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NANTES, 'A PLEASANT TOWN TO LIVE IN'

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1. *Autour de l'Île*: a progressive city project

Since some twenty years by now, the operational dimension of city planning in France identifies with the expression *projet urbain*. This concept synthesises a complexity traceable back to the capacity of managing operations of urban transformation with complex economical and financial mechanisms; but also a reflection on the practices that allow to city planning, architecture, infrastructural engineering and landscape design to converge towards the objective of urban quality.

This experience starts with a critique and a revision of the centralized and technocratic practices of the 1970's and 1980's, and attempts to pioneer an approach that could be more open to discussion and to negotiation from one hand, and to the idea of the city as a primarily physical and morphological entity from the other. The debate and some experiences matured in Italy since the early 1960's have been appreciated by several authors as highly important in the definition of some of the stages of this French path towards the urban project. A path which, as opposed to our Country, in France has materialized in actual rehabilitation projectsⁱⁱ referring to several small and medium-sized cities (Lyon, Bordeaux, Aix-en-Provence, Lille, Amiens, Rennes, Roubaix, etc.), besides of course the Parisian region.

In these cases, the recourse to urban project has implied working on (besides the topic of public space, real common denominator of all these experiences) the structural aspects of urban complexity, such as the enhancement of architectural and urban estate and its relation with contemporary urban space, the research of functional *mixité*, the rehabilitation of the *périurbaine* and of industrial and infrastructural *friches*, the concept of landscape as a structural aspect for urban rehabilitation.

Nantes is one of the cities involved in this type of planning and design procedures. Since some years, it represents a case of great interest for the contemporary experience of urban design in Europe. Not accidentally, the town is considered by the French one of the most pleasant cities of the Hexagon to live in. In these years, major public investments have been made in the fields of culture, education and research as well as economy, among other reasons in order to fight the processes of deindustrialization, similar to those taking place in many other European cities. In the case of Nantes, these processes have regarded, mainly, its estuary port and the connected activities. The investments activated by local authorities have aimed at closely linking urban policies with projects of urban rehabilitation.

As more specifically regards town planning and urban design aspects, project strategies have concerned taking over spaces and places of the city starting from a reflection on the role of public space and on the multiform character of urban landscape. The projects have dealt with problems which are common to many European cities: the relations between transport infrastructures and urban spatial organization; the rehabilitation of public housing neighbourhoods; the design of new neighbourhoods with mixed uses; the recovery of areas now disused but strategic for the reorganization of the whole metropolitan area. As a tip of the iceberg of this phenomenon can be taken the case of the *Île de Nantes*, briefly described below.

The city is located where the Loire meets the Atlantic, at the confluence with the Erdre, on an area that long time ago was characterized by a great number of river islands. This geomorphologic particularity has conditioned the urban and territorial settlement structure, for example by determining the growth of the city on the northern side of the river. In the course of the years, the relations between the city and the river have changed. The city has started to take over land from the waters of the Loire but also of the Erdre which, during the 30's, was forced to partially flow underground in order to allow the 'modernization' pervading the whole Western world, reinforced

by the diffusion of the car (**Fig. 1-3**).

Nantes is today the first urban agglomeration of the Western part of France with its two hundred seventy thousand inhabitants, that reach almost six hundred thousand in the entire metropolitan area. Its importance has been consolidated a long time ago: Stendhal, in some of his correspondences, underlined its character as *grande ville*, as did Julien Gracq in his fascinating story *La forme d'une ville*, even if in a less straight-forward manner.

Npadays the city is well placed in the French urban dynamic, thanks to precise local and national policies. The arrival in 1988 of the TGV, for example, has marked a clear change in the relations between the city and the west coast on the one hand, and the Parisian region on the other now reachable by train in two hours (the time necessary to cover a distance of about 450 km). Accurate choices in environmental and cultural fields have consolidated the role of the city. In this regard we can mention the inter-municipal water management system and the rehabilitation of riverbanks, whereas in the field of culture important actions have included the strengthening of the University as well as the creation of cultural events of international interest (such as the music festival *Les folles journées*) and of equipments for cultural and music events and contemporary art, such as the LU (*Lieu Unique*) in the rehabilitated area of the *Bassin Saint-Félix*. Such policies have made it possible to limit urban deindustrialization processes, transforming the city into a tertiary pole of regional interest and into a centre of research and education with strong appeal both on national and international level.

