

Where did the architects go in the "Grand Paris"? : A chronology

Autor(en): **Ottaviano, Nancy / Parvu, Sandra**

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WHERE DID THE ARCHITECTS GO IN THE 'GRAND PARIS'? A CHRONOLOGY.

Nancy Ottaviano, Sandra Parvu

In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy launched a consultation for Greater Paris. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, and over a period of nine months, ten teams were commissioned to reflect upon the future of Paris and its region in the context of the post-Kyoto metropolis. The teams were composed of a range of different experts including economists, sociologists, artists, advertising executives, and ecologists. They were represented by six Parisian architects, and four European teams: Yves Lion, Djamel Klouche, Christian de Portzamparc, Antoine Grumbach, Jean Nouvel, Roland Castro, Finn Geipel and Giulia Andi, Richard Rogers, Bernardo Secchi and Paola Vigano, and Winny Mas. The visibility thereby given to the architects brought them back, once again, to the forefront of the stage in rethinking the metropolis as a whole.

It is usual to start a discussion on the 'Grand Paris' with the large-scale maps of the region which have been drawn since the 1910s. We choose to contextualize the history of this consultation through a selection of maps easily accessible to the public. All were extensively published in newspapers or made available on the Internet. This kind of enterprise can only be partial and leaves aside significant information. What we have achieved from this standpoint, however, is to reconstruct a specific narrative of the 'Grand Paris' that investigates how public opinion is formed through this type of representation. Moreover, through this process we reassess the relevance of the architectural contribution, and the figure of the architects themselves, in the elaboration of this project.

1980 'ORBITALE'

The Outer Ring

'Orbitale' fig. a was the first among a series of projects to develop a circular subway line outside Paris. Developed by the 'Paris Public Transportation Company' (RATP), it aimed to bring together the ring of suburban towns that surround Paris. It was also connected to the subway lines going into the city centre.

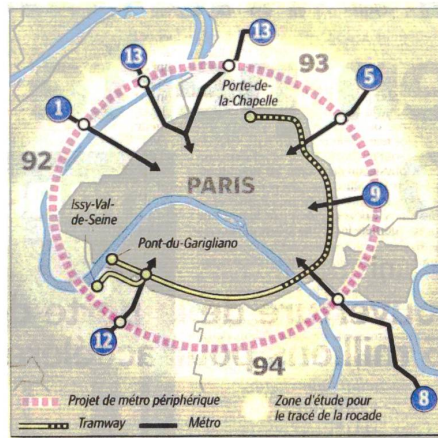
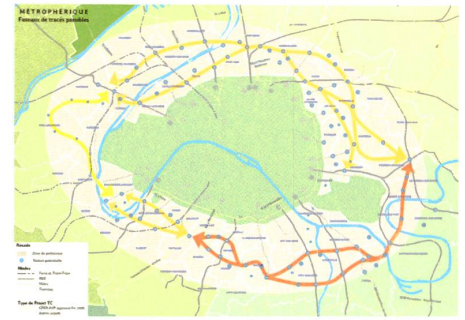


fig. a
Projet Orbitale, 1980 © Le Parisien.

fig. b
Métrophérique, 2006 © RATP.



2006 'METROPHÉRIQUE'

Thickening the Ring

For financial reasons, 'Orbitale' was abandoned. The revision of the 1994 'Master Plan of the Paris Region' (SDRIF) led in 2006 to the presentation of a new infrastructure scheme. The striking aspect of this new proposal, called 'Métrophérique', is that rather than focusing on a particular trajectory, this new infrastructure was mainly defined by a 'zone of pertinence' (in gray on the RATP map fig. b). This zone has almost the same population density as Paris. Within this thickness, possible paths were indicated with dotted lines (<20 minutes' map fig. c). To the contrary of 'Orbitale', this suburban area seems to have now become the focus of attention: the arrows towards the centre have been replaced by tangential ones and the connections to the subway have been replaced by connections to the existing 'Regional Express Network' (RER).

