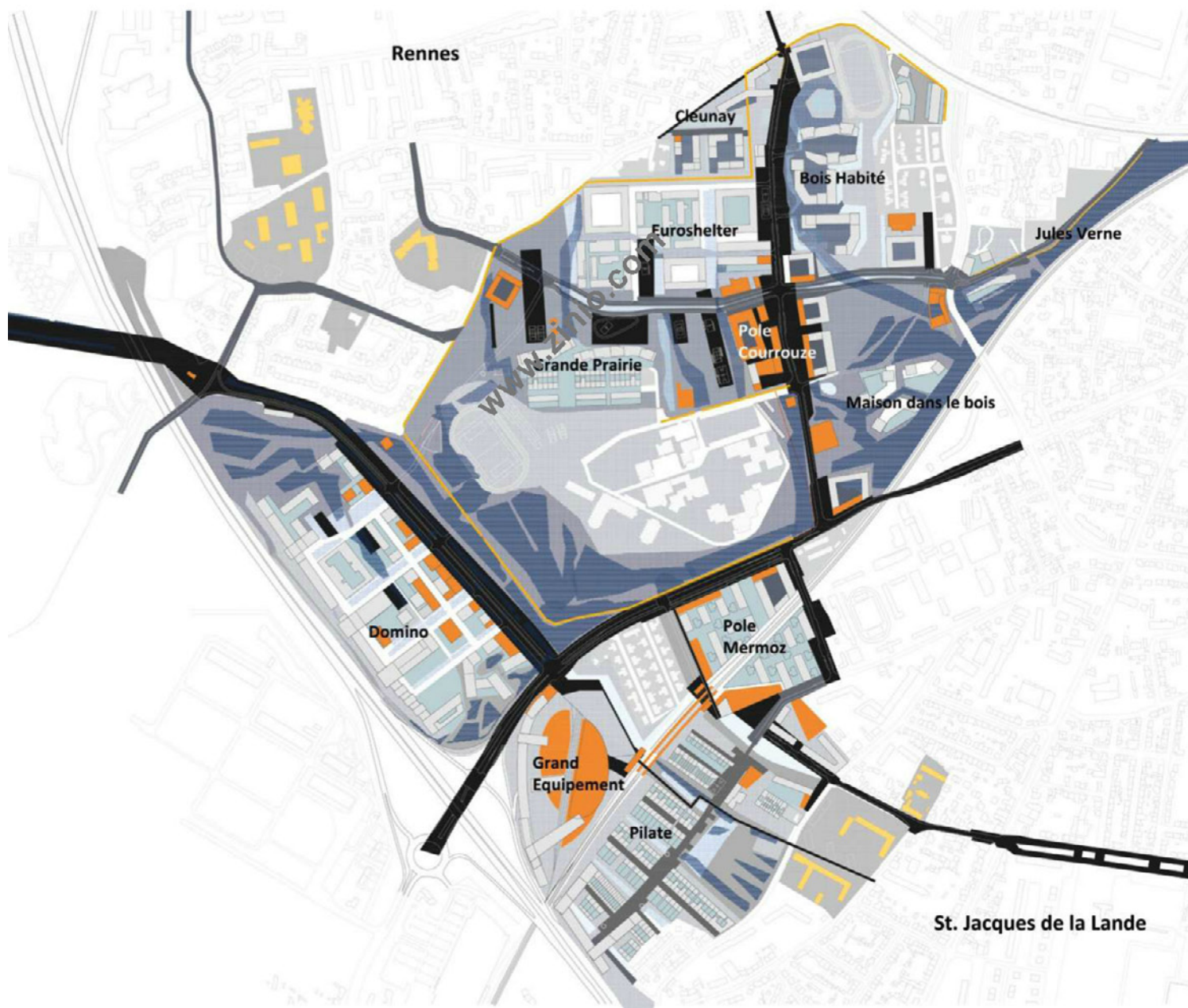


88 ²⁰¹⁴ The Narrative of Landscape

MARIEKE TIMMERMANS TEXEL: READING A LANDSCAPE • DANIEL CZECHOWSKI THE LAYERS OF LANDSCAPE • RICHARD SENNETT NARRATIVE AND AGENCY • MARTÍ FRANCH DISCOVERING THE LIQUID LANDSCAPE OF LA TANCADA LAGOON, SPAIN • LUIGI LATINI CULTIVATION IN LANDSCAPES OF WAR, BOSNIA • ALEXA WEIK VON MOSSNER CINEMATIC LANDSCAPES • SASKIA SASSEN LAND AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LIVING • ADRIAAN GEUZE THE NARRATIVE OF STOLEN PARADISE • J. M. LEDGARD, MATTHEW SKJONSBERG ON EARTH – A CONVERSATION ABOUT AFRICA





