

## 9 Viewpoint II. The Atlas of four landscapes

### Thick landscape as socio-ecological medium

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#### Sauntering

The Atlas of Paris Landscapes is a collective interpretative journey guided by the idea, conveyed by the European Convention on Landscape, following which “Landscape is a part of a territory, as perceived by local people or visitors, which changes over time as a result of natural forces and human activity” (European Landscape Convention, 2000). But unlike all those already produced, this atlas concerns a metropolis, a state capital, one of the most intense and stratified cities in the world. Paris is a fundamental *tópos* in the collective planetary imagination, a place of excessive power concentration, of a thousand cultures, an urban area in the throes of the ecological and social transition. Starting from the landscape definition offered by the EU convention, the Atlas explores its rich ambiguity and inclusive character, opens to the geographical and cultural tradition of landscape studies, the material production of the urban scape, a systemic and ecological reading, the aesthetic dimension of the contemporary sentiment of nature. The Atlas of four Landscapes<sup>1</sup> is then the deposit of the collective experience of Paris realised during its construction: readings, discussions, presentations, walks, interviews, seminars, involving residents, experts, civil servants, associations, schools, places, monuments, geographies, perceptions, and atmospheres. A “space for different narratives”, “un espace de récit” (Besse, 2024).

As we wander around Paris, we are like the stroller described by Thoreau in his little book *Walking* (1862): not just Baudelairean *flâneurs*, but rather those who practise “sauntering”, whose etymology takes us back to the French language and the search for the Holy Land (*Sainte Terre*) at the time of the Crusades, or, following different roots, to the *Sans Terre* (nomads without land) who are never at home and at home all the time, sharing descriptions, interpretations with inhabitants, visitors, local experts, institutional levels. The choral dialogue around landscapes traces the possibility of common understanding and visions. Each chapter of the Atlas concludes with issues and recommendations for the future of Paris landscapes. Here, it reveals the full “social and political significance of urban landscapes” as pointed out by sociologist Luca Pattaroni (HRC-EPFL, 2024); the ecological and social transition emerges in all its centrality as a profound gap between consolidated landscapes and novel imaginaries which alters all codes of coexistence.

## Four landscapes

The Atlas is built on the semantic complexity of its terms: “An atlas is not just a book; it is an intellectual method of exploration. It must be seen as a superimposition of images, texts, and maps of all kinds in a space that is the space of representation of our world” (Besse, 2024). Such a definition gives form to a hybrid product that contains multiple perceptions, descriptions, and narratives.

The methodologies traditionally used in landscapes atlases have never focused on an (in its entirety) “urban landscape” such as Paris. Nor on the perception of the city as a sum of landscapes, a “social space” whose psycho-geographical representation enables inhabitants to situate themselves in a concrete space (Chombart de Lauwe, 1952). The right to landscape and the right to express oneself about natural and urban landscapes legitimise speaking through perceptions, collective or individual memories; the right to make a public space exists through ordinary language. The common experience of place is fundamental: being there, sharing the moment, crossing spatial and cultural barriers, appropriating the landscape. The “right to landscape” is a democratic right (Settis, 2023), and landscape is a relational concept that is activated through collective and individual experience; it introduces new possibilities into urban thinking.

The Atlas proposes a thick concept of landscape because the simplicity of the European Convention’s definition is only apparent. Its openness and inclusiveness risk the paradoxical impossibility of dealing with such semantic breadth. Originating in the geographic turn, the EU convention deals with the sometimes-surprising interaction between man and nature, between the natural landscape and man-made transformations. Its foundations lie in a cultural idea of landscape that goes beyond the “veduta” and becomes the sensitive experience and expression of human and non-human uses, activities, and organisations. The value of all living environments is an essential character of any landscape, although only a few have the cultural power to define a place, valorise it, aesthetically and politically (Zukin, 1991). Other traditions of thought need to be mobilised.

Cultural perception is the first dimension of the Atlas thick landscape, a cognitive approach that is at the opposite of the Cartesian analytical one. *Gestalt* psychology, developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, gives primary importance to the visual act, but it involves the whole spectrum of the senses. What we see, the landscapes inscribed in our gaze, are transformed into sensible memories: of a comfortable place, a repulsive situation, which can be intimate or shared by groups (the inhabitants of Paris, young Parisians, tourists, etc.). The status of sensibility and appearance (Carnevali, 2012) recovers social importance, beyond the constant dualism that runs through Western culture: the opposition sensitive appearance/reality. Shared perceptions create points of reference in the collective imagination and structure socio-political discourses; they are powerful levers for action engraved in the material urban consistency. These perceptions – sensitive and affectionate, shared, or intimate – are the starting point of the Atlas: the world presents itself to human observation. To access these perceptions, it weaves together multiple lines of exchange: public walks, conversations, seminars, and meetings between experts

and public stakeholders, citizens' associations discovered along the way, literature, or visual art. These perceptions are unstable in time and space, but common motifs and infinite variations build together unequivocal Parisian themes.

