

**Starting Points:
Gilles Clément and the
Recuperation of Space**

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Gilles Clément, Le Jardin en Mouvement, Parc André Citroën, Paris.
October 2008. Photo by the author.

Abandoned tracts of land offer a mix of aesthetic and ecological fascination. Within a few years, these ostensibly empty spaces can burst into life with an unexpected profusion of flowers, birds, and insects. These spontaneous pockets of nature seem all the more poignant for their precarious existence as largely unnoticed by-products of modernity. We routinely overlook an array of transient or neglected spaces—widely characterized as waste ground—that develop their own structural forms and ecological assemblages without the precise imprint of human design. These accidental gardens reveal the ceaseless energy of biophysical and ecological processes and also evoke an ironic reference to the manufactured wilderness of the picturesque tradition and other “wild” elements incorporated into the history of gardens and landscape design.

For the French gardener, landscape architect, and horticultural engineer Gilles Clément, these abandoned spaces are not waste ground in the conventional sense but a “paradise of weeds.”¹ These patchworks of color along canals, railways tracks, and other marginal or interstitial spaces form a distinctive aesthetic and biotic archipelago that has been systematically neglected. Surveys of contemporary landscape design tend to emphasize the utilitarian potential of waste spaces rather than their intrinsic qualities. The American landscape architect Alan Berger, for example, asks how contemporary urbanism might reincorporate such anomalous spaces “in the service of efficiency, aesthetics and functionality,” while the Australian landscape architect Richard Weller sees contemporary landscape design as a postmodern effort to clean up the debris of modernity.²

Clément, who has taught at the Ecole du Paysage de Versailles since 1979, has consistently sought to combine his interest in gardens with developments in ecological science and the politics of biodiversity. He has used the ecological dynamics of wastelands as the starting point for his distinctive conception of landscape design. His first significant project originated from an abandoned field in Vassivière-en-Limousin, central France, which he bought in 1977 to enable detailed observations of ecological, structural, and aesthetic changes on *fiche* [fallow] land. He later extended this first project called La Vallée [the valley] to a nearby site called Le Champ [the field] in 1995. The only interventions made were an annual mowing during the

second week of September (to enhance botanical diversity) and the construction of a simple wooden observation platform that he called the *radeau des champs* [literally “raft of the fields”] after the botanist Francis Hallé, who used an inflatable raft called the *radeau des cimes* [raft of the peaks] to observe the canopy of tropical rainforests in Africa.³ From these field experiments, Clément developed his conception of the *jardin en mouvement* or “garden in movement,” which follows its own logic of change with minimal human interference.⁴ Clément found that under a temperate climate, a seven-year period is typically needed for a new ecological assemblage to fully take shape, and that certain biennial genera such as *Digitalis* and *Verbascum*—themselves characteristic of disturbed ground—play a special role because they continually rearrange their presence to produce an unpredictable mosaic that confounds formal conceptions of garden design.

Clément first gained international prominence with the garden he designed for the Parc André Citroën in 1992, in collaboration with the architect Patrick Berger, on the site of the original Citroën car factory that had been in operation from 1915 until its dismantling in the 1970s. This large site next to the Seine river provided the opportunity for a major international design competition for the redevelopment of a post-industrial space and the construction of one of the most significant public landscapes since the parks of Jean-Charles Alphand in the Haussmann era.⁵ This park, along with Bernard Tschumi’s 1982 design for the Parc de la Villette on the site of an extensive abattoir and meat market in the north of Paris, represents a key development in the recent history of urban design.⁶ As the architectural critic Charlotte Ellis observes:

In the northern corner is the “Jardin en Mouvement,” a carefully contrived wilderness where the plants are left to seed themselves at will and roses are left unpruned. It is here that small children seem most prone to elude their parents, while adults speculate on what this area will be like “when finished,” or complain about the lack of proper paths. If the absence of formal instructions about where one may or may not walk and the notion of allowing weeds to flourish are unconventional by Parisian standards, this is by far the most courageous approach adopted anywhere in the park.⁷

1. Alain Roger, cited in Giovanna Borasi, “De la nature à l’environnement, « en vérité, il est difficile de faire une place à l’homme »” [“Between nature and environment: ‘In truth, man is hard to accommodate’], in Giovanna Borasi, ed., *Gilles Clément/Philippe Rahm: Environ(ne)ment: manières d’agir pour demain* (Montreal: Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Milan: Skira, 2006), 41.

