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cambridge architecture journal

Erasing Boundaries

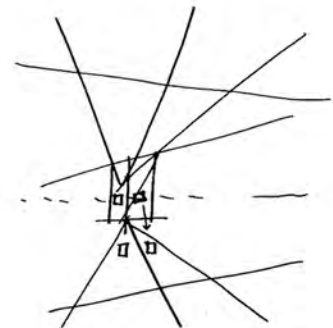
Desvigne & Dalnoky

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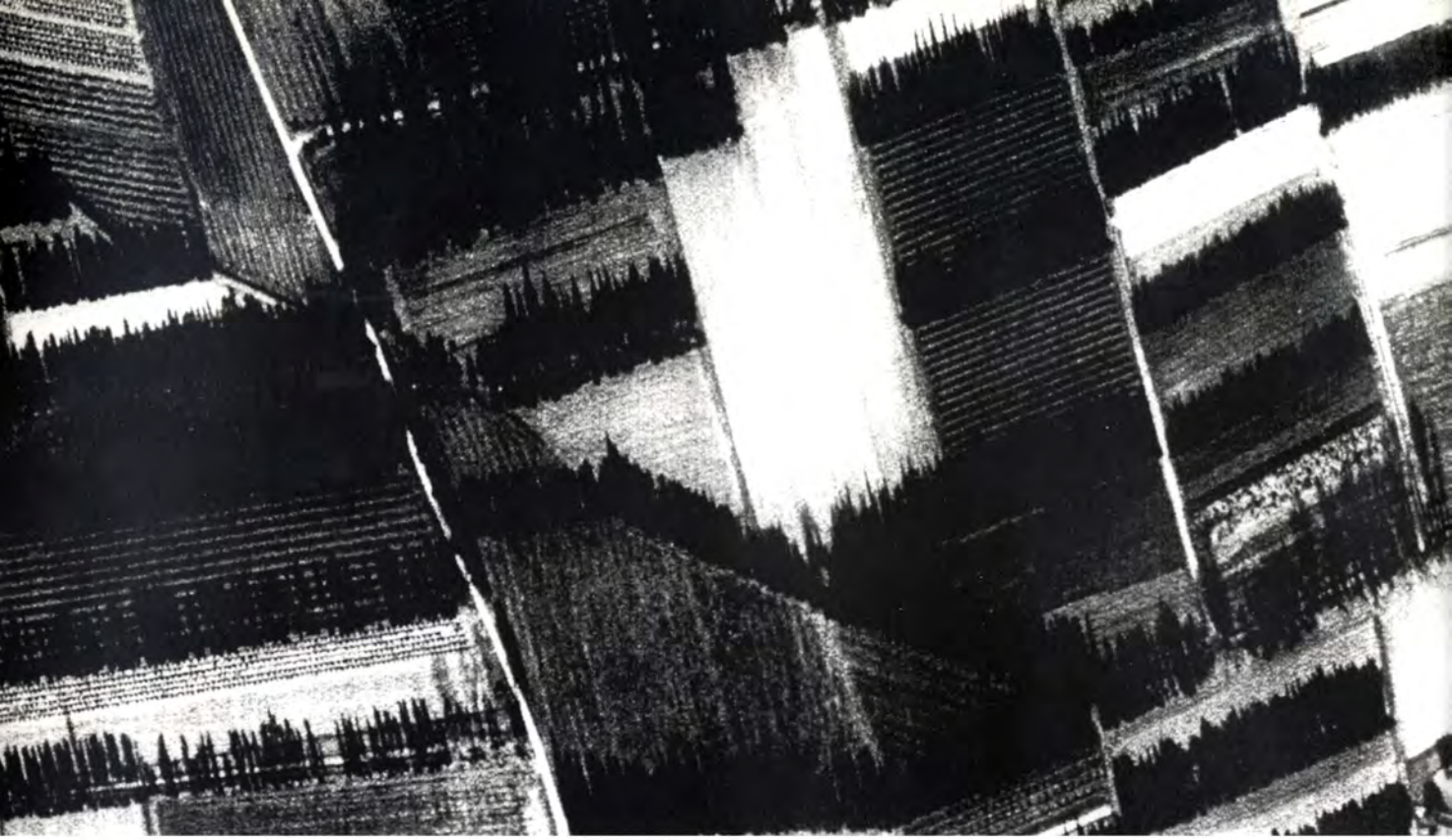
I think it is important to make a difference between profession and competence. Often, the richness of urban fabric comes from the superimpositions and contradictory interventions of different professions upon one piece of land. The order and time span in which they affect the processing of the land, should not be dictated by the professions, as their boundaries do not concern competence. Competence is beyond those boundaries.

