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A few factors in understanding French town planning

Stadtplanung in Frankreich – einige Faktoren zu ihrem Verständnis

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Abstract

Current affairs have lately shone a less-than-flattering light on various events associated with French planning, but without giving much illumination to the reasons behind them. It is difficult to decode the deep-rooted causes of these phenomena without knowing about the historical, political and administrative context of French planning. We also need to understand the new political issues that are arising and the economic levers acting on a European scale, such as the emergence of new global private operators interacting with local contacts in terms of fundraising, management and urban design.

Kurzfassung

In der letzten Zeit haben einige Ereignisse ein nicht gerade schmeichelhaftes Schlaglicht auf verschiedene Begebenheiten im Zusammenhang mit dem Städtebau in Frankreich geworfen, aber nicht wirklich Erklärungsansätze aufgezeigt. Die tieferen Ursachen dieser Phänomene sind schwer zu verstehen, wenn man den geschichtlichen, politischen und verwaltungstechnischen Hintergrund des Städtebauwesens in Frankreich nicht kennt. Außerdem muss man um die neuen politischen Herausforderungen wissen und die wirtschaftlichen Hebelwirkungen verstehen, die auf europäischer Ebene ansetzen, vor allem das Auftauchen neuer privatwirtschaftlicher und globaler Akteure, die mit lokalen Partnern bei der Mittelbeschaffung, beim Management und bei der Entwicklung des architektonischen Stadtbilds interagieren.

1 Introduction: significant recent events

A lack of perspective on current developments

It is important to note at the outset that a battery of relatively recent legislation has had a profound impact on the processes for drafting, negotiating and managing French town planning procedures, and that we do not yet have enough perspective to be able to evaluate all the consequences. In addition, it is currently difficult to forecast the real planning policy intentions of the new government the country has just acquired, as they have not yet been clearly expressed. For example,

the recent environmental consultation meetings with the title “Grenelle de l’environnement”, organised by the government at the end of 2007, may soon result in decisive movement whose impact we cannot yet determine. This paper does not therefore aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the French town planning situation, but more simply to explore a few factors that can help understand recent developments.

Crisis in the suburbs

It should be said that current affairs have lately shone a less-than-flattering light on various events associated with French planning, but without giving much illumination to the reasons behind them. Of these recent events, the most disturbing, or at least the most visible, was without doubt the unrest that flared up in the outlying districts of several of the country's major cities in November 2005. The watching eyes of the world's television cameras feared that the scenes presaged a wider insurrection. For several weeks, riots pitted the young inhabitants of the suburbs against the forces of order, raising a great many questions in the background about the political, economic and social problems caused by the design of large urban estates in the 1960s. Criticism resurfaced of the pathologies resulting from the systematic use of blocks in the shapes of towers or bars, the low technical quality of such housing, which was built quickly in response to an urgent need, the oversized pedestrian paving slabs around them, the failure to make better use of the public spaces, the low density and lack of social mix in these districts, management methods that cause problems for poorly integrated population. Once again, the point was made that the solutions suggested so far to resolve these issues had not produced satisfactory results.

Divided decision-making powers

Other recent symptoms have also put certain features of French planning under the spotlight, such as its relative rigidity. For example, the rivalry between London and Paris for the 2012 Olympic Games, and the French capital's repeated failure after 2001's unsuccessful bid, threw into sharp relief the city's difficulties in imposing an innovative urban strategy in the context of a metropolitan area divided into hundreds of independent local authorities. Faced with a British bid put together by a coherent and unified territorial body, Paris had to negotiate with central government, the Ile de France region, the three *départements* within the region and some 300 affected *communes* (the smallest administrative subdivision).

Similar reasons led to the move of businessman François Pinault's project for a contemporary art foundation, initially planned for the site of the former Renault factories in Boulogne-Billancourt but eventually installed in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. This decision, taken in 2005 by the Pinault foundation due to administrative hurdles, despite the official go-ahead already having been given for the project designed by Tadao Ando, demonstrated how the way in which town planning power is shared between large numbers of local and national authorities can sometimes inhibit global

strategies and prevent opportunities being taken. The car maker had already announced its intention to get rid of these 74 hectares of wasteland in the heart of Paris at the beginning of the 1980s. Since then, countless aborted projects for the site have followed in succession. A good twenty years of fierce rivalry between the different levels of political decision-making power, from the prime minister to the local mayor, and ten years of endless discussions with experts, architects and property developers, had to pass before the first significant results began to emerge.