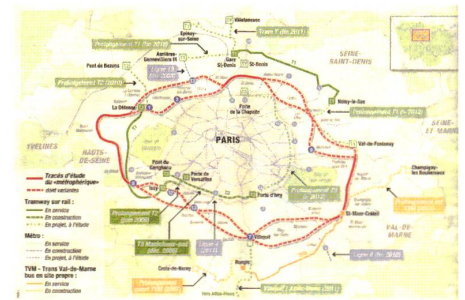
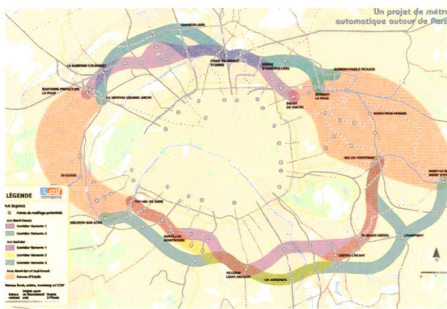


fig. c
Métrophérique, 2006 © 20 Minutes.

fig. d
Arc Express, 2009 © STIF.



2008 'ARC EXPRESS'

A Braided Network of Lines

In 2007, there was a change in terms of responsibility and financial funding from the RATP to the region. Although the transportation scheme was re-baptized 'Arc Express', its general layout and the areas affected by its development were quite similar. It is interesting to notice that the multiple paths of the 'Métrophérique' come from the difficulty in deciding where the subway lines should pass. Now the paths are presented as actual trajectories. This transforms what used to be a single metro line into a braided network of lines. The proposal is divided in four sections: the Northern and Southern ones are relatively precise; the Eastern and Western sections are represented as blurry surfaces in which a number of possibilities can still be drawn. However, as the thickness of the lines indicate on the 2009 map fig. d presented by the transportation steering committee on behalf of the region (STIF), the paths remained roughly defined until the moment the scheme had to be defended in front of the public in 2010. fig. e

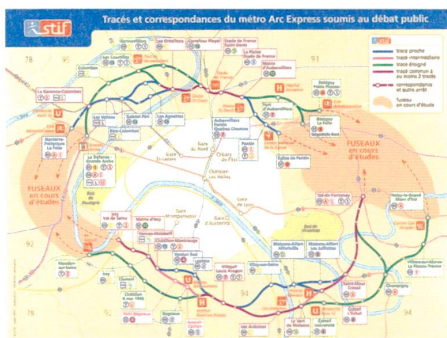
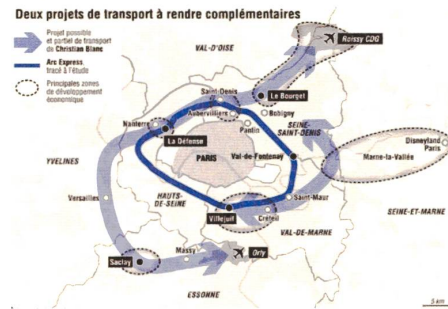


fig. e
Arc Express, 2010 © STIF.

When Nicolas Sarkozy became president in 2007, he launched within the year the international consultation for Greater Paris and placed it under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. Ten teams of architects were given a simple incentive: «Make us dream!» By the time they started work in June 2008, the president had already created a state structure whose responsibility was «to define a vision of the capital region in 2030, and to imagine ways of transforming this vision to reality». Christian Blanc, ex-president of the RATP, was appointed to lead this new institution. Shortly thereafter, he publicly expressed his disapproval of 'Arc Express'.

fig. f
Arc Express, 2010 © Le Figaro.



2009 'GRAND HUIT'

The Presidential Project

The day before the opening of the exhibition at the 'Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine' which publicly presented the projects of each team of architects, the newspaper '20 minutes' published a map fig. g of the 'presidential project', nicknamed after the figure 8 of its path, the 'Grand Huit'. The juxtaposition of the maps shown in various newspapers illustrates the confusion brought by this new project to the existing regional transportation proposal. Christian Blanc's scheme breaks with the tradition of circular infrastructures developed for Paris and its region until then. fig. f The two loops cutting through the city extend much further into the suburbs than previous proposals, and link places that are described as present and future poles of economic development.

