

Citizen's words are not just idle talk: Collecting stories for giving ground to the project

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ABSTRACT: This paper is concerned about the way we as architects approach a project on ordinary urban spaces. Changing such spaces takes more than just a clear political vision guided by strong architectural design. The people are already settled there, the place is a *palimpsest* of buildings and of personal stories. We make the hypothesis that better design needs to take the existing condition into account and giving an account to the place and its inhabitants can help reaching it. This story telling of the *genius loci* is both singular and plural. It gives an account of social practices, ambiances, and history(ies). It mixes past, present and the future. It gives voice to the ordinary citizens in the same way as it does to the politicians or the urban managers.

We make the hypothesis that hybridizing techniques and expertise from practical and research fields in architecture/urban design can help developing a project. Many methods coming from the research world can be adapted to urban design: "commented visits", observations, etc. Recounting photographing drawing or filming are multiple ways of telling the stories of a place. Each place, territory or project needs its very own set of techniques. The voice, ordinary and expert at the same time, is given on the spot. These methods make it possible to reveal the characters of a place. These make it possible to gain a better mutual understanding between all stakeholders of a project. If they are not the project yet, they give stronger foundations to (the development of) the project.

Conference theme: Collaborative and interdisciplinary research, education, and design

Keywords: ordinary spaces, stories, project, urban design

INTRODUCTION

It is not an ordinary thing to be interested by ordinary things.

Going into a project on ordinary urban spaces such as brownfields, derelict lands, suburbs, urban fringes need special tools and attitudes. Changing such spaces takes more than a clear political vision guided by a strong architectural design. People are already there, settled and the place is a palimpsest of buildings and personal stories. Giving an account of the place and its inhabitants can help getting into project. This story telling of the *genius loci* is both singular and plural. It gives an account of social practices, ambiances, and history(ies). It mixes the past, present and future. It gives voice to ordinary citizens in the same way as politicians or urban managers.

Better design on such spaces needs to take into account the existing conditions. We make the hypothesis that hybridizing techniques and expertise from practical and research fields in architecture/urban design can help getting into project. The following paper presents one of our projects regarding a 300-social-dwelling neighbourhood in Hem, France, as an

example of the results of our 8 years of research, urban projects and developments, for which we were awarded the price of "Young Urban Designer of the Year" by the Ministry for Sustainable Development and Planning in 2007 (BazarUrbain 2007).

1. *IN SITU*... FIRST OF ALL

For us, the field is a *sine qua non* for both analysis and project purpose. Being *in situ* is about walking around the places or meeting their users. It is also about making the site a necessary third party for all the participants of the project... the residents, the designers, and the project managers.

This position we use for all our studies entails developing specific methods to help "reveal" the place through a multi-faceted prism: the story-telling, the observation, the measurement taking, and the urban reading. This methodology is further supported by analysis concepts that enable us to name and organize these sensitive, technical and practical *corpora*.

1.1. Telling the story of a place

Influenced by the Perceps style attempts (Perceps 1974)

and Kevin Lynch (Lynch 1960) or Pierre Sansot's early researches (Sansot 1986), the story-telling appears to be one of the essential modalities for apprehending a place (Thibaud and Tixier 1998). The Cresson laboratory has developed numerous space recounting techniques, from Jean-François Augoyard's early PhD works in the seventies on the Villeneuve neighbourhood in Grenoble (Augoyard 1979) to the "commented visit" method theorized by Jean-Paul Thibaud (Thibaud and Grosjean 2001). We applied these techniques to the project to recount the place and involve its stakeholder.

"Situating story-telling" is a certain speech describing the place and its heritages, given right on the spot, which thus allows the immediate comparison between one's representation of a place and the "reality". "Shared story-telling" which takes place within a group on site, helps inserting the time, the bodies and the customs in real-life situations. It also makes people aware of individual and collective representations (of the place) and allows laying the foundation of a common experience.



Figure 1: "Commented visit" – Saint-Etienne. Source: (Bazar Urbain 2001)

"Commented visits" resulting from research lead to "collective visits", which we almost systematically organize with the stakeholders associated with a given place: city officials and technicians, professionals who manage urban activities (lenders, teachers, postmen, city policemen, garbage collectors, people in charge of parks and green spaces and road maintenance etc.), users, representatives of associations or residents.

