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Similar to other Western European nations, the prevailing model of urban expansion across France since the 1970s has been that of urban sprawl. However, since the 1990s, several cities, including Strasbourg – which, with approximately 450,000 inhabitants, is the 11th largest urban area in France1 – have developed an alternative model, characterised by a ‘renaissance’ of the urban centre (including the cessation or even reversal of inner-city flight) in tandem with a relative decline or stabilisation of peri-urban growth.

In 2008–2009, the city of Strasbourg won a national award as part of a call for ‘Eco-city’ projects that was initiated by the French Ministry of Environment. The ecological development strategy proposed by Strasbourg was based upon an ambitious expansion of the city centre along the Rhine in the direction of Kehl, the German municipality just across the border. This strategy aims to achieve demographic growth of 50,000 inhabitants by 2025, as well as the completion of 24 projects within the current boundaries of the city in order to increase the density of the city centre. This flagship project of the new municipality, led since 2008 by a socialist mayor whose predecessor was a member of a right-wing party, has been accompanied by a number of initiatives directed at promoting ‘local democracy’ that go beyond legislative incentives. Since the enactment of the local democracy law in 2002, all French municipalities with more than 80,000 inhabitants must establish neighbourhood councils, while the law leaves municipalities free to define the functions, competencies and the composition of these local bodies. Such local bodies are thus not a novelty in Strasbourg. In comparison to earlier legislation, however, the new initiatives have been given more autonomy in relation to the municipal government (e.g. they are no longer presided over by an elected official). Furthermore, they are systematically consulted about the planned projects for the neighbourhoods, and a portion of their membership is chosen by lottery. In addition to these bodies, the municipality also developed participatory structures that target young people (i.e. youth councils) as well as immigrant communities – that is, persons who do not have the right to vote in municipal elections (councils of non-EU foreigners).

Since 2009, a new method for public participation was established by the ‘Service de la démocratie locale’ (department of local democracy). Under this method, known as the ‘project workshop,’ participation is not organised at the neighbourhood level or directed at a particular population, but instead concentrates on an urban plan. An initial experiment with this form of ‘co-construction of the urban plan’ was undertaken beginning in June 2008, only a few months after the municipal elections, in order to plan the development of a new neighbourhood on the right bank of the Rhine, the Danube eco-neighbourhood (see map 1).

The Danube workshop project was first conceived of by Alain Jund, the mayor’s referee in charge of urban affairs. The aim was to launch a thorough re-evaluation of the eco-neighbourhood project, for which the previous municipal administration had initiated studies, as well as to develop a transparent debate about the project2. The elected officials, technical service depart-

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1 Ever since the 1990 census, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) has used the term ‘urbanised area’ to measure urban expansion across the territory of France. It defines this concept as ‘the ensemble of municipalities within a single bloc and without enclaves constituted by an urban pole (an urban unit providing at least 5,000 jobs) and a peri-urban crown composed of rural communities or urban entities where at least 40% of the employed resident population work within the remaining urbanised area.’

2 Interviews with the head of the Danube project on July 8, 2011, and with the individual in charge of the ‘workshop project’ mission on April 8, 2011.
mements, several experts and a number of associations active in the area of sustainable urban development (association for car sharing, for self-promotion, association for promoting eco-neighbourhoods) all came together for an initial meeting in June 2008 during which they were presented with their mandate. At this stage, the objective of the initiative was to redefine the specifications for a consultation to select a planner (see box 1). The participants were divided into three topical workshops: 1) public spaces, the role of the automobile; 2) urban planning; 3) the organisation of the project and governance. These workshops went on to meet in two three-day sessions, first in October and then in November 2008.

In tandem with these meetings, three local associations met internally to develop their own contributions that were submitted at the time of the final meeting, which synthesised the results of the workshops in December 2008.

In 2009, during the public discussions regarding the selection of a planner, the group made several site visits, including a visit to the eco-neighbourhood in Tübingen, Germany. This visit encouraged the members of the workshop to include an additional criterion in the list of requirements for the selection of a planner (see box 1): This would require that about twenty different builders be involved in the actual construction and that parcel size be variable in order to assure a diversity of structures.

Starting in February 2010, the designated planner became a new interlocutor. He suggested organising a ‘competitive dialogue’ to select a project manager for the urban works (see box 1): Three preselected teams are working in parallel and each one obtains community feedback regarding their plans. A ‘limited group’ selected from all of the participants in the workshop project is taking part in this dialogue. The conditions of their participation are the following: (1) adherence to a pledge of confidentiality and (2) attendance of all meetings. This ‘limited group’ is not responsible for selecting the project manager. Responsibility for this choice falls to a ‘steering committee’ composed of elected officials and technical services staff along with two members of the neighbourhood councils that had participated in the project workshop and in the limited group.

Finally, between March and June 2011, the workshop project met again on four separate occasions to discuss the urban design plan presented by the chosen project management team.

Compared to other workshop projects set up by the municipality (there are approximately 4. According to the interview with the head of the Danube project on July 8, 2011.

Box 1: Major steps in an urban project in France

Since the 1990s, the term ‘urban project’ has replaced the older term ‘urban planning.’ This reformulation of terminology parallels changes in the process of city planning that relate to decentralisation, aimed at providing local French governing bodies (Regions, Departments, Municipalities or Communities of Municipalities) more competencies in the areas of planning and urban design. It also marks the concomitant reduction in the power of the central government in these domains.

