



⚙ Paris, The Grand Projet

IN 1998 THE INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC was presented with the completed Bibliothèque Nationale de France, culmination of the *Grands Projets* of François Mitterrand. These projects, comprising not only a number of individual buildings but also the urban design of significant portions of peripheral Paris, are attributed to the will of Mitterrand himself, much in the way that the last great reorganization of Paris carries the name of Haussmann (however originally envisioned and presided over by Napoleon III). Compelled by creation of a symbolism monumental both at the scale of the individual building and at that of the city, the projects were motivated almost entirely by the French president. Although conceived and executed under a system of democratic governance, they entailed a decisive implementation on Mitterrand's part that often meant circumventing typical legislative procedures or political compromises that might have threatened to obstruct their progress. And thus appropriately, the Grands Projets will indeed remain a legacy, imbued with great possibilities of authoritative vision but tainted by the disquieting presence of authoritarian rule.

An American political sensibility might dismiss the series of building projects as phenomena of a lingering monarchist sensibility of power. Although this would probably be an accurate assessment, the first distinction to be drawn in France is in the very different historical value accorded to a paternalistic notion of state. Termed *dirigisme*, the traditional role of the state is not limited as an unqualified representation of its citizenry, but exists as its benevolent protector, guarantor of its wealth, and securer of equality among its citizens. *Dirigisme*, translated literally, connotes not only management but also guidance. This distinction is a legacy in France, where an expansive concept of state developed as democratic structures

introduced in the French Revolution joined with paternalistic leanings of Louis XIV's *ancien régime*. Evolving most recently under the consolidation of presidential power of Charles de Gaulle's constitution of the Fifth Republic of 1958, the leader of state was granted authority to make sweeping changes in parliamentary structures and elections, effectively giving presidents decisive control over a number of government offices and policies.

Many historians believe that of all recent French presidents, François Mitterrand assumed the mantle of Charles de Gaulle, his old political enemy, in assuming the mythic *politique de grandeur*.¹ Like de Gaulle, in the new bipolar structure of world power inherited from World War II, Mitterrand tenaciously maintained a notion of France as independent, however secondary. Under him, the public sector in France was also enlarged significantly; upon assuming office he nationalized thirty-six banks and a host of industrial companies, and expanded the nation's elite rail network. However debatably unsound economically, however vehement the calls for reform issued by the United States and other European countries, the legacy buttressed by Mitterrand is maintained zealously: in both public and political spheres, an expanded public sector is held in high esteem.² The idea of a beneficent state thrives in France, fortified ethically, and tenaciously, against the liberalism of competitive private economies elsewhere.

If we are to believe recent intellectual scholarship, the unrelenting French notion of state is complemented by an uncommon sense of the public (at least of those native French) of the collective whole of their society and culture. A consensually held amalgamation of cultural beliefs is at the core of the mythical national French persona, *la France éternelle*.³ Under such a value system, the relationship among the state, its leadership, and its citizenry is, despite the complexities and intrigues of a multifarious system of modern political parties, vaguely familial. The fluidity of identity between governing entities and their public constituency becomes of central significance when examining the Grands Projets, which were instigated by Mitterrand but had the intention of representing Paris, which had the historical mandate of representing all of France.

Most of the Grands Projets were built, to some degree, of glass. It is the contention of this study that the transparency of the projects presumed to express, yet simultaneously challenged, the implicit continuity between an expression of state and an expression of the public, an agenda embedded in Mitterrand's newly ascended leftist government. Predictably, these enormous monumental projects, as political statements brought into physical form and overlaid on the capital city,



1.1 Johan Otto von Spreckelsen, the Grande Arche de La Défense, 1989, north flank.

were enveloped in controversy. The most prominent buildings were greeted with national and international protests. Although Mitterrand and his committee deftly maneuvered successfully through the worst of these, building nearly all the projects proposed, his activities hardly exemplified the benevolent transparency proposed rhetorically as the new leftist relationship between the public and its government.

Surrounding these relatively local dilemmas is the larger crisis of monumentality itself, particularly in France. The oldest of European states, the nation's descent to secondary status after World War II is being steadily amplified by the cultural drain of international globalization. French intellectuals portray their traditionally hegemonous culture as under attack in all terms economic and cultural.⁴ Glittering in their glass skins and technological garb, Mitterrand's insistently transparent monuments present the beguiling desire to disappear, rather than to assert France's mythic presence.⁵

The most debated of Mitterrand's projects—I. M. Pei's Grande Pyramide du Louvre and Dominique Perrault's Bibliothèque Nationale de France—went beyond extolling the use of glass and steel; they were statements about the nature of transparency itself. The emergence of transparency was given added emphasis by the host of other prominent, although more politically benign, examples in the projects that also use glass—greenhouse structures (*Les Serres*) at the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in the Parc de La Villette (1986) and at the Parc André Citroën (1992) designed by Adrien Fainsilber and Patrick Berger, respectively, in collaboration with engineers Rice Francis Ritchie (RFR); Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe of 1987; and Pei's second, less controversial Petite Pyramide at the Louvre Carrousel of 1993. This book examines each of these Grands Projets as well as Nouvel's Fondation Cartier, completed in 1993, whose prominence in the public sphere grants the building relevance for the discussions at hand. These contemporary examples are set against two less recent works that establish precedents for monumental transparency in Paris: the Pompidou Center of 1977, by Piano and Rogers and Gustave Eiffel's tower for the Exposition of 1889.

Two other Mitterrand Grands Projets attest to the singular appearance of transparency at a monumental public scale, but since this book undertakes the study of transparency primarily as a material phenomenon (see Preface), they are not included. They are, however, significant to the scope of the transparent operation in Paris. The first, Johan Otto von Spreckelson's l'Arche de la Défense of 1989, establishes an emblematic precedent for the transparent antimonument; opposite to



1.2 Bernard Kohn et Associés, subway head, Métro Météor, 1999.

Pei's Grande Pyramide du Louvre, at the other end of the Voie Triomphale, the arch is seen through rather than focused upon.⁶ The second example, the last of Mitterrand's Grands Projets, was never built. Parisian architect Francis Soler's Centre International de Conférences was to be located along the Seine near the Eiffel Tower before cost overruns of Perrault's Bibliothèque Nationale quelled enthusiasm for the project. If it had been completed, Soler's visionary structure would have been a culmination of many of the themes posed by the other transparent Grands Projets. An international diplomatic meeting facility, replete with large facilities for the press, would be housed alongside a contemporary garden in enormous double-shelled glass boxes. Political events would be intermingled with huge trees and exotic birds, all of which would be open to view—and considerable interpretation—by the general public.

Although plans for this building were abandoned, Nouvel's Musée du Quai Branly, unbuilt at this writing, is intended for the same site. It will house existing collections from the National Museum of African and Oceanic Arts and the Musée de l'Homme. This latest museum, instigated not by Mitterrand but by his successor and long-time adversary, Jacques Chirac, was dubbed by the popular press as Chirac's own Grand Projet. Once again, it will continue the lineage of the contemporary Parisian monument: it will be built almost entirely of glass. Taken together across the public landscape of Paris, these buildings have been vehicles for a new symbolism. Despite Chirac's late rush to contribute his own transparent legacy, doubtlessly glass and technological imagery in Paris's monuments will be historically attributed to Mitterrand and, by extension, ascension of the Left to momentary power.

