

# Remaking Paris as the 'City of Flows': Design Politics, Mobility, and Conflict in the Networked Metropolis

## NODE TO NETWORK

Recently, urban scholars and public officials have been engaged in rethinking the geography of Paris. Their narratives have shifted away from a strong dichotomy of center and periphery toward a picture of the city as a constellation of diverse, complementary centers. This new diagram is both analytical and aspirational. On one hand, it is based on one study of how

the city actually functions—of emerging patterns in the locations and movements of residents, workers, employment, and leisure activities, as well as new investment. On the other, this diagram reflects an increasingly influential paradigm—the multipolar metropolis. Multipolar city-regions, consisting of networked centers of activity that are specialized yet complementary, have been touted as tremendously efficient engines of economic growth by such institutions as the European Union and have become a dominant development model in Europe and in Asia.

Meanwhile, the infrastructure networks that facilitate this framework, especially transportation, are playing an expanding role in the city's spatial and design politics. These networks are framing urban conflict and shaping public space. They are also changing how architecture is employed as a tool in metropolitan and national politics. Finally, new infrastructure networks are engendering strategies to negotiate governance and urban planning in a contested, highly fragmented metropolis.

One result of the shift to a network discourse is a project currently underway in the Paris region, a state initiative to finance and build a *super métro*. This project is an extensive regional high-speed automated train system intended to transform Paris from a highly centralized into a multi-centered urban region. Most recently christened the *Grand Paris Express*, it envisions the construction of approximately 200 kilometers of track and seventy new stations forming regional loops that tie into existing Metro, regional RER and long-distance high-speed TGV lines and enhance connections to the region's three airports.

**Lara Belkind**  
Columbia University

On one hand, this new diagram of Paris as constellation can be read in both visual and empirical evidence, such as photo-documentation of the Paris region and analyses of its evolving economic and demographic trends.<sup>1</sup> On the other, re-envisioning the city as a network of flows has become central to political rhetoric promoting the city's economic development. Although they have a somewhat opposite perspective, proponents of urban social justice have similarly adopted a network discourse, focusing on physical mobility as a fundamental civil right. These contrasting perspectives on mobility and flows were at the core of a recent debate between two proposals for Paris's regional transportation future: *Le Grand Huit*, advanced by the state, and *Arc Express*, developed by the region.

Meanwhile, Paris faces a conundrum. In the abstract, the city is confronting narratives of decline and the apprehension that it is losing its place in a global hierarchy of cities. This hierarchy, and the perception of Paris's tenuous position within it, was illustrated by Saskia Sassen in *The Global City*, in which she ranked Paris below London, New York, and Tokyo as a global "command and control center" of world finance and related service industries.<sup>2</sup> Another symbolic injury to the city's global brand was Paris's loss to London in its bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. But beyond anxieties about narratives and symbolism, the city faces more concrete signs of trouble. Its regional economy has been expanding more slowly than in prior decades—more slowly than other French regions and then other world cities. In addition, it faces challenges such as rising unemployment and living costs, a housing shortage, a strained public transport system, and growing social inequality.

Ostensibly to address these concerns about Paris's future, President Sarkozy initiated a sweeping design and planning consultation in 2007, *Le Grand Pari de l'agglomération parisienne*, of which the results were exhibited to the public for seven months at the Cité de l'Architecture in 2009. In his address inaugurating the exhibition, Sarkozy stated the central goals of the consultation to be achieving a city that is globally competitive, sustainable, and socially equitable.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in practice, strategies to achieve each of these goals are often directly in conflict.

### **NARRATIVES OF MOBILITY: THE GLOBAL CITY VERSUS THE JUST CITY**

That different advocates of each of the three central goals of the *Grand Pari(s)* design exploration—competitiveness, social equity, and environmental sustainability—should all adopt the discourse of urban mobility speaks to how important the ability to move has become in an urban context increasingly defined by networks, flows, and exchange. And yet the map of a new rail network is drawn very differently according to which of these objectives is given precedence. Whose mobility should come first—that of global capital or disenfranchised residents? What approach is likely to be most sustainable ecologically, socially, or economically? Political struggles over Paris's priorities and its future are currently playing out in the charting of a new rail system—and the map of this system is, in effect, a map of these politics rather than of the rational technocratic engineering that steered such proposals in the 1960s.





