

Towards a negotiated project-led urban planning: principles and instruments of the French model

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Contemporary urban challenges call for innovative planning tools able to overcome the dichotomy between regulatory planning (rigidity) and site-specific interventions (fragmentation) in order to produce urban space. This paper investigates the hybrid operational realm between these two dimensions, with particular reference to the French context. In France, over recent decades, a renewed idea of a negotiated urban planning has developed, positioning local authorities as initiators of ‘project-led’ transformations

1. Introduction

As Gaeta (2021) recalls, the negotiated character – particularly between public and private actors – constitutes a foundational element of city-making. From this perspective, any urban

transformation can be understood as the outcome of some form of negotiation among actors.

Over recent decades, however, the ‘shift’ from government to governance in urban politics across Western countries (Gross, Hambleton, 2007; Debernardi, Rosso, 2007; Pierre, 2011) has profoundly altered the conditions under which such negotiation processes unfold. In many contexts, this transition has resulted in a gradual withdrawal of local

of strategic urban areas. The instruments associated with this paradigm promote deliberative arenas that bring together civic actors, private stakeholders, and design teams, aiming to explore and co-construct possible trajectories of urban development. The paper examines the French model through its historical-theoretical reconstruction, a description of the operational tools in use, and an analysis of the revitalisation project for Hennebont's city centre.

authorities from the direct steering of urban transformations, often placing them in a subordinate position *vis-à-vis* private initiatives. In this sense, as Gross and Hambleton critically observe, governance risks appearing “less as a creative process of collective problem-solving and more as a mechanism that allows the state to abdicate its responsibilities for providing social care and support” (2007, p.9).

Rather than a simple shift ‘from government to governance’, what can be observed, as Pierre suggests (2011), is a redefinition of the role of government within governance processes.

In the absence of strong public steering, such processes may indeed lead to forms of urban disarticulation.

In reaction to such premises, the French case offers a set of practices in which local authorities

actively seek to steer urban transformation through the elaboration of place-focused spatial strategies, initiating processes of co-construction and negotiation with civil society at large. Within these practices, the governance of urban transformations is exercised through the instruments of urban design, understood as the “purposeful process of shaping the built environment” (Madanipour, 2014, p. 2); fostering a negotiated and/or cooperative approach both in the formulation of strategic visions and in their implementation.

Building on the author's professional experience in the French context, as urban designer within the firm *Particules*¹, this article seeks to situate the recent debate and to examine this set of practices that have progressively consolidated across France over the course of the new millennium.

The first section of the article is more firmly grounded from a scholarly perspective. It aims to frame the notions of *urbanisme de projet* and *urbanisme négocié* in France, drawing on a body of literature produced between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

The second section focuses on describing a number of innovative urban governance instruments that have gained increasing prominence in France in recent years, largely promoted by local authorities responsible for territorial development. The third and final section examines the case study concerning the project for the revitalisation of

Hennebont's city centre, in which the author was directly involved.

Part of this section is based on the *cahier des charges*² drafted by the municipality.

2. Urbanisme de projet and urbanisme négocié in France: a historical-theoretical framing

From the 1980s onwards, the French context experienced a significant shift in urban planning policies. Against the backdrop of administrative decentralisation and the transfer of competences from the central state to local authorities, a planning model based on a strongly dirigiste framework – characterised by tight state control over rules and implementation timelines – gradually gave way to more flexible and adaptive modes of intervention (Roncayolo, 2004). This process was further reinforced by the growing dissatisfaction among practitioners towards an urban planning culture perceived as excessively technocratic, and more specifically characterized by “an overly juristical approach.

Such an approach [...] tends to reduce planning practice to the mere regulatory control of land use, while expelling any concern for urban composition”³ (Pinson, 2009, p. 8). Consequently, administrative decentralisation led French cities to enter into a logic of inter-urban competition, “generating a form of struggle between territories competing in terms of their attractiveness” (Ingallina, 2004, p. 30).

It is within this context that the notion of *projet urbain* began to take shape.