Anecdotes tell of Mitterrand's private obsession with *la transparence*. It was he, after all, who defended Perrault's glass towers against an international onslaught of (well-grounded) criticism. In the face of strikingly obvious problems associated with housing France's literary archives under glass, Mitterrand tenaciously justified the material's use by arguing for its cultural symbolism—accessibility of knowledge to all. And in a recent counter-gesture whose irony was not lost on many, the library, besieged from its opening by tremendous operational problems, was posthumously renamed by the succeeding rightist government la Bibliothèque Nationale de France *François Mitterrand*.

The proliferation of glass, however tempting to dismiss as Mitterrand's personal folly, is wedded in a far more complicated way to a contemporary international material zeitgeist. Initiated debatably by the French projets in the 1980s,

particularly Pei's pyramid, the use of glass and advanced technology pervades much architectural production in the present day, especially in buildings of British High Tech (Richard Rogers, Nicholas Grimshaw, Norman Foster, et al.) as well as more contemplative work in Switzerland of Peter Zumthor and Herzog and de Mueron. Despite the prominence and prevalence of contemporary glass, critical examination has been sparse at best; the most comprehensive overview occurred in a 1995 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York heralding "Light Construction." Here, curator Terence Riley equated attainment of lightness, most often through the use of translucent glass, with ambitions paralleling the rise and fall of architectural postmodernism. He wrote: "They [the projects in the exhibition] likewise reject the strictures of post-modernism, which have alternated between invoking, as inspirations for architecture, a suffocating supremacy of historical form or arid philosophical speculation."⁷

In France the ubiquitous appearance of glass in the 1990s hardly indicates interest in academic architectural polemics, although it follows Riley's suggestion that the emergence of transparency is largely self-propelled. Despite being advanced by the public scrutiny of the Grands Projets, the invasion of glass into realms of both public monument and commonplace vernacular suggests a popular movement with motivations beyond Mitterrand's political symbolism. Glass can be found in numerous recent commissions at all scales and degrees of civic significance completed by a variety of lesser-known French architects—Christian Hauvette, Frances Deslangier, Haumont and Rattier, Brunet and Saunier, Phillippe Gazeau, and many others.

In 1997, the pervasive presence of transparency in specifically Parisian architecture prompted a large exhibition sponsored by the Pavillon de l'Arsenal—the architecture and urban history center of the contemporary city—entitled "*Paris sous Verre: La Ville et ses Reflets*" (*Paris under Glass: The City and Its Reflections*), which chronicled the development of glass from its earliest appearances to the latest ubiquity. Beginning its documentation with examples of Gothic cathedrals of Saint Denis and Sainte Chapelle in the twelfth century, and tracing its proliferation in late nineteenth-century in department store atriums, train stations, arcades, and exposition halls, the exhibition ends its view of the latter day with the pervasive use of glass in modernist work of the 1930s and 1940s. The intent is apparent: if contemporary French architecture seems besieged by glass, history suggests that this is only a resurgence of a material that seems oddly wedded to Paris.⁸

This suspicion is borne out by examining the significant history of glass manufacturing in the city that dates to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁹ Considering the exorbitant price of glass at that time, importation of the fashionable commodity from Venice represented a significant economic loss for France. For several centuries France contrived to steal glass-making secrets and artisans from the Italians, granting immigrating glass-makers special noble status, although exposing them to risk of punishment by death if found out by Italian authorities. It was not until the seventeenth century that French glassmakers perfected a technique for casting glass on metal tables, which granted them the international market for the large sheets of flat glass eventually known as plate glass. In 1700, Louis XIV granted the manufacturer of this new product complete monopoly over its production. The company, Manufacture Royale des glaces de France, evolved over the centuries into the Saint Gobain Vitrage, S.A., now located in the Parisian suburb of Courbevoie and still the country's preeminent glass manufacturer. Indeed, in most of the projects presented in this book, Saint Gobain Vitrage played a considerable role, researching and engineering new methods for producing and constructing with glass.

French preeminence in glass manufacturing was confirmed in the widespread emergence of new building typologies employing the material in its capital. Whereas the most recognized nineteenth-century glass exposition building is Paxton's Crystal Palace of 1850 in Hyde Park, the most pervasive appearance and evolution of the building type was in Paris. In the world expositions of 1855, 1867, 1878, and 1889, the serial building of the great *Galleries des Machines* continuously challenged previously known structural concepts and scales of enclosed spaces.¹⁰ These buildings went beyond heralding new technologies of iron building. Constructed to house displays of consumer goods, they were meant to dazzle and seduce an increasingly large and undifferentiated public, influencing civic opinion in favor of governing entities responsible for the expositions.¹¹ Glamorizing the power of the state, the glass exposition buildings anticipated the definition of the spectacle that was to obsess Guy Debord and his band of Situationists a hundred years later, in another very Parisian phenomenon.

The presence of glass in Paris also had another precedent in a seamier locale to which Debord was far more sympathetic: *les passages couverts*, arcades built in the earlier nineteenth century. Largely destroyed by Haussmann's reconstruction of the city in the 1860s, their demolition elicited protestations by such figures as Louis Aragon, who in *Paris Peasant* described a very different aura of a glassed

space: “My attention was suddenly attracted by a sort of humming noise which seemed to be coming from the direction of the cane shop, and I was astonished to see that its window was bathed in a greenish, almost submarine light, the source of which remained invisible.”¹² For Aragon the glassed arcades were both frames for supernatural visions as well as venues for subterranean existence, imaginative life-lines for surrealists and dadaists.

In these two very different urban structures, the presence of glass signals especially relevant, if contradictory, associations for the latter day. The arousing presence of the exposition buildings indicated the state’s full knowledge of the seductive power and expressive potency of advanced glass technology. Conversely, for surrealists, glass’s alteration of light and image incited a fantastic thrall that was conceived as a form of resistance to that same state; in this case, the hegemonizing tendency of Haussmann’s urban development. Both of these aspects of glass, firmly embedded in Parisian urban sensibility, unite to construct a paradoxical subnarrative, a conflicted “text,” in which the meanings of the new Grands Projets must operate, whether or not they were conceived in such terms.

THE CITY RESTRUCTURED

In beginning to address the Mitterrand projects and their presence in the city, it is first necessary to go further in understanding a more conventional sense of the historical urban context in which they were envisaged. No city in the world has been deployed as a symbol of national identity to the same degree as Paris. Since Le Nôtre followed Louis XIV’s command to extend the Tuileries axis down the Champs-Élysées in the seventeenth century, the city has served as an unparalleled laboratory for architects and urban designers. This willingness to experiment with the image and structure of the city at the grandest scale imaginable continued as recently as the 1960s, when Georges Pompidou, like Mitterrand, attempted his own transformation of Paris to address the demands and imagery of a contemporary technological city (see chapter 2).

