Twilight of the myths, or, How to familiarise with urban nature

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Abstract
The consideration of the relationship between city and nature has historically been characterised by the latter being alternatively evaluated as an unbreakable, resilient, unpredictable or fragile system. Both attitudes of reverence and mistrust, as much as aestheticising nostalgia, have progressively sharpened the human detachment from nature, which is often idealised, crystallised or bent to urban needs. The article proposes a reading of Square Sauvage, by the Ceinturama collective, as an example of a contemporary landscape architecture attitude that is increasingly prone to accommodating forms of wildness in urban open space design. The Parisian project exhibits a distinctive approach that combines and transcends established mythologies, revealing an ordinary nature that is both spontaneous and friendly. This design attitude encourages experience and contact with the non-human realm, endowing it with new dignity and a novel form that is more seductive and welcoming.

La riflessione sul rapporto città-natura è storicamente caratterizzata da posizioni alterne che vedono quest'ultima come sistema inscalfibile, resiliente, imprevedibile o fragile. Tanto gli atteggiamenti di riverenza e diffidenza, quanto la nostalgia estetizzante hanno progressivamente acuito il distacco dalla natura, comunque idealizzata, cristallizzata o piegata alle necessità urbane. L'articolo propone la lettura del progetto Square Sauvage del collettivo Ceinturama come esempio di un'attitudine contemporanea della progettazione del paesaggio che, sempre più frequentemente, accoglie forme di selvatico nel disegno dello spazio aperto urbano. Il progetto parigino mostra un approccio peculiare che mescola e supera le mitologie consolidate, rivelando una natura ordinaria, al contempo spontanea e amichevole. Questo atteggiamento progettuale tende a favorire l'esperienza e il contatto con il regno non-umano, conferendogli una nuova dignità e una nuova forma, più seducente e accogliente.

Keywords
Multispecies coexistence, Urban wildness, *Friche*, Biological colonisation, Infrastructural heritage
Coesistenza multispecie, Selvatico urbano, Friche, Colonizzazione biologica, Patrimonio infrastrutturale

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Nature-city relationship status. 'It's complicated'

In the Western world, the interpretation of the relationship between the city and the natural landscape – an expression of the traditional nature-culture binomial – has undergone multiple interpretations over the centuries of human history, oscillating between different attitudes: from veneration to fear, from exaltation to distrust. Mention can be made of the close, sacred relationship that many ancient cultures had woven with woods (the *alsos* of the Greeks, the *lucus* of the Romans, or the *nemeton* of the Celts), mysterious places where they could relate to the divine. In continuity with such sacredness of the forest as a place of spiritual revelation, is the late-medieval legend of Saint Eustace, born Placidus (Eco, 2014). At the time he was a general in the service of Emperor Trajan, Placidus was induced to Christian conversion after the miraculous apparition of a bright cross between the antlers of a stag, which he encountered during a hunting trip in the woods.

However, the nature-city relationship took on a strongly anthropocentric connotation within the Christian theological tradition, where humans were conceived as subjects called upon to exercise dominion over the surrounding natural elements, thus legitimising a position of superiority and detachment from nature itself (Celestini, 2019). This detachment reflected in the compact morphology of Medieval cities, which were embraced by defensive walls, symbolically and physically constituting a demarcation line between the domain of culture and that of uncultivated nature – Dante's 'dark forest'. An example is the renowned 14th-century *Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government* fresco cycle by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. The *Effects of Good Government* frescos depict the 'well governed' city as an orderly and luminous complex, separated from remote, sporadic wild areas. This separation occurs through reassuring expanses of agricultural land, whose vegetation has a domesticated and orderly character that declares subservience to the needs of the human/urban community (Jakob, 2009). Later, ideal representations of the Renaissance city celebrated urban beauty by emphasising regularity and architectural purity, while no trace of vegetation could be found, except that contained and tamed in pots.

Such a dichotomy deepened further within the framework of Cartesian dualistic metaphysics, which established an irreconcilable ontological divide pitting the knowing (human) subject against the (natural) object of knowledge. In fact, nature was depicted as *res extensa*, an inert material reality susceptible to the rational mind's domination and manipulation. This approach was also reflect-

ed in the composition of open spaces and gardens, where grids and sharp geometries were imposed to tame and rationalise nature.

In the 18th century, a groundbreaking aesthetic sensibility began to spread from England, which was experiencing a particular economic prosperity due to mercantile development. Concerned that such prosperity was weakening the steadiness of society and individuals, flattening them to a passive aesthetic appreciation of reality, the cultural and artistic debate provided new rhetoric on nature that revolved around the exaltation of irregularity, smoothness of form and informal planting (Olin, 2021). From the middle of the century, this approach acquired increasingly dramatic and emotionally involving forms (Panzini, 2019), significantly radicalised – first in Germany and then all over Europe – through the Romantic fascination with the disruptive nature, both beautiful and frightening.