Figures coming from architectural disciplines sought to delineate and interrogate this idea (Devillers, 1994; Panerai and Mangin, 1999; Ingallina, 2001). Providing a single, unambiguous definition remains a complex task; what matters here, however, is that through this notion, the physical dimension of urban space – both in its built components and in the configuration of ‘open space’ – returned to the core of France’s urban planning debate. Unlike the Italian context, this shift did not occur solely at a theoretical level: the *Projet Urbain* also became a shared cultural and political project, endorsed by the country’s governing institutions. In this sense, by the end of the twentieth century a genuine *urbanisme de projet* (project-led urban planning) began to assert itself in France, in which spatial issues “prevail over political, legal and social ones” (Choay, 2010, p. 66).

In essence, the *Projet Urbain* gradually established itself as one of the key operational instruments through which French public administrations would plan the city, or parts of it. The ZAC (*Zone d’Aménagement Concerté*)⁴ constituted the central operational tool of this phase, providing the institutional framework through which the *projet urbain* was translated into practice.

However, for several years now the ZAC model itself has been the subject of increasingly explicit criticism, primarily concerning the structural limits of an often rigid procedural framework, the predominantly formal nature of consultation

mechanisms, and the difficulty of substantively integrating the perspectives of residents and existing uses.

In a number of cases, moreover, ZAC-led operations have resulted in urban environments that are highly specialised, as well as socially and functionally homogeneous, thereby contributing to processes of land valorisation and gentrification.

Other ways of deploying the *projet urbain* have sought to respond to this 'rigidity', reacting to social processes that have characterised the new millennium: the multiplication of actors involved in the production of urban space; an increasing demand for participation and representation on the part of civil society; a shift from the construction of urban areas 'from scratch' towards the regeneration of the existing city; a trajectory of shrinking public financial resources; and a partial overcoming of the compartmentalisation of competences.

These were the new conditions that led Yves Chalas to relaunch contemporary urban planning as a form of 'weak thought'¹⁵: no longer grounded in totalising visions imposed upon society by a group of experts, but rather in situated, specific, pluralistic, and contingent interpretations. This shift has opened the way to a renewed emphasis on the processual dimension in the constitution of the *projet urbain*.

To Chalas's critical reading one may add the perspective of the geographer Marcel Roncayolo, for whom the construction of an urban project

must be understood as "a social process, involving individuals, groups, and decision-makers within a highly organised society, according to very different modes and styles" (2000, p. 28). According to Roncayolo, it is "impossible to conceive the notion of the urban project separately from this idea of process, both at the stage of conception and at that of material implementation" (2000, p. 28).

From this perspective, the *projet urbain* acquires a distinctly processual dimension. In other words, the project also becomes a process – necessarily negotiated, given the constellation of interests at play within urban space. In what Françoise Choay terms *urbanisme de négociation*, the project of the city is not to be understood as a definitive and completed image, but rather as "a set of objectives (including spatial ones) to be achieved through the governance of the city's own process of formation, by means of legal and financial procedures and through relations of power" (2010, p. 66).

As Palermo (2024) emphasises, within this paradigm project and governance are closely intertwined: the *projet urbain* does not merely define a spatial outcome, but assumes the role of a device for negotiation and regulated confrontation among public and private actors. Already at the stages of conception and elaboration, the project structures the conditions of dialogue, organises the issues under discussion, and makes explicit the margins, constraints, and objectives of collective action.

Negotiated project-led urban planning does not present itself as a prescriptive formula, but rather as a method of spatial production in which the mobilisation of relational networks and the governance of processes acquire a foundational role in steering spatial transformations, while seeking to preserve a form of public control over them.

3. The instruments of the French paradigm: pre-operational studies and the plan guide.

France's negotiated project-led approach to urban planning, as outlined in the previous section, has developed a set of (pre-)operational instruments that have progressively been refined over recent years – moving, in certain respects, beyond and even 'above' the ZAC. This section focuses on two of them, which are often deployed sequentially: the *étude urbaine pré-opérationnelle* and the *plan guide*.

As previously noted, these instruments operate within a sphere of public initiative that seeks to bridge Planning and Design. Within this paradigm, grounded in the strategic design of medium-to long-term urban transformations at the scale of a neighbourhood, city, or territory, what is defined are not only the development logics and guiding principles; but also the physical, spatial, and functional qualities of interventions – albeit in an open-ended manner. In essence, French public authorities aim to equip themselves with strategic plans and projects – already negotiated at the stage of conception

– which they subsequently endeavour to implement through further negotiations, thereby moving beyond the framework of the traditional municipal land-use plan.