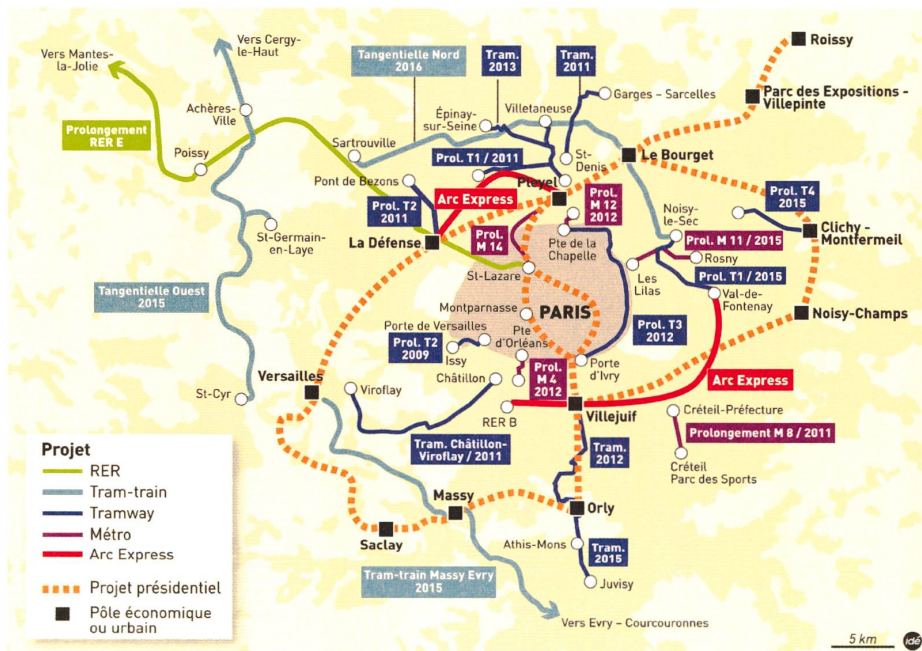
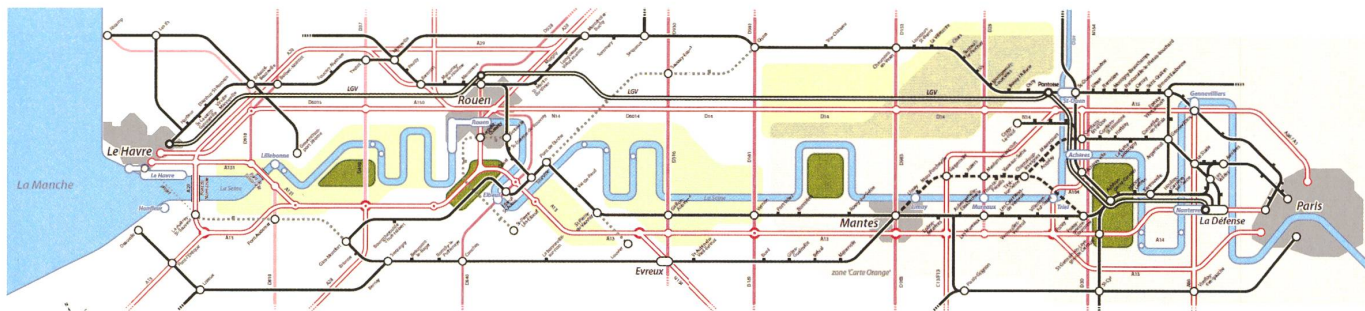


fig. g
Grand Huit - projet présidentiel, 2010 © Agence IDÉ / 20 Minutes.

fig. h
Seine Métropole, Paris, Rouen, Le Havre, 2009 © AGA, Antoine Grumbach and Associated.



2009 GREATER PARIS PLAN

Twelve Proposals

The teams of architects worked for nine months. The volume of documents produced is impressive. The variety and complexity of topics they covered is vast. For the exhibition, each team had to fit the synthesis of their work in an enclosed box of 20m².

At the opening, on April 29, Nicolas Sarkozy reiterated his support to Christian Blanc. He introduced the 'Grand Huit' with the following: «We are not to oppose architects to engineers. The financier should not decide alone through a simple quantitative approach. We are not to see the architect carried away by the mad dream of an ideal city that makes a clean slate of reality.»