EVOLVING NARRATIVES

In Brittany, in the city of Rennes a large-scale urban project known as “La Courrouze”, covering a space not far from the city center, is fully underway. For over ten years operations involving the ground, from “reading” it to reconstructing it, have been at the center of a profound reflection on the characteristics of the inhabited space and the recycling of a site. An area of 118 hectares, La Courrouze recovers disused military and industrial areas in Brittany’s dynamic and growing capital. The program of 4,500 new dwellings is sited on a territory full of signs and dense with objects. In the slow, deep understanding of the various layers of ground and artifacts, in the initial selection of sites to be transformed and those where existing habitats were to be restored, the project’s descriptive and demonstrative role – developed from a rhythm of visits, on-site exchanges, historic investigations, public debates, and design tests – has merged with the narrative of the landscape.

In La Courrouze, the site description has guided the selection of the fundamental elements of diverse situations, where the urban program together with existing and new landscapes has finally yielded a new narrative, synthesized with the project motto “living in the city, (at) home in a park” (*vivre en ville, habiter dans un parc*). It is an evolving narrative that connects the landscape’s long evolution to contemporary urban lifestyles and their myths, the memory of the site to its possible futures.

A topological reading

When discovering La Courrouze – arriving from the Prévalaye, the great wetlands along the Vilaine river, crossing the powerful *allées cavalières* (bridleways), or from the city center, crossing the railroad – its diversity dominates the viewer’s perception. A military site since the 17th century, then an arsenal from the 19th century, it was extended towards the south-west during the First World War, bombed in 1940, then occupied by the German army until 1944 when it was completely destroyed by the same army. At the city limits, but still within the ring road, characterized by poor soils and the “badlands” of La Maltière, the military area of La Courrouze was a secret, prohibited space until 2003. Since then it has gradually become a place of discovery for neighbors, who now consider it their park as well as a place of memories.

The city is a renewable resource. Design activity constructs a situated knowledge that reframes the context through interpretation.

The large-scale urban project “La Courrouze” covers an area of 118 hectares in Rennes, Brittany’s dynamic capital. Studio Associato Bernardo Secchi Paola Viganò together with Charles Dard, AMCO and Pierre Bazin developed the master plan and the public spaces for this disused military and industrial site.



Bois habité. The reconstructed ground: park, playground, wadi (dry basin). The new topography multiplies space. It was built with aggregates from the demolished facilities where now gorse grows and play opportunities have been created. The wadi is situated between high-density dwellings.

Through its varied landscapes and sites, visitors who explore La Courrouze on foot are thrown into a kind of drift as they experience the different spaces. There are higher areas from which one can see Rennes cathedral, lower points in the wooded impluvium where one has the sensation of being at the center, and marginal zones that face existing quarters; interiors, closed in on themselves, yield to panoramic views opening outwards, towards the distance. The center is a low point, and it is there that the intersection of the two main roads occurs; here a square with the new school, commerce and services is currently being realized.

The diversity of these places is the first richness of this area and the housing project is itself born out of highlighting the site's topology and the topography, enabling us to imagine different types of habitats. Topography, topology, and social practices are at once the origin and the concrete manifestation of the site's diversity of landscape. A complex history is encrusted here, providing an armature for the design. The project is an appropriation and conscious manipulation of the site's layered narratives.

Living in the city (at) home in a park

Open space is at the center of the project strategy, yielding an urban form that does not result from the repetition of the traditional urban block, but from a painstaking reading of the existing situation and its biodiversity. The variety of settlement principles is aligned with perspectival relations that a building establishes with a particular viewpoint, with the woods, with the density of parts in which the functional mix has an important role. The notion of a park at La Courrouze takes on both metaphoric and



concrete meaning. Metaphoric because this project uses the idea of the park literally as a federative concept of different situations and of public space. But the park in La Courrouze is also a concrete part of a project in which the public space gradually turns into private space, in a project of “grey scales” that attempts, without oversimplification, to follow a strategy of dilution of public space within individual spaces. This strategy recognizes that any habitat is not fully transparent, and that porosity and gradual opacity organized along sequences of space enrich the project.

