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Open Space

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THE PAILLON PROMENADE A CENTRAL PARK FOR NICE?

The new park above the River Paillon in the French Mediterranean reconnects disparate spaces, and reveals long-lost views of the sea, city and surrounding landscape.



The river Paillon flows through the city centre as shown in the image on the left, dated 1860, shortly before the first section of the river was covered-over. The new park by Péna & Peña is, in fact, a roof garden that measures over one kilometre in length.



Nice is a city of drama. And the opening of the Paillon Promenade was, as the French would say, a *coup de théâtre* – colour, light, music, dance, opera and ten thousand Niçois. On a sunny day in October 2013, two years after the demolition of two very big, ugly buildings, a huge crowd waited in the town square, outside closed gates draped with curtains, watching as the story of a river was told on giant screens. A drone flew overhead, filming. Images on the screens changed to show live footage of the park from above: spray from the fountains, the mayor hand in hand with a child dressed traditionally in red, and beyond them – the crowd, us! As the child pushed open the gates, the curtains fell, the crowd cheered and the spectacle began. Built over an artery in the heart of the city – its river – the Paillon Promenade is finally open!

Nice is famous for its azure backdrop, palm trees and 19th-century architecture. Dufy, Munch, Matisse and Toulouse-Lautrec all painted the celebrated *Promenade des Anglais* and its carefree, beautiful people. The bay of Nice stretches as far as the eye can see, in a gentle, south-facing arc, ending where blue sky meets blue sea in a horizon that shimmers in year-round sunshine. Beyond the farthest reaches of the city, a succession of hills rises northwards to meet the Mercantour's snow-capped mountains and more blue sky. It's hard to beat the beauty of this setting, this sunlight or this climate.

France's fifth city, located on the Mediterranean coast close to Italy, has 350,000 people. Nice greets four million visitors annually and is one of the glamorous towns of the Côte d'Azur, but despite its glittering image, it's a city of disparate fortunes. For centuries, *paysans* worked the land, and if riches finally fell from the sky, it would be a mistake to think that everyone shared in them. The modern town, crammed into gaps between steep slope, coastline and river, is squeezed by its geography, its



PAILLON PROMENADE, NICE, FRANCE
 Client: Metropole Nice Cote d'Azur
 Landscape architects: Péna & Peña, Michel Péna
 Construction: 2010 – 2013
 Area: 12 hectares

Functional areas that can accommodate exhibitions, public gatherings and various temporary services are otherwise transformed into magical spaces in the heart of the garden. Water – in reflective sheets, shimmering pools, dancing jets, changing misty clouds – has been used to extraordinarily successful effect in this climate.

suburbs located in the hills, and social housing relegated to the back of beyond. Its demography changed after the independence of Algeria, and cheap travel means that today's Nice competes with other global destinations. If Nice didn't grow much in the past half century, it was partly because it had nowhere to go.

For centuries, the Paillon served Nice as a source of energy for its industries and, famously, for the washing and drying of sheets, but as the city grew, the river was considered ugly, divisive and dangerous. If the riverbed that runs through the city is sometimes dry in summer, in spring it carries stormwaters through the hyper-centre. Almost as soon as the town became French in 1860, Nice began seeking ways to suppress its river. The Paillon split the 19th-century town in two: on one side, the higgledy-piggledy mediaeval *cité* and, opposite on the west bank, a rapidly growing new town, laid out to house European aristocrats who loved wintering there.

In 1868, a first section was covered over as the start of what was to become a long-term land-use policy: Between 1884 and 2000, burying the river Paillon provided Nice with a series of infrastructural and



cultural projects, including not only gardens and other public open spaces, but a monumental casino (built in 1882, demolished almost a century later), a 1960s exhibition hall, a 1970s bus station and multi-story car park, a 1980s congress hall along with a couple of hotels and, ten years later, a National Theatre, a Museum of Modern Art, and a turn-of-the-century library to complete what is known as the *Promenade des Arts*. At some point, it seems, 19th-century concerns about dividing the town were forgotten in favour of civic building.

