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FIG. 1 The jardin-forêt of Bibliothèque Nationale de France, site François Mitterand. Photograph by the author of this article.

Playing the Green Card

– the Commodifying Fiction of a Derivative Jardin-Forêt

ABSTRACT

With the point of departure in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, site François Mitterand (Dominique Perrault, 1989-1995) and more specifically its central but inaccessible jardin-forêt, this essay intends to problematize what has been described as the neo-liberal shift in architecture and urbanism. The BnF and its garden-forest has been interpreted as a last breath of modernist urbanism and welfare ideas. Yet rather than dismissing this grand opération as a tardy spasm of modernism,
it is perhaps more productive to consider the ensemble an exponent of the derivative, or spin-off, spatial logic, currently sustaining the fiction of urban fertility and growth.

Keywords: division, dislocation, fictitious commodification, environmentality, capitalist beliefs, derivative logic

Introduction

Historically, the socio-political dimension of modernist urbanism was often played out ‘in the green’. Both recreational and projective, urbanized nature came to materialize ‘the double desire’ of modernist architecture and planning — the apotheosis of a technologically advanced, “radiant” park city, where, as Le Corbusier famously put it, what is being “excavated” in the construction process “accumulate by the side” as diversified mounds planted with trees and sown with grass.\footnote{This urban landscape vision is followed up in Mitterand’s 1980s \textit{Grands Projets}.} These extensive projects may be perceived as echoing the Corbusian belief in a “reason […] reinforced by a well-timed lyricism;”\footnote{a sensitivity with natural greenish overtones. Perhaps more epic than lyric, these large-scale and high-tech architectural ensembles have been described as the last breath of modern, centralized \textit{dirigisme} by which—as architecture theorist Annette Fierro notes in her analysis of the \textit{Projets} —“the traditional role of the state is not limited as an unqualified representation of its citizenry, but exists as its benevolent protector, guarantor of its wealth and securer of equality among its citizens.”\footnote{This strong governmentality of the state is certainly an aspect of how the \textit{Projets} seem inflated to an ambiguous maximum, indeed, a grandiloquence – motivating their dismissal as the last sigh of a puffy and anemic modernism. There is, however, a possibility to detect in the voluminous expressions of the \textit{Grand opérations} a}}
certain breathlessness, a new form of respiration, and as such a potential sign of recharging before new and exigent challenges in a riskier and more unbounded urban enterprise. In the following, I will explore one of the Projets from this perspective, tracing what I suggest should be understood as competitive adjustments of urbanity to an emergent financial logic. Drawing attention to the material gestures of the political economy sustaining contemporary urban development, the aim is to show how a ‘greener’ architecture may deliver not simply environmental decompression, but also justify an increasingly derived, detached and deregulated urban development.

The point of departure for such an analysis is one specific instance, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, site François Mitterand, and more specifically its green core: the encapsulated pseudo-natural jardin-forêt. Designed by Dominique Perrault and erected 1989-1995, the library and its garden-forest present a projection and a plan of an explicitly programmatic kind. From a peripheral, brown-field position, the knowledge archive that is the library rises to the sky, not only manifesting a specific understanding of the future in the present, but acting out a ‘futuring’ or future generating present—equally natural as it is scientific—with an animated, green heart. In my attempts to unravel this complex ensemble, I rely on several sources and strands of thinking. Apart from on-site observations and analysis of the discursive material produced in conjunction with the development process, I turn to economic anthropology for a historical contextualization of the means of urban economic accommodation played out through the BnF. Described by Karl Polanyi already more than seventy years ago in terms “fictitious commodification”, this make-believe process unfolds through innovative spatial and material moves, in different ways sustaining capitalist modes of production. To further explore the ontological and aesthetic underpinnings of this mode, I also draw on recent thinking in political philosophy to demystifying the poetic figures sustaining not only commodification but further financialization, potentially contributing to the development of what German philosopher and cultural theorist Joseph Vogl refers to as a “poetology of knowledge” sensitive to the logics of an increasingly deregulated and green urbanity.
The most evocative access to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France is not necessarily by way of its designated Métro station but from the opposite side of the river, by way of Parc de Bercy, the rather frayed green area hidden between the pyramidal grass-covered Omnisport Arena and Quai de Bercy. Before reaching the quay, stairs take you up the embankment, from where you get a first view of the four glass high-rises of the national library. Like enormous encyclopedic volumes standing on end, they tower over the opposite riverbank; like gigantic book volumes touching the clouds, they open up their transparent hardback covers to the public, exposing what is supposedly an acculturated accumulation of knowledge.

