

Rhythms of Construction **An Interview with C. De Portzamparc**

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Starting out in the 1970s – General Conception of Architecture

Books&Ideas: Your career as an architect started at the end of the 1960s. What was memorable in your first experiences at that time?

Christian de Portzamparc: I became involved with the history of architecture as a teenager, in the 1960s. It was a very exciting time, people had faith in progress. At the time, the issue was to build for the numerous people who were poorly housed, and as students, we viewed humanities as crucial. I found myself, rather by chance, working in a multidisciplinary team which focused on the sociology and the analysis of waking dreams, led by Jacqueline Palmade. This was an essential phase in my work, it would be a long story to go into, but suffice it to say that it allowed me to focus on the question “why be an architect”. This happened after I’d finished studying – between 1969 and 1971 – when the spirit of the time meant questioning the assumption that architecture still made sense, wondering if it hadn’t become an outdated field - “bourgeois” was the term we used back then - a field unable to meet this new era’s needs and techniques. Our dream was for these techniques, or self-construction, to lead to creating housing and neighborhoods without needing this architect, who was viewed as a demiurge, as someone who got in the way of people inventing their own happiness.

And as a matter of fact, right at that time, I wondered “what is the point of architecture and of being an architect?”, to determine if I would or would not pursue that activity, by paying attention to these waking dreams. We were working with psychoanalysis and studying how people perceived and were reacting to these newly built neighborhoods, all these new estates. That’s why our team was made up of sociologists as well as psychoanalysts; there were about 10 of us. Some had a Marxist approach and others listened to waking dreams and worked with Freud, Oedipus, whereas others had a more classical and sociological perspective. What I heard was space. I could hear the pains, the hardships caused by the spaces, the agoraphobia, the claustrophobia, the closeness of this or that, of the neighbors. That’s what I talked about with them, space actually, and most listened.

I drafted a research project on that topic, which I ended up not carrying out, because at the same time I had offered to design a water tower in Marne-la-Vallée (1979). At the time, I realized I was either caught up in studies and research (one hemisphere of the brain), or drawing and designing projects (the other hemisphere). At the time, I would spend six months on one topic then move on to the next, but I didn’t easily bring both together. It is odd, and I was well aware of it. I overcame this problem once I had built, after I had finalized the Hautes-Formes buildings (1979). From then on, going from language to the visible wasn’t an

issue anymore. In the 1960s, science and techniques were acclaimed as the means for a better world, for the emancipation of mankind, for creating more freedom, wellbeing and equality. Then we went down that road and quickly, as early as the 1970s, it appeared that it was not so easy. Of course, progress was being made in medicine, etc., but some techniques have remained dangerous, destructive; they are polluting or sources of inequality. This 40-year progression has been based on techniques, on the city, on the different projects that have been implemented one after the other. It's interesting if you look at where we're headed now, since in the 1960s the future seemed all mapped out for everyone, whereas now the future is much more uncertain, indefinite, sometimes disquieting.

Books&Ideas: What is your conception of architecture?

Christian de Portzamparc: The aim of architecture is to contribute to our most personal and intimate life, as well as to public life. It uses changing techniques. It has an aesthetic aim in different aspects as well and this makes it important. It is also the expression of an era, a time. It tells us what existed two centuries ago and what is here today; it is a means for us to identify with our time. People easily talk about it, they look at their apartments and make judgments on others according to how they've decorated and use them. So my definition of architecture is quite broad: furniture, trinkets, landscapes, highways, infrastructure... Our visible environment is made up of all these elements, it requires and deserves to be at the heart of a reflection which isn't just about specific projects. Why do we perform architecture and what does it mean? Thinking and questioning the city, the visible, the home, city planning, buildings, construction sites, is very enlightening about the world as a whole, as well as about history. All of this is at stake, in other terms. Why? Because architecture is a crossroads where many things come together: techniques, inspirations, rational ideas, more intuitive ones, predispositions. I do as much city planning as architecture and as soon as you start working on a neighborhood you interact with elected representatives, inhabitants, and then developers and contractors. All of these people relate to the world in quite different ways, sometimes their visions are even antagonistic, and it all gets mixed into my work.

