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Bregtje van der Haak, director. *Grand Paris: The President and Its Architect*. 50 min. DVD (First Run/Icarus Films, 2010) \$375 U.S.

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The history of the city of Paris is larger than any contemporary issue that beleaguers or fascinates its audiences. As the first city consciously aware of its own morphology, the city initiated, to a large degree, the practice and discipline of urban design. From the 1860s onwards, principles refined in the era of Haussmann spread throughout the world and dominated the very concept of the city as both intellectual and aesthetic object. Whatever specific issues of the city's development capture public debate, whatever befalls the city economically to prompt and/or prevent the realization of grand agendas, Paris will always *represent* the city as an idealized figuration, certainly more than the actual city exemplifies it. To tackle Paris as a subject it is to tackle the history of cities in general, as well as the concept of the ideal city, unfolding through past and future visionary states.

"Grand Paris: The President and Its Architect," a recent documentary directed by Bregtje van der Haak, chronicles subtly events of 2008 and 2009 after the French state invited ten international and prominent local architects to re-imagine the French capital as a megalopolis, joined with its surrounding suburbs in the light of "post-Kyoto" environmentalism. Just behind the avocation of a united, sustainable Paris was the recognition that the international stature of the city had diminished in the past two decades. For Nicolas Sarkozy, the rejuvenation of Parisian grandeur is intended the primary legacy of his presidency. The nature of the endeavor, titled *Le Grand Paris*, was ambiguous from the beginning. Not clear was whether it was conceived as a conventional competition, which might imply that one architect's proposals would be chosen over the others and eventually realized, or whether the intention was simply to generate a large public discussion of the city's future, in which large and small architectural personalities might lend provocative imagination.

In the film, the "French state" is reduced largely to Sarkozy and then Secretary of State of the *Region Capitale*, Christian Blanc. In the film, Sarkozy is shown briefly in a series of clips, issuing the terms of the investigation; Blanc is held to discussing conclusions after the exhibition and public discussion. Given its fifty-minute length, the short film is left with the impossible task of reducing a year-and-a-half long study, day-long symposium and substantial exhibit, which opened in April 2009 at the national museum of architecture, the *Cité de L'Architecture et du Patrimoine*. Van der Haak's intention is clearly distinct, however, from a comprehensive re-telling of *Le Grand Paris* and its conclusions. The audience is left to its own devices in recreating the staggering complexity of the architects' research and proposals, which themselves might constitute the basis of a very interesting documentary study.

Tracing the events largely through the lens of Winy Maas, principal architect in the well-known Dutch firm MVRDV, the film follows the proceedings chronologically, beginning with the initial meeting with Sarkozy, through various presentation stages and concludes with the symposium and exhibit. From the beginning, the film poses, through Maas' vantage, that the

primary struggle of the architects was esoteric, their first mission was to *divine* the essence of contemporary Paris, through what often seemed highly subjective criteria gleaned while flying overhead. As the film develops, the task of the architect is represented as converting these intuitions into comprehensive strategies for the city. At one point in the film, Maas wonders, "What would the perfect *gift* to Paris be? A university campus? An urban rail station?" Well, yes, of course, responds local architect Patrick Céleste, perplexed momentarily that the simplicity of the suggestion has evaded a long discussion on the dire necessity of bringing industry and work back into the center of the city. Maas continues distractedly to ponder solutions that centralize and concentrate all of the city's activities into singular buildings.

