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The public of parks: in between observation and action

The example of Paris

1 Introduction

The central problematic which drives this project is: how does one take into account the social dimension of the planning and management of public parks? Or to be more precise: how does one "give a place" to users and city dwellers? The answers to these questions are primarily concerned with the social sciences and the role that they can play in an intervention on public parks and gardens. The example that we will use here is the City of Paris, which includes 455 green spaces, designed and managed by the municipal park service (*Direction des espaces verts et de l'environnement*^[1]), an agency with which we have been engaged in various types of cooperation in recent years^[2].

First, we must remember a few elements of the French context that make this type of inquiry and approach possible. On one hand, there has been a state of agreement between social scientists and urban planners on management practices – as well as landscaping – regarding the need to establish an apparatus of cooperation and collaboration between the various types of planners and the public. This has happened, in our view, because of the changing paradigms of the social scientists and urban planners. Some social scientists have moved beyond a posture of radical social critique to refocus their emphasis on the social subject, meaning and action. Urban planning, for its part, has abandoned its functionalist dogmas to be closer to the context sensitive realities of the field site. The design process is now considered as a more collective, cooperative process based on multiple partnerships in which users play an important role.

On the other hand, at a political level, laws promoting consultation and public participation were promoted in the 2000s (see SRU 2000, the law of solidarity and urban renewal, see the 2002 law establishing the *conseils de quartier* – "grassroots" based neighborhood councils). This legislation reflects the recognition of a social demand and the taking of involvement practices held at the community level into account.

2 The social sciences and public parks

Our hypothesis is that the social scientists' role of investigating the social prepares us for a dual role vis-à-vis the populations

affected by these green spaces: one is cognitive and one is mediating.

We describe one role as cognitive because it engenders the accumulation of knowledge about customs and social dynamics. This approach aims to understand the uses and users (and non-users) of public parks according to their forms (be they squares, gardens, parks or forests), depending on their location and according to their range of services, but also the modalities of their uses and users, which are often marked by contradictions, conflicts, and tensions. Indeed, one of the issues which is raised as Paris and other major cities become increasingly ethnically diverse, is that of pluralism. It arises from the fact that the purposes of these spaces have become more complex as their histories (as spaces of pleasure, recreational spaces, "spaces of life", etc.) and as social practices, bodily dispositions, and representations of nature have transformed. For instance, public parks have increasingly become the focus of festive expressions of private life (birthdays, wedding photos, housewarmings, picnics, art expositions ...).

Thus, today's public parks are put in the midst of contradictions that are difficult to resolve. Parks become a paradoxical space which must respond to an exacerbated need for "nature", while at the same time, becoming a more common public space with the effects of higher vulnerability and marked by the expression of incivility. Indeed, parks – because of their enclosure, their versatility, their polyvalent meanings, the significance of periods of rest, the ubiquitous presence of plants, the relationship with time – differ from other public spaces because they create specific expectations. This plurality of practices and performances, some of which can be harmed by cohabitation, demands to be regulated and therefore studied.

The regular observation of these practices may help our understanding of social life with its processes and dysfunctions. But it can also help with the improvement of the public services entailed in public parks by enlightening those, who, in a classic division of labor, have as their missions the conception, planning, design, implementation, and maintenance of these places.

Another important aspect is the role of mediation between users or residents and actors involved in development and management. The production of "on the ground" knowledge can transform, through an engaged dynamic, the "investigated" into actors who we work with as well as on, and whose vernacular skills can be measured against those of technicians and experts. This dynamic could develop further if it is supported by existing structures (associations, committees) and other forms of involvement, which could become more institutionalized in planning projects. We can hypothesize that the social sciences, which are equipped with knowledge they collect "on the ground", can accompany this sharing and pooling of knowledge and practices. They can, because of their scientific neutrality and their role of uncovering knowledge in the field, be placed in a position as mediators between users and stakeholders in planning and management.

3 How to observe? A strategic moment

This position – in which some will see a certain activism – requires a multi-track approach to research where direct presence and observation in the field are central to allow (but do not necessarily assure) action. The most advanced experiments carried out by our American colleagues in anthropology, sociology, and urban planning allow us to outline what we call an ethnographic approach. In these approaches, we focus on certain nuances and variations in the methods utilized and the degree of involvement of users in processes of intervention (through development or management).

We were able to identify three types of ethnographers who function as exploratory figures for our experience. They are of special interest to us because one of the concerns of sponsors is a diversity of access and the involvement of wide array of communities in parks.

