

Disegno

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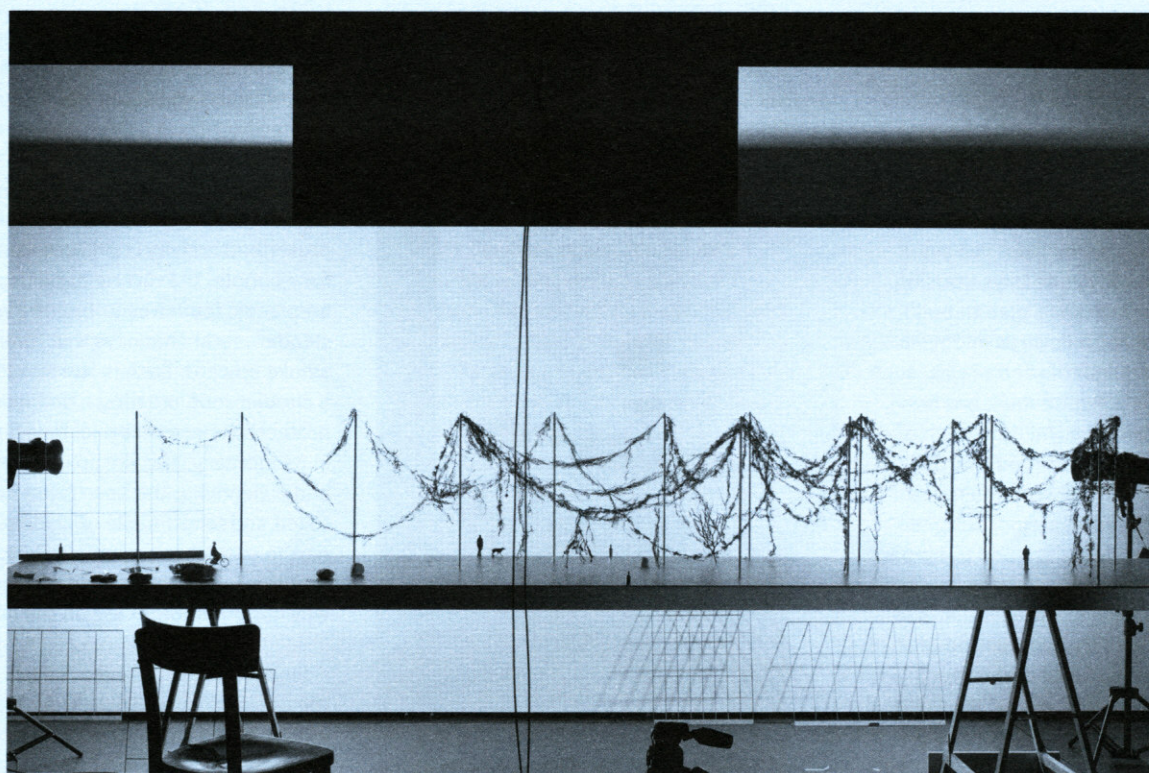
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Rêveries Urbaines

Words Johanna Agerman Ross

An exhibition in Rennes by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec raises important questions about public space, but does it attempt an answer?



This spring has seen a public uprising in France. Throughout the Nuit Debout movement, thousands of people have gathered in town squares as night falls, protesting against a lack of affordable housing, tax evasion and new labour laws. It's been likened to the 2011 Occupy campaign, but its targets of discontent are more diverse and it seems to lack the overt politicisation of its predecessor. Unlike Occupy, Nuit Debout breaks up at dawn, only to reconvene the following night. "The concept behind the movement is 'a convergence of struggles' with no one leader. There are no union banners or flags of specific groups decorating the protest in the square – a rarity in France," declared *the Guardian* in April about the gatherings in Place de la République, Paris.

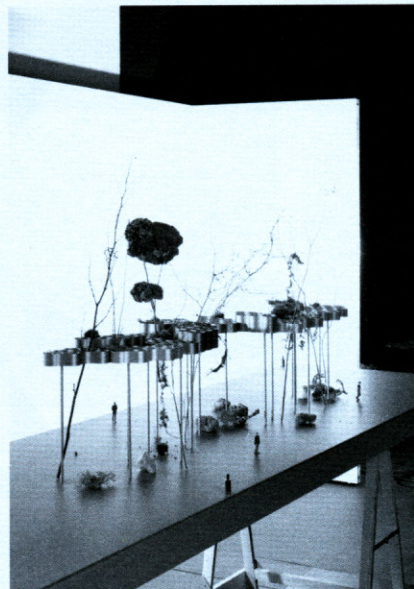
France has a rich history of public protest, just as it has a rich history of controlling it. Georges-Eugène Haussmann's famous restructuring of Paris commissioned by Emperor Napoleon III commenced five years after the bloody June Days Uprising in 1848. Haussmann's plan to build wide, straight boulevards ending in large, paved squares and plazas, such as Place de la République, has been widely regarded as militarisation of public space. "Their [boulevards'] proliferation in the Second Empire was considered strategic, designed to permit free lines of fire and to by-pass the hard to assail barricades erected in narrow, tortuous streets that had made the military suppression of 1848 so difficult," writes the anthropologist David Harvey in his essay 'The Political Economy of Public Space'.