The representation of the architect as the intuitive mystic is considerably unfaithful to the structure of *Le Grand Paris* as it was originally conceived. Very little is said of the large teams of urbanists, economists and engineers that were in partnership with the star architects. The team of Richard Rogers (now Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners) was accompanied, for example, by world-renowned engineers Arup as well as experts from the London School of Economics. So too, MVRDV worked in collaboration with a large and prestigious team of architects and urbanists, ACS and AAF, based at primarily at Nationale d'Architecture de Paris Malaquais. Several of these figures are very well known and respected in Paris, but are relegated to support staff in the film. The audience is left with the disappointing and stereotypical romantic impression of the charismatic architect working alone, intuitively, with a small group of earnest young interns at his side. That this is the now typical reification of the star architect is troubling to begin with, but more problematic is that this reduction misportrays the nature of Sarkozy's mandate and its significance. Though the proposals of the ten architects might indeed be characterized by the signature images of the principal architect, the complexity of all the disciplines involved distinguished Sarkozy's intention as far more comprehensive than the typical visionary city competition. As the generation of vast amounts of urban research suggested, Sarkozy's intention was to prompt real solutions for real times. (Or so it seemed.)

In the actual exhibit and its catalogue, first among the problems of contemporary Paris articulated by Sarkozy and tackled by the architects was the disconnection of the suburban *banlieue* to the central city.<sup>[1]</sup> This disconnection, resulting in a troubling disaffection among further-flung Parisians, was explored convincingly in the film through interviews with local inhabitants. The perception of being left outside of Parisian life proper is apparently strong enough in these areas to outweigh perceived relationships with region and continent alike. All of the architects' proposals acknowledge this as a primary issue to be addressed, solved first by improving outdated and insufficient mass transportation to the suburbs and increasing accessibility to the central city. More distinct and subtle to each of the architects' solutions in the exhibit were the environmental agendas that were conjoined to transportation improvements.

These were unfortunately not covered in the film. The team working with Jean Nouvel, for example, augmented the requisite new train transport with of a comprehensive strategy of "re-greening" the city, adding garden roofs, greenhouses at the scale of skyscrapers, and vast amounts of treed streets and gardened public spaces. So too Christian de Portzamparc developed green rings around the city and patchwork gardens invading every available empty parcel of land at key nodal moments of the city. The environmentalism of Maas' MVRDV proposal, on the other hand, was based in the dispersal and re-aggregation of the city's "hardscapes," that is, its buildings. Maas' new Paris is re-densified by adding building above and around existing buildings with vast amounts of new high-rises around its peripheral rings. Re-densifying the city ostensibly reduces all travel, especially that of the automobile, and for Maas, simultaneously served to "relocalize" the city, after the sensibilities of interviewed Parisians—a delicate cultural gesture.

The exhibit *Le Grand Paris* comprised plenty of modestly conceived, pragmatic proposals for the city, typically coming from the more local of the architects, who constrained themselves to limitations to be encountered if the proposals might actually be built. The show-stoppers in the exhibit, however, were those where the architects took full liberty with reasonable expectations. Despite the copious research alongside, the images of Maas' newly stacked city were wildly visionary, invoking a Paris dramatically reconstituted volumetrically, with steady streams of cars flying in air spaces in between. Jean Nouvel's too seemed a marvelous mirage of the city invaded by frothy fernlike textures and a sea of delicate glass skyscrapers holding nothing but plants. The team of Castro Denisoff Casi sprinkled dazzling cultural venues and experimental structures, adopting the sensibility of new China and Dubai to give identity to new metropolitan cores. Antoine Grumbach and his partners imagined the corridor of the Seine developed all the way to the English Channel.

All of these extravagant visions seem radically at odds with what van der Haak's film surmises at its outset, that *Le Grand Paris* was to address a Paris that is no longer the economic or political capital of Europe, in a France that has been downwardly spiraling in international and economic prominence since World War II. Even since the early 1990s, France's economy has faltered and fallen far behind those of the UK and Germany, overwhelmed by its internal economic structures and the global strain upon them. Anyone at all familiar (who isn't?) with these daunting realities could not possibly expect that the most dazzling of visions given back to Sarkozy would be realized in any near or distant future. The film's conclusion is thus foreshadowed from the very beginning, seemingly anticipated by all but the architects involved. Despite all of the research and grand visions presented, at the symposium's finale, Blanc announced that actual implementation would consist only of a fully automated new rail circuit connecting the banlieue, a foregone conclusion. Maas asked himself (somewhat petulantly) "Were we as architects *used* in this process?"