The first instrument generally mobilised for the construction of a broad strategic project is the pre-operational urban study. This instrument falls within the French public procurement procedures known as *marchés de définition*, which are typically employed in the early stages of complex urban operations, when the programme has not yet been clearly defined or when the contextual complexity renders traditional tools inadequate. The urban study provides a response in situations where the more conventional procedure of architectural and engineering competitions – whose structure confines dialogue between client and designer to the strict observance of a predefined brief – proves incapable of addressing the complexity of the envisaged operation (Choay, 2010).

These studies aim to produce an action-oriented territorial analysis, clarifying objectives, development and regeneration scenarios, programmatic hypotheses, and initial spatial configurations. The project is progressively constructed through a structured dialogue – or rather, negotiation – primarily between public institutions and designers, while increasingly involving citizens in the process. Real estate developers are rarely present at this stage, as public authorities seek to preserve a margin of political and design autonomy, preventing

considerations of immediate feasibility or land valorisation from prematurely steering strategic choices.

In essence, pre-operational studies do not seek to produce a definitive project; rather, they aim to explore and compare a range of possible and alternative solutions.

In doing so, they foster a collective appropriation of the project. Their aim is to overcome the dichotomy between the regulatory rigidity of statutory planning and the sporadic character of urban transformations driven by isolated interventions, by fostering an integrated vision that brings together strategy and design in the construction of urbanscapes. Such an approach strives to hold together issues of urban morphology, the quality of public spaces, mobility, landscape, and land-use programming within a coherent framework.

At times, the design process initiated through the *étude* culminates in the formulation of a *plan guide*, which becomes the overarching framework document guiding urban transformations during the operational phase. By virtue of its nature as a flexible steering instrument, the *plan guide* does not establish fixed rules, but rather sets out guidelines capable of evolving over time. In this sense, it promotes an integrated vision able to coordinate incremental and heterogeneous interventions, enabling ongoing negotiation among the involved actors and adjusting design choices to emerging resources and interests.

The notion of the *plan guide* was first introduced in the urban development project for the *Île de Nantes*, drafted around the year 2000.

It emerged from the collaborative work between SAMOA (*Société d'Aménagement de la Métropole Ouest Atlantique*), a public agency specifically established by *Nantes Métropole* to manage the urban development operations of this city sector, and the team of designers led by urban designer Alexandre Chemetoff.

As Devisme emphasises, the *plan guide* is “the evolving instrument of urban fabrication. [...] It is a reference document: it orients action in the short term, embedding it within a long-term vision of the territory” (2007, p. 8). It becomes a shared point of reference in negotiations with developers and landowners: not a regulation to be applied mechanically, but a framework of coherence within which issues such as building volumes, spatial layouts, and relationships with public space can be discussed. It constitutes “an evolving working tool enabling all actors of the city to share the project” (Devisme, 2007, p. 11). It is important to recall that, by virtue of their exploratory and indicative nature, these instruments do not constitute legally binding rules and are devoid of prescriptive or regulatory force.

The *plan guide* itself carries no formal legal status; however, in the case of the *Île de Nantes*, it ultimately led to an amendment of the municipal land-use plan.

In summary, whereas the *études* remain confined to the exploratory and strategic phase, the *plan*

guide incorporates a managerial and economic dimension, making explicit how – and under what conditions – urban transformation can be effectively implemented.