2. Urban strategies and projects

The projects we will now talk about are part of a strong strategy, which is not based on a general master plan, but on numerous projects with a structural relevance, and on a reflection on the morphological features of the town and on its metropolitan relations.

This kind of 'vision of a city' can be summarized in the following three aspects:

1. First of all, the need to review the entire system of urban accessibility, with the intent to diminish the impact of car traffic. This objective has been achieved by restoring the tramway and by actions aimed at upgrading public spaces both in the old town and in the outskirts.
2. The vision of the city has allowed to rediscover places, spaces and lost identities through the transformation of the *Île Feydeau*, the rehabilitation of the banks of the Loire, and especially through the ambitious project for the *Île de Nantes*.
3. Finally, this project strategy must be seen in the framework of a broader metropolitan vision, which leads the city to establish relations with the ancient rival city, Saint-Nazaire.

The absence of a strong general master plan has not, however, prevented the town from realizing projects for specific sectors (public transportation, housing, recovery of disused areas etc.) but with a great urban relevance, tied together by the common denominators of public space and urban landscape. Beyond the questions these experiences raise concerning the role, weak or strong, of the public actor and the relations between strategies, general plans and specific actions, they certainly make evident the presence of a culturally high-quality commissioning group on the one hand, and the efficacy and authority of the public actor and its technical structures in the management of complex projects and processes on the other.

In more specific terms, the central points of Nantes project strategy refer to:

- the rehabilitation of those spaces, both central and peripheral, of the city the tramways cross (*Cours des cinquante otages*; neighbourhood of *Belleville*; the *quais* along the river Erdre);
- the upgrading of public housing neighbourhoods (the *grands ensembles* of *Malakoff-Pré Gauchet*

and *Les Dervallières*);

- the renewal of disused but strategic areas (recomposition of *faubourg Madeleine-Champs de Mars* and *plan-guide* for *Île de Nantes*).

3. The centrality of public space in defining the project strategy

Reinforcing public transport becomes necessary in order to reduce the impact of cars on the internal traffic of the city, but "*la politique de transports collectifs fait davantage que résoudre un problème de déplacement, elle est un moment de la construction de la ville, par les échanges qu'elle engendre, la mixité, la continuité urbaine*". These words of Patrick Rimbart clearly and explicitly state the sense of the operation related with the construction of the tramwayⁱⁱⁱ, defined in France as the "*tramway urbaniste*". In fact, the tram has made it possible to start an urban project aimed at upgrading public spaces in that part of the city where the new lines run. This operation has shown a complete understanding of the complexity of urban problems by not confining the intervention exclusively in the sector of infrastructural engineering, whereas the construction of a diffuse network of public transport was made possible by the ring road (*le périphérique*), completed in 1991 (**Fig. 4**).

Nantes, as well as many European cities, had a tramway since the 19th century. In 1958, however, it was dismantled, partly as a consequence of the war and of the consolidation of the car as the first means of transport. In 1978, Nantes was among French cities relaunching the idea of tramway as the 'new' form of public transport to privilege. Some numerical data may help to understand the size of the project: 37 km of tramway, construction of tram/bus intersections with parking space for 5.000 cars, 300 km of cycle lanes. Of the three tramway lines, particularly the second has been taken as an occasion to redesign a large part of public spaces in the central area of the city and along its main arteries, such as *Cours des Cinquante Otages* and the spaces around *Île Feydeau*. This has enlarged the 'central poles' of the town and brought into effect interventions that have also included the renewal of built patrimony and the construction of new mixed use buildings by means of working on urban interstices and on the sewing up of spaces between the neighbourhoods of the centre and the periphery.