The Ethnographer-Counselor

William Kornblum, a sociologist at the Graduate Center, CUNY is a good example. For many years, he has been regularly sought by the Parks Department in New York City for his expertise, and has thus issued a handbook to managers and community leaders on urban parks (Kornblum et al., 2001). This guide calls for a qualitative and quantitative assessment, which works as a scoreboard to monitor the necessary adjustments and interventions on parks. It solicits all research methods, including quantitative counts on attendance. It encourages collaborations with what might be called the “working grassroots”, or organizations representing groups of users (such as dog-walkers, for example) who can work as official interlocutors with officials representing public services.

The Rapid-Ethnographer

This refers to Setha Low, an anthropologist at the Graduate Center, CUNY who has invented and formalized the idea of REAP, or “rapid ethnographic assessment procedures” as part of a request by the U.S. National Park Service for a rehabilitation of Independence National Park (Low et al., 2002, 2005). This work analyzed the relationships that various local communities had with the park (including symbolic and cultural values, as well as practices and expectations) and the parties involved in the planning of the park. Her approach was to develop a rapid method, a rapid ethnography applied to “gather cultural information for operational planning of any existing or public space to create links between users and producers”. Over 3 months, 150 people were consulted. The approach is based on two principles: teamwork and the merging of different methods^[3] which trigger an iterative process of interpretation with the actors, designers, and users.

The Ethnographer-Mediator

As the consulting firm Project for Public Spaces (PPS) demonstrates, academic and disciplinary membership is less important for our examples of ethnographers – all which are unique to the United States. It is nonetheless quite exemplary of our approach featuring observation and action, at least in its function and doctrine. Project for Public Spaces intervenes heavily in the development of parks and efforts to foster activity in them (PPS, 2000). Its founders have been greatly inspired by William H. Whyte (1980), a geographer-planner, who had wanted to repair “public spaces” based on the observation of their “social lives.” Today, emphasis is placed on the mobilization of the people concerned (grassroots groups and community associations) as well as with the analytical background provided by their professional researchers.

To conclude this section, we would like to emphasize the importance of the field in these three approaches: it is a place of confrontation with a complex reality, as such, it is a source of information, not only in teaching about what a park looks like or simply rediscovering common sense, but it is also and above all, uncovering skills and wisdom that often goes ignored.

It is also important to stress the ability of this renewed knowledge to allow the inclusion of actors and their own methods of doing things. This is because this approach re-establishes the social world – the field – as the center which should be arranged as much as developed in its tensions and contradictions.

4 As for Paris?

Starting in 2001, after the election of a socialist mayor led to a change in urban politics, the City of Paris saw an increasing in emphasis on uses and, above all, users. At the national level there has been help as well, in the form of laws stressing local democracy (*démocratie de proximité*) and mandates for neighborhood level committees (*l'obligation de comités de quartiers*), as well as a willingness towards policies favoring sustainable development – which include the social level. Although Paris' parks administration (DPJEV) has in effect been concerned with these questions since the 1990s, it took a new impetus for it to begin formalizing solutions. It is also interesting to note the question of usage is formulated as consisting of two axes. First, there is a pragmatic focus on the accommodation of the public in parks, particularly in a managerial sense, (hours, regulations, the professionalism and duties of employees who work with the public such as guards and gardeners.) The other, more cognitive direction, concerns technicians who are called upon to the listen to “expectations of the public”.

A variety of measures differing in nature and importance have been taken along these lines. There have been reflections on a *charte d'accueil* (charter of good service) for public facilities, and according to a new regulation, more studies on

certain groups of users like families and, at a more ambitious level, a restructuring of services that reconsiders the role of management and maintenance in 2005, along with changes in the designation of the guardians.

Here we will be primarily concerned with the way in which the social sciences have been associated with this movement. In order to take up the terminology and the divisions of the technicians and the services themselves, I will distinguish two forms of encounter between the social sciences and the users themselves: "An observatory on uses" and "a sociological intervention".

4.1 "The observatory on uses"

The first, "the observatory on uses" has been put in place in a series of informal and ad hoc initiatives based on research opportunities, internships, workshops in the academic setting of various schools and universities. The parks proposed for study were selected based on the questions raised by the park service and are thus rooted from the outset in operational concerns. In practice, however they remain instruments of knowledge, which are not insignificant, but they are not directly operationalized. This allows the park service to "keep an eye on the trends" of uses. These trends can be translated into internal changes, which can have real impacts.

