

Zeitschrift: gta papers

Herausgeber: gta Verlag

Band: 4 (2020)

Artikel: Plate glass and celluloid : Jacques Gréber's Immeuble Esso and Jacques Tati's Playtime

Autor: Bideau, André

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-880878>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 11.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Plate Glass and Celluloid:

Jacques Gréber's Immeuble Esso and Jacques Tati's *Playtime*

André Bideau

The three decades from the end of the Second World War to the global recession of the 1970s is known as *Les Trente Glorieuses* in France: like the period of the *Wirtschaftswunder* in Germany, the “glorious thirty” years are associated with rapid economic progress and the establishment of the Keynesian welfare state. The *Trente Glorieuses* also recalls a period of fraught French politics: the unravelling of the colonial empire in Indochina and Algeria, the creation of the Fifth Republic in 1958, and the subsequent governments of president Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou. The loss of colonial territories had significant repercussions on the homeland, tellingly referred to as “la métropole.” Here, the government intensified investment in the economy and in projects demonstrating technological progress: the development of Concorde, highspeed rail, the expansion of the nuclear sector, and the provision of vast leisure infrastructure for tourism along the southern coastlines of France and in the Savoyard Alps.

State intervention led either to direct or indirect involvement in large-scale construction and to urban renewal programs such as La Défense. Decades in the making, this business-district-by-decree would host many of the corporations under the control of the French state. Since its inception at the height

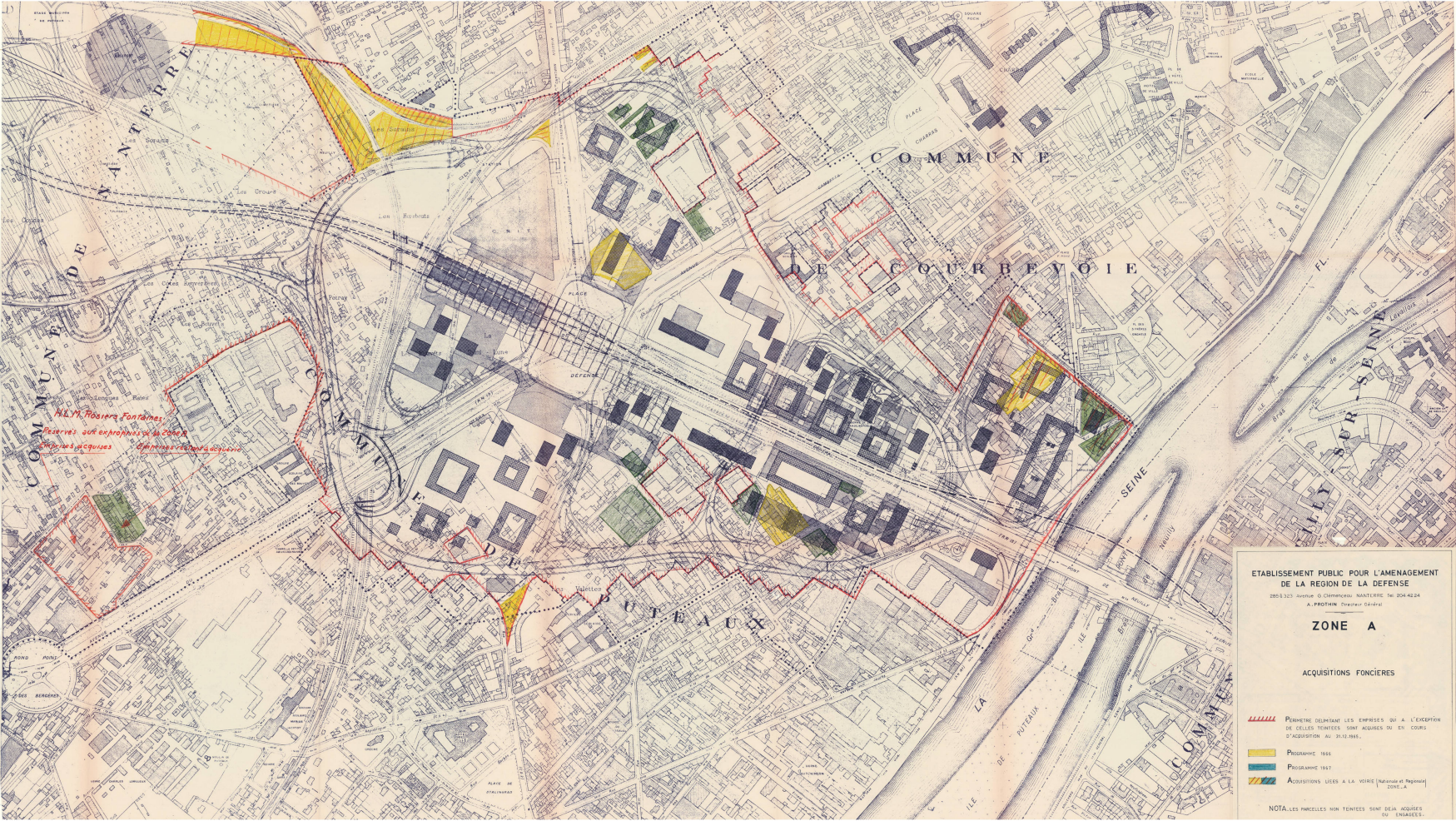
André Bideau teaches theory and history of architecture and urbanism at the Accademia di architettura in Mendrisio.



fig.1 Immeuble Esso, designed by Jacques Gréber, built from 1958 to 1963 as the first office building at La Défense. In its early years, varying positions of blinds proudly display the corporate name while flaunting the translucency of the curtain wall, the first in France on this scale. Source: Archives Defacto/La Défense.

of the *Trente Glorieuses*, the boundaries of public and private investment have been increasingly blurred at La Défense. By the twenty-first century, the superblock found itself increasingly encroached upon by a forest of corporate towers, stridently “iconic” buildings whose task is as much symbolic as functional.

fig.2 Masterplan for La Défense, as approved by the government in 1964. Its main characteristics are a central spine, a ring road, and a raised superblock, requiring massive property acquisitions (red) in the adjacent towns of Courbevoie, Nanterre, and Puteaux. To compensate for the resulting displacement, subsidized housing is also planned within the ring road. Grafted over the existing urban fabric, the masterplan also replaces the nineteenth century Rond Point de La Défense, which will survive in name only. The CNIT convention center and Immeuble Esso, recently completed to the east and west of Rond Point (Place Défense) respectively, are plugged into the superblock. The scale and density of La Défense will ultimately far exceed the massing proposed in this early document — the main legacy of the masterplan is zoning: delimiting the superblock, its infrastructural core, and the vertical separation of vehicular and pedestrian circulation. Source: Archives Defacio/La Défense.