But while the leafy thoroughfares of Paris are hard to read as militarised space now, the secondary outcome of Haussmann's town planning has had a more lasting effect on how we experience cities – the commercialisation of public space. With Haussmann's boulevards came wide pavements complete with street-side cafés, and with the demolition of old residential blocks arrived large department stores and fashionable arcades. Because of these dual powers of control and commerce, there has been a long-standing ambivalence, even suspicion, towards public space – who controls it exactly and who benefits from it? It's a discussion that has come to the

fore in recent writing by architecture theorists such as Anna Minton in *Ground Control* and Owen Hatherley in *Militant Modernism*.

The Nuit Debout movement has brought this debate into the open – literally – which is why designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec's *Rêveries Urbaines* exhibition is so timely. As an exploration of the public domain and its possibilities as a designed space, it comes at an apposite moment.

When you enter the cavernous hall that hosts the exhibition at Les Champs Libres in Rennes, northwest France, it takes a while for the eye to adjust. Instead of visual cues, you pick out the exhibition's soundtrack – quaint noises of trickling water, children's laughter, the friendly honks of a car horn and



The Bouroullecs created more than 50 miniatures for *Rêveries Urbaines*.

the nostalgic tinniness of a barrel organ. It's like stepping into the studio of a Foley artist working on the soundscape of a Jacques Tati film. As you acclimatise, a multitude of small urban landscapes appear. The exhibition is the result of a year-long research project by the Bouroullecs, presented as more than 50 case studies or miniatures of different urban situations – "rêveries" as the designers call them. The specially created display system is made up of anodised aluminium shelves suspended from steel cables, and the spotlights

trained on the exhibits help to create the illusion that the display is floating, adding to the impression of entering a dreamscape.

So what is actually here? A multitude of propositions for how to sit and walk in public space and how to engage with our cities. The proposals are largely focused on bringing nature into the city in playful ways: streams instead of fountains; rocks and creepers instead of paving and pruned flower beds; canopies of light instead of lamp posts. There are circular platforms that serve as roofs to shade people from the sun or protect them from rain, and anodised-aluminium panels that form troughs for water to trickle into. There are cows grazing on urban farms, open-air heaters and metal canopies covered in vegetation, as well as carousels, and seating for reclining and resting.

These are relaxed propositions in which the suggestion of enjoying public space without the need for any prescribed activity is pre-eminent. Take, for example, the *rêverie* depicting open fireplaces: four circular hearths with slender metal chimneys that direct the smoke upward. Each is surrounded by a circular roof, creating a defined and protected space that becomes homelike in its intimacy. The set-up is generous and welcoming, the hearths an invitation to loll and loiter. A pile of wood sits next to each chimney, emphasising that this is a space for participation: why not put another log on the fire? Indeed, the whole scenario bespeaks a sense of collective care. Implicit in the designs is the idea that public spaces are environments that we ought to take responsibility for and tend to as a society. Everything is executed with exactitude, with even the smallest details made specially for the exhibition.

Although such precision model-making is a trademark of the Bouroullecs', *Rêveries Urbaines* is a curious proposition for a design studio that made its name creating products for the home. As a retrospective exhibition in the nearby Frac Bretagne museum reveals, the careers of Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec have been dedicated to the domestic rather than the urban landscape, with televisions, sofas, curtains, ceramics, chairs, armchairs and shelving all featuring in the display. Even when the

