From *place* to *espace*: Napoleon III's transformation of the Bois de Boulogne

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At its inauguration in 1854, the newly redesigned Bois de Boulogne existed only as an arrangement of paths and greenery, laid out in the naturalistic and popular English style of garden design. As such, the Bois de Boulogne was little more than a site. Theorist Michel de Certeau articulated the difference between a site and a space, using the example of the city to outline the means by which practices change a site or a *place* (the visible and tangible) into a space or an *espace* (the invisible and experiential). He claimed, "Spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life." Just as practices transformed de Certeau's city, so usage altered the visible forms of the park. In their carriages and crinolines, the park visitors of the Second Empire imbued the site with meaning and subtext through activity. Thus, over a period of more than a decade, the Bois de Boulogne metamorphosed into the unique and recognizable *Le Bois* of the Second Empire. Just as de Certeau's theory prescribed, the practices of the parkgoers turned this simple design into a social and cultural institution which became the epicenter of Parisian society during the halcyon days of the Second Empire.

The Bois de Boulogne had long been a green area on

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the western edge of Paris. For centuries, the crown maintained control of the forest of Rouvray that was situated on the spot and preserved it as a private hunting ground. After the revolution of 1789, the area became the possession of the central government, and it fell into disrepair as successive regimes came and went. Finally, in 1852 when the Empire was declared, the new government ceded the property to the city of Paris and work began on a redesign of the park. Years of exile spent in England introduced Napoléon III to the popular jardin anglais style of garden design, with its natural forms and serpentine paths. He resolved to turn the park into an example par excellence of this favored style; he assigned the task to designer-engineer Adolphe Alphand, under the supervision of Baron George Eugène Haussmann.

The political and economic climate that surrounded the work in the park had a significant impact on the way in which the space ultimately came to be used. After the revolution of 1848, then presidential candidate Louis Napoléon vowed to bring about an era of "order and

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4 Florence Mary Baker, Parisians and their Parks: the creation and development of the Paris municipal park system, 1853-1900 (Ph. D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1994), 91.
security" in France.⁵ As Emperor Napoléon III, he expanded his promise to include not only civil order but economic prosperity and stability as well. Napoléon III believed that economic progress would improve the lot of all Frenchmen, even those on the lowest rungs of society. Through a form of "trickle down economics," the Emperor hoped France could catch up to England in the race to industrialize.⁶ He loosened controls on businesses and instituted a policy of laissez-faire. He envisioned a strong central government that would inspire confidence in the economy and encourage entrepreneurial activity. His government spent immense amounts of money and encouraged others to spend by floating loans. The government of France became embroiled in an endless cycle of borrowing, lending, and speculation, which came to be known by supporters and detractors alike as the fête impérial. As historian Alain Plessis pointed out, "The debt swelled rapidly until 1865, and the increase during Napoléon III's reign was 100 per cent as against 20 per cent during the July Monarchy."⁷ While this frenzy could not be sustained, throughout the years of the Second Empire the practices that shaped the espace of the park were built on consolidating the power of those with money and upholding Napoléon III's regime and its economic policies.

The creation of the Grand and Petit lacs in the Bois de Boulogne, one of the earliest embellishments of the park, demonstrated the way in which use transformed design and

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⁷ Ibid., 64.
contributed to supporting the *fête impérial*. The lakes originated as a single body of water designed by landscape gardener Louis Varé. Varé's original concept, however, was a dismal failure. The water that filled the single, large lake repeatedly leached out through the sandy soil and left a swampy, stagnant mess in its wake. Frustrated with the delays caused by the failure of the lake to retain water and disappointed in Varé, Haussmann encouraged the Emperor to replace the gardener with a young, talented engineer: Adolphe Alphand. Haussman knew Alphand well and had had the opportunity to work with him years earlier while an administrator in Bordeaux. The engineer's solution was to design two lakes instead of one and to line them both with a form of concrete to prevent seepage.

