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Murs à Pêches

In the peripheries of Paris, Montreuil is a commune in the suburb of the Seine Saint-Denis in close proximity to the Bois de Vincennes. This area has a long history of agriculture and industry in service of the Parisian populace. The area earned a reputation for its peach cultivation at the time of the Royal court's occupation of the Chateau de Vincennes during the 17th century. The method developed for this large-scale peach production created an extensive landscape of walled orchards on the plateau of Montreuil. Much of this landscape is threatened today because of urban expansion and the Paris housing crisis, which perceives this land as agricultural or vacant. However, this walled typology creates a unique cultural and spatial form with a singular ability to create different rooms and passages. The struggle between conservation and development of the 35 remaining hectares rages-on, unveiling complex social interactions between associations, residents, politicians, transportation offices, and developers. In this situation with high stakes for all actors involved, I would propose that a study on form could increase the value of this area by highlighting its intricacies and deciphering the empirical decisions that formed this landscape. I would then posit a foundation for an urban form derived from my observations that might reclaim the character of the lost walled gardens without aspiring to recreate historic artifacts, but hoping instead to exceed the power of nostalgia and truly find a sustainable future for this landscape. I will then begin with an outline the history and interactions occurring with this situation.

The peaches of Montreuil were famous for their quality and supply of the royal court at the chateau of Vincennes from the 15th C, and long after the court left for Versailles in 1682. (Vincennes, 2014) After the French Revolution, the abolition of serfdom and the sale of aristocratic and clerical lands lead to a great increase in the peach industry. Seventy five percent of the population was directly involved in the peach industry. Ten percent more were dependent upon it. After peaking in 1870, the PLM (Paris, Lyon, Marseille) rail line was constructed, and supplied Paris with fruit earlier in the season, which virtually ended the Montreuil industry and its economy.

The particularity of the cultivation of these peaches was the use of walls to aide the fragile fruit trees in growing in a very controlled manner. These walls were oriented north-south in order to capitalize on the direct sunlight on both sides. The dry-stone walls, covered in plaster for its thermal properties, absorbed heat during the day and radiated it steadily during the night, creating good conditions for production by decreasing the risks of frost and speeding-up the ripening process. These walls were therefore not parting walls of gardens, but working walls for cultivation which were never enclosed. This way, farms had unimpeded access to both faces of the wall. These were dubbed "Levant" for the east face and 'Couchant' for the west face. Enclosure of orchards occurred only at the end of property lines, where walls were detached from the actual boundary in order to profit from the productivity of the bounding wall. Therefore walls are constructed on each side of property lines in order to profit from the production of the wall on one's property. Many irregularities in the grid result from the need to

access water from streams for instance. Some section of the orchards are oriented at tangents in order to offset the ripeness of some fruit and extend the growing season. These formal decisions spring from inherited communal traditions with empirical agricultural origins. The resulting spaces range from 5m to 10m wide and 50m to 200m long, the incident open courtyards are surrounded by 3m walls, largely left in ruin today, and mostly overgrown with dense bush and trees. The original orchards would have been equipped with straw mats that could roll down and cover the crops during the night as well as a little crown to both avoid direct rainfall on the plants and prevent seeping into the dry-stone wall. Cultivation techniques were labor intensive and extremely technical. These involved specific tutored growth to stress the plants just enough to incite fruit production and offset production in different branches every season.

Deciphering the seemingly organic landscape typology—when a grid structure with a clear logic is actually superimposed upon the land, places this typology in a unique period predating Fordist industrial efficiency values, but also negating and challenging the simplifications of the industrial revolution era. This typology could therefore suggest a typology of inherited structure while retaining an organic logic and character.

