

Metropolitan landscapes

Paris-Ile-de-France : From the Regional Green Plan to the Open Spaces Regional System

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Introduction

Slide #1 : Timeline of regional planning since 1960, showing the Regional Green Plan (1995) and Open Spaces Regional System (2008)

In the early 1960s, the first and second regional master plans of the Paris-Ile-de-France region already showed a clear link between urban planning [as symbolized here in dark grey] and “green” planning [as symbolized here in green]. Green planning was expected :

- first, to contain and structure urban growth,
- second, to deliver recreational spaces to existing or planned urban developments, at both local level (for daily use) and regional level (for week-end use).

In the third regional master plan of 1976, which ratified the concept of polycentricity and the creation of 5 satellite new towns, the containment of urban growth became more complex and led to the idea of a regional green belt, expectedly keeping the new towns apart from the central built up but also from each other. At the same time, the Ile-de-France regional authority was created by law and was given exceptional prerogatives on “green spaces”, i.e. spaces that were neither urbanized nor “urbanizable” according to the new regional master plan.

In 1983, while the central government was keeping its prerogatives on urban planning but was rapidly reducing its interventions on “green spaces”, the newly-created Ile-de-France regional council launched its first large-scale coordinated action on these green spaces, by giving shape to the green belt project and the green belt policy. In 1994, the green belt project found its most complete expression in the first Regional Green Plan, which clearly considered the green belt as an interface between the central built-up area “green grid”, the outer “rural belt” and the valleys and green links running through this concentric pattern.

The Regional green plan was a major contribution of the Regional council to the 4th regional master plan of 1994, still drawn up by the central government. Nevertheless, in the end, this contribution was not strongly enough integrated to the new master plan to prevent the Regional council from giving a negative opinion on the document.

Ten years later, in 2004, the law had changed and the Regional council, not the central government, was now responsible for drawing up the regional master plan. Thus, it seemed possible, at last, to better integrate urban planning and green planning. The 5th regional master plan, voted by the Regional council in 2008 after three years of intense consultations and debates, seized this opportunity of better integration and was definitely based on a strong Open Spaces Regional System.

The purpose of my presentation today is to highlight the main changes that green planning has undergone in Paris-Ile-de-France over the last fifteen years, i.e. between the Regional Green Plan and the Open Spaces Regional System :

- first, how we have moved from “green” to “open spaces” ;
- second, how we have moved from a “plan” to a “system” ;
- third, how we have given a different meaning to “regional” ;
- finally, why the green belt is still a significant part of the Open Spaces Regional System.

1. From green spaces to open spaces

Slide #2

Since the early 1960s, green planning in Ile-de-France has constantly extended its focus to a growing variety of spaces, but also to a growing variety of functions for these spaces, and to a growing variety of pressures on these spaces.

In the 1960s and 70s, the types of spaces that were mostly considered by green planning were parks and woodland. The main functions, as we have just seen, were spatial – to contain and structure fast urban growth – and social – to deliver recreational spaces to a young and thriving population. The

main pressures were consumption – at a time when private woods on the outskirts of the central built-up area were still being sold for urbanization – and overuse – especially in areas where the population was growing much faster than the network of parks or woods open to the public.

In the 1980s, the focus of green planning was broadened to farmland, at a time when land speculation was threatening the economic viability of farming, especially of market gardening on the outskirts of the central built-up area. During the same decade, green planning started to show more interest for the economic function of farmland and woodland and for the pressure of use conflicts - for instance between market gardeners and dog walkers on farmland.

In the 1990s, green planning extended its focus to natural spaces, like wetland or chalk grassland, as the interest for the preservation of biodiversity was rapidly growing. Beside the preservation of biodiversity, other environmental functions, likely to be played by natural spaces but also by woodland and farmland, received more interest :

- the mitigation of and the adaptation to climate change
- the sustainable management of natural resources (water, air, materials)
- the prevention of natural and technological risks (flood overflow, flood runoff, land erosion,...).

During the same decade, as urbanization was slowing down but road building and traffic growth on existing roads were continuing, green planning became more aware of the pressure of fragmentation – or cutting-up -, not only on biodiversity but also farming and rambling.

The use of the term “open spaces” in 2008, instead of “green spaces”, results from this long and slow enrichment. It is now used to express what these spaces have in common :

- they are all neither urbanised nor impermeabilized,
- they are likely to play the same variety of functions,
- they are likely to undergo the same variety of pressures.

Considering these spaces together can help green planning in two main types of ways :

- by arousing common understanding of problems, for instance when risks of fragmentation by a new road project are equally understood by farming unions, ecologist groups and rambling associations ;
- by suggesting joint solutions to problems, for instance when adjacent wetland and farmland are treated together as a large flood-plain.

