Saint-Nazaire, France

Social cohesion for a transition town

Following heavy reconstruction efforts after World War II, community participative planning has a long tradition among the population of Saint-Nazaire. Since its creation in 2001, the metropolitan council is radically transforming its approach to urban development, from its eco-district redevelopment to being an eco-city of the 21st century.

In the Certé neighbourhood, north of Saint-Nazaire, its approach is to reorganise the urban space by creating a better social mix with a denser building pattern in order to maintain affordable prices, and above all, to meet the need of local people for the central location of all public services. The ERDF is contributing to the depollution of the adjoining wasteland, the renovation of a sports hall and the renewal of streets and footpaths.

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Street theatre and urban workshops facilitated by professional actors helped the people of Certé, on the northern outskirts of Saint-Nazaire, to prepare their vision of the future, by expressing their hopes and dreams before and after the demolition in 2009 of the tower blocks that had been home to families of shipyard workers. As the area was redeveloped, ERDF support has been instrumental to cleaning up the adjoining polluted wasteland. This has enabled the full reclamation of the site, radically transforming the area's reputation. Without this global approach, this deprived neighbourhood would have remained isolated, cut off by traffic infrastructure that serves regional rather than local needs.

The redevelopment strategy is to reorganise the road pattern to reconnect the neighbourhood with the town to the south and the nearby regional park to the north. Public services have been grouped in the centre where they are easily accessible by vehicle and by foot. A variety of housing types is being offered so as to encourage a good social mix, and the density is being increased to keep costs affordable.

The social development and participative planning approach is rooted in the local history of former rural communities which earned their living from the shipyards. This has involved collective action and solidarity for many generations. This genuine affinity with social development finds its expression in many instances of community action, like the reintroduction of 'commons' owned by the municipality but left for the use of local initiatives, dating from the 1980s and still continuing.

The total ERDF support to this urban renewal programme amounts to €700 000, which corresponds to 22.4% of the total investment. Three projects are being supported: the depollution, the renovation of the sports hall and main renewal work on the streets and footpaths in the inner part of the neighbourhood.

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Saint-Nazaire has a big plan. As a metropolitan area, it aims to assert its identity as a maritime city, attractive and influential, dynamic and united, the seaside pole of the Atlantic metropolitan area formed with Angers, Nantes, Rennes and Brest.[1] This ambition translates into an integration of functional development at all levels, from the neighbourhood to the metropolitan council.

More modestly, back in 2007 the metropolitan council joined its neighbour Nantes, the regional capital, in signing a 20-year planning strategy called the Nantes Saint-Nazaire Territorial Cohesion Scheme (*Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale – SCOT*), which takes under its wing 57 municipalities and a population of 760 000 people. Its ambition is in fact not so modest, as it aims to 'reflect on and respect the need of future generations to have a preserved living space'[2] – in fact to become an 'eco-city' of the 21st century.

Saint-Nazaire and surroundings in 1933

Saint-Nazaire and surroundings in 2000

The principle of sustainable development is endorsed at each level of planning, from municipality to region. For the Saint-Nazaire metropolitan council (CARENE), the challenge is to unlock the western and northern parts of the metropolitan area by building mixed housing (both houses and flats) and improving public amenities, in order to increase the social mix, improve the quality of life and make this part of the city more attractive.

To do so, CARENE is implementing an Integrated Urban Programme with two distinct but inter-connected strands: one in the western part of the city, the other in the north, called 'Horizon Certé', which is considered here.

On the northern approach to Saint-Nazaire lies the deprived urban area (*zone urbaine sensible – ZUS*[3]) of Certé, which suffers from a bad reputation among both its own inhabitants and those of surrounding areas. It has benefitted from an urban rehabilitation programme (*projet de rénovation urbaine*) which has tackled social cohesion and urban integration, since 1996.

To better understand the context of this neighbourhood redevelopment and its various strands, a rapid overview of French urban policy is needed.

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[1] Also known as the Loire Bretagne Metropolitan Pole
[2] http://www.nantessaintnazaire.fr
[3] The 1996 Bill no. 96-1156 sets out the 750 deprived urban areas in France (*zones urbaines sensibles* – ZUS). Additional bills in 1996 (nos. 96-1157 & 96-1158) set out the 416 urban redynamisation areas (*zones de redynamisation urbaine* – ZRU) among the 750 ZUSs (396 in mainland France, 20 in overseas territories).