Ten years ago, a competition to revamp the gardens of the Paillon was held, but the winning scheme never went ahead, the cost of the city's new tramway halting many other projects. An ambitious new mayor, however, changed all that, delivering the first in a series of high-profile cultural and infrastructural improvements planned for the town. As part of this thrust, the removal of a bus station and car park from their central position over the river Paillon and between the old town and new was long overdue. Nevertheless, demolishing two of the ugliest buildings in the city to create an open space was a courageous act

– not least because it raised the cost of the gardens to 41 million euros. Landscape architects Péna & Peña won a 2010 competition to restore the reclaimed site, link it to the series of 19th-century open spaces already located above the river, and create a single 6.5-hectares garden running down to the sea. The winning scheme proposed a simple plan: a kilometre-long promenade and edge treatments (representing the *ripisylve*) that united the existing disparate spaces into one to reveal long-lost views of the sea, the old town, the new town and hills beyond.

The designers did not challenge the city's decision to fence off the new gardens, but exploited the situation to plant a greater variety of rare, exotic and precious plants adapted to the Mediterranean climate, playing with transparency and opacity, carefully opening and closing perspectives, and revealing glimpses of the town beyond. This long, thin garden contains over 1,000 trees of 170 different species, 6,000 bushes and 55,000 perennials in a variety of beds, extraordinary fountains, water mirrors and fog machines, a thousand seats, shade structures, children's games, an eight-metre-wide promenade and a very green strip of grass – a luxury material in the south of France.



The *Coulée Verte* (as the garden was affectionately known before its official opening) is punctuated by transversal roads, the tramway, and the monumental Place Masséna (redesigned by Bruno Fortier in 2005) that divide it into four separate parts. The strength of Péna's plan, however, is such that the gardens read as one. Only where the river meets the sea is the connection lost, as pedestrian passage across the busy *Promenade des Anglais* is neither easy nor direct.

The competition brief prioritised not only vehicular traffic but also the series of annual cultural events and festivals that draw hundreds of thousands of international visitors. The Carnival, with its exuberant processions, fireworks and “Battle of Flowers,” which traditionally passes through the Place Masséna and Nice Jazz in July, also occupies parts of the garden, transforming them and interrupting tram, vehicular and pedestrian circulation. The new garden has to accommodate such events, acting as “wings” to a main stage, taking heavy vehicles, materials and temporary stands and structures as necessary. Péna's stroke of genius has been to hide these vast functional areas under a cloud of mist, or a thin sheet of still, reflective water that also forms

part of one of Europe's largest choreographed fountains. This multi-functional area creates “space” within the garden, an extraordinary, colourful, dynamic, interactive and ever-changing visual space that works perfectly in this hot sunny climate – for the pleasure of children and adults alike.

The garden appears deceptively simple – grass, trees, games, misty places and large timber structures providing shade and seating, juxtaposed alongside a wide quartzite path that represents the ribbon of water below – yet elements are thoughtfully arranged to reveal intriguing glimpses of treasures within the old town or elsewhere. Much in this park awaits discovery on a quiet day, or in the evening after dark, when its ambiance changes.

Six full-time gardeners are charged with the task of maintaining lawns and plant-beds. Sixteen men and women of the newly formed Parks and Gardens Brigade will look after security, opening and closing the many gates early in the morning and late at night to ensure ease of access. Whether such a large area of lawn was the most sustainable solution is

not certain, but in this part of the world, green grass corresponds to the notion of luxury that underlines the garden. Interactive panels tell of the park's trees, sounds of birds and insects emerge from loudspeakers in the bushes, floral scents are sprayed with the mist, and at night, fantastic images are projected onto surfaces. Nevertheless, as time goes by, some wildlife might return. As Péna says, there's no need to fear time, it helps the plants to grow.

Ultimately, however, the park's success will depend on careful long-term maintenance. The Paillon Promenade is a high-maintenance park: It will always be popular, as open space is in great shortage here. Perhaps the opportunity to create a more resilient place was not seized, but the Paillon Promenade corresponds to the glorious image of this city. Without doubt, it adds a major attraction for locals and tourists alike, and has already become a part of this town.

If anyone should care to wander further upstream, past the Exhibition Hall, the waters of the Paillon itself reappear. There, too, for the moment at least, albeit in a different way, the city of Nice turns its back to the river and the realities of nature.

The Promenade du Paillon reunites a series of disjointed, underused spaces to create a joyfully varied sequence of confidently colourful environments in the hyper-centre of the town. Striking is the very green strip of grass – a luxury material in the south of France.