A lack of consultation

Another recent project can be seen to some extent as representing the breakdown in certain current town planning procedures in France. The Forum des Halles in Paris, built in the centre of the capital in the 1980s, is in need of large-scale renovation work. Used by 800,000 people a day, and an important traffic hub and commercial centre, the development no longer meets today's standards of comfort, accessibility and safety. Due to its central location and its many public transport connections, it constitutes an essential gateway between the city and the suburbs, a purpose for which it was not initially designed. Finally, it is surrounded by a densely-populated area which acts as an important focus for the capital's commercial and tourism activities. The local council has therefore been examining what changes the facility needs, and has recently launched a consultation to attract bids from the world's major architects. In their proposals, the four selected candidates suggested sweeping, ambitious changes to the whole area, but did not respond to the specific questions initially asked in the council's specifications, and even less to the issues raised by people living in the neighbouring districts, who felt left out of the project definition and evaluation process. This lack of real consultation naturally led to reactions of rejection and protest that were reported in the press, hindering the smooth progress of the project and its schedule.

This process is symptomatic of a certain confusion that currently exists between the urban and architectural aspects in the French design approach known as the *projet urbain* ("urban project"). This procedure, designed to facilitate creativity and collaboration between different players in the same operation, demonstrated on this occasion that it does not always allow enough space for true consultation with either economic stakeholders or the inhabitants affected. Under these conditions, it is not hard to understand the later difficulties experienced by the council in selecting one of the architects, and those of the architect in opening a dialogue with the population on the basis of the design.

We will return to each of these phenomena later and try to explain their causes, some of which go back a long way in the country's urban planning traditions, because it is difficult to decode these issues without knowing about the historical, political and administrative context of French planning in recent decades.

2 The inheritance

A network of medium-sized towns

A quick overview of planning history explains the current characteristics of the French urban landscape. The French population has always been relatively large compared with its neighbours: the country already had 12 million inhabitants in the year 500, 16 million in the 13th century and 25 million in 1750 (at a time when the UK population was only 7.5 million). The current figure is 62 million. This regular growth should be seen in the context of a low overall population density, with habitation spread over the whole territory. The average density is currently 112 inhabitants/km², while in Great Britain, for example, the figure stands at 247.6 inhabitants per km².

The country has few major regional cities that could be compared with the Italian maritime republics or Germany's Hanseatic towns. On the other hand, it does have an important fabric of small and medium-sized towns, often created from scratch on a "new town" principle: fortresses in Aquitaine and the Garonne basin, fortified towns around the periphery of the country, military and merchant ports, radical extensions such as those of Haussmann's time. These towns, still referred to as "provincial" until relatively recently, have been stable for a long time and are generally supported by a powerful agricultural hinterland. The specific nature of this strong town/country relationship has repercussions for the political division of the national territory: France has 36,785 communes, of which 31,819 have fewer than 2,000 inhabitants and represent only 25 % of the population (compared with 45 % in 1945). The deeply-rooted links between these towns and their agricultural lands have played, and still play today, a very important role in their evolution. For example, they have contributed to making land ownership a sacred right, doubtless more than elsewhere in Europe. "Each citizen must be a landowner to have a homeland," wrote Saint-Juste during the French Revolution. In recent decades, this hinterland has been transformed into a real-estate reserve destined to be privately owned in the form of suburban houses, which have degraded the French countryside with no overall control.

A centralised nation

After François I (1494–1547) laid the foundations for the absolutism that in the next century would transform a feudal and itinerant monarchy into an instrument of absolute power based in Paris and then at Versailles, France became an extremely centralised country, and to a certain extent it remains so, despite the efforts towards regionalisation that have been undertaken in the last 25 years. The consequences of this centralism can be measured by the relative political and economic weakness of the regional capitals, at least until very recently, and of the peripheral regions of the country, which are weaker than their European counterparts. They can also be seen in the road and rail systems that converge on Paris, familiar to all the nation's travellers, which can make journeys from one region to another difficult.