The second landscape dimension covered by the Atlas is material and systemic: topography, water, trees, and their complex interactions with a city of two million inhabitants. Landscape is the form of the earth, the unique work realised by waters that erode, soils that move, altered, and stratified, it is vegetation and fauna. It cannot be described without ecosystemic readings of characteristics and functionalities (the agency of slope and water flow, soil and subsoil permeability, drought and flooding risks and the potential of relationships). Perception reveals, passes through the rapid path of impression; the atlas explores, decants, finds threads, reasons for being there of certain landscapes. The Atlas cross-references perception and experience with ecological logics and rationalities of a "territory subject" (Viganò, 2024).

However, the two landscape dimensions do not exhaust the Atlas; a third landscape must be added: façades, passages, the urban ground floors, the intricacy of open and built space. All material and cultural elements creating unique contexts that are typologically and morphologically defined: the urban landscape of the built palimpsest. A disappeared landscape structure, such as the Bièvre watercourse and its phantasmatic presence, or the Belleville *villa* housing types, the zinc roofs of Paris, another mythical landscape, or the evolution of parks and gardens give depth to the investigations of the Atlas, clarifying the cultural and technical issues of the Parisian material and immaterial heritage.

The fourth landscape, finally, includes the aesthetic dimension, i.e. the evolution of codes that express a sentiment of nature, today partially connected to climate and societal adaptation, and inevitably underpinned by philosophical ideas of landscape, its meaning and necessity. The recent "environmental aesthetic" is a particularly important issue to highlight which extends and hybridise heritage, social, and political issues. In an age that questions traditional aesthetics by ecological concepts and climate adaptation, environmental aesthetics criticises the idea itself of landscape construction as a set of inherited codes and patrimonial considerations (Briffaud, 2022).

The four landscapes are brought together to enable a discourse on landscape that practices its full thickness. Issues and recommendations underline the centrality, in the future, of thinking in landscape terms to address the controversial choices implied in the project of the socio-ecological transition.

### **The Atlas**

Paris is its position, its natural foundation, modified over time by urban and environmental history. Among the landscape structures, topography is the first and fundamental one, together with the Seine and others for their function in organising space (well beyond its boundaries: *Paris sort*, it is a sum of open territorial figures), or as major landmarks (axis, monuments, large parks, forests, etc.). They unite and define a common horizon, but also cut, divide, and fragment. Structures are often

limits, boundaries that act in the collective imagination, drawn in physical and social spaces. With their strong ecological/geomorphological/symbolical expression, they are source of multiple inspirations through their forms, materiality, and aesthetics.

The metropolitan “villages” and “commons” (Figure 9.1) are the entities that deconstruct the built mass of the city: “Paris is a big city, made up of little towns and villages...” writes Jean Cocteau describing the Palais Royal, his own “village” (Cocteau, 2013). The “villages and metropolis” dialectic has always been crucial in urban and territorial thinking. The centrality of the village as a socio-cultural-historical spatial entity stems from the multiple paths of its roots (history, uses, culture, etc.), and even more so from its relevance to the contemporary debate in the face of gentrification and expulsion dynamics. In his 1887 study *Community and Society*, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1957 [1887]) drew a distinction between the *Gesellschaft* of modern society and the traditional values of the *Gemeinschaft*. In the modern and contemporary metropolis, every individual lives in both dimensions and, as Tönnies describes, moving from one to the other fluidly. The intermediate landscape of the village, located between the large metropolis and the housing units, opens the way for a discussion on a contemporary form of urban and socio-ecological coexistence. Against homogenisation, villages describe the particularity, the exception, the diversities that coexist in the big city. A “metropolis made of villages” is not a sum of enclaves, but represents culture as an assembly of eras, populations, histories, and landscapes. By stressing their formation process, their representation and literary description, their existence in the public space means listening to their stories: lifestyles, daily trajectories, micro centralities and meaningful places, revealing unexpected mechanisms of sharing and solidarity. The villages reflect a widespread feeling among the participants, that of still being able, in Paris, to recognise an intermediate scale of proximity, of solidarity which is readable in space and assumes the characters of a landscape of affection.

