



Éric Alonzo
L'architecture de la voie
Histoire et théories

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Éric Alonzo holds a PhD in Architecture and teaches at the Champs-sur-Marne School of Architecture of Towns and Territories, where he codirects the post-master in Urbanism. In 2005, he published *Du rond-point au giratoire* (Parenthèses), and in 2011 he founded the journal *Marnes*, *Documents d'architecture* with Sébastien Marot. His PhD was awarded the Manuel de Solà-Morales European Prize in 2017.

The opus *L'architecture de la voie, histoire et théories* is the result of a very exhaustive study, with an original approach that inventories and analyses the evolution of the concept of 'the road' through the ages, starting from Roman times with antique roads. With a clear and remarkably shrewd view, it links the development of the road to the world of construction and architecture and not just of civil engineering, as used to be the case in Roman times. It links the road to garden art and landscape architecture, as an integral part of these fields and even considered as an art in itself, as mentioned by Édouard André in his *Traité de composition de l'art des Jardins* (Paris, Masson, 1879), and as the testimony of 'the gathering of expertise' dear to Alexandre Chemetoff (a concept developed in the journal *Le Visiteur*, founded by Sébastien Marot in 1995).

The wide, long and straight planted walks in Olivier de Serres's *Théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs* (1605), already show alleys defined by their tree alignments, their hedges and moats. Later, with Boyceau and his *Traité de jardinage* (1638), walks are part of the beauty of the garden,

through their perspectives and proportions. They are used as promenades for walkers and are subdivided into paths of higher or lesser importance. With Le Blond and Dezallier d'Argenville's *La Théorie et la pratique du jardinage* (1709), paths become one of the main attractions of the garden, and their forms, dimensions and proportions are established following criteria of convenience, attractiveness and view. 'Paths in gardens are like streets in a town,' says Dezallier. This famous treatise theorizes at its very best what is considered to be the archetype of the seventeenth-century 'French garden'. At the time, the line between gardeners and architects did not exist, and gardens were the result of these interacting specialties, a dynamic perfectly illustrated in Le Nôtre's talent. He was keen on translating systems stemming from garden art to town planning, as in the case of Versailles, Les Tuileries or the Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris.

Alonzo shows how planted paths, originating in garden art, start having two specific functions culminating in the middle of the eighteenth century: on the one hand they bring aesthetic improvements, on the other they are used as service roads into towns, conceived of as promenades. The successful invention of boulevards on the edge of towns offered wide alleys that safely separated pedestrians from carriages, in a more comfortable manner than was possible in the narrow town streets at that time. The author here sees the prefiguration of what would soon be called 'urbanism'. These improvements were

directly managed by town or province administrators, architects, engineers or learned amateurs, whose projects belonged to the same formal rhetoric from the previous century, based on tridents, stars and crossroads.

This book presents this development with accuracy: as suburbs extend, they progressively urbanize planted roadways, which in turn become an integral part of towns. It's only from 1832 onwards that trees start to be planted in town streets in Paris. This principle was systematized in 1854, after Emperor Napoleon III chose Georges Eugène Haussmann as prefect of Paris. Haussmann appointed civil engineer Adolphe Alphand as head of the *Promenades et Plantations* service. One of his first attributions was to transform the forest paths of the Bois de Boulogne into wide alleys suitable for carriages, paved and aligned by trees. Within a few years, he would design three parks, two bois, two gardens and nineteen public gardens, creating a landscaped network throughout the city. In 1867, after an important reorganization, Haussmann integrated the Public Roads service into the *Promenades et Plantations* service, which shows the actual supremacy of garden art over urban development in his administration. In his book *Les Promenades de Paris*, and in his *Mémoires*, Haussmann presents the emperor as the first sovereign who wanted to bring garden art to the service of all. Haussmannian Paris, with its straight and monumental planted streets and avenues, included its own 'antithesis': its organically shaped gardens and bois, which are deeply rooted in the eighteenth-century idea of the picturesque garden, in which the eye prefers a panoramic view to a vanishing point, and the pleasure of surprise and contrast to geometry.