Within the industrial cities, nature progressively acquired the status of a lost paradise sacrificed in the name of progress. The ravenous logic of production and capitalism kept shaping crumbling, asphyxiated, polluted cities whose dramatic sanitary state fostered degrading living conditions, especially among the working class (Engels, 1892). While the pathologies of modernity were fatefully detaching humanity from the rest of the living world, Charles Baudelaire wrote that "nature is a temple" (1857, p. 19): although often unintelligible to humankind, it speaks of the infinite correspondences between the human and natural realms. Such correspondences echo a spontaneous and joyful vitality, whose call was nostalgically felt by humanity despite the progressive alienation dictated by increasing urban development. The need to rediscover contact with nature and its redeeming power in the insalubrious city was reflected in the construction of the great public parks of the 19th century, whose design was oriented towards the adoption of natural-looking compositions borrowed from England (Panzini, 1993), yet spreading an aesthetic primarily based on an ideal, picturesque image of nature.

During the 20th century, the topic of integrating nature into the city underwent a significant evolution from aesthetic and functional approaches towards an increasing integration of ecological science, environmental philosophy and social justice into urban development and design practices (Panzini, 2019; Corner, 1997; Thompson, 2009; Reed, Lister, 2020). The gradual recognition of the impacts of human agency led to the development of an ethical, environmental approach, which in the late 1940s was built around the seminal contribution of the ecologist Aldo Leopold. Understanding all living beings as a continuous manifestation of

a shared vital flow (Coccia, 2022), Leopold's work was based on the belief that humans have a moral duty towards biocoenoses and living environments, although such awareness is reached after a long, emotional and intellectual process. Such duty especially emerged in the years after World War II, when the exponential growth of the global population (known as 'great acceleration') resulted in a massive increase in the exploitation of natural resources, use of transport, production of waste, soil sealing and land fragmentation (Steffen et al., 2011).

The human responsibilities towards the biosphere became evident in the 1960s, thanks to advances in scientific environmental knowledge, which provided evidence of the human impact on natural processes and biological communities, increasingly recognised in their value. Such consciousness took on a radical dimension in the 1970s, when philosopher Arne Naess advocated for a "deep ecology' in contrast to the 'shallow', anthropocentric theories in environmental ethics, which were merely concerned with the effects of pollution and resource depletion on human health (Naess, 1973). Assuming an almost Spinozistic identification of the individual with the entire nature, such an "eco-philosophical rather than ecological" (ibid., 99) approach would motivate humans to protect rather than damage or exploit it. The progressive intellectual awareness was paralleled by the emergence of ecological movements, which helped disseminate notions mainly known at a specialist level. Especially in countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, where the respect for natural dynamics had already been promoted in open space design since the beginning of the century, ecological movements focused on recovering abandoned, interstitial, or dismissed sites, which became experimental grounds for urban transformation and renovation (Panzini, 1993).

Globally, the complex city-nature relationship has been progressively enriched by the recognition of the ecological contribution provided by ordinary environments, such as public and private green spaces. Scientific, design, and artistic interest also focused on leftover, marginal, and decommissioned spaces nestled within the urbanised fabric, such as brownfields, wastelands, and roadside verges (Clément, 2005; Berger, 2006; Jorgensen, Tylecote, 2007; Braae, 2015; Gandy, 2022). Since the 1990s, this growing attention to residual, de-functionalised spaces has favoured the emergence of an urban wildness aesthetic, emphasising nature's free flow, which reappropriates space according to an unpredictable logic.

Faced with the evidence that cities are catalysts of spontaneous dynamics and inevitably subject to colonisation by numerous living beings, urban

contexts emerge today as key places for rethinking the relationship between humans and non-humans, between tamed and wild. This reflection leads to a radical revision of the divide between nature and the city, in which the latter is no longer considered a closed system separate from the natural world but is increasingly understood as hybrid, stratified, open and dynamic (Steiner, 2011; Weller, 2019), manifesting unusual forms of biodiversity, new relationships between species, unprecedented behaviours and *taxa*. This shift in perspective results in the awareness that humans and non-humans are part of the same environment (Haraway, 2016; Orff, 2016; Caravaggi, 2022; Coccia, 2022) and that even unplanned dynamics – such as hybridisation, uncertainty, spontaneous proliferation of non-native and invasive species – can have as much impact as design and policy on disrupting the opposition between nature and culture (Prominski, 2005; Jorgensen, Lička, 2012; Gonthier, 2019; Leger-Smith, 2020). In this view, the city is interpreted as a system of ecosystems in constant renegotiation, whose peculiar biodiversity derives from continuous processes of synurbisation and confrontation between the conflicting interests of different species (Adams, Lindsey, 2011; Kowarik, 2011; Wauters, Martinoli, 2018).

However, several contradictions remain. The growing interest in the spontaneous dynamics of urban nature clashes with deeply rooted cultural legacies, which have sharpened the urbanites' expectations of a manicured, orderly type of nature that responds to the logic of the city, marked by dense fabrics, superimposed grids, and infrastructures that regulate and separate. Faced with the cultural tendency of interpreting the urban landscape as a space of order, care and management, the spontaneity of nature in the city can thus be perceived as disturbing, inconsistent, degraded, or even dangerous (Nassauer, 1995; Ward Thompson, 2002; Gobster, 2012; Metta, 2019; Rinaldi, 2021). On the contrary, while ecology is often portrayed as an antidote to every urban disease (Metta, 2022), integrating ecological principles into design does not automatically correspond to aesthetic and spatial quality. The interplay between perceptual aspects and ecological values is the crucial subject of a lively theoretical debate from which it emerges that the contradictory arguments of aesthetics and those of environmental sustainability are still difficult to reconcile, although strongly interrelated (Gandy, 2013; De Block, Vicenzotti, 2018; Treib, 2018).