Yet, we must be aware that the term “open spaces” may lead to some misunderstandings :

- open spaces are not always “open to the view” : for instance, the parking area of a supermarket is not considered as an open space even though it is vastly open to the view ;
- open spaces are not always open to the public” : for instance, the garden of a detached house is considered as an open space even though it is not open to the public.

Another significant change between the Regional green plan and the Open Spaces Regional System was the change from merely preserving the open spaces to enhancing the open spaces, that is allowing them to fulfil their functions in a better way, or to fulfil more of their many potential functions – that is to reveal their “multifunctionality”.

Finally, green planning has not only extended its focus to a growing variety of spaces, functions and pressures, but has also extended its tool-box for implementation : land-use documents, acquisition and laying-out of spaces in the 1960s and 1970s ; land-ownership watch – in order to pre-empt farmland when land speculation may destabilize farming – in the 1980s ; integrated management in the 1990s.

2. From plan to system

Slide #3

As the many potential functions of the open spaces were receiving growing interest, it became obvious that, as the new regional master plan puts it, “the capacity of open spaces to fulfil their multiple functions depends not only on their intrinsic qualities but also on the qualities of the links between themselves and with the built-up environment”. For instance, a wood is all the more likely to give shelter to a deer that this wood is directly linked with a field where the deer can find food.

This is why the term “system” started to be used. Whereas a plan is sometimes only made of juxtaposed elements, a system consists not only of elements but also of links, of interactions, of interferences between these elements. Of course, the strategic diagram of the Open Spaces Regional System [that we can see here], as well as its translation in the more precise land-use map of the new regional master plan, use the “traditional” patches of colours to show the various types of open spaces. But they also use many types of arrows and lines to symbolize links, frontiers, fringes needing to be enhanced between these various types of open spaces.

The use of the term “system” instead of “plan” also means something about the evolving nature of planning in Ile-de-France :

- whereas the notion of plan often means starting things from scratch, the notion of system means understanding how things already work, and - only then - trying to make them work better ;
- whereas the notion of plan often means producing a rigid image of the future, the notion of system offers more flexibility in its implementation : for instance, the actual location of a link can depend on the evolving local context, as long as the link fulfils its expected regional function.

3. From regional coverage to regional interest

Slide #4

While drawing up the new regional master plan, the Regional council worked very hard to promote this systemic approach to open spaces, during three years of intense consultations and debates with the central government, the local authorities, the business organizations and the non-governmental organizations.

Therefore, in the end, the new regional master plan did not need to cover the whole region with precise intentions on open spaces. Instead, it could concentrate on the elements and links of regional interest, knowing that local authorities would be interested in playing their part at their own level, because they understood both the global “image” of the system and the “philosophy” behind it.

This type of partnership is sometimes called “supportive subsidiarity” :

- all partners share vision and knowledge ;
- each partner is acting as its own level ;
- but, if a partner has difficulty acting as its own level, other partners may help it : for instance, a county council may delegate its pre-emption right to the Regional council to enable it to purchase a piece of open space of regional interest ; on the other hand, the Regional council may subsidise a town council to help it to create a new publicly accessible local park.

4. From concentric to radio-concentric – and the green belt, still

Slide #5

In the Regional Green Plan of 1994, the synthetic diagram was characterized by a mainly concentric pattern, in which each belt was experiencing the same type and level of pressures – i.e. the same kind of problems.

In the Open Spaces Regional System of 2008, a more systemic approach to open spaces has led to the recognition of some significant radial links of solidarity between open spaces, within each of the large penetrating wedges running through the belts : for instance, farming in the residual open spaces

of the inner green belt is very dependent on the larger farming base of the outer rural belt for some specific services to agriculture (silos, machinery repair shops, ...).

In other words, whereas belts were mainly considered as “communities of problems”, wedges started to appear as promising “communities of solutions”.

The green belt, still

At the same time, the specific “problems” of the green belt area started to be better understood and described – but not always better tackled yet.

The green belt area, laying between 15 and 35 kilometres from the centre of Paris, is :

- an area of spatial transition, which is neither really urban – even though, for instance, it has a majority of group housing –, nor really rural – even though it still has a majority of open spaces ;
- an area of fast change, which has, over the last two decades, concentrated 70% of the Paris-Ile-de-France region’s new inhabitants and 90% of its new jobs on only 20% of the region’s surface area ;

It is, above all, an area of obvious perplexity for urban planners and landscape architects who, for lack of shared references, can not agree on the type of housing estates, city centres, roads and parks that should be designed in order to respect a certain « sense of space ». On the contrary, they are confronted with an increasing number of internationally standardized « urban » objects (shopping centres, motorway interchanges, logistic platforms, huge residential estates...) and, in the best case, are asked to « sew » them up together again with the scattered elements of the former landscape.

It is therefore an area where the notion of a metropolitan landscape, that would be specific to the Paris-Ile-de-France region, appears to be the most at risk.

Conclusive questions

Slide #6 showing a series of similar pictures of “internationally standardized urban objects” in Ile-de-France and the United States