The defining feature of La Défense has remained intact: the raised pedestrian mall grafted onto the monumental east–west axis of Paris, the Voie Triomphale. The kilometer-long pedestrian platform, approved in 1964, extends westward from the Seine waterfront toward a former nineteenth-century roundabout, the Rond Point de La Défense. This spine was imagined as a plinth into which office towers and a scattering of lower-rise buildings for housing and retail were fused. It is effectively an invisible megastructure: incorporated in its heart, underneath the linear plaza, lie facilities for parking and shopping, an expressway to St Germain, the commuter rail link to Paris, the Réseau Express Régional (RER), as well as a metro line. A node in multiple networks, but physically isolated from the low-rise *banlieue* context, La Défense presents a highly insular territory.

True to the authority of the state, La Défense can be described as an absolutist gesture of late modernism. On a regional scale, it participates in formal hierarchies that date back to the seventeenth century. The roundabout at La Défense was the terminus of the east–west axis that cuts through the center of Paris, itself hailing from the baroque geometry between two royal palaces: the Tuileries and St. Germain, the latter the birthplace of Louis XIV and a royal residence before the court relocated to Versailles in 1682. The linear extension of the urban landscape over the Seine was envisaged in a competition in 1931 that imagined the westward extension of Paris with a boulevard that would have reached as far west as St. Germain. The Great Depression and World War Two conspired to ensure that the bridge over the Seine at Neuilly was the only element from this scheme that was constructed. ¹

The name La Défense came from Louis Barrias's statue *La Défense de Paris*, erected on an intersection in 1883, in commemoration of the valiant defense of Paris against German troops during the 1871 war. During the Cold War, the historic rivalry of France and Germany became an anachronism, superseded by the economic and military hegemony of the United States. Benefiting immensely from the Marshall Plan, postwar France was increasingly enmeshed with the transnational exchange of postwar capitalism. In this regard, it is indicative that the pioneering office building at La Défense was dedicated to a commodity controlled at the time by the United States: oil. The Immeuble Esso was a tribute to both mass motorization and American corporate power in postwar Europe. ^{fig.1} The French headquarters of the American oil company ² were housed in a twelve-story building designed by Jacques Gréber and completed shortly after his death. The veteran academician, at the conclusion of a lengthy career on both

¹ In 1929, a speculative, privately arranged competition had involved the Porte Maillot area (with entries submitted by Le Corbusier, Mallet-Stevens, and Perret), before the city-sponsored competition of 1931 that addressed the river crossing at Neuilly. See COFER (Comité Français pour l'Expansion et le Rayonnement International de Paris-La Défense), ed., *Paris-La Défense métropole européenne des affaires* (Paris: Moniteur, 1987), 28.

² Esso is a brand belonging to ExxonMobil, but the name dates to the break-up of Rockefeller's Standard Oil corporation by the US Supreme Court for anti-competitive practices in 1911. With its phonetic rendering of the initials of Standard Oil, S.O., "Esso" was quite literally a sublimation of US monopoly power.

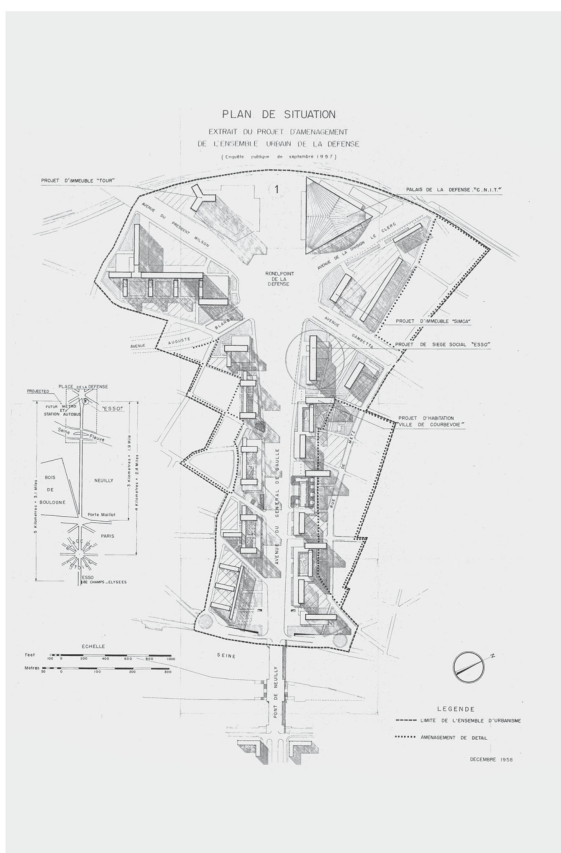
sides of the Atlantic, collaborated with his son Pierre Gréber and in partnership with the New York firm Lathrop Douglas.³

Conceived before the final commitments for La Défense were made, the design and construction of Immeuble Esso coincided with the planning process leading up to the 1964 masterplan. **figs. 2, 3, 4** The headquarters of French Esso had previously been located on the Champs Élysées, making this a westward move along the same axis symbolically significant. Historical records provide evidence of the challenges that the Esso Standard corporation faced in procuring land. The site was the result of negotiations with small landowners in Courbevoie, conducted before the La Défense superblock was carved out from the intersection of the three towns of Courbevoie, Nanterre and Puteaux. In the flexible floor plan within the massive new building, the patchwork of old tenures that once divided the site would be dissolved.