Of the many periods of redevelopment, none is more instructive to revisit, however, than the precedent-setting Haussmannian era in the mid-nineteenth century. Certainly, issues raised in these earlier *Grands Travaux* served as the point of departure for contemporary critics and historians interpreting the effects of the Grands Projets.¹³ One particular distinction raised by Haussmann’s intervention parallels the intent of Mitterrand’s building program: while developing ambitious pragmatic solutions to an explosion of the city’s population, both regimes were



also actively involved in discovering urban and architectural devices through which to transform the city into a monument. In their similar missions to intervene in extant orders of monumentality, the two eras forced changes to the expression of national identity and drastically altered the mnemonic order of the city.

Haussmann's legacy first established an overwhelming physical setting within which the Mitterrand projects would have to resonate. Although Haussmann's reorganization of the urban fabric was motivated by a number of highly complex infrastructural features, its most memorable characteristic was permeation of that fabric with a comprehensive system of grand axial boulevards. Conceived to provide increased mobility through the congested medieval city, particularly by providing for an east-west axis along the Rue de Rivoli and a north-south axis along Boulevard Saint Michel and Boulevard de Sébastopol, the boulevards also instigated a number of highly potent visual devices, connecting new and existing foci across the scale of the entire city, establishing a visual and physical connectivity at a scale that would augment how Mitterrand's transparent monuments would be individually situated and perceived.

In terms of physical and economic interventions, the two urban projects were of course markedly different. Georges Eugène Haussmann, Prefect of the Department of the Seine from 1860–1870, was commissioned by emperor Napoleon III to implement a variety of measures, primarily to augment existing and new infrastructures: streets, parks, and services, particularly sewer systems, as well as buildings associated as urban focal points. Haussmann's interventions provided specific remedies to insalubrious conditions, from introduction of a network of subterranean storm sewers to addition of substantial green spaces throughout the city. Among his additions to Paris are the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, the Parc Monceau, and the two "lungs" of Paris, the Bois de Boulogne and the Bois de Vincennes.

Napoleon III and Haussmann's shared desire for a new monumental order was augmented by reconfiguring the existing context of the city to complement the new arteries. Vernacular buildings pierced by new boulevards were refaced with highly regularized façades. Existing street, plaza, and monument façades were thoroughly cleaned. Trees were planted throughout the city. Various significant existing buildings were given new squares in front of them; by freeing them from the mesh of urban fabric, these buildings acquired new status in the city. Most important of these was the Cathedral of Notre Dame, which illustrates





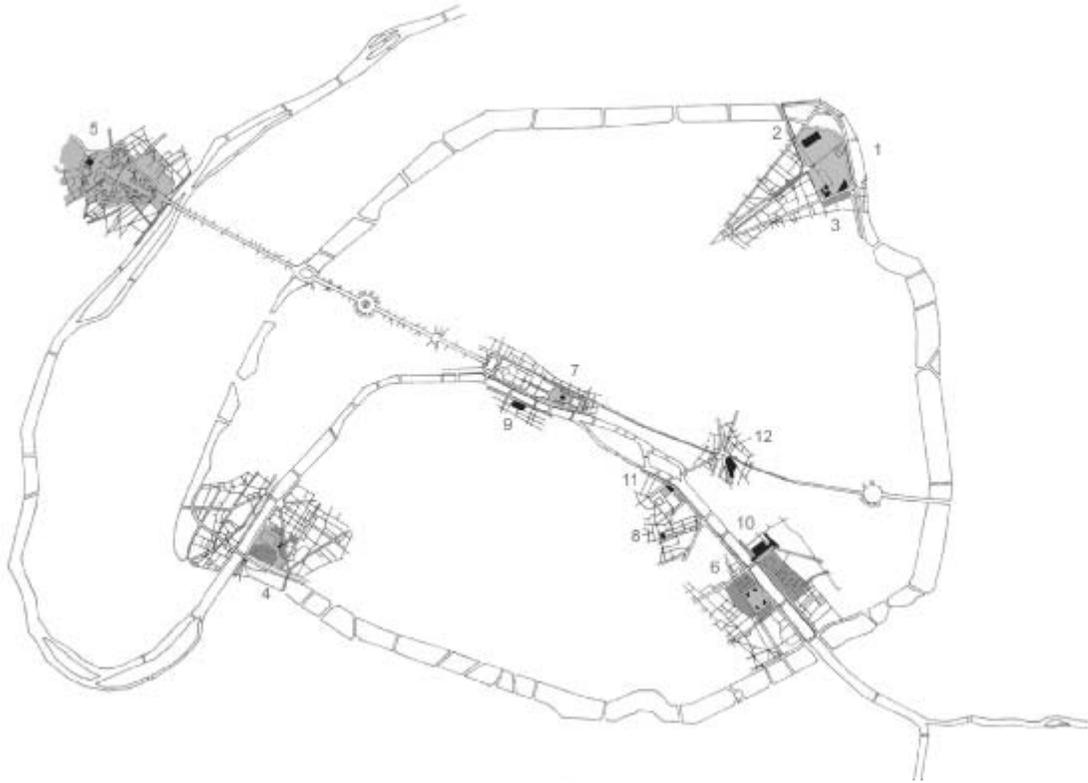
1.4 Place de la Bastille, with Carlos Ott's Opéra de la Bastille, 1989.

Haussmann's typical methods. By both augmenting the frontality of its façade with the new parvis and liberating the sculptural quality of its flanks and back toward the Seine, Haussmann distinguished it as the symbolic center of the Church in Paris. Similarly sited new monuments were added as well, most notably the Opéra Garnier, typical of the new types of cultural institutions demanded to accommodate the burgeoning and increasingly powerful upper middle class.¹⁴ According to Haussmann scholar Howard Saalman, the mere presence of these prominent institutions had a decisively political intention. For the struggling regime of the second empire, this new grandeur in the city's buildings provided evidence of a stable and powerful political order—a "symbolism of governability."¹⁵

Prior to this great scheme, Paris had never been surveyed comprehensively. As Haussmann's Paris marked the first consideration of a city as a single organism, it also marked the birth of urbanism as a disciplinary study. For Mitterrand, president of France from 1981 to 1993, the precedent of the Haussmann project first established the viability of reorganizing the order of the entire city. Yet the morphological order of the city represented only the partial agenda of visions of Haussmann and Mitterrand's Grands Travaux. Instigated in a time of perceived malaise, both sets of projects set out to establish a new image for Paris through which France's prominence in the current world order would be revitalized. In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the new image of the city was intended to insinuate France into the first order of technologically advanced countries.

The specific devices employed by the Mitterrand projects in reordering and reimagining the city were distinctly different from those of Haussmann. Buildings and urban spaces of the twentieth century were to be legible as new construction, in decided contrast to older monuments and fabric. Rather than manipulating the order of the city to emphasize existing monuments, the Mitterrand projects strategically deployed provocative technological imagery in new public buildings and spaces. This program of creating a new aesthetic was meant to rejuvenate the entire city's celebrated nineteenth-century grandeur.

Whereas the Grands Projets did not encompass the connective urban strategy associated with Haussmann's boulevards and infrastructural services, one intervention across the scale of the city particularly recalled the axial boulevards. Terminating the Voie Triomphale at the Grande Pyramide du Louvre and simultaneously building the new Opéra at the Place de la Bastille (by Canadian architect Carlos Ott, 1989) effectively extended Le Nôtre's western axis across the entire city



1.5 François Mitterrand's Grands Projets, Paris, 1998. (Drawing: Ufuk Ersoy.)



1.6 Paul Chemetov and Borja Huidobro, Grande Galerie du Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle. (Renovation, 1995)

(see no. 12 in figure 1.5), an alteration of tremendous significance for Paris' urban history.¹⁶ In addition, the two large open green spaces at Parc de La Villette and Parc André Citroën specifically recalled the Haussmannian parks of Monceau and Buttes-Chaumont, particularly as they similarly provided amenities to peripheral working-class neighborhoods.