The intertwining of greater environmental awareness and deep-rooted cultural constructs, therefore, provokes conflicting attitudes and reactions

in public opinion, ranging from optimism to denialism, from a desire to control and manipulate the world to pessimism, detachment and isolation (Latour, 2017). From such attitudes emerges the paradoxical role of humanity, which is both a destroyer of the planet and a leading actor in its salvation through responsible policies, projects and actions. In light of this complexity, Bruno Latour (2017) suggested that the ecological crisis has already occurred and that what we are experiencing today is a new era, a real mutation in our relationship with the world. Far from indulging in guilt, egocentrism or isolation, we should become conscious actors in a slow, moderate transformation of our relationship with nature.

Designing with urban wildness

The increasing need for such a renegotiation process has stimulated a profound theoretical reflection on the potential of landscape architecture as a tool for constructing suitable conditions for different species[1], sharpening the public's sensitivity and encouraging the acceptance of a different, wild aesthetic. The understanding of the city as a system of multispecies habitats has prompted new theoretical concepts and design approaches oriented towards greater biological inclusivity (Rinaldi, 2024), legitimising and celebrating the presence of uncultivated pieces of naturalness in the city: ordinary, neglected or marginalised spaces, but rich in vital and creative energy (Clément, 2005; Metta, 2019; Gandy, 2022). The theme of urban wildness and the development of spontaneous naturalisation processes reinforced the understanding of open space projects as unfinished devices capable of embracing hybridisation and evolution over time.

From this perspective, landscape design is read as a process characterised by controlled indeterminacy, a catalyst for biological dynamics and relational conditions. Landscape architectural projects are thus evolving, with the growing awareness that open space is configured as an indispensable connective tissue, enabling species relations, exchanges and movement. Far from articulating a concluded, defined, immutable design, landscape theory and practice progressively admit evolution, uncertainty and hybridisation. Although not always immediately perceived as positive, this uncertainty entails the construction of surprising and unusual spaces within established cities, fostering greater involvement by those who move through the space (Rinaldi, 2024). In this sense, and in response to the gap between environmental value and aesthetic perception, Catherine Howett (1987) called for a balanced dialogue between ecol-

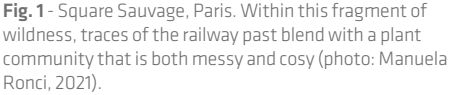

Fig. 1 - Square Sauvage, Paris. Within this fragment of wildness, traces of the railway past blend with a plant community that is both messy and cosy (photo: Manuela Ronci, 2021).

ogy, spatial experience and the meaning of space to modify our perception and understanding of the world. The idea of landscape design as an experiential device was also reiterated by Ann Whiston Spirn (1988), who emphasised how the spatial experience involves all the senses, fostering the sentient subject's understanding and appreciation of dynamic processes, changes and temporalities.

In the same direction, philosopher Cheryl Foster (1998) emphasised how the human aesthetic appreciation of nature derives from a dual sensory and emotional matrix. Both aspects go beyond visual perception alone: the former in its multiple extension of olfactory, tactile and acoustic experience (Gandy, 2013), while the latter for its interconnection with the intelligibility of the invisible processes that have contributed to shaping the observed object, the materialisation of what the human eye cannot perceive (Mozingo, 1997; Gobster et al., 2007; Olin, 2021). In design terms, this translates into a narrative construction capable of staging the ecological complexity concealed behind the apparent ordinariness.

The debate is therefore converging towards the idea that landscape design should take an active role in the articulation of an ecological aesthetic capable of transforming the public perception of urban biodiversity, promoting spaces of coexistence in which the multispecies dimension is not only tolerated but recognised, valued and experienced. The Parisian project *Square Sauvage* (2017-2018), designed by Ceinturama collective, is a clear example of this shift in perspective. The intervention was developed within a segment of a decommissioned railway line, where years of neglect allowed the spontaneous colonisation by dense wild vegetation, typical of the *friche* (wasteland), endowing the site with a great ecological value as an urban corridor of biodiversity. The following examination aims to show how the project gives urban nature a new guise that is both wild and friendly, messy and cosy, lush and seductive (Fig. 1).