3 Lathrop Douglas had previously designed an Esso administration building in Elizabeth, New Jersey, as well as retail architecture for nearby Levittown in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

fig. 3 Early proposal for La Défense, updated in 1958 and showing the Immeuble Esso and CNIT exhibition center, nearing completion. The extension of the east–west axis is still the guiding principle, inscribing the masterplan in the “Voie Monumentale” of Paris while dramatizing the existing Rond Point de La Défense intersection. Source: Archives Defacto/La Défense.

fig. 4 Construction of the infrastructural spine containing an RER rail station, bus terminal, parking, and logistics for the planned office district, ca. 1965. Requiring demolition of large recent buildings (bottom right), the disruption caused by the superblock is apparent in the aerial photo. Source: Archives Defacto/La Défense.



In its initial years, Immeuble Esso occupied a key position within the imagery of the *Trente Glorieuses* consumer culture. Its twelve stories rose over a concrete plinth aligned with the traffic flow on Avenue Charles de Gaulle, its massing and façade conveying the weightlessness of Gordon Bunshaft's Lever House in Manhattan. In the initial years of the building's operation, the translucency of its skin was flaunted with a pattern of drawn and open blinds that spelled out "Esso" on the façade.⁴ The curtain wall was among the very first of its kind in France. Constructed in steel, the cantilevered office floors jugged out from an inner

4 A nocturnal performance at a contemporary oil corporation headquarters also existed on the outskirts of Rome in the ENI building (Marco Bacigalupo and Ugo Ratti, 1962), its curtain wall displaying a luminous six-legged canine mascot. According to Davide Spina, the twenty-story building was “a simulation of American Modernity,” just as its “International Style was derivative,” given the status of ENI as a state-run corporation in a backward postwar economy. Davide Spina, “Sign Language,” *AA Files* 68 (2016), 103–9, here 106. Like Esso, ENI opted for a new business district in Rome, the EUR, initially destined for a universal exhibition, similar to postwar La Défense.

core zone, allowing flexible divisions behind the curtain wall, a feature emphasized in contemporary publications. With its horizontal strips of blue enameled spandrels, Immeuble Esso showed undifferentiated elevations on all four sides. The office world would no longer be constrained either by the Haussmanian façade or by the hierarchy of front and back, which had informed every other building typology in Paris. This neutrality, along with scale, was symptomatic of the budding postwar aesthetic of La Défense.

As a volume defined by vectors in space, abstracted from its place, the cantilevered box of the Immeuble Esso served as a representation of things to come. It served as placeholder and reference for the planners — Robert Camelot, Jean de Mailly and Bernard Zehrfuss⁵ — working on the La Défense master-plan in the years leading to 1964. Various perspectives from their work show Gréber's structure as a phantom on the east–west axis between the Seine and the roundabout at La Défense. For everyone else, Immeuble Esso permeated the Jacques Tati film *Playtime* (1967), production of which began one year after the building was completed.

From La Défense to Tativille: Suspending the Notion of Place; or, The Plot Develops

The opening shot of *Playtime* shows Immeuble Esso set proudly against soft white clouds and a blue sky. The glass and aluminum grid façades appear as a blank contemporary matrix that might limitlessly extend upwards, before cutting to two nuns striding down office corridors as if they were in a cloister, starched wimples wagging with each step. Although the Esso logo is concealed, the building would have been instantly recognizable to contemporary viewers.

Following the opening shot, the many homologous buildings we see in the remainder of the film are not the Immeuble Esso itself but rather meticulously reconstructed allusions to it, arranged in innumerable configurations. The bulk of the film was not shot at La Défense but on an empty site set aside for future highway construction, adjacent to the Bois de Vincennes on the periphery of southeast Paris. Tati and his designer Eugène Roman invested extraordinary care (and a large part of the film's budget) in the construction of a set that was soon dubbed "Tativille" by the French press.^{6/fig.5} With many elements at half scale and full scale, the studying and reconstruction of model architecture for Tativille was a costly and time-consuming exercise that culminated in each carefully determined shot of the film. Tativille confronts us with an urban vision that

⁵ Zehrfuss had been Gréber's student at the Institut d'Urbanisme of Paris University during the 1930s.

⁶ During its prolonged use from 1964 to 1966, the spectacular set became an attraction, prompting Tati to suggest its future availability for film students and younger filmmakers. See François Penz, "Architecture in the Films of Jacques Tati," in François Penz and Maureen Thomas, eds., *Cinema & Architecture: Méliès, Mallet Stevens, Multimedia* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 62–69, here 68.



fig.5 In use for over two years, the set for *Playtime* was equipped with building props on tracks that enabled seemingly endless configurations of curtain-wall-clad architecture. While urban massing options were simulated on the film lot, at the opposite end of Paris, Immeuble Esso, the inspiration for "Tativille," initiated office development at La Défense (1964). Source: Sylvie Baudrot, 1964.

is no longer underpinned by a revolutionary political project or the program of an aesthetic vanguard. Throughout the film, the transparent grid of the Esso building exerts its influence, even inspiring the abstract ornament of *Playtime*'s poster.

The first film director to use the Immeuble Esso was, however, not Tati, but Jean-Luc Godard, who relied on extensive location shooting in *Alphaville* (1965). With night-time views of the curtain wall and of long artificially lit corridors, Godard culled a different message from Gréber's architecture than did Tati. *Alphaville* is a sci-fi noir film set in an urban universe dominated by robotic violence. The anonymity of the office world unfolding at La Défense was an ideal backdrop for both Godard's and Tati's films about societies that could no longer recognize themselves in the iconography of humanism. But while Godard deploys a Marxist framework to interpret the fates of individuals caught within capitalism, Tati's interests lie elsewhere. His film is constructed from a sequence of episodes whose relation is spatial and contingently temporal, rather than based around the development of character. A long-time vaudevillian, Tati serves his commentary on mass society from a seemingly neutral position — unlike Godard, or, for that matter, Guy Debord, whose *La Société du spectacle* was released in the same year as *Playtime*. Subversion occurs, but in a comic — not a revolutionary — manner, a multi-actor dance, set to the rhythms of Francis Lemarque's remarkable score.