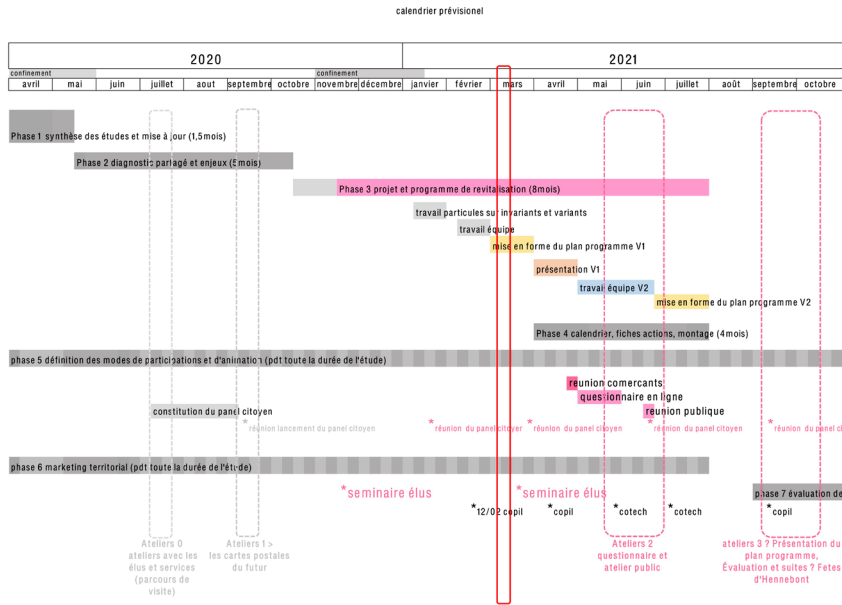
Often, this type of project-led approach is mobilised as an instrument of legitimation and as a means of accessing supra-local funding channels, particularly at the regional, national, and European levels.

4. The plan guide for the Revitalisation of Hennebont City Centre

Hennebont is a Breton town that has developed around the *Blavet* river, whose course structures the urban landscape and separates the historic core from more recent expansions. Its morphology is shaped by the fortifications and the fluvial port, while residential neighbourhoods have progressively extended along the valley axes. In 2019, the municipal administration, led by the Socialist mayor André Hartereau, decided to launch a pre-operational urban study with the aim of “defining an overarching project and a programme of actions for the revitalisation of the city centre, the strategic programming of key sites for pre-operational purposes, and the support of the project’s implementation”⁶. The urban study would aim to elaborate a strategic framework plan for the revitalisation of the extended city centre of Hennebont, conceived as a shared project for territorial development and spatial reorganisation and, more concretely, as the definition of a programme of

actions to be implemented within a 5-10 year horizon; integrating the full range of issues that contribute to the development of a city centre: heritage, services, commerce, public facilities, public spaces, infrastructure, private and public housing.

The call for tenders for the urban study required the constitution of a multidisciplinary team including, at a minimum, the following areas of expertise: an architect-planner; an architect specialised in the valorisation of architectural heritage; a landscape architect; a civil engineer; an urban programmer⁷; a building services engineer responsible for energy diagnostics; a sociologist; an expert in communication and place marketing; a specialist in participatory and stakeholder engagement methodologies; and an expert in technical and economic-financial programming. The design process set out in the call for tenders was structured as a sequence of progressive and incremental phases – ranging from the synthesis of existing studies to the definition of an operational programme and subsequent support during implementation – accompanied by two cross-cutting missions respectively devoted to the consultation of citizens and local stakeholders, and to the development of a territorial marketing strategy. The contract was awarded to the *Particules* team⁸, which, already at the tender stage, carefully structured the design process that would lead to the preparation of the *plan guide* over the subsequent eighteen months (Fig. 1), introducing the idea



Operational calendar of the urban study for the revitalisation of Hennebont city centre. Produced by Particules, 2021.

Source : Particules.

Fig. 1.

of organising civic consultation around the establishment of a *panel citoyen* (citizens panel). The negotiated governance system underpinning the urban study was thus defined from the beginning, and structured across four complementary tiers, differentiated by their respective roles, decision-making weight, and frequency of meetings:

1. *Comité de pilotage*, strategic level: it would include the principal institutional actors, a representative of the *panel citoyen*, and the project team. It would perform

a political-strategic steering function and validate the major orientations of the *plan guide*.

2. *Comité technique*, operational level: composed of representatives of the municipality, and the project team, with the targeted involvement of other elected officials or stakeholders depending on the issues under discussion. It would constitute the arena for ongoing technical coordination.
3. Associated actors and experts, thematic level: this tier would bring together business

associations and economic stakeholders (port authority, healthcare sector, heritage bodies, tourism organisations). Their role would be consultative and sector-specific, contributing specialised expertise and articulating local interests in order to enrich and refine the project's thematic dimensions.