The Petit Lac was the smaller of the lakes with a surface area of 30,000 square meters. Nonetheless, it was referred to as the "lac supérieur," since its elevation was the higher of the two. The *lac supérieur* fed the Grand Lac, or *lac inférieur*, via a cascade that measured six meters in height. The Grand Lac was many times larger than the Petit Lac with its surface area of approximately 190,000 square meters. Alphand also constructed two islands in the center of the Grand Lac as a focal point. The whole site was densely planted, and the effect was lovely and picturesque. Years later, the well-known and respected British horticulturalist, William Robinson, praised Alphand's naturalistic work. According to Robinson:

> The islands seen from the margin of the lake are beautiful . . . they show at a glance the superiority of permanent embellishment over fleeting annual display . . . The planting

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8 Baker, 91.  
9 Haussmann, 1:125.  
10 Alphand, 27.
of these islands was expensive at first, and required a good
knowledge of trees and shrubs, besides a large amount of taste
in the designer; but it is so done that were the hand of man
withheld from them for half a century, they would not suffer
in the least.\footnote{William Robinson, The Parks and Gardens of Paris considered
in relation to the wants of other cities and of public and private gardens
(London: MacMillan and Co., 1878), 2.}

Alphand encircled the lakes with a carriage path in order to
provide multiple observation points and sweeping vistas of
the islands and this central water feature. On a visit to Paris
in the 1860s, United States Senator John W. Forney noted
that the lakes were a "lovely alternation of wood and water,
promenade and drive."\footnote{John W. Forney, Letters from Europe (Philadelphia: T. B.
Peterson & Brothers, 1867), 184.}

The significance of the lakes was not, however, the
ingenious design or the natural beauty which they
celebrated. Rather, the area of the lakes became significant
through use; the \textit{tour des lacs} became the most important
function of this site. Each afternoon at four o'clock throngs
of the Parisian \textit{haute bourgeoise} descended on the Bois in
carriages and made several passes on the road around the
lake before heading back to their homes in the city. Alfred
Delvau described the \textit{tour} in his 1867 Paris guidebook. He
wrote, "Going to the Bois is a tradition which one was
careful not to miss . . . an excellent occasion to display
one's horses or mistress when one is a man or to exhibit her
toilette and critique those of others when one is a
woman."\footnote{Alfred Delvau, \textit{Les Plaisirs de Paris: guide pratique et illustré}
(Paris: A. Faure, 1867), 35.}

John Forney sketched the scene for his
American readers: "Of the number of vehicles present I can
give you no estimate, save that they seemed to be miles in
extent, while on both sides of the carriage-way rode horsemen and horsewomen, attired as only French people can dress."\textsuperscript{14} Even the Emperor participated in the \textit{tour des lacs}. Historian Hervé Maneglier wrote that "one saw him often enough, driving himself in his phaeton at a lively pace, with his two grooms seated behind him, arms crossed, as motionless as statues."\textsuperscript{15}

Novelist Emile Zola immortalized the tour in the opening scene of his work entitled \textit{La Curée}. Zola began his novel by describing the \textit{tour des lacs}, and the way in which characters Renée and Maxime Saccard experienced it. The author underscored the overwhelming popularity of the event writing, "All Paris was there in spite of the lateness of the season." Zola's construction of the scene exemplifies de Certeau's distinction between the visible \textit{place} (the lakes) and the invisible \textit{espace} (the \textit{tour des lacs}). Renée's attention shifts back and forth between the physical and experiential. She takes notice of the trees along the lake, the flowers, and the rocks only to turn back to the human activity around her. By studying the behavior of her social peers, their dress, their equipage, and the company they keep, Renée is instantly made aware of who is making money and who is losing money in Second Empire Paris. As Renée and Maxime observe the crowd around them, they themselves are observed. Zola deftly moves Renée's focus back to the physical lake, the water, a sailboat, and the shrubs along the shore, all of which stand in marked contrast to the dynamism of the crush of the carriages.\textsuperscript{16} The practice of the \textit{tour} altered the lake and

\textsuperscript{14} Forney, 184.
\textsuperscript{15} Hervé Maneglier, \textit{Paris Impérial: La Vie Quotidienne sous le Second Empire} (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), 156.
transformed it from a well designed and pretty water feature into a vital information center and communication network for those participating in the feverish conspicuous consumption of Second Empire Paris.