Architecture is often credited with being the true protagonist of *Playtime*. If modern architecture dominates *Playtime*'s plot, then its chief antagonist is the familiar figure of Monsieur Hulot, Tati's filmic persona. We witness Hulot in his search for

employment in the office environment. Hulot's itinerary is interwoven with the passage of tourists through the imaginary Paris. Their movements seem to be punctuated by forays into shops and restaurants and characterized by boredom and anarchy in hybrid holding areas. In the second half of the film, Hulot and the tourists and other motley characters find themselves attending the opening night of Royal Garden, a slick nightclub. Characterized by wide shots, deep focus and long takes, the 48-minute-long Royal Garden scene culminates in the reduction of the interior to a pile of trash through the unintentional vandalism of patrons, staff and the flailing architect himself. In their festive destruction of the vulnerable interior, the Royal Garden patrons are fused together as a community: "opening up the horizon for the possibility of utopia," or to "reclaim it — through direct human intervention," as argued by Paul Obadia or Ben McCann. ⁷

Playtime's spatiality emphasizes constant mobility. The majority of the film is made up of individuals moving through a continuous space, in which not only the notions of indoor and outdoor but any notion of function or place are suspended. After following the nuns, the action then shifts to individuals idling in a large lobby or waiting room that is eventually revealed to belong to an airport terminal. ⁸ Groups and individuals are shown traveling not only horizontally but also vertically, with elevators and escalators providing mechanized mobility. Tati considered himself to be speaking on behalf of the users of architecture, not making architecture theory. ⁹ Nevertheless, the agenda of Functionalist urbanism is addressed implicitly in the way *Playtime* celebrates redundant mobility to the point of absurdity. Setting the tone for the aimless trajectory of all the characters, a group of female American tourists are shown entering Paris for a sight-seeing trip compressed into a single day. The movable props of Tativille were themselves architectonic vehicles — mysteriously contemporaneous with Archigram's *Walking City* (1964) — set on tracks that facilitated the configurations of an imaginary Paris whose generic architecture appears as little more than a guard rail to channel endless streams of traffic.



⁷ Paul Obadia, *Le personnage, le mouvement et l'espace chez Jacques Tati et Robert Bresson* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012), 265; Ben McCann, "Du verre, rien que du verre: Negotiating Utopia in *Playtime*," in John West-Sooby, ed., *Nowhere Is Perfect: French and Francophone Utopias/Dystopias* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 193–210, here 204.

fig. 6 Barbara Dennek, one of many amateur actors involved in *Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967), entering a building in the imaginary metropolis inspired by La Défense. Reflected in the lobby door is an icon of historic Paris. Source: Les Films de Mon Oncle, Specta Films CEPEC.

⁸ Only airport, intended as the main filming location, did not accommodate Tati's initial request. The façade of the new terminal, designed by Paul Vicariot and completed in 1961, appears in the closing shot of *Playtime* as "Aéroport de Paris."

⁹ Armand-Jean Cauliez, *Jacques Tati* (Paris: Seghers, 1968), 106.

Especially where tourists are processed through the city, the exterior scenes are flooded with cars. *Playtime* closes with a traffic jam on a roundabout, delaying the sightseers' return by bus. In the closing shot, nightfall transforms the approaching Orly terminal into an abstract field of lights.


Playtime shows the collisions of people both within and with an antiseptic urban environment, where the service worker crosses paths with the shopper and the snobbish patron of night-life encounters the tourist. The collation of these juxtapositions produces what has been described by Joan Ockman as "oneiric elements of an unmappable pedestrian and vehicular milieu."¹⁰ In their absolute aesthetization, Eugène Roman's sets are essential for the narrative. Unusual for technicolor, the rather monochromatic palette of the film reduces the difference between actor and set. The dominance of blacks, greys and blues in the photography results in a convergence of costume and architectural skin—"of dress and décor."¹¹ In turn, camouflaging the colors of figures with the space that they are immersed in increases the distracting effect of motion. Moreover, Tati, who was indebted to vaudeville, is known to have meticulously choreographed the movements of his cast. As *Playtime* has virtually no dialogue, its extreme visuality is key. The stylization of the silent figures suggests analogies between the packaging of the body and of the architectural environment. The disembodiment and flattening is carried further in several scenes where women coast through the set like robots or are literally presented as cut-out silhouettes.

¹⁰ Joan Ockman, "Architecture in a Mode of Distraction. Eight Takes on Jacques Tati's *Playtime*," in Mark Lamster, ed., *Architecture and Film* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 171–96, here 180.

¹¹ Lisa Landrum, "Architects of Playtime: Cities as Social Media in the Work of Jacques Tati," in Edward M. Clift, Mirko Guaralda, and Ari Mattes, eds., *Filming the City: Urban Documents, Design Practises and Social Criticism Through the Lens* (Bristol: Intellect, 2016), 63–78, here 70.

Illusions of Choice

Tativille is a place of sameness, repetition and of senseless propulsion of individuals, where the local is as alienated from the city as the visitor. We observe dowdy tourists and chic Parisians alike, inhabiting restaurants, hotels, nightclubs, showrooms, drug-stores and neighboring apartments where they consume identical television programs. The touristic experience, Tati implies, is no longer restricted to tourists. Instead, he depicts an urban reality where work and leisure are no longer distinct but collapse into one ludic environment where everyone seemingly enjoys the illusion of choice. In the lobby of a travel agency, world cities are advertised with posters that present identical renderings of a high-rise hotel, with the identity of each travel destination conveyed only through variations in typeface.

The glazed membranes of Tativille control the views and hermetically seal in the tourists, who seem oblivious of the fact that they are barred any direct physical contact with Paris.  fig. 6 Occasionally, monuments such as the Eiffel Tower or the Sacré

12 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 877.

13 Completed in 1966, designed by Jean de Mailly and Jacques Depussé, with Jean Prouvé responsible for façade construction.

