



Between Green Paris and Immigrant Paris: The Politics of the Jardins d'Éole

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Reviewed: Andrew Newman, *Landscape of Discontent: Urban Sustainability in Immigrant Paris*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015

As leaders in global cities reimagine and rebuild their metropolises as green capitals of the future, who has the right to the new sustainable city? In her review of Andrew Newman's Landscape of Discontent: Urban Sustainability in Immigrant Paris, Maura McGee comments on the contradictions of ecological urbanism in northeast Paris.

Global discourse on urban sustainability has sparked a green turn in urban policy, planning, and design. Local officials deploy environmental policies not just to manage pollution and reduce carbon emissions, but also to increase their cities' global competitiveness and attractiveness. Global cities jockey to assert their position at the fore of environmental urbanism, and Paris may have the lead. From recently hosting the COP21 climate conference to pedestrianizing the highways along the Seine, Paris is poised to become a green global capital. At the same time, Paris and other global cities are roiled by socioeconomic inequalities and contestations over citizenship and belonging. Anthropologist Andrew Newman shows in his ethnography *Landscape of Discontent: Urban Sustainability in Immigrant Paris* (2015) that tensions between green Paris and immigrant Paris set the stage for conflict over visions of Paris's future.

Landscape of Discontent documents the contestation and negotiation behind the transformation of the Jardins d'Éole in northeast Paris from a postindustrial brownfield site into an urban park. Conceived by multiethnic, neighborhood-based activists who sought to address social and environmental inequalities, the park was ultimately realized in 2007 because it aligned with politicians' grand visions of redeveloping immigrant northeast Paris as a node of sustainable urban design. But renovating the landscape often goes hand in hand with gentrification, and this globally focused sustainability project was inseparable from policymakers' class-based and ethnoracial remaking of the capital.

Through research with residents, activists, and urban planners, Newman weaves together a detailed ethnography of grassroots mobilization with a structural analysis of neoliberal urbanism. He examines the Jardins d'Éole as a way of tackling larger questions: "How do people—from residents to planners—create 'vibrant' urban spaces, and how are such places reproduced in everyday life, and for what political end" (p. xviii)? As officials and social-movement actors build more ecologically sound cities, who then has the right to them?

A park amid the rail lines

The Jardins d'Éole lie in northeast Paris's 18th *arrondissement*.¹ At the outer limits of the capital,² northeast Paris sits roughly between touristified Montmartre and gentrifying Belleville, and is often thought of as the place “behind” the railroad terminals of Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est: “a ‘backstage’ hinterland to the spectacle of modernity that was Haussmann's Paris” (p. 14). Northeast Paris is strongly identified with immigration from France's former colonies; more than a third of its residents are foreign-born, predominantly from West Africa and the Maghreb. Many live below the poverty line in social housing, or in overcrowded apartments that are structurally unsound and lack basic amenities like proper ventilation and running water. A dense area with little green space, it has long been characterized by political, social, economic, and environmental inequality.

The railroads are a defining feature of northeast Paris, and are often seen as “a form of oppression” by local residents (p. 10). They cut through and divide the area into disconnected micro-neighborhoods. And while trains are often billed as the environmentally friendly alternative to automobile transit, residents experience them and their infrastructure as an environmental menace: diesel engines pollute the air, constant passing freight and passenger trains preclude quiet, and vacant lands beside the tracks have been used for illegal toxic-waste dumping.

However, residents have transformed those same spaces and bits of infrastructure, constantly reshaping the landscape in the image of their desires by making art, by gardening, and by simply hanging out. The mobilization for the Jardins d'Éole represented a next step in a process of creative and political reappropriation of land that came to embody a demand for social and environmental justice.

The site of the Jardins d'Éole was once a vacant railroad facility known as the Cour du Maroc (literally “Moroccan Court”). It became the crossroads of diverse visions and desires. As one of the largest remaining open parcels of land within the capital, the Cour du Maroc was extremely valuable, and the potential for future profits had powerful public and commercial interests vying for control. SNCF (France's state-owned national railway company) wanted to lease it to a private corporation for a diesel-truck depot, and the then mayor of Paris, right-winger Jean Tiberi, wanted to locate a municipal waste-processing facility there.