As for the capital, although it only represents about 2 million inhabitants (compared with 7 million in Greater London) concentrated in 105 km² (1 500 km² in Greater London), it lies within the Ile de France region, which covers some 12,000 km² and has a population of 12 million inhabitants in 8 *départements*, including Paris, and 1300 *communes*. Its gross domestic product currently represents 25 % of the national GDP. The divide that has always existed between the capital city enclosed within its walls (or now the "périphérique" ring-road) and the surrounding region has widened further in recent years. The centre, with its prestigious development projects and a flourishing property market, most of it available to well-off first-time buyers, stands in contrast with the suburbs, where feelings of relegation, insecurity, mediocre facilities and devalued accommodation, mostly rented, are accumulating. In this respect the French model is markedly different from most of its European counterparts.

State planning

This centralism goes hand-in-hand with a powerful administration, itself centralised, which is still described as "Colbertist" after the minister under Louis XIV to whom the origin of this bureaucracy, highly efficient at the time, is attributed. The main bodies of *fonctionnaires* or civil and public servants, created under the Bourbon monarchy, have developed since the Revolution and Napoleon I through the foundation of elite schools such as the Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées (ENPC) for engineering, the Ecole Polytechnique for science and the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) for public service and management. Constituting a powerful, centralised administration in the service of national public policy, these bod-

ies of engineers and managers were restructured under Napoleon III by prefect Haussmann, who favoured the co-ordinated organisation of *département* and town services. But these public servants, efficient though they were, were directly responsible to central government, and thus remained relatively remote from local authorities and from the population of the country, both the business world and individual citizens. The third republic passed a law on 5 April 1884 to bring the municipal system into line with its democratic principles. Under the terms of this law, municipal councils were elected with universal suffrage, with mayors elected by the councils. The mayor remained a magistrate, an agent of the State, but also became a representative of his fellow citizens. Henceforth the public sphere gained in local democracy while remaining under the control of the State in the person of the prefect, who had considerable powers to intervene in the decisions taken by a mayor and his council. It is understandable that this system did not favour local consultation, and that this consultation is still a difficult process to implement in the country. Only since the decentralisation laws of 1982, less than 25 years ago, have the decisions of municipal councils had enforceable status, with the prefect responsible only for ensuring their legality. Since this time, the agents of the State have been reallocated in large numbers to the regional and local administrations. But the centralist tradition can still be clearly felt, even if practices are currently evolving fast.

3 Milestones 1945–2006

Reconstruction and the growth years 1945–1965

The country did relatively little building between the wars: between 50,000 and 80,000 homes per year. The freeze on rents following the 1914–18 war drove private investment out of a sector that was no longer very profitable. The recession that marked the post-war economy and demographics did not encourage the state to develop ambitious housing policies. The funding mechanism put in place for the construction of *habitations à bon marché* or affordable housing, later to become the HLM programme, certainly enabled a few projects to flourish, including several exemplary garden suburbs around Paris. But by 1945 the existing housing stock was ageing and lacking in comfort, not to mention the destruction caused by the Second World War. Of 13 million homes, fewer than 700,000 had a level of comfort that met the modern standards of the time. In parallel, a third of the rural population had relocated to the urban centres during this period.

In response to this situation, the state, in line with tradition, set up a centralised top-level organisation after the second war. A national public finance body, the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (CDC), was given responsibility for organising real-estate policy. The CDC created two subsidiaries to co-ordinate operations: the Société Centrale pour l'Équipement du Territoire (SCET), or central company for amenities provision, which was in charge of acquiring and equipping land via the *sociétés d'économie mixte* (SEM), companies owned jointly by both public and private stockholders, that were responsible to it; and the Société Centrale Immobilière de la CDC (SCIC), or CDC central property company, which carried out a massive construction programme together with the local Offices d'Habitations à Loyer Modérés (HLM) affordable housing offices. A national housing policy set up programmes consisting of several dozen homes entrusted to companies which optimised their rationalisation techniques. This is the policy that generated the hybrid between the Athens Charter advocated by architects and the logic of standardisation demanded by industrial research departments that came to be known as the *grand ensemble* (housing estate), and was referred to at the time as a ZUP (*zone d'urbanisation prioritaire*, priority development zone) in the administrative jargon.

The principle of the ZUP was very technocratic. These developments were mostly built in areas known as *zones opérationnelles d'aménagement*, operational development zones, which were developed and serviced quickly on the edges of towns. The “ideal” ZUP was considered to represent 8,000 to 10,000 homes on average, housing a relatively diversified population. The land was acquired directly by the CDC. The site plans were decided on in the Paris offices of the SCET. Construction was entrusted to major public works contractors able to offer very low construction costs in exchange for framework contracts lasting several years and covering thousands of homes. In a single decade, the edges of French towns were covered with ZUPs.