14 COFER, *Paris-La Défense* (see note 1), 35; Virginie Lefebvre, *Paris — ville moderne. Maine-Montparnasse et La Défense, 1950–1975* (Paris: Norma, 2003), 169. In 1932, during the consultation process prior to the Exposition Universelle of 1937, the area had already been under consideration as a potential host site. See Danilo François Udovicki-Selb: “The Elusive Faces of Modernity: Jacques Gréber and the Planning of the 1937 Paris World Fair,” *Urban History Review* 29 (2001), 20–35, here 21.

15 In the first half of the 1960s, ORTF would build its national headquarters along the Seine on a prominent site in the 16th arrondissement. The project for a national museum of twentieth-century art was brought back to the core of Paris, merging with the massive urban renewal underway for the Les Halles transit hub and leading to an architecture competition in 1970 for an adjacent cultural center that would become Centre Pompidou in 1977 (named after the former president and collector of contemporary art). Lefebvre, *Paris* (see note 14), 162.

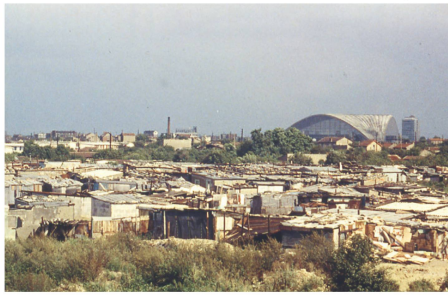
Coeur Basilica flash into the film, their reflections caught in glass doors opening. *Playtime*’s reflections recall Walter Benjamin’s remark that Haussmann had remade Paris as a city of mirages and “mirror-like perspectives.” Civic monuments appear at the end of the new corridors of mass mobility, “hovering above the ground and opening, architecturally, a *fata morgana*.”¹² The circulation of images is of strategic importance, not only for mass tourism but for urban renewal as well. During the *Trente Glorieuses* the profound transformation of the Parisian periphery and ensuing placelessness required the deployment of images.

La Défense’s Haussmannian relationship to the capital is captured by a brief scene in *Playtime*. It is the only instance in the entire film when the actual city is shown directly, and not as a reflection. On his search for employment, Monsieur Hulot stumbles through the reception area of an office building and catches a spectacular view of Paris. The location used for the scene was not the lobby but the top floor of Immeuble Esso. Around 1965 this vantage point offered a panoramic view of the urban landscape with the Eiffel Tower in the distance. In the foreground, an office building then nearing completion, the Tour Nobel,¹³ appears along the still incomplete superblock platform. It was the first marker of the anticipated high-rise development at La Défense that eventually dwarfed the Immeuble Esso. Whereas the tourists see only fleeting images on mirroring surfaces, Hulot, with his back toward the camera, is mesmerized by the view of actual Paris. Gazing down from the Immeuble Esso, Tati is drawn into the vortex of the east–west axis at the same time. The extension of Avenue Charles de Gaulle is clearly visible in the image, yet the Arc de Triomphe is dissolved by the haze, as if to symbolize the disconnection between the futuristic office environment and the city from which the service sector has been lured away.

Seizing Control

Before being designated an office district, other fates had been considered for the area. In 1946, the parliament proposed hosting a world’s fair on a site adjacent to Rond Point de La Défense in 1953.¹⁴ This would have inserted another exhibition in the east–west axis, which had a tradition of world’s fairs, as well as stimulating development in the area surrounding the Rond Point. Other ideas for hosting prestigious organizations were promoted well into the second half of the 1950s: providing a headquarters for NATO and UNESCO, for the national radio and television ORTF (Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française) or a museum of twentieth-century art.¹⁵ All came to nothing. The compromise was the Centre National des Industries et Technologies (CNIT),

a vast convention center that would dramatically alter the scale of the neighborhood adjacent to the Rond Point de La Défense. Completed by 1958, the CNIT was the site of consumer fairs, particularly for electronics. Its designers – Robert Camelot, Jean



de Mailly and Bernard Zehrufuss (assisted by Jean Prouvé for the façades) – would go on to work on the masterplan for La Défense. Converting the suburb almost overnight,

the soaring dome of the CNIT and was seen as a descendant of the Grand Palais on Champs Élysées, a site of the 1900 Exposition Universelle.¹⁶ However, aerial views of the Nanterre-Courbevoie-Puteaux area from the late 1950s still show a disjointed urban fabric characterized by fairgrounds, workshops, small industry, cemeteries, tenements and *bidonvilles*.

The temporary settlements adjacent to Rond Point de La Défense were amongst the largest of France. ^{fig.7} As it happens, *Playtime's* filming location, the set of Tativille at the other end of Paris, was also located near a shantytown, the notorious Champigny-sur-Marne *bidonville*. Except for the fleeting flashes of Parisian monuments as reflections in plate glass, all traces of history, not to mention decay, are carefully expunged from *Playtime*.¹⁷ The aimless drift of bodies through spaces of administration and consumption in the film had their invisible correlate in the displaced individuals inhabiting the *bidonville*. The shantytowns stood for a form of placelessness and obsolescence that was the other face of the mobility celebrated by contemporary consumer culture – both in Gréber's Immeuble Esso and in its clones at Tativille. The postwar *bidonvilles* perpetuated the tradition of informal housing that had surrounded the capital since the nineteenth century, but they were home to a new migrant population. Along with a massive return of Algerians to France, a growing workforce hailing from the Maghreb and from Portugal altered the demographics in urban areas. *Bidonvilles* such as in Nanterre led to the rise of a different form of state control, where managing an unruly periphery encompassed

fig.7 View from Nanterre toward La Défense, with the dome of the Centre National des Industries et Technologies (CNIT) in the late 1960s. The vast shantytown in the foreground, housing a majority of migrants from Algeria, was amongst the largest of its kind in France. Source: Archives Defacto/La Défense.

¹⁶ COFER, *Paris-La Défense* (see note 1), 35.

¹⁷ For its predecessor, *Mon Oncle* (1958), Tati had used an existing tenement in Saint Maur, contrasting the dilapidated home of Monsieur Hulot and the futuristic villa of his relatives.