Coming somewhat as a surprise in his opening address at the *Grand Pari(s)* design exhibition at the Cité de l'Architecture in 2009, President Sarkozy announced a plan for a regional rail network and multipolar development scheme that had quietly been formulated under the direction of his state minister for the development of the capital region, Christian Blanc, while the *Grand Pari(s)* design consultation was in progress. This scheme, dubbed the “*le Grand Huit*” or “Big Eight” because of its double-loop configuration, was in stark contrast to an existing rail proposal, *Arc Express*, already being advanced by the regional council and its metropolitan transportation authority, the STIF. Where the Region’s *Arc Express* proposal emphasized connecting underserved communities in northeast Paris, a zone of intense rioting during the social unrest of 2005, the state’s *Grand Huit* proposal largely bypassed the near northeast and instead focused on connecting future economic development poles to international transport networks. In the wake of the *Grand Pari(s)* design consultation, the discourse of mobility and these two conflicting transportation proposals of the state and the region soon became the primary focus of public action and debate over Paris’s future.

#### **DESIGN AS POLITICS: FROM GRANDS PROJETS TO GRAND PARI(S)**

The fundamental transformation of the city into a networked territory is not only shaping public space and mobility conflicts but it is radically altering how design is instrumentalized as a tool in metropolitan politics. It is changing the way politicians and other urban actors employ architects in political maneuvers and also how architects themselves approach metropolitan projects.

Within the fragmented political context of the Paris agglomeration, architecture is playing an increasingly strategic role in helping politicians and other stakeholders (such as the region’s transit authorities) create media interest and build public support for their proposed approach, even without control of institutional mechanisms necessary to implement it. For example, the *Grand Pari(s)* design consultation and exhibition allowed the state to gain control of the narrative about greater Paris’s future, despite the fact that real institutional power had largely been transferred to regional and local authorities under decentralization policies first initiated in the 1980s.

This strategic role of architecture marks a shift away from its more symbolic function in politics, for example, during the era of President François Mitterrand’s *Grands Projets*. In the 1980s and 1990s, President Mitterrand and Mayor Jacques Chirac both employed architectural symbols in the struggle between socialists and neo-gaullists to control national politics. While Mitterrand sought to build great cultural monuments to the socialist collective, Chirac characterized these as products of an aloof socialist elite and countered with a building program of “populist” projects. In the context of greater Paris, President Sarkozy’s pragmatism could be characterized as a shift from deployment of architecture’s symbolic power to its effective power in urban politics.



01

The state's initiative to direct development of the Paris agglomeration, loosely referred to as *Grand Paris*, began with an address by Sarkozy at the opening of the Roissy 3 air terminal in June, 2007 and continued at his inauguration of the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, national architecture museum and library in September, 2007. Responding to pressure to address social unrest in the *banlieue* and to accusations that he was callously disinterested in the plight of the suburbs, Sarkozy suggested that architecture be deployed to consider both city and periphery. Also on his mind was the upcoming mayoral election in Paris, in which he hoped a conservative party candidate would be successful and the relationship of Paris to the suburbs was a key issue. He further proposed that a new global plan for greater Paris be the subject of an international design consultation. By mid-2008, ten interdisciplinary teams led by high-profile architects were commissioned by the Ministry of Culture to spend nine months studying the future development of the Paris agglomeration. The results of this consultation were internationally publicized and exhibited at the Cité from April to November of 2009.

Taking many of the architects and regional authorities by surprise, toward the end of the work of the teams, Christian Blanc, Sarkozy's minister for development of the capital region unveiled his *Grand Huit* plan for a regional "super métro" and seven new economic development poles.<sup>4</sup> At the close of the exhibition, the *Grand Huit* plan was advanced by the state, and the architect teams complained bitterly that, after such extensive study, few if any of their recommendations were adopted.