Politique de la ville: Taking action for the social cohesion of cities

The French urban system[4] is a transitional one between North and South Europe. It consists of a high density network of cities in the northeast of the country, urbanisation along the rivers and the coast in the southeast, and relatively autonomous cities with large rural areas in the west.

Designed to house more than five million people, the social housing estates built between 1950 and 1975 as part of the post-war boom were often poorly integrated into the cities of today. In order to reduce territorial inequalities arising from these areas, a government policy was established in concertation with national, regional and local stakeholders in the late 1980s, called the *Politique de la Ville*. This does not mean, as a literal translation might suggest, policy for cities as a whole, but is rather the policy for disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the fields of housing, environment, social inclusion, employment, education and training, health, public amenities and urban services, with the overall aim of reducing inequalities.

Since 1988, a government administration has been in charge of implementing and coordinating this policy, which is built on three pillars: (i) horizontal governance with inter-ministerial coordination; (ii) vertical governance and partnerships with public authorities at regional and sub-regional levels; and (iii) the provision of common operational resources through the National Urban Renewal Agency (ANRU) and the National Agency for Social Cohesion and Equal Opportunities (ACSE).

Since 2003, the legal framework has been strengthened and the main planning tool is called the *Opération de Rénovation Urbaine* (ORU), or Urban Renewal Project. An ORU allows for the deep transformation of neighbourhoods not only through spatial intervention but also through the diversification of housing. Rationalised land use and urban heritage preservation are taken into consideration in order to maintain urban cohesion.

Urban policy in France has been organised around formal partnerships called Urban Social Cohesion Contracts (*Contrats Urbains de Cohésion Sociale – CUCS*), which bind the different stakeholders into a common strategy. Since 2007, ERDF Article 8 has intervened in support of this policy, encapsulated in Integrated Urban Programmes (*Programmes Urbains Intégrés – PUI*) for the current period. In 2012 there were 61 PUIs operating in France, representing one of the largest implementations of integrated approaches in Europe.

Revisiting the urban goals

The urban renewal programme (*Projet de Rénovation Urbaine – PRU*) of Trignac is part of the development strategy of the northern part of the Saint-Nazaire metropolitan area, which stretches from the railway station to Certé. It became operational in 2001. The 2002-2003 planning documents identify regeneration projects, and the ORU operates on all development factors: housing, economic activity, social development, environment, etc. The economic strand faced a major challenge with the conversion of 70 hectares of land near the high-speed railway station into 40 000 m² of tertiary sector amenities (offices, etc.) with a target of 1 200 direct and 400 indirect jobs.

Its main fields of intervention are the diversification of housing, rehabilitation of the old social housing, renewal of public amenities and space, economic development and social inclusion. The project affects around 10 000 inhabitants: over 800 social flats are to be demolished and reconstructed with four social landlords[5] contributing to their reconstruction, over 700 households are being moved and 1 500 units rehabilitated. Close to 1 000 new units are built by various private operators.

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[4] For more information on the institutional context, see
http://www.eukn.org/France/fr_en/EUKN/Urban_Policy_in_France
[5] Silène, CIF Habitat, Espace Domicile, Logi Ouest

View of Certé neighbourhood in 2008   **View from Saint-Nazaire harbour, with Trignac in the distance**

Certé is one those urban hinterlands spreading away from a busy harbour area and hidden from the beaches and hotel resorts on the coast. Indeed, Certé is cut off by harbour installations which serve regional access needs rather than local ones. The neighbourhood was characterised by dead-end streets, empty spaces and a lack of public transport. The opening up of the neighbourhood is based on restructuring major routes like the Certé road intersection and converting Route Nationale RN471 into an urban 'boulevard'. These changes have radically improved mobility and access to employment for residents.

