

Redevelopment of Place Darcy **SIMPLICITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND RESTRAINT**

Text and images by Alfred Peter
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PROJECT CREDITS

Location: Dijon, France **Completion Date:** 2012 **Client:** Grand Dijon **Design and Project Architect:** Atelier Alfred Peter
Team: Egis Group (Engineering), L'Acte Lumière (Lighting), Cofely Ineo Gdf Suez (Energy) **Consultants:** BET Clement (Structure), RIBI (Circulation), Streetlife (Flowerpots), Nursery Daniel Soupe (Tree-nursery), Magnitude Architectures (Architects), EUROVIA (Roads), VDS (Security and fire protection), Tarvel (Landscape management), Duc et Préneuf (Landscape contractor)
Site Area: 1 hectare



"The duty of an architect is to support places as they metamorphose and create a better way of being human."—Aurélio Galfetti

The classic Darcy Square in Dijon, France, underwent a major refurbishment. French landscape architect Alfred Peter of Atelier Alfred Peter was responsible for the innovative design. The classic square has been given a green layer, which is pleasing to the eye. An arboretum of 55 different trees in a geometric pattern has been created. On hot days, their shade offers a pleasant retreat.

Like many other iconic public spaces in France in the 1960s and 1970s, Place Darcy was decimated by the relentless implementation of traffic and parking projects. Thus, the refurbishment project undertaken by local authorities of the City of Dijon combines three objectives: first, rebalancing usage between traffic and urban practices; second, tackling the difficult task of dealing with a car park slab; and third, reintroducing new uses through renewed usability.

Objectives

Rebalancing usage

Upon redevelopment, the surface area of Darcy Square occupied by roads, openings, and bus routes has been significantly reduced from 80 to 20 percent. With the redevelopment, Samuel Maillot, a mobility engineer recognised for his work on multimodality, "freed" some extremely spectacular room. The traffic was not moved onto other roads, but taken back to the city centre's peripheral ring roads.

Car park slab

Three-quarters of the surface area of the square is in fact the roof of a seven-storey car park building. Extremely close to the surface,

this slab prohibits any overload beyond that of the parking posts. This extreme constraint dictated the redevelopment scheme, which involved punctuating the surface with 52 huge pots, sunk to varying depths into the ground depending on the height of the slab.

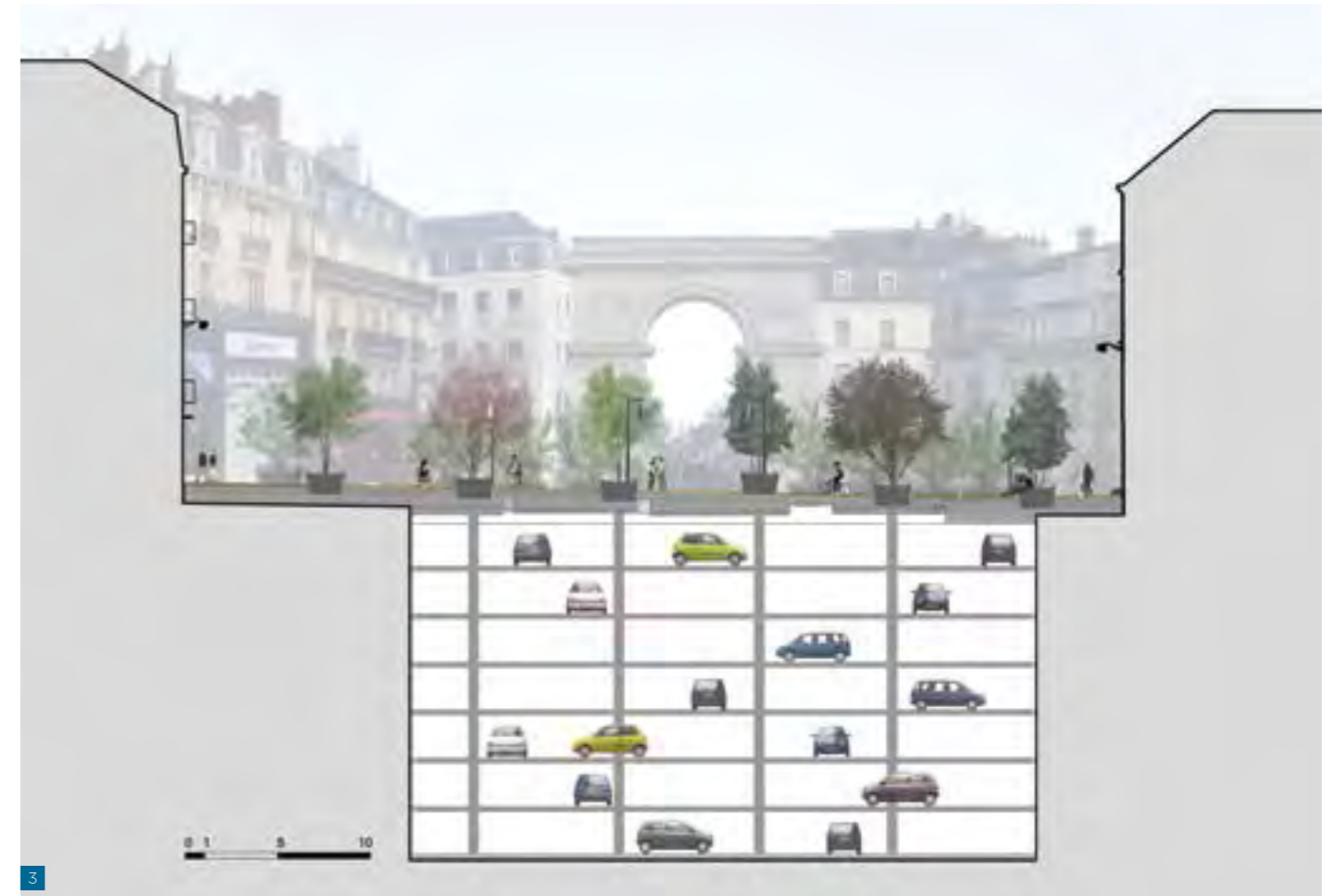
These pots from landscape suppliers Streetlife, containing four cubic metres of substrate, were developed from an extremely high-resistance synthetic resin material. All the openings were set apart from the entrance and exit, which otherwise would have required extremely significant structural changes to the car park.