The comments from the participants provide us with practical experiences, perceptions, desires, the attachment to a place, complete dissatisfaction, etc. Photographs are systematically taken and then selected by the participants themselves. "Visit albums" are then put together to reconstitute words and images under various forms depending on the actions: portfolios, ABC books, flip books, urban albums, etc.

The principle is to always give things in return to those who have given their comments, stories and time. The "albums" as well as a synthesis document with the



Figure 2: "Collective visit" with technicians who manage urban activities. Source: (Bazar Urbain 2007)

statement of the purpose of the work may be handed over at a public meeting.

The individual comments are multiplied by those of the others, and thus become "polyglot". The experience is shared; the knowledge of the place is built with small touches that will then be refined through other approaches.



Figure 3: "A square for three neighbourhoods" - 2007 - Djamel Klouche's and Jan Kopp's project following the BazarUrbain study (2005). Source: (Bazar Urbain 2007)

Telling the story of a place enriches the project by finding its seeds in the competences of the residents (original experiences, know-how and imagination, heritage etc.). Far from slowing things down, taking the time to talk accelerates the project as the participants' different views are rapidly absorbed. Without being an extravagant or even unnecessary expenditure, story-telling gives the possibility to involve residents in the project rather than apply the project to them. With such an approach, the sponsor is a priori assured of a better project feasibility within due time while reducing risks of being at odds with the residents.

1.2. Observation, Statement and Measurement through urban reading

Being *in situ* is also a way of observing and measuring, a way we apply through the notion of site reading. In French, reading (*lecture*) implies an analysis or a rigorous, progressive interpretation of a text, a road, or a landscape. For that matter, read and link have the same Indo-European root, *leg*, meaning to “gather”, to “choose”. When we read a map or an urban landscape, what we do is decipher its constitutive elements to link them one to another in order to reach a general meaning.

Although reading city maps is crucial to urban analysis, one should not forget to read a place with one's own eyes by going on the spot, pacing up and down and “measuring the site”. As Bruno Queysanne noticed

To our wonderment, the Latin meaning of the word read, before taking on today's underlying meaning, also means going through space, wandering, sailing along the twists and turns of the coast. Thus, there would be a first reading which would not merely decipher signs deriving from a two-dimensional plan but which would entail exploring a three-dimensional space with adventurous connotations as whether by land or by sea, space would be read along winding routes. Therefore, reading space would imply gathering it by walking through it, by travelling its length and breadth. The spatial form cannot be given in one go, but won over little by little (Queysanne 1983: 4-5).

As far as we are concerned, visiting/reading occurs at different speeds, depending on the means of transport (on foot, by bus, by car), in order to apprehend territorial scales ranging from site to country. This kind of reading helps ascertain whether such a neighbourhood is far away from or close to the city centre or shopping areas, how much time is gained and how much energy is saved by walking through pedestrian passageways or by walking up stairs, whether a given public transportation line is efficient or not etc.

2. PAYING ATTENTION TO THE ORDINARY MAKING OF A CITY

It is necessary to look closely at how a city is designed and continuously re-designed. Rather than the work of one architect, one urban planner or one politician, a city is made day by day, by capillarity, through an anonymous accretion of actions by a vast number of individuals. Understanding the city so as to work on it requires paying attention to the ordinary making of the urban environment.

This attention further leads to a postulation: the territory carries in itself the qualities and elements that are necessary for construct a project, particularly in its urban fabrics, its customs or its ordinary heritage.

2.1. The urban fabric

Making the urban fabric the subject of research, an

analysis or a project entails being interested in the context, the site, the trivial things just like Marcel Poëte (Poëte 2000) J.W.R. Whitehand or Philippe Panerai (Mangin and Panerai 1999) invite us to do. The urban fabric is not interested in exceptionalness or in great urban works that are just singular elements, *i.e.* remarkable features such as monuments, palaces, churches, etc., but in the very structure of the city. It means understanding how an urban organization shows a strong solidarity among its various elements yet at the same time has the capacity to adjust, alter or transform itself.

This involves thinking about how elements can be renewed and continuously substituted without distorting the coherence and efficiency of the city as a whole. Lastly, working on urban fabrics is to also admit that there are multiple fabrics co-existing side by side in the city and, in theory, forming the unified whole. This forces one to constantly ask the question of weaving links between the urban fabrics of different periods.