While transparency and insight were fundamental principles of the original design, the towers were already initially tremendously problematic, partly because of the non-compatibility of rare books with daylight. Although an interesting aspect of the Grand Story, I will leave this enlightenment theme aside, focusing instead on the emergent course of action—the integrated promenade architecturale—which starts already with the ceremonious approach by the Passerelle Simone de Beauvoir, the undulating footbridge providing a convenient yet dramatized crossing over the Seine. A rite-de-passage from the mundane to the solemn indicated already in Perrault’s competition entry of 1989 (Fig. 2), the walkway lands on top of the extensive, wooden deck at what constitutes the upper entrance plaza. Despite its fixed position in between the corner towers, this explicitly rectangular plateau gives a disorienting impression, reinforced by scattered information walls and ambiguously marked non-slip paths, enforcing upon the visitor a right-angled movement pattern, further underlined by the edges of the oblong cavity opening up in the centre of the large surface. Penetrating through is the canopy of an entire forest — “a sea of trees, a sheaf of foliage” — a significant mass of greenery, which, apart from giving rise to considerable astonishment, indicates that in order to enter this knowledge castle, one has to find one’s way down to its very ground.

Much more can be noted about the entrance into what the State Secretary for the Grands travaux in a written reflection would describe as “a ‘completely new type’ of library, designed to cover all fields of knowledge, to be available to all, to use the most modern data transmission technology, to make remote access possible…”

On both sides of the vast platform, escalators transport the visitor down through an entrance slit and into the public foyer—Haut-de-jardin—still at the level of treetops—through the mandatory security check and further on to extended wardrobe desks, where personal bags are replaced for identical transparent portfolios. The continuous passage leads from the large public space, via security locks and even lengthier escalator shafts through a high tech interior clad with metal fabrics to the Rez-de-jardin, the very base level, accessible for researchers only, and only after screening and interview. And beyond yet another security sluice, the woodland appears again, now as green thickets on the other side of tall glass walls.

On my first visit to the ground-level reading halls, the immediate impulse is to go for a privileged walk around the one-acre atrium grove. While fascinated by the forest’s splendid isolation, accessible only three days a year and then only for a restricted number of people, I find the jardin-forêt ambiguous, even uncanny. As the wild and growing centre-piece of Perrault’s otherwise clear-cut and systematic design, it supposedly plays a more convoluted role than that of simple negation. I am reminded of the conceptual imagery presented by Perrault in his proposal showing a surrealist art piece by Wolfgang Nieblich entitled Buchweizen (Eng. buckwheat)—a pun object of a book exposing a bizarre fertility (Fig. 3).

FIG. 3. Wolfgang Nieblich, BuchWeizen/Buchobjekt, 1983. Published with permission by the artist.