Regional development 1965–1983

By 1965, this policy was beginning to show its limits. The accommodation and public spaces provided by the ZUPs deteriorated very quickly. However, the provision of public housing continued to be concentrated in the ZUPs/*grands ensembles* until 1973, when the government ended the policy. In the meantime, middle-class inhabitants had abandoned them in favour of individual houses on modestly-sized plots, often offered for sale by small-scale local companies. This poorly-controlled transition had two serious conse-

quences: on one hand, the offer of individual buildings cut into the outlying areas around towns in a very piecemeal and even anarchic way, with no overall vision and no attempt at continuity of public spaces; and on the other hand, it accelerated the segregation of poorly-integrated populations in the large estates, whose inhabitants quickly became even more vulnerable and marginalised.

The period between 1965 and 1983 remained a time of extremely centralised state planning. In 1963 the government founded the DATAR, the delegation for territorial development and regional action, to launch major development programmes in all economic and geographical sectors. The mission of the DATAR was to lead French planning away from its logic of urgency, focused on massive home building, towards a more global strategy for each town, reflecting on how its territory should evolve. Throughout this period, the DATAR played an important role, supporting the country's industrial modernisation, contributing to the construction of what could be called the "French model" of urban planning and bringing urban policy and regional development together. It implemented regional development policy, coordinating national policies and facilitating their local application through direct action in towns. It provided essential momentum for ensuring that decisions taken by the major public services – energy, transport, telecommunications etc. – were consistent with each other. It led to the selection and structuring of "métropoles d'équilibre", cities intended to counterbalance the weight of the capital. It also took important initiatives to develop tourist areas in both coastal and mountain regions.

Regional development schemes were published in 1965, including one for the Paris region. These schemes gave French urban structures most of their current form. They resulted in the creation of nine new towns, five of which were around Paris. Unlike the British new towns, which were relatively small, dense and quickly built, the French designs placed more emphasis on planning for the future and long-term development. They were created to contain a minimum of 10,000 homes in the short term, and were to be managed by a temporary authority for at least 25 years (some still are). The five towns around Paris constitute enormous urban spaces intended to develop over several dozen years – the area of Marne-la-Vallée is larger than that of central Paris. They were designed as independent regional centres, with their own local administrations, universities and shopping centres, linked to the capital by a new network of public transport routes, including the RER regional express rail network.

In 1967, the government enacted an outline land law (the LOF, or *loi d'orientation foncière*) intended to develop an ambitious planning policy. It specified that each *commune* would have its own urban planning and development plan (*schéma d'aménagement et d'urbanisme*, SDAU) and land use plan (*plan d'occupation des sols*, POS), and facilitated the creation of *zones d'aménagement concerté* (ZAC) or "concerted development zones", which were to replace the ZUPs. The idea of *concertation* or consultation included in the ZAC title was to be interpreted as an outline for dialogue between the apparatus of the state, represented by senior civil servants in the all-powerful ministries, and the local authorities, which were beginning to take on greater responsibility and learning to manage their own development. The ZAC procedure enabled relative flexibility in adapting planning documents for negotiations between the various public and private stakeholders involved. Its financial approach was clearly defined in space and time. In particular, its budget included the cost of local facilities, which were thus partly the responsibility of the purchasers of the right to build, and were finally transferred to the end users. As this financial and tax complexity has only increased with time, the procedure, although still in existence, is currently used less and less.

Quantitatively speaking, the results of these administrative provisions were considerable: during this period, 500,000 to 600,000 homes were built every year. In addition to the new towns, these years saw the creation of the RER network, which serves the Paris region by connecting SNCF rail routes with the capital's metro system, and road building on a very large scale (during this time France built twice as many roads as its neighbours), with urban motorways carving up entire cities. This new infrastructure was accompanied by the development of major retail outlets on the edges of towns, despoiling town entry routes and depopulating their centres. Jean-Paul Lacaze, a civil engineer who played an important role in planning at the time, baptised this phenomenon, which transformed the French urban landscape in a few short years, the "bypass model". In parallel, a policy of promoting town centre heritage began to take hold, while the explosion in the market for individual houses led to the beginnings of a poorly-controlled urban sprawl.