In a nutshell, the issue of transportation was addressed as a poetic enterprise by Roland Castro's team. fig. k Bernardo Secchi's Team proposed a dense network of tramways, fig. m LIN focused on the juncture between different scales of mobility, fig. l Jean Nouvel's Team introduced a ring of high-speed lines a few kilometers outside Paris, fig. i Antoine Grumbach's Team developed the 'Seine Métropole' that links Paris to Le Havre through a network of high-speed trains, fig. h and Christian Portzamparc's Team designed an air train on top of the 'Périphérique', fig. j the ring road around Paris. Ten teams, and twelve different ways – including the region's and the state's projects – of seeing the Paris region transportation development.

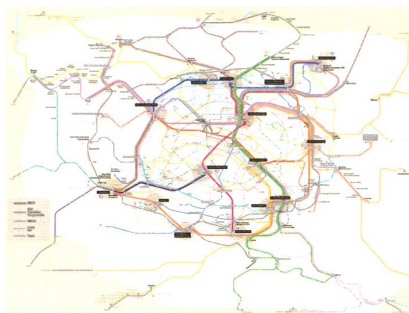
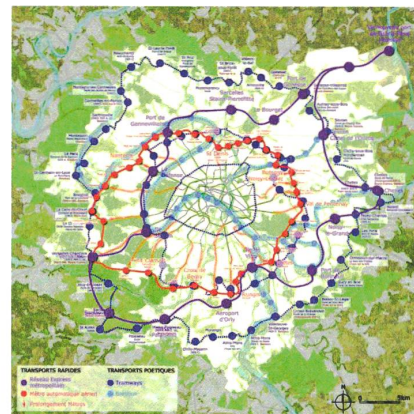


fig. i
Networks, Connections, Meshings, 2009
© Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Jean-Marie Duthilleul (AREP), Michel Cantal-Dupart (ACD).

fig. j
The Annular, 2009 © Christian de Portzamparc.

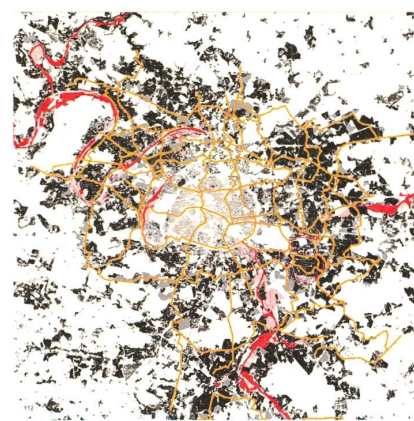
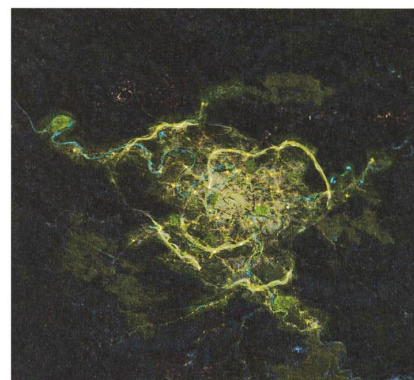
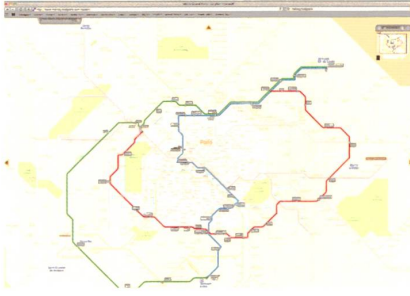


fig. k
Rapid Transports, Poetic Transports, 2009
© Atelier Roland Castro & Sophie Denissof.

fig. l
The tangential BRT lines become an orbital figure, 2009
© LIN Finn Geipel + Giulia Andl.

fig. m
Tramways, Urban Fabric, and Wetlands, 2009
© Studio 09, Bernardo Secchi, Paola Vigano.

fig. n
The Future Transportation System shown as a RATP Map, 2010 © metrograndparis.com.