18 Such as Sonocatra, an institution set up in 1956 to police a population that was seen as a potential risk of destabilizing France during the war of independence. See Marc Bernardot, "Chronique d'une institution: La Sonocatra (1956–1976)," *Sociétés contemporaines* 33–34 (1999), 39–58. With approximately 150,000 ethnic Algerians based in the Parisian region by the early Sixties, government containment policies tightened to brutal acts of repression — acknowledged only in 1998 — like the disappearance of approximately 300 demonstrators protesting a curfew targeting Algerians in 1961, the final year of the war of independence. Maurice Papon, the accountable head of the Paris police (and subsequent director of state-run Aviation Sud where Concorde was being developed), had been appointed by de Gaulle in 1958 after his involvement in Algeria, where as a governor he had condoned the use of torture — a career illustrating how the Fifth Republic provided career opportunities to transfer expertise back to the mother country.

19 Recent research dealing with this interrelationship and its legacies includes Kenny Cupers, *The Social Project: Housing Postwar France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Samia Henni, *Architecture of Counterrevolution: The French Army in Northern Algeria* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2017).

20 Pierre Chabard and Virginie Picon-Lefebvre, eds., *La Défense: Un dictionnaire; architecture / politique*, (Paris: Parenthèses, 2012), vol. 1, 186–89, 235–39.

21 The overarching regional planning policy was the Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme (SDAURP) that defined a new relationship between center and periphery for the Paris region, foreseeing the Villes Nouvelles and the RER transportation network that would connect La Défense with the future commuter hub at Les Halles. See Chabard and Picon-Lefebvre, eds., *La Défense* (see note 20), 360–62, and Cupers, *The Social Project* (see note 19), 193. The SDAURP was overseen by Paul Delouvrier 1961–1969; previously this veteran administrator been in charge of the "One Thousand Villages" emergency relocation program in Algeria. See Henni, *Architecture of Counterrevolution* (see note 19), 254–66.

22 One should also note that in 1958, the same year as EPAD, the Zone urbanization priorité (ZUP) was introduced: an instrument encouraging investment in urban peripheries throughout France. Catering to top-down planning and, in particular, to the industrialization of the construction sector, ZUP led to an economy of scale where prefabrication became profitable in housing and office construction.

23 This should not lead one to think that its younger cousin, the London Docklands, was a demonstration of Thatcherite free-market urbanism. In order to succeed as a redevelopment project and become a magnet for international investment, Canary Wharf relied on the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), a government agency with the power of direct intervention. See Susan Fainstain, *The City Builders: Property Development in New York and London* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

the discipline and surveillance of transient bodies through designated government agencies. 18

In France more than in any other European country, the discipline of urban planning was entangled with this painful retreat from colonialism. 19 The political objectives and individual actors involved in the planning of La Défense cannot be understood in isolation from the civil war that began in 1954 and ended in 1962 with Algerian independence — the historic context within which the Fifth Republic was created. In May 1958, General Charles de Gaulle was invited by the last government of the Fourth Republic to respond to the disarray caused by the Algerian war. The constitution for the Fifth Republic would establish an executive with a stronger authority granting more scope to direct state intervention. Put in place under de Gaulle's presidency, new instruments soon streamlined the process of technocratic decision-making.

Like other urban peripheries in France, La Défense became a testing ground for rezoning and relocation policies. The same year as the founding of the Fifth Republic, the Etablissement public de l'aménagement de La Défense (EPAD) was created as a government agency answering directly to the Ministry of the Interior. 20 A departure from piecemeal redevelopment, the EPAD established La Défense as a focal point within the ongoing comprehensive regional planning strategies. 21 Its masterplan by Camelot, De Mailly and Zehrfuss was finalized and approved in 1964. The masterplan's subsequent implementation would benefit directly from government patronage, as the EPAD not only provided the physical infrastructure for the superblock but also backed loans and persuaded corporations to move their headquarters from the center of Paris. When real-estate dynamics threatened to stall development, the EPAD had the power to seize and resell properties and intervene in ongoing projects. 22 La Défense thereby became a model for French urban renewal policies, as well as the showcase of a government-sponsored market economy envisioned during the presidencies of de Gaulle and Pompidou (1958–1974). 23

Obsolescence

The decades of the *Trente Glorieuses* encompass the time span during which Tati directed his six feature films, from 1949 to 1971. Due to the commercial and critical success of his previous pictures, he was granted a substantial budget for *Playtime*. Tati planned to chart new ground after *Mon Oncle* (1958), to go beyond the established slapstick of the Monsieur Hulot character. In 1958, in a *Cahiers du cinéma* interview, Tati described his desire to develop a project centered on everyday situations experienced by normal people.²⁴ The “democratization” of the comic trajectory in *Playtime* has been noted by numerous critics²⁵ and attributed either to the loose narrative, the predominance of untrained actors or to the polycentric choreography of scenes, their panoramic effect amplified by 70mm wide-angle lenses that take in more than the human eye can register. Tati thereby not only marginalized his character, Monsieur Hulot, but by using doubles and cut-outs he ironically rendered Hulot himself part of the contemporary staple of perpetually disappointing commodities: a comic brand that poked fun at the public’s expectations. Given such meta-play, it is perhaps not surprising that *Playtime* initially failed to exhilarate the general audience. To make matters worse, the custom widescreen film stock prevented the majority of French cinemas from showing the feature, which led to a very limited release.²⁶

Is it a further irony that sponsorship deal product placements — numerous appearances of the British Petroleum (BP) logo, Simca cars, references to French supermarket Prisunic and Moët & Chandon champagne — were unable to offset the costs and prevent the banks from foreclosing on the production? Countless retakes, due to the director’s exacting perfectionism, severely challenged production, resulting in cost overruns and severe delays.²⁷ When *Playtime* finally premiered in fall 1967, Tati had been forced to sell his rights to his film and endure substantial cuts in length prior to distribution. The film was a financial failure but a critical success, and it continues to be viewed as Tati’s masterpiece.

