



International symposium

*Urban wastelands: a form of urban nature?*

# Relations to the place and the living in a Parisian wasteland

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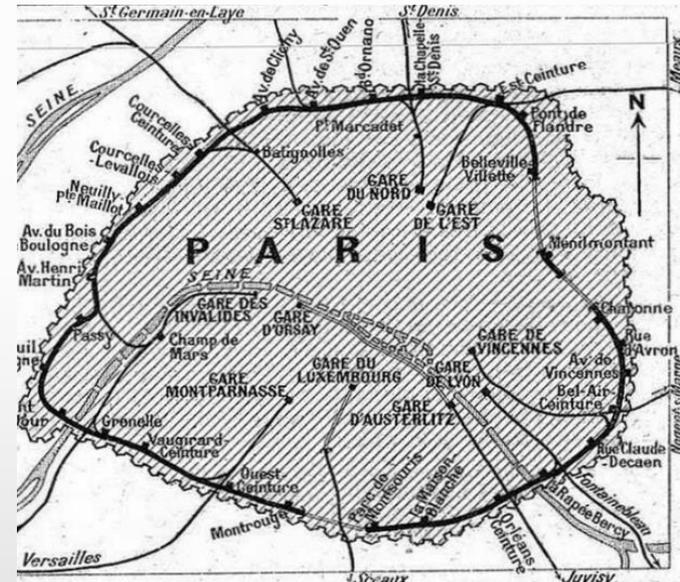
MAIRIE DE PARIS





# Introduction

- The *petite ceinture*, a railway that circles Paris, built in the middle of the 19th century, for passenger and freight transport
- 20th century : competition of the metro and desindustrialisation...
- 1990's : the end of train circulation (except a segment in the west)





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# Introduction

Around 20 kilometers of railway unexploited

Colonized by flora, fauna... and many inhabitants, despite a prohibited access





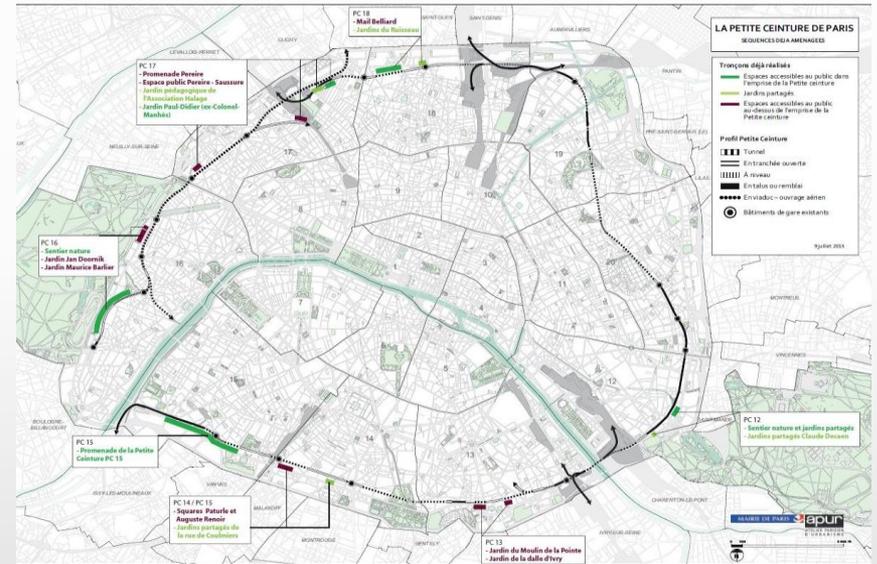
# Introduction

Around 20 kilometers of railway unexploited

Colonized by flora, fauna... and many inhabitants, despite a prohibited access

2000's : from a railway to a green infrastructure

- An ecological management since 2006
- A territorial stake for the biodiversity policy of Paris (2011)
- Creation of associative gardens and public green spaces by the City of Paris





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# Introduction

While the *petite ceinture* is in transition to a space of nature,

**Do (material and immaterial) relations of informal users with the place rely on nature and how is this nature thought out ?**