Figure 1: Sarkozy inaugurates the *Grand Pari(s)* exhibition



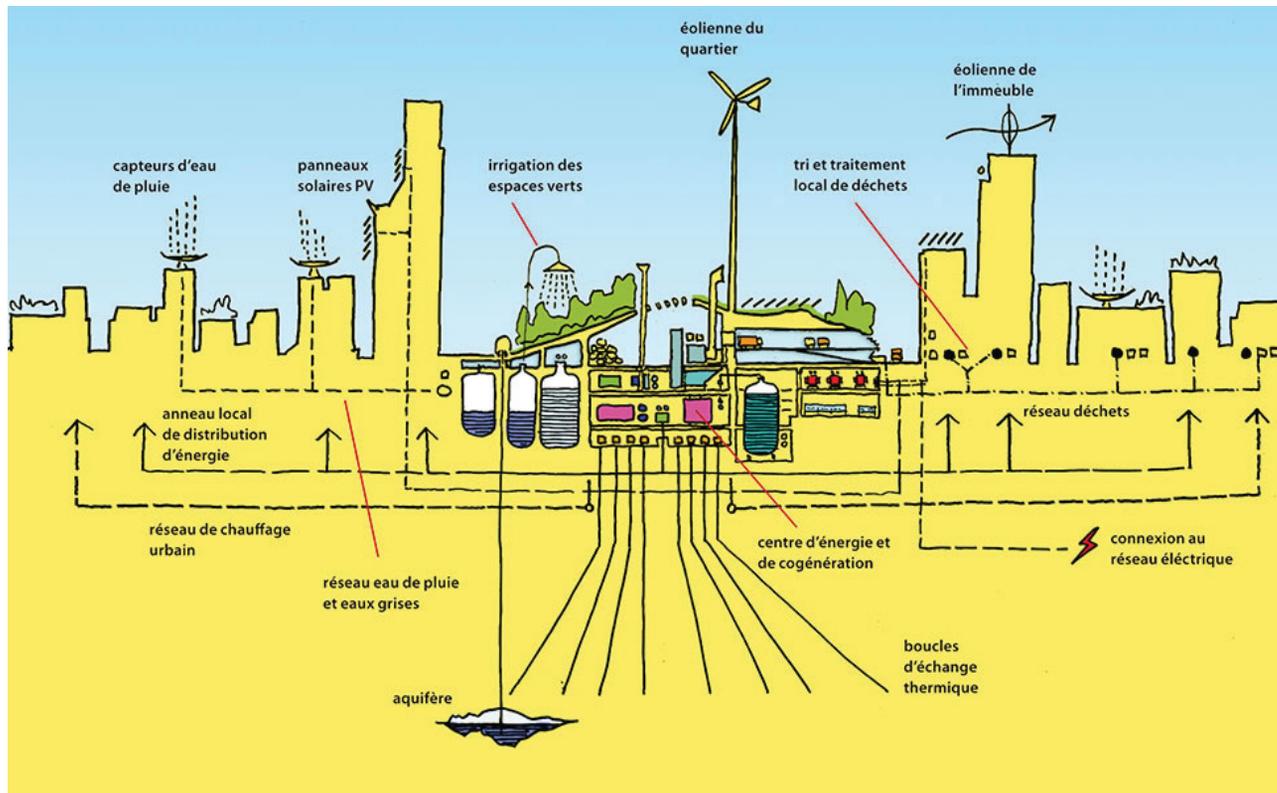
Whether or not this was the original intention, the *Grand Pari(s)* design consultation permitted the state to retake control of planning for greater Paris from regional authorities in order to promote its own priorities for the capital. Where the local region's emphasis was on rebalancing mobility inequities, particularly in disadvantaged communities, the state's goal was to promote business interests and Paris's economic position on a global stage. The highly mediatized design consultation, in effect, allowed the state to appear to be directing the thinking process, and it also bought time for Minister Blanc to formulate his own counterplan to the region's.

