The changing role of the *jardin publique* in the planning of Paris

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Paris has some of the finest urban parks and gardens in the world, and whilst Mitrašinov1 notes that the historical distinction between the terms ‘park’ (from the Latin ‘parcus’ a small tract of land) and ‘garden’ (signifying something more ordered and designed) has become blurred, the map of Paris nevertheless exhibits a considerable number of both. Because of their size and location these spaces, such as the Jardin des Tuileries and the Parc du Champ de Mars, as well as the city’s many places and squares, can easily give the impression that the population is well provided for. However, what appears to be a generous provision at street level misses the implication of the high density development of Haussmannian-influenced blocks and apartments that make up so much of Paris intra-muros.

Paris, with 24,400 persons per km², is the most densely populated capital city in Europe, yet at the same time it is one of the capitals that offers its inhabitants the least green space (Paris 13m² per habitant compared with London 45m²). This presents enormous challenges for those planning the city. These are made all the more daunting by a growing population. On top of this Parisian planners are now faced with new challenges familiar to many twenty-first century planners around the world: transport, regeneration, ecology, health issues etc. As a consequence, those planning Paris have placed great importance on the provision of open space when producing plans to cope with this density and even with increasing it. This has been so for the last 150 years, since the grand designs of Napoleon III and his city planner Baron Haussmann. This research has found that over the last thirty years or so the role of the park and garden in Paris has changed dramatically as planners see its position developing in response to today’s planning challenges.

Over these last thirty years the park and garden has become a planning tool par excellence in Paris and their changing roles can be traced back through a number of important plans and instruments. The publication of the Plan d’Occupation des Sols identifying potential sites for open space coincide with the devolution of some planning powers from the President to the Mairie de Paris. Whilst the Elysée has continued to impose its ‘grands projets’ on the capital the Mairie has used its new plan making role and its ability to create Zones d’Aménagement Concerté (ZAC) to increase the number and types of parks and gardens in the city. The ZAC in particular has proved its worth at bringing together multi-disciplinary teams of planners, landscape designers and architects along with the finance and power to implement ambitious projects in a designated quarter of the city. The successor to the POS, the Plan Local d’Urbanisme continues this practice of using parks and gardens to address planning priorities of the moment by identifying the next tranche of public parks and gardens for the city and their functions.

As a result Paris has moved away from the traditional parc or jardin publique, laid out either à la française (Place des Vosges and Jardin du Luxembourg) (figure 1) or à l’anglaise (Bois de Boulogne and Buttes Chaumont) (figures 2 and 3) to, for example: a regeneration opportunity (La Villette 1982), a 4.5km
1. Place des Vosges, 1605, the oldest square in Paris.  
   Image credit: Mike Devereux

2. Bois de Boulogne, 1852, provided for a growing population by Napoleon III.  
   Image credit: Mike Devereux

3. Buttes Chaumont, 1867, garden showcase for the Universal Exhibition.  
   Image credit: Mike Devereux
car free urban artery (Promenade Plantée 1988), a space for local residents and workers (Parc André Citroen 1992) (figure 5), an urban retreat (Jardin Atlantique 1994) (figure 4), an educational tool (Parc de Bercy 1997) (figure 6), a social and cultural space (Paris Plage 2002), a showcase for neighbourhood sustainability (La Cour du Maroc 2007) and an ecological lifeline (Jardin des Grands Moulins 2009.) These and other recent Parisian parks and gardens are all distinct in the way they approach their particular responsibility, so bringing a new variety to the very formalistic Haussmannian layout of the city.

The way in which the Mairie de Paris has pushed that agenda has lessons for planners in all large cities. For example, in June 2009, ‘The High Line’ a 2.33km long linear park directly modelled on La Promenade Plantée opened in New York and in 2011 the Bloomingdale Line will open in Chicago. This importance placed on the diverse uses of parks and gardens as central to urban living and as playing a vital role in modern Paris is set to continue with the redevelopment of Les Halles

(Top right)
Image credit: Mike Devereux

(Right)
5. Parc André Citroen, 1992, laid out on the site of a former car factory.
Image credit: Mike Devereux
(starts 2010) and the particular emphasis it places on inclusion of a ‘health’ garden ‘for all ages’ in the complete rebuilding of this quarter of the 1ère arrondissement in the heart of Paris.

The evolution of parks and gardens in Paris responds to the demands placed on planning to address contemporary urban issues and the creative response from the Mairie de Paris has changed the perception of the Parisian park from parc and jardin publique to espace polyvalent.

The author brings his research findings to fourth year planning students during a week long study visit to Paris in which they assess whether the new parks and gardens match Lefebvre’s analysis of public space as either ‘representations of space’ (planned, controlled, ordered space) or whether they have evolved away from original intentions into ‘representational space’ (appropriated space)6.

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