Square Sauvage: from railway legacy to multispecies open space

La Petite Ceinture de Paris is a 32 km railway line built between 1852 and 1869 around the urban core of Paris (Iosa, Vallet, 2021). The advent of the faster and more convenient subway line marked its decline, and from 1934, it was dedicated solely to freight traffic, which was eventually discontinued in the 1990s. The line was decommissioned but not dismantled, and a section was integrated into the RER C line. Starting in 2006, the City of Paris began re-functionalising some railway sections as part of its central policies for urban regeneration and development[2] to preserve both the historical infrastructure and the ecological val-

ue it had acquired over years of abandonment. In 2015, the City of Paris and the National Company of French Railways (SNCF) signed a partnership agreement to recover additional railway portions in the eastern part of the city. The main objectives of the initiative were to encourage the development of cultural and recreational activities, including urban agriculture and social gardens, and pursue the balance between the use and conservation of this infrastructure, already recognised by the 2011 municipal biodiversity strategy as a critical tile complementing the Île-de-France regional green belt (Mairie de Paris, 2011; Iosa, Vallet, 2021). The design of interventions within the neighbouring 12th, 19th and 20th *arrondissements* was entrusted to the Ceinturama collective – consisting of landscape architects Wagon Landscaping, the architectural and artistic atelier Bruit du Frigo, architect Anne Labroille and engineer Laurent Becker – who was engaged for 18 months in a participatory co-design process[3] (Fig. 2).

Square Sauvage is the project developed in the 20th arrondissement, at the former Ménilmontant station. It stretches between two railway tunnels over a longitudinal railroad section of approximately 250 metres, bordered by tall buildings and embankments. The site, lower than the urban level, is crossed at its core by an elevated pedestrian footbridge, *Passerelle de la Mare*, which reconnects the two urban portions divided by the railway (Fig. 3). The lowered topographical configuration affords the area physical and perceptual autonomy from its surrounding context. This separation is further reinforced by masses of spontaneous vegetation, which colonised platforms, tracks, and embankments. The history of the site and its proximity to

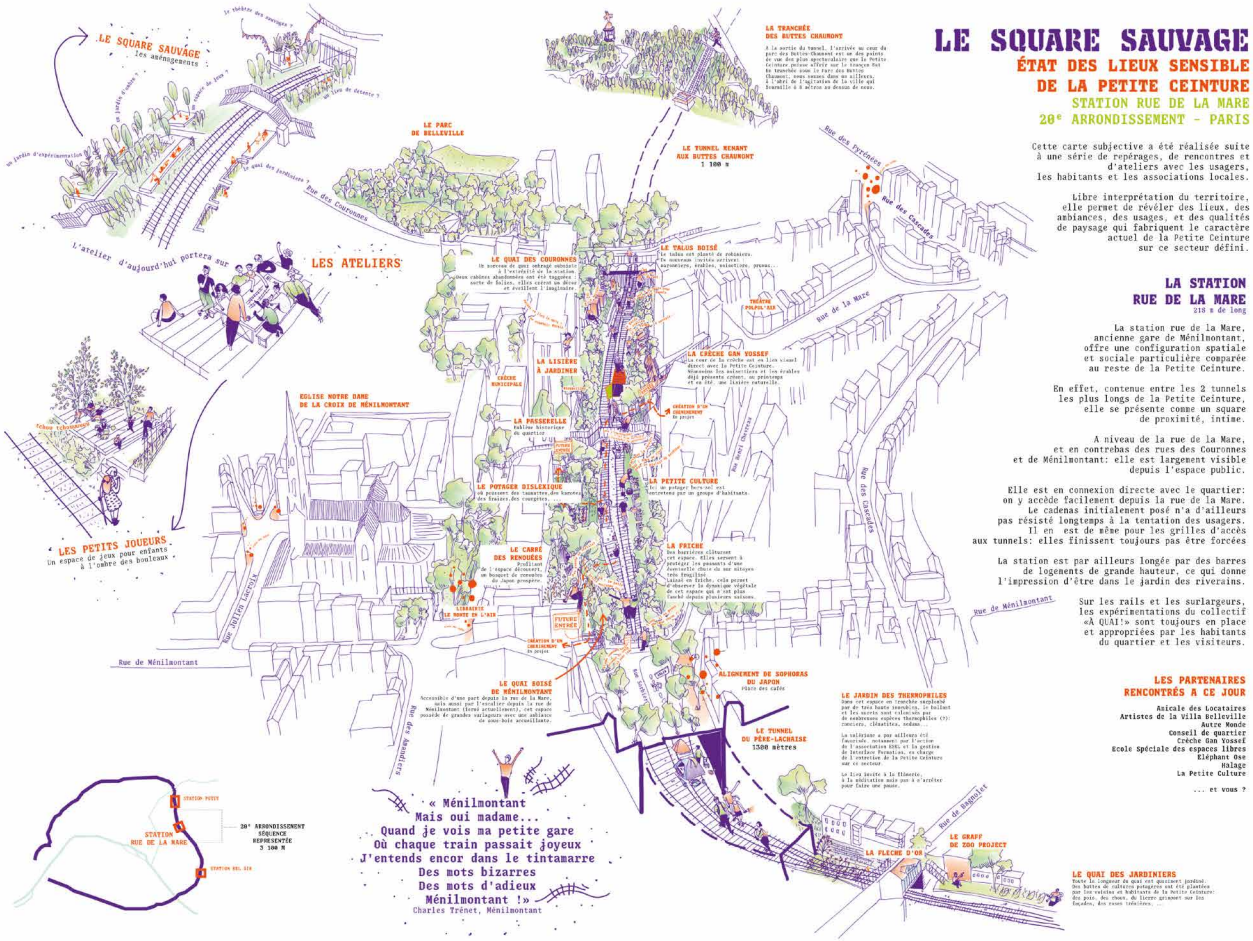

Fig. 2 - Petite Ceinture, 20th arrondissement, Paris. Interpretative map highlighting pre-existing landscape qualities and potential design directions, developed through site surveys and community engagement (Wagon Landscaping and Bruit du Frigo, courtesy of Wagon Landscaping).

