Inverted peripheries: 
Le Boulevard Périphérique and the struggle for identity in Paris.

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This research uses a ‘deep mapping’ method to explore the struggle for identity at the ‘periphery’ of Paris, the spatial manifestation of which begs the question: are you in Paris or not? The paper charts a contemporary battle at the wall of Paris where the defence is being ‘breached’ by those outside who do not want to be seen on the periphery and so want the symbolism of Paris extended beyond the wall; whilst at the same time the wall is ‘repaired’ or even ‘rebuilt’ by those who want to remain separate and not Parisian. Symbols, colours, signs, and material particular to one side or the other of this identity clash are the ordnance of this battle. In the case of Paris the struggle to assert identity is played both consciously and subconsciously.

The findings suggest that Paris exhibits an ‘inverted periphery’ in which the walls of a city not seeking to extend its boundaries are being ‘attacked’ by those outside who emulate its imagery and so bring *intra muros* symbolism to their territory. Yet at the same time there is an institutional drive to reinforce the walls visually and retain *extra muros* identities. Should those seeking to reduce the physical impact of the Périphérique succeed Paris will, for the first time in its history, be left defenceless and be in risk of ‘invasion’.

The paper is reproduced here as it was read out at the Architectural Humanities Research Association Conference at Queen’s University, Belfast on 28th October 2011. A longer version is available.

INTRODUCTION

I explore the complexities of borders and the subtle territorialisation of space that occurs around them. This research has two aims; first is to explore a method that I might use in the bigger project and second to record the confusion of identity played out on the streets and spaces surrounding Paris’s ring road – the Périphérique. In short it asks, how do you know where you are; in Paris or outside Paris?

My focus was two communes in the south-east of the Périphérique. These two communes were not chosen at random. Within them the Périphérique exhibits all three physical options for occupying space – it is elevated, in a cutting and at grade within a relatively short distance. The commune of St Mandé is an enclave surrounded by Paris. Much of its once wider territory was appropriated by Paris in 1844 to build an outer defensive wall. A second part was lost in 1922 when the Bois de Vincennes was permanently annexed by Paris as public open space. As a result of this the commune is now one of the smallest in France. Neighbouring Montreuil has a strong tradition of political opposition to Paris.

My research uses a deep mapping technique that relies on a detailed understanding of the subject matter being unearthed in much the same way as an archaeologist might. In this it draws on the work of Michael Shanks. It gathers together all evidence from seemingly trivial to highly fundamental clues to piece together a picture of the present. This evidence comes from observing and recording everything that leads me to an opinion on whether or not I am in Paris. So, it is eclectic and it is a method that has been used to good effect by William Least Heat-Moon in understanding Chase County in central Kansas. It is to some extent a development of the work of psycho-geographers. It uses the concept of the detached urban observer developed by Benjamin and applied to a modern landscape by the likes of Sinclair and Self. As psycho-geography has so often done, it explores an interface between the institutional fabric of a city and the place that underlies that controlling layer imposed on the landscape.

There are two key components to the method.

First a detailed understanding of Paris. I have that from:

- Living in Paris
- Extensive reading
- Previous research and writing on Paris that I have done
The important point is that the method relies on me as an ‘expert observer’ interpreting clues I find.

Second, as an expert observer I need a means to explore and collect ‘evidence’. For this I set up a grid of 20, 100m x 100m squares as the base for my ‘archaeological’ investigation. That grid was superimposed over a detailed plan. The grid is centred on the Périphérique and its orientation determined at random. In this case it was oriented south-west to north-east. Within that grid I gathered all the evidence I could to establish whether I was in ‘Paris’ or not. This evidence takes the form of visual and aural clues: some are physical objects attached to the ground or buildings, others moveable; some are noises by humans, machines or simply nature.

To supplement the ‘grid’ a walk along the ‘boundary’ in a north-south direction was superimposed over the area of study. The route of this walk was determined by my attempt to walk on the ‘boundary’ as I perceived it between Paris and the outside world – as in a derive. I walked north-south over the area of study. I kept detailed notes of my finds, their location (using a GPS), their significance to me. As an archaeologist might, I also took photographs of the evidence unearthed.

THE PÉRIPHÉRIQUE AND WALL TODAY
Until the twentieth century Paris had been a walled city. The outer wall was demolished in 1929 to be replaced by the ring road I am studying.

It is 35 kms long. It is only 7 kms from the Périphérique to Notre Dame. It is entirely in Paris but the city boundary runs just outside. The effect of this is to create a modern day moat and defensive barrier between the worlds intra and extra muros. Inside the line are 2.2 million Parisians - associated by writers such as Simon Ronai and others with luxury, arts, culture and refinement. Outside are 9.6 million banlieusards – seen as anonymous, peripheral and remote from the centre. Even the name itself with its use of the terms ‘boulevard’ and ‘périphérique’ at once conveys something of belonging to Paris, yet also unequivocally states that it is the extremity. There are no boulevards in St Mandé or Montreuil.

The urban rupture brought about by the construction of the road has meant that ever since it opened there has been talk of covering it up or in other ways reducing its impact. The uncritical assumption has always been that this was a good thing to do. Yet the road has been described as the most beautiful avenue of Paris by the architect Dominique Perrault. On the other hand, Claudia, the waitress I overheard talking to a regular customer in the Café Tourelle St Mandé at 8am on 30th September 2011 certainly recognises the negative impact of the road. She makes clear that she definitely wants to move to Paris. And ‘Paris’ is the word she uses, she is not fussy about defining where in Paris. Both waitress and the customer agree that there is ‘independence’ and there is ‘much to do’ in Paris. Yet, Café La Tourelle is exactly 152 metres from Paris.