Decentralisation 1983–2000

The 1982 decentralisation law upset the balance of the existing forces, provoking the state to disengage and leave the field open to town and regional authorities. Twenty-six regions were created, of which twenty-two are in mainland France. The one hundred *départe-*

ments created in 1790, 96 in mainland France, were retained. The central authorities lost a great deal of their power in favour of local, *département* and regional bodies, which were gradually put together. As the *commune* level seemed inappropriate for deciding questions of local governance, a 1999 law laid the foundations for *communes* to group together. To date, 2,390 “communities of communes”, 164 “metropolitan communities” (*communautés d'agglomération*, each having over 50,000 inhabitants in principle) and six new urban area associations (*syndicats d'agglomération nouvelle*) for the new towns have been created. The main regional cities, such as Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon and Strasbourg, constitute “urban communities” (*communautés urbaines*), of which there are currently 14, covering a total population of 6.2 million. The central government has signed contracts with most of these local authorities, primarily with a view to intervening in support of districts with economic or social problems or providing specific help for economic restructuring. Where the state's intervention is considerable, and the government considers that its investment is of strategic national importance, it may result in the creation of a public body which remains under central control, such as Euroméditerranée in Marseilles, or Plaine St-Denis on the edge of Paris, around the Stade de France.

This subdivision results in great complexity when it comes to urban development processes. The *communes* or urban communities have legal jurisdiction over urban planning. But central government, although it has given up much of its involvement in planning questions, remains present as a legislator, financier and even manager in the case of public bodies, while the regions and *départements* also share part of the funding of infrastructure and public facilities. Despite the relative balance that has gradually emerged between these different levels of political power, the lack of clarity of decisions can sometimes make arrangements and decisions difficult and draw out the time needed for operations, as well as hindering the involvement of private operators. Nevertheless, this period began a wave of important advances in the quality of the urban environment. Experiments in consultation were introduced between urban developers and local inhabitants, bringing out true civic aspirations. The concept of landscape was strengthened, contributing to better qualification of public spaces. The question of housing, and how to finance it, was raised once again, leading to great variety in urban forms and lifestyles. Planning tools were made more flexible, with public services tending to relax the boundaries that separated them, facilitating their relations with professionals in the field.

The *Euroméditerranée* operation in Marseilles is a perfect example of this overlap between national and local institutions and of all these evolutions. At the beginning of the 1990s, the city was in dire need of shock therapy to reverse the downward trend it was facing, along with most of Europe's ports. The government's proposal was to implement a large-scale urban regeneration project to make Marseilles a “European port on the Mediterranean”. The operation, sited in a part of the port area and the inner harbour, was dubbed an “accelerator of metropolisation”. In reality, it brought together in a 313-hectare site a collection of projects that had already been identified, giving them a certain coherence: cultural facilities, economic activities, offices for port logistics and new technologies, conversion of existing housing, construction of luxury housing, creation of public spaces. The whole was designed to link with the arrival of the TGV high-speed train service and the transformation of the Saint Charles station, and also included a link between the city centre and the GPV (*grand projet de ville*, major urban project) to the north of the city. In 1995 the government created the Etablissement Public d'Aménagement Euromed (EPAEM, public body for the development of Euromed) together with all the local authorities involved, in partnership with the SNCF, the port authority and the chamber of commerce and industry. Fifty percent of its budget was provided by the state, 25 % by the city of Marseilles, 10 % by the Bouches du Rhône *département*, 10 % by the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region and 5 % by the community of *communes*. Separate funding was planned for the TGV station and a museum. European funds were also allocated, and the private sector was asked for considerable contributions. On this basis, we can understand the obstacles the project has encountered, caused by the slowness inherent in the multiplicity of decision-making authorities, torn between national and local interests, the succession of individual projects and operational teams and the uncertainties over continuing government funding. Over ten years since the operation was launched, these uncertainties remain, and the project's ambitions seem likely to be revised downwards.

4 The current period 2000-2007

A new legislative framework

At the beginning of the new century, the French government has made considerable legislative efforts to renew the institutional framework of urban planning. A new law entitled “Solidarity and urban renewal” (SRU), enacted in 2000, brought profound changes to methods of land development and urban governance.

Two other laws were passed in 1999, one to encourage *communes* to group together (the Chevènement law) and the other to introduce the concept of sustainable development into planning processes (the Voynet law).