Certainly the architects were tantalized by adding their signature to the urban history of Haussmann and Le Notre as much as they were compelled legitimately by contemporary issues. It is hard to imagine, however, that architects of this stature, well-accustomed to the vicissitudes of realizing projects, especially enormously scaled ones, would be so deluded as to imagine that any one of their schemes would be built comprehensively. Certain also was the devastating effect of the sudden global collapse of credit halfway through the study, which dampened the initial enthusiasm of the government. The ambiguity of the intended outcome of the study is, however larger than these circumstances. Paris is, after all, a city that has demonstrated the will and resources to accomplish its own monumental reconstruction in the past.

Haussmann's rebuilding of the entire city is the key precedent but would be relegated to distant history if it were not for the more recent civic monuments imposed upon the city—the *Grands Projets* of François Mitterrand of the 1980s and 90s. Both of these endeavors were truly visionary, transgressing what would have been considered realizable at the outset, pushed forward by the virtues and excesses of authoritarian structures. Both, however enormous in scale and scope, had products envisioned from the beginning that were tangible and finite: a series of new parks and civic buildings, a city connected by new infrastructure. Sarkozy's *Le Grand Paris* was framed quite differently, as an open-ended question it left open a wide scope of possibilities, many of which were unabashedly utopian in premise. It is this characteristic that limited their viability as built work but which promoted them into a very different system of value. If the visionary is never realized physically, then what is its lasting contribution?

Here there is often a gross misunderstanding of the genre. In the great alternative history of the visionary and utopian in architecture, dream projects have served to both enlighten the public as well as to advance the questions of architecture outside the limitations of building, notoriously slow in comparison. Since the Enlightenment, developments in architecture and urbanism were often been accelerated by the utopias of Ebenezer Howard, Tony Garnier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Buckminster Fuller, Le Corbusier, Bruno Taut, Archigram and many others, for whom speculative vision provided as much substance as concrete building. Embedded in these types of visions is the tease that they might be actually realized, but this state of wish-fulfillment typically happens well after the curtains have parted and belief has been totally suspended.

As many theorists have proposed, it is the distance between the vision and its realization that provides exactly the most productive sphere of influence for visionary work. Frederic Jameson has suggested that, as wishes cannot always be successfully fantasized because of constraints of narrative, so too constructions cannot always be built because of constraints of the historical situation. This disjunction, however, provides the essential *function* of the utopian, “But what these utopian oppositions allow us to do is, by way of negation, to grasp the moment of truth of each term” [2]. The value in the visionary lies first in the inherent critique posed to extant orders and then, just as importantly, in the push toward change that the imaginative rhetoric device can prompt, more than any other persuasive genre. The hidden force of the visionary is in the libidinal desire it provokes toward its own realization, although all parties know implicitly that this will never happen. Even more so in the case of the projects of *Le Grand Paris*, in which the massive amount of urban research connotes a study poised for implementation, against the fantastic scale and imagery of the many of the final proposals, which were conjectural. Van der Haak ends his film with Maas and his young son (we presume) viewing a large tower that is part of MVRDV’s proposal. The son—an obvious emblem of innocent wisdom, turns to Maas and says “You shouldn’t do that for real.” The boy is correct, in historical terms: utopias can never be built, by definition, and indeed, attempts at doing so have proved some of the most devastating failures in human culture. It is in this wise acknowledgement of what is real, what is visionary and the enormous value in between, that van der Haak does not linger long enough and let the audience grasp the dilemma at the heart of the exercise. At that moment, the illumination of the content of the enormous study is lost, and the film fails to capture the issue at its most exquisite.

## NOTES

[1] *Le Grand Pari(s), Consultation Internationale sur L’Avenir de la Metropole Parisienne* (Paris: AMC, Le Moniteur Architecture, 2009).

[2] Frederic Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review* 25, (London, Jan/Feb. 2004), p 50.

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