Mitterrand's projects also used Haussmann's device of the isolated monument to provide focal points at numerous discrete areas. In planning large swaths of peripheral Paris, typically an architectural setpiece was prominently located within the boundaries of larger areas of renovation, granting each development a sense of identity through its own local spectacular building. Thus the three projects at La Villette—the Parc de La Villette of 1987–1991 by Bernard Tschumi (no. 1 in figure 1.5), the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie by Adrien Fainsilber of 1986 (no. 2), and the Cité de la Musique by Christian de Portzamparc of 1992–1994 (no. 3)—recharacterized a segment of the nineteenth arrondissement that included new housing built over the defunct slaughterhouse district. Equally, Patrick Berger and Gilles Clément's Parc André Citroën of 1992 (no. 4) marked a large area of housing and institutional building in the fifteenth arrondissement over remnants of the old Citroën automobile-manufacturing yards. For this comprehensive development, the area was designated as a *Zone d'Aménagement Concerté* (ZAC) under provisions set up to circumvent typical regulatory authorities and transform marginal or peripheral lands in urban regions.¹⁷ If Johan Otto von Spreckelsen's arch of 1989, looming over the enormous new development at La Défense (no. 5), is the earliest example in the history of the Grands Projets of the use of an architectural set piece to focus a large development area, the latest is the new Bibliothèque Nationale of 1998 (no. 6), surrounded by an extensive development in the twelfth and thirteenth arrondissements, areas also designated as ZACs.

Other Mitterrand Grands Projets, all but one a cultural institution, follow Haussmann's precedent even more closely in terms of being single entities monumentally sited in distinction to the urban fabric. In contrast to the large urban developments, as single buildings they are limited in engaging a relative degree of active urban planning. Their isolation is also largely due, however, to the relationship of individual projects to preexisting institutions; most of them were initiated out of urgency to redress drastically outdated facilities. Of these there are three types: renovations of existing institutional buildings, relocations of existing institutional entities, and entirely new cultural institutions.

The challenge to architects of institutions remaining on their former sites consisted of both reordering highly complex existing facilities and reinvigorating already highly monumental buildings. The most prominent of these were the Grande Pyramide du Louvre by Pei and Partners of 1989 (no. 7, figure 1.5) and the Grande Galerie du Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle (no. 8, and figure 1.6), a renovation by Paul Chemetov and Borja Huidobro of an original building of 1889 by Jules André. Another Grand Projet that might be included with these was the Musée d'Orsay of 1986 by ACT Architecture and Gai Aulenti (no. 9), a renovation of the Gare d'Orsay (Victor Laloux, c. 1900) undertaken by former president Giscard d'Estaing to house the substantial Impressionist collection previously held at the Jeu de Paume.

Relocations of other existing institutional entities were undertaken primarily because of inadequate space at the original locations. One of these is the Ministère de L'Economie of 1988 (no. 10), also by Chemetov and Huidobro, a building mandated by the Louvre's incorporation of its north wing, the ministry's previous home. Now prominently relocated extending into the Seine on the Right Bank in the twelfth arrondissement, it joins a constellation of new building in the Bercy-ZAC Rive Gauche area. The Bibliothèque Nationale itself can be similarly characterized; the project included the Olympian task of relocating existing national archives and research facilities previously housed adjacent to the Palais-Royal in a complex notable for the famous Labrouste reading room of 1868–1869. The final category of projects, representing entirely new cultural institutions on new sites, was even more akin to the bourgeois monuments built during Haussmann's era: certainly, the Opéra Bastille, designed as the focal point of various axial boulevards at the Place de la Bastille, but also to some extent the Institut du Monde Arabe of 1987 by Nouvel (no. 11), poised across the Seine from Notre Dame.

Whereas Mitterrand's first pragmatic motivation in replanning the city was, like Haussmann's, to accommodate a burgeoning population expanding in various directions outward, planning for latter-day projects explicitly addressed the destructive effects of decentralization resulting from Pompidou's recent expansions toward the *banlieues*. Outward growth was complemented by insistence on maintaining the density of inhabitation at the core, regarded as a crucial component of the city's urban character.¹⁸

The general attitude toward urban intervention exhibited neither the comprehensive nor coherent precision of Haussmann's projects. Nevertheless, the Grands Projets were conceived holistically. Rather than Haussmann's surgical

infrastructural incisions, they present a diffuse strategy of rehabilitation by evenly distributing projects of spectacular dimension throughout the city. Especially for projects located in economically troubled peripheral areas, the capital gain from tourism was expected to revitalize and regenerate those areas. This explains their support by conservative mayor Jacques Chirac.¹⁹ Rather than merely signifying accrual of symbolic power, as in Haussmann's era, reimagining of the city in Mitterrand's era was also expected to sponsor significant economic gains.

THE CITY REVISUALIZED

Although Haussmann's Parisian boulevards legitimately improved circulation and indeed initiated the rapid passage characteristic of the modern city, the boulevard itself proved to be the central facet of symbolic reinvestment of the city's fabric. The effects of the arterial axis were multivalent. Walter Benjamin notes that the widened boulevards in the *plan voyant* provided a ventilated locale for the Parisian promenade, a practice in drastic contrast to the *flânerie* of the previous era that had been associated with the poetic reverie of the passages couverts.²⁰ Yet these two urban practices had marked similarities. Constituted by forms of passage and movement, both were also dominated by the overabundance of images of consumable goods and crowds they attracted. Balzac described the passages as "*la gastronomie de l'œil*," a quality shared at a different scale and density by the boulevards.

On the boulevards, the newly affluent, many of whom had been made wealthy through real estate speculations during the Haussmann era, could display themselves to each other. Equally, newly produced commodities (available to a wider spectrum of population through mass production) could be shown in ground-floor shop windows. Embodied as an arena of display for the bourgeois, boulevards provided a physical manifestation of social relationships developing among the newly stratified society. Indeed, the accomplishment of nineteenth-century Parisian urbanism was to render society itself as a spectacle.²¹

Two distinct effects to the extant monumental order thus emerged in Haussmann's new city. The first, based in the infinite one-point perspectival vista had already been inscribed in the city's sensibility by Le Nôtre's Louvre axis and his gardens at Versailles.²² Haussmann's boulevards, however, implemented within Paris across similarly vast distances, terminated on discrete monuments rather than open vistas, monuments that had been largely known previously within intimate physical constructs. Haussmann's axes had the effect of turning formerly stable

popular symbols into floating *signs*, whose shifting meanings were dependent on the eye of the beholder.²³

In eighteenth-century Paris known for the rise of capitalist culture, the image of these monuments at the end of their vistas also became agents for propagandizing the city as a tourist destination. If earlier glass exposition halls had exploited technological imagery as a spectacular device, the Haussmannian boulevard followed this precedent in terms of consciously manipulating the city's images: existing sites of particularly cherished popular import were appropriated by the state purely for their values as images, in another anticipation of the Debordian spectacle, replete with his apprehensions of modern alienation.