Alonzo likewise gives a bright analysis of the emergence of a new garden art in eighteenth-century England. Thomas Whately, in his *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770), had set up the principles of what has come to be known as the English landscape garden: the introduction of winding paths organizing a lateral and asymmetrical view onto the landscape, announcing new principles that would be of great importance for the future. Soon, horse riding, speed and continuous movement would become essential notions that would enlarge the scale of the landscape to the scale of the territory. Very soon translated into French, the concepts in Whately's book were studied by Jean-François Morel and René-Louis de Girardin and inspired them in the creation of Ermenonville. The more pragmatic

Humphry Repton, who designed gardens at the end of the eighteenth century, was a prolific author on gardens. His 'Red Books' are particularly famous. He adapted the picturesque ideas to a search for comfort and convenience, and gave priority to movement, roads and pathways. His ideas remained a reference until the middle of the twentieth century.

Alonzo mentions that French historian François Loyer considers Napoleon III's and Haussmann's Paris to be the last and most accomplished of all European Baroque creations. Its influence in Europe would end at the beginning of the twentieth century, and in the United States this French tradition would influence Daniel Hudson Burnham and Edward Herbert Bennet's City Beautiful movement for their project for Chicago in 1907–1908.

The keen analysis of the different contributions by architects, landscape architects and urbanists from Europe and the United States shows interactions between both sides of the Atlantic. The Parkway system inaugurated by F. L. Olmsted, with its splendid chain of parks known as 'The Emerald Necklace' in Boston and Brookline (Massachusetts), is a perfect illustration of this dynamic. This creation was strongly inspired by Olmsted's visit to Haussmann's public park system in Paris, as is precisely documented in Alonzo's book. He categorized the different circulations of the park into walks, rides and drives. Besides, Olmsted's project brilliantly expresses his concern for finding an ecological solution to the water drainage system, an important challenge we still face today.

The author mentions the sudden emergence of mechanized transport (the train), a fact rightly understood by engineer Ildefonso Cerda to be a crucial element in linking towns and people, as he did in the case of Barcelona. He became one of the first urbanists to work precisely on roads and junctions and promoted a tradition of engineers concerned by the urban form in Barcelona.

Alonzo shows how the advent of the car increased the usage of roads, which had originally been developed for horse-driven carriages. But with constantly increasing speeds, the necessity for developing regulations and separation systems between different 'flows' imposed itself. These systems were inspired by the different flows of the human body and applied to parkways, and later expressways or motorways, letting the different flows run separately in beautiful landscapes. As illustrations of this concept, we can admire



Robert Danis' Rocquencourt three-level interchange (1937)

Eugène Hénard's synthetic engravings of his inventions—roundabouts, central collectors, side-walks, travelators, etcetera—in *Les villes de l'avenir* (1910), later Henri Prost's Paris regional planning, *Fragment of the East Motorway* (1928–1934) or Robert Danis' Rocquencourt three-level interchange, a huge and impressive landscape architectural monument (1937).

The author shows how the extreme development of the highway system in the United States in the post-First World War period, dedicated entirely to the mass use of the car, induced great changes of thinking among its commissioners. More than architects or landscape architects, engineers would start to be considered the most competent professionals to create suitable projects. According to Alonzo, the start of this conception seems to stem from those who had abandoned the railway model to come back to the old expertise of road development. The increasing technical and functional constraints linked with road building explain architects' and landscape architects' withdrawal and their feeling of being 'side-lined'. Le Corbusier, in 1929, considers that their traditional expertise is 'unsuited' to building roads in the automobile era.

After the Second World War, a new edition of the Athens Charter, signed by Le Corbusier (1957),

would generate a large following: the principle of the dissociation of different circulation flows excluded any other organizational principle. Swiss architect Rino Tami from Lugano writes about the transformation of landscapes induced by motorways, advocating specific rules. The evolution of road networks observed in the United States in the 1920s would spread to Europe after the Second World War, reaching a peak in the 1960s.

What then follows is an analysis about our present concerns, anticipating the end of the concept of 'everything for the road and the motorway'. The author is convinced, like Kevin Lynch and Aldo Rossi, that instead of destroying infrastructure, some creative and economic choices will emerge by using existing structures for new purposes, as was common in earlier times.

In this book, the visual part of the narrative is outstanding, with an original and rich iconography in a perfect support and complementarity with the text and theory. Its clear structure of four main chapters—'Built Elements', 'The Garden', 'The Flow' and 'The Car'—constantly guides our attention. Its lucid style spurs on our interest throughout the book to bring us to question ourselves about the future of the concept of the 'Road'.