An exclusive silvarium, a forest collection behind glass, the allotted greenery is part of what appears to be a totalising set of different materials, besides the glass,
opaque concrete, metal fabric, and solid wood. Adding to this assemblage, an intense red sound-absorbing carpet runs along the outer perimeter of the centre court, operating as a base frequency that further accentuates the condensed shades of dusty green on the other side of the glass curtain wall. While well defined, the sealed woodland raises concerns. On the one hand clear-cut, on the other hand ambiguously twisted—levels reversed, matter exaggerated, inside and outside inverted—the garden-forest unsettles the analogy suggested by Fierro between the ordering vision of the national institution and architecture “as absolute knowledge.” Rather than a sample of nature, what is exposed in the abyss are plagued existences rising from an inflamed riverbed, uprooted survivors hiding in the dugout. The history of the displaced *jardin-forêt* is one of compulsory transfer, commented on by W.G Sebald in terms of *banishment.* The original idea was to move a chunk of the legendary Fontainebleau forest to this industrial site next to Gare d’Austerlitz. As this showed to be impossible, the romantic woods were instead reconstructed from scratch through the dislocating of 120 adult red pines (*Pinus sylvestris L.*) from the Forêt de Bord in Normandie, as such also saving the condemned stand from imminent disforestation. The laborious re-establishment of the fully-grown trees required careful excavation and filling out of the atrium cavity with a five metre layer of forest soil and meticulous composition and maintenance of the specific forest biotope. In collaboration with designer Gaëlle Lauriot-Prévost and landscape architect Eric Jacobsen, Perrault reconstructed a portion of nature, which besides the moved conifers was complemented with nursery plants—another 40 or so pines, 65 birches, 21 oaks, 18 hornbeams, and on top of that, spontaneously settled species, today counting 19 specimens of wild cherry, 7 of black elderberry, and of 3 mountain ash and aspen. In an interview, Jacobsen recalls the early discussions about how to achieve silvicultural serenity in this busy part of the city:

“The idea of a vast interior courtyard emerged, ‘a well of light’ providing daylight to the reading halls on the second level, and in this well, a piece of adult forest should grow, exuberant, diverse, and disorderly, balancing the simplicity and rigor of the surrounding buildings”.
During my half kilometre stroll around the bushed well, I take notice of this balancing. In the cavity, exaggeratedly tall pines are struggling for light in all kinds of ways, elongated to the limit and therefore braced up with wires running diagonally through the forest, as if a circus set up, only without the tent. Sustained and protected, allegedly managed without chemical fertilizers or pesticides, this supposedly self-organizing wilderness is neither autonomous, nor spared from indiscriminate invasions. In the penumbra of the depression, defiant undergrowth takes root, including bracken, heather and anemones among many other species, providing an urban habitat for insects and birds, the latter, as Sebald laconically noted during his visit, occasionally slamming into the window reflections of the forest “with a dull thud.” During my morning stroll, however, a female mallard with her ten ducklings would walk totally unconcerned along the other side of the window pane, as if she were an extra engaged in this intricate play.

**Accommodations**

The sealed garden-forest gives rise to hesitant wonderment, and eventually, doubts. According to the architect, it is an engineered fragment, “a totally artificial nature[...], conceived of as a casing or a box,” yet at the same time growing, exuberant, diverse; as one commentator put it, a deliberately symbolic attempt to “[put] some green into the old libraries.” But more specifically, what is the active substance of this addition of wilderness in the midst of the public urban institution? While a straightforward answer to this question is unlikely, it is possible to treat the greenery as a cultural indicator and accessory of an emergent “knowledge economy”—an economy based on the extraction of surplus value not from industrial production but from knowledge intensive activities, from the cognitive and innovative extraction of energy from the most basic and most vital of sources.

The Projets were initially legitimised in terms of democratization, as a necessary means of ‘opening up’ an increasingly inert and lifeless urban culture. As expressed by Mitterand’s cabinet representative, “[a]n impulse was needed to boost the momentum [of urban culture] which is constantly restrained by short-term economic realism, as much as by the routines of administrative management.”
ideas were grand, including unprecedented bridging of tradition and innovation. A
general characteristic was the ample use of glass structures, supporting what Fierro
describes as “a politically construed metaphor of accessibility.” In the case of the
BnF, conspicuous transparency was combined with significant permeability,
allowing for public access from the riverside street through a porous façade,
furthermore, from the entrance plaza by way of suspended walkways cutting right
through the lush canopies of the garden-forest. The original idea was thus to allow
the visitor to pass through a re-oxygenating, fragrant and sound-absorbing grove
before entering the knowledge complex. This idea of a public park passage
disappeared during the development of the project, for logistic and safety reasons,
and the decision was taken to seal the atrium off. Even though this drastically
changed the building’s sensitizing function, this separation instead opened for a
total unhinging of the edifice from modernist civic ideals. In a programmatic text
accompanying his entry, Perrault had conceived of the access in terms of inclusion
and belonging: “Coming from the RER station, we will converge towards this home,
unique and global, through the garden, passing on the footbridges in trees” (Fig.
4). With the inviting garden sealed off, what remained was a new kind of
exclusivity, the idea of an essential, common value, safely stored for future
purposes.