The Mur à Pêches long-lot partitions were oriented North-Southward, and were mainly located on the Montreuil plateau. However, the lower-Montreuil had similar long-lots, which resulted from a more traditional French agricultural logic. As in Montreal, where the original long-lots were dispatched to grant access to the Saint-Laurent River for every landowner, the plots in lower-Montreuil grant access to the road for each owner. Therefore, this orientation is more aligned to the block geometries. These lower lands were originally used for subsistence farming, but after the decline of the Montreuil peach industry, became places for medium-size industries of the industrial revolution. The disconnection of Montreuil from the city by ways of rail or river meant a much inferior industrial development to that of the north and west Paris peripheries. The limited size of these factories was thus somewhat appropriate to the lot partitions of the lower Montreuil area, creating walls where the peach industry had not been present, thus creating an interesting parallel.

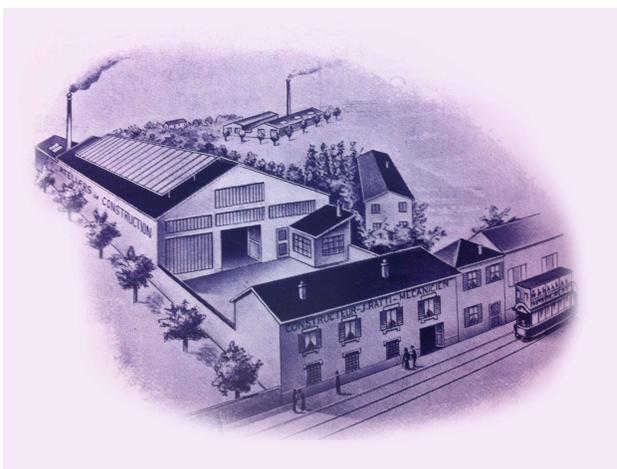


Figure 1: Decau, Patrimoine industriels de Montreuil

In 1935, the communist municipality seized many tracts for public amenities, mainly choosing the ‘vacant lands’ for this. The main premise of the Parisian urban expansion into Montreuil is the ever-increasing demand for housing. The politic governing the dispatch of land to developers has chiefly emerged from the perception of the Murs à Pêches as vacant and fallow rural land. The consumption of land reduced the 500km

of walls to a mere 35 hectares. In 1970, the highway networks under Pompidou suggest the A186 going through the heart of the remaining walls, which were declared protected in the 50s. The highway was never completed, but the planned route was razed.

Faced with the continuous destruction of their heritage, local groups have become increasingly vocal. These voices are joined by those of the blossoming écoquartier (éco-neighborhood) around the walls.

The supporters of conservation point to the unique typology of the landscape, economic heritage, oasis of rural air, the involvement of the community in the remaining parcels, and hope to permanently protect the walls by opening them to the public and stage varied landscape interventions to highlight the variety of character inherent in the landscape. Additional goals are to remediate the soils contaminated with traditional fertilizer containing high levels of lead and cadmium, thus making the agrarian uses viable once more. Note that acceptable contamination levels in Europe are typically one tenth of that allowed in the Americas. This would be achievable with phyto-extraction methods up to a depth of 50cm with the use of Indian Mustard and soil-cycling. The presence of heavy metals emanating from the use of fertilizer suggests that the metals would have bound with this organic matter and thus not likely to seep to great depths with rainfall. Among the opponents to conservation are the

