hadid worked steadily with OMA.

[3] 1978 was a year that marked a change in the way OMA operated: until then it had been more of a laboratory of ideas on the architecture of the city than a professional studio. In particular, on November 16, *Delirious New York. A retroactive manifesto for Manhattan* was published [Koolhaas 1978], while the following day (coinciding with Koolhaas's 34th birthday) OMA's first major exhibition titled *OMA: The Sparkling Metropolis* was inaugurated at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. More than 50 drawings were exhibited, made by the large group of architects and artists who populated OMA and describing their visionary reflections on the city.

[4] The awareness of the analogy between the strategies of the metropolis and the fact "that landscape" was a tactic applicable to the grazing field, as much as to the supermarket" [Aesopos, Simeoforides 1994, p. 133] had just been experimented, in particular by Elia Zenghelis, in 1980-1981 in the design of a series of small villas on the island of Antiparos in the Cyclades [Zenghelis 1981]. As Zenghelis himself recounts, the project was an unexpected watershed with which the term 'confetti' was introduced for the first time, later used more emphatically in the project for the Parc de la Villette [Khosravi 2024, p. 4].

[5] Already in the mid-1970s, for OMA 'making architecture' meant making a project that was "almost purely program and almost non-form" [Koolhaas 1985, p. 4].

[6] "The program for the Parc de la Villette was a very important step in this series [of projects], because it allowed us to delve into the theme of congestion, which for us is the key component of any architecture or metropolitan project. [...] The idea of this park comes from the American skyscraper, which embodies the superposition of a series of activities in a single building. We took this model and developed it horizontally" [Koolhaas 2016, p. 10].

[7] "Defined diagrammatically in this way, an abstract machine is neither an infrastructure that is determining in the last instance nor a transcendental idea that is determining in the supreme instance. Rather, it plays a piloting role. The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality" [Deleuze, Guattari 1987, p. 142].

[8] This transition was already so evident with the Antiparos project that, in July 1981, the magazine *Architectural Design* dedicated a long article to OMA in which it underlined how the series of paradoxes that characterized their work had shifted from Manhattanism to Mediterraneanism [Zenghelis 1981].

[9] The formal and theoretical influence of the constructivist Ivan Il'ič Leonidov on Koolhaas and OMA is explored by several authors, including Roberto Gargiani [Gargiani 2006] and Francesco Marullo [Marullo 2013]. However, Leonidov was more than a reference for Koolhaas. He was undoubtedly a 'model', so much so that "Koolhaas dedicated his first long architectural article to him, analyzing the Narkomtjazzprom project, from 1934, on the pages of *Oppositions* in 1974. Only eight years later, he returned to it, paying evident homage to it in the plates of his contribution to the competition for the Parc de la Villette in Paris" [Cohen 2010, p. 14]. In this regard, see also [Koolhaas, Oorthuys 1974] and Ventura Blanch [Blanch 2022].

[10] The color screen printing of *The Pleasure of Architecture* (1983, dimensions 30 11/16" × 20 3/16") is part of the important collection of

drawings assembled by Alvin Boyarsky during his tenure as chairman of the Architectural Association in London from 1971 until his death in 1990. This collection shows the role of drawing for Boyarsky not only as a tool of representation, but as a form of architecture in its own right, as also demonstrated by the ambitious program of exhibitions and publications curated by Boyarsky, including the book *Drawing Ambience. Alvin Boyarsky and the Architectural Association*, curated in 2014 by Marjanovic and Howard [Marjanovic, Howard 2014] for the touring exhibition held from 21 September 2014 to 14 January 2018.

[11] Alex Wall, designer and teacher at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, graduated in architecture from the Architectural Association in London, worked at OMA in London and Rotterdam from 1982 to 1989, after which he was associate professor of architecture at Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania. From 1998 to 2013 he was professor of International urban design at Karlsruher Institut für Technologie, Germany.

[12] Willem Jan Neutelings (1959), an architecture graduate from the Delft University of Technology (1986), worked from 1981 to 1986 at OMA. In

1987 he opened his own studio in Rotterdam, first in association with Frank Roodbeen, since 1992 with Michiel Riedijk. From 1988 to 2000 he was a lecturer at the Academy of Architecture in Rotterdam and at the Berlage Institute in Amsterdam.

[13] From a conversation between Richard Hall and Alex Wall on November 11 2021 [Hall 2024].

[14] Roger Brown (1941-1997) lived and worked in Chicago and California. He graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1970. His work has been the subject of numerous solo and major group exhibitions, and his work is held in numerous public collections worldwide. He began exhibiting in the late 1960s, with a group of artists often referred to as the *Chicago Imagists*, who celebrated their use of imagery, figuration, narrative, and pattern, and created deeply personal and visually diverse works.

[15] The map was in fact published in the movement's journal to explain the theories on situationism and the techniques of drift and détournement [Notes Editoriales 1959].

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