FIG. 4: Plan of the entrance level showing elevated walkways through the garden-forest. Dominique Perrault, Competition panel, 1989.

What was meant as a material staging of democratic ideals developed into a
protective and securing gesture, as such a direct response to “the financial tremors”
at the time. In the face of a declining faith in nation based welfare husbandry, the
hovering walkways may have seemed overly venturous. Instead, given a world-wide
economic instability, the general significance and function of urban interventions
changed, from the politically representational to the economically performative.
Naturally emergent or even a bit wild, the isolated jardin-forêt was able to actualise
this shift in a balanced way; on the one hand a disruptive juxtaposition, but on the
other hand a persuasive adaptation to ideas of spontaneous urban evolution and
growth, in Perrault’s terms “souple, flexible et de géométrie variable.” While the
initial idea of public walkways through a scented and rustling forest disappeared, it was replaced only with a more adaptive and purely visual encounter, either abstract volume out of reach or pale apparition behind stained window panes. What this abstract cut out plays out, however, is the scientific fiction of a nature that in order to become object of study cannot be socially shared or publically used, but has to be protected and ‘reserved’ for knowledge production, and this in relation to the new urban game board of ‘the knowledge economy’, here further materialized as a vast (wooden) plateau of symbolic exchange and information flows; an aspect that Perrault attentively refers to in terms of *bibliothéconomie*.\(^{21}\)

As mentioned, the recession of the 70s, with radically decreasing cultural and social budgets, was the main motif behind Mitterand’s decision in the early 80s to allocate one percent of the total national budget to culture.\(^{22}\) As architecture historian Hélène Lipstadt pointed out even before the finalising of the *Projets*, this narrative might be called into question. Unlike earlier periods of grand and ideologically motivated urban transformations, while having great urban and symbolic potential, the *Projets* were as much “the result of happy coincidences and political artistry.”\(^{23}\) Given the pervasiveness of the new global currents, the spatially articulated cultural policy of Mitterrand was little more than “a brilliant example of the bourgeois art *d*’*accommoder les restes*;”\(^{24}\) of opportunistically readjusting modernist leftovers into a cultural appetizer that would be appealing also in a situation of world-embracing economic swirl.

As Lipstadt suggested, this inspired accommodating of modernist residue also happened against the background of disintegrating international economic regulations and stability agreements. When in the early 70s, as the international post-war economic agreements disrupted, it generated a fundamental imbalance in global trade that ultimately did not enforce further regulations but the complete release of currencies from underlying assets, resulting in a discharge of global trade. Economic transactions could now happen with respect entirely to a belief in economic emergency, without any consideration of back-up in fixed assets. Actual resources were no longer of importance; what mattered was instead the
performative turn-over, stimulated by active gaps between credit and debt, between sign and signified, resulting in relative and fluctuating revenue streams.25

Parallel to this economic self-referentiality, a new environmental awareness emerged, following the Stockholm Declaration of the UN Conference of the Human Environment highlighting the need for attention to “renewable resources.”26 This ‘environmental’ awareness stimulated the revitalisation of ‘organic imaginaries’ or in other words ideas of natural systems as self-generating, circular and essentially sustainable. Stressing the fact that “disruption to circulatory processes could lead to permanent degradation,”27 the report would come to function as a new “ethical force;”28 according to Australian philosopher Adrian Parr introducing a new kind of ‘natural’ moralism. In her analyses of climate change politics, Parr draws the attention to the emergent sustainability culture and the ways “in which it manages the inherited power relations of a specific social fabric with sensitivity;”29 in concrete terms how bio-systemic thinking is subtly transposed and re-articulated in managerial and economic terms, as a green, eco-efficient and managerial ‘triple-bottom-line,’ organically balancing economic, social and ecological goals. In studies of the emergent eco-awareness of the 70s, political scientist Timothy Luke also emphasizes what he sees as a new kind of “environmentality” or “green governmentality.”30 Inspired by Foucault, Luke identifies efforts to generate systems of "geo-power/eco-knowledge," managing but also operating through Nature, as “a biophysical systems that can be dismantled, redesigned, and assembled anew to produce ‘resources’ efficiently and in adequate amounts when and where needed in the modern market-place.”31