A number of regulatory changes have come along with this transformation. Since the Solidarity and Urban Renewal Act (SRU) of December 13, 2000, municipalities are each required to formulate a Local Urban Plan (PLU), which defines major directions for future urban development in a perspective that integrates housing, transport, the environment, the economy, etc. To put it in different terms, the PLU is a regulatory translation of the ‘urban project’ that is formulated and defined by the municipality as a means of integrating all dimensions (economic, social, technical, etc.) of the development of its territory.

When, in the framework of its PLU, a municipality is contemplating urban development projects or redevelopment at the level of a whole neighbourhood, as for example in the case of the Danube eco-neighbourhood in Strasbourg, it can use a planning tool known as the Integrated Development Zone (ZAC). To create a ZAC, the municipality must complete a series of preliminary studies on its own or through a public or private consultancy, which will serve as the basis for defining the development programme, justify its site selection, evaluate the technical, economic and financial feasibility of the programme, the terms of its insertion into the overall perimeter of the municipality, and select a procedure for actually accomplishing the programme. The French urban planning code requires local bodies to consult formally with the public (citizens, associations) beginning at this stage. Documentation of public participation must be included in the dossier for creating a ZAC, but its conclusions are not binding upon the local body. Otherwise stated, it has no obligation to alter the original programme based upon the results of public input. A ZAC comes into being after examination of the initial dossier by the commission of the municipal council in charge of urban planning and formal approval by the council.

Once the dossier establishing the ZAC is approved, which includes the programme of public facilities and construction to be performed in the area targeted by a financing plan, the municipalities frequently entrust technical oversight for the operation (i.e. the role of informing and coordinating the ensemble of participants involved in the project, acquiring and preparing the sites before ceding them to developers or purchasers) and the supervision of the urban works (i.e. the task of sharpening the project in translating the wishes of the local body into the design plan, ordering ad hoc feasibility studies and implementing specifications for cession and financing) to outside management teams (public, semi-public or private firms). In any event, the selection of such teams must be made on the basis of a public call for bids, which may take several forms, the most common being that of a competition.

The dossier for implementation of a ZAC is also contingent upon a positive vote on the part of the municipal council before actual site work can begin.

3 Taken from the minutes of the meetings held on June 26, September 23, October 14-16, November 18-21 and December 11, 2008.
4 According to the interview with the head of the Danube project on July 8, 2011.
eight workshops currently under way), the Danube workshop project is the oldest. Its ‘method’ was developed empirically in 2009, and without drawing onto the expertise from the local democracy mission who helps to guide the other workshops. The workshop has benefited from the active support of the mayor’s referee who first initiated the workshop project and has taken part in all of its meetings with the exception of the two topical sessions in 2008.

Without specifying their exact form, French urban planning laws require the establishment of procedures for public participation both at the time that plans are made for defining the Integrated Development Zone (ZAC) and for implementing its proposed projects. Compared to the requirements of French law, the workshop project initiative established by the city of Strasbourg as part of the Danube eco-neighbourhood project clearly goes much further: it gives participants a chance to be involved at every phase of the project, which also allows them to observe how their input is being integrated or not integrated at any given moment during the evolution of the project. From the perspective of the local body and its technical service departments, this type of initiative allows for a ‘multiplying of viewpoints’ for the urban project under consideration: ‘This multiplies the complexity of a project, which is not to say that it makes something more complex than it really is. In an urban project, such complexity is real, and you can never finish accounting for all the different aspects of a project. By multiplying viewpoints, you can survey the entire scope of the project, and no project management team for an urban project could possibly accomplish this function as well’.

However, from the perspective of its implementation, this initiative presents five distinct problems:

1. The level of participation at meetings was quite variable over time, and as a result, it was necessary to repeat information already presented in order that those persons present could discuss technical issues, such as soil pollution;

2. The project workshop includes about a hundred members (21 experts, 28 private and public real estate developers, 11 persons from local self-promotion groups, 13 representatives of associations, 18 employees from technical services of the CUS and three elected officials). The limited group was restricted to about 30 individuals and excluded developers. Despite this fact, it still proved quite difficult to hold in-depth discussions among 30 to 50 individuals (the 100 members were rarely present at the same time).

3. The ‘tools’ for the discussions, particularly techniques that would permit visualisation and a sense of spatial dimensions, proved to be inadequate for the purposes of discussing the urban design plan proposed by the project management team: for many participants, it became difficult at this stage of the initiative to move conceptually from plan to ‘reality.’ The value added through participation appears to have been less at this stage than at the stage of developing the specifications for selecting the urban planner.

4. The project director believes he has devoted about 10 per cent of his working time to tasks related to the organisation of processes. Thus, given that his working time and the human resources of the service have not diminished since June 2008 compared to the preceding period, when the projects mobilised extensive public participation (public meetings and presentations), this represents time he has sacrificed that could have been used to further develop technical aspects of the project.

5. The scale of the debate has proved to be too limited: by restricting the debate to the perimeter of the ZAC, the local body and its technical service departments lost the larger perspective of how this project intermeshes with bordering urban development projects.

5 Interview with the head of the Danube project on July 8, 2011.
6 Interviews with the Director of the Danube project on July 8, 2011, and with the head of the ‘workshop project’ mission on April 14, 2011.
Participation in Urbane Climate Protection
Answers of European Municipalities

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