Many residents felt that that the neighborhood's future would be defined by the fate of the Cour du Maroc (p. 40). A diverse group of approximately 300 resident activists proposed a park as a way of “linking ecological concerns with housing, health, safety, quality of life” (p. 61). Importantly, they wanted the city to realize the project as an official public action. This would ensure that the community space wouldn't be razed when more powerful interests found use for it. The mobilization's diversity generated fruitful points of ideological tension. Some leaders, like European French-origin Tomi, appealed to color-blind republican ideology that condemns discrimination by focusing on equity in general. Others, such as Martinique-born Odile, explicitly tied ecological critiques to ethnoracial discrimination and stressed the importance of “justice for those who were victims of racist oppression” (p. 42). Many foreign-born residents like her are part of the “overburdened classes,” living in overcrowded apartments in peripheral and resource-starved neighborhoods precisely because of France's colonial history. Taken together, the group espoused a politics that was laced with immigrant-justice-oriented politics but not entirely antithetical to republican values, thereby legitimizing the movement in the eyes of the powerful.

Conflict over the fate of the land played out in the run up to Paris's 2001 mayoral race. Socialist Party (PS) candidate Bertrand Delanoë publicly supported the Éole activists as they opposed incumbent Tiberi. The activists didn't need to appropriate the global-elite discourse of sustainability

¹ The city of Paris is divided into 20 administrative districts called *arrondissements*. The 18th *arrondissement* lies on the northern edge of the city and includes the neighborhoods of Montmartre, Clignancourt, La Goutte d'Or, and La Chapelle (where the Jardins d'Éole are located, on the boundary with the 19th *arrondissement*).

² Here, by “the capital”, we mean the city of Paris, i.e. the area governed by Paris City Council. This relatively small area excludes the city's extensive suburbs, which are governed by their own town and city councils.

in order to win political support. PS politicians were already sympathetic to environmental concerns (particularly when forming coalitions with the Green Party). Rather, it was the mobilization's style of activism that won over politicians: *à la* May '68, they adopted a convivial, middle-class, "carnavalesque" approach (p. 53). In contrast to more radical movements like the Droit au Logement (Right to Housing), whose angry street politics embraced confrontation, the Éole mobilization organized *manifs festives*, or festive protests in the spirit of block parties. This ingratiated the movement with PS leaders who identified with the May '68 style, affording the movement legitimacy.

After being elected, Delanoë saw an opportunity to realize a campaign promise, and "provide Paris with a distinct 'niche' and identity among other global cities"; construction of the park was set (p. 63). Residents and activists viewed their success against powerful profit-driven opposition as an "end to authoritarian urbanism" and as "coup for local, grassroots democracy" (p. 61). The mobilization was a way to "recast *what the city is for* [...] and to radically reimagine *who the city is built for*" (pp. 61–62). Yet with this victory came new questions: what would the site's transformation entail, and who would control the process and the space?

The contradictions of ecological urbanism

Newman uses the Jardins d'Éole case to reveal contradictions in the politics surrounding the production of urban green space. Northeast Paris's role as the connective tissue between central Paris and the *banlieue* and its postindustrial built environment made it an ideal landscape onto which both policymakers and residents projected visions of a sustainable urban future. Those visions, however, diverge.

For politicians and planners, the park is one element in the globally focused branding and upscaling of the city.³ Real-estate and land values in northeast Paris have been rapidly rising, and capital is flowing into the neighborhood. At the same time, more than 350 apartment buildings have been demolished since 2001, evicting masses of residents to clear the way for new development (p. 128). Paris's Haussmann-style "reconquest" of working-class and immigrant neighborhoods is carried out, in large part, under the hallmark of sustainability. Officials' prioritization of green benchmarks and branding over the immediate struggles of vulnerable residents highlights contradictions between environmental and social sustainability. For the many activists whose ecological critiques were a way to confront social inequalities, this outcome is a significant rupture in their vision.

