

SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT: WHERE IS URBAN PLANNING HEADING TO?

From February to June 2018, we conducted a research to spot the benefits and rising issues of the “Réinventer” calls for innovative urban projects. This study is based on 30 interviews with professionals and scholars currently involved in “Réinventer” competitions (from Réinventer Paris in 2014 to Reinventing Cities). We published our findings in [articles on Medium](#) – in French – and gave a conference at the Paris Center for Architecture and Urban Planning in July 2018. This document summarizes our main findings.

INTRODUCTION.....

Our research was motivated by three observations on contemporary French urban planning:

- all stakeholders (public organizations, private consultants, real estate developers...) promote sustainable cities in their projects;
- public and private sectors rarely have an integrated practice of sustainability since most organizations have a “sustainability department” acting apart from the other departments;
- finally, there is no consensus over the notion of urban sustainability itself, as if the notion was biased by the fields or sectors professionals are work in.

We started to investigate these statements by identifying the underlying institutional and political specificities of the “Réinventer” method. Our illustrations can be found [online](#).

METHODOLOGY.....

The study is based on 30 interviews from various backgrounds, supposed to reach the diverse fields involved in the Reinventers (public officers, real estate developers, urban planning consultants, sustainability consultants).

As agreed with the interviewees, the list of the contributors is not public. Authors might be contacted for further information.

RESULTS.....

The interviews enabled us to gather a large, cross-field material that we long analyzed through the lens of urban sustainability. For our findings to match the common vision of sustainable development, we have decided to break them up into the three categories usually composing this notion.

1. While Citizen Inclusion Is Increasing, Social Exclusion is Growing

The “Réinventer” calls for innovative projects have shifted the subject of citizen inclusion from the public to the private sector. In France, the historic process for project inputs is that the City collects its citizens’ needs and then provides private actors with a comprehensive specification book. As of now, real estate developers are likely to undertake the difficult task of including residents’ requests in their projects. Such a shift implies issues on transparency, common good and public responsibility for many scholars and private consultants. The City of Paris itself is unsure of the benefits of this process: for Réinventer Paris 2, the City reversed its method by using the historic public consultation before the call for innovative urban projects. This devolution-friendly method was used in Réinventer Paris 1 and is also applied to C40’s Reinventing Cities.

Apart from the questions arisen by the pri-

vate-shift over public consultation, citizen inclusion definitely gets better after the collection of local needs. During the design process of their projects, private stakeholders are invited to provide ideas to “animate” the project site before, during and after the construction phases. This idea is widely welcomed by real estate developers, who usually work with start-ups to plan the citizen development of the site in a long-term strategy.

While citizen inclusion is being reinvented by the private sector, it seems that social inclusion is forgotten in the “Réinventer” process. Indeed, many of the professionals we interviewed expressed their concerns about the massive number of non-affordable housing units being developed through the competition winning projects. A lot of scholars also mentioned the growing gentrification taking place in areas on which calls for innovative urban projects were focusing. This finding highlights the fact that the “Réinventer” contests do not easily solve the issue of affordable housing or social diversity - although a few projects actually tried to promote such solutions.

2. Public-Private Partnerships Are Going Further

France is a country where the public sector has still a very strong power on urban projects. As the “Réinventer” competitions imply private stakeholders at an early stage of the urban project process, they are pushing real estate developers to undertake general-interest or political orientations in their projects. Thus, while the public sector accepts to devolve its skills to private stakeholders, these increasingly stick to the political approach of urban planning that is likely to be appreciated by local mayors.

Public-private partnership are not only restricted to the design of urban projects. With the “Réinventer” process, Cities are - for the first time - keeping an eye on the management of the project

once it is constructed (with the so-called “innovation conventions”). Such an initiative had never taken place in France: if it is warmly welcome by both public officers and private consultants, this process still needs to be actually set up before drawing any conclusion on its benefits. However, this idea highlights possible cross-sector partnerships in the very-long run (we’re talking about several decades!). As French real estate developers have already shifted their business model towards the service industry, they seem more likely than ever to accept partnerships that would enable them to operate on more markets in exchange of a City control on some of their projects.

As innovation is the definitive motto of the “Réinventer” method, this notion is considered by many stakeholders as a risk more than an opportunity for urban sustainability. Indeed, Cities are more willing than ever to accept building features and materials that have literally never been used before. In the meanwhile, real estate developers take more risks to build sophisticated, comprehensive proposals to seduce local mayors. Being innovative, for public and private actors, thus means being risk-taking in both cases. If some interviewees highlight the benefits of newfangled green buildings, others fear the rise of construction problems jeopardizing the implementation of innovative feature on future buildings - that would thus look similar to the ones that pervade our cities.