24 “Je voudrais arriver à faire un film, je ne le cache pas, sans le personnage d’Hulot, rien qu’avec des gens que je vois, que j’observe, que je côtoie dans la rue et leur prouver que, malgré tout, dans la semaine ou dans le mois, il leur arrive toujours quelque chose, et que l’effet comique appartient à tout le monde,” André Bazin and François Truffaut, “Entretien avec Jacques Tati,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 83 (May 1958), 2–20, here 4.

25 Jean-André Fieschi and Jean Narboni, “Le champ large: Entretien avec Jacques Tati,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 199 (1968), 6–21; Michel Chion, *Jacques Tati*, Collection “Auteurs” (Paris: Seuil, 1987); Iain Borden, “‘Tativille’ and Paris,” in Neil Leach, ed., *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2002), 217–35; Wolfram Nitsch, “Carousel: Non-Places as Comic Playgrounds in the Cinema of Jacques Tati,” in Mirjam Gebauer, et al., eds., *Non-Place: Representing Placelessness in Literature, Media and Culture, Interdisziplinäre Kulturstudien* vol. 7 (Aalborg: Universitetsforlag, 2015), 113–28.

26 See Heike Klippel, “Play Time: Herrliche Zeiten,” in Michael Glasmeyer and Heike Klippel, eds., *Playtime: Film Interdisziplinär; Ein Film und acht Perspektiven*, Medien/welten. Braunschweiger Schriften zur Medienkultur (Münster: LIT, 2005), 12–24, here 14.

27 Lee Hilliker, “In the Modernist Mirror: Jacques Tati and the Parisian Landscape,” *French Review* 76 (2002), 318–29, here 319.

28 It was given scant coverage in architectural historiography (see Chabard and Picon-Lefebvre, eds., *La Défense* [see note 20], 24–26) but received some attention in contemporary trade journals due to its technological innovations. See “Immeuble administratif de la société Esso Standard au rond-point de la Défense, architecte J. H. Gréber,” *Bâtir: Revue technique de la fédération nationale du bâtiment* 117 (1962), 3–11; Paul Trébouet, “Un bâtiment type: Le nouveau siège social de la SAF Esso Standard à Courbevoie (France),” *Acier-Stahl-Steel* 28 (1963), 437–45.

29 Gréber designed Garden Cities in France and Canada during the 1920s and 1930s, and the masterplan for Marseilles (1932), before directing the reconstruction of Rouen after World War Two and developing the masterplan for the new Canadian capital, Ottawa (1950). An admirer of Albert Speer, Gréber visited Berlin in 1942 as part of an official invitation to artists and architects from France that also included Jean Cocteau and Auguste Perret. See Udovicki-Selb, “Elusive Faces” (see note 14), 28.

fig. 8 Dismantling the curtain wall of Immeuble Esso in 1993, to be replaced by the Cœur Défense office tower in 2001. Source: Archives Defacto/La Défense.

For its part, Immeuble Esso remains a blind spot. ²⁸ As a work of architecture, it is rarely acknowledged in the literature on *Playtime* and Tati, while the literature on La Défense makes only scant references to it. Gréber’s building was dismantled after a mere three decades, to be replaced by the Cœur Défense office complex by Jean Viguier, a set of interlocking forty-story towers that in 2001 became, by floor-space, the largest building in Western Europe. **fig. 8**



Most recent scholarship on Gréber has focused on his earlier work, particularly on his contributions to urban planning. Given his international experience in masterplanning, it is noteworthy that he played no role in the greater urban plan for La Défense. ²⁹

Having graduated from the École des Beaux Arts in 1906, Gréber was well versed in the pairing of rationality and scenographic effect in urban planning, landscape design, and, especially, in the planning of exhibitions. Gréber established himself with City Beautiful designs such as the masterplan for Philadelphia’s Fairmount Parkway (1917). He had been architect-in-chief of the 1937 Paris Exposition Universelle and served on the committee of 1939 New York World Fair. ³⁰



fig. 9 La Défense pedestrian platform (left) with Immeuble Esso and CNIT (right) in the early 1970s. As the superblock grew westward, these two pioneering buildings were cut off from the Avenue Charles de Gaulle, suddenly facing a blind wall 20 feet tall. In an attempt to alleviate its unsightly presence for visitors to Esso’s French headquarters, the monumental relief by Vincent Guiro was completed in 1971. Source: Archives Defacto/La Défense.

30 On Gréber’s implementation of electrically enhanced scenography for the Paris Fair. See *ibid.*

Earlier, at the 1931 Exposition Coloniale in Paris, Gréber had been in charge of the United States contribution, creating a full-scale reproduction of George Washington’s Mount Vernon home in the Bois de Vincennes fairground. He therefore participated in the transatlantic exchange of architectural codes, except that he did it in reverse: rather than taking radical modernism across the Atlantic, as his ultimately more famous contemporaries did, he consistently reimported (in both directions) near-

obsolete codes and cleverly reapplied them to novel situations.³¹ Just as Gréber had previously used Beaux Arts compositions to alleviate urban chaos within the American grid, now he brought the International Style to bestow distinction upon the French *banlieue*.

In this light, Gréber's Immeuble Esso can be seen as a translocation and reinterpretation of the Lever House for the Esso Standard corporation. Yet by the mid-1960s, the machinic and festive display of transparency was outdated by the corrugated textures of brutalism. By the time other firms began to relocate from Paris, the Fordist sublime of the International Style was no longer fashionable. For their La Défense headquarters, corporations began to seek more individuality than the unified language stipulated by the planners in the initial massing schemes.³² Jumping to a new scale, deeper towers were about to become the solution that allowed for a maximization of workspace.³³

Ironically, Immeuble Esso also became a victim of the Athens Charter via the 1964 masterplan of Camelot, De Mailly and Zehruss. Their elevated pedestrian plaza paid tribute to the separation of functions codified in the Charter by disconnecting buildings from the ground level. This decision to abandon the streetscape robbed the most car-centered building at La Défense of its lifeblood: Immeuble Esso was neither aligned with the raised superblock nor the ring road because its conception predated the masterplan by half a decade. The plinth on which Gréber had placed his curtain wall building now sat in a moat, facing the substructure of the expanding superblock that Esso employees dubbed the "wailing wall."^{34/fig.9} This required plugging a pedestrian bridge into the marble-clad plaza and creating a new main entrance on the third floor. By the time Esso sold its headquarters in 1993, the CNIT — its dome also severed from the plaza — had ceased to function as an exhibition center and was being remodeled under new ownership.³⁵

³¹ See Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scènes de la vie future: L'architecture européenne et la tentation de l'Amérique 1893–1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995); André Lortie, Jacques Gréber (1882–1962) et l'urbanisme: *Le temps et l'espace de la ville* (Lille: Atelier National de Reproduction des Thèses, 1998); David Gordon and Isabelle Gournay, "Jacques Gréber, Urbaniste et Architecte (1882–1962)," *Urban History Review* 29, no. 3 (2001), 3–5.