2. Alan Berger, “Drosscape,” in Charles Waldheim, ed., *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural

Press, 2006), pp. 197–217. See also: Alan Berger, *Designing the Reclaimed Landscape* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008); Richard Weller, “An Art of Instrumentality: Thinking through Landscape Urbanism,” in Waldheim, ed., *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, 69–85.

3. Jean-Francois Pousse, “The End of Scorn?,” *Techniques and Architecture* 486 (October/November 2006): 48–53.

4. Gilles Clément, *Le jardin en mouvement: de La Vallée au parc André-Citroën* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1994). Artists and photographers

who have also documented ecological succession and the transformation of “empty landscapes” include Paul-Armand Gette and Camilo José Vergara.

5. Lorette Coen, “Gilles Clément: The Planetary Gardener,” *Scape* 2 (November 2007): 46–61.

6. Charlotte Ellis, “Parc André Citroën: The Rage in Paris,” *Landscape Architecture* 83: 4 (April 1993): 59–65.

7. *Ibid.* p.64.

Other important examples of Clément's work include the Derborence Island—named after a remote Antipodean island—in the Parc Henri Matisse at Euralille (1995), created from the earth and rubble left behind after the excavation for a new train station. This island park is actually a raised 3,500-square-meter plateau that cannot be entered without the use of a ladder and is monitored for its biotic diversity every two years. The idea is that the island will serve as a kind of seed bank to allow more vulnerable species to survive and recolonize the surrounding area. More recently in 2006, he explored an inaccessible slope between the garden of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal and an adjacent railroad. This spontaneous garden was also accompanied by an exhibition of discarded objects found on the site, in the form of a chandelier in the CCA gallery, to illustrate neglect toward what Clément terms the “third landscape.”⁸

Clément first set out his *Manifeste du Tiers paysage* [manifesto of the third landscape] in 2002 after observing aerial photographs of variations in land use in the Limoges region, where uncultivated reservoirs of biodiversity can be seen as fragments or islands nestling among vast monocultural landscapes devoted to industrialized agriculture or plantation forestry. His use of the term “third landscape” references the revolutionary anti-aristocratic tract on the “third estate” written by Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès in 1789 and underlies Clément's interest in landscapes of resistance against either neglect or utilitarian erasure.⁹ For Clément, the *tiers paysage* is characterized by its higher biotic diversity than surrounding areas and has three forms: the abandoned or *délaissé* space associated with past agricultural or industrial uses; the *réserve* spaces that have been scarcely modified by human activity, whether by chance or inaccessibility; and designated nature reserves—the *ensemble primaire*—that enjoy some form of state protection.¹⁰ It is the idea of *délaissé* space, however, that is of particular significance for wastelands.

For Clément, the ecological vibrancy of *délaissé* space evokes “wonder and enchantment.”¹¹ These sites serve as scientific observatories for the recording and enjoyment of biodiversity so that the experience of landscape becomes a shared scientific project. The emphasis on “attentive observation” is both a form of aesthetic pleasure and a

kind of ecological advocacy.¹² The ecological interest in waste spaces fostered by Clément raises wider questions about the biodiversity of post-industrial cities in comparison with surrounding areas: some studies suggest that an increasing diversity of habitats acts as a kind of sanctuary for many threatened species, whereas contrasting research has emphasized how higher levels of urban biodiversity may persist for geological reasons in spite of the presence of cities themselves.¹³ Cities provide specialized micro-habitats that have enabled an enormous diversity of species to flourish, especially those that would have only prospered before human occupation through the impact of dramatic events such as fires or storms that open up forest canopies for sudden concentrations of fast-growing species that favor disturbed *ground*.¹⁴