### **A CHANGING POLITICAL CONTEXT**

The differences of approach between the state and regional propositions stem partly from the multiple roles of the Paris agglomeration and its fractured governance. Paris is at once a global city, a national capital, and a local municipality. To many, Paris is France. It contains by far the highest concentration of population and economic activity in the nation and is the country's economic and cultural engine. For this reason, the state is reluctant to cede control of the capital and prioritizes global interests. Meanwhile, the city's local interests are frequently in conflict with those of the state. France's presidents have often leaned to the political right of the capital region, as they are elected primarily by the more conservative provinces. Meanwhile Paris and its concentration of workers have generally leaned left. This is particularly true of the regional municipalities in the Paris agglomeration that are the historic home of the industrial working class. The regional council has always been resistant to control by the Right, putting it in direct conflict with Sarkozy's presidency. Such fragmented political interests make metropolitan governance a challenge.

In addition, Paris has been subject to a national policy of decentralization since the 1980s, which granted more autonomy to regional and local authorities and eroded the state's centralized technocracy. While Sarkozy made several gestures to return to centralization—such as the appointment of a state minister for the development of the capital region and creation of an autonomous authority, the *Société du Grand Paris*, charged with securing territory and financing for the *super métro* project—in the end most implementation mechanisms remain in the hands of the region and local authorities.

In contrast to the era of Paris prefect Paul Delouvrier, when a handful of officials and engineers controlled decisions to construct the *Villes Nouvelles* and the RER rail system in the 1960s, political advocacy movements have also created requirements for extensive public participation. Indeed, the *Débat public sur le projet de Réseau de transport du Grand Paris*, to debate the state's and the region's conflicting transportation proposals, was France's most complex participatory planning exercise to date. Another essential shift since the Delouvrier era is the dependence on the private sector partners to finance and construct urban projects.<sup>5</sup> Borrowing a term from Deleuze, state minister Christian Blanc appropriately described as a "rhizome" the open-ended plan and transportation network being assembled in this context of partnered, negotiated urbanism.<sup>6</sup>



02

Asked whether he views Sarkozy's *Grand Paris* initiative as an attempt at recentralization, Vincent Feltesse comments that there is a difference between a strategic semblance of centralization and actual institutional centralization, which he feels is in any case outmoded:

First we have Nicolas Sarkozy who has borrowed the expression "Grand Paris" and launched it into the space of media and politics. His second successful step has employed an innovative methodology: an international consultation, with pluralist teams who really have carte blanche. But the mistake is to have believed that the State could advance without the regional authorities...

The whole problem is to recreate a national centralized intelligence in a decentralized country. Today, it is the State who continues to give structure to things, but it no longer has the mechanisms for regional action. And the regional authorities, who have these mechanisms, don't have the capacity to integrate things at the national level...

But in this mobile world, will the solution really come by way of a single, permanently fixed frame? Looking at our European neighbors, territorial governance takes on a variable geometry.<sup>7</sup>

### FROM ARCHITECTURE TO INFRASTRUCTURE

Also of interest is how the complexity of greater Paris influenced the work of the *Grand Pari(s)* architecture teams themselves. Stephen Graham begins a discussion of the relationship between architecture and networked urbanism with a provocative statement from Lars Lerup:

Figure 2: Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

Architecture has been pitilessly absorbed into the metropolis ... The metropolis has replaced the city, and as a consequence architecture as a static enterprise has been displaced by architecture as a form of software.<sup>8</sup>

Graham surveys the work and writings of contemporary architectural theorists including Rem Koolhaas, Keller Easterling, Alex Wall and others and concludes that in the contemporary city, flows, infrastructure, architecture, and landscape are now considered together by designers as a single complex or field.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the *Grand Pari(s)* architects indeed opted to study urban systems and infrastructure rather than buildings, but approached these systems very differently. First, the team led by British architect Richard Rogers, offered a techno-utopian vision of Paris's green future with the transformation of the city's major rail corridors into a self-contained armature of the sustainable city. Proposing that train rights-of-way could be layered with multimodal transport, wind generators, water collectors, and linear parks, the Rogers scheme presented an ambitious, neo-metabolist vision of Paris—a flexible (yet top-down) megastructure.