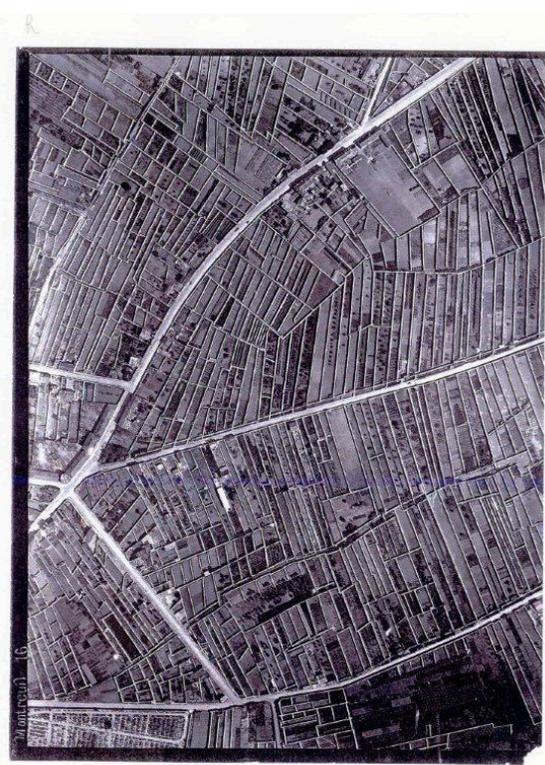


Figure 2 MAP Website: Walled Lots on the Plateau

developers, for obvious reasons, and those residents living east of the Walls, thus having poor access to public transit, and now to automobile access to the city as well (since the closing of the A186 highway in 1990). Social housing in this area constitutes 40% of the housing stock. Much of the businesses in the area are auto-repair shops with a reputation for holding stolen cars, and saw mills, which have become a common sight in all of Montreuil. The eastern portion of the Walls was claimed by 'gens du voyage' (gypsies) after the highway created the separation, to the great grief of the locals.

The political mediators are reluctant to make any promises when it comes to protecting the walls. They are in favor of returning the land to agriculture, but this would be for heavy production with tractors, and entail the destruction of the walls. The local associations quickly retracted this proposition. Both developers and the department pressure the commune to urbanize and increase housing units, but not necessarily to densify, which could be more costly. Also, the outcry from local associations was not strong enough to urge the authorities to dislodge the settlers.

Multiple projects that threaten the Murs à Pêches are already under way. A 'ecological pool' proposal aims to turn the walls into pools. This would mean their destruction. Also, a high school is planned for the northern stretch of the walls, coupled with a tram-servicing station (i.e a train yard) as a part for the highway's transformation into a much-needed public transit connection. Defenders of the wall must weigh the value

of gaining allies among dissatisfied neighbors versus attracting more development interest on their space. This prompts the question of the quality of these areas that were previously protected. More than this, it asks what is the quality of these tracts and their ability to interact with the urban fabric. Granted, most of them border the half-constructed A186 highway, but the understanding of these scarred systems, as a whole, is the only way to propose a more unifying vision of its identity.

In studying the forms of the Murs à Pêche, it will be helpful to think in terms of Shelley Rice's description of the construction Paris. This area was once poised on the verge of urban oblivion, and now the last bulwarks stand as a feeble reminder of what used to be the principal landscape of the Montreuil plateau. The construction of Haussmannian Paris was an unprecedented transformation in the city's habitat, creating a rupture of the zeitgeist due to its suddenness. New photographic technologies and the writings of some more vocal figures contributed to the construction of a nostalgia devoid of an anchoring point in the urban fabric. Rice posits that early images might have contributed to giving of form to the boulevard because of the inability for these imprints to show the motion of people in the streets, thus proposing a city free of the overcrowding problem of old Paris. (Rice, 1999) Whereby memory is faulty and nostalgia is inherently subjective and biased, this was a time where there was no reference to an urban reality within these accounts. Therefore, one might ask to what extent the constructed nostalgia of the Parisian people helped construct the new city, and how much of this was a direct influence of the media employed and how to see the imprint of collective memory on the urban fabric when the only remnant of this zeitgeist is now in the form of photographs and the resulting urban form. In some respects, there are many parallels between these stories, which might provide clues in thinking about the creation of the future city, and I hope to call upon some of these ideas in guiding the ideas to come.

Whereby some precedent of the appropriation of long-lots exists, I would seek out examples that retain some character, logic, parcel size, or even walls and study how these appropriations work in the urban fabric. Where both the walled lots and the open lots were largely transformed, each of these may provide clues in reclaiming some of the razed and deteriorated areas around the Murs à Pêches in order to promote better linkages, and awareness within Montreuil, and, especially, do so through the transformation of the collective imagination itself.

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