Well embedded, it is this economically accommodated environment we encounter in the new national library. It is an environment, as emphasized by Luke, “not to be understood as the naturally given sphere of ecological processes which human powers try to keep under control, nor should it be viewed as a mysterious domain of obscure terrestrial events which human knowledge works to explain [but as ] historical artifact that is openly constructed, not an occluded reality that is difficult to comprehend.”32 Yet it is important to note to what extent this accommodation relied on a naturalizing discourse in order to become politically
viable. In Perrault’s words, the library should be “[a] place not a building,” furthermore “[a] place capable of evolution.”

**Commodification**

In a back-casting of the productive imaginaries of the liberal market economy, economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi drew attention to the transformative role of compartmentalization, or of the creation of a system that may be broken down into separate and compatible components. In his major work entitled *The Grand Transformation*, Polanyi traced capitalism back to the territorial shift of early 16th century England and the reconfiguration of land as commodity through the enclosure of fields and commons. Polanyi described how “grazier lords” would parcel out open pastures for a systematic extraction of cash produce (wool) to be fed into mills and beyond, into an increasingly complex, unified and all-encompassing ‘market,’ eventually comprising entities — like land, labour and money — which are obviously not commodities or object produced to be sold, but basic prerequisites for social life. Hence, the necessary structural intervention in the transformation of society into market was a fictitious commodification through a formal subdivision of the substantial elements of human life into mobile and marketable units. Following the twists and turns of this stepwise shift from “substantivism to formalism, Polanyi showed how this fictitious production was radicalized and naturalized, ultimately explained in biological terms and allowing for the total separation of the market from the political state.

Revisiting Polanyi’s ideas, American political philosopher Nancy Fraser pays particular attention to the anthropological observation that “[p]reviously, markets had been ‘mere accessories’ of economic life, and no such thing as a separate ‘economy’ had ever existed.” On the cutting-up of commons or ‘nature’ followed the partitioning and mobilising of labour, today including intellectual work and affective labor; and, eventually, money, which in a contemporary economy constitutes an ever-more detached and generalized ‘product’ sustaining the innovative but also highly abstract master fiction of “One Big Market” interconnecting every imaginable supply-and-demand mechanism. Applying
Polanyi’s ideas to a current situation, Nancy Fraser emphasizes that for Polanyi, the inevitable outcome of fictitious commodification of society “all the way down” was crisis, social, ecological as well as economic. Hence, paradoxically, “the notion of fictitious commodification affords the prospect of an integrated crisis theory that encompasses in one fell swoop the concerns of feminists, political ecologists and political economists.” Accordingly, market and nature are similarly subjected to environmental crisis and similarly in constant need of special yet non-offensive attention.

Eerie beliefs

The question remains, however, how this crisis management applies to the BnF and its exposed garden-forest. To what extent is the abstracting, extracting or derivative cut-up/plug-in economic tendency at work also in the project of the national library? What is the specific role of the seemingly superflously added feature of an inaccessible green? In an analysis of the historical unfolding of the idea of a capital-driven economy, Joseph Vogl explores the constituent elements of what he terms the oikodicy problem—a paraphrase on the theodicy problem—the question of why an all-encompassing, neutral and fundamentally self-managing market sometimes results in imbalance and shortage. How come a supposedly natural dynamic does not always—as its inherent natural logic postulates—evolve according to a given and benign Providence? The classical economic answer is that, following the market’s performative and self-fulfilling logic, it will eventually, like any organic system, reach its ideal state of equilibrium. Influential economic thinkers such as Joseph Townsend and later Friedrich Hayek thus solves the oikodicy problem by insisting on the market as being spontaneously just, hence also the solution to its own crisis. The imaginary of the harmonizing market, notes Vogl, “took shape before the market,” as such offering both “a model”, and with reference to Foucault, a naturalized “truth program.” Hence, Vogl shows how the vision of cosmological harmony itself tellingly economizes with complexity, short-circuiting complexity for reasons of efficiency and clarity, reducing intricate sociopolitical commercial relations into manageable modules of competitive value.
This idea of the market economy as a naturally self-balancing system has several consequences, of which I will mention two. First, it motivates a *temporalization* of value as intrinsic. Value unfolds as a promise or a potential that will precipitate in due time. Rather than grounded, value is *virtual*; a future that, as Danish sociologist Jacob Arnoldi expresses it, “ceases to be something that is merely possible – and hence nonexistent – and instead becomes something that – even though it strictly speaking remains non-existent – has being ‘in practice.’” This temporalization constitutes the precondition for an economy based on credit—on the deferral of payment and the postponement of compensation for actual debts. “Chains of payments have now become chains of payment promises,” guaranteeing that every transaction, every move, give rise to a multiplied number of fictive futures, equally promising. Yet although deceptively similar to a social contract, this *futuring* principle is non-representative in kind, first of all a driver of circulation and a spreading of risk. It is an open and non-binding promise, a relative time deal that “revokes itself in the giving.” Uncoupled from the exchange of real goods, it is only made on condition of endless deferrals.