So you're always trying to understand why you reacted this or that way, or made this or that decision. I don't obsess over it; it doesn't mean I intellectualize everything. It just means that I'm curious and that it is exciting to be able to understand oneself, that's all. And when I work on projects I'm always trying to unravel what is more intuitive from what is more rational, what is backed by a reason. I don't just work with intuitive and purposeless shapes, there are reasons for them. But *raison d'être* can't account for everything either. Some things exist as an impression for a while and then gradually you come to understand why. There are also non rational ideas you keep, just because life isn't completely rational. Besides, it is exciting to view the world as not having only one right answer to any question. In the performance-driven world we live in, it often appears there is one single best answer. That's not true in architecture. This could be viewed in a round approach, but if you use a square or hexagonal approach, wouldn't it work out too? It means much more complexity; two different ideas appear. This actually means learning to be tolerant, despite one's beliefs, and to follow an empirical approach; you do need to have preferences, but at the same time approaching things with ready-made theories and blueprints inevitably leads to making mistakes. In the face of reality, there must be constant questioning to determine whether the situation should be viewed some other way.

Architecture & Language - Architecture & Music

Books&Ideas: You have often stated that architecture eludes language. So what is the nature of the architectural experience?

Christian de Portzamparc: Architecture expresses thoughts without using - or without necessarily using - language. I posit this because when I am studying, drawing up blueprints or taking photographs, when I make changes and the project's idea shifts - with sketches, blueprints or diagrams - I am not always or necessarily using language to do so. I often am, sometimes I discuss these changes with my team, but sometimes things simply shift, for yet unclear reasons - language hasn't expressed them yet and nonetheless these are thoughts, these are ideas. That's what made me think and make this statement; I argued it fairly emphatically to put an end to a pervasive and Cartesian presumption: "we think with language, we think with concepts". I have discussed this on some occasions, during congresses or seminars, and I remember discussing it at length with Roland Barthes, for instance. This question was also the reflection of an era - the late 1960s - in which linguistics was reaching a very wide audience. Saussure's work was drawing a lot of attention and the French structuralists based much of their analysis on the fact that we are speaking beings. Lacan considerably developed this idea: the unconscious is structured like a language. The idea immediately caught on and spread like wildfire, and architects and city planners started saying that the city could only be conceived as a language.

I spoke out against this trite idea. When I said that, I was also saying: "if you think you can reduce all of this to a matter of signifier and signified you'll be missing precisely what is irreducible to speech". Of course, we use language to conceptualize, to classify, to memorize, to express the meaning of "upward" or "top" and "bottom", etc. Hence it helps us establish shortcuts, by the use of concepts - which can namely be applied to space, to the visible, etc. Geometry itself is a language and so we can say "this is cylindrical", "this is cubical", etc. We are beings of language, but I am truly convinced that in addition to that we are *also* beings of space. This means that most of our memory is structured by distant impressions, among which spatial impressions - places we've lived, the way light entered a room, the simple movement of things. Bachelard was crucial in making a whole generation become aware of this, but he wasn't the only one. As an architect, one obviously works with this reality, with this basis which is our relation to space and to life.

As far as I'm concerned, I have no idea why but I enjoyed drawing landscapes, or deciding what color I should paint my room when I was thirteen. Should it be yellow? People said: "maybe white would be better"; so I painted it white and became a passionate advocate of the color white. We act on visual impressions. Well, actually I used to draw but I also painted. Other people may be less sensitive but they do experience it too. Anyone who visits an apartment will go to the window, open it and observe: "What can I see?", "When will the sun shine in?", "What's it like over there?", etc. This is something we experience. And doing this, "inhabiting", is absolutely fundamental; it's something we need. It is a crucial part of our life and it's not just a material issue, in my view it's also mental. It structures us. Of course, there is a form of thought involved. When you read a novel - let's say Dostoyevsky, for the sake of it - and you remember it, you remember the places, you remember the things, and you were the one who designed it. It isn't in the text, the text gives you a description but then you put your own film together. You can see the film. You go see the film adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* and you think: "not so bad!", but you're seeing something different from

what you had imagined. It shook you up and sometimes you think: “oh, I loved the book, but not the movie!” And then sometimes films overpower the book because they successfully impose a specific kind of image, and you accept the filmmakers’ vision. But we are constantly spatializing.