The rehabilitation of the public spaces of *Cours des Cinquante Otages* and of *Île Feydeau* has been carried out on the basis of a project drawn by Bruno Fortier, Jean-Thierry Bloch and Italo Rota, winners of a competition whose participants were asked to start from the tramway line 2 and recompose this 'hinge area' between the medieval and the 18th century town. Before the realization of these interventions, floods of cars coming from the North and the East of Bretagne filled the street and the traffic daily reached 35.000 vehicles. Today, the area appears to be mostly dominated by pedestrians and, although it may exceed in design, there has been a major diminution in car traffic thanks to the re-planning of the street pattern: small roundabouts, new pavements and the enlargement of the old ones with granite plates, tramway service areas and, last but not least, the quality of the elements of furniture, of public lighting and diffuse vegetation have completely changed the image of the area (**Fig. 5-10**).

4. Re-socialising the city

But as it was previously said, the strategy and the ambition of the city have not been limited to its central parts; on the contrary, one of the strongest objectives has been to 'enlarge the centre', in

particular towards South and thus to the Loire, by 're-socialising' significant parts of the city. Urban rehabilitation has therefore concerned both peripheral public housing neighbourhoods (i.e. *Devallières*, *Malakoff-Pré Gauchet*) (Fig. 11), and rather central districts in which, however, productive activities have fallen in disuse, such as *Madeleine-Champ de Mars*, which is worth a brief description.

Also in this case we are talking about an old island of the Loire, on the southern border of the centre. The area developed during the 18th and the 19th centuries as a suburb with agro-industrial activities, wholesale and retail trade and working-class housing. After some important factories were shifted elsewhere, and consequently the workers moved to new neighbourhoods, the zone became a kind of *friche industrielle*. But the arrival of the TGV, in 1988, completely changed the role of this, by then marginal, area. Since 1989, an urban project has thus been elaborated, aiming at countering phenomena such as: a considerable increase in the value of real estates, the realization of real estate operations tending to functional and social homogenization, the difficulty in constructing social housing, etc.

The project has been developed according to the procedures of the ZAC (*Zone d'Aménagement Concerté*), and conducted, on behalf of SEM Nantes Aménagement (mixed economy company), by the urban planner Jean-François Revert, who has co-ordinated the various construction works and defined how the public spaces should be disposed. The programme regards an area of 50 hectares, and is based on two objectives: firstly, the recomposition of the neighbourhood through working on its texture and its morphological rules; secondly, the construction of a contemporary, high-quality district along the canal and around the new congress palace drawn by Yves Lion. Revert's working method consists in defining light rules, which consents a continuous dialogue with the planners of the various interventions, accordingly to an approach that is consolidated in the city and characterized more by negotiation than by imposition of obligations. The core assets of SEM's activity lie in finding qualified planners and in stimulating a debate, through conferences and publications, on the value of contemporary architecture and on the enhancement of cultural heritage. The need of finding a balance between the definition of rules for constructing and organizing urban space on one hand, and the pressure from the different operators on the other often results in conflicts and in the sacrifice of some of the initial objectives of the project. For example, the failure of the wish to keep all cars underground has prevented the organization, foreseen by the project, of the public gardens and green areas along some of the streets. However, the success of this upgrading operation is evident in the socio-economic data and in the projects which have already been realized. It represents the outcome of a rather resolute and against-the-trend action, built and managed by a public actor, combining quite a flexible regulation apparatus with a resolute practice of negotiation, based on precise objectives and quality requirements as well as on public interventions aimed at and concentrated on a few prestigious operations, such as the recovery of the old LU factory, transformed in the cultural container *Lieu Unique* (Fig. 12-16).

5. The guiding plan for the *Île de Nantes*

Among the projects for the future renewal of the entire urban area, however, the most well-known and loaded with expectations is the one concerning the so-called *Île de Nantes*. The *Plan guide* (guiding plan), that has lately been in the centre of debate was elaborated by a team conducted by the landscape architect Alexandre Chemetoff and by the architect Jean-Louis Berthomieu. The plan was the winning proposal in a competition held in 1999.