These studies also have nuances which have implications for operational practices and management. We would like to cite a study in which we have been involved in covering a major Parisian park, *Parc Floral* (next to the Bois de Vincennes) in eastern Paris. The initial study was conducted by students from the Institut d'Urbanisme de Paris as part of a framework of courses on "the observation of public space for development". The first study consisted of an ethnographic study of the space itself that also took into account attendance and uses of the park. This well executed study, which as – mentioned previously – was conducted in conjunction with the park service's operations, gave rise to very rich and important documentation. The sociologist-teachers who oversaw this work felt that it was necessary to continue two aspects of the project.

One aspect continued the work that had been initiated on the public, which covered a range of the experiences reported by park employees, gardeners, maintenance workers, and guards through intensive fieldwork using interviews and focus groups. Another facet developed a set of recommendations for development (a renovation project was underway) in terms of organizing information for management (involvement of the park staff "serving the public").

While the results of this study did not meet our expectations, it remains important nonetheless, as it shows the key figures which we think are fundamental to the lives of Parisian parks: agents of the "public" who are both guarantors of the hospitality and social plurality of these spaces and, because of their permanent presence in these places, observers of social life at the same time. Their skills, both technical and communicative, as well as their knowledge, based on their everyday

practices, make them important players in the process of "co-production" (Jolé and Tonnelat, 2004; Jolé, 2005).

4.2 "The sociological intervention"

The other aspect, "the sociological intervention" applies more directly to development projects (in their design, their implementation and management). While various experiments have been conducted, the *Jardins d'Eole* is perhaps the most peculiar and novel, and moreover, it concentrates varying aspects of our problematic into one case study. The *Jardin d'Eole* is a 4.2 square hectare park in a working class, multi-ethnic district in eastern Paris. Inaugurated in 2007, it is the product of a residents' based political mobilization that began a decade ago and was placed on the agenda of the new municipal administration in 2001. The park's specifications were defined after very intense dialogues and consultations, particularly with the residents' association (The *Jardins d'Eole* Association) who wanted a park that would accommodate the collective needs of the district. The City of Paris, under pressure by the association, conceived of the park as having a dual purpose: a landscape aspect and a "life project." Following this logic, it required the design team, consisting of an architect and landscaper, to include a sociologist.

The sociological component of the development project (the *mission sociologique*) faced a serious challenge in this project, having to virtually rework the core of a project that was already well underway and subject to external political pressures. Indeed, it was exceptional that a call to the social sciences was even made at this stage of a project. It might be said from the outset the park became a true public space as its occupation and uses became treated as a communal affair where the sociologist found a specific niche, among the other key players in the process. An initial contribution of the sociologists was a reflection alongside the designers during the conception of the park, based on shared the recognition of existing uses already current in the vacant "pre-development" space, which were themselves an expression of the socially vitality of the neighborhood.

Once the project was started, the sociologist conducted a survey of the neighborhood and all the key figures involved. This survey allowed him to build a certain "legitimacy" which he used to follow up the implementation of the project and to prepare for its opening and its future operation. He managed to obtain, despite the difficulties, local information for residents and other members of the public. Guided tours around the park were held in the construction site with association members and municipal employees. Discussion groups were also formed as partnerships under certain special situations (such as the case of youths playing in the construction site or the organization of a community garden). All of these actions had the effect of preparing the future personnel of the park, gardeners, and guardians to become familiar with the neighborhood and become "guides" for future users. The degree to which the "sociological intervention" was a long and winding road of learning cannot be adequately reflected here, but it suffices to say the lessons it posed for reproducing this approach were many.