However, Newman warns against overemphasizing parks as simply urban greenwashing. Parks and public spaces "have a tendency to be more important for people who are excluded from private access to things as basic as open space, clean air, and other shared facilities" (p. 35). Many viewed the construction of the park as a feat of environmental and social justice. For Nassima, a native of Algeria, for example, it was important because of the access to outdoor space it provided for her and her son. For young men of immigrant origin who lived in crowded apartments with their families, the park served as "a kind of self-contained social world or refuge" where they could gather at night to people watch, joke around, and ride their scooters (p. 106). During Ramadan, large groups of Muslims gather to break fast after sunset for a collective *iftar*, a testament to the public inclusivity of the space amid growing Islamophobia in France.

At the same time, tensions surfaced over the surveillance, securitization, and governance of the space. The park's construction and early years unfolded within the context of growing ethnoracial and class-based tension in France, including an immigration crackdown⁴ and heightened efforts to

³ Parks can play an important role in gentrification; see Gould, Kenneth A. and Lewis, Tammy L. 2017. *Green Gentrification: Urban Sustainability and the Struggle for Environmental Justice*, London/New York: Routledge – Earthscan, "Routledge Equity, Justice and the Sustainable City" series.

⁴ See: www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/03/france.angeliqechrisafis.

police youth following the 2005 *banlieue* uprisings. Further, the site of the future park was the epicenter of the city's crack-cocaine market. Therefore, the question of how to secure the space was highly political. Delanoë's office and parks department settled on "social" solutions. The Jardins d'Éole is characterized by an expansive concrete esplanade, sparsely planted in contrast to the lush gardens residents imagined. With this surveillance-friendly design, the entire park can be observed at once (p. 145). Nonetheless, in contrast to the rest of Paris's highly-managed and enclosed parks, the esplanade is ungated and open at all hours. This was a significant concession to the Éole activists, who maintained that the success of the park as a social project rested on popular control of an open, public space. Residents argued that a fence was unnecessary because they would "animate" the esplanade with regular organized activities. Residents, rather than guards or police, would discourage drug activity by populating the space. Newman recasts Jane Jacobs' "eyes on the street" as "vigilant citizenship": residents and neighborhood associations taking over processes of social control from the state.

However, the parks department installed a short wall around the park's perimeter that could provide the foundation for a fence if necessary, a constant reminder of the threat of enclosure. Moreover, those under surveillance were often immigrant-origin young men, who struggled to assert their position in the space *vis-à-vis* middle-class residents seeking to cultivate a public they deemed more compatible with "reified notions of French culture and republican citizenship" (p. 152). In one vignette, Newman recounts two middle-class Éole activists of European French origin putting down their glasses of rosé to reprimand immigrant-origin men for riding their scooters. Neither alcohol nor scooter-riding is technically permitted in the park.

Striving for equitable sustainability

At the Jardins d'Éole's inauguration ceremony in May 2007, Mayor Delanoë struggled to get through a speech touting the sustainable elements of the new park. Behind a line of riot police, activists with the Mal-Logés (poorly-housed) housing-rights mobilization loudly protested the housing demolitions in northeast Paris, which they associated with ecological urbanism. Many of the protesters were Maghrebi and West African women with children. While the park was a victory for environmental-justice activists, it was part of a political project that marginalized many residents of northeast Paris. At the same time, it gave those residents a formally defined public space in which to render inequalities visible and demand rights.

The Jardins d'Éole ultimately saw the light of day because it aligns with the effort to make Paris a global capital of sustainability, an endeavor that, as practiced, reproduces inequality and exclusion. But Newman stresses that areas such as the Jardins d'Éole are inherently spontaneous spaces. As different groups struggle for rhetorical and material control, the balance of their future can tip in different directions. Newman leaves us with the important reminder that even "smaller, less spectacular sites of creativity, possibility, and even potential transformation, emerge around us all the time" (p. 200). The question going forward is whether activists can continue to mine the potential of ordinary urban spaces to demand more just outcomes.

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