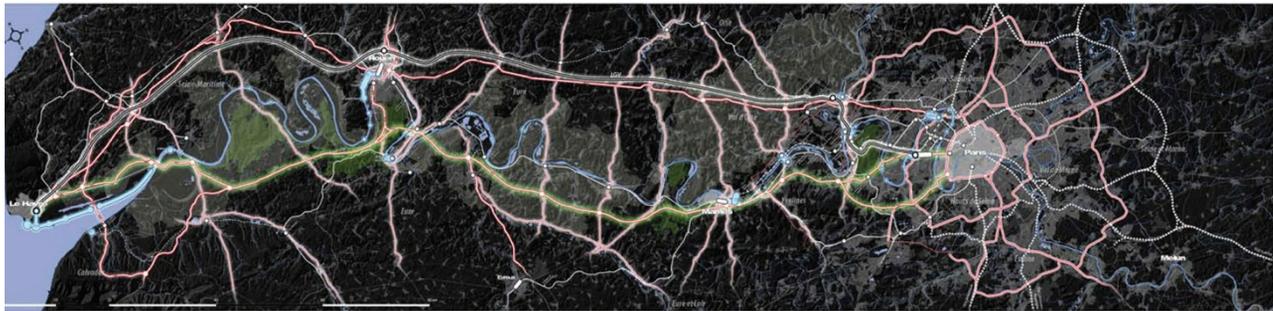
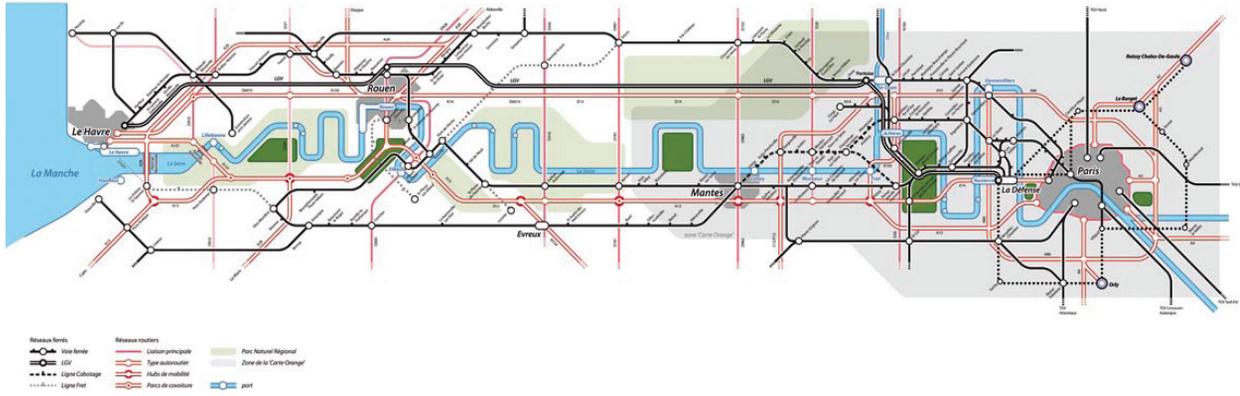
Antoine Grumbach was also interested in territorial-scale armature, reading the existing landscape of the Seine River Basin as a system of infrastructure jointly engineered by man and nature. Weaving the river into an accompanying network of express and regional transportation lines, he de-centered Paris in its agglomeration to emphasize the city's relationship to a larger economic geography and represented the entire territory as a network map, appropriating the graphics of the London underground.

Grumbach's interpretation of the regional landscape as infrastructure shares an interest of other *Grand Pari(s)* architectural teams in reading the city as a complex system. Their objective is to study this system and its internal rules, in order to appropriate them and intervene. This is related to a parallel interest in the emergent metropolis—the city as a set of fragments and situations, unique or typological, with the seeds of a larger metropolitan order contained within them—a sort of metropolitan 'DNA' that directs a self-organizing, larger whole.

