The imaginability of the metropolis

Nathalie Roseau

▶ **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Roseau. The imaginability of the metropolis. Antonella Contin. Questo Metropolitan Architecture, Maggioli Editore, pp.84-91, 2015, 8891609038. hal-01291311

HAL Id: hal-01291311
https://enpc.hal.science/hal-01291311

Submitted on 8 Sep 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE IMAGIBILITY OF THE METROPOLIS

NATHALIE ROSEAU

QUESTO.indd 97 17/06/2014 16:28:13

/* Images, as well as metaphors or discourses, are taking a structural place in urban planning and design. However, their influence seems to be underestimated, both in the analysis of the sociotechnical process along which urban projects are conceived and materialized, and in the historical analysis of the fabric of the city. In exploring the roles of early twentieth-century panoramic and aerial views, Hubert Damisch pointed out the narcissistic structure of the urban environment, which constantly seeks ways to depict itself as a representable whole. "It is as though, at the moment when the great city, the metropolis, the *Großstadt*, was beginning to call for an image of agglomeration other than a strictly architectural one, it seemed indispensable to preserve its visibility or, to evoke a Freudian problematic, its *representability* [1]." The following essay will here explore the way images crystallized some key metropolitan paradox, originating from the need of representing new phenomena that previous views could not represent, and generating in turn new projections, also proving how important is the performative power of images.

City of flows and space representations

/* The airport example embodies a metonymic figure of the phenomena in progress and the difficulties of representing them through images. As an integrated exchange platform at the epicentre of intra-city flows, accumulating more and more functions and services, the airport's role in the metropolization is gradually making it one of the dominant figures in global cities. As they get bigger, airports both anticipate and underpin the distension of urban space, eating into swathes of outlying territories that are in turn invested with programs, buildings representing a mix of architecture, urban forms and infrastructure, sprawling complexes of air terminals and hangars, and transport and engineering networks. The numerous dimensional parallels which have been conceived by airport designers in order to make clear this change of scales as well as the appearance of new type of scales show how this strong process of both diffusion and intensification is one of the key issues in airport's planning and design.

---

[1] Hubert Damisch, Skyline, La ville Narcisse, Paris, Seuil, 1996, p. 29.

QUESTO.indd 98 17/06/2014 16:28:14

Moving all of these new amenities further away, this process increases the absolute necessity of forging physical links between the airport and the city to which it is the aerial gateway and this issue also shows how the relation between airport and the city is quite ambivalent. In order to counter the effects of placing the airport outside the built up central area, planning has constantly strived to compress or even ignore the intermediate space that separates these two attracting poles. Contemporary airport design has also refocused on the figure of urban air terminals. In the Hong Kong archipelago, the decision for moving on the airport from the centre to the periphery led to a whole new plan for the « refurbishing » of the territory. Polycentric city with high density peripheral urban nodes, linked by high-speed metros, has been settled in a very short time, combined with the building of very intensive nodes in the hypercenter, like Central and Kowloon, which are quasi-global cities within the city. These places welcome in-town airport terminals, exacerbating the thematic of urban integration and consequently introversion. They are not only airport terminals for the luggage check-in, but they also housing commercial functions, cultural displays, office complex, hotels, residentials, and even public spaces, exterior or interior. Terry Farrell, the architect of Kowloon Station, argued he wanted to "urbanize the airport", also renaming his station "SuperKowloon". But we rather may see the urban station as being airportized, this artifact being a hybrid between airport and the city, transforming both imageries [2].

Grand Paris, City and its exteriority

/* Launched in 2008 by the Ministry of Culture and Communication at the request of the President of the Republic, the international consultation on the future of metropolitan Paris gathered 10 teams led by renowned architects. In the course of this event, designers and planners were confronted by issues beyond the normal reach of simple project design: tensions between centre and outskirts, friction between forms and flows, the obsolescence or durability of urban installations, the polarization and atomization of

[2] On the role of images as both understanding and acting mediators on the forging of relations between airport and the city, read from Nathalie Roseau, Aerocity, Quand l'avion fait la ville, Marseille, Parenthèses, 2012.

power, and the sturdiness and resilience of local structures [3].

In order to *visualize* the metropolis, architects made abundant use of aerial, satellite, and cartographic views, seeking to recover the legibility of the metropolis through those globalizing representations. The more we go up in the air, the more we can encircle the urban fabric, trying to reconquier it as a figurable entity. However, this sensation of power stimulated by this apparent remastering of the metropolitan reality, is quite an illusion as this highly narcissistic point of view erases scales, articulations, obstacles which can be seen only from the ground or more precisely. A flat depiction of a megalopolis as fluid and practical on foot as Tokyo is hard to read for Westerners; the map of its public transportation is no clearer, while an aerial view of its endless, continuous urban expanse, interrupted here and there by clusters and spires of skyscrapers is no more explicit in explaining the main forms and structures of the city. Yet the effect of chaos sparked by an aerial view of the Japanese capital should not make us overlook its intrinsic urbanity—"apparent disorder, hidden orderi [4]."