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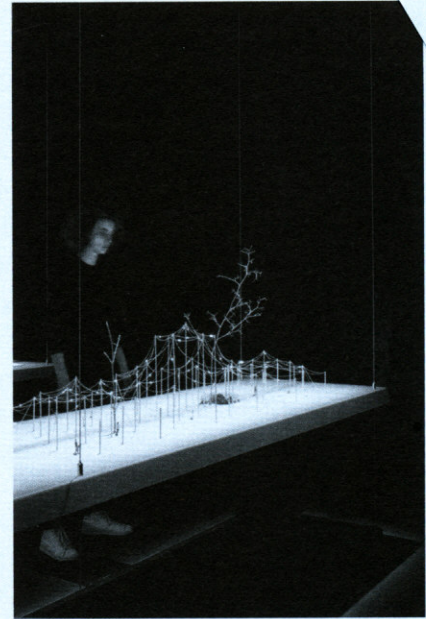
in the studio's work. During the London Design Festival in 2011, the Bouroullecs presented their large-scale (240m²) *Textile Field* in collaboration with Kvadrat in the Raphael Cartoon galleries at the V&A – a landscape of upholstered panels that was best enjoyed shoeless and reclined, so as to offer a new perspective on the venue's 16th-century art, as well as providing a moment of contemplation and peace.

Then, in 2013, their *Lustre Gabriel* was installed at Versailles. A Swarovski crystal chandelier measuring 12m in length, it gently loops from the ceiling of the chateau's Ange-Jacques Gabriel staircase. Last autumn, the studio presented *17 Screens* at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, an experimental take on the division of space that used large-scale screens made

from ceramics, metal beads, guipure lace, ribbon and rope to partition the vast gallery.

Connecting all of these projects is a keen interest in material exploration and a wish to challenge archetypal solutions for the creation of space. The studio's two modular room dividers, *Algae* for Vitra and *Clouds* for Kvadrat, are organic approaches to reconfiguring areas in the home, emblematic of the Bouroullecs' fascination with looking at environments and people's interaction with place. Yet to take this thesis from the secure confines of palaces and museums, and to suggest that it has an application in an urban environment is daring and risky: the city is a far broader canvas than the Bouroullecs are used to working on, as well as a less controlled environment. Many of the studio's previous projects are hinted at in *Rêveries Urbaines*: the *Textile Field* is reimaged as a gently angled outdoor floor; the strands of the Gabriel chandelier are draped like garlands between poles; the Tel Aviv screens are reconceived as trellises for vegetation. But everything is experienced as miniature, tabletop landscapes, with only the Tatiesque soundtrack suggesting where exactly you might encounter these propositions in real life.

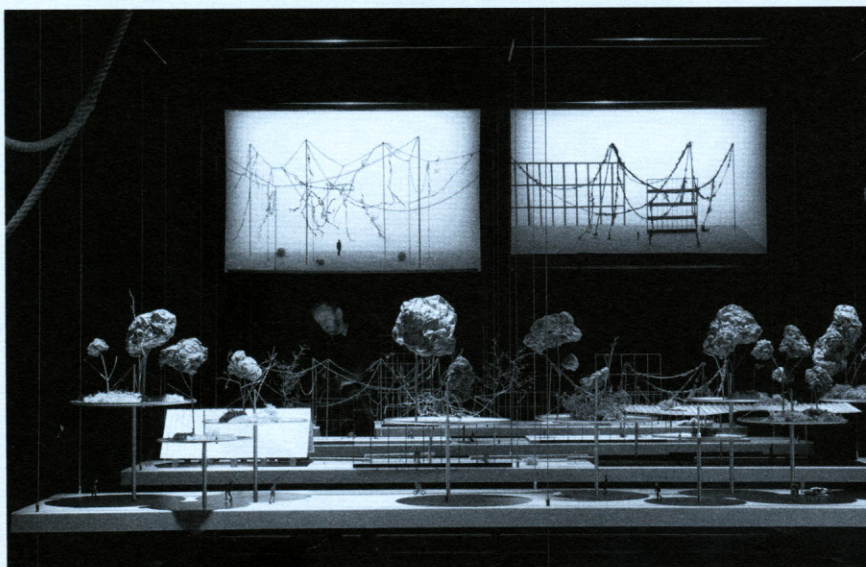
The *Nuit Debout* protests had their own architecture. Temporary shelters appeared as makeshift wooden structures with tarpaulin stretched across, portable sound systems were



The exhibition took one year to research and build.

used to disseminate messages, and movable heaters kept protesters warm on chilly nights. Despite the lack of a considered aesthetic, these night-time interventions find common ground with *Rêveries Urbaines* in that they treat public space as something other than fundamentally commercial. Both propose spaces where people might come together in ways reminiscent of an idealised Greek agora – a place to share thoughts and ideas, and to express one's identity as a citizen. To formalise the temporary structures of the *Nuit Debout* into an active architecture of the city – and to do so in a way that lets citizens partake in shaping public space beyond consumption and protest – is an important project.