Historically speaking, Versailles is a good illustration of the difference between profession and competence. At Versailles Le Notre and Mansard, landscape architect and architect, invented the classical town, using the layout of a garden, which was itself based on the structure of the larger countryside territory. The garden design was a domestication of the hunting grounds around Versailles, which had a very strong geometry because of the clear views they required. When Le Notre used the proportion and organisation of this drawing, for aesthetic rather than functional reasons, the countryside became architecture. This new aesthetic model then became the reference for the urban structure of Versailles and has had an enormous influence on town layouts, especially in France.

Today, people forget the existence of the hunting drawing and think of Versailles as a totalitarian way of looking at the countryside. Everyone thinks that Le Notre extended the lines of the garden to the countryside. In fact, it is the contrary: first of all there was a hunting layout, which developed into a garden plan and then became the basis for a town. The great talent of Le Notre was his capacity to see the structure of the pre-existing landscape and his ability to play with this found structure in a restricted area. He produced a kind of interiorization of the large countryside structure, for which, both conceptually and functionally, the garden was a medium. In that sense the garden of Versailles is more than a boundary, it is a transition, a series of very gentle sequences between countryside and town.



Above Versailles, garden and countryside structure.

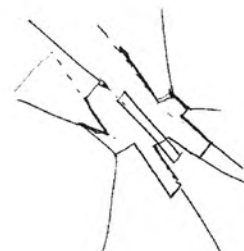
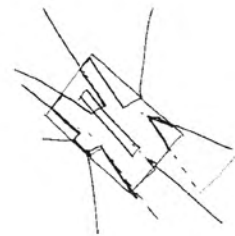