Nathalie Roseau observes this interest in complexity in her reading of how *Grand Pari(s)* architects represented the idea of the metropolis:

It is also to this heterogeneous mosaic that the AUC team addresses itself, adept, like team Lin, in a "philosophy of the discrete," which establishes conditions of a possible mutation of the metropolis starting from situations that are at once local and specific, but which carry within them important metropolitan potentialities.<sup>10</sup>

For example, in contrast to the Rogers team's techno-utopianism, the Jean Nouvel-Duthilleul partnership proposed an elegant solution of extreme pragmatism. With a close study of all modes of existing rail transportation in the region, and their existing travel times, Duthilleul (who contributed the proposal's subtlety through his experience as the architect of the French



03

national railway) devised a micro-weaving of existing lines and a unified ticket for a merged Metro, commuter rail, and TGV system that could reduce all trips across Paris to one half hour or less.

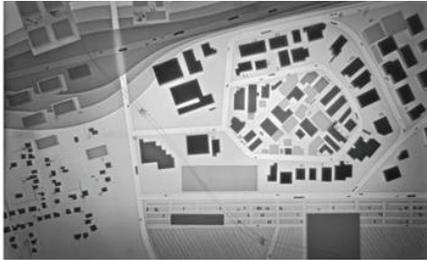
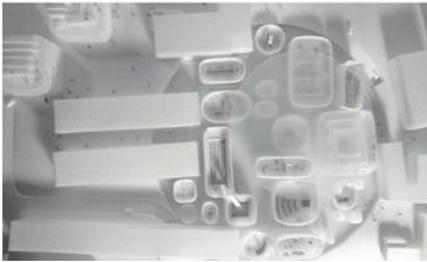
The L'AUC team's approach meanwhile refused what Michel de Certeau would term a "strategic" representation of greater Paris in its entirety, but depicted it rather as a matrix—an accumulated series of "tactics" and micro-situations. One such situation, TTGL (très très grand Louvre) looked at infrastructure as an intense generator of urban cosmopolitanism, depicting a mass of urban cultural, commercial, and leisure program incorporated into the vertical section of a regional metro station.

Similarly viewing the metropolis as an accumulation of specific conditions, Secchi and Vigano, explored the "porous city" with a series of close studies of permeability—the weave of multiple scales of mobility flows into a patchwork of various urban tissues. In parallel, Studio Lin took an approach they called the "light city." This was a diffusion of multi-modal transport networks into a range of samples of existing urban conditions in the Parisian periphery.

### THE NEGOTIATED NETWORK

Although the *Grand Pari(s)* design consultation can be interpreted as a strategy through which the state regained control of the metropolitan narrative, this does not signal a return to the centralized planning of the 1960s. Instead, it makes apparent new political strategies required to operate in the fragmented, pluralist context of a complex agglomeration. Within this setting, an infrastructure project itself can become a form of emergent

Figure 3: Agence Grumbach et Associés



04a

governance and negotiated planning. This appears to be the case of the *Grand Paris Express* regional rail proposal, the dominant project to issue from the *Grand Paris* initiative.

From its inception, *Grand Paris Express* embodied a very different approach to regional planning from the RER and *Villes Nouvelles*, which were realized during France's most technocratic era. The outlines of the early *Grand Huit* route traced a set of individual political deals struck by state minister Christian Blanc with regional mayors and local authorities—a map of politics, not of engineering.<sup>11</sup>

Its next phase incorporated the vast *Débat Public*, which though not its mission, coaxed a negotiation from the state and region. In response to an impasse between the Minister Blanc and the regional council, the independent *Commission Nationale du Débat Public* launched the process to debate the *Arc Express* and *Grand Huit* rail proposals and greater Paris's public transportation future. The *Commission* was formed in the mid-1990s to facilitate public debate of urban planning initiatives. Among the issues discussed in public meetings held throughout the agglomeration over a four-month period were mobility inequity, station locations, and financing strategies. The sessions were filmed, fully transcribed, summarized, and made available to the public.