The Bouroullecs are not alone in turning their attention to our use of the city. Running parallel to the growing body of scholarship focused on the whys and wherefores of public areas, is an increase in practices that address these questions in reality. Muf Architecture in London has made public interventions on its home turf since the 1990s, with many of its projects having come to fruition through active consultation with citizens and local councils in England. The art and architecture collective Assemble won the Turner Prize in 2015 for its Granby Four Streets project, which involved reinvigorating a run-down



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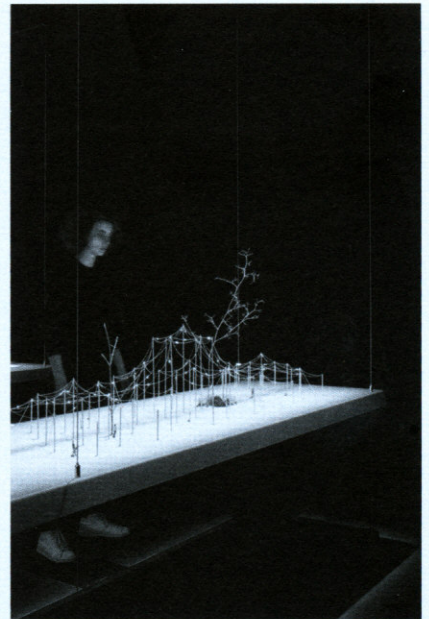
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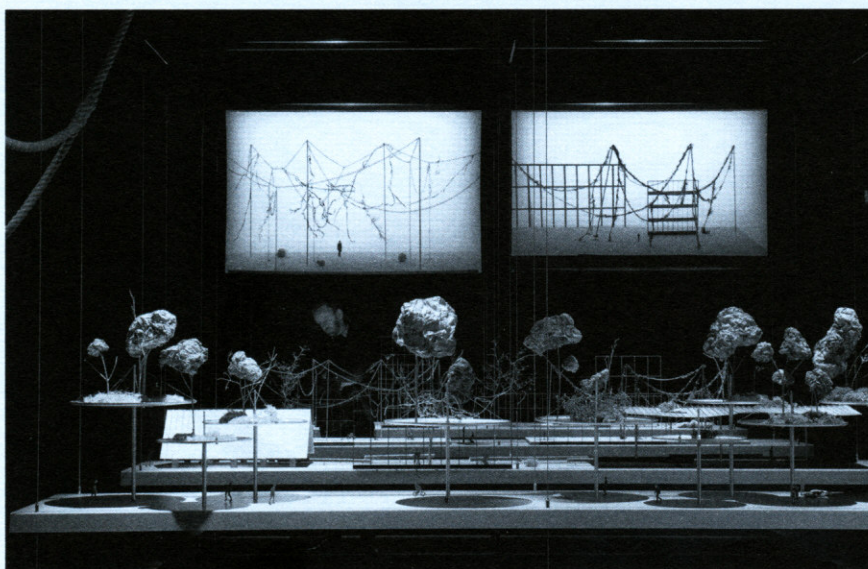
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area in Liverpool through collaboration with its inhabitants; Jasper Morrison worked on a bus garage in Graz, Austria, with Andreas Brandolini, rethinking the layout and use of a “dead” urban area through speaking to commuters; and architects Caruso St John worked with artist Eva Löfdahl in reshaping the main square of the Swedish town of Kalmar using light and sound effects to make the severe granite space come to life.

However, what’s refreshing – and what seems new – about *Rêveries Urbaines* is the plurality of its displays and the fact that these are branded as reflections rather than proposals. These miniature solutions are not considered absolute,

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but rather are presented as sketches and works-in-progress. The Bouroullecs have initiated a series of debates about how we can treat public space, with each of the *rêveries* united by their essential domestication of these areas – their questioning of the stark monumentality of Haussmann and his followers, and their insistence on communicating the power of the state rather than the people. *Rêveries Urbaines* introduces a human scale to the urban environment and in doing so brings playfulness to the city. These are places where you can simply do nothing, an engagement that requires neither consumption nor protest. Imagine reclining on a bench specifically designed to allow for this, or warming yourself in front of an open fire, or watching a cow grazing in an urban environment. Each of these are small gestures, but even the theoretical prospect of treating our cities as places where these activities might be possible changes our perceptions of what we should demand from our public spaces. The essential hopefulness for change that lies behind the *Nuit Debout* movement is present in *Rêveries Urbaines* too. It is a show that encourages us to challenge the public spaces now on offer.

Rêveries Urbaines is on show at Les Champs Libres, Rennes, from 25 March to 28 August 2016.