By virtue of the very length of the boulevards, however, very often monuments at the termination of axes were simply too far away to be seen. Subsumed into a Paris recomposed of vast boulevards, the monuments' status was preempted emphatically by the city itself. Benjamin reported that the buildings along the boulevards were draped in canvas en masse and unveiled on completion. Rather than commemorating a specific event or providing a legible institutional function, the boulevards themselves became permanent, iconic testaments to a collective historical moment, significantly different monuments than objectified buildings or markers.

Rather than a static entity set prominently within the city fabric, these boulevards were composed of a fabric that was dynamic and volatile, a composition of vehicular and pedestrian movement set in the foreground against the highly regulated neutrality of buildings' elevations.²⁴ Sometimes as long as three miles, the boulevards constituted the flanks of an endless perspectival stage in constant motion. Particularly for Piano and Rogers's Pompidou Center (chapter 2) as well as Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe and Fondation Cartier (chapter 3), this dynamic redefinition of the urban flank provided a seminal point of departure for the concept of façade in a contemporary Parisian setting; not only was the action of the city to be foregrounded against the building, but the face of the building itself was to become actively involved as a dramatic component. At the Pompidou, the transparency of the building's façade was conceived to unite the actions of the building's occupants to the city, creating a seamless condition that followed Haussmann's sense of the boulevards' flanks against the active city. At the Cartier, the image of the street in constant motion was reflected back to the city on Nouvel's glass façades. In a manifesto of cultural representation, the façade is made possible



1.7 Ricardo Bofill, Place du Marché, 1998.

not only by reflective glass, but by Haussmann's precedent in raising street traffic to a preeminent component of urban constitution.

For dwellers and shop owners disenfranchised by Haussmann's appropriation of property, boulevards represented the state's right to seize entire terrains of the city indiscriminately. Yet as a visual device, the boulevard not only represented the state's authority at that particular moment, but was implicated in a lengthier historical representation of power. Recalling Le Nôtre's imposition of perspectival vistas for Louis XIV at both the Louvre-Tuileries axis and at Versailles, representations of power in Haussmann's era were nevertheless different. As noted by Allen S. Weiss, the perspectival vista imposed onto the seventeenth-century garden was directly correlated with the gaze of the king and operated at two scales.²⁵ At the scale of Le Nôtre's landscape, the western-extending axis enjoined his reign with the divinity of the setting sun; within his court, the gaze of the king was a local device to disempower his subjects. Stripped of the literal presence and representation of the king at the termination of the axis, the boulevards constituted a secularization of the perspectival vista appropriate to representations of power in a postrevolutionary republican society.

The fundamental mechanisms inherent in the perspective as a visual device were equally powerful, however, in affecting relationships among inhabitants of this newly configured city, particularly when regarded in a theoretical sense. Art historian Norman Bryson illustrates the consequences of encounters across such dynamic geometric fields by recounting Sartre's scenario of the "watcher in the park" (from *Being and Nothingness*). As the solitary watcher's field of vision—its horizon, its implied lines of convergence—is broken by another (the Other, an intruder), Bryson contends that shifts in vanishing points from center to tangent pull the scene away from the watcher to "where he is not." This shift constitutes Bryson's thesis of the "annihilation of self-possession," a modern *decentering* of the subject, a phenomenon he poses as the norm, rather than the exception, of perspectival space.²⁶

If we apply Bryson's conjecture to Haussmann's Paris, the consequence of imposing vastly scaled perspective fields continuously across different scales and reaches of the city becomes evident and terrifying: not only did the morphology of the city shift in conforming to the order of the gaze, so did the profound order of relationships among its inhabitants. With scalar distortions and imposed mechanisms of observation in the boulevard came disintegration of an urban intimacy



1.8 Rue de Rivoli, looking east, 2000.

that had previously comprised “self-possession” for its inhabitants. If not unitary in a purely theoretical sense, this self-possession was certainly the fundamental element in the constitution of personal privacy within an urban domain.

The gaze of the new bourgeois public in Haussmann’s Paris was to have as its subject a new class of inhabitants unfamiliar to them. As boulevards cut across the city in unrelentingly straight lines, they provided a sectional slice through quarters that had been closed to view. Immediately behind the regulated facades of the boulevard, neighborhoods of the lower classes could be seen, and their constituents had full access to the city’s major thoroughfares. Consequently, boulevards provided an arena for the display of the bourgeois not only to each other, but to a wide demographic mix of economic classes and nationalities. In the face of irresolvable social and economic difference, the gaze of the public became anonymous, passive, and truly modern in its alienated disaffection.²⁷

Various writers have commented on similar aspects of the boulevards. Particularly for Engels, the now modern crowded street was abhorrent: “The greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference, the unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs.”²⁸ Situationists, in a similarly Marxist vein, were even more damning, identifying Parisian boulevards as primary agents of the mechanistic workings of the city, providing the setting for the “artificial imperatives of speed, making savings on capitalized time, rushing toward sites of alienated production or consumption.”²⁹ Only Benjamin found some grace, however ambivalent, in the axial boulevards and the crowds they generated. Reflecting on Baudelaire, he noted that the crowds were also to present an enervated setting for the poet’s *flâneur* to become enraptured, but as well disfigured, within the modern cosmopolitan setting: “the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love.”³⁰

As a consequence of Haussmann’s work, the city inherited by Mitterrand was resoundingly modern, dismembered by boulevards hurling crowds and traffic across the vastly scaled landscape toward landmarks themselves transformed into vaporous mirages. By virtue of the boulevards, the new bourgeois city was also transfigured as a relentless arena for display—the entire city a temporal vitrine. When characterized in these evanescent terms, the imaginary quality envisioned by Mitterrand of his sparkling crystalline monuments seems a contextual response to Paris itself, a city pulsating radiantly with forces of alienation as well as light.

TRANSPARENCY, SURVEILLANCE, RATIONALIZATION

The Haussmann network of arterial streets and green public spaces was motivated by a more tangible sinister agenda, as Sigfried Giedion and Benjamin, among others, noted. Amelioration of public space and introduction of light and air were also meant to quiet the discontent of the masses, whom Haussmann disdainfully admitted into the ranks of the public. In the event that these measures proved inadequate, the widened boulevards, especially in the eastern working-class section near the new Bois de Vincennes, provided that the lower classes spilling out onto the boulevards could be seen and presumably controlled. The boulevards' width now not only provided a means of surveillance, they also facilitated transportation of troops in quelling popular unrest, which had last been witnessed in 1852. Rather than Mitterrand's ambition to gather crowds (particularly of well-heeled tourists) at key points in the city, in nineteenth-century Paris the dominant goal was their dispersal.