*Research based on an ethnological survey (2013-2014)*





# Plan

- I. The place's meaning : an « elsewhere »
- II. Informal activities : recreation, transgression, creativity and sheltering
- III. The wasteland nature, a component of the place's identity





# I. The place meaning : an « elsewhere »

## *Informal users profiles*

Mostly men, but a significant presence of women

Mostly teenagers (12-20 years)

Adults from 20 to 40 years old

Occasionally a few accompanied children and adults over 50 years old

Middle classes dominant

Working classes differently represented

People in precarious situations

- A selection based on different dispositions to transgress and physical capacities





# I. The place meaning : an « elsewhere »

The *petite ceinture* is above all an « elsewhere »...

« *en dehors de Paris* » (*outside of Paris*)

« *un échappatoire par rapport à tout le reste* » (*an escape from everything else*)

« *comme si c'était une bulle à part* » (*as if it was a bubble apart*)

« *sortir de Paris sans quitter Paris* » (*getting out of Paris without leaving Paris*)

...





# I. The place meaning : an « elsewhere »

The *petite ceinture* is above all an « elsewhere »...

... because it's physically separated from the rest of the city :

The fences : a concrete frontier between the inside and the outside

A space often invisible from public spaces around





# I. The place meaning : an « elsewhere »

The *petite ceinture* is above all an « elsewhere »...

... because it's governed by different rules than public spaces

*A peculiar sociability*

*A reduced surveillance (explicitly felt and wished)*





## II. Informal activities : recreation, transgression, creativity and sheltering

*From conventional practices...*

Alternative tourism, walks, convivial meetings...





## II. Informal activities : recreation, transgression, creativity and sheltering

*To transgression...*

Break-in, graffiti, cannabis smoking, campfire, stones throwing...





## II. Informal activities : recreation, transgression, creativity and sheltering

*... And creativity*

Artistic expression





## II. Informal activities : recreation, transgression, creativity and sheltering

### *... And creativity*

Artistic expression

Body expression

Entering, striding along... in a space not designed for walking and pedestrians

And other forms of body expression as shooting, singing, dancing, jumping, throwing...





## II. Informal activities : recreation, transgression, creativity and sheltering

*... And creativity*

Artistic expression

Body expression

Material creativity

Through manipulation, construction, destruction...





## II. Informal activities : recreation, transgression, creativity and sheltering

### *But also sheltering*

Mostly men

French or from Eastern Europ mainly

Poor, sometimes workers

Alone or in groups, they lived in the railway for court periods or several years





### III. The wasteland nature, a component of the place identity

*What place for nature ?*

#### **Nature isn't fundamental in the relations with the place**

Practices linked to nature (gardening, naturalist observations...) marginal and limited interactions

In discourses, nature isn't what users look for in the first place

- However, nature (particularly vegetation) is a **component of the place's identity**





### III. The wasteland nature, a component of the place identity

*From an ecological point of view*

Species diversity is sometimes known by medias or presumed through observation

- However : **ecological discourses are marginal**





### III. The wasteland nature, a component of the place identity

#### *A socio-spatial meaning*

*« wild », « rare in the city », « less controlled », « less ordered »...*

The spontaneous vegetation is the nature of the elsewhere, **linked to order and control issues**

Always **valued** and **compared to vegetation in the city and parks**, still mostly selected and managed





### III. The wasteland nature, a component of the place identity

#### *A socio-spatial meaning*

- A nature thought in relation to the place signification
- Reflect of the (relative) freedom that people experiment here
- Defended on the name of a right to exist in the city





# Conclusion

As urban green spaces offer nooks, the *petite ceinture* is a great **hiding place**

- That offers a particular intimacy (less dense, less watched), where people can get closer or be isolated
- It offers a peculiar experience in the city, where there's a place for the unexpected
- It welcomes other social practices, depreciated or that can't exist elsewhere

**The *petite ceinture* is a « social breathing zone »**





on nature?

# Thank you for your attention