The “metropolitan common”, the space in-between villages, sometimes a “free zone” (Hazan, 2002), often a specialised enclave (religious, military, political, etc.), is no less inhabited, it produces pauses and interruptions in urban multifunctionality and in the fine grain of the Parisian street level-ground floor (*rez-de-ville*) (Mangin and Boudjenane, 2023). It is through this subtle, often abrupt play of fractures/pauses/continuities that the recognition of places, boundaries between one landscape and another, often contrasted worlds, is played out. It is a question of atmospheres created by the practices, and by the very traces of inhabiting (Benjamin, 1989). Understanding the material conditions of space production contributes to make the urban landscape visible, because, paradoxically, we see differently if we know how to read traces, and spatial practices.

Landscape elements usefully complete the logic of organisation and structuring of space and, at the same time, unequivocally characterise the landscapes of Paris. The Seine bridges, for example, with their exceptional number, reinforce the structuring role of the river; the fragments of the fortifications, with their gates, help to understand certain breaks in the continuous fabric, the *métro* stations reveal the dense Parisian underground.

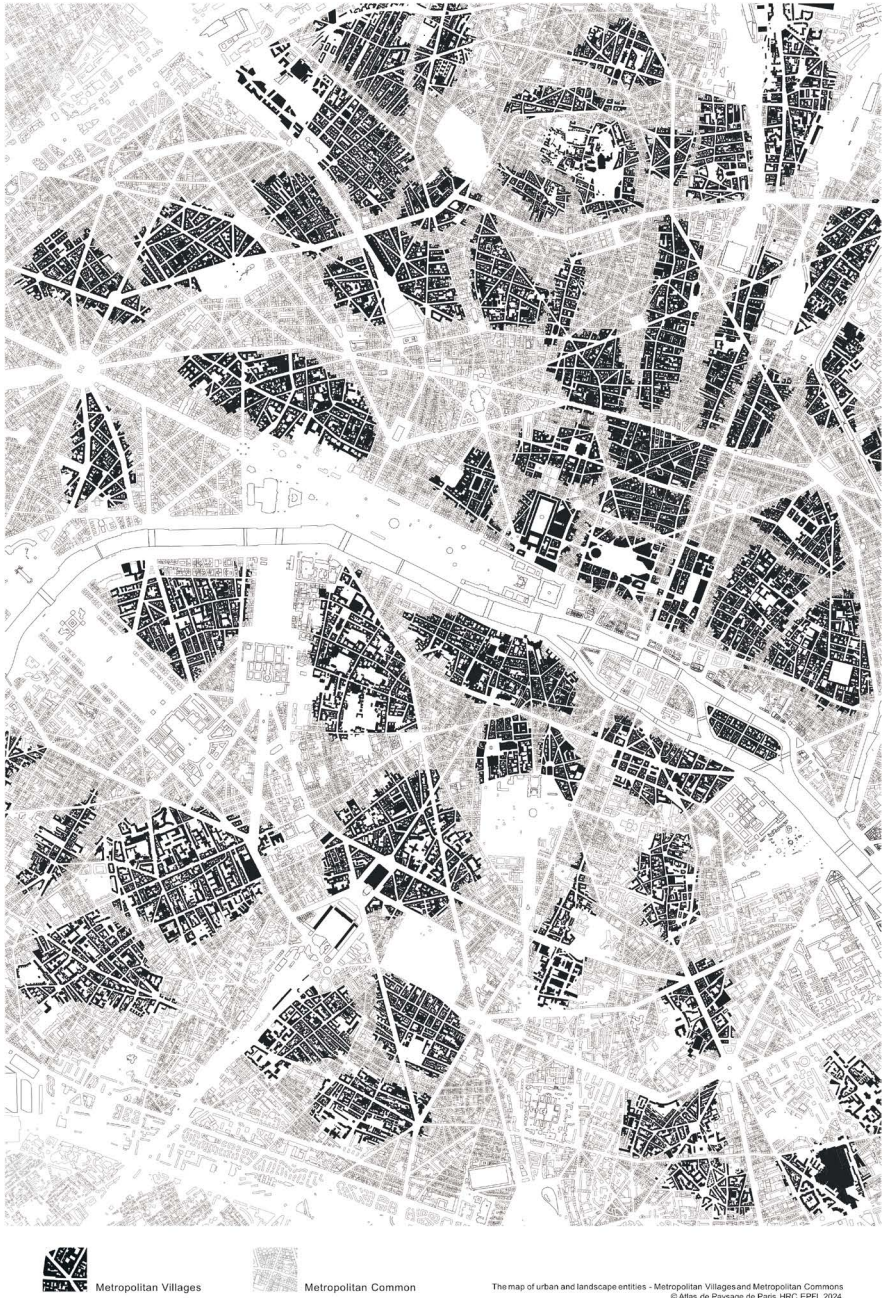


Figure 9.1 The map of urban and landscape entities - Metropolitan Villages (extract and detail)

Source: EPFL-HRC, 2023.

The landscape units, with the fractures and discontinuities recognised in the Parisian space, offer an overall image of Paris, and it is an original, unexpected image: for once, the *arrondissements* are not “taken for granted”, nor the “neighbourhoods” in the administrative sense, the most distant from a landscape gaze. The units are based on the topographical reading of the Parisian bedrock, the historical evolution of the city, always in relation to the inhabitants’ perceptions. Another Paris emerges in relation to valleys, hillsides, plateaus, and *cols* (passes), a term that has disappeared in recent maps and revalued by the Atlas.

Walking has been one of the fundamental research tools in the Atlas construction, it produces information, exchanges, testimonies recorded by video, maps drawn on site. Walks are always complex activities: our body is exposed to the place; all its perceptions produce the individuation of each landscape. It is re-territorialisation, we are there and not elsewhere, it is individuation of figures (Augoyard, 1979). It is always the construction of situations, through our presence with others, the synchronous movement of a group, its stops and movements. There are moments of intensity, production of ideas, debate. Walking with children, elderly people, with fragile populations or choreographers, with expert citizens or quasi-tourists, let arise the fears, the desires, the commitments of each individual, the positions taken on the possible futures of each landscape crossed. It is thanks to the generosity of each speaker, participant, person that the Atlas can call itself a “choral”, where “chorality” touches on polyphony (a plurality of voices and themes), a narration around a common territory: the “carte de paysages” returns this collective endeavour.

