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March 11, 2003
Urban Design Politics

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La Grande Arche de la Défense, Paris

Paris, among many things, is a city of monuments. Although most are emblems of the past, the tradition of using prominent sites to make political statements is very much alive in the present. Just as the Arc de Triomphe commemorates the return of Napoleon's men from battle, the Grande Arche proclaims the importance of France's financial capital, La Défense.

Danish architect Johan Otto von Sprecklesen's Grande Arche de La Défense is one of Paris's most recent contributions to the city's collection of monumental architecture. Situated to the northwest of the historic city's frontier, the building forms the northern terminus of the Grand Louvre-Place de la Concorde-Champs-Élysées-Arc de Triomphe axis. A testament to political symbolism and process, the building exemplifies the urban operations of post-World War II France, particularly those under François Mitterrand's ambitious building program, *les Grands Travaux*¹.

The conception of a building for the site of the present Grande Arche began in the late 1950s with the creation of La Défense, a new business and financial district for Paris. The name was taken from a monument, La Défense de Paris, which was erected in this area in 1883 to commemorate the war of 1870. The new *département*, La Défense, was created on a flat plain across the Seine from the Bois de Boulogne. Although the district's development proceeded

¹ La Grande Arche is the first among numerous 'projets' carried out under Mitterrand, including the extension of the Louvre, adaptive reuse of Musée d'Orsay, various projects for La Villette, L'Institut du Monde Arabe, Le Ministère

through the early 1970s, a combination of factors—a fluctuating economy, political imbalance, and shifts in aesthetic opinion—prevented the finalization of a design for the Grande Axe’s terminus site until the early 1980s.² Consequently, the process leading to its completion in the early 90s is as imbued with urban design politics as its present monumental form.

Taken at face value, the Grande Arche commands attention from afar. Its axial orientation alone assigns it unmistakable importance in the same manner Haussman’s boulevards created the ideal site for the Opéra Garnier. In more modern times, with more modern technology, the Grande Arche announces its importance in dissimilar ways. Its monumental size, symmetrical form, and open nature draw one’s attention to it, as do its shining white marble facades and lengthy staircase. It compliments its context among modern buildings, adding to the futurist sensation of La Défense. Apart from of its disregard of human scale, the building acclimates well with its surroundings. Contextualization, however, is not the most fitting way to categorize the building’s situation.

The Grande Arche’s position at the heart of La Défense hints at its significance in the realm of French capitalism. The building is not a skyscraper in the American sense, however. It is not F.W. Woolworth’s flagship commanding attention over the New York City skyline; i.e. it is not big business advertising itself. THIS is government asserting its power and importance in the financial bureaucracy of modern times. Political power is, indeed, constructed through space. “The scale of the structure reminds the mass of political spectators that they enter the precincts of power as clients or as supplicants, susceptible to arbitrary rebuffs and favors, and

des Finances, et L’Opéra de la Bastille. Francois Chaslin, *Les Paris de Francois Mitterrand: Histoire de grands projets architecturaux*, Gallimard: 1985, pp. 11-19

² Francois Chaslin, “A Monument in persepective,” *La Grande Arche de la Défense*, Electa Moniteur: 1989, pp. 19-125

that they are subject to remote authorities that they only dimly know or understand.”³ Edelman’s discussion of the hierarchy of some public spaces is applicable to La Grande Arche, a building embodying public investment but accentuating governmental control.

Aside from its monumental size, shape, and placement, the Grande Arche further imposes its political power through its manipulation of the past. Its arch form is undoubtedly related to the Parisian monument most visible from its steps: the Arc de Triomphe. The Grande Arche uses the symbolic Roman triumphal arch not only to identify the city’s northwestern extension, but also to welcome new business interests to La Défense. Just as the Arc de Triomphe commemorates the return of Napoleon’s men from battle, the Grande Arche announces the importance of France’s financial capital, La Défense. It accomplishes this most obviously with its cubic arch shape, but some subtle details such as the geometries of the interior panel work resemble the coffers of the authentic Parisian triumphal arch. By utilizing such symbolism, the building appears to be asking for comparable respect.

The long process of the Arch’s completion also speaks the politics of space building, as it is the result of the government’s intervallic involvement in the project. Changes in political power and fluctuation in the national economy lead the project through various stages. One significant phase that speaks to the intended outcome of the development is the government’s bold efforts to attract international architects for the 1982 competition. After having received few American and Japanese submissions, propaganda was placed in several architectural circles to publicize the project’s importance around the world.⁴ It is possible that Americans were sought out because La Défense, when completed, was to rival American business centers. By alerting many nations to the monumental scale of the project, the government was seeking to

³ Murray Edelman, “From Art to Politics:How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions,” pp. 76

promote La Défense as an international business and financial center. As London's Canary Wharf was simultaneously being realized as a similar kind of economic center, the announcement of La Défense via the 1982 competition was likely intended to further promote it.

Upon his election as President, Francois Mitterrand took rapid action to complete the La Défense project. He chose Sprecklesen's design in 1982 among over 400 entries. Among several political moves, Mitterrand sought to quell opposition to la Grande Arche's visual impact on the view from the Grande Axe in the direction of La Défense. He went to great lengths to carry this out, demanding that Europe's largest crane be brought to Paris in order to hold up a life-size rendering of the Grande Arche to simulate its visual impact.⁵ Although this may not have suppressed the opposition, it portrayed Mitterrand as a sympathetic leader. Having successfully paved the way for the Grande Arche to signify France's importance in business and finance, he utilized its success to launch an array of other *grands projets*. Among the others, La Grande Arche de la Défense is emblematic of Francois Mitterrand's devotion to creating modern monuments attesting to France's central role in art, politics, and the world economy at the end of the 20th Century.

⁴ Francois Chaslin, "A Monument in perspective," *La Grande Arche de la Défense*, Electa Moniteur: 1989, pp. 19-125

⁵ *Ibid*, 153-55

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11.302J / 4.253J Urban Design Politics
Spring 2010

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