Years after the creation of the lakes and the popularization of the tour, Adolphe Alphand created another site within the park, a site which was likewise transformed and altered by use. In 1856, Alphand ordered the construction of the Hippodrome and the Tribunes of Longchamps.\textsuperscript{17} The racetrack and the grandstands quickly became a space of tremendous exclusivity deep within this public city park. The grass track and wooden structures were little more than the physical features of a space defined as exclusive by those who used it. Further, the entire facility functioned to provide an outlet for patriotic sentiment, to uphold class distinctions and social structure, and to provide a distraction for the rich and powerful lest they become involved in Orleanist or Legitimist activity.

Adolphe Alphand designed two overlapping grass tracks for the purpose of horseracing on the plain of Longchamps near the ancient cemetery of the village of Boulogne. The larger racetrack, the Grande Piste, was a 3,000-meter track. On its northern end, it incorporated the smaller 2,000-meter Petite Piste.\textsuperscript{18} Alphand appointed Gabriel Davioud, lead architect of the city of Paris and close associate of Baron Haussmann, to design the grandstands. Davioud’s plan involved five separate structures bordering the track; together they would accommodate five thousand spectators.\textsuperscript{19}

The Emperor’s Pavilion was the most elaborate of the buildings and stood at the very center of the cluster. It was

\textsuperscript{17} Alphand, 96.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Mangelier, 159.
a five-story edifice topped by an open-air observation deck. The interior walls were expensively wainscoted, and the upper sections were covered in red silk damask. The ceiling was composed of delicately sculpted plaster, and the doors were constructed of polished, hand carved ebony. Known as the Tribunes, the structures to the left and right of the Emperor's pavilion consisted of an iron framework covered by ornately carved wooden balustrades and valances. At either end of the buildings, Davioud placed two three-story towers, which approached, but did not exceed, the height of the Emperor's pavilion. In these two tribunes, the amenities were entirely first class. Spectators viewed the contest seated in finely upholstered chairs. A restaurant and a concierge desk graced the lower level. Urinals were provided for the men and powder rooms for the women. A physician was on the premises to attend to both fallen riders and ladies of society who might become faint from the heat and excitement. Beyond these luxurious grandstands stood the public bleachers at either end of the entire complex. These stands measured forty meters long and only thirteen meters high. They were wood-frame constructions and decorated in the popular Victorian "bois découpé" or denticulated wood. Here spectators enjoyed the races while seated on wooden benches. A low, wrought iron fence separated these exterior bleachers from the Emperor's pavilion and the two central grandstands. The fence formed the paddock and also divided the site into two distinct and separate areas.  

American essayist Charles Warner described Longchamps after a visit during the glory days of the Second Empire. "The enclosed oblong space is not flat," he recalled, "but undulating just enough for beauty, and so

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20 Alphand, 97-98.
framed in by graceful woods, and looked on by *châteaux* and upland forests, that I thought that I had never seen a sweeter bit of greensward." He rhapsodized further: "The day I saw it, the horsechesnuts were in bloom; and there was, on the edges, a cloud of pink-and-white blossoms, that gave a soft and charming appearance to the entire landscape."21 William Robinson had a decidedly different opinion of Longchamps. In his trenchant evaluation of the racetrack, Robinson railed at the idea of such a sporting facility, claiming:

The creation of a new steeplechase-course in the very best position in the Bois, just beyond the top end of the upper lake, is as vulgar an error as can well be commited in a public garden . . . Imagine the best part of the Regent's Park in London, or the Central Park, New York, prostituted to the purposes of "suburban meetings"!22

Intermittent visitors to Longchamps had much less impact on transforming the place of the racetrack into a space of exclusivity than did the "owners" of the track, the Société d'Encouragement pour l'amélioration des races des chevaux en France, more commonly known as the Jockey Club.23

Upon the completion of the work at Longchamps, the city of Paris granted a fifty-year concession on the track to the Jockey Club, arguably one of the most exclusive clubs in the entire nation. Established in 1831, the club epitomized bloodline, wealth, and propriety. Frédéric Loliée recalled that "if one posed the question 'Is he a Jockey?' it was the equivalent of asking: Is he well born,