Figure 4: Residents reading Echirrolles' urban fabrics – “visit album”. Source: (BazarUrbain, 2004)

2.2. Customs and ordinary heritage

The city is not only one or several urban forms but it is also one or several social forms. In order to understand one entails taking an interest in the other. When a city is made by men's anonymous and daily actions, it is essential to take their lifestyle into account. We postulate that the residents and users as the “experts of their daily lives”.

Appropriate techniques (walks, guided visits, free-conversation style speeches) make it possible to put residents in a situation where they can tell what makes sense for them in their living place. Gradually, they manage to expose those elements of the heritage that are apparently very ordinary, such as the views, the gardens of the working class, the moments of celebration or “insignificant” buildings that are in fact full of meaning (craftsmen's houses, factories etc.). This is how the professionals acquire the elements of the project from conserving and enhancing the heritage.

This approach questions the very nature of “inheriting”. We manage to stay away from the traditional well-known works and artefacts, which are usually identified

through classical listings. Heritage is not only in the beautiful freestone, but also in everything in the city, in life, that are full of meaning and remarkable for their spatial, sensory (view, sound, insulation...) and user-friendly qualities. It can be, of course, the spaces or, more exactly, the configurations of senses as well as the temporalities and customs: so many heritage elements that are difficult to express, to qualify and to be recognized.

The techniques used enable us to conduct inventories by noticing what lies there, seemingly ordinary, yet having created the delights in our everyday urban life... They allow us to consider the residents' experience as active and respectful inheritances. They give us the possibility to project a future without denying today's customs or falling into automatic conservatism. This way, we hope to avoid going through what could be caricatured as the "murder of the customs".

3. BEING IN PROJECT... THREE MODES OF ENTRY

We usually enter in a project by considering the three following modes: customs, atmospheres and the play of scale.

3.1. Mastery of custom, mastery of customs - (*Maitrise d'usage, maîtrise des usages*)

With consultation having legal force in France, residents and users are gradually seen as a possible third mastery for projects alongside the conventional (parties of) project management and architects. Accepting such an attractive but dangerous idea of "mastery of custom" entails knowing exactly what consultation should (and should not) be about and which balance ratios should be reached among the three parties.

The willingness to see the residents participate in urban projects is not enough. Participation is not something that can be decreed. A clear position must be adopted about the whole project, just as about its available tools and process of realization. The willingness of local councillors is often undermined by inexperience. Furthermore, the overflowing enthusiasm of young architects / urban planners who supported participation architecture during the urban struggles of the seventies gave way to scepticism among professionals over the interest of consultation when putting together a project. First of all, when conceiving of the residents' participation, the elected representatives, the professionals and the residents must learn to get to know each other and work together, but at the same time to preserve their exclusive territories. Even if a resident is involved in the life of his/her city (e.g. as the head of an association or a member of a neighbourhood authority), even if he/she can boast a professional experience in city management, he/she cannot expect to play the role of an elected representative or urban planner. It is up to elected representatives to make decisions, which will be binding on the community, and up to the urban planner to implement the territory project.

That said, conducting a survey on customs helps understand the possibilities of a place on a large range of scales from the house and its backyard to the road systems. "Mastery of custom" enables us to revitalize the way we look at project management and project ownership.

Users dismantle some myths and planning reflexes. Their aesthetic vision may surprise tasteful experts. The same goes for the way people look at the "necessity" of standardizing a road. Although no driver is against road improvement, some will still mention the pleasure they feel when driving on old highways, as opposed to driving on the new highways.



Figure 5: "embedded journey" with the patrolman on the motorway. Source: (BazarUrbain, 2007)

3.2. The notion of *ambiance* as a principle of disciplinary crossing

Our desire to cross masteries' or disciplines' points of view raises the question of the principles of hybridization. This step is made possible by the notion of architectural and urban *ambiance*, which is created through the research.

The *ambiance* lies at a crossroad of various dimensions that help to apprehend and understand it. This concept, was developed more particularly at the Cresson and Cerma laboratories, notably by Jean-François Augoyard (Augoyard 2007) or Pascal Amphoux (Amphoux 1998). This concept situates either a phenomenon or a place to be analysed at a crossroad of several dimensions: the sensory dimension (what appeals to our senses, what we feel), the technical dimension (buildings, road system, technical engineering) and the social dimension (practices, imagination of a place).