2010 'FEASIBILITY STUDIES'

Power Shift

None of the ten architectural proposals were kept. Christian Blanc wrote a proposal to pass a new law that would enable the implementation of the 'Grand Huit'. Among other things, the law should stipulate that the 'Société du Grand Paris' (SGP), the company in charge of the project on behalf of the state, has the right to expropriate and pre-empt the land around each station at up to a radius of 400m. As one of the first steps the SGP launched a website ^{fig. n} on which travelers could calculate transit times and how they would be reduced by future infrastructures – as if they were already in use. Additionally, the society commissioned feasibility studies along the trajectories of the two loops, including a thorough analysis of aerial, land, and underground constraints. ^{fig. o,p}

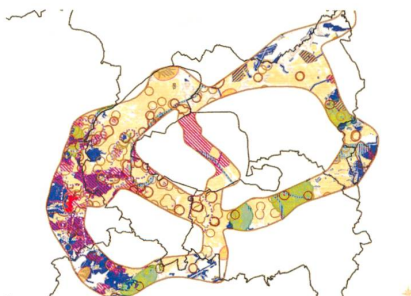


fig. o
Study for Metro/ Road connections, 2010 © SGP.

fig. p
Aerial and Land Constraints, 2010 © SGP.

Right-wing state and the left-wing region confronted each other by defending their respective projects. As can be seen in the 'France Info' map, ^{fig. q} there was no more discussion of accommodating the 'Arc Express' to the 'Grand Huit'. Each party now stood its own ground.

Le projet de «double boucle» de Christian Blanc et du gouvernement

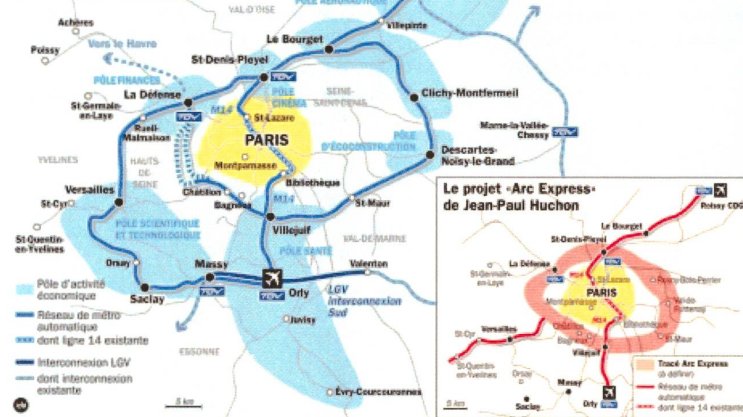


fig. q
The Double Loop vs. Arc Express, 2010 © France Info.

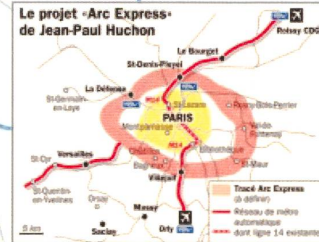


fig. s
Newly Proposed Infrastructures, 2010 © AIGP.

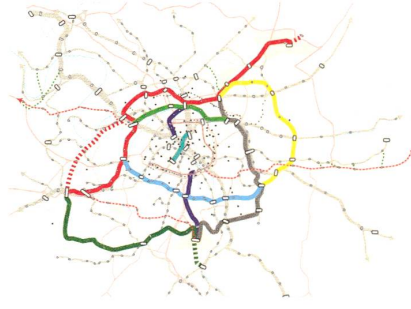


fig. u
Grand Paris' Network of Infrastructures, 2011 © IAU idf.



2010 'NATIONAL DEBATE'

Seeking Public Opinion

This disagreement led to the presentation of the competing projects in front of the 'National Public Debate Commission' (CNDP), a structure created in the 1970s to inform citizens of the impact of major regional projects on their environment. The public debate lasted four months and was conducted through surveys and public talks in the course of which anyone, private individuals as well as associations, could contribute their point of view.

The commission drew a widely published map fig. r of both projects synthetically represented on top of each other. It showed the territory and name of each commune involved in the project set against a blue background. The graphics remind one of an island. Looking at the choice of colors for each project, one notices that the light green of the 'Arc Express' recedes into the blue background, while the red shades of the 'Grand Huit' make it stand out.

Pushed aside in the 'Grand Paris' debate, the ten teams of architects joined forces in the 'Atelier International du Grand Paris' (AIGP) and together presented a counter proposal fig. s for a new and single transportation design.