Reintroducing new uses

The client imposed the presence of plants in the redevelopment. This resulted in the square being treated as an airlock between the city and garden, with the size of plants increasing from the famous monument Arc de Triomphe to the park.

The exacting ground level layout was designed to respect the morphology of this triangular square, bordered by stunning eighteenth-century façades. The distinctive atmosphere generated has returned to the site a variety of uses, including concerts, for which a stage can be set up beneath the Arc de Triomphe, festive celebrations like Christmas markets and Neighbours' Day, and café terraces.

The square has become what it should have always been: a place for "better way of living". According to Peter, it is a culmination and a concentration of everything he has learnt over the last 30 years of working on public spaces, summed up in three words: simplicity, authenticity, and restraint.



1. More liveable Place Darcy, City of Dijon, after redevelopment.

2. Highly built-up Darcy Square before refurbishment.

3. Three-quarters of the surface area of the square is actually the roof of a seven-storey carpark building.

4. Place Darcy is part of the biggest Tramway projects in France (Photo: Streetlife).

5. Vibrant civic activities in the refurbished Place Darcy by the famous Arc de Triomphe.

6. The square incorporates 52 handpicked exceptional trees that combine beauty, durability, and easy maintenance.

7, 8. Bio-composite giant flowerpots placed below ground make perfect shading and relaxing spots (Photos: Streetlife).

9. Street lamps, inspired by candle trees, provide warm, backlit light at night.





Technical Details

Surfaces: Simplicity

Dijon is considered a “limestone” city, only 30 kilometres away from neighbouring commune Comblanchien’s quarries. The floor of the square is therefore made of limestone blocks, treated as a high-quality surface and not as a design. The ground is neutral.

Openings: Discretion

As is often the case, the first job for a designer of public spaces is a clean-up. Various kiosks, railings, ugly fixtures, and lighting from another era were removed. The second job involved limiting new openings and fixtures. In this case, the impact of the work done on the plants is so powerful that it “digests” what could not be removed: lift shaft, redesigned openings, and posts (a limited number!). In no way were the fixtures a structuring element of the project; public spaces are not designer showrooms. They must be discreet, but this does not prevent them from being elegant.