Nature and its reconstruction

The biodiversity analysis was one of the founding moments of the project and its narrative – this within a descriptive approach that sees the projective operation as one of the most sensitive readings of existing context. The design constructs a situated knowledge that reframes the context and interprets it. New infrastructure has been minimized – the new housing has been superimposed onto sterile areas and onto existing platforms, maintaining and reinforcing the areas rich in vegetation. Instead of imposing a new order, we had the ambition to reveal latencies, to explore forms of implicit order less related to the traditional construction of an urban tissue through continuity.

Due to the site’s long-time abandonment, processes of natural re-conquest encompassed large tracts of the area, establishing fragile ecosystems such as the woods of beech or gorse shrubs growing in mere centimeters of soil deposited on concrete slabs ten times as thick. At the same time, some of the areas that existed as parkland – even during military occupation –

Bois habité. Aesthetics of the reconstructed ground: paths and benches in schist and concrete slabs. New walking paths lead through the newly vegetated expanse adjacent to a high-density dwelling area. The porosity and gradual opacity are organized along sequences of space and thus enrich the project.



Maisons dans le bois. Reinforcing existing nature: The city is built into the clearings of the forest. A new green route crosses the existing wooded zones. Ecosystems, of which the beech forest is one, are included in the public space.

contained impressively species-rich vegetation. This privileged condition suggested the image of the *coulée verte* (greenway). Our interpretation of this idea was to refuse the grandeur of a green axis and to explore the image of the territorial sponge, where biodiversity and urbanity coexist; the public space and the vegetal mass irrigate and structure the city.

While the concept proposed was appreciated, enabling us to win the competition, its application required overcoming numerous complexities and cultural clichés. We faced them all in the first phase, which involved the transformation of the hardest and most sterile ground on the entire site. On a high concrete platform open towards the city, crossed by rail tracks and severely polluted, we realized the prototype of the “sponge,” constructing a new ground, a new topography, and new habitats. Minimizing imported topsoil from outside the area meant having to make do with rather poor new soils – slightly acidic and dry in the higher parts, and only gradually more humid in the lower ones where rainwater is retained. This new topography, reusing aggregates from the demolition of existing concrete surfaces and structures, perceptibly multiplies the space – from new elevations where gorse grows, one descends into a variety of wetter areas; a strip of between 40 and 100 meters opens north toward the city, bordering a variety of housing types.

Abstaining from the traditional grammar of residential gardens, the aesthetics of the newly vegetated expanse adjacent to high-density dwelling areas (120 dwellings per hectare, excluding parkland from the calculation) prompted an extended discussion on the role of open public space – a space responsive to standardized demands of “typical” inhabitants, often banalized and oversimplified – and, even more difficult, a delving into the common rhetoric on “nature in the city.”



Acknowledging these two questions, let's step away from my account of the experience of La Courrouze to consider some skeins of reasoning that I would like at least to outline here. Among the most interesting examples of the modern European city, the Swedish social-democratic city – in particular what was built in Stockholm in the 1930s – reflects a distinct shift in the conception of green space in the modern city, totally coherent with functionalist ideology and the idea of building a different society. What is less considered in this tradition is that the functionalist park expresses the new social system by making use of a “new” idea of nature, as Thorbjörn Andersson stated in his 2002 essay “To Erase the Garden: Modernity in the Swedish Garden and Landscape”.

Established around the idea of the “return of nature” to the city, the Stockholm School of landscape architecture followed two fundamental directions. In the first, site-specific conditions are exploited and emphasized, revealing possibilities and eliciting potentialities; the second regards comfort, recreation, pleasure – in this sense the park is utilitarian, an asset shared among the greatest number of people. For Erik Glemme, chief designer of the Parks Department of Stockholm from 1936-56, or Holger Blom, head of Stockholm's parks from 1938-71, the park's social programs reflected the conviction that the city is a profoundly democratic institution. For La Courrouze, the Swedish functionalist park is a source of inspiration in a further sense in that it seeks to emphatically recreate, on marginal sites, the characteristics of the regional landscape within the city. It reconstructs nature through its archetypes. Pine forests and the rocky terrain of the archipelago appear as reconstructed landscapes within the city. In this process the third of the three natures defined by John Dixon Hunt – the garden –

Maisons dans le bois. Skatepark in the forest clearing: the space under the viaduct and towards the creek is put to new use. The access to the skating facility responds to the existing topography.