The project is based on the concept of limit and on that of centre, and – according to the authors – it will lay the first stone of the rehabilitation of the *Île de Nantes*. It is not a definitive project, but a statement of methods and themes that ought to make it possible in the future to put into effect the various projects contained in the guiding plan. The unconcealed ambition of this work is to contribute to the construction of a complex urban project that, besides transforming the settlement structure of the island, will also contribute to the renovation of town planning practices by working upon a renewed interest for ‘urban art’ and an attempt to reach agreements on the choices and objectives of transformation through negotiation and participation practices (**Fig. 17-20**).

The island is central when compared with the metropolitan area, but peripheral as regards the city of Nantes. It has a surface of 337 hectares, and its form is the result of progressive modifications of the Loire river-bed. It is 4.900 metres long, while at its largest point is 1.100 metres wide. There are approximately 13.000 inhabitants and, despite the shutdown of the shipyard in 1987, 9.000 people still work there. The island appears to be compactly disposed, but is actually the result of the fusion of a dozen islands; in fact, it is on this factor that its physical variety depends on. This place was historically one of the city entrances, thanks to the bridges that have been built in the course of times. Let us have a look on it from the east to the west. The eastern point of the island, called *Beaulieu*, is characterized by floodable fields and a thick vegetation on its farthest away point. After the Second World War, it has been urbanized with residential neighbourhoods, particularly after the 1960’s, when a new urban fabric grew around a shopping centre and a group of public offices. On the contrary, in the western part of the island there are various productive (chemical, mechanical and agro-industrial) activities, now mostly in disuse, as well as port activities and related shipyards. The central part still has a rather thick, prevalently residential tissue, whereas towards the east spaces tend to grow larger (**Fig. 21-24**).

6. A planning-oriented reflection

The planning-oriented reflection on the destiny of this important portion of the territory already started in the 1990’s, with a research conducted by Dominique Perrault and Françoise Grether. It was thanks to this work that awareness rose regarding the questions the island posed for its role within the metropolitan agglomeration, its wider territorial relations, and the extent of its reconversion problems. Other projects drawn up during those years (*Projet 2005*) moreover strongly emphasized the strategic role of the Loire for the entire Nantes agglomeration, such as the study carried out by AURAN (*Agence d’urbanisme de l’agglomération nantaise*) on the territory of the river, entitled *Atlas de Rives de Loire*, describing its features, diversities and problems. This last one is at the same time a work of analysis and diagnostics and a tool for promoting the cooperation among the fourteen municipalities along the river and for building the metropolis of Nantes-Saint-Nazaire.

Thanks to this kind of contributions, the project for the *Île* has started to mature through the production of a number of further studies that permitted, in 1998, the city to publicly propose a research aimed at defining a scheme for arranging public spaces and a *cahier des charges* that put in evidence four themes of structural interest: the relation with the memory of places; the promotion of activities connected with the river, port activities included; the research of a balance in the reorganization of activities and of a coherence in urbanization; and lastly, the request of thinking of the island as a single whole. But let us now describe the winning project drawn by the Bureau des Paysages of A. Chemetoff and J.L. Berthomieu.

The work is presented under the form of a *Plan guide* (guiding plan). The intent is to define the

state of the places by arranging their transformation and rehabilitation projects into a temporal perspective. This becomes possible through a general drawing of transformations: relations, characters, ambitions that represent both public and private punctual actions within a structural long term vision. On the basis of this tool the discussions with the community are conducted.

The plan works on the texture of public spaces by interpreting existing traces and by organizing their hierarchy. It defines the geometry of the new *îlots*, as well as the morphological layout of streets that all have as their final background the landscape of the Loire. It disposes a localizing programme for the different activities of the *Île* and, consequently, identifies places to subject to detailed projects in order to transform them into new identity points of the site. The plan comprises 2.096.100 square metres of public space, of which 35.200 of existent public space, 1.284.900 of restored public space and 817.000 of new space. As far as blocks of houses are concerned, there are 190.300 square meters of new blocks and 1.133.900 to be rehabilitated (**Fig. 25-30**).

