

Paris Plage: “The City is Ours”

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Background

Paris Plage is a simulated beach resort created for one summer month, in the heart of Paris, on a part of the banks of the Seine usually overrun with cars. To create the Paris Plage, the Georges Pompidou expressway, the main artery crossing Paris from east to west since 1967, was closed to traffic.

- Paris Plage is a political act that symbolizes the politics of the new socialist Mayor Bertrand Delanoë.
 - The mayor’s goal is “to give the riverside back to Parisians” and to enable everyone “to take possession of public space and to experience city life differently.”
 - The setting was created by a scenography agency that specializes in staging public events.
 1. It is a theatrical event telling the story of the beach.
 2. The designers created an atmosphere with 3000 tons of sand, rolls of sod, dozens of potted Mediterranean plants, beach cabins, furniture, and beach umbrellas. There were games, a library, a daycare, places to nap, restaurants, pétanque area.
 3. They did not confine themselves to organizing a functional space; they were conceiving and creating a project. They intended to make an œuvre, an original creation.
 - About 3,000,000 people participated at the event: Parisians, suburbanites, tourists, families, friends, and couples. There were joggers, roller skaters, bicycle riders and people strolling.
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Discourse

Participating in Paris Plage also meant commenting on it.

- The operation existed through discourse about it in speeches and the media.
 - It was a topic of conversation for all citizens and visitors – everyone had an opinion.
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Analysis

It’s clear that people did what was expected of them, what has been planned.

- They treat the event like an organized attraction which provides a number of activities.
- Furthermore, they know that it is a theatrical production. There is no simulacrum but, rather, a game, identified and accepted as such.
- Everyone sees it as the mayor’s political move, as perhaps even a symbolic action.

- Through their various operations, the different actors made the quays not only an open, shared place but also a public space, since people not only coexisted and did the same things side by side, they also acted “publicly.” It allowed people to have different social relations than those governing ordinary life.

But there is one prerequisite for the emergence of such a social space:

Everything worked because everyone agreed to divert the bank of the Seine from its original function for a definite period. All the actors participated in the playful, slightly rebellious transfiguration of the space.

And the condition of the operation is the absence of the sea. Everyone accepted the absence of this fundamental element.

1. Had there been a sea, nothing would have worked.
2. It would have been a beach like any other beach.
3. Because the sea wasn't there, people were not simply users or spectators, but the main levers of the scheme, themselves the actors and authors of Paris Plage.
4. The highway became a stage where people played at “being at the beach.” With the sea gone, the event becomes a performance.

The authors finally understood the logic of Paris Plage when they looked at how people reacted to them in the field as they worked. Although photographs are usually a difficult part of field work, everyone there agreed to be photographed – not something you could do on a real beach. People were not being photographed as individuals, but as “Paris Plagers.”

Comments

So a beach scene is performed, in a place that cannot be the sea: it is in Paris. By creating something that can't be in Paris—a beach—the city is brought into being, in a sublimated form, by conjuring up what, by definition, it can't be.

A mock beach in Paris sets up a special city, a new Paris that is not a simple juxtaposition of neighborhoods and segregated spaces, but a “good-natured, convivial” Paris: a city where “everywhere would belong to everyone.”

It was successful because it exhibited the possibility of a city authored by everyone – it created the means of its own transformation, even if just for one summer.

- Paris Plage was one of those places not devoted to culture, but taken over by it in a deliberately ephemeral way, playing, for that reason, a central role in producing a new Paris, a city about which people would talk endlessly: They would be its specialists, in a sense.
- The result is a city composed of sociologists and specialists of urban life.