22 Robinson, 14.
23 Haussman, 1:187.
Well-bred and well-mannered, they were nonetheless extremely suspicious of outsiders. In fact, the Société d’Encouragement required that the general public who attended the races access the public stands via separate drives. Once there, they were to remain outside of the paddock and wrought iron fence. Club members, on the other hand, occupied the tribune immediately to the left of the Emperor’s pavilion while the one to the right accommodated princes of the imperial family, ministers of state, and leaders of the army. At Longchamps, the Jockey Club members were equal to the most powerful men in the government of France. Through their attitude, their behavior, and even their seating arrangement, the members of the Société wrote the exclusivity of their club and its prominence in society onto the site at Longchamps.

Napoléon III recognized the Jockey Club as a force to be reckoned with. He upheld and encouraged the use of Longchamps as a private, elite space in an effort to mollify and distract the membership of the Société. Rich, patriotic, and chauvinistic, these men could easily have challenged the power of the government if so they chose. Napoléon III encouraged the Jockey Club to seclude themselves at Longchamps, far from the center of the city, to hold their contests and breed horses rather than revolution. Patriotism flourished in the suburban retreat. In 1863, when an English horse took the prize at the first Grand Prix, the loss was tantamount to a national crisis.

The following year, when the Comte de Lagrange’s horse,

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26 Alphand, 97.
27 Plessis, 127.
28 Maneglier, 160.
Gladiateur, retook the prize for France, the Emperor quite dramatically descended to the field and rewarded the Jockey Club member on the spot, naming him an officer of the prestigious Legion of Honor.  

Practiced elitism by the members of the Jockey Club at Longchamps and the Emperor's support of their activities transformed the place of the racecourse into an espace of exclusivity, patriotism, and political status quo.

Just as the bourgeoisie transformed the lakes of the Bois de Boulogne into an information center and the members of the Jockey Club turned Longchamps into a private realm within the public park, so too did Napoléon himself change a simple, crescent-shaped pond, known as the Cercle des Patineurs, into an extension of the court of the Tuileries. The Cercle was located in a secluded portion of the Bois de Boulogne called "la pelouse de Madrid," about seven hundred meters due north of the tip of the lac inférieur. The Cercle des Patineurs was not open to the public; sole ownership and use of the area belonged to a private skating club of the same name which was personally endorsed by the Emperor. Adolphe Alphand designed the landscape and once again called on Parisian architect Gabriel Davioud to build the primary structure on the site, the Grand Chalet. Work on the complex began in February 1865, and quite remarkably, the Cercle was available for use late that same year. The site boasted a shallow cement pond two hundred fifty meters long and fifty meters wide, a tall, wrought iron fence set back fifteen meters from the border of the pond, and a large wooden

31 Haussman, 1:204.
Architect Gabriel Davioud patterned the Grand Chalet after a Swiss chalet, and the interior was outfitted to accommodate the most privileged of guests. The Grand Chalet consisted of a large central pavilion flanked by two smaller satellite pavilions and connected by galleries. Although built of common pine, the chalet was, nevertheless, elaborately decorated with "lambrequins, finials and balustrades of denticulated wood." With its large cast iron stove in the middle of the floor, the central pavilion provided guests with amenities such as a cloakroom, a buffet, a lamp room and toilets. The pavilion to the left housed the Imperial Salon and the one to the right, with its small, adjoining office, was reserved for the Cercle's committee. Two galleries, each lined with benches surrounding a smaller, central cast iron stove, linked the three pavilions. Here the domestics and coachmen of the skaters warmed themselves during the winter skating parties. The simplicity and unpretentiousness of the layout of the Cercle des Patineurs belied its function during the reign of Napoléon III.

The Emperor and Empress hosted extravagant skating parties at the Cercle des Patineurs. Indeed, the Cercle became an extension of the Palais des Tuileries in the Bois de Boulogne. Author Arsène Houssaye attended many of these occasions. Writing in 1885, he reminisced about those sparkling evenings:

One could imagine that the Marshals' Salon on the day of a ball had been magically transported to the Bois de Boulogne.