Just as Haussmann's projects were tainted with disquieting undertones, so too were Mitterrand's projects overshadowed. Both eras of Grands Travaux encountered resistance to the idea of a single governing entity imposing their whims across the scale of the entire city. Often Mitterrand was accused openly of pharaonic impulses in dictating almost entirely by himself the conception and execution of the Grands Projets, and often for his own political gain. This authority over the city granted to the president was historic. After the city's right to self-governance was rescinded in 1871 following the revolts of the Paris Commune, it was not until 1975 that the municipality of Paris once again had an independently elected mayor. Responsibility for the city had been long considered a national priority, and subject to the rule and desires of the president, or monarch. In Mitterrand's era, despite the election of Jacques Chirac as mayor, little changed in the role of the president in establishing major agendas affecting the city. Planning of programs, sites, and competitions for various Grands Projets was accomplished primarily by Mitterrand, and his minister of special projects, Emile Biasini, with a select committee of four: Paul Guimard, a writer; Jacques Lang, Minister of Culture; Robert Lyon, cabinet head and advisor to the president; and Roger Quillot, Minister of Urbanism. Repeatedly the concentration of power compelling enormous public issues was called into question by the popular press.

The aesthetic goal of the projects to modernize Paris overtly was also certainly a great point of contention. To the general public, initial proposals of a glass and



1.9 Tour Société Générale, La Défense. (Architect unknown)

steel pyramid in the heart of the seventeenth-century courtyard of the Louvre complex seemed preposterous stylistic arrogance. Yet even the harshest critic will today admit that the discontent and controversy of the pyramid quelled considerably since its completion. Indeed, in many separate instances involving prominent glass construction in the Grands Projets, public outrage quieted on growing familiarity with the built fact. In the new buildings, the presence of highly advanced glass technologies, both in support systems and the material qualities of glass itself, perhaps provided enough distance from preconceived objections anticipating the glass box skyscraper as it proliferated in the 1970s. The new systems and surfaces are characterized by technical inventiveness, rather than technological homogenization.

Equally, newer glass construction is now far more responsible to a variety of environmental factors that in previous eras were the basis for strong financial objections. These technologies, particularly in surface modifications and methods of coating applications, have substantially improved the performance of glass and reduced the cost of interior climatological systems. In the 1970s the glass skyscrapers of La Défense were vastly underpopulated; newer glass constructions in the same area are now fully occupied.

The most lasting objections to glass architecture might be drawn from higher levels of critical discussions, which, as in the case of the perspectival boulevard, implicate the material with the discourse of vision. Martin Jay, in his comprehensive *Downcast Eyes*, outlines the repeated appearance of “ocularphobic” critiques weaving through twentieth-century French philosophy, from Bergson and Foucault to Derrida and Lyotard. Jay notes the profound suspicion on the part of these writers to the hegemonic role of visual metaphors in French art and intellectual discourse. And yet Jay himself also notes that the actual urban culture in Paris, in which many of these philosophers produced their treatises, seems remarkably indifferent to their critiques. The “City of Lights,” is renowned, after all, for cultural forms predominantly visual in nature—fashion, cinema, and architecture.³¹

The relationship of glass to these discourses relies on a fundamental supposition: the glass window provides a bipolar viewing frame from within and from without, a picture plane that is intrinsically related to the painted canvas, the perspectival plane, or, perhaps more closely, the filmic image. From within a disengaged interior the ability to capture the surrounding scene and to reflect on it introspectively is nothing but another version of the very same problematic gaze.³² The mandate of economic constraints to enclose interior space environmentally



1.10 View from within Sirvin et Associés, the Maison de la RATP, 1996.

further supports the analogy. Vision typically separated from all other sensory activity renders the external world available for review, isolating it, objectifying it, and giving the viewer the opportunity to control it by means of distanced abstraction. In painting, as theories go, the subject's disengagement from alternative sensory modes ultimately produces disembodiment, reduces the erotic and even the *narrative* constituent of the viewed space (and its participants) as apprehension is limited by purely visual parameters.

Recent critiques come to this: as the subject is rendered transcendent and the object of view inert, the ethical boundaries, which previously governed relationships between the two, disintegrate. As Michel Foucault noted in his work on the evolution of disciplinary institutions, architecture has the capacity, far more than painting or other representational media, to make literal the most disturbing aspects of vision. By either allowing or occluding vision, constituent elements of buildings—windows, doors, corridors, spaces—transform hierarchical relationships between those being viewed and those viewing, between those being surveyed and those surveying. According to Foucault, this transformation happens particularly when the actions of the body are controlled. Foucault's ideas extend not simply to those positioned in the privileged points of power but implicate the transformation of a vast network of relationships: in this hyperbolized visual world, everyone would be complicit in some way, everyone would be surveyed by someone else. In an effort to escape attention and maintain circumspect neutrality under such a prospect, Foucault surmises that the final effect on a population would be the systematic normalization of all behavior.³³

This troubling potential becomes doubly problematic when considering large public works. As the discrete mechanism of the framed window is enlarged to the enormous glass wall, the building is posited symbolically and literally to structure relationships between individuals and national culture. A frequent complaint reported in the popular media from scholars anticipating the experience of working in glassed spaces of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France was the prospect of being constantly on display, "animals in a zoo," exposed to scrutiny from a general public who were too distant for the scholars to engage reciprocally and meaningfully.

If the bodies of the viewer and the viewed are de-eroticized through the mechanism of the sealed window, the body of the building is equally prey to the ravages of vision.³⁴ The Renaissance idea of transillumination posed that the metaphysical implications of light—the divine *lux*—was truth, ultimately the will



1.11 Aymeric Subléna, Direction de l'Action Sociale, Ville de Paris, 1992.

of God. The eighteenth century's fascination with optical instruments and the mathematical properties of light and optics represented an attempt to recover the geometrical purity of nature, therefore divine guidance. For architecture the origin of these principles was in the Renaissance, founded particularly in the transparency implied by anatomical studies of Leonardo da Vinci. Yet the full fruition of this divine illumination came again in the period of the high modernists, fortified by principles inherited from the Enlightenment. In a gesture that was equally endowed ideologically, the building—its structure, its mechanical systems, its constructional processes, and its very skin—was violently disrobed, revealing its previously hermetic inner workings. This disrobing was to engage intelligence; the revelation was intended to be moral as well as didactic. The imperative of authenticity added impetus to rendering concurrently developing systemization of building legible, ensuring not only that the building be rationalized technologically, but that its rationale also be apparent—or *transparent*.

This ever-encroaching impulse to rationalize figuration in building shares much conceptual ground with that of perspectival depiction; unchecked, both have the capacity to sublimate all aspects of building and/or scene to the rationale imposed by the gaze. For both, the manifestation of this rationale occurs in geometric terms, either in the mathematical construct of the perspectival cone of vision, or in the imposition of a regularized module on a building's structure and constituent systems.³⁵ The most problematic extension of this effect would be, again, on the body; not the literal bodies of visitors, but on the larger metaphor of the building itself as a body. Suggesting the infiltration of emerging biological sciences into eighteenth-century Ecole des Beaux Arts pedagogy, the Ecole's idea of *transparaître* provided building enclosure with the analogy of human skin: just as the presence of internal organs is legible on the skin's surface, so interior spaces might be evidenced by buildings' external massing. Specific correlations are numerous in this analogy; not only does the enclosure of the building equate with the body's skin, but so does the building's structure with the skeleton and its mechanical systems to circulatory networks. Operating in this metaphor, transparency at the exterior boundary is fundamentally unsettling. Not only are the building's basic physical properties overturned, but they are also controlled, subjected to a rationale of logical empiricism. Critic Gerhard Auer wrote:

Leonardo dissected the body in order to acquire the secret of its beauty; Alberti and others defined that invisible spatial grid of proportional geometry



which could be used to impose universal rules on buildings. Filarete showed in his anatomical drawings what later was postulated by Filibert de l'Orme: the fact that inner structures manifest themselves in an outward appearance. And yet it was only the Enlightenment (and the progress of science) that the myth of transparency reached its peak: material no longer remained tangible between heavy and light, solid and airy, opaque and transparent. Its contradictions fused into an infinite structure to be made legible by the X-Ray gaze of empirical knowledge.³⁶

According to Auer, a transparent, "objective" condition at the exterior boundary implied that through disintegration of the exterior skin as the *physiographic* boundary of the body, rationalization of the human body itself would be complete.