We build; we can effortlessly imagine a landscape based on a text, because we have a *huge* stock of imaginary building blocks, of landscapes and places, within ourselves. We draw on this reserve without even realizing we do. I think all this imagination, this dreaming, is fundamental, and when you work on a project reason and dreams are always competing. Sometimes you think: “how about doing this?” (that’s the dream) and then: “ok, but that’s stupid, it won’t work because of this and that and so...” (reason takes over again). It’s really a kind of interaction, because reason is just as important for designing and it makes contributions to quality and even to beauty. Beauty also comes from rationality, in a sense, from something which is well designed, which is logical. But if you only work logically, you can end up getting dreadfully stuck. As for me, I’m always caught up in this competition between dreams and reason.

Books&Ideas: You have designed many buildings for music, is there a special relationship between these two fields, architecture and music?

Christian de Portzamparc: There are two ways of viewing this issue. The first approach is purely metaphorical: music proves inspiring and leads to speak of rhythms, melodies, colors. There are even tone-colors - *Klangfarbenmelodie* -, in music; these are the types of connections that have been made. But the most obvious connection for an architect, which is not exclusively metaphorical, has to do with time and process. The architecture of a neighborhood or a house is revealed in the process of exploring paths, which unfolds over time. You come in, you see this, then something else, then this and that... Time is essential to listen to music, you can’t hear the whole piece at the same time, you have to experience the process over time - and this is also true, of course, for films. This process is crucial for me in my work as an architect. It is important as a city planner and it is important as an architect. I enjoy discovering things, being surprised, I like not finding the same thing in the next room; it makes it memorable. Thus there are fifty or seventy good photographs for most of the projects I have designed. It depends, whereas on the contrary some architects think five good pictures should be enough to provide a complete description, they use the same elements and they like it. It’s not really my state of mind.

I connect it with music, i.e. with discovering differences, because a musician seldom says: “I am going to compose a four movement sonata and all four movements will have exactly the same rhythm and the same instruments”. It happens, but musicians are well aware that it’s quite the opposite: a composition’s life lies in surprises, expectations and discoveries. It is essential in music and I think it is in architecture as well. It is true however that we live in such an eclectic world... Well, eclectic... Rather chaotic, overloaded, brimming with differences. It is so far from a sense of unity that often we seek calm, unity, a feeling of unified oasis, from spaces. So I am not against anyone doing it, it isn’t a total rejection, but music conveys this idea of discovering and perceiving through time. And this is also true, in my view, for architecture as I conceive of it. It is a pretty simple relationship, expressed by the words “rhythm”, “arrangement”, “rupture”, “surprise”, “discovery”, “expectation”... as a matter of fact, it has taken me time to learn to focus on these aspects!

To give a very simple example, I designed the Nanterre dance school of the Paris Opera between 1983 and 1986. It is quite luminous; the school opens onto a beautiful garden and the Nanterre Park. A young ballerina I was talking to one day said: "I like it here, but there is something I miss: the dark Opera corridors that I found slightly frightening". It was such a beautiful sentence. It had me thinking. I was designing and perfecting the project for the *Cité de la musique* (the conservatory in la Villette) and so I decided to design dark corridors with light at the end. There are four spans and corridors that are mostly in the shadows and then all of a sudden you reach a light-flooded space with a view on the park to the right, and on the avenue to the left. This conservatory is built on the interplay of shadows and light and chiaroscuro at some places, that I might not have imagined if I hadn't had the dance school experience of a more classical building - in the modern sense of the term -, meaning more luminous, hygienic, clinical. So you see, that sentence set off a significant process.

The Principle of the Open Block - The *Grand Paris* Project

Books&Ideas: You formulated the urban principle of the open block; could you explain this notion and its application in your city planning projects?

