

Great Walls of China

EMMANUELLE BORNE

“It’s a question of rendering porous the Great Wall of China that lies between the public and private sectors.” This quote comes from Jean-Louis Missika, Deputy Mayor of Paris, responsible for its urban development, architecture, the Greater Paris project, along with the city’s economic development and appeal. Talking at the Pavillon de l’Arsenal architecture centre on 20 September, about the ‘Réinventer Paris I’ call for projects launched in 2014, Missika assured the audience: “This is not a substitute for public commissions.” This first of many calls for innovative urban projects is actually based on the transfer of real-estate property from the city to the winning teams, led by developers. In summary, we are assured that the architectural integrity of the projects proposed during the competition, of which none has yet seen the light of day, is guaranteed. But does that imply that this new approach to urban development deserves unanimous approval? It seems legitimate to be worried, not so much about the barrier between public and private stakeholders being made ‘more porous’, but about the transfer of the notion of public interest to people who don’t have that culture. If it now falls to developers to propose ‘quality public spaces’, ‘communal gardens’ and other places destined to encourage ‘community living’, what, for example, happens to the democratic dimension that traditionally defines such places? If Kaufman & Broad had designed the Place de la République, in Paris, would it have been quite so suited to demonstrations as the Nuit Debout events that took place during the spring of 2016? If we are to accept that the form of our towns changes faster than our mortal hearts, and that it is from now on possible to marry apparently opposite ideas – public space with private prerogatives, artistic endeavour with return on investment, opening up boundaries with the protection of people and places, etc. – we should probably forearm ourselves, without waiting for the harsh proof of reality, against the possibility of wrong turns when public vocation is partly left to private stakeholders. Some would argue that it is all a question of ethics and that the elected authorities aren’t always as scrupulous as they are expected to be. Was it right to wait for women and men’s lives to be lost before evacuating other insalubrious buildings in Marseille recently? Was it right, again in Marseille, to build a 2,5-metre-high wall around a square in order to carry out a redevelopment questioned by the residents? Of course a developer can build quality public space. But shouldn’t it be the responsibility of our elected authorities not only to render the Great Walls of China less porous, but above all to ensure that no more of them are erected?