### **The Atlas of landscapes as medium: First and provisional conclusions**

Paris is changing “all the same” (Bailly, 2022). Between planning and spontaneous transformation, ecological crisis and urbanism, landscape opens to multiple perspectives: all subjects are likely to be questioned by its existence. Collective representations reveal or imply the relationships among the subjects who construct and modify landscapes. Together with landscape, the Atlas acts as a medium: of discourse, positions, criticism, a vast collected knowledge<sup>2</sup> to discuss the evolution of landscapes inside the radical nature of the change underway.

Through this, the Atlas speaks of a city, its characters, shared or contrasted images, transformations, issues. Its approach might be extended to other urban and metropolitan contexts including the frame of the MetroPublicNet research and of Lisbon Metropolitan Area. The exploration of the metropolitan palimpsest through the lens of public space defines places of accumulated memory on which to inscribe a contemporary creative process. Some of the categories explored in the Atlas resonate with the research and with metropolitan Lisbon: the “metropolitan common”, for example, the space in-between villages, translates well what is the Lisbon Metropolitan Area up to current times, and that only recently is becoming part of a metropolitan imaginary. Public spaces contribute to this same imaginary. They are part of fundamental metropolitan landscape structures, and to recognise

them means to explore the figures that organise the metropolitan space, ecologically and socially.

It is obvious that the Atlas talks about society, ecologies, economies, urbanism, urban policies, and power relations. But thanks to the entrance through the landscape, the Atlas opens rare possibilities of expression. Because regarding landscape we are all free to express ourselves: from what we see, from what landscapes bring us, sharing memories, and images of the future.

## Notes

- 1 The Atlas has been realised by HRC (Habitat Research Centre) at EPFL (Paola Viganò, director, Ben Gitai coordinator of the team, Noémie Lécoanet, Joanne Nussbaum, Clarisse Protat, Hugo Silva Costa, and, as EPFL experts, Charlotte Grossiord, Gabriele Manoli, Luca Pattaroni, Paolo Perona), and with Jean-Marc Besse, Valentin Bourdon, Dominique Marchais, Chiara Santini, Pieter Uyttenhove as external experts. Clients: City of Paris and DRIEAT (State of France).
- 2 In collaboration with APUR and taking advantage of its unique accumulation of information, studies, and projects.

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