The second consequence, closely related with the first, is the treatment of economy as a positive science, modelled upon natural laws. This *physicalism*, this quasi-naturalness at the core of capitalist thinking is grounded in the belief in a spontaneous, organic order; a growing and vital randomness corresponding to a natural pattern of competition and causality. A classical liberal idea, it gains new vigor from the late 70s onward, leading not only to a disengagement of economy from the responsibilities characterizing political life, but to an economic codification of society at large. Economy is increasingly recognized as a law-bound ecology, the probable development of which can be mapped and forecasted through statistics and algorithmic equations of ideal processes. It is thus a physicalism legitimized not in or through social use, but in terms of algorithmic, pattern-oriented beauty. Paradoxically, the neo-liberal—and urban—appraisal of market logics unfolds as abstractly lyrical, even Romantically poetic, thus in ‘poetological’ terms allowing “the circulation of mere illusions to determine economic relations.”
Green derivatives

In the shift addressed here and briefly described in terms of a systemic conflation of nature, market and the urban environment, an added chunk of greenery might seem to play a marginal and purely symbolic role. In the competition for the BnF, there were also other entries presenting even more explicitly organic metaphors or systemic and processual ideas, such as the undulating proposal of Future Systems of “a smooth and enveloping shell forever open,” or the multilayered, computational server solution of Rem Koolhaas/OMA.

In the case of the winning project, and its green cut-out, the conspicuous thing about it is its eerily evasive presence. Tracing the imaginaries of the city as an organic system back to Simmel’s early following of monetary currents, and perhaps more relevantly, back to the metabolistic theories of the Chicago School, it is obvious that the city was never seen as “merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction”, but already initially understood as the result of “vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature and particularly of human nature.”

Also in the modern city, there was a fundamental naturalization at work, a continuously supported reliance on the city’s capacity to rationally control itself as organism. In a neoliberal urbanity, however, these tropes are fully released and developed into an imaginary of modular capital energy flowing through a system without direct grounding. In the case of the BnF, this release is played out in narrative form, through the crisis of the uprooted yet secured and growing ‘non-forest’ as foregrounded element and subtle switch between conflated orders. The paradox of this extra-natural order, bluntly exposed by the BnF garden-forest, is that it does not eliminate the need for intervention or institutional backing, but on the contrary, enforces the demands for gentle supportive scaffolding in order to comply with the principles of natural law. Publicly sustained and securely compensated for, furthermore intricately braced up in order not to collapse, the green reserve thus amply exemplifies the tangy remark that what is frequently referred to as more or less spontaneous “deregulation” often depends on “an ensemble of forceful interventions.”
Disengaged yet secured, the garden-forest is played out as a *derivative* of nature or a natural order. ‘Derived’ from an underlying asset, in this case what was eventually a forest at some point somewhere, its value is not directly linked to this ‘underlying’ asset, but simply referring to its performance. The more real and accessible forests, the less valuable this ‘forest’. The more deforestation and urbanization, the more valuable is this forest amount. As a financial instrument in a capitalist economy, the derivative enables trading in “aspects of assets”53 and in the fluctuation of these aspects, without the need to actually hold the substantial asset as such or consider its quality. A derivative logic therefore reorients time; disregarding the past it is entirely oriented towards the future, productively ‘futuring’ a capital that would otherwise simply sit passively in a local context. Neither garden nor forest, but an abstraction of nature; the garden-forest acts as a virtuality, a fictive entity oriented towards a promising future, yet acting this future out in the present. A probabilistic module rather than a real forest, it replaces a normative or institutional order, according to sociologist Adam Arvidsson, “making it possible to create a higher order of continuity that can render apparently incompatible entities compatible.”54 As a derivative ‘credit swap’ the garden-forest renders compatible environmental debts and market economy risks, thus revealing the extent to which the entire *Projet* is subjected to the new economic semiotics of ‘forwarding’ the demands for accountability. While playing out the green card—in this case a marker of “forest”—is a gambling with the urban future, a ritual risk-taking grounded only in belief, it is at the same time a securing, not through institutionalization, but through the developing of financial bonds. In the urban game, playing the green card potentially means recognizing urban nature as an ‘ethical force’. In the context of a pervasive market economy, however, the green acquires the role of a joker, both bail, compensational security, and forcing holding.