The former wall was a substantial piece of engineering. It consisted of gates, ramparts, bastions and was surrounded by an area on which construction was forbidden. Le Périphérique retains this physical presence. At the St Mandé border the architecture of the defensive wall is ever present with high walls, acoustic screens, floodlights and access towers.

To add to the sense of physical containment provided by the wall the re-planning of Paris under Napoléon III in the nineteenth century produced a strongly radial street pattern that centred on the core of the city and spread outwards to the city gates – and they were that; gates that could be opened and closed. The gate as a space that can be closed off is still apparent on the routes in and out of the city and onto and off the Périphérique. Entry into and out of Paris is controlled. Gates at the periphery can still be locked, denying access to the ‘other side’.

There is a formal boundary between Paris and St Mandé. Each side leaves its mark on the street through infrastructure markings and street signage. Public transport tickets are clearly marked to restrict usage to ‘dans Paris’. Street surfaces change here – black is Paris, red is St Mandé.
But whilst Paris might be reinforcing its defences and locking the gates, and the formal boundaries of public bodies are imposed here there is evidence that near the wall Paris is defending itself in other ways. There is a slice of Paris ‘extra muros’ here that does not have the protection of the wall and for 150 metres or so we can map this ‘little Paris beyond the walls’. Paris needs to prevent St Mandé from creeping up nearer to the wall. Large clues such as the building form and street orientation confirm the location, but other more subtle clues confirm its covert undercover work – posters in shop windows for art classes held in St Mandé advertise themselves not as ‘something to do in St Mandé’ but as something to do ‘in Paris’. The Parisian Resistance movement is at work here.

But these skirmishes are soon interrupted. Street patterns change to run north-south to form a barrier perpendicular to Napoleon’s radial street pattern of Paris. Here there is a natural topography, far too undulating to be Parisian. Haussmann would have levelled this had we been in Paris. We are now 200 metres from the wall and we have left Paris. This change is reinforced by the juxtaposition of Mairie, with its formal semiotic and local schools imposing their communal self identity at opposite ends of the enclave. This is the stronghold of the Commune de St Mandé.

For St Mandé is an enclave, and one that is still fighting to keep its identity. No sooner has the commune established it presence than it is beginning to lose it again. An on-going Parisian attack is played out on the ground by a flanking movement from the city to retain the Bois de Vincennes as its own parkland. Officially in St Mandé but now Parisian in all but name the hôtels surrounding the park signal a weakening frontline. The gravel surface underfoot tells us we have crossed back into the Parisian territory that is the Haussmannian Park.

But Paris here relies on peace with St Mandé – its water supplies across St Mandé’s territory and can be easily identified. As can the capitals benchmarks in St Mandé used to map out the park.

The gates of Paris and the zone outside them still provide a focus for refugees – people not wanted by either side. At the Porte de Montreuil ‘refugees’ inhabit a space on top of the Périphérique – officially within Paris, but to all intents and purposes a no-man’s-land. They sell ‘their’ goods off the pavement, with one eye towards the border guards of the Police Municipale de Paris; ready to escape should they be challenged. All this reflects back to a time one hundred years ago when around the gates grew up a ‘zone’ of shanty buildings inhabited by those unable to live in Paris and described by Georges Duhamel in his 1930s book ‘View of the Promised Land. He says:

Approaching the gates I hear the words, the laughing and the singing of Paris, it is then that the Zone hits you, a field of misery all around, invading the magnificence and splendour of the city.

Still pertinent today.

But the refugees cannot turn their backs on Paris and simply make their home in Montreuil. When the Périphérique is elevated the presence of the wall as a barrier is clear. What is extraordinary in Montreuil though is that here the Périphérique is in a cutting, and the ‘edge’ to Paris is relatively soft. Should they want to it would be ideal territory for those extra muros to assume the form of Paris. Yet Montreuil wants none of Paris. It has built its own ‘wall.’ To impose itself on the landscape and to prevent the encroachment of Paris any further Montreuil has deliberately allowed to be built, along the border, a line of fortification higher, more imposing and more hard faced than any original wall. This line of impenetrable commercial buildings with narrow ‘gates’ reluctantly opening into the commune controls entry to Montreuil. Penetrating the commune is off putting and forbidding, territory is clearly marked out and the architecture of defence from attack evident.

The semiotic significance of the ‘CGT’ trade union signage looking towards Paris cannot be lost on the capital’s bourgeoisie. Montreuil is uneasy, it sees Paris as a threat and has decided to defend itself.

LA FIN

Those considering sweeping Le Boulevard Périphérique under the carpet in an attempt to spread the Parisian ideal fail to understand the complexity of this periphery. This is far more than a convenient...
administrative line. It is a front line, and not an easily defined one – even the bureaucracy can’t decide where it is. Whilst parts of St Mandé are already lost to Paris, that which remains, alongside Montreuil displays defiance.

The capital’s élan needs to be contained; allowing it to spill out threatens to overwhelm other cultures, equally but differently diverse. These cultures are defiant and the Périphérique serves as a peace-line between them. The aim of those seeking to remove or hide the border is never to draw these diverse extra muros identities into Paris. It is always to expand the cultural footprint of Paris. Perversely this might not be good for Paris, should these people succeed it will be the first time since it was founded that Paris is left ‘defenceless’ and this might well have serious repercussions for its future, the ideal of Paris will be diluted. Paris will no longer be Paris.
NOTES

1 Heat-Moon W L PrairyErth; 1991 Boston MA, Houghton Mifflin
4 Self W. Psychogeography; 2007, London, Bloomsbury
8 Duhamel G. Vue de la Terre Promise, 1934, Mercure de France pp 44-45