The main purpose of the SRU law was to widen the scope of urban planning documents by including consultation about all the aspects involved: housing, travel, the environment, risks etc. This law replaced the land use plan (POS), a rigid document with little room for evolution designed on the principle of zoning, with a new local development plan (*plan local d'urbanisme*, PLU), which takes a more holistic view and is better suited to the requirements of continuous negotiation imposed by planning actors. It also provided for territorial consistency plans (*schémas de cohérence territoriale*, SCOT), which make it easier to manage inter-commune issues. This law is part of a trend towards greater consistency in local development, more responsibility for local actors and the beginnings of consultation. It enshrines the gradual withdrawal of the state and greater independence for local authorities. It facilitates the emergence of three essential steps forward in modernising planning practice: bringing communes together, involving the local population and taking account of sustainable development issues. On the other hand, it has not simplified planning procedures, which still involve an accumulation of highly administrative documents that are very complex to implement. It still leaves too little room for defending the general interest against the demands and pressures of local policy.

Major urban projects (GPV)

The SRU law does not provide mechanisms for arranging and funding large-scale urban renovation projects. To develop a new urban policy and make it easier to set up renewal projects for disadvantaged areas, the government founded the Agence Nationale de Renouvellement Urbain (ANRU, national urban renewal agency) in 2003. Working with local authorities, the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (CDC), the European Union (ERDF) and private operators, the ANRU provides funding for *Grands Programmes de Villes* (GPV) or major urban projects at a level of about 32% of the cost of works eligible for subsidy. Its objectives for the 2004–2013 period are to build 250,000 units of rented social housing, renovate 400,000, demolish 250,000, construct public and commercial facilities and carry out urban development. In 2007, 161 GPVs were approved for the next five years, at a projected cost of 17 billion euros, 6 billion of which will be funded by the ANRU. Criticism has been made of the fact that ANRU projects relate mainly to the physical aspects of development operations. In response to this criticism,

the government created a new authority in 2006, the Agence Nationale pour la Cohésion Sociale et l'Égalité des Chances (national agency for social cohesion and equal opportunities), which signs "social cohesion contracts" with local authorities linked to the contracts with the ANRU.

The renovation of the La Duchère district in Lyon is a good example of the possible impact of GPVs. La Duchère is an area of 120 hectares on the edge of Lyon. It includes 5,300 homes, of which 80 % are rented social housing with 12,500 inhabitants. This housing is part of the *Grand Projet de Ville* for the Lyon metropolitan area for the period 2003 to 2012. In all, the GPV covers four sites and 29,000 homes, 83 % of which are social housing occupied by 75,600 inhabitants, who represent 7 % of the population of greater Lyon. The project is supported financially by the city of Lyon, Grand Lyon (the *communauté d'agglomération* or metropolitan community), the Rhône *département*, the Rhône Alpes region, central government via the Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine (ANRU), the European Union, which helps fund the ANRU, and other partners, mainly public and private operators.

The main objective of the La Duchère renovation programme is to narrow the gap between the proportions of rented social housing and privately owned housing from the current ratio of 80/20 to 60/40. To achieve this aim, 1500 social housing units are being demolished, to be rebuilt in other less sensitive areas of the city. In parallel, more diversified housing is being built by private developers, including student accommodation and sheltered housing for the elderly. A huge programme to renovate the public areas and green spaces is also planned, together with new education, sports and cultural facilities. To strengthen its economic attractiveness, La Duchère is being designated a zone franche urbaine (ZFU) or free urban zone, giving companies created here exemptions from certain taxes and employee costs. A new traffic route is being built to provide better links with surrounding economic centres. In addition, an employment and training centre is being established in the area to make recruitment easier and provide professional training services. Finally, consultation with the inhabitants, although small-scale, is taking place via a "participative monitoring committee".

The cost of the whole GPV is considerable. For the first phase, 2001–2008, it stands at 500 million euros, of which

- 100 million come from funding credits for the renewal of social housing,

- 200 million consist of investment from the local public authorities: the city of Lyon, Grand Lyon, the Rhône-Alpes region and other operators associated with these institutions,
- 50 million are an ANRU grant (including ERDF funds), and
- 250 million come from private investment, which at this level represents a new phenomenon in France.