These urban refugia—a term most often used in relation to pockets of biodiversity that survived the last ice age—serve a didactic role that can connect disparate local spaces into a wider international sensibility. For Clément, scaling up from the local leads to the *jardin planétaire* [planetary garden], which has three aspects: the idea of *finitude écologique* or the garden as a metaphor for natural limits; the *couverture anthropique* as a form of stewardship of land that encompasses the monitoring of ecosystems; and the emphasis on *brassage planétaire* or the global mixing of species. His conception of biotic mixing does not distinguish between good and bad species, and is immediately at variance with “nativist” approaches to landscape design that seek to eliminate “alien” species—a sentiment that reveals an intellectual lineage between regionalist or static conceptions of landscape and contemporary forms of “ecological restoration” that valorize certain species on historical grounds.¹⁵ It is for this reason that Clément seeks to distance himself from variants of political ecology that prioritize indigenous species or adopt authoritarian, neo-Malthusian or anti-humanist positions toward social justice. Like Bruno Latour, Clément tries to differentiate his conception of nature from the use of nature—however arbitrarily defined—as a blueprint for social policy and urban design. Unlike Latour, however, Clément's disaffection with conservative strands of political ecology does not lead toward the network-oriented ontologies of post-humanism

8. G. Clément, “Le lustre,” in Borasi, ed., *Gilles Clément/Philippe Rahm*, 102–113.

9. Coen, “Gilles Clément.”

10. Gilles Clément, *Manifeste du tiers paysage* (Paris: Éditions Sujet/Objet, 2004).

11. Gilles Clément, “Faire avec (et jamais contre) la nature / Working with (and never against) nature,” in Borasi, ed., *Gilles Clément/Philippe Rahm*, 94.

12. Gilles Clément, *La sagesse du jardinier* (Paris: L'Œil neuf Éditions, 2004).

13. See, for example, Alexis A. Alvey,

“Promoting and Preserving Biodiversity in the Urban Forest,” *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 5: 4 (2006): 195–201.

14. See Mike Davis, “Dead Cities: A Natural History,” in *Dead Cities* (New York: New Press, 2002), 360–399.

15. See, for example, Gert Gröning and Joachim Wolshke-Bulmahn, “Some Notes on the Mania for Native Plants in Germany,” *Landscape Journal* 11:2 (1992): 116–126; Gert Gröning, “Ideological Aspects of Nature Garden Concepts in Late Twentieth-Century

Germany” in Joachim Wolshke-Bulmahn, ed., *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 221–248; Anthony Kendle and Juliet Rose, “The Aliens Have Landed! What Are the Justifications for ‘Native Only’ Policies in Landscape Plantings?,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 47:1–2 (February 2000): 19–31.

16. Louisa Jones and Gilles Clément, *Gilles Clément: Une écologie humaniste* (Paris: Aubenil, 2006).

but underlies his evolving conception of *écologie humaniste* [ecological humanism].¹⁶

Clément's conception of landscape also avoids regressive forms of historicism rooted in the manipulation or mimicry of the past. Clément's disdain for the proliferation of "touristic" spaces as part of the recapitalization of post-industrial cities is instructive in this respect.¹⁷ Equally, the aesthetic experience of Clément's landscapes is left open to the observer, so that the meaning of these dynamic assemblages remains in a state of flux. The disavowal of contrived forms of historical continuity does not mark a disengagement from the politics of space but rather an opportunity to establish new lines of critical thought. We do not encounter a neoromanticist fascination with ruins or the abstract aestheticization of space. The sense of visual awe to be found in the representation of wastelands in the photography of Edward Burtynsky, for example, is quite different from Clément's attention to far less obtrusive or aesthetically overwhelming spaces of marginality.