This concept is particularly interesting for projects because if we position ourselves at a crossroads of different dimensions for the reading of a place and the development of its project, decisions are made by taking into account the complexity of the existing situation rather than in favour of an exclusive dimension that would only correspond to a partial vision of things. Building up a project by using all these data is more complex but also richer and more interesting in terms of



Figure 6: Multi-actor workshop. City of Saint-Etienne.
Source: (BazarUrbain, 2001)

proposals, as it allows all participants to play a role in relation to their competences.

3.3. Interscalarity: principle of multi-scale action and reflection

The approach to a site, by placing the participants in the place, leads us to enter a project on a scale where the body becomes rooted into the field, while taking on various postures and moving itself. It is the scale of the body and of the sensory modes, the scale immediate, the scale of the single parcel, the block, or even the neighbourhood. It is the scale of proximity, where the users' competence, their daily expertise, is relevant. When using the scale of the body, one is not necessarily situated in a public space, but may be in a private space, a collective space, or in the street around one's place of living and working. This type of scale uses methods such as the wandering and the commenting while walking.

Even if this scale is extremely important to us, we do not, however, ignore the other scales, which refer to neighbourhoods, cities, suburbs or even the country. From the closest to the furthest, the project must take into account the experience acquired at these various scales in order to propose and build up a coherent system by alternating between these different scales. A project on a block of houses should not ignore the coherence of the neighbourhood nor its inscription within a larger scale...

4. CONCLUSION

Such ordinary yet expert comments take place in situ most of the time. The place then acts as a third party between the speaker and the interviewer. Such methods are not really consultation tools, but firstly they set out the characteristics of a site with its ambiances and reveal the various elements of its ordinary heritage. Secondly they enable all the stakeholders to be aware of everyone else's representations and issues during the conversation. Lastly, by synthesizing this information, these methods allow us to discover issues,

identify levers and make an inventory of ideas for the project.

However, these words gathered on site will gain a more special meaning when, some time later, they return materially to their speakers. This is done via three systems: the transcription of their own stories (full text, pictures etc.), the editing of the elements making up the stories of others (ABC book, photo albums with comments, polyglot itineraries, etc.) and the thematized synthesis that reveals characteristics and issues of the place. Attention given to these ordinary words, the possibility of reading stories of oneself again or those of the others and reacting again turns the interviewer into the interviewee. Citizen's words are not just idle talk...

5. CASE STUDY: HEM (FRANCE)

5.1. Recitation, exhibition, and design: 3 modes of action for a neighbourhood



Figure 7: Hauts-Champs neighbourhood before renovation. Source: (BazarUrbain 2005)

The Hauts-Champs neighbourhood is made up of strips of house blocks, which belong to the Logiciel (CMH group) social landlord and is located in Hem, in northern France. Right in the middle of the blocks, more than 400 garages were built as mineral, closed spaces and dead ends. These dilapidated garages, separate from the houses, are sometimes used for unlawful activities. The way they are positioned has contributed to develop a feeling of insecurity that has been slowly enhanced by the vacancies of the garages.

The objective of the study, for which BazarUrbain was appointed, is to take from the problems of the garages to a "shared project" of the evolution of the neighbourhood. This aim is reflected in a report on daily life issues, a proposal of several project scenarios and a master plan for each block.

This approach is based on three work principles:

- A principle of scales: working on the project by using several scales: object – building – block of houses – neighbourhood – city

- An interdisciplinary principle: analyzing and suggesting courses of actions by balancing social dimensions (customs), sensory dimensions (ambiances) and technical dimensions (constructions) in the best possible way
- A principle of involvement: implementing a process in which the project management, the architects and the residents can get involved, express themselves and be heard.



Figure 8: Entrance of a collective backyard. Source: (BazarUrbain 2005)

Three modes of action make up the project. Every action is defined in close relationship with the project management and gives rise to a public meeting during which a document is handed over to all stakeholders, including the residents.

- **The recitation** consists in reading and telling about the place so as to lay the foundations of the project. This is about establishing the urban and social aspect of a place: urban reading (forms, regulations, customs), organizing collective visit specifically with the project management, architects and residents and setting up interview-based visits at the residents' private homes. Every block of houses is subject to a report synthesizing the three different readings of the place (data base, topic mappings, thematized speeches) and announcing the challenges of the forthcoming project.