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32 Alphand, 99.
33 Ibid.
The Emperor and the Empress, all of their esteemed court; the ministers, the ambassadors, their coterie from the Tuileries and Compiègne would all relocate themselves there, at times beneath the fog of three o'clock, at times under the evening stars accompanied by paper lanterns.35

These impressive affairs at the Cercle des Patineurs were private, but they offered those fortunate enough to secure an invitation a rare opportunity to approach the ruler in a less formal setting than at the Tuileries. Gaston Jollivet recounted one such moment when he was a guest of the Emperor at the Cercle, and its disappointing outcome. The young man determined to have the Emperor's ear for a moment, but he slipped and fell on the ice, landing speechless at the feet of the sovereign. Ignoring the gaffe, Napoléon turned and made his way back through the crowd with General Fleury by his side, continuing their conversation.36 A missed opportunity to be sure for young Jollivet who, in that rare moment of personal contact with the Emperor, might have secured imperial favor and his own fortune. Jollivet's account of this one incident at a skating party at the Cercle des Patineurs demonstrates just how physically accessible the ruler was in this particular space. This kind of personal access, impossible at the state functions in the Tuileries, was commonplace at the Cercle.

The Emperor's interest in skating spread throughout Parisian society, although the Cercle des Patineurs was off limits to most. Some people tried skating on the Grand Lac, but the depth of the water and successive mild winters often made that a dangerous proposition. The Cercle des Patineurs remained the best place to skate and the private

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haunt of the court. Indeed, within the international circles of high society, the complex earned the sardonic nickname, "chez les Happy Few."\(^{37}\) Further evidence of the private nature of the space may be found in the travel memoirs of Americans who frequented the Bois de Boulogne during the Second Empire. Accomplished world travelers such as Charles Warner, John W. Forney, and Junius Henri Browne reported at length on the \textit{tours des lacs} and the races at Longchamps yet made no mention of the Cercle des Patineurs. Given the highly restricted nature of the place, it is likely that these foreign writers never saw it. Napoléon III's use of the Cercle des Patineurs transformed a simple skating club and pond into a space as private, exclusive, and official as any room in the Tuileries Palace.

Michel de Certeau's concept of space as a practiced place\(^{38}\) fits well into a consideration of the many establishments within the Bois de Boulogne of the nineteenth century. Time and again, human activity transformed the site into a space by inscribing the physical place with new meaning and significance. Through the \textit{tour des lacs}, the Grand and Petit \textit{lacs} became an essential information network. The exclusive Jockey Club transformed the racetrack and tribunes at Longchamps into representations of social hierarchy and centers of patriotism. The many skating parties and the presence of the Emperor at the Cercle des Patineurs changed the ice rink into an imperial stage where the sovereign presented himself to a select inner circle. With each passing year and additions to the Bois de Boulogne, it appeared that the park creators recognized this relationship between use and the creation of space. The design and installation of each new establishment within the park demonstrated an increase in

\(^{37}\) Maneglier, 158-59.  
\(^{38}\) Certeau, 96.
the desire to control the use of the space by diminishing the potential variable of human activity. Fences and structures at Longchamps and the Cercle created a divided space and supported the increasingly exclusive nature of the locations. Indeed, there is a distinct temporal progression from the creation of the lakes (1854), where design and usage appear uncoordinated, to Longchamps (1857) and the Cercle des Patineurs (1865), where design and use are increasingly harmonized. This delicate dance of design and practice, place and espace, performed beside a lake, on the plain of Longchamps, in luxurious grandstands, or on the ice of a manmade rink, defined the spaces of the Bois de Boulogne and transformed the park into an area whose distinctive character epitomized Second Empire Paris.

On a material level, Napoléon III's Bois de Boulogne was little more than a site. It was an area of forest and greensward to the west of Paris, a stretch of land totaling 846 hectares.³⁹ "Le Bois," as it came to be known, was much more: it encompassed and conveyed all that occurred in that place during the heady days of speculation and wealth that shaped Paris in the 1850s and 1860s. Le Bois embodied the Emperor's dream of political order and economic prosperity. "Le Bois" expressed the invisible nature of the park, its social significance and cultural meaning. During the Second Empire, use and practices transformed the place that was the Bois de Boulogne into a space known as "Le Bois."

³⁹ Alphand, 5.