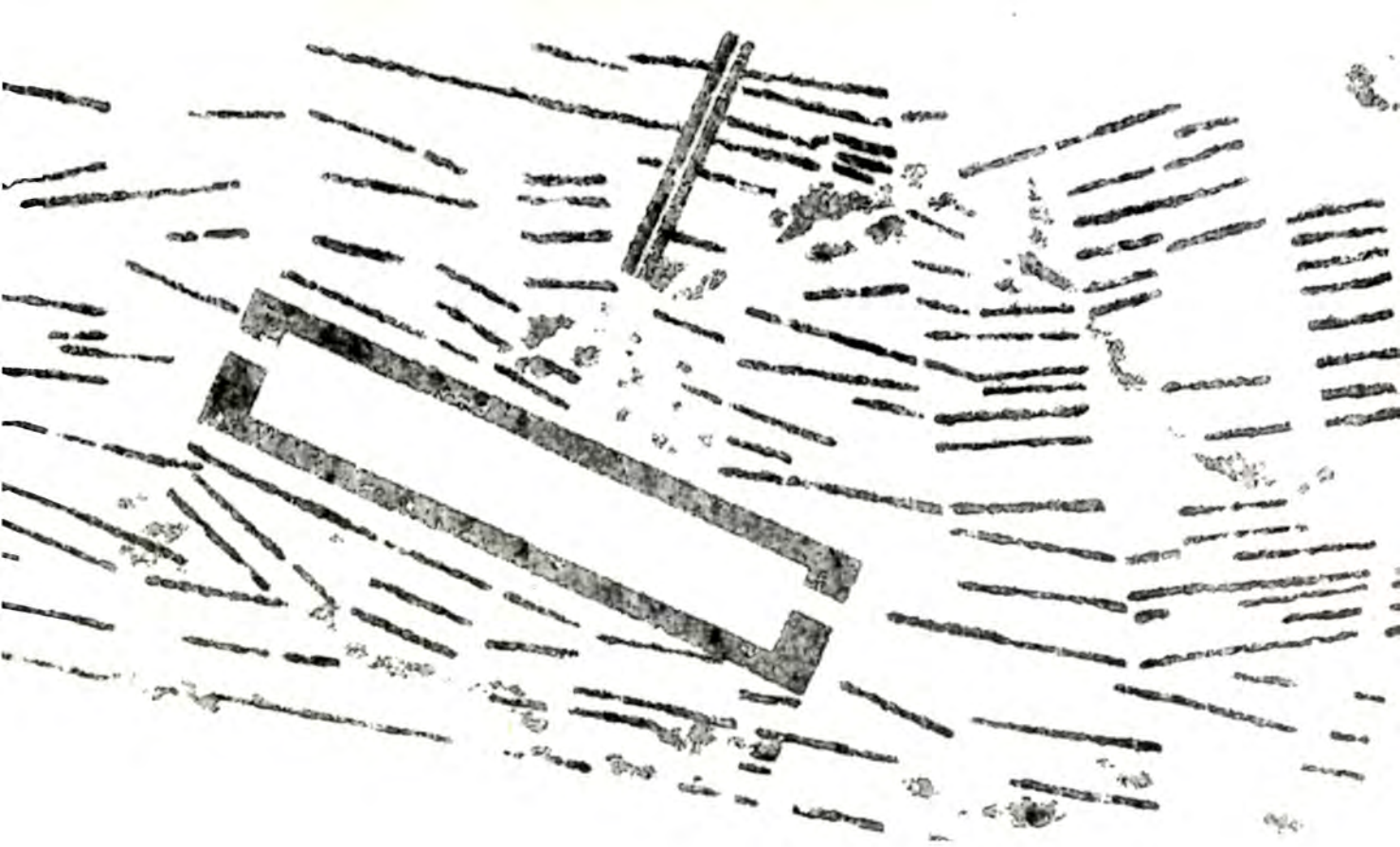
Interiorization and Superimposition : South-East TGV Stations

The project 'South-East TGV Stations' is concerned with the creation of new landscapes around three newly built stations in a forested part of the countryside in the South of France. The stations are placed outside existing towns. The developing infrastructure and facilities of the new stations will eventually be read as an extension of the existing town. Usually, in cases like this, the temptation for politicians and urbanists is to lay out the structure of a small town around the new station, using a well known referential device, such as a grid. Instead, we propose to build a strong and simple garden around the station. We hope that this garden will become a real constraint, which will stimulate the work of those who will subsequently urbanise this landscape.

The countryside around the four stations on the South-East TGV is highly structured and this project is similar to Versailles because it interiorizes a large existing landscape. The landscape surrounding Avignon, which is one of three sites, is composed of windbreak edges and orchards that have been, and still are, an essential part of the landscape and culture of the South of France. Although they had vanished on our site, we found their tracks on old aerial photographs. We have continued the tracks of those wind break edges to the boundary of our station and made the lines visible by planting trees and vegetation, thus making a strong configuration, which gives orientation in this landscape.

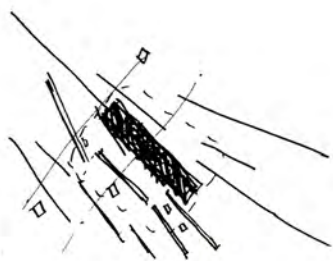
The lines of trees make their presence strongly felt and they will have to be taken into account, by urbanists and architects alike, when they come to build the new town. This situation is very different from a grid; we have proposed no roads and no building plots, our tree lined edges will still organise buildings and land parcels, but not in a rigid way.