The neighbourhood was mostly residential and was the main concentration of social housing available in the municipality of Trignac. A third of its buildings were managed by a social landlord. It was famous for its 1970s buildings in the form of tripods. The monofunctional nature of the area, dedicated only to housing, with poor public amenities and no local shops, together with the low income of its households, exacerbated the trend towards increasing poverty. Jobs had mostly been linked to the Saint-Nazaire shipyard – now closed down – and many families living in the social housing are facing difficult social situations, as unemployment is high and nearly half are single parents.

The neighbourhood of Certé became an 'Urban Regeneration Area' (*zone de redynamisation urbaine*) in the 1990s, and several projects helped to improve the quality of life in the area. But the impact remained limited in terms of urban integration, as it lacked a social and physical opening up to the larger city. In the light of the neighbourhood's persistent difficulties, the municipality decided in the 2000 to engage in an overall urban renewal on a larger scale.

Demolition, depollution and reconstruction

The reconstruction of social housing is a component of the social cohesion plan in CARENE's local housing programme. This had led to the decision to develop a more varied housing supply and a better balance of population at metropolitan level. Most of this reconstruction is taking place in the municipality of Trignac, including Certé but also on other sites at Menée Landais, Grandchamps and Océane-Acacias. The demolition of two large system-built buildings in 2009 meant the removal of 216 social housing units. These have now been replaced by smaller dwellings, connecting in a more rational manner to the town centre of Trignac, the neighbouring Grand Large shopping centre and the Saint-Nazaire railway station. The new houses and flats are linked by the opening up of the area. Medium-sized houses are organised around footpaths, and a footbridge over the main road has been built to access the shopping centre. A group of 65 new apartments have replaced the 1970s tripod towers.

One of the particular features of the 'Horizon Certé' project is the presence of 10 hectares of industrial wasteland[6] formerly given over to defence installations from World War II, which

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[6] Saint-Nazaire was the centre of submarine operations during WW2. Since 2010, its submarine site has been recognised as an item of cultural heritage. See http://insitu.revues.org/779

was not included in the ZUS perimeter. It used to generate pollution – the main contaminants being heavy metals and hydrocarbons – which conflicted with the nearby residential area. The integrated approach supported by ERDF Article 8 includes this space in the project, allowing for the full reclamation of the site by October 2010, radically transforming the reputation of the area. The techniques to remove pollution used on-site organic treatments. Without this global approach, the ZUS would have remained isolated and facing difficult challenges in terms of sustainable urban development.

Towards a transition town?

A key word of the renewal plan is centrality. As a result of the participative process in transforming and improving neighbourhood life, the idea has been to concentrate public services and amenities within a radius of 150 metres from each other.

Des équipements qui entrent en résonnance dans l'espace public

L'offre d'équipements est complétée par des commerces et services privés (1700 m³ à terme), une médiathèque et des salles associatives (1000 m² et un potentiel complémentaire). Cet ensemble constitue un tout, sous forme d'un plateau aux entrées thématiques.

Dans un rayon de 150 mètres, tous les composantes de la vie sociale de proximité sont présents et assurent une attractivité résidentielle de premier plan dans l'agglomération.

Le réseau de cheminements et la mutualisation des stationnements et dessertes poursuivent la logique de proximité entamée avec le projet du collège et des venelles piétonnes.

La rue Léo Lagrange, en son centre, joue le rôle de barreau de liaison et confirme son statut d'espace public fédérateur pour le quartier.

Back in 2005, the ORU supported the creation of a new leisure centre, close to the school, in order to improve educational in the neighbourhood and provide extracurricular activities. The kindergarten was also reorganised to cater for more children, and to provide additional services to meet parents' needs. In order to better meet the needs for local mobility, further public amenities have been provided with ERDF support, such as the school bus park and the areas near the kindergarten, the medical house and the citizens' house. Home-to-work shuttles are organised to coincide with nursery opening hours, and home care services are provided early and late in the working day.

The urban strategy aims to create suitable transitions between old and new buildings, keeping an architectural coherence between the various property projects and the natural assets of the area. The residential landscape is being carefully redesigned to include attractive surfaces and pavements, lighting and street furniture which take into account notions of 'soft' mobility and renewable energies.

Small house next to social housing, part of the same estate project

New style Social housing apartments

Housing projects are the responsibility of the metropolitan council (CARENE), and target a high environmental quality label,[7] while the municipality of Trignac is in charge of restructuring public amenities and rehabilitating existing social housing. Each housing project allows for revisiting the road system, reducing dead ends or creating new streets.