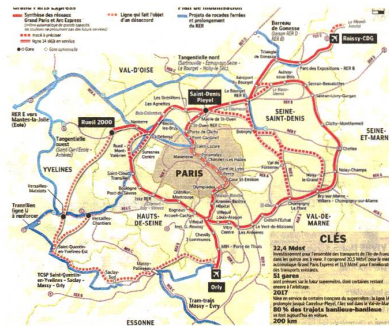


fig. t
Synthesis of the Grand Paris and Arc Express Projects, 2011 © Le Parisien.

2011 'AUTOMATIC SUPER METRO'

The State Takes Over

According to the protocol of the 'National Public Debate Commission', two months after the end of the public consultation, a report was issued that settled the disagreement between the State and the Region. An overall scheme was published that re-conducted to a large extent the project proposed by Christian Blanc. The main contribution of the 'Arc Express' to this final project is an extra line shown in orange in addition to the double loop. The discrepancies between the two maps – one published by the SGP for the State, fig. v the other by the 'Institute of architecture and urbanism of the region' (IAU IdF) fig. u – mainly consist in the phantasmal shadow of the old 'Arc Express' path that continues to float in the SGP map underneath the double loop. It has an ambiguous status because, as mentioned previously, this path was officially approved by the final automatic super metro scheme on a restrained specific stretch and erased from others.

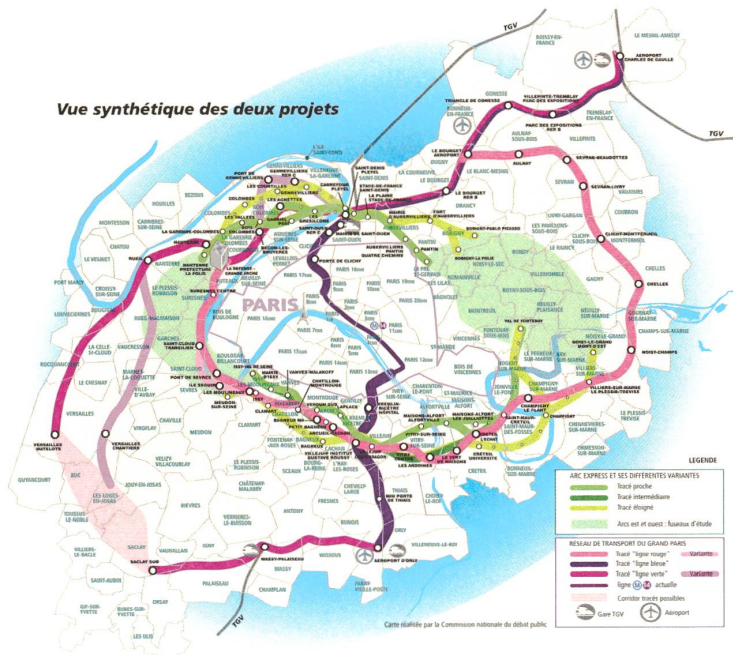
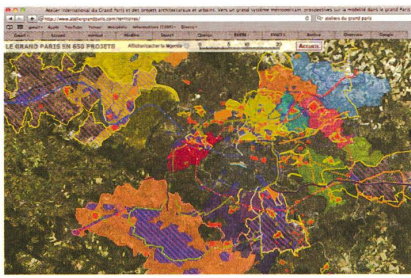


fig. r
Synthetic View of Both Projects, 2010 © Commission Nationale du Débat Public (CNDP).



fig. v
Final Trajectory of the Grand Paris Express, 2011 © SGP.

fig. w
650 Projects of the Grand Paris, 2011 © AIGP.



2011 '650 PROJECTS'

Multiplicity of Scales

Four years after the beginning of the consultation, 'Grand Paris' appears as more than one project. On the one hand, there is the transportation scheme, to which at times it seems to have been reduced. On the other, the map of the 'Grand Paris' as presented by the ten architects of the AIGP has become a superposition of all sorts of projects that address the local changes of 'Grand Paris'. It includes zones defined as representing a national interest (OIN), sensitive zones in terms of their infrastructure needs (ZUS), underprivileged areas (ZFU), perimeters undergoing heavy urban renovation (PNRU), large-scale building sites, and the potential contracts of regional development signed between the State, the Region and the communes (CDT). In total, as indicated on the map, fig. w 650 projects. The image fig. x resulting from their superposition, as illustrated by the picture of the invitation to the 'Cité de l'Architecture' conference entitled 'Grand Paris, 4 years later', reminds one of a nebulous constellation.