*Concluding reflections*

After spending a spring semester in the *Rez-de-Jardin* reading room, and after a considerable number of loops around its green atrium, I had hoped for a final encounter in in real. My attempts to capture its subtle but pervasive affective
presence on the larger architectural complex seemed pitiful and incomplete. The window panes veiled the view, impeding a clear experience of being there, overlooked by these imposing woods. Endless image sequences did not help, and the wildlife did not show when I wanted. I therefore signed up for one of the rare occasions when the garden-forest opened to the public, which happens only one week-end a year. Yet while I was looking forward to an early June visit to a sprouting grove, the rain poured down over France, and the Seine rose to an alarming level, bursting the banks of the river, forcing the Métro and the RER to close and threatening landmarks including the Louvre and, of course, the national library and its sunken green core. (Fig. 5)

FIG. 5: View of the jardin-forest from the Rez-de-jardin. Photograph by the author.
While regretting a missed opportunity for an intimate *rendez-vous*, I conclude that the most conspicuous aspects of the green—its uprootedness as well as its ‘futuring’—would not really make themselves known face-to-face. The garden-forest of the BnF block do exists, at least from the perspective of the many non-human species from which it today draws its vitality. Its primary function, however, is not to contribute to the urban biodiversity, but to sustain a capital fiction of credit and growth. Its most agitating aspect is therefore its arbitrary non-presence, its potential crises and its possible debts. Radiating through the protective glass is not only a growing capacity, but a logistic history of 120 pines with their root system and all, being evicted from a local setting and transported on trailers, then with the help of cranes lifted into the cavity of an urban economic system, fitted in place and propped up with wires, thus ‘banked’ and transformed into “a nature that capital can see.”

When the looming future becomes the only productive force—an existence on hold—the very rationality of urban development may be called into question. Instead of grand expectations of a ‘common future’, the *jardin-forêt* stirs up a muffled whining, the moaning of mortgages without coverage, the rustling of forced risk taking and indefinite deferral of both instalment and dividends. Lingering diseases and haunting floods are what make the garden so evocative, so valuable, and ultimately, so *beautiful*, its supportive bracings and wires of liability and balance running the length and breadth of the embedded clearing. As the green card of a global “modular risk culture,” the *silvarium* of the BnF provides what could be described as a symptomatic ‘Freudian slip’, ritually performing in public the shift described by Polanyi from an understanding of economy as the reciprocal householding with respect to a resourceful environment—to an understanding of economy as a self-regulating environmental game, played out through spatio-temporally unbounded and future oriented risk-taking. Yet rather than regarding this shift as an abrupt volte-face from relational welfare to competitive *laissez-faire*—taking into consideration also the crises of both—this paper has argued for a more complex understanding of the shift as a subtle, yet institutionally authorized and architectonically staged, derivative process, fictitiously commodifying and financializing the very basis of public urban life, in modules fitting it into the
enclosing principles of a global market economy.

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