

# PIN-UP

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# GARDEN M Z VARIETY

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June 14, and M/M Paris

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# GRASS HOPPERS

## A former wasteland outside of Paris undergoes a subtle architectural makeover

In the rarefied world of architecture, the small French town of Poissy will be forever associated with Le Corbusier's illustrious Villa Savoye. Located on a voluptuous bend in the Seine, 19 miles outside Paris, Poissy was very rural in the 1920s when Corbu built his seminal weekend house, which in those days stood alone in splendid isolation. Today it's surrounded by trees that block out the neighboring buildings, but the villa was in fact oriented so that the celebrated living room and solarium could take advantage of stunning views across the Seine valley. And what you would see immediately below, were it not for today's greenery, is the *commune* of Carrières-sous-Poissy on the other side of the river. Moreover you would see a changing view, for on the one hand Carrières is densifying, while on the other its waterside flood plains are being transformed into the evocatively named Parc du Peuple de l'Herbe (literally "people of the grass").

Masterminded by French landscape architects TER, the new park occupies 279 acres of wasteland that was the product of gravel and sand extraction in the 20th century. It was these activities that gave the site its two large, shallow lakes, and it was the gravel diggers' departure that allowed the current secondary-succession vegetation to take over. Abandoned to nature for decades, the terrain is now home to several rare species of

birds, plants, and insects (including some that are protected by law), which TER aims to encourage and preserve through the design of the new park. To achieve this, they divided the site into three zones: a "*bande active*" (a tree-lined roadway, footpath, and cycle lane) running alongside the housing on the park's landward perimeter; a riverside pathway with restored gravel banks — a type of habitat that, once common, has now become very rare in the region — to encourage flora native to the Île-de-France; and a central "wild" zone where nature can reign supreme without being disturbed by the park's users. "Our scheme makes the most of all the site's current advantages, and will continue to improve the ecology thanks to the planned management strategy," say TER. Since the budget was minimal, so were their interventions, taking the extant and improving it in just the subtlest of ways.

But human leisure activities are not entirely banished from the Parc du Peuple de l'Herbe — in fact they are encouraged by a handful of buildings that were jointly designed by Paris-based architects AWP (Alessandra Cianchetta and Marc and Matthias Armengaud) and the Basel-based firm HHF (Tilo Herlach, Simon Hartmann, and Simon Frommenwiler). "The brief was about creating a family of structures that would create a sort of brand image for the park, rather in the manner of

the Parc de La Villette [famous for Bernard Tschumi's red Deconstructivist follies]," says Cianchetta. "But obviously, given the natural beauty of the site, we needed to do something much more subtle," adds Frommenwiler. Twelve structures are planned in all, of which the three principal are a visitor center/museum of insects, an observation point, and a *guingette* (a café-restaurant). Two have so far been completed — the visitor center/insect museum, and the observation point — while the *guingette* is due to be built next year. A series of smaller "orientation totems" and information kiosks will follow in its wake as funds become available. "The presence of barges, fishing huts, and houseboats was a powerful source of inspiration," say the architects. "Beyond the park is nondescript suburban housing. Our design springs from a process of hybridization between these two existing habit models — floating barges and the archetypal suburban house — that results in a new typology which reflects the site's memory and identity, both spatially and socially, while providing a contemporary and forward-looking response."

Part public-leisure amenity and part garden folly, the new structures take the childlike shape of "houseness" and multiply and jumble it up, as though Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* had crash landed several times in chaotic succession in the middle of the brush. Siberian larch slats dress up the visitor center/insect museum (whose structure is in Douglas pine), treated in various colors and finishes that will weather differently, and the exterior also includes large expanses of corrugated polycarbonate that light the lofty, generous internal spaces. The visual result is a succession of subtle and not-so-subtle vertical stripes that stand out in the landscape through

their ghostly pallidity. Meanwhile the observation point, which the architect called Poissy Galore, takes the form of a tall belvedere that has been formed from a piling-up, at crazy angles, of pared-down house forms outlined in white-painted steel. Engineered to within an inch of its life with Swiss precision, the belvedere's several viewing platforms (pictured on the following page) allow the "wild" heart of the site to be surveyed without human intrusion.

An expanse of flat wasteland next to a densifying suburb of outer Paris doesn't sound very appealing. Yet the Parc du Peuple de l'Herbe is absolutely magical in its own discreet way, even in the middle of winter when the landscape is at its most barren. Looking across the terrain towards the Seine, the park takes its full place as part of a majestic valley landscape, constituting an expansive, horizontal counterpoint to the high wooded escarpments of the far riverbank opposite. The subtle winter palette of browns, grays, and mossy hues, in which the bare trees add relief, bones, and texture, gives way in summer to a riot of vibrant greens in a whole vigorous colorway of the most varied and manifold shades. Whatever the season, the landscape appears to recede in successive semi-transparent planes, like the superimposed layers of one of Le Corbusier's Purist paintings. But it's perhaps more of a Russian influence that holds sway with the Constructivist-Cubist assemblages of the follies, which punctuate the site with just the right combination of discretion and brazenness, strangeness and familiarity, solidity and immateriality. They appear to hover just above the site, ambivalent, hallucinatory, yet very sure of themselves, these people of the grass.

— ANDREW AYERS

GRASS HOPPERS

PANORAMA

Photography by Julian Lanco