Christian de Portzamparc: The reflection on the open block stems from modern architecture, the modernity I was taught in the 1960s. This question "What is the point of being an architect?" actually has to do with the question "What does being modern mean? What is this era that radically transformed the concepts of the city, of habitat and housing?". Everything was a blank slate and new; we were borne by the postwar enthusiasm, still tangible fifteen years later. However, a hesitation, a question, transpired as early as 1965. This question was aimed at the modern concept of space, which I'm now beginning to grasp. When we visited the new estates, we thought they were fabulous because they were new, because they provided housing for a lot of people, because it was so different from what existed beforehand. Between 1961 and 1964, we were sure four fifths of Paris would be demolished for renovation and that only some historical sectors would be preserved. This was really the theory. That's why some streets in Paris are scheduled for realignment, because some of the buildings on them are set back from the others. They were allowed to build higher because they built ten meters back from the road and they were told "you are the first to do this but all the other buildings on the street will eventually rebuild because of the expansion, because everyone will benefit from it since more square meters can be built, because the owners will sell to developers". And once that happens, they will have to move back, we will have 25-30 meter-wide avenues, maybe even more, and we can build 35 meters high or more. We were genuinely excited about this reconfiguration of space; we thought it would solve the decrepit and dirty aspect of Parisian streets, which Le Corbusier had said all needed to be scrubbed with lime milk, eliminated; these tuberculosis-channeling streets had to be given up.

The traditional city was viewed as congested, filthy, unhealthy and unhygienic; a city where streets jumbled everything: pedestrians, cars, networks, horses, windows opening onto a view, fresh air, trees, all together! Downstairs there are stores but also attorneys, offices, schools; everything is mixed on the same strip, it's insane! Modern thinking, which is obviously modeled on and inspired by the technical method (I would say the technical method rather than the scientific method), focuses on needs, on functions, on problems and on ways to solve them. Le Corbusier started all this and said: "let's separate things, create parks, build housing units, separate from cars, separate from pedestrians; the stores will be located in big

spaces specifically designed for them, sports can be a little further, in specific areas...". This city rid of its streets - an old-fashioned idea where everything was jumbled - was called zoning, the green city, the radiant city; functions were clearly separated, everything would be where it belonged and everyone would know. But I was intent on doing the contrary, on connecting with a contemporary way of shaping space - a space providing protection and allowing for freedom too, something that wouldn't be imprisoning. It had to do with striking this balance between protection, intimacy and having a broad horizon. That's the idea behind the Hautes-Formes buildings. They are built on narrow spaces but they open onto a sweeping vision too; it's all about this combination. This led me to think: "the block is an interesting idea".

You know what a block is: it's the square - sometimes trapezoidal - space between four streets, sometimes three, lined by buildings and with a courtyard or gardens in the middle. The traditional block city is familiar to all. It's the crisscrossed city! It's the "city of streets". But I really believed that the street was not a shape of the past, that it had a great future. It is the simplest form which is able to welcome the most unpredictable diversity: small things, big ones, round, square things... It is a key for interpreting the visible world and having addresses, for recognizing so many different things. This simple street was so much richer, superior, to these combinations of set squares and lines which made up modern estates. Tomorrow's true modernity lay in rethinking this street and not copying these perpendicular line patterns.

That's when I thought the model could be a more open street; buildings themselves would no longer be adjoining (not stuck to others with a frontage, a back and two adjoining buildings, which I hated). So I decided: "no more adjoining building but streets nonetheless". This led to the idea of the open block, a block with buildings, with light cutting through it - so a more open street. I had this idea of open blocks after the Hautes-Formes buildings, which were set back from the street but already allowed for crossing spaces, light corridors, transparency. There is even a street cutting through the block, which I built for the Hautes-Formes. At the time, I almost considered making it a theory but then I refrained, thinking: "I'll be doing the same thing as Le Corbusier, conceiving a theory of the ideal city, but actually the concept hasn't been tested". So I worked on many projects. And little by little, towards the end of the 1980s, I started working on other projects for which I was drawn to designing open block neighborhoods. Then, in 1994, I won a competition to build an open block neighborhood in Masséna, in Paris. It went against the Paris Urban Planning Agency's opinion and everyone thought it wouldn't work. It was considered too sophisticated, something that could only work with architectures I myself designed. The 30 architects who worked on it in very different manners proved them wrong. It worked out perfectly well! Nowadays, the idea is copied with major or minor differences, and it has become a standard method for city planning: to rework the streets, to not build adjoining buildings, to design open blocks. Many people claim it as their own; many use it without calling it open blocks because they find it irritating to have to explicitly refer to de Portzamparc, but that's fine, it doesn't matter. It was a different approach to city planning.