We do not know exactly how this area will develop, but we have created a strong landscape which, I think, will influence everything. The constraints we give have a legitimacy because they are rooted in the existing territory, they are linked to the culture and use the vocabulary of the place.

In Avignon, as in the other sites, we are dealing with boundaries on the periphery of towns, which especially in France, are highly undefined. When railway authorities buy land they consider it a 'blank sheet', on which they can draw what ever they want. What we are doing is taking the same sheet and extending over it the existing structure of the countryside. In the end, the boundary of the land that we want to consider is not an abstract rectangular shape, which ignores the special qualities in the suburbs, but a shape linked to the surrounding existing conditions. The boundary we have drawn for the TGV station at Avignon is not linked to a formal gesture, but to the position of the existing windbreaks tracks. In this way we have adapted the boundary of the station to the existing landscape.



In the TGV station in Avignon, there is a superimposition of two scales. The first one is that of the wind break edges and the second is the scale of the railway. We have planted rows of alignment trees, which are between 1 and 4 km long, depending on their location, with which we are superimposing a main structure for the station building, as an affirmation of the contemporaneity of the project: it is a national station set in the existing landscape. By playing with the existing conditions we retain the memory of what was there before, but this is more than a process of restoration, because we redefine those found conditions, we change their scale and we change their use. Our landscape imposes a stronger and bigger scale on the chaos of the periphery.

Opposite page

Top Aerial photo of wind break edges at Avignon.

Below Sketches: Creating the boundary of the South-East TGV station at Avignon.

This page

Top South-East TGV Project, Avignon, vegetation layout.

Below Sketch: boundary of Avignon station.



Legitimacy and Scale: Greenwich Peninsula

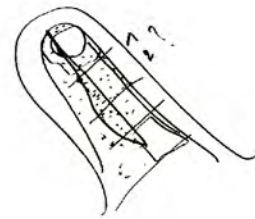
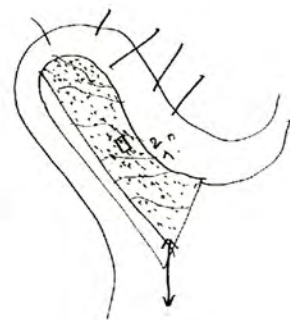
As landscape architects we manipulate very large territories and the legitimacy of what we do is linked to the geographical scale of our intervention. The project we are doing in the Greenwich Peninsula is a good illustration of this. Left to nature this peninsula would be covered by marshland and an alluvial forest. Instead, it has been used as an industrial site. Urbanists and architects consider this peninsula a developing area, and plans for it are made with the scale of building plots, roads, parks and squares in mind. We, on the other hand, propose to colonise everything on a very different scale: that of a forest. It is not a very sophisticated idea, but we need this simple way to think of the site.