We can also differentiate Clément's landscapes from the Olmstedian tradition in terms of both politics and aesthetics. The seemingly untouched "ramble" of Olmsted and Vaux's Central Park, for example, is a *trompe l'oeil* emerging from the intricate reconstruction of an imaginary primal scene: it is not a fragment of undisturbed nature or its spontaneous reemergence. In this sense, the preservationist ethic associated with Olmsted—reflected in the creation of national parks as well as much landscape design—is at variance with Clément's conception of a self-organizing landscape.¹⁸ Yet a detailed study of Clément's garden at Parc Citroën reveals some interesting anomalies: the choice of plant species, although including many non-indigenous species to the Paris basin, nonetheless largely excludes those new arrivals, such as buddleia *Buddleja davidii* (of Chinese origin) and locust tree *Robinia pseudoacacia* (of North American origin), that typify both the concept of *brassage planétaire* and the *délaissé* landscapes of Paris with their global assemblage of species. Clément reveals that his choice of species was in fact significantly driven by aesthetic considerations after all, so that the stark contrast with more formal design traditions might ultimately be misleading.¹⁹ Furthermore, Clément's conception of "the

garden in movement" and his emphasis on "a new sort of beauty, not at all associated with formal matters" should be considered in relation to the geometrical formalism of French traditions rather than the serpentine legacy of Anglo-American park design.²⁰

The work of Clément appears to provide a contrast with the nineteenth-century legacy of urban beautification and its complicit relationship with the underlying dynamics of capitalist urbanization. Interviewed for *La Liberation* in May 2007, for example, on the day after the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as French president, Clément stated that he would not allow his work to be implicated in the *projet ultralibéral* and its failure to respond adequately to either human or environmental needs.²¹ He then proceeded to cancel all his contracts with the French state "with the exception of official or unofficial authorities where there is ascertainable opposition" —a rare gesture by a high-profile architect or designer.²² Yet if Clément's key political concepts of *écologie humaniste*, the *citoyen jardinier* [citizen gardener] and the *jardin planétaire* are to have wider applicability, they need to engage with developments in the global South. How does Clément's reading of *délaissé* space work, for example, where the production of additional food or the construction of informal shelter takes priority? How does the idea of *délaissé* space relate to the global proliferation of "zones of indistinction" where different forms of spatial and political marginality become most intensely intertwined?²³ It is, after all, at the margins of the city where *délaissé* space becomes most concentrated and also most inimical to life. More practically, how can Clément extend his aesthetic fascination with spontaneous or unplanned spaces to the malaria-infested creeks or vast waste dumps that fringe many cities in the global South? Does Clément's agenda—despite its ecological and internationalist sentiments—remain somewhat parochial in the final analysis?

Clément's interpretation of abandoned landscapes holds several implications: first, it represents a diversification of professional expertise and a potential deepening of public engagement with ostensibly marginal spaces; second, his inclusive celebration of biodiversity carries a degree of historical continuity with earlier movements devoted to widening access to the enjoyment of nature through the

17. Ernst Bloch also warns against forms of historicism that not only distort the past but also subvert the possibilities for new forms of critical thinking. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986 [1959]).

18. Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

19. Danielle Dagenais, "The Garden of Movement: Ecological Rhetoric in Support of Gardening Practice," *Studies in the History*

of Gardens and Designed Landscapes 24:4 (2004), pp. 313–340; Louisa Jones, "Gilles Clément Revisited: Biology, Art and Ecology: A Reply to Danielle Dagenais," *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 26:3(2006): 249–252.

20. Gilles Clément, "Faire avec (et jamais contre) la nature/Working with (and never against) nature," 99. See also Ann de Charmant, "Changing the Myth: An Interview with Gilles Clément," *Art and Design* 12 (1997): 34–39.

21. Eliane Patriarca, "Le paysagiste Gilles Clément explique qu'il annule ses engagements avec l'Etat," *La Liberation* (May 19, 2007). See also Gilles Clément, *Le jardin planétaire: réconcilier l'homme et la nature* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999); Jones and Clément, *Gilles Clément: Une écologie humaniste*.

22. Coen, "Gilles Clément," 47.

23. Matthew Gandy, "Zones of Indistinction: Bio-political Contestations in the Urban Arena," *Cultural Geographies* 13:4 (2006): 497–516.

creation of parks, swimming pools, and other embellishments of the urban experience; third, the multiplicity of wild spaces celebrated by Clément challenges the creeping homogeneity of urban form decried by Kenneth Frampton and others; and fourth, the dynamic spaces that Clément creates may play a role in rematerializing spatial politics and enriching the public realm. Instead of viewing vacant landscapes as loci for utilitarian expediency, we can marvel at the intricate beauty of space itself.