- **The exhibition**, which aims at reversing images, consists in collecting the story of a place and the memories of its residents and stakeholders (local communities, lender...) in order to help improve the neighbourhood and elevate its residents. This activity, which runs across each block, will be completed in Spring 2009 and a book, which combines the words and stories of the residents, the photo footages and the materials from the archives of the original project (in the late 50s) with its developments, will be published.

- **The design** consists in producing the scenarios of developing the hearts of the blocks and then the master plans which takes into account the residents' lifestyles as well as the urban reality with its developments on every scale (urban organization maps, cross section of

a street, housing approval proposals). At this phase, the residents' contribution are crucial to precisely identify the local issues (e.g. the need of storage spaces), to rely on existing practices (rainwater collection...) and pinpoint the challenges and the scales of necessary transformations.

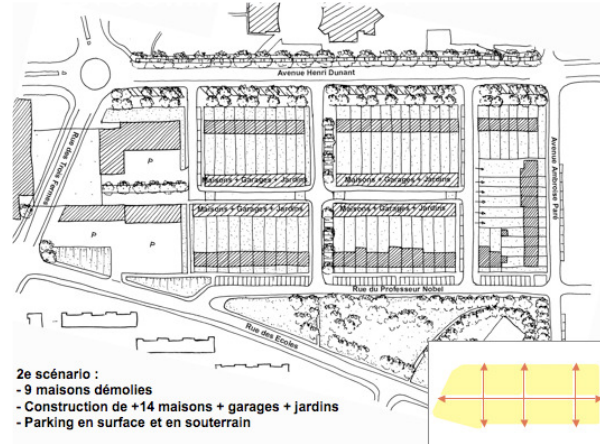


Figure 9: Plan of a scenario - project. Source: (BazarUrbain 2007)

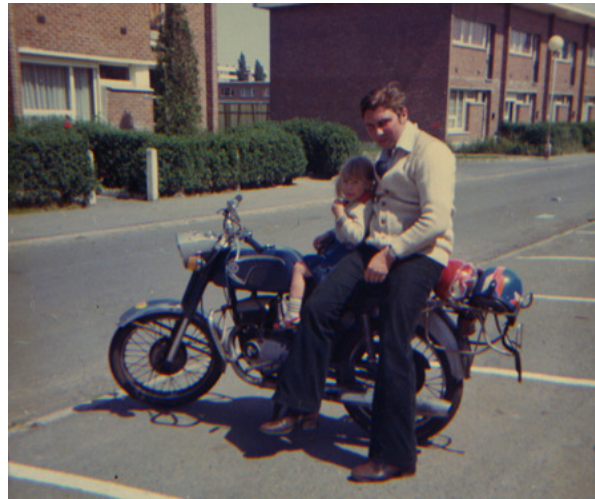


Figure 10: Photo extract from a family album – exhibition book. Source: (M. Arnaud and BazarUrbain 2006)



Figure 11: Overall plan - project. Source: (BazarUrbain 2008)

5.2. From public meetings to participative workshops

As regards the housing scale, we set up workshops in collaboration with the residents to best define the specifications of two objects which are useful for everyone and contribute to change the neighbourhood image: a multi-function console in the front of the house and a garden shelter at the back. The latter, which can be used in different ways (storage or DIYs space, additional room etc.) allows collecting rainwater and even the dew water.

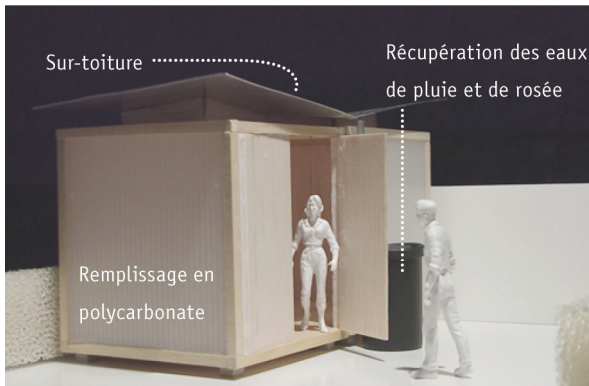


Figure 12: Garden shelter - project. Source: (BazarUrbain 2006)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank all members of BazarUrbain (www.bazarurbain.com) and Lilan Pan for her contribution.

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