In contemporary Paris, two agents of vision merge to form a multiply layered display of the urban spectacle (in the historical spectrum of urbanism, perhaps *the* manifestation of the spectacle). At the head of the Haussmann boulevard an imaginary perspectival plane frames emptiness, if not empty signs—distant floating monuments disconnected from their cultural locales. Located somewhere in the infinite beyond, this perspectival plane is framed by the dynamic flanks of the city's vernacular fabric, as if the lines extending outward from the frame had become miraculously embodied by the urgent life of the city. In this context, Mitterrand placed his signature glass architecture as if to challenge the perspectival paradigm of the earlier era with his own. As in the case of the Louvre, or the Grande Arche, or even the Opéra Bastille, when Mitterrand's monuments are placed directly on urban axes, their transparency becomes wedded to the emptiness that predated them. Located on the urban flanks, his transparent buildings engage, indeed attempt to *become*, the life of the city.

As the bodies of visitors and general public are displayed and surveyed through the translucent skins of monumental buildings, so are the bodies of buildings themselves, replete in all previously undisclosed and shadowy inner domains. Haussmann's perspectival boulevards add the final context to the unrelenting mechanisms of vision in an enormous and multifaceted display of the potential reach of the rational gaze. One needs only the example of the Pompidou Center to admit a convergence of such speculations. And yet, this reading of the building's relationship to its surrounding is incomplete without an account of the complex social dynamic of the same transparent condition (see chapter 2).

TRANSPARENCY, ACCESSIBILITY, POLITICS

Mitterrand said of the national library in 1995, “The second imperative was entirely new: it involved the accommodation of a huge public, people of all ages trained to all kinds of different professions and callings; people eager to deepen their knowledge, to enrich their culture, and to gain access to the documents necessary for their work.”³⁷ This suggests a basic intention on the part of the state. Indeed, the dominant idealism of many of the Grands Projets was based in a principle of accessibility, an opening of a previously closed and therefore elitist French culture to the general public.³⁸ This agenda was consistently reiterated throughout the conception and planning for all of the Grands Projets; their success was to be measured in the general public’s interaction with the various cultural institutions. And indeed, dispersal of various forms of public culture throughout the capital since the inception of the projects has been impressive.

New and renovated museums provide vast amounts of public exhibition space allowing the display of substantial permanent collections previously held in storage. The Louvre renovation eased circulation and provided new public galleries, some even fully visible from exterior public thoroughfares (figure 1.12). In the sciences, several new important educational facilities were created; many in decay were rejuvenated. Despite controversies associated with it, the new national library provides desperately needed public access to material long sequestered for scholarly use. The new performance halls at the Opéra Bastille, through their sheer capacity to accommodate large numbers, have the ambition and the potential to make classical opera popular.³⁹

Yet the galvanization of popular public access was intended to occur not simply through literal access but through symbolic connotation.⁴⁰ If Haussmann’s boulevards provided a literal visual and physical connectivity at an urban scale, Mitterrand’s buildings were to interpret transparency as a metaphor at the scale of the building, the metaphor of accessibility tied to the leftist government and symbolic democracy. It is noteworthy that the use of glass toward this end was not conceived initially, but rather acquired potency as the various buildings were realized and a group of glass monuments emerged to identify Mitterrand’s influence.⁴¹ Neither the Grande Pyramide nor the Institut du Monde Arabe—both early projects—overtly used glass as a device symbolizing political intentions. Yet by the time of the national library competition, glass had accrued a significance that was increasingly deployed to prompt a particular political signification.



1.12 I. M. Pei and Partners, Passage Richelieu, Musée du Louvre 1992.

The contemporary association of literal accessibility through architecture, and particularly transparent architecture, to symbolic democracy did not originate with Mitterrand. As recently as the 1960s this metaphor was propelled into public consciousness by de Gaulle and André Malraux's (then Minister of State for Cultural Affairs) visualizations of "open institutions." It culminated in the building of the Pompidou Center, a cultural center encompassing various functions from public library to cinema house to contemporary arts center. In the 1960s, however, the primary gesture in opening official culture was oriented toward the French provinces; it implied decentralization away from Paris, having the exact opposite effect of the Grands Projets.⁴² Indeed, the Grands Projets are as conspicuous an endeavor to glorify and centralize the capital as were the projects of Haussmann's era.

In consciously using architecture as a vehicle to embody specific ideological expression, the agenda of the state remains a point of public contention. The last decades have seen Mitterrand's transparent architecture become entrenched as a national focus of political discord between the conservative Right and the progressive Left.⁴³ This is due certainly to recalcitrance of the Right to accept the imposition of a set of monuments on Paris that would forever stand as a visible legacy of a Socialist regime. This is also due, however, in no small part to disproportionate expenditures by Mitterrand on public architecture, which were held partially accountable for the national economic duress of the 1990s—*la crise*. Whether they are reasonable or not, these claims undoubtedly influenced public reception of the new architecture, particularly in the case of the national library.

The association of the Grands Projets with leftist politics exists at several levels. First, the programmatic concept of state-sponsored projects might be itself regarded as a demonstration of Socialist principles, an illustration of the state's responsibility and potential to advance culture over and above that of private enterprise. Equally significant is the first gesture of Mitterrand in extending the axis of the Voie Triomphale eastward to the poorer sections of the city—an enormous symbolic gesture to the commitment of the Left to disenfranchised segments of the city.⁴⁴ Similarly, as has been mentioned, the two parks of the Grands Projets were located contiguous to working-class areas. Whereas they certainly represent political appeasements to significant voting blocks, the highly used parks are uncontestable amenities, and provided without the hidden agenda in the Haussmann era of placating discontented workers.



1.13 View from Masa Yuki Yamanaka and Armstrong Associates, Maison de la Culture du Japon, 1997.

Despite Mitterrand's desire to represent these socially minded gestures as phenomena of leftist rule, many of them were rooted in practices established by the French Revolution. Indeed, in many ways the Socialist enterprise for the Grands Projets included the blatant appropriation, and overt public projection, of Revolutionary values. Architectural historian William J. R. Curtis noted of the Mitterrand projects, "Of course, it so happens that the Left is in power for the commemoration of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which is publicized as a charter of universal human relevance with, we are told, an inevitable future trajectory in world events. History is thus telescoped to suggest that the current Left is the heir to all that is most idealistic about the revolution."⁴⁵

The Grands Projets, inaugurated in 1989, were in themselves a 200-year commemoration of the Revolution. The three actual memorials were institutions located along the Voie Triomphale—the Grande Arche de La Défense, the Grande Pyramide du Louvre, and the Opéra Bastille. The connection of the monarchist axis to the Bastille, the most symbolic site of the Revolution, is confirmation enough of the projects' homage.⁴⁶ Programming the projects as cultural centers also stemmed from the Revolutionary zeal for democratic institutions. Even the expressive use of progressive technology was characterized by fervor for all things Revolutionary: the projects of 1989 followed a legacy established by the centennial of 1889, an exposition whose buildings included the indelible Eiffel Tower. In Paris monumental technological expressionism, of which glass and steel construction is a primary component, is inextricably tied to the symbols of the Revolution.