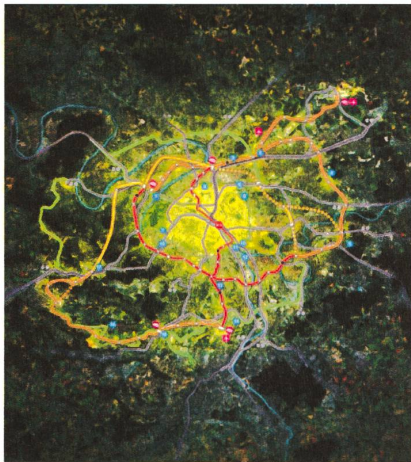


fig. x
Cover of the Invitation Card to the Exhibition 'Le Grand Paris, 4 ans après', 2011
© Cité de l'architecture.

2011 'ARCHITECTURAL COMMISSIONS'

From Dream to Reality

Eventually, most architects invited to the consultation and their associates received commissions to develop poles that stretch along the trajectory of the newly re-baptized 'Grand Paris Express', as seen on the map published by the French architecture magazine 'AMC'. fig. y At this point in time, Yves Lion's office continues to work in Marne-la-Vallée, an area east of Paris where he founded a new school of architecture in 1998. Roland Castro's team now works in La Courneuve-Le Bourget, an area to which he has dedicated much attention since 1983, as evidenced by a visit with François Mitterrand, then president, and the program of urban renovation that ensued. For other teams, the consultation provided an opportunity to work on new areas, such as l'AUC in Saint-Denis, Secchi-Vigano in Orly-Rungis, Christian Portzamparc as well as Jean-Marie Duthilleul on different aspects of Le Bourget, and LIN in Clichy-Montfermeil. Each of these projects was approved under the seal of the 'Grand Paris'. Thus, the promise of a vision has become fragmented into a multitude of projects and in this process the label 'Grand Paris' is currently being set in place. fig. z

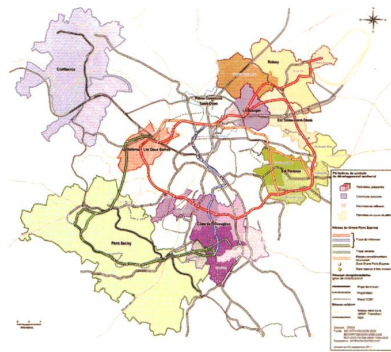


fig. y
Grand Paris Express and Contracts of Regional Development (CDT), 2011 © AMC.



fig. z
Nine Public Commissions, 2011 © Le Figaro.

The consultation of the architects had raised the hopes for an encompassing vision that would give an overall direction to the future of the metropolitan area. What becomes clear from this chronology is that the consultation was a parenthesis in the Parisian long-term problem of developing a transportation scheme on the scale of its region. In the space of four years (2007-2011), the architects have moved away from a privileged position in which they were to design a 'Grand Paris' master plan. What can be said now, as the implementation of the 'Grand Paris' is just starting, is that they are responsible for the design of local projects. Yet, at the metropolitan scale, their role as performed in the context of the 'Atelier International du Grand Paris' (AIGP) has been turned into that of advisors. As long as the motor behind the development of this project is a transportation plan, one remains sceptical about the possibility that architects will ever fill a role other than that of peripheral consultants.

Nancy Ottaviano, born 1981
Architect, Phd Candidate at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris and at the Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie (School of Architecture Paris La Villette). She works on the process set in place by representation in contemporary urban design projects, and has collaborated on research projects funded by the City of Paris and the European Commission on topics related to metropolitan quality of life. She curates exhibitions and teaches at the School of Architecture of Paris-Belleville.

Sandra Parvu, PhD, born 1973
Research fellow at the Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie (School of Architecture Paris La Villette). Her work focuses on urban design, public housing, the politics of place, and landscape architecture. Author on these topics of several articles and books, including 'Grands ensembles en situation. Journal de bord de quatre chantiers' (Metispresses 2010) and 'Stalker à La Praille' (with Eunata Torres, IAUG 2005). Following graduate studies at Princeton University, she taught at the University of Geneva.