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Track C Approaches and tools

The Plan-guide, from one island to another

Valéry Didelon

Following on from my researches about Euralille as a case study of contemporary urban development¹, I'm glad today to look with you at another major project that has been realized in France during the last decades, and to discuss one particular tool then introduced in the professional fields of urban design and planning. This tool, which I believe, remains relatively unknown elsewhere in Europe and has been little studied until now², is the *plan-guide*, and the project I'm talking about is the one of the Île de Nantes.

In the early 2000s, the conditions of the making of cities were changing in Europe accordingly to the rapid evolution of various environmental and social legislations, economic and financial trends and crisis – especially the one of 2008, and multiple and often contradictory demands of the local politicians and inhabitants, who at last had their say. Architects who were in charge of urban design had to adapt their practices as much as they can in the context of the renewal of urban governance and of the deepening of public-private partnerships in urban development. They strove to renew their working organizations, their “approaches and tools”, and occasionally they innovate in the way they think and represent the contemporary city.

Changes in the practices of urban design and planning have been global, but I believed they are better understood through particular situations and circumstances since actual geography, history and social context are determining. Today, I will present to you a first draft of a research that is still in its early stages. I thank you in advance for your comments and questions, which will certainly help me to proceed with my work.

¹ See: Valéry Didelon, *La déconstruction de la ville européenne : Euralille 1988-1995*, Paris : Éditions de la Villette, 2021.

² See nevertheless: Laurent Devisme, *Gouverner par les instruments. Première approche : les épreuves urbanistiques du plan-guide*, POPSU, 2007.

Nantes

In the matter of urban design, the notion of *plan-guide* has appeared for the very first time in Nantes during the fall of 1999 – before that plan-guides had mainly to do with tourism. The circumstances were the ones of the transformation of large industrial wastelands located on an island of the Loire river, not far away from the city center. The last shipyard had closed a decade earlier. At the initiative of the mayor of Nantes Jean-Marc Ayrault – a socialist who would become prime minister years later, three teams of architects have been then invited to work on an urban renewal scheme, not in the context of a regular competition but of a definition study (*étude de définition*). That is to say, a procedure that enables to select an urban designer after a series of studies and workshops which gather the competitors, city's officials and representatives of local associations. For nine months the architects received some feedback on their proposals, and sometimes came under harsh criticism as they might have underestimate local issues. Let's notice that the whole process had been documented in real time, and could be watched in the enlighten documentary movie: *La ville, le fleuve, l'architecte*³.

So, the team⁴ led by the landscape architect Alexandre Chemetoff won the race not with a *masterplan* but with a *plan-guide* for the island, which on this occasion finally took the name of "Ile de Nantes". It should be noted that the set of drawings and texts that have been presented to the city council was immediately released by Chemetoff to the public in the form of a small book⁵. Not very well adapted to the presentation of urban plans, this A5 format volume looked like a travel guide for the Nantes residents, but even more like a manifesto for architects and planners. The writing style used by the authors confirms the kind of book it was, and made clear the ambition of Chemetoff who, beyond his project for Nantes, obviously intend to contribute on a theoretical level to the renewal of urban design in the context of procedures like definition studies, which have been more and more customary.

So, what was exactly the plan-guide? First of all, it was a rather unusual graphic document, namely a double map drawn at a scale of 1:2500. This double map will be later

³ See the documentary by Pierre-François Lebrun *La ville, le fleuve et l'architecte* (2000).

⁴ The team gathered Alexandre Chemetoff (Bureau des paysages) and Jean-Louis Berthomieu, an architect from Nantes

⁵ Alexandre Chemetoff et Jean-Louis Berthomieu, *L'île de Nantes. Le plan guide en projet*, Éditions Memo, 1999.

presented during working sessions to be hold over the years, sometimes at the city hall and more often in the offices of the company in charge of the development of the Ile de Nantes. Far from representing a clear and precise vision of the island as it will be once the urban design would be fully implemented – like a masterplan would do – the plan-guide was showing a rather ambiguous prospect. The first map showed a detailed survey of the public spaces and buildings as they already exist on the site – it should be noted that the Ile de Nantes was already inhabited and urbanized. The second map showed some provisional hypotheses for renovations and new construction to be implemented. All together the plan-guide thus represented in a synchronic way the urban form as it is and as it could be – rather than should be since the design was meant to develop. These two maps were not proof to each other as they were updated every three months. The existing public spaces and buildings slid, little by little, to the second map as they underwent transformations. Conversely, the once projected and then transformed public spaces and buildings became existing ones, and slide smoothly to the first map. In other words, past, present and future of the island merged in this double map that was never definitive and represent the urban form in its fluidity.