European stimulation

While the main impact of European structural funds is clearly financial, they also have an educational role, as they facilitate the emergence of new methods and procedures. In financial terms, funds such as Urban I and above all Urban II (103 million euros distributed between 9 disadvantaged areas) have been important levers for the renovation of deprived districts. In fact, it is considered that each euro of EU credit has mobilised at least two euros in national credit (in Aquitaine, the proportion has been three French euros for each EU euro). And yet for many years France consumed relatively little in the way of structural funds, mainly because the number of planned projects was too low. Today, credits are consumed on a much larger scale, and we are even starting to see the structural funds being exhausted. Unfortunately, these credits have long been sprinkled over too many operations of lesser importance, to the extent that their usefulness and effectiveness have been called into question. Nevertheless, they are involved in a little more than half of all urban contracts, affecting 19 million inhabitants.

Beyond these mixed financial aspects, the contribution of European funds to urban policy in France has brought out new skills in the field of transforming urban areas and restoring their economic and environmental attractions. The creation of European networks of political and technical actors has also encouraged cooperation, the exchange of skills and the comparison of best practices. The result in France has been to accelerate the development of processes by which local inhabitants can be consulted or even participate in planning. Such networks have also certainly accelerated the transition from traditional methods of land development to logics of local development that encourage local authorities to make a more determined commitment to supporting the establishment of economic and small business activities, local urban management, employment for integrating people into the workplace and a move towards greater involvement of the local population. These new responsibilities, which are accompanied by a reduction of state intervention and corresponding greater involvement of the private sector, have resulted in the development of socio-

economic partnerships between local authorities and private operators. These partnerships have obliged local authorities to seek ways of bringing their projects to maturity more quickly and to set up procedures to monitor, inspect and evaluate progress and provide information. They have had to implement more effective support for decision-making to justify public action and facilitate the adoption of programmes by both citizens and economic players. Criticism remains of procedures that call on European funds, because the overheads are such that they too frequently overshadow the intended actions themselves.

The Concerto project is an illustration of these influences. This European Union initiative, launched in 2003, encourages local communities to develop concrete alternatives in the areas of energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources. The financial support it provides can cover 35 % of eligible costs (ranging from 5 to 15 million euros). The funding is accompanied by the implementation of network mechanisms with the explicit policy aim of supporting and extending the environmental, social and economic benefits stemming from local initiatives. Nantes, Grenoble and Lyon are among the 28 communities taking part. Swept up by the European momentum, they have included dynamic policies for sustainable development in their urban projects and planned construction programmes to experiment with innovative practices. As an example, the Lyon urban community, which has been associated for several years with the municipality of Zaragoza in Spain and the region of Lombardy in Italy, is leading the Concerto-Renaissance project. The associated Grand Lyon project involves three islands in the heart of the Lyon-Confluence site, an ambitious urban project to extend the city centre and convert areas of urban wasteland. All the buildings within these three islands (totalling 620 homes, 14,000 m² of offices and 4,300 m² of shops) must comply with Concerto energy commitments to be eligible for financial support. In order to satisfy these requirements, Grand Lyon has set up a cooperative process involving local authorities, associations, design offices and research laboratories. The initiative has resulted in extra momentum for local policy on sustainable development, which has gone well beyond the framework of the Concerto-Renaissance project.

Urban development through projects

Most French towns now structure their development, together with their communication and marketing, around “urban projects” (*projets urbains*). The term urban project has been used in France and Italy since the 1980s, in reaction to previous planning practices,

to designate development processes at a level between town planning and architecture. All major cities now have their own urban projects, and sometimes more than one. They attract the biggest names in architecture and the boldest investors, and thus strengthen their identity as dynamic towns, their marketing and their modern image. Montpellier has created Antigone with Ricardo Boffil, Nantes is working on a project at the Ile de Nantes site with Alexandre Chemetoff, Lille has employed Rem Koolhaas to work in the Euralille district, Lyon has Coop-Himmelblau working in Confluence, Marseilles is developing the vast Euromed area with a stellar cast of famous architects, etc.

This approach is limited in both space and time. It calls on individual management methods for each project, and makes it easy to put together multidisciplinary teams, generally based on partnerships between the public and private sectors. It is justified by the way it facilitates innovative practices and considers as essential the need to take account of economic, social and, more recently, environmental issues right from the beginning of the planning process. Urban project methods have generated new expertise in the field of design, new more urban project ownership and solutions that are often more innovative.

