

## Reflection Graduation Project – La Petite Ceinture; reanimating the urban fringe

Coen van Bergeijk

Student nr.: 4157524

October 2018

With the constant urge for progress that characterizes our society, there are bound to be some casualties. Disused and forgotten by the people not immediately involved with them, post-industrial areas are often left vacated and are quickly falling into ruin. Old factories, empty shopping malls, abandoned villages and creepy hospitals litter the urban fringes of many cities. They form an eyesore for developers and city officials and indeed many have fallen to the sledgehammer. Derelict areas like these, however, prosper in natural life and create a safe haven for people living in the margins of society. Insubordination, informal activities and people, plants and animals of all sorts can roam freely through these areas, creating an in-between zone of both material and psychological value.

When I first entered the derelict railway tracks of la Petite Ceinture in Paris I immediately felt captivated by its obscure beauty and the sense of freedom. The beautiful industrial architecture from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century was clearly visible in the neglected and abandoned stations along the line, but it was more than the historic sensation that captivated me. By walking the line and exploring the tracks, one tends to feel disconnected from the bustling life of the city surrounding. The enormous diversity of plant and animal species, the informal activities and the ever-changing views and people make for a very diverse experience. It was clear that this was worth preserving. However, precisely why this had value for me was not immediately so well-defined.

To really understand the intrinsic values of decay I decided to do research on the subject. However, to make a thorough exploration of the subject I had to absolve myself in a range of disciplines, unfamiliar to myself. The basis of psychology, memory studies, sociology, ecology and art history had first to be understood before making any assumptions about the experience of ruin and decay. This involved reading a broad spectrum of scientific literature in all fields. Finally, to simplify the matter I found that decay could best be understood on an aesthetic, social, ecological and emotional basis, so it is along these categories that I structured my thesis. It was essential these concepts from an architectural point of view or they would remain untied and general, but also to tie the

research to the process of design. So I chose to research the connection between the values of decay for the built environment, making the research of inseparable value for the design and helping me already in the early phases to guide my fascination and appreciation for the urban wildscape that is la Petite Ceinture.

I concluded my thesis with a description of seven distinct concepts to appreciating ruin: tranquillity, transience, fragmentation, ambiguity, asylum, affordance and testimony. The idea was to generate a toolset for future designs. However, this proved trickier than anticipated. Every location is different in age, size, degree of deterioration and social or spatial impact, although they often have shared characteristics and values. So not only did the subject not particularly fit the method, also it seemed impossible to subtract definite results from the often fluid and vague values I found in my research.

The design of the line as a walkway was in itself not so much the problem as was the idea to affect the untouched beauty of the line as little as possible. How to design without designing? My design process has, above all, been a search for what could happen and what should happen on the line. It was clear that the potential of the Petite Ceinture should be unearthed to the people of Paris, but it had to be done without sacrificing its already existing qualities; the relative freedom and autonomous character and of course its enormous value for biodiversity all along the city. Another issue I was forced to deal with was the imminent gentrification of the surrounding neighbourhoods the development of the line would ensue. I deemed this an undesirable effect, as not every neighbourhood was ready for this top-down injection yet. One of the ways I tried to guide this was by introducing the notion of time. The line will develop according to its needs and degree of 'readiness'.

Finally, I decided that to enrich the experience and activate the enormous potential of the derelict line it was necessary to open it up for the Parisians and create various 'follies' that would emphasise the relationship between the city and the 'underworld', between inside and outside, between nature and city and the fluidity of time. These structures would guide the visitor along the line, creating an ever-changing experience. To do this for the full 32 km of the line would be too much, so I chose a segment in the East of Paris I am very familiar with and which has in my opinion the most interesting and diverse features, like ever-changing typology, observed types of walking and varying connection to the surrounding city.



From the toolset I developed during the research I distilled six ways to perceive ruin and decay: bewilder, calm, discover, play, shelter and remember. These notions shaped the conceptual idea of the six interventions I intended to make. By making them a central theme of each entrance, they were anchored into both the neighbourhood and the particular section of the line, as well as adding an extra layer to the design. Before, the research helped me understand the values of the line. Here, research and design finally came together in a concrete manner, shaping the project.

My project, the obsolete railway line on the outskirts of Paris, is an invaluable territory of human and animal transgression, an oasis in the urban jungle. With impending formal development of the ring, these values could be lost forever. However, my design tries to celebrate these intangible values and guards them as much as possible, without falling into a lethargic laissez-faire. My project could be used as an example for future development not only on la Petite Ceinture, but on a much broader scale of the fringe and the urban wildscape.

Coen van Bergeijk

Graduation Committee

Robert Nottrot - department of Architecture

Jan van de Voort - department of Building Technology

Inge Bobbink - department of Landscape Architecture

Daan Vitner - external examiner