More than just a complex and ambiguous graphic document, Chemetoff and his project leader Patrick Henry – soon to become his associate – championed a method for transforming the urban form "along the way", as they said. As a direct product of the definition study of 1999, the plan-guide was cautiously presented as a "state of play" (*état des lieux*) from which everybody could express an opinion and have a discussion. Actually, it was first of all about the public spaces since the city owned very little of the plots that might be built. After a year of talks between Chemetoff and the city official to define the scope of the project, the architects were awarded a very big contract for the management of more than 2 million square meters of public spaces. Then, from the end of the year 2000, they establish an *ad hoc* design office based on the island itself. Counting as much as 10 co-workers *L'atelier de l'île* started working on the overall reorganization of the urban spaces, as well as on their immediate renovation in some precise areas. Since the recollection of the past was from the beginning an issue, paved street floors, spontaneous vegetations and the relic of harbor and industry were incorporated in the design layouts. In a more pragmatic way, reused of existing structures and soils made it possible for the architects to keep the spending within the budget. Simultaneously, the plan-guide concerned a series of feasibility studies for real estate ventures that could be developed on the different plots, knowing that

almost all of them were privately owned. Regarding building permits, the plan-guide had no binding value. New and refurbished buildings had only to be compliant with the Plan local d'urbanisme (PLU) established by the city council. This PLU was nevertheless soon revised to accommodate the logic of the plan-guide. That is to say, usual alignments and heights rules that applied everywhere in the city gave way to specific volumetric potentials, which were devised by the architects for each one of the plots. Let's notice here that in this way the urban regulations have adapted to the project as usually things go the other way round. As such, the plan-guide opened a new era in urban design in France.

From the discovery to the recovery

The analysis brings us back to Chemetoff's background and his initial training at the Ecole du paysage in Versailles. Indeed, being a landscape architect has certainly led him to consider in a specific way the Île de Nantes. The site was characterized by its very large size – 337 hectares, the loosening of open spaces on the river, a certain dereliction of industrial buildings, and the entanglement of declining activities. In many ways the island was more suburban than urban, in some places even rural, and was showing a mixture of artificial and natural elements that Chemetoff approached with empathy. His work in the 2000s could be understood as a *recovery* that occurs in the aftermath of the *discovery* of the island by the industrialists who undertook its rather brutal modernization and urbanization in the 19th century. This notion of “recovery” (*reconquête*) has been proposed by the philosopher Sébastien Marot in the mid 1990's to describe the particular way that landscape architects have to take care patiently of the suburban spaces when architects rush their development until they became fully urban. In Nantes, Chemetoff clearly emphasized the reading of the site rather than the handling of the program, which was anyway not given from the beginning. To quote Marot: "the site understood as a mixture of geographical and historical data, is not a context in which one would inject a program, (...), but it constitutes the very matter of the project. It is on the site itself that the program of the intervention has to be deciphered."⁶ As they invented the plan-guide Chemetoff and Henry devised in this way a specific tool for an *urbanism of recovery* that was building up on material and immaterial traces. Their work stood as an alternative to both program-oriented and composition-

⁶ Sébastien Marot, « L'alternative du paysage », *Le Visiteur* n.1, 1995.

oriented ways of designing cities. Marot and others have then presented this approach as an act of resistance towards the run-of-the-mill logic of urban development.

An urbanism of negotiation

As relevant as it is, such understanding might nevertheless idealize and overestimate the role of the urban designer at the very moment other players strengthen their grip on urban development. In Nantes, by the end of 2003, a *Zone d'aménagement concertée* (ZAC) – an urban area with its own rules – was created covering the whole island. Then a public company, which will then manage the project was set up, its main shareholders being the *métropole* and the city of Nantes. Laurent Théry became the managing director of this Société d'aménagement de la métropole ouest-atlantique (SAMOA). He was an economist and he has been working since 1996 with the city's mayor Jean-Marc Ayrault. In the context of an industrial land reconversion, his implicit goal was to draw to the island service companies and cultural institutions, as well as new residents, who should rather be wealthy and belong to the creative classes. Théry's logic was the one of any *aménageur* – a profession as recent as powerful in France that I have previously studied in the context of my research on Euralille. The *aménageur's* duty is to enhance the land value and to facilitate real estate ventures while ensuring the implementation of the public policy especially in the matters of housing, environment, and culture.