The Île de Nantes operation is one of the most high-profile urban projects currently being developed in France. It clearly demonstrates both the advantages and the limitations of the approach. When the city of Nantes launched a call for bids for the urban development of this vast area of 360 hectares near the city centre, it chose Alexandre Chemetoff, a landscape architect, rather than a traditional architectural planner. Chemetoff proposed to produce a "guide plan" for the whole site, which is neither an urban development plan nor a set of specifications. Chemetoff's "guide plan" is rather the result of a method that specifies objectives and levels of requirements, particularly in terms of public spaces, and therefore leaves a great deal of latitude to the SAMOA, a société d'économie mixte representing the city, to negotiate the project with both the political and voluntary sectors and with the investors and their architects.

In certain cases, the urban project principle meets a stumbling block due to its ambiguous position between urban planning and architecture. This is the case with the redevelopment of Les Halles in Paris, mentioned above. Any consideration of this renovation required prior reflection at the level of the whole Paris region, detailed consultation with the area's inhabitants and traders and research into how to optimise traffic and the movements of the various populations affected.

Naturally the hurried consultation of famous architects carried out in the media spotlight did nothing to facilitate these processes. How else can we explain how the project has run aground, and the claims and counter-claims and the fears for its future that are currently being relayed by residents' groups and the press?

5 Conclusion: criticism and new developments

The scale of the recent changes in urban planning procedures and practices in France makes it impossible to draw definitive conclusions as yet. However, we can pick up on three comments that are currently being debated in professional circles and among researchers.

Firstly, most practitioners are critical of the long chains of administrative and political authorities involved, from *communes* at the lowest level up to government bodies via *départements* and regions. Intermunicipal links are certainly an important effort at making connections, but they now add an extra political level without removing those that already exist, which does not always make decisions simpler. Neither do these chains of responsibility facilitate the integration of major projects into areas that are generally overflowing with this kind of political limitation, as was clear in the Olympics project in Paris. This multiplication of decision-making bodies also aggravates procedural rigidity and leaves too little room for private operators in the project arrangement phases. The project for the Renault site in Boulogne Billancourt is an example. We can anticipate that the current development of public-private partnerships should help reduce the effects of this rigidity.

The second comment concerns deprived areas. After almost thirty years of manoeuvring in response to the problems of the suburbs - the first operation dates back to 1977 - the political authorities involved have taken note of the fact that the territorial segregation of the big estates, and the social segregation that follows, were the main causes of the violent protests that blew up in the French suburbs in late 2005. They now seem to be aware that the response to these problems can only be a global one. A significant effort is now under way to confront the issue, including the GPV policy, which is still too recent for a meaningful assessment to be made. The results will have to be evaluated and any faults corrected in the near future.

Finally, the third comment relates to France's late development in managing sustainability in comparison with neighbouring countries. The issue of renewable energy sources is still only approached timidly. What is more, there is still no real culture of citizens' participation in

the country, except for a few all-too-rare experiments. The French situation regarding local Agenda 21 plans and the agendas for the 21st century adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 is a microcosm of the country's particularities in terms of sustainable development. No real interest appeared in France until the beginning of the new millennium, while the initiatives taken in the UK, Sweden and Germany date back to the years immediately following the Rio conference, though a certain number of local initiatives have developed over the last five years. This French situation can no doubt be explained by the residual traces of centralised policy, which do not leave enough room for experimental approaches at local level, and by the absence of a tradition of participatory democracy. In addition, the oversized road system and the importance of the motorising lobby also limit the scope for an energetic public transport policy. Finally, the backlog in the construction of housing that has accumulated over more than a decade and the current efforts made by the public and private sectors in this area could be an opportunity to relaunch ambitious housing policies.

This overview of French planning has demonstrated the weight of its historical inheritance and described its current political, economic and social transformations. While it does not allow a comprehensive assessment, it tends to show to what extent the French urban model differs from those of other European countries. We cannot escape the conclusion, however, that the problems facing French towns and their surrounding areas in the coming decades are similar to those in most European cities: an ageing population, funding to make up for the lack of housing and for the renewal of public facilities, sustainable governance etc. This is why it would be desirable to multiply our efforts in European urban research, encourage comparative studies and exchanges of best practice between professionals in the field and stimulate teaching of planning that is more open to the European space.

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