But just using the term "open block" does not guarantee quality. Some of the ones I have seen are too large, too systematic... This formula also requires close attention to dimensions, to transparencies, rhythms, light, where the sunlight is coming from and so many things. For all these reasons, I think it is not a sufficient concept for urban planning. Creating a clearing is all very well and good but you can create an empty, appalling space that no one likes because it is not well dimensioned or well oriented... Every time, this *in situ* quality,

almost bodily, also has to be brought to the space. It is rather troubling because it means it is hard to do and it is therefore less rewarding than it used to be. Why is that? Because before the same models were copied over and over again, architects had these models and they put them into practice.

Books&Ideas: You are currently taking part in the second consultation on the *Grand Paris* project, has your vision of the future of the Parisian metropolis changed?

Christian de Portzamparc : We have had the opportunity to work on specific spaces, namely around Orly, Rungis, but also towards Le Bourget, some work on Drancy, Dugny, the airport, Le Blanc-Mesnil. We have worked on places and situations, like at La Défense, for instance. After a theoretical approach, this concrete grounding and the confrontation with elected representatives and inhabitants was edifying. It confirmed several elements that were contained in this Greater Paris project, in my view. The first one, which was essential at the first stage and I was constantly stressing, is that we had to open up spaces: the highways and their tubes cut up all these large territories on the outskirts and have made them enclaves that are sometimes unpleasant to live in (residential housing areas on the one hand, estates with many unemployed inhabitants on the other hand, then exclusively logistical or productive or industrial areas, etc.).

There are many places where walking or even bicycling is not an option, and if you live say in Rungis or around Belle Épine - with the big Belle Épine market - or Orly, you can get lost driving and walking can be unfriendly and dangerous. So these are challenging territories but we need to work on urban planning near the centre and not encourage new settlements around Coulommiers or Chantilly (even if there are some; to avoid more transportation, waste, CO2, etc.). For these places, we have been working on the possibility of building, and not just building isolated housing but rather housing alongside services, stores, schools, to create desegregation. We quickly realized that spaces need to be opened up and that people should not be placed in closed-off situations; this is something highly valued by mayors and inhabitants. So we've been working on this a lot.

It is related to rhizomes since they were used to represent the idea of connecting spaces in the Greater Paris without having to loop into the centre (a rhizome is a plant which sprouts roots from different points or nodes). So we're looking at what happens between Orly and Massy, for instance, or Orly and les Ardoines, or even further. But as we had in our first study, we are focusing on the connections that can be made. Considering that these trains or these underground metro networks are beyond our control, we are turning towards a kind of roads that I call "aggregative lines". These roads are former main roads or sometimes streets, which can be redesigned. We're interested in finding ways for people to travel by car, by bicycle, or even by foot, and by establishing continuity in a city which is now totally fragmented. Today, highways and trains provide continuity, but these same highways and trains cut up the space and the bridges or tunnels needed to connect them haven't always been built, because these are distant outskirts. In Paris, on the other hand, the bridges and tunnels have usually been built, above the Montparnasse train station for instance, so they can be bridged. In the outskirts, it often hasn't been done for bigger distances.

Doing this successfully means creating a better future for many places which can be connected. It provides an incredible range of choices for some municipalities; it opens up plots of land which cannot currently be developed, because they are trapped. This is one of the important aspects, I think, in terms of urban planning, which can be done without

spending too much money: starting with decent roadways. The traditional city, which I call the “First Age city” and was born in Greece, is a city with a grid-based road network. This type of network is a horizontal layer on which any point can be reached by following the grid. If you missed a turn, you can turn on the next street and find your way - this is true in Manhattan, in Paris or in Buenos Aires.