4. *Panel citoyen*, participatory level: these meetings would establish a direct dialogue between the *panel citoyen* and the project team, with the aim of incorporating residents' perspectives into the development of the *plan guide*; orienting choices on issues related to uses, everyday practices, and the perception of places.

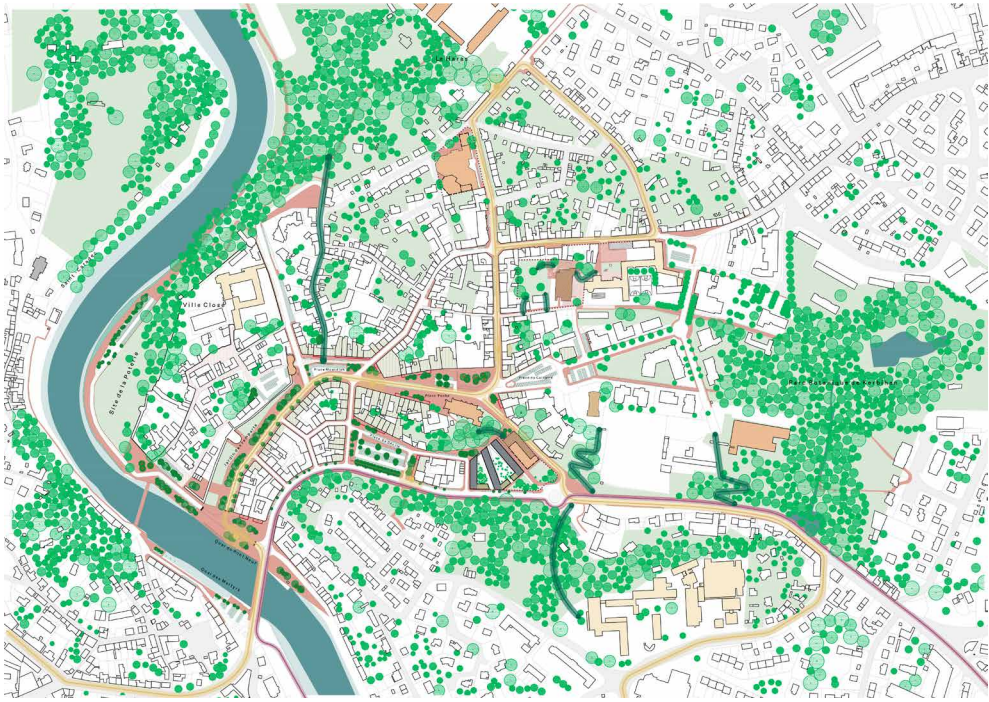
The first six to eight months of the study saw the team primarily engaged in synthesising the extensive body of municipal studies previously produced, establishing the *panel citoyen*, and ultimately constructing a *diagnostic partagé*⁹ capable of mobilising all the urban components relevant to the future evolution of the city centre. This phase was characterised by site visits, collective walk-throughs, and targeted meetings with elected officials and local stakeholders, enabling the development of a shared reading of existing conditions, grounded in the direct experience of places and in the confrontation between institutional, technical, and user-based perspectives.

Three 'spatial figures' were identified – the Blavet valley and its natural areas; the sequence of urban squares between the railway station

and the botanical garden; and the network of collective facilities conceived as gateways to the city – together with three *visions citoyennes*¹⁰ – *La ville nature*, *La ville du local*, and *La ville du week-end* – as foundational elements for the construction of the *plan guide*.

For each spatial figure, the long-term *enjeux* – that is, the key strategic stakes and issues at play – were identified and divided into 'invariants' (non-negotiables) and 'variables'.

It is precisely at the intersection of these components that, in the following months, the elaboration of the project and the revitalisation programme began to take shape. Three broad development 'scenarios' were initially developed, conceived both as alternative visions and trajectories capable of fostering dialogue among the spatial figures without compromising the 'invariant' objectives, and as strategic options enabling the concentration of efforts and resources in specific areas rather than others. These scenarios structured the debate and negotiations among the various components of the project's governance. In April 2021, the *comité de pilotage* decided to discard one of the proposed scenarios and to construct the *plan guide* at the intersection of the two remaining. The *plan guide* was developed and finalised between spring and summer 2021. The final document, comprising approximately 130 pages, was submitted to the Municipality of Hennebont in October. It set out a long-term, comprehensive spatial vision (Fig. 2), accompanied by a series



The main spatialisation of the plan guide, submitted at the end of the urban study.