³² The distinction became even more visible at Front de Seine, the inner Paris sequel to La Défense, with its high-risers positioned on a superblock as structurally expressive objects.

³³ In 1969, under its new director Jean Millier, EPAD organized a business trip for French professionals to study United States examples and meet with those developers and designers who represented new trends in office design and who subsequently became involved with La Défense. See Chabard and Picon-Lefebvre, eds., *La Défense* (see note 20), 26–27.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Today, its iconic dome houses a Hilton, while the footprint of the vault serves as an access point to the Quatres Temps shopping mall and various rail lines beneath. Currently under construction underneath CNIT is a new RER station for the RER E extension from St Lazare-Gare du Nord to add a second express rail connection to Paris in 2022 (in addition to RER A, in service since 1970); in the near future La Défense will also be linked to the orbital metro of the Grand Paris Express.

The Doubling of Parodic Gesture and Reality

In the closing scene of *Playtime* we see a roundabout congested with buses and cars. Tati comically reframes the typical events that accompany contemporary mobility. This kinetic spectacle, a choreography of vehicles and bodies, is more cheerful than stressful. Its festive quality allows one to relate the scene back to a time before the La Défense superblock, even before Immeuble Esso and the CNIT: to when the historic Rond Point de La Défense was a site of popular entertainment alongside its roundabout, with amusements and attractions awaiting Parisians. 36

36 Tati's first feature length film, *Jour de fête* (1949), evolved around the arcane sites of popular entertainment. Wolfram Nitsch, "Vom Kreisverkehr zum Karussell: Nicht-Orte als komische Spielräume bei Jacques Tati," *Romanische Studien* 3 (2016), 301–17, here 317. The urban edge was also the environment of vaudeville and early "prenarrative" film, a comic tradition that also informed Tati, who moved from music-hall stage to cinema screen. See Borden, "Tativille" (see note 25), 232.

fig. 10 Construction of the La Défense ring road and substructures, ca. 1970. The view toward the Seine and the bridge to Neuilly (top right) shows the ongoing removal of condemned tenements, warehouses, and manufacturing structures in Courbevoie. Source: Archives Defacto/La Défense.

This environment disappeared during the 1960s as the superblock grew westward and pedestrians were relegated to the new raised civic realm. The subsequent fate of such pioneering buildings as Immeuble Esso and the CNIT is another result of the hypertrophy of La Défense that was encouraged by the EPAD. Decades of construction would fulfil Tati's vision of a seamless urbanization that forces users to navigate a vast system of multilayered circulation. Along with the raising of the ground level, the masterplan would erase



the nineteenth-century Rond Point de La Défense. The civic typology of the roundabout disappeared completely under the superblock, itself surrounded by a ring road completed in 1971. This new ring now compromised the dominant urban axis of the Voie Triomphale; the superblock itself became a roundabout, enacting an ultimate disconnection of vehicular and pedestrian flows. fig. 10 Such editing of the ground plane is characteristic of urban renewal policies that accelerated not only mass mobility but also the ongoing attempts to develop mechanisms of control over urban peripheries that were already destabilized by demographic shifts. 37

Echoing the nineteenth-century military legacy of the site, La Défense became a citadel. But, regardless of the technocracy

37 On modernization, segregation, and displacement in postwar France. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995); Mireille Rosello, "French Bidonvilles Around 1960s Paris: Urbanism and Individual Initiatives," in Leach, *Hieroglyphics of Space* (see note 25), 247–59.

and streamlined urban development policies of the Fifth Republic, it also continues to present a palimpsest of aborted ideas and built realities. Not only was the existing urban texture of tenements, workshops and shantytowns overlaid in this process but the themes of modernism themselves become obsolete — from the differing interpretations of the Voie Triomphale to the accelerated obsolescence of the Immeuble Esso building. The constant metabolism of immaterial signs and physical concrete can be read as symptomatic of an intersection of the semiotic functions of the state and the logic of capital.

As simultaneous activities, the first phase of development at La Défense and the construction of Tativille represent a doubling of parodic gesture and reality. Like the Esso Standard corporation, *Playtime* celebrated a mobility based on fossil fuel in an era where architecture and urban design had become interchangeable services. Against this backdrop, both burdened and equipped by their obsolete cultural baggage, Gréber and Tati both sought to capture modernity and stage the contemporary reality of consumer culture. ^{fig.11} As much as their products were signifiers in the spectacular logic of the *Trente Glorieuses*, they were also victims of the evolving dynamics. Their respective products embody a specific historic moment in capitalism: a real-estate failure and a commercially unsuccessful comedy that shared a common architecture, and also, perhaps, a redundant form of knowledge. Tati would direct only one more film before the oil shock that brought the *Trente Glorieuses* to its close. *Traffic* (1971) would subliminate both his previous experiments with architecture and urbanism, and also his trouble with history: its plot involved the ordeal of a French car manufacturer attempting to reach an automobile fair, in Amsterdam, on time.

fig.11 Jacques Tati interacting with a mockup of the *Playtime* set and with television reporter Bernard Tournois (left). This image from 1965 is evidence of heightened media interest in the film's production as well as the popular attraction that its spectacular filming location had become. Source: Bernard Allemane, Ina / AFP. → 118/119

Acknowledgements
The author wishes to express his thanks to the archives at La Défense, and to Johan Huynh-Tan in particular.