a dense system of private gardens have, in fact, favoured the establishment of ornamental plants, invasive species, and ruderal vegetation typical of wasteland, as well as numerous species attractive to pollinators, butterflies and birds[4] (Wagon Landscaping, 2019). While transforming the former railway into a *promenade*, the design was strongly oriented towards the protection and enhancement of the existing plant communities, paying particular attention to the flora-fauna relationship and carefully studying the specific plant dynamics of the *friche*[5]. The designers also preserved the double-track railway line in place, with gravel ballast and sleepers retained on the eastern track. On the contrary, the western track was filled with stabilised limestone and repurposed as the only path of the composition (Fig. 1, 3). Moving from north to south, the project provides a sequence of diverse environments arranged along two strips extending on both sides of the double-track railway line (Fig. 4).

The western strip, which is more homogeneous, includes a long, dense stretch of ornamental herbs, shrubs and trees running alongside the tracks towards the *Passerelle de la Mare*. South of the footbridge, two small areas of prairie vegetation and uncultivated land surround a platform housing wooden seats and a container (Fig.

Fig. 3 - Passerelle de la Mare, Paris. The footbridge crosses the railway cutting (photo: Manuela Ronci, 2021).

5). The latter was repurposed to store gardening tools and technical installations (for electricity and water supply) while being left to be freely decorated by writers. This area preludes to a larger space for passive recreation, consisting of a minimally invasive and removable structure. Reminiscent of railway platforms, an elongated wooden deck was built along the edge of the track/path during participatory workshops with local communities. On the other side, the deck is flanked along its entire length by a dense bramble thicket, which occasionally creeps over the wooden surface (Fig. 6). In doing so, the brambles embrace and define smaller areas, provided with seats and *chaise longues* arranged singly or in pairs over the deck. The bramble mass also separates the platform from a pedestrian pathway (Passage de la Station-de-Ménilmontant) that ends in a system of stairs connecting the elevated level of the city to *Square Sauvage*. Enclosed between the Passage and the built fabric is a final edging of shadow-tolerant plants and undergrowth, integrating a space dedicated to the spontaneous development of pioneer plants (Fig. 7a, 7b).

The eastern strip is a more articulate system of small areas. To the north, near a primary school, a dense grove and a border of ornamental plants flank a second, smaller wooden deck, also equipped with seats and chaise longues. Instead of being juxtaposed to the path as the previous one, this smaller deck is surrounded by a strip of ballast colonised by herbs, thus, resulting slightly more secluded and far from the rail tracks (Fig. 8a, 8b). The sequence continues with two small plots of uncultivated land, subject to experimental decompaction treatments and progressive processes of spontaneous colonisation. The uncultivated plots are separated by a tiny kitchen garden (Fig. 9), designed for collective activities and social