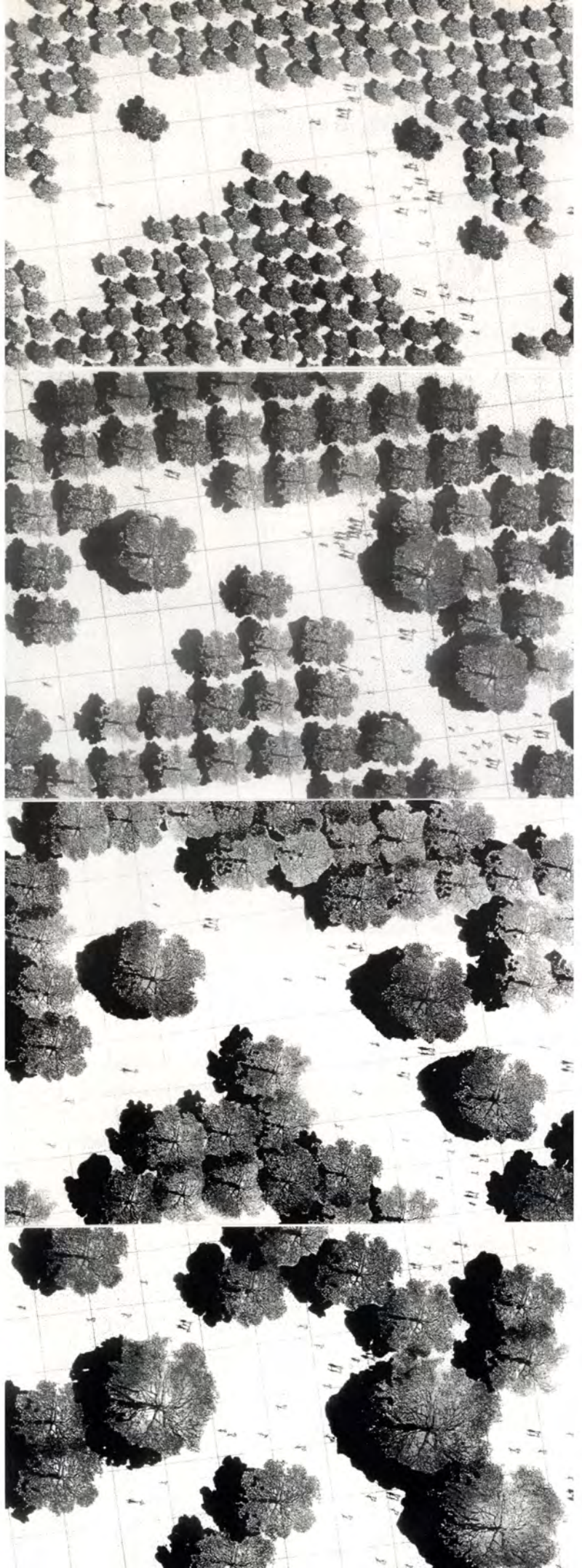
For this project two concepts were required, one for the Millennium celebrations and something for the future. Initially, a park was drawn up by the architects in a very classical way, like a piece of town, and for the time being all we can do is build our forest in segments around this plan. To start with we are planting trees on a very dense grid of 1.75 meters. Slowly, over time, this grid will thin out to 7 meters and after forty years we will have something which resembles a natural forest. Using this very dense grid will allow us to create something very quickly for the first stage of the project; although small, the trees will immediately constitute a strong spatial structure. In the future a large part of the initial structure on the peninsula will vanish, and we will have a kind of natural forest at another scale. The species of trees chosen to recreate the natural ecology of the peninsula and scale of the forest correspond to the scale of existing forests near by.

In this project there is another important boundary that we can speak of, which is related to time. We are creating a place, without complete control, because it is in the process of making itself. We do not know exactly how it will develop, but we want this forest to exist there. With the trees we have found a material which surpasses all boundaries and which is close to the geographical scale of the site. At the moment the peninsula looks very planned and complex and the idea of a forest gives a kind of clearance for everything.

The landscape cleaner

The landscapes I build in Europe are very simple, because Europe is very saturated, especially France. For political and historical reasons everything is complex. The projects we do mainly have to empty space, to give readability and hierarchy, which is why they must be very simple. This is particular to Europe and our time. I think this could be a very short period; it is not a good way to be on the earth, but at this moment we have to do that. What we can give is clarity in a complex situation. The way we are playing with all the boundaries is to erase them.





Opposite page

Above Map of London, 1998.

Below Sketches of Greenwich Peninsula project.

Bottom Greenwich Peninsula and surrounding forests.

This page Forest formation, Greenwich Peninsula.

Desvigne & Dalnoky is a landscape architecture practice in Paris.