7. Re-designing and rehabilitation of public spaces

Re-designing and rehabilitating the pattern of streets and public spaces aim at recovering, directly or indirectly, the river as a background setting. The programme drawn by the *Plan guide* foresees the upgrading of the area by the arrangement of a mix of functions that already today, even if in unqualified ways, characterize the island. In other words, the project not only plans to rehabilitate ancient *faubourgs* and *villes jardin* and to build new residential blocks, offices and commercial activities, but also to maintain existent activities (the market place and the sugar factory) and to build new different places for highly qualified collective ones that, besides functionally strengthening this part of the city, also define its character and status.

These different planned actions can be grouped according to some logics. First of all, a number of projects regard the rehabilitation of places in the western harbour (realization of *port Atlantique* with a new seaport station and a mooring for the transatlantic liners; creation of a new internal basin for the tourist boats *de la Loire Atlantique*; organization of a naval museum together with the recovery of ancient shipyards). The old shipyard site will become a great public space arranged in several open spaces that re-interpret the geography of the site, and in cultural and expositional equipments. The opposite point of the island, to the east, will be rehabilitated starting from its present character, in order to create large residential settlements, a shopping centre, a sports centre of citywide interest and a wood (*parc des Deux-rives*) on the part that also extends on the side towards the city. In the centre, between the two extremes described above, sewing-up actions will mainly deal with the complete rehabilitation of the old *faubourgs* and of the still existent productive areas, and with the re-design of some large streets. Here the project puts into effect a great variety of actions aimed at restoring the significance of different places, such as the rehabilitation of the *quais* both as public spaces and as residential areas or of the urban landscape of the large street *Cours du Général de Gaulle*, for which interventions of resectioning are planned in order to improve accessibility; or, again, the design of the new *Rue des commerces*, conceived as a new system of connection and of functional reinforcement between the two sides – north and south – of the island on the part of *Belleville*, where both tertiary and commercial settlements have come up in a disordered manner (**Fig. 31-33**).

8. The new urban status for the *Île*

Today the island is already becoming the site of functions with a high urban status. It hosts on its

western side, along the *quai nord*, the *Palace of Justice* planned by Jean Nouvel and connected by a new footbridge to the other part of the city. The construction of the new *Maison du Syndicat* represents another intervention of high quality and has been realized according to the project of Atelier Forma 6. Actually, this construction involves the building of a real urban space, organized around a square and based on the recovery of a small disused railway station. The plan to situate here other important buildings of urban and territorial interest (such as the new *School of Architecture* and the *Cité* of biotechnologies on the site of the old Alstom factories) aims at consolidating the role of the island inside the metropolitan area, of which – as we already stressed before – it geographically represents an undoubtedly central point (**Fig. 34-37**).

Presently, the first operational phase of the project, approved by the *Communauté urbaine*, is under way and should be concluded in 2007. Interventions on about 70 hectares of public space are being planned for, in order to build public and private constructions for a total of about 150.000 square metres of usable surface area.

The project is going to be realized gradually and through single sequences of actions that are separated in time and space, but refer to a strong framework of urban and landscape relations. Its philosophy actually synthesises the ‘pragmatic’ approach of the whole Nantes experience. An approach which re-conducts the projects inside a process based on an idea of the city as strongly anchored in the urban geography and in the ‘environmental conditions’ of its location. An approach to urban rehabilitation through projects which are capable of making every single need of intervention in the urban body an occasion to make new relations and to improve the quality of the city. A method that, to cite the words of the Mayor Ayrault, combines ambition with solidarity.

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Sources of the pictures

The pictures are taken from: (Masbounji, eds, 2003), (Bureau des Paysages, J. L. Berthomieu 1999).

NOTES

ⁱ This paper refers to some reflections that are illustrated in the publication (Farinella 2004).

ⁱⁱ See (Cohen 1985).

ⁱⁱⁱ "the policy of collective transport is much more than just resolving a problem of accessibility, it is a chance to construct the city for the exchanges it generates, the *mixité*, the urban continuity". Patrick Rimbert is the vice president of the *Communauté Urbaine de Nantes* and the quotation has been taken from (Masbounji, eds., 2003).