On the contrary, however, in all of these outskirts there is no such grid, never, or hardly ever - some remainders can be found in teensy old villages. At a larger territorial scale, it doesn't exist because it was never designed. What was designed though are these major highways which created what Le Corbusier called the “large sectors” (which measure 600m x 600m or 1km x 600m). These areas are located between train tracks, a highway, a metro. When we were working on the planned cities (*villes nouvelles*), we called them “potatoes”: an area given to three developers. I consider that these are areas of urban imprisonment. In these areas, there is no grid and the roads are terrible. If you've ever tried to go to a friend's birthday celebration in a planned city or in the outskirts, you've experienced this and ended up on the phone saying “Hello, I can see your house but I can't get there, it's a dead end! What road should I take? Les Fauvettes? Oh, ok...” and then it takes half an hour to find the exit on the highway because you missed it; because the street map looks like a tree (full of dead ends), or is circular (with shorter dead ends), or comb-shaped.

All these road maps are imprisonment and entail lacking the future capacity to evolve, unlike a grid - the streets around the Butte aux Cailles street (which was a very poor neighborhood in the 19th century) have gradually evolved and the homeowners in the area were able to imagine these transformations. Because streets are universal, all roads lead to Rome, to put it differently; and even if it's a cheaper neighborhood, the same cops and the same people will walk the streets. Everyone, rich and poor, can walk the streets. This republican conception of public space is of utmost importance to us. It is endangered since in vast parts of the world pieces of the city are being privatized, because of these areas we have created, that were designed by our elders, the Moderns (I'm using the term “the Moderns” as a reference to Bruno Latour, who performed an excellent anthropology of the Moderns).

These “Moderns” were our mentors, we have been respectful but it is our duty to question the implications of their endeavor. Because these areas of imprisonment were designed in the name of modernity. If it could easily be destroyed we would say: “that's ok, we have a different paradigm now”, but that's not the case, infrastructure is not easily demolished - and not just for technical reasons, since anyhow tar could be poured over them - no, because it is all a matter of property. Inalienable property rights mean that now this or that land owner, bank, or owner has this or that and we can't decide on that space. So we have planned a terribly repressive and repressed territory, by protecting minor things but without allowing for changes. It cannot be transformed and it is doomed to remaining as it is. That's what is so alarming!

By building up these “aggregative lines”, where a former main road can become a boulevard, we will at least be mapping out a broader web (which is neither a highway nor a thin comb-shaped or looped around string) and we will be able to say it is everyone's public space. I think we must truly strive to recover this public space. There are countries like Brazil, with huge outskirts divided by highways and private pockets, where you need a chip card to enter. Where we are building the City of Arts in Rio, at Barra da Tijuca, there are huge private estates - called Novo Ipanema or Novo Leblon, named after glamorous areas in the city centre - where you flash a card to a militia to enter. I led a TV crew there ten years ago to make a

film on Rio. First we went to the favelas and then we went to these places. The militias came; they took the cameras and asked us what we were doing. People live in these gated communities because their children can play outside, go for a walk; there might be a small infirmary, a pre-school, a few stores, the basics. They have to drive out all the time but the gated communities promise safety, or protection. It's appalling, it's a hostile world. You step outside and there is no public space, the highway is a technical tube which is almost as dangerous. It's a terrifying vision of the city; it amounts to annihilation, in a sense, of the city as a public space. Anyhow, this all sounds very pessimistic but it's a reality that should be discussed because it can be avoided. If we don't mention it, people may start implementing it and thinking it's ok. I had conversations with Brazilian urban planners who told me: "but this morning you criticized condominiums - that's what they call them - you know, you should come by our house, it's not so bad and it's really made our life easier with the kids". I go and I tell them: "Yes, it's true, I understand. But imagine if the whole world were like this..."

They are nothing more than camps, camps sealed off from each other. [...] It's impossible to imagine that this may be the only form that will spread, because as I have said it stands in the way of the future by preventing any transformation. In this sense, I would say it is anti-sustainable because sustainability means being able to adapt. We don't know what future generations will want or how they will function but if there are gated communities all over, the whole estate will have to be purchased. But these are huge pieces of property with so much work to be done, whereas cities are transformed by more isolated operations, in a much more flexible setting and economy.

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