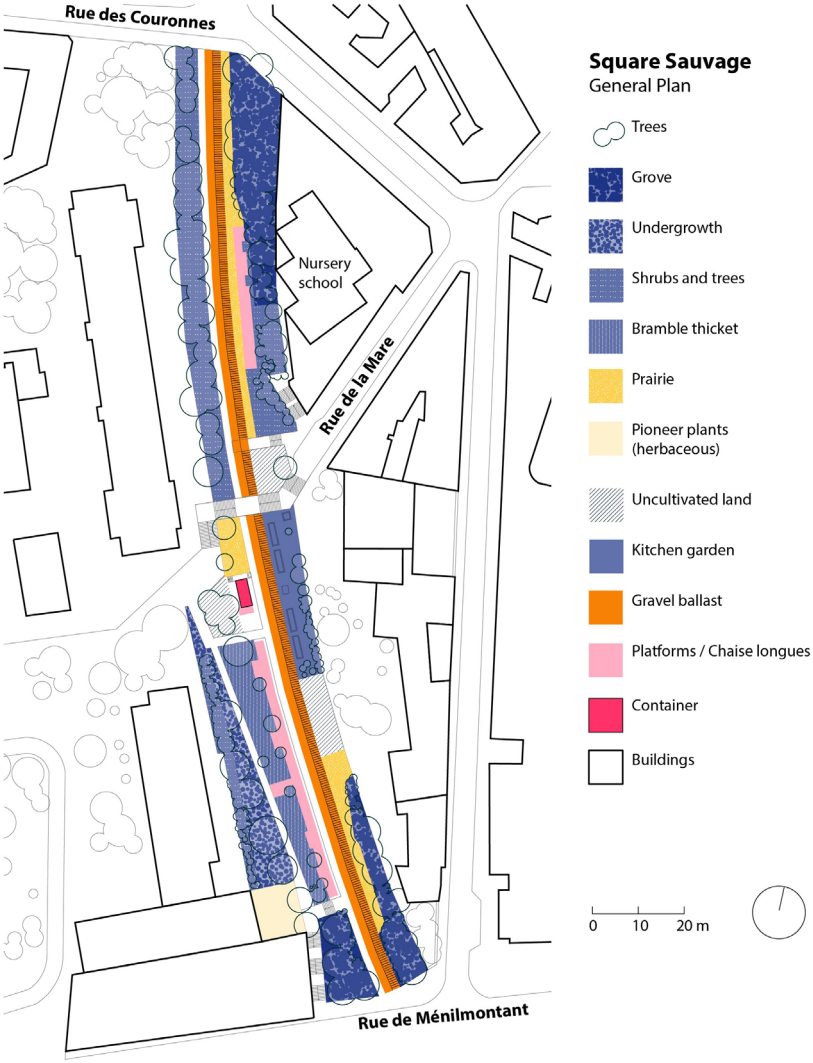

Fig. 4 - Square Sauvage, Paris. General plan of the project (author's elaboration based on Wagon Landscaping, 2019).

gatherings. The system concludes with a final significant stretch of woodland, flanked by a strip of prairie vegetation.

Square Sauvage comprises a diverse range of habitats, such as groves, bushland, prairies, and meadows, which provide food and shelter for a varied animal community, including hedgehogs, weasels and wall lizards. The existing vegetation was further enhanced through the inclusion of prairie species, such as *Lotus corniculatus*, *Medicago lupulina*, *Medicago sativa*, *Onobrychis viciifolia*, *Phacelia tanacetifolia*, and *Trifolium resupinatum* (ibid.). Complementing the project, Wagon Landscaping also developed a *cahier d'éntrétien*[6], a detailed adaptive-management plan for the site and its vegetation based on differentiated, low-budget gardening solutions that respect the site's biodiversity.

Fig. 5 - The container and the small space for passive recreation (photo: Manuela Ronci, 2021).

Fig. 6 - The long wooden deck is bounded by a dense bramble thicket, which embraces and defines areas with varying degrees of seclusion (photo: Yann Monel, courtesy of Wagon Landscaping).

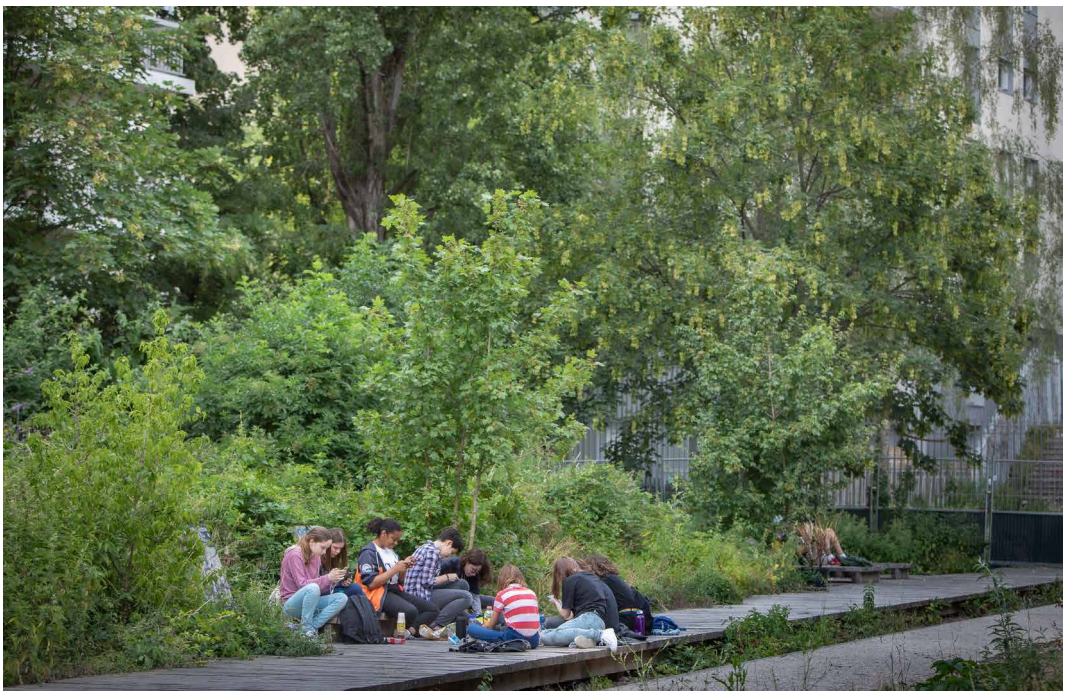

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Fig. 7a, 7b (prev. pages) - South-west of Square Sauvage, Passage de la Station-de-Ménilmontant is flanked by dense undergrowth and an experimental plot occupied by pioneer and invasive species, such as *Reynoutria japonica* (photo: Yann Monel, courtesy of Wagon Landscaping).

Fig. 8a, 8b - A second, more secluded, wooden deck is embedded between a dense grove and ballast colonised by herbs and prairie species (photo: Manuela Ronci, 2021).