Source : Particules.

Fig. 2.

of guidelines concerning the design and management of public spaces, the evolution of the stock of collective facilities, the development of new residential buildings, and the reorganisation of the city centre's circulation system. An operational timeline extending to 2026 was also developed within the *plan guide*, accompanied by a series of thematic 'action sheets' detailing the nature of the short- and medium-term operations to be undertaken, together with their legal and financial frameworks. Once the *plan guide* had been defined and formally validated, the *Particules* team assumed an accompanying role during the operational phase, providing technical and methodological

support for the implementation of the planned actions and assisting the administration in translating the strategic framework into concrete interventions.

As of 2026, only one of the *fiches actions* developed within the *plan guide* has materialised into a concrete intervention: the redevelopment of *Foch square*. Negotiations with private operators are instead envisaged in relation to the former hospital site, where the transfer of a portion of publicly owned land is conditional upon the construction of collective housing units. This will constitute the primary arena of public-private negotiations; however, the municipality will enter this phase well prepared,

supported by a strong and coherent overarching vision, as a result of an almost two years long collective effort.

5. Conclusion

The article highlights how the negotiated character of urban transformations is not, in itself, a novelty within planning policies; rather, what is at stake are the conditions under which negotiation unfolds and the capacity of public institutions to structure and steer such processes. From this perspective, the French experience offers a particularly relevant empirical ground. Through the progressive consolidation of an *urbanisme de projet* and its evolution towards more explicitly processual forms, French public authorities have sought to reassert a strategic and operational role within place-shaping processes by developing action-oriented instruments in order to govern spatial outcomes over time.

Pre-operational urban studies and the *plan guide* operate in an intermediate space between planning and design, strategy and implementation. Their distinctive contribution lies in framing negotiation within the construction of place-focused spatial strategies that clarify objectives, constraints, and margins of action. In doing so, they enable a form of 'project-based governance' in which spatial design is not reduced to a final output, but acts as a device for structuring dialogue, aligning interests, and maintaining coherence across fragmented interventions.

The Hennebont case illustrates how such an approach can produce a shared and robust vision, capable of equipping local authorities with stronger negotiating positions when engaging with real estate developers.

Beyond the specific case, several broader implications emerge for planning theory and practice. First, the French model suggests that the opposition between regulatory planning and project-based approaches can be overcome through hybrid instruments that combine strategic vision, spatial design, and process management. Second, it points to a redefinition of public action in planning: not a withdrawal in favour of market-led dynamics, but a transformation towards forms of indirect steering, where local authorities organise arenas of negotiation while retaining control over the overarching spatial trajectories – from governance to 'governing' (Gross, Hambleton, 2007). Third, it reinforces a processual understanding of the urban project, in line with theoretical perspectives that conceive planning as an iterative, situated, and relational practice.

What these practices ultimately foreground is the possibility of rearticulating negotiation and public control, suggesting that the quality of urban transformation depends not on the elimination of conflict and plurality, but on the ability to organise them within a coherent and collectively constructed spatial strategy.

Note

- ¹ The urban design practice Particules is engaged in a series of urban regeneration projects (and processes), working alongside French public administrations to define strategic guidelines for the spatial transformation of specific urban areas.
- ² The document through which the public client defines the objectives, scope, methodology, phases, and actors involved in the assignment.
- ³ Unless otherwise indicated, translations of texts into English are to be understood as free translations by the author.
- ⁴ A legal-operational instrument that enables a public authority to plan and implement a complex urban operation while retaining public control over both the project and its implementation phases.
- ⁵ See Gianni Vattimo's notion of *pensiero debole*.
- ⁶ Wording derived from the *cahier des charges* of the urban study.
- ⁷ The professional figure within French urban planning concerned with defining the needs, objectives, functions, uses, and spatial requirements of an urban intervention.
- ⁸ In addition to Particules, the team included Soja Architecture, D'ici là paysage et territoires, Artelia Ville & Transport, Tetra, and Vraiment Vraiment.
- ⁹ Collaboratively produced assessment of existing conditions.
- ¹⁰ Structured, collectively constructed imaginaries that orient the project

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