Toward the end of the public process, the region and the state, feeling pressure from the debates' exposure of their political paralysis, struck a compromise and issued a new plan, the *Grand Paris Express*.

The most significant innovation in the process has been the creation of the *Contrat de Développement Territorial* (CDT) mechanism which, in effect, locally distributes development responsibility. The law founding the *Société du Grand Paris*, the authority responsible for establishing territory and financing for the project, also created CDT contracts allowing local and regional authorities whose territory lies along the proposed route of the *Grand Paris Express*, to self-organize into groups and collectively propose local urban development plans. These must define a development zone, address issues such as housing, transportation links, sustainability, public participation, and financing and implementation strategies. In turn, many of these local plans rely on private-sector partners, distributing development control even further. Through the CDT, local authorities enter into an agreement with the state, which is represented by the prefect of the region.<sup>12</sup>

Nearly twenty of such plans are currently underway, and the local collectives have been given 18 months to complete them.<sup>13</sup>

Although still in an experimental stage, the CDTs may create an opening for what Coutard and Guy describe as a "politics of hope" and urban readings employing the tools of science, technology, and society studies:

Within an STS framework of analysis, therefore, a more plausible prediction might be that while in some instances both network and urban inequalities grow in a mutually supporting process, in other instances this is not the case.<sup>14</sup>

They incorporate micro-struggles into the planning process and leave room for concepts that Amin and Thrift term “performative improvisation” and for Georges Perec’s “everydayness.”<sup>15</sup>

Other theorists explore how infrastructure networks engender indirect forms of governance and coordination in large, highly fragmented urban agglomerations. Sociologist Dominique Lorrain posits that, particularly in the developing world, “rather than a scenario of catastrophe,” complex mega-cities “find themselves governed indirectly by network services. To construct and manage these technical systems, it is necessary, consciously or by default, to resolve institutional questions concerning legal status, organization and financing.”<sup>16</sup> He further analyzes how infrastructure projects achieve this both by shaping space and by offering an opportunity that is easily recognized as extraordinary:

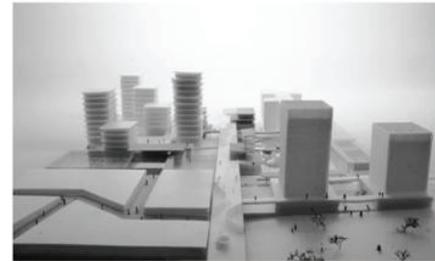
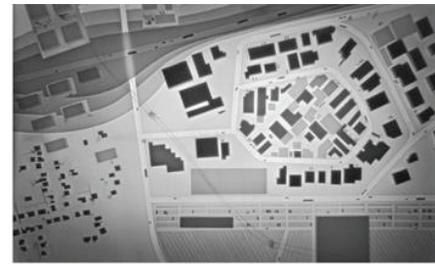
Our argument is to consider how these objects (major infrastructure and networks...) represent an opening to address the problem of governing large metropolises. First, they form a backbone of the city... organizing space and avoiding a soup without hierarchy. Furthermore, these technical systems are put in place with operations that are out of the ordinary, either in their level of investment, technical feats, and irreversible consequences on the structure of cities. To realize them, urban governments are forced to resolve numerous institutional problems.<sup>17</sup>

Political scientist Paul Kantor, reads a parallel phenomenon in the New York region. According to Kantor, recent megaprojects in the New York area represent the most extensive infrastructure improvements since the top-down era of Robert Moses. However, these have been realized through a more decentralized process and very little direct cooperation between local authorities. Kantor believes that local governments prefer to “coordinate rather than cooperate” but that they are spurred to do so when they recognize an opportunity that is out of the ordinary, such as an infrastructure project presented to them by a public benefit corporation:

Governments often get a lot done without cooperation, and they usually don’t want to collaborate. Governments don’t need a lot of cooperation to manage problems of regional scope. Political cooperation by local government arises from the fear of being left behind by public agencies and infrastructure builders.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, sociologist philosopher Bruno Latour deploys actor-network theory to describe how objects themselves—such as infrastructure proposals and new technologies—become powerful actors in processes of metropolitan democracy. However, he also recounts how it is essential for new technology to respond to specific local political culture in order to be successful.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of greater Paris, the *Grand Paris Express* proposal is indeed an actor—an agent that is forcing negotiation between disparate parties in a vast and varied agglomeration. These parties include more than 200 municipalities, local and regional collectives, the state, the regional council, and participants in the broadest participatory process in France’s history.