Planting: A tribute to biodiversity

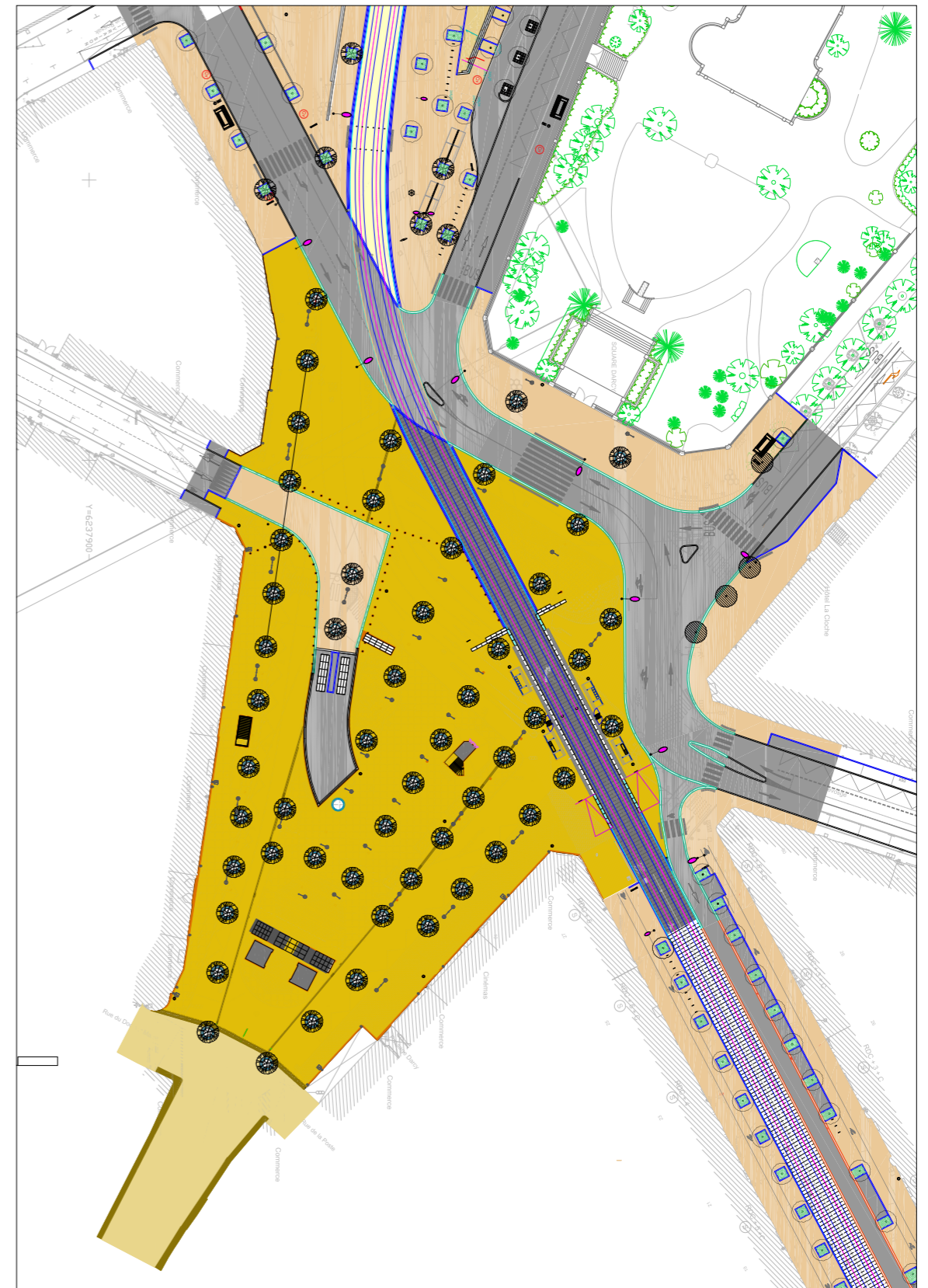
An open-air nursery, with 52 hand-picked exceptional trees that combine beauty, durability, and ease of maintenance, tones down the “mineral” appearance of the square. Planted in a fan shape, they create a pedestrian alleyway almost devoid of obstacles leading to Place Darcy. Plants are a very important component of the square. They create regular rhythm, like French artist Daniel Buren’s sculptural columns. The substrate contained in the four-cubic-metre pots guarantees good potential for plant growth.

Each pot contains a different species (1 pot = 1 tree = 1 species). They were chosen to enrich the biological palette of the city of Dijon and create a diminishing awning from the square to the Arc de Triomphe. For the most part, the species chosen were rare, evergreen, and grown by the Soupe nursery in Châtillon sur Chalaronne. The rims of the pots form circular benches around the trees. Thus, each tree becomes a potential spot to rest, under an umbrella. Even at tram stops, the potted trees serve as furniture for waiting.

Shedding light: Free from useless effects

L’Acte Lumière’s lighting plan creates a generous and stylised atmosphere through the use of a series of candelabra, or candle trees, positioned in a radiating pattern from Porte Guillaume towards Place Darcy. The lighting supplied in polished shiny stainless steel provides brightness and an important presence in the day by reflecting its surroundings, and creates a complex play of warm, white, backlit lantern reflections at night. At night, the dim light of their lampshades is reinforced by the use of a very subtle blue background, reflected back over the whole space from the surrounding façades, which act as isotope reflectors.

To guarantee the levels of lighting required for movement, small asymmetrical lights were placed along the buildings. This more sustained level of lighting along the base of the façade strengthens the perception of a more intimate space in the centre of the square. 



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Site Plan