Given this situation, the structural vagueness of aerial views led the teams to suggest other modes of representation. High-angle views were thus complemented, amplified, or even replaced by various registers of imagery. The Italian team led by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Vigano employed sampling to free itself from the collective imagination of Paris as a city ringed by outskirts with its poles and fringes, and thus to convey a geography of *porousness* that can, above all, be *paced out*. Rejecting the illusion of a plan seen from above, Christian de Portzamparc's metaphor of *rhizome* presented the city as a multiple organism whose development needed stimulating. The *matrix* developed by the AUC team stressed the metropolitan potential of local perspectives, proposing a non-hierarchical organization whose ordinary components would provide the basis of its transformation. The *calculator*

[3] For a synthesis of the whole works produced during the consultation, read the special issue of Moniteur AMC, « Le Grand Pari(s), Consultation internationale sur l'avenir de la métropole parisienne », 2009.

[4] Inspired from Émille Aillaud, Désordre apparent, ordre caché, Paris, Fayard, 1975, title which has also inspired the tribune written by Paul Chemetov et Michel Lussault, copresidents of the scientific council of the consultation, in Le Monde 11th april 2009.

QUESTO.indd 100 17/06/2014 16:28:14

devised by the Dutch agency MVRDV, meanwhile, modeled the metropolis by working on potential paths to compactness.

These images —tools of discussion, provocation, and consensus— then served as the means to project a transformation of the *reality* they sought to reflect. The globalizing approaches cast the future of the metropolis around bold visions designed to counteract the radial-concentric trend inherited from the historic narrative of Grand Paris. Whether polycentric or linear, polarized or more diffuse, the proposed urban "networks" were designed to break with the logic of upward and downward pressure-points that shape metropolis. The emergence of this net-city was accompanied by an enlargement of either the physical extent of the metropolis or the size of the buildings comprising it. The transition from urban to metropolitan was materialized here by changes in dimension, the most emblematic ones being a conquest of the west as far as the sea (proposed by the Seine Métropole scheme) and a metabolic resurgence of mega-objects in urban architecture embodied by *hyperstations* and *nodal clusters*.

However, sensing the limitations of a vision reduced to the emergence of a multipolar structure, the teams sought to explore alternative forms of locality that were more specifically contextualized if less immediately graspable. From this perspective, a local, narrow, sampled, and deliberately non-hierarchical representation likened the metropolis to something nebulous, whose situation and projection could not be reduced to a single system of rationalization. In a turning of the tables, the interstitial city here became the very essence of the metropolis, thereby reformulating the potential meanings of the notion of polycentrality.

QUESTO.indd 101 17/06/2014 16:28:14

From plan to project, from project to plan

/* Operating from plan to project, the architects focused on one place in particular: transport stations. Given the crisis in planning programs now subject to uncertain financing and unforeseeable future, infrastructure has actually emerged as one of the last ramparts of large-scale urban development once it is viewed not just as a technical object for easing urban flow but is conceived in a more general way as construction project, inhabited building, urban system, indeed regional structure. Faced with increasingly massive flows and increasingly individual habits, stations have then become a key figure for projecting representations of the metropolis. However, the diverse terms that have designated a station as a site of urban convergence—hub, nodal cluster, switch point, technopole, microcentrality—have also reformulated the issue of its conception. The polycentric view of the metropolis favored stations as monumental blocks even superblocks, incarnating the urban aspirations of the day. Alongside these heroic images, the defenders of the diffuse city focused on the interstices of the net, redistributing the infrastructure and its hundreds points of convergence.

Thus we can see that, when projected onto the conception of a large infrastructure, the expression of polycentrality produces different systems of objects depending on how it is defined. On the one hand we may have a ring of monumental stations that assert their role as hypercenters along a multipolar archipelago. On the other hand there may be a more diffuse network of suitably sized facilities that seek to begin the process of redefining the suburban town. Each vision is to be taken into account, if we want to apprehend the alchemy between the local and the global, which is affecting each part of the metropolis. Each vision also produces a total approach that lends forms to the world of infrastructure, endowing it with its own identificatory, formal, and functional vocabulary, thereby channeling the changes of the region it irrigates.

The current Grand Paris process shows that urbanism is incarnated above all by an underlying narrative that it simultaneously helps to write: an open and multiple narrative of "images" that seeks to describe our metropolitan

QUESTO.indd 102 17/06/2014 16:28:14

condition, a narrative of "places" that singly and jointly make it inhabitable, and condense the diverse issues faced by the metropolis. The main point here to insist on is to reduce the risks of rupture between representations and projects. Thus, designing process needs to let opened all the possibilities for the project to retroact on the representations, which in turn could also modify according to the project living experience.