The welcoming side of urban wildness

Square Sauvage provides a sensitive and accessible interface between human dwellers and the urban nature, which is not domesticated but made welcoming through gentle spatial devices and targeted management measures. Instead of imposing an order by reorganising the vegetation according to traditional aesthetic canons, the project cohabits with the pre-established living communities, respecting their spontaneous logic and encouraging their development.

The entire project hinges on the dialectical tension between the structure of the composition, inevitably influenced by the infrastructural linearity of the tracks and platforms, and the disorderly yet welcoming density of the plant associations. Although the regularity of the layout imposes a prevailing direction, which constrains and directs the view and movement, the plant stratification disrupts this rationality, giving greater dynamism to the composition. It is precisely in the negation of the norm, in the interruption of the ordered rhythm, that this section of *Petite Ceinture* reveals the suggestive and poetic potential of urban nature. A wild nature that, through its disordered flow, can dilute and contaminate urban rationality. The atmosphere of the site is strongly influenced by both human activity and the spontaneous dynamics of other species, as much by the built environment as by the pre-existing vegetation. The double margin formed by buildings and vegetation ensures that the city and nature both act as reassuring presences, making the project's ambiance peacefully suspended and intimate (Fig. 10). On the one hand, the presence of the city is suggested by the buildings that can be glimpsed beyond the foliage, reminding the visitor that the urban, managed dimension is not far away. On the other hand, the dense vegetation serves as a welcoming filter that separates from the hectic city and encourages an immersive experience of urban nature. The plants, preserved and enhanced, are managed to a minimum in order to construct a liveable space for humans and non-humans alike. The vegetation helps generate a system of informal and diverse environments characterised by varying degrees of intimacy and isolation, different heights and densities of vegetated masses and, thus, alternating light and shadows. The urban nature of *Square Sauvage* is not merely a scenic backdrop but acts as a relational device. In addition to symbolically and perceptively mediating the relationship between the visitor and the surrounding city, the wildness welcomes and embraces, suggests and separates spaces. Thus, it offers a protect-

Fig. 9 - The tiny kitchen garden is hosted in wooden containers, flanked by uncultivated, decompacted land (photo: Manuela Ronci, 2021).

Fig. 10 - While the reassuring view of the city can be glimpsed beyond the foliage, the dense vegetation is a welcoming filter that allows an immersive experience (photo: Yann Monel, courtesy of Wagon Landscaping).

ed sphere yet open to the possibility of everyday experiences, such as staying, walking, observing and cultivating, within a space with a lush atmosphere, wild in appearance, but surprisingly hospitable. In this sense, *Square Sauvage* also operates on a semantic level: uncultivated vegetation is not a symptom of degradation or abandonment but a value; spontaneity is not disorder but an expression of vitality. The blurred borders between the designed spaces, the lightly managed areas and those left to self-evolution suggest an aesthetic of the transitory and flux, which allows the public to become familiar with a different image of nature: less predictable but more lively and evocative.

The project is part of a well-established trend of disused railway regeneration but differs from exemplary cases – such as *Naturpark Schöneberger Südgelände* (2000), *Park am Nordbahnhof* (2010) and *Park am Gleisdreieck* (2013) in Berlin, or the *Parisian Martin-Luther-King Park* (2021) – mainly in terms of scale and spatial typology. Given its small size, *Square Sauvage* accommodates a few defined functions, focusing more on the ecological heterogeneity. Nevertheless, while being highly wild, it is not perceived as a frightening space, as it can be largely controlled with the gaze (Fig. 11).

Scale is also linked to the theme of spatial categories. The mentioned railway projects are 'urban parks', while it is relevant to observe how the project within the *Petite Ceinture* refers, in a contemporary key, to the category of the 'square': an open space that in the Parisian urban tradition has acquired an intermediate role between square and garden, introduced by the Haussmann plan as an urban device for sociality, recreation and health (Lizet, 1989; Panzini, 1993; Christiany, 2010). Consciously fitting in this tradition and reinterpreting it, *Square Sauvage* subverts its formal order and ornamental logic, instead embracing an uncultivated, spontaneous aesthetic. Such a subversive attitude towards established canons is part of the stylistic identity of Wagon Landscaping. Projects such as *Jardin de Jouyeux* (2016) in Aubervillers or *Asphalt Jungle* (2020) in Paris, although very different in size, transformed anonymous residential courtyards, rendering them wild. In this sense, 'wildness' is not only an ecological condition but becomes a perceptive and semantic quality, able to surprise, give new meaning to space, and, at the same time, entrench itself in the everyday life experience.

Therefore, even in its exceptionality, *Square Sauvage* does not represent an isolated and unrepeatable fact but a possible, peculiar condition of the contemporary city, characterised by dynamics such

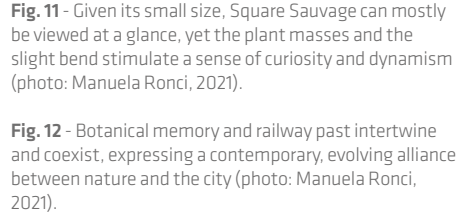

Fig. 11 - Given its small size, Square Sauvage can mostly be viewed at a glance, yet the plant masses and the slight bend stimulate a sense of curiosity and dynamism (photo: Manuela Ronci, 2021).