04b



05

Figures 4a, b: LAUC team

Figure 5: LIN—Finn Geipel + Giulia Andi

Added to the mix is the private sector, which has become a dominant player in the urban development of the Paris region as its primary source of financing. A proposed new network, a “super metro” recognized as a singular opportunity, is coaxing an incremental plan for the metropolis that is developing piece by piece, negotiation by negotiation. This represents an extreme departure from the totalizing visions of technocratic regional plans of the 1960s and 1970s. ♦

## ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, photo-documentation of the Paris region by Dominique Delaunay, “Points de vue,” included in the exhibition, *Le Grand Pari(s): Consultation Internationale sur l’Avenir de la Metropole Parisienne*, Paris, Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, April 30–November 22, 2009.
2. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1991 (Second edition published 2001).
3. Nicholas Sarkozy, “Discours de Monsieur le Président de la République a l’inauguration de l’exposition sur le Grand Pari(s)” at the Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, Wednesday April 29, 2009.
4. Conversation with architect Bernardo Secchi, October 29, 2011.
5. For a discussion of public-private partnership in contemporary France, see Isabelle Baraud-Serfaty, “La nouvelle privatization des villes,” in *Esprit* No. 373, March-April 2011.
6. Christian Blanc, 2010, p. 149.
7. Interview with Vincent Feltesse, founder of Les Métropolitaines think tank, president of the Bordeaux regional authority, president of the National Federation for Urbanism Agencies, “La métropolitisation honteuse” in *Esprit* No. 373, March-April 2011, p. 145.
8. Lars Lerup, *After the City*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2000, p.22 quoted in Stephen Graham, *Splintering Urbanism*, London, Routledge, 2001, p.32.
9. Graham, 2001, p.32.
10. Nathalie Roseau, “Le Grand Paris des infrastructures, un projet en crise?” in Dominique Rouillard, ed., *L’Infraville: Futures des infrastructures*, Paris, Archibooks + Sautereau, 2012, p. 59.
11. Interview with Yannick Beltrando, Director of the Metropolis Work Group at the Atelier Parisien de l’Urbanisme (APUR), November 12, 2010.
12. *Décret n° 2011-724 du 24 juin 2011 relatif aux contrats de développement territorial prévus par l’article 21 de la loi n° 2010-597 du 3 juin 2010 relative au Grand Paris*.
13. *Le Monde*, “Le Grand Paris dans les starting-blocks,” September 14, 2011.
14. Olivier Coutard and Simon Guy, “STS and the City: Politics and Practices of Hope” in *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 32, No. 6, Middle-Range Theories in Science and Technology Studies (Nov., 2007, pp. 713-734.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Dominique Lorrain, “The Institutions of Urban Fabrication” in *Métropoles XXL en pays émergents*, Dominique Lorrain ed., Paris, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2011, p. 14.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 15. See also Patrick Le Galès and Dominique Lorrain, “Gouverner les Très Grandes Métropoles?” *Revue Française d’administration publique*, March 2003 no107, p. 305-317.
18. Paul Kantor, presentation to workshop on “Governance players,” at Paris, *Metropoles, Le Defi de la Gouvernance* international seminar at Paris City Hall, December 1, 2011. See also Paul Kantor, Christian Lefèvre, Asato Saito, H. V. Savitch, and Andy Thornley, *Struggling Giants: Governance and Globalization in the London, New York, Paris, and Tokyo City Regions*, Minneapolis MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
19. Bruno Latour, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1996. See also Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social, an introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.