Most important for this study, transparency was a theme inherited directly from the Revolution, primarily through the influence of Swiss naturalist philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For Rousseau, transparency was a fundamental metaphor expressing a utopian state for humans. When each person's innermost feelings and thoughts were absolutely open, the deceptive outer appearances (to which Rousseau assigned the greatest evil) would disappear, leading to a pure expression of inherent goodness. Writes Jean Starobinski on this pervasive theme in Rousseau's writings: "Evil is veil and obfuscation, it is mask, it is intimately bound up with fiction, and it would not exist if man had not the dangerous freedom to deny, by means of artifice, what is given by nature."⁴⁷

Rousseau's extension of his theory of artless transparency to principles of social order was profoundly significant to revolutionary political constructs. Suggesting popular sovereignty governed by a self-imposed law of reason, his advocacy of the *honnête homme* was projected into a utopian political state where

governance by the people would emerge spontaneously from concern for the common good. This idealized state could be reached only by the absence of separation between government and public. Thus the rhetoric of accessibility of both Pompidou and Mitterrand urban projects was informed principally by a lingering sentiment of Rousseau's romantic transparency. As a subtext of the doctrine of the Revolution, the concept of transparency had been universally influencing French thought for several centuries.

Transparency, even in the days of the Revolution, was not without flagrant contradictions. As it was transferred from a utopian hypothesis into an actual set of social practices, these contradictions would become terrifying. R. J. Sierksma wrote, "The French Revolution demanded it [complete transparency] and gave it political force. Solitude would become anti-Revolutionary. Privacy would be suspect."⁴⁸ The "popular sovereignty" advocated by Rousseau would become a form of popular justice that was essentially a police state composed of the masses. Evidenced in the infamous September massacres of 1790, newly anointed citizens were sanctioned to "cleanse" society, murdering anyone even slightly suspected of harboring secret royalist sympathies, as well as prisoners deemed a threat to the new republican purity. Applied to architecture, the transparent metaphor was equally burdened. After the Revolution, Danton authorized indiscriminate "domiciliary visits"; surprise late night or early morning searches through residences for incriminating evidence against the Republic.⁴⁹ Inhabitants were also required to post on their exterior walls lists of visitors. In the name of transparency, no secret was to be kept from the populist government; even the solid walls of houses were to reveal potentially damaging information living within.

In appropriating the values of the Revolution to characterize his tenure, Mitterrand's government carefully chose those of its early, less controversial, stages to emphasize primarily the Revolution's proclamation of universal human rights.⁵⁰ Mitterrand's adoption of transparency to symbolize dissolution of boundaries between state and public seems as selective, given the conflicted history of the concept from the Revolution. If the goal of the projects was to express accessibility, surely a more benign metaphor was available.

TRANSPARENCY, MODERNITY

Whereas transparency has particular associations in France, it has also been implicated into the more universal developments of modern architecture. Transparency,

both literal and phenomenal, as well as metaphorical, pervaded the entire modernist architectural oeuvre, from Le Corbusier to Mies van der Rohe and Rietveld, to the later work of Richard Neutra and Gordon Bunshaft. Indeed, the modernist project was noted by Vidler to be “haunted” by the idea.⁵¹ And while early modernist architecture was not consistently engaged with the actual use of glass, its central characteristics include peripheralization of space and concurrent disintegration of the exterior boundary. These characteristics suggest the definition of another form of transparency, most eloquently understood by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky.⁵² Theo van Doesburg, whose *de Stijl* manifestoes proposed expansion of dematerialized space into the realm of everyday (proletarian) life, provided the accompanying reformative ideology.⁵³ Presumably through a denigrated exterior boundary, a purified aesthetic realm would escape and proliferate into the vernacular landscape. As the *de Stijl* aesthetic spread it would rehabilitate the general population as well. Common people would live better, freer, and more honest lives in such unfettered surroundings.

The aesthetic revolution heralded by van Doesburg did not happen through the rarified language and short-lived production of the *de Stijl* architects. Instead, “objective construction” was manifested primarily in France, indelibly inscribed in the vernacular landscape by Le Corbusier and his imitators in hundreds, if not thousands, of buildings interpreting his aesthetic and spatial investigations.⁵⁴ This proliferation happened essentially in terms of transparency; not one of glass construction, but manifested as volumes of space and solids in a tense relationship with an exterior container. In Le Corbusier’s early career, this container comprised the signature white skin of the international “machine” phase of his works, whose paradigmatic products, the villas at Poissy and Garches located just outside of Paris, were tremendously influential in France. Indeed, Le Corbusier’s work realized most palpably van Doesburg’s heroic calls for universal aestheticization. That is, until the latest and debatably even more effective excursion into the vernacular by the proliferation of glass.

As ubiquitous as the influences of Le Corbusier and the latest appearance of glass might be in France, neither can be credited with the type of societal reformation found in either Rousseau’s romantic naturalism or in the modernist merger of politics and aesthetics in which both utopian metaphors of transparency are considerably burdened. As critiques of modernism have long demonstrated, prophecies of societal reformation were at best naïve, hopelessly confused between the literal properties of architecture and its associated metaphors.



1.14 Renzo Piano, Agence de la Propreté. (City Cleaning Department, 1988)

Three fundamental tensions thus undermine the implementation of a contemporary symbol of transparency in Paris. The first is the ill-considered Socialist operation to reinstitute the conflicted metaphor of the Revolution, which is burdened by the events of the Terror. The second is the problematic tie of transparency to the failed aspirations of the modern movement, an equally naïve desire to infect the world with the aesthetics and social moralism tied up in the movement. The third is in the theoretical affiliation of transparency with mechanisms of control. In the obsession to reveal, transparency is fraught with problematic capacities of vision from sublimating the behavior of architecture's human inhabitants to provoking methods of technological rationalization in the design of buildings and public spaces. These tensions have been discussed only perfunctorily in relation to the Mitterrand projects; perhaps their very obviousness makes commentary unnecessary. Yet they are undoubtedly at the core of the indifferent intellectual reception to the Grands Projets.⁵⁵

This book neither attempts to justify nor invalidates the buildings according to these expansive terms, which are limited not by their accuracy but by their generality. Through an extensive examination of the buildings situated in their particular context, with their particular ambitions and histories, the effort is to discover the parallels and divergences from these fundamentally problematic conditions of transparency. Through the nuances of each specific condition, these buildings have established their own coherent precedent, altering and contributing substantially to the body of history surrounding the deceptively simple but ultimately elusive term known as transparency.