Fig. 12 - Botanical memory and railway past intertwine and coexist, expressing a contemporary, evolving alliance between nature and the city (photo: Manuela Ronci, 2021).

as grafting, overlapping, colonisation and cohabitation. In this sense, the project maintains and exalts Jacques Réda's poetic description of the *Petite Ceinture*, "which, by means of a ring of forest sleep, surrounds the frenetic city and connects it, through various branches, to the dream networks of the planet"[7] (Lizet, 1989; Michel, 1994). Grafting itself onto the disused infrastructure, *Square Sauvage* softens its liminal condition and transforms it into a welcoming landscape, a suspended place suited to the encounter of humans with a wild and friendly urban nature. The former railway line thus becomes a labile threshold, an uncertain margin. Once the urban order is loosened, the city's rigid functional logic leaves room for a powerful imagination nourished by the creative whim of plant spontaneity. The intervention preserves and enhances the vigorous dimension of urban nature without, however, excluding human presence and experience. The design intervention supports the spontaneous biological dynamics through management methods that are light, adaptive and oriented towards the conservation of existing biodiversity. At the same time, the infrastructural memory, preserved in the railway tracks and artefacts, is not erased but reinterpreted as an integral part of the narrative, underlining once again how human and non-human events intertwine and overlap in the history of cities (Fig. 12). The juxtaposition of recreational spaces that merely suggest possible uses and uncultivated areas subject to spontaneous colonisation reflects the desire to foster interspecific cohabitation. In this way, humans and non-humans find in the project a favourable environment to freely explicate their different ways of "worlding" (Haraway, 2016), that is, the multiplicity of ways they have of existing and co-existing. *Square Sauvage* is a space delicately designed to allow us

> to remain open to the dizzying otherness of existents, the list of which is not closed, and to the multiple ways they have of existing or of relating among themselves, without regrouping them too quickly in some set, whatever it might be (Latour, 2017, p. 36).

Rather than educating about nature in a didactic or moralising way, at the heart of the intervention is the will to create the conditions for nature itself to engage, surprise and fascinate. The seduction of the wild landscapes is not modelled on established aesthetic rhetorics; it emerges from the care with which what was shaped by the mutual human and non-human agencies – the spontaneous processes of biological colonisation, the raw materiality of soil and disused infrastructure – is welcomed and amplified. In this way, *Square Sauvage* promotes a cultural paradigm shift which

rejects containment as much as aestheticisation or idolisation. This approach, instead, recognises nature as a vital subject with which to build dynamic, open and constantly evolving alliances, revealing an effort to question the myths of nature that have long shaped the Western imaginaries. Whether resilient, tolerant, or fragile, the nature evoked by past narratives loses its oppositional stance towards humanity, turning into a shared, uncertain, and negotiated realm. Such an effort results in a post-mythical landscape, where the attitude towards separation gives way to an attitude of coexistence. *Square Sauvage* does not conceal the contradictions of this condition, for wildness remains unpredictable, somehow unruly, sometimes ordinary yet regenerative and enchanting. The acceptance of these multifaceted ambiguities discloses a new imaginary in which the myth is no longer needed to explain nature from afar but embodies a daily, intimate experience of it. The twilight of the myths does not mark their extinction, but rather their transfiguration into a new narrative of proximity, familiarity and shared agency between humans and the more-than-human world.

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Note

[1] Among others, see works by Martin Prominski (2014, 2019, 2024), Wolfgang Weisser and Thomas Hauck (2017), Annalisa Metta (2019, 2022), Maike van Stiphout (2019), Mitchell Joachim (2020), Bianca Maria Rinaldi (2021, 2024), Emma Salizzoni (2021a, 2021b), Anna Lei (Lei, 2023).

[2] More information is available on the website of the City of Paris <www.paris.fr/pages/la-petite-ceinture-et-ses-promenades-ecologiques-7855> (05/25).

[3] The experience is described in its main stages on the official website of atelier Bruit de Frigo <www.bruitdufrigo.com/projets/fiche/ceinturama/> (05/25).

[4] The plant list includes, among others: (1) *Cornus sanguinea, Laurus nobilis,* (2) *Ailanthus altissima, Clematis vitalba, Robinia pseudoacacia,* (3) *Ballota nigra, Centranthus ruber, Hypericum perforatum, Lysimachia arvensis, Papaver rhoeas, Rumex sp. pl.*, (4) *Anthriscus sylvestris, Arctium minus, Phacelia tanacetifolia,* (5) *Buddleja davidii,* (6) *Crataegus monogyna, Euonymus europaeus, Prunus avium.*

[5] As landscape architect François Vadepied (Wagon Landscaping) claimed, private communication in Paris, 07/21.

[6] A copy of the document, drawn up in 2019, was provided by François Vadepied and supported the analysis (private communication, 07/21).

[7] "[cette Ceinture] qui entoure la ville frénétique d'un anneau de sommeil forestier, et qui par divers embranchements la relie aux réseaux de rêve de la planète" (Réda, 1981 cited in Lizet, 1989, p. 268; Michel, 1994, p. 182), translated by the author.

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