Apart from our analysis, we proposed the idea of a circular economy of land-use control. In order to comply with the increasing number of public-private partnerships in the long run and to minimize the risks brought by innovation, our study proposes to replace the sells occurring in the “Réinventer” competitions by land-occupation authorizations. Such an initiative would enable all stakeholders to minimize the risk they bear over general interest, while providing the calls for innovative urban projects with a sustain-

able land-consumption model - since public plots dramatically diminished in the Greater Paris area since Réinventer Paris in 2014.

3. From Specifications to Innovation: the “Réinventers” Model Is Challenging Sustainable Urban Planning

The main finding about sustainability is that most of the stakeholders engaged in “Réinventer” projects share a biased approach of urban sustainability, focusing their efforts on three fields: the reduction of CO2 emissions, the increase of biodiversity in urban areas and the growing use of renewable energies. If these points are definitely relevant to limit global warming effects, we may think that this shared vision of sustainability should be enlarged to other issues and solutions, such as rain-water management, resilience...

The calls for innovative urban projects also change professional practices. For several decades, French urban projects included environmental concerns through specification memos. In these documents, real estate developers discover the constraints that apply to the development of urban project on a given site and design proposals matching the requirements set up by the local community. The “Réinventer” model provides a new framework, driven by innovation instead of constraint. This new vision of sustainable planning leads professionals of all fields (architects, landscape designers, developers, etc.) to provide sustainability as a service more than as a constraint. If this method is supported by a few key players, most of the consultants in sustainability we interviewed expressed their fear to see a run for innovation-washing. Finally, it seems that biomimicry might operate as a synthesis between the logics of constraints and of innovation by providing an approach in which buildings of all kind provide a service to the environment (farming, CO2 absorption...) while preserving on-site natural state of affairs.

The “Réinventer” calls for innovative urban projects are also interesting in that they lead city planners to reconsider land use regulations. As Réinventer Paris was focused on innovation, many rare features became quite common in the bids - such as wood construction. As a result, progressive cities are considering implementing these formerly innovative features in their land use restrictions. As an example, Paris is trying to set up a rule defining wood as the default construction material for a whole neighborhood - despite the fact that this material was hardly ever used in new constructions a few years before. Thus, the “Réinventer” competitions may lead innovations to become constraints!

DISCUSSION.....

The previous results gave us the opportunity to set a range of recommendations for sustainability-focused calls for innovative urban projects. Six items are detailed in [our last article](#): most of them apply to the case of Reinventing Cities.

- Planners should re-introduce social concerns into urban projects and policies to counter the increase of social and economic inequalities.
- Cities may promote the emerging rise of tactical urbanism, as it provides communities with livable and animated spaces, which are important for urban safety as well as for the economic well-being of our towns.
- Our towns can also anticipate the shift of public-private partnerships by studying the opportunities in the long-run and, thus, renewing their business models.
- Communities could benefit from the land-use authorizations to make urban planning more sustainable, in order to avoid the loss of large amounts of public lands.
- Public organizations and NGOs may take the lead on sustainable fields and give financial or promotional support to innovative features, along the lines of Paris with wood construction.
- Reinventing Cities is innovative in the way it required each team to hire a consultant in sustain-

ability: this obligation may seem trifling compared to the wide range of issues that we have to solve, however it definitely is the first step to bring practices into urban sustainability. We are convinced that all future “Réinventer” contests should duplicate this initiative and involve sustainability experts at all levels of the competition.

LIMITATIONS.....

The limitations of this study are influenced by the limited - although rather consistent - number of professionals and scholars interviewed. Despite the fact that there is always room for improvement, we are confident to say that the sample of stakeholders we met through this work covers the conclusions that can be drawn by the calls for innovative urban projects in France.

Another research is currently being conducted by J. DESPAX and A. MURER, to understand how the “Réinventer” model may be applied in the Northern American institutional and sustainable context. The results of this second study will be available by February 2019.

CONCLUSION.....

In France, calls for innovative urban projects raise as many benefits as they raise questions on the urban future that we all wish for. In this complex transition, we identified three emerging trends that we believe will be established in the incoming years:

- as cities diversify their tools for public consultation and inclusion at all the levels of urban projects, social and economic inequalities increase;
- the purpose of public-private partnerships are shifting from the design of urban projects to the management of public services;
- innovation redefines the way urban planning is monitored by public and private stakeholders as it brings risk to urban projects.

The “Réinventer” model has gained an international scope less than three years after its launch

in Paris. This short period of time limits the conclusions that can be wisely drawn from the French experience. However, it is clear that urban sustainability has entered a new realistic dimension through this method - not only through the benefits of “Réinventer” competitions, but also through the complex issues which stems from the process. As the first constructions of Réinventer Paris 1 are being built, we now expect to be able to further analyze the impact of the “Réinventer” model on Urban Planning.

REFERENCES.....

- [1] COYO K. and MURER A, 2018. “Développement urbain durable : où en est la fabrique urbaine ?”. *Medium* - online.

CONTACTS.....

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