The total ERDF support to this urban renewal programme amounts to €700 000, which corresponds to 22.4% of the total cost. Other contributors are the municipality of Trignac, the metropolitan council CARENE, the regional council of the Pays de la Loire, Loire Atlantique general council (*département* level), social landlords and the state (ANRU).

Demolition work in 2009

Reconstruction work in 2012

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[7] HQE: *Haute Qualité Environnementale* is a French label limiting negative environmental impact of any building construction.

Participative planning with the arts

The design phase includes a robust participative process in which the locals are both regularly informed and can make their voices heard in the planning process. A contractual partnership called *Gestion Urbaine de Proximité* – GUP[8] signed between the National Agency for Social Cohesion and Equal Opportunities (ACSE) and Trignac municipality allows for information and facilitation resources for citizen participation at neighbourhood level. The aim is to raise their awareness about the issues and challenges at stake.

Since the project's start, the municipality has regularly organised citizen involvement and public information through various channels including local press and media and public meetings. Back in 2006, street performance and other artistic approaches were taken up to empower the local community and create a shared vision, and a number of events were organised in order to let the local community express its fears and dreams for the future of their neighbourhood. A CD entitled *Enchanté Certé* ('Delighted Certé) was produced and presented at a show in December 2007, followed by a 28-minute movie directed by a professional who worked with the local citizens, called *Certé 2037*. In 2008-2009, a series of 10 'urban workshops' were organised before and after the demolition of the Tripods tower blocks, collecting the views of local citizens on footpaths and other environmental issues.

A dedicated space has been opened as an exhibition room and resource centre in the city hall. At regular intervals (usually every month), a *café-chantier* is organised on a thematic issue such as mobility, social life, inclusion, sports, culture, youth, etc.).

During the seventh public meeting in March 2012 launching one of the projects called 'ZAC Océane Acacias', the sports hall was fully booked. A slide presentation was accompanied by commentaries by the technical stakeholders (SELA), the urban planner and the social landlord, who providing details on the new buildings, which include a playground, 130 social housing units and a new sports hall. The calendar was presented in detail – from May 2011 to December 2014. Questions on the budget and the impact of this ambitious project on local taxes were raised. The conversion of a dead end into a through street was also critically debated. 'These streets are not private; if we want to cut down the traffic of 5 000 cars a day on the main road, we have open up the circulation'[9] said an urban planner. Other issues over security, flood hazards and parking lots were also debated.

The social function of social housing

Of course, all issues cannot be solved with local participative democracy. Even though the landscape and surroundings have significantly improved since the demolition and depollution phases, the neighbourhood is still suffering from heavy physical 'surgery' with road works, diversions and noisy work in progress. The full redevelopment of housing and neighbourhood renewal will not be completed before 2014, and until then, there will be people complaining. However, the officers in charge of the rehousing scheme did not report any particular tension among the families they are dealing with, and the number of requests for social housing is stable. The policy aim here is certainly not to use environmental arguments while eliminating social housing and preparing the ground for tax-paying middle class families or more up-market housing developments. The CARENE representative emphasises the social function of social housing. The approach is to reorganise the urban space by creating a better social mix, with denser housing in order to keep prices affordable (below 2 500/m²) and above all to meet the needs of local people by grouping all public services in the central area.

According to one of the local councillors who has lived in the neighbourhood since childhood, this social development approach and participative planning is rooted in the local history of former rural communities earning their living from the shipyards, involved in collective action and solidarity for many generations. This genuine affinity with social

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[8] http://www.ville.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/La_gestion_urbaine_de_proximite_actes.pdf
[9] *Ouest France*, 19 March 2011

development finds its expression in many instances of community action, like the reintroduction of 'commons' owned by the municipality but left at the disposal of any local initiative, dating from the 1980s and still ongoing.

The Saint-Nazaire Metropolitan Council has an ambitious vision of its integrated sustainable development. It looks on the 'Horizon Certé' Urban Renewal Plan as an urban laboratory which is helping it to draw up further Integrated Territorial Investments. In many ways it is a Local Agenda 21 or Transition Town project made real.

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