Grande Prairie. Extensive stretches of grassland and oaks are conserved in the urban project. A new pedestrian path in schist leads along the preserved vegetation. An existing stone wall, part of the remains of military installations, was inserted into the pedestrian path grid.

disappears: wilderness infiltrates the city, establishing no distance from it, becoming an abrupt and integral part of the urban tissue – an active space where many of its inhabitants' practices are hosted. The idea of the functional city, in the ecological and spatial sense, is here represented.

Evolving narratives: space and soil as capital

This legacy has been important for our project, along with the idea of the archetypal, rocky Brittany landscape, albeit prompting criticism – and even fear – from public opinion. The project narrative, then, evolved from the discovery and revelation of the site to the level of collective imagery around the landscape archetype idea, resisting the transformation of a polluted site into a banal part of city through a normalization process. The broom, gorse and furze of Brittany landscapes represented in Alexandre Ségué's and Paul Sérurier's paintings reinforced the new narrative in favor of a less domestic aesthetic. Starting out as a sterile ground, the concrete platform eventually went through a metamorphosis and became a new nature to live in.

The reconstructed nature of the Bois habité (inhabited woods) is today inserted within La Courrouze, establishing new relations with the urban surroundings, within limited space and without overlooking any of its asperities. Along the Vallon Jules Verne a creek crosses the city between the rails and a steep denivelation; the "sponge" is crisscrossed by paths and by episodic, rhythmic insertions of comfortable areas. The project reveals a richness of stratification and the complex relations between natural dynamics and urban practices. Old railroad lines, halfway up the slope, and old platforms emerging from the ground are integrated within public space: spaces for water,

ZAC COURROUZE, RENNES/ST. JACQUES DE LA LANDE, BRITTANY, FRANCE

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Architects: Studio Associato Bernardo Secchi Paola Viganò (urban design and public spaces); main collaborators: Simona Bodria, Adrien Lefèvre; Alessia Calò, Dao-Ming Chang, Tommaso Fait, Carla Greco, Griet Lambrechts, Gunter Pusch, Uberto degli Uberti, Silvia Urbano, Kasumi Yoshida and Giovanna Comana, Iva Berthon-Gajsak (on site control)

Landscape design: Agence Charles Dard

Infrastructure and engineering: AMCO; Philippe Thébault, Samuel Baury, Olivier Jeuland, André Chaplet

Consultants: Aubépine (Pierre Bazin, ecology and forest engineering), Gwenaél Desnos (hydraulic engineering), Yves Hernot (acoustics)

Area: 118 hectares; 4,500 new dwellings

Timeframe: 2003 – 2025



existing fords, crossings, new jogging tracks, new systems drawing rainwater from both sides of the valley, and new stairs alongside fine pre-existing stone walls. Again, history re-emerged through these investigations – one of the railroad platforms was recognized as being that from which the last train loaded with prisoners sent to German concentration camps departed, only days before the liberation of the city on August 3rd, 1944.

Beyond a stretch of grassland, the mixed quarter of offices, residences, and services sits on a new avenue designed like one of the *allées cavalières*, heading towards the Prévalaye. The avenue's section conveys rainwater towards the vegetation. A new hill, where polluted materials retained on site have been safely consolidated, has become a belvedere from which to observe the remains of the arsenal and the open spaces of the Prévalaye wetlands.

La Courrouze is now about halfway complete, and in a few years will be inhabited by around 12,000 people and used by thousands of city-goers. It has been a great conceptual sparring partner, forcing us to clarify notions often taken for granted but that encountered resistance in the inertia of collective imagination. In reality, this project – which contains nothing exceptional in terms of urban programs – shows the radical nature of the changes occurring in our time, enabling us to observe the city and the territory as deposits of life-cycles, as alternating rhythms and processes subject to metamorphosis. Here I would like to locate the starting point of a theory of the city as a renewable resource that comes with an evolving narrative and a descriptive depth. The strategy of recycling the city lies at the center of this theory. With this ambition, and with this theory/tool, inertias, latencies, and possibilities can be related to further comprehend the novelties of the present, and to interrogate the future potentialities of space and soil as capital.

Domino. Mixed quarter of offices, residences and services: the new avenue, designed like an "*allée cavalière*" and with new public transport, valorizes the existing vegetation. The section conveys rainwater towards the plants in the middle of the road.