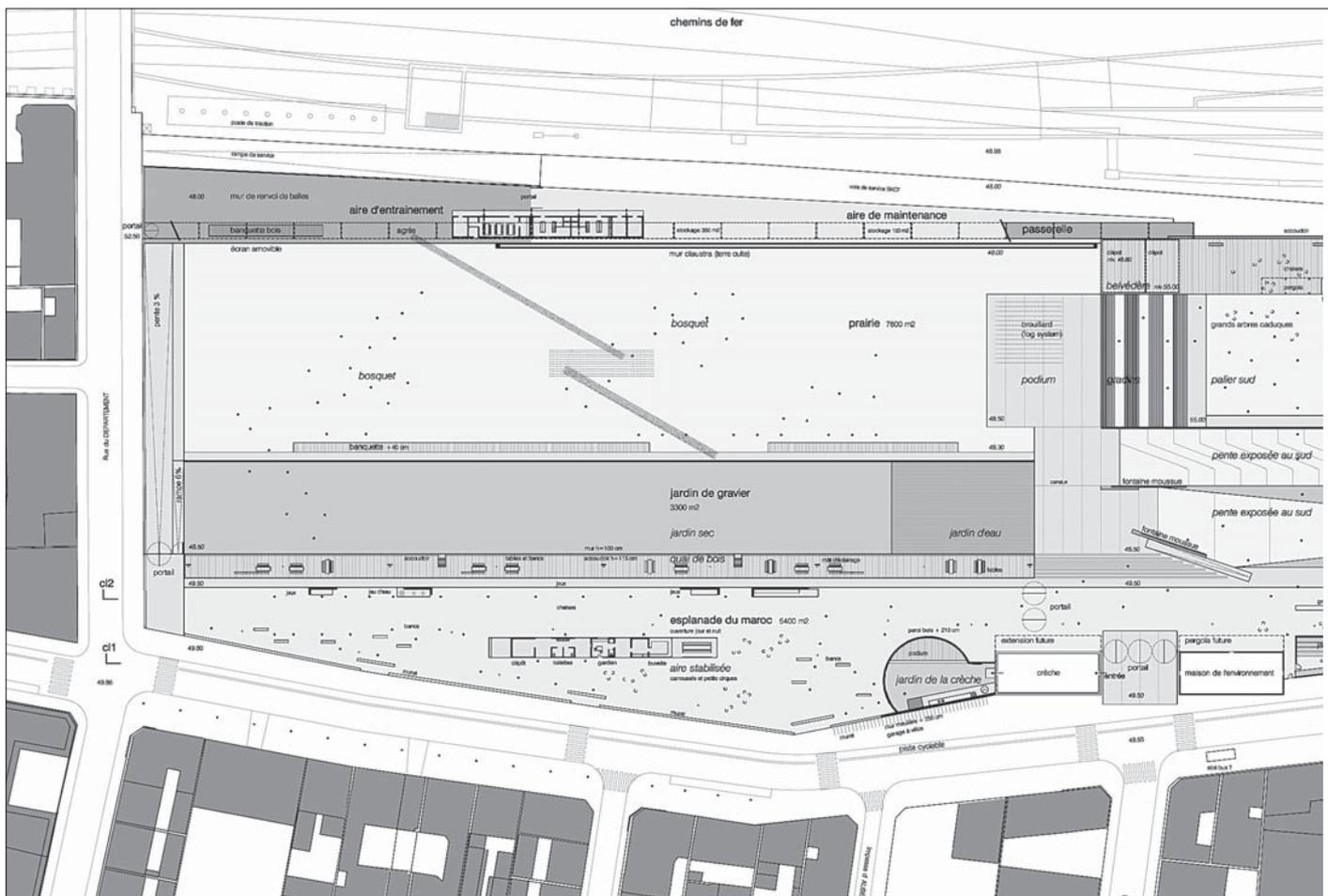


Figure 1: Plan for the Jardins d'Eole (source : Agence Michel Corajoud, 2004).

5 Conclusion: New questions raised and issues encountered

We would like to conclude with questions raised by these experiences and the resulting principles that we might identify. One of the difficulties for the social sciences is finding a suitable or good place to “fit in” in the development process. This supposes a reorganization of a division of labor, but equally, a recognition of the social sciences’ own legitimacy as well as acknowledgment by politicians whom have social dialogue as their own competences. In a parallel sense, it is about not claiming a position of all knowing expertise, but rather, to expand the “circles of investigators”.

The difficulties that were raised our projects could resolve themselves in a division of labor between two approaches to parks:

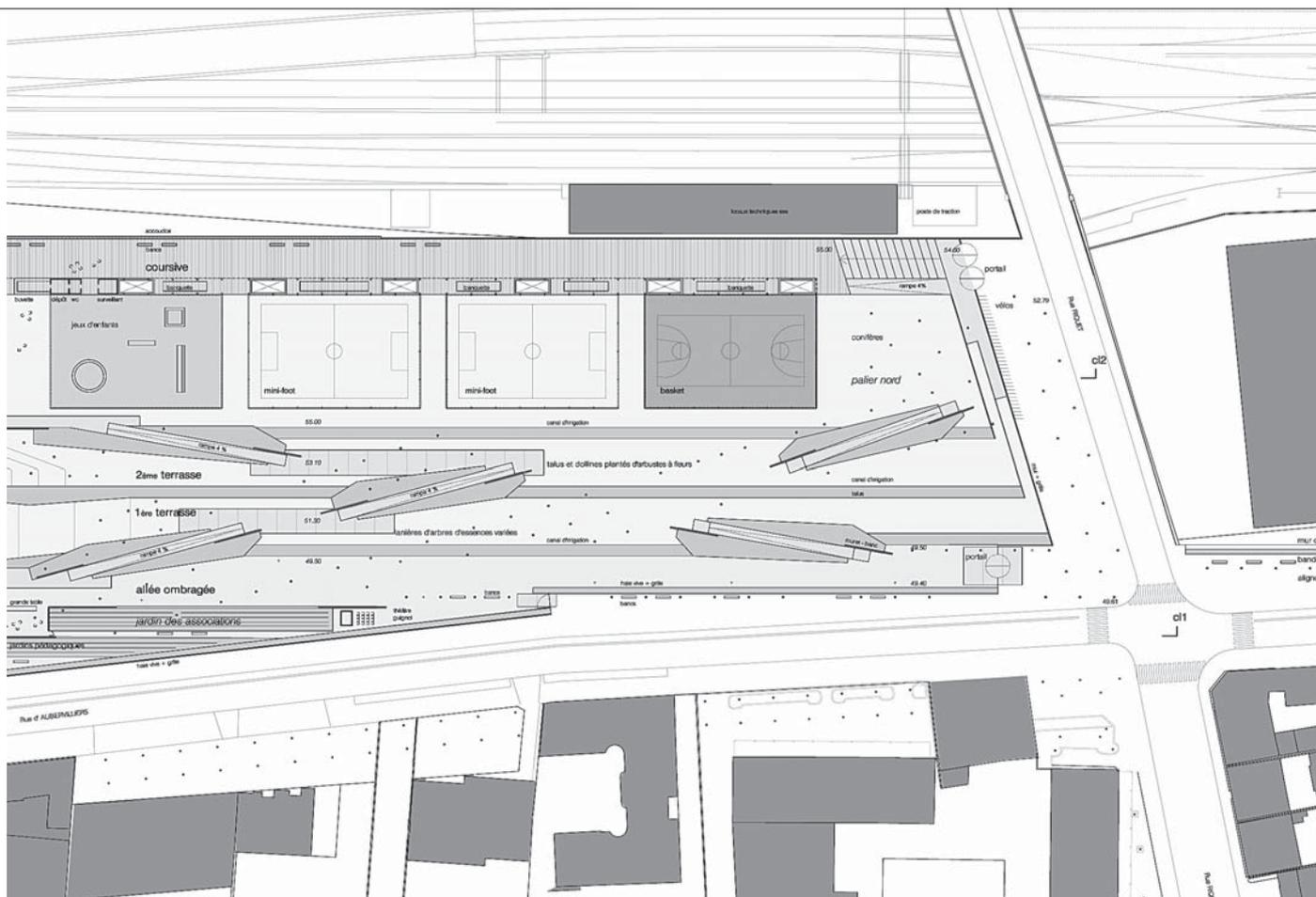
On one hand, there is “the mission of uses” (*maîtrise d'usage*)^[4], the role of which will be to create a process of discussion and negotiation around the place of the users in the conception and management of the gardens. This mission would be of an equivalent status, but separate from the mission of planners and designers (*maîtrise d'oeuvre*), and would begin in the initial phases and last until the final stages of completion.

On the other hand, the sociological analysis, around the “observatory of parks”, could permit the constitution of

knowledge and awareness of the uses and how they contribute to the parks’ management. A better knowledge and a better qualification of actors involved in development could have the users and the mission of uses (*maîtrise d'usage*) on one side, and on the other, the maintenance service and their employees, gardeners and guards that are also often excluded from the process of conception and construction. It also seems to us that in this process of double qualification towards the users and the towards the employees, there might be the installation of mechanisms of discussion and of co-management of public parks. These mechanisms could then find more natural translations in the discussion between parks departments and operators (*maîtrise d'ouvrage*) and the mission of uses (*maîtrise d'usage*).

In this regard, the American practices are a good inspiration for us insofar as they illustrate, each in their own way, different fashions to integrate either in the mission of users (*maîtrise d'usage*) (PPS) or in an observatory of gardens (Kornblum, Low). To conclude, we would like to insist on the vital role in administration, although it is often discreet, played by some “entrepreneurs of processes”, who by giving their support advance reflection.

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Notes

- [1] 455 greenspaces: 254 squares, 154 parks, 15 parks, 32 promenades.
- [2] We are now preparing a research project, funded by the city of Paris, entitled "the public between observation and action", which revisits the various projects that we have conducted in the last several years, with a case study comparing two parks, the Jardin d'Eole Paris and Morningside Park in New York.
- [3] The different methods are: behavioral mapping, transect walks, users' interviews, expert interviews, formal/informal discussions, participant observation, historical documents, focus groups.
- [4] We use in French language a specific terminology to name the division of labour between designers and planners on one hand (maîtrise d'oeuvre) and the decisions-makers and operators on the other hand (maîtrise d'ouvrage).

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