In this way, Théry became the key man of the Île de Nantes project. At the head of the SAMOA, he was the contracting authority of the renovation of public spaces, which would improve the attractiveness of the island. Since he did not had control over the privately owned plots, he took the role of go-between the land owners on one side, and the investors and developers on the other side. In this context, the plan-guide had many qualities. It allowed for a step-by-step definition of the program. It offered a wide range of constructability for each plot, which had its own volumetric potential as seen before. It favored the diversity of architectural designs in tune with the real estate market. Updated every three months, the plan-guide welcomed the hesitations of investors and potential tenants who position and reposition themselves according to the realization or the cancelling of the ventures. Created by Chemetoff and Henry, the plan-guide was then a flexible and responsive tool in the hands of Théry who became responsible to the success of Île de Nantes project.

One could pinpoint here an *urbanism of negotiation* as it was described by a French sociologist in the mid-1990s. Michel Callon, who is one of the main proponents of the actor-network theory (ANT), was then explaining that in such an urbanism "it is the social matter itself that is progressively taking shape: it is only at the end of the race that the actors end up knowing what they want, who they are and who the others are, with whom they interact."⁷ Such a *negotiation model* would oppose the *hierarchical model* that has dominated French urban planning from the post-war time till the 1980s, a model in which every actor was ensuring a predetermined and fixed task inside a rigid structure of decision. Talking about the experts – let's assume he was thinking of the *aménageurs*, Callon was saying that they are now "mediators who connect, combine and evolve resources." Thus, in Nantes, the many players of urban development were actually able to learn from each other since the plan-guide was not a "black box" locked up by the architect, but an open, shared and constantly challenged design process. Let's notice that such an *urbanism of negotiation* was also highlighted at the very same moment by Crimson Architectural Historians in the context of the post-welfare state urbanization in the Netherlands⁸.

A weak urbanism?

Implemented between 2000 and 2010, the plan-guide quickly caught the attention of architects, urban designers and planners, and *aménageurs* in France. The innovative tool brought by Chemetoff has been especially in the spotlight during an exhibition held in 2005 at the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine in Paris. The Île de Nantes project was then shown for comparison with a project for the former Renault factory lands in Boulogne-Billancourt, which were developed according to the plans of the architect Patrick Chavannes. On the one hand, one could see in Nantes the logic of small steps and the primacy of the process over the final result, which remains unforeseeable at the time. On the other hand, one could witness in Boulogne-Billancourt the rapid and faithful implementation of a large composition devised in the context of a competition. Chemetoff's multiscale, iterative and careful design contrasted with the prescriptive and hierarchical scheme by Chavannes. The

⁷ Michel Callon, « Concevoir : modèle hiérarchique et modèle négocié », in *L'élaboration des projets architecturaux et urbains en Europe*, Paris : Plan construction architecture, 1997, p.170.

⁸ See : Valéry Didelon, « Négocié Leidsche Rijn », *D'architectures* n.163, avril 2007.

plan-guide proceeded from the existing public spaces and buildings and framed the development on the scale of rather small plots, while the masterplan for the ZAC Rives de Seine in Boulogne-Billancourt made a clean sweep of the industrial past, and led to the *ex nihilo* creation of very large building plots – the *macro-lots*. In the context of this 2005 exhibition, and later on, the site-specific design for the Ile de Nantes was understood by commentators and players as a way to prevent the advent of a generic urban landscape as it was already arising in Boulogne. Thanks to the plan-guide, a particularly flexible, reactive, open-ended and perhaps more democratic urbanism seem to be possible – this last point is highly debatable since the inhabitants have been little involved after the definition study. To a certain extent, Chemetoff and Henry were able to turn their renunciation to a grandiose vision into a strength. Mirroring *strong* but rigid schemes like the one implemented in Boulogne-Billancourt, they devised a *weak urban form* that as such could not be ruined in the course of its realization. They represented it accordingly with the double map that showed no hard figure, and invited to the continuous redrawing of the urban form. In a way, the project was done to be undone, and redone...The ever-changing plan-guide allowed tactical adaptations of built and unbuilt spaces which responded well to the uncertainty and instability of the economic and financial situation, especially in the wake of the 2008 crisis. In this way, as Théry took over the Ile de Nantes project year after year, the plan-guide was obviously going with the market-oriented logic of urban development rather than it challenge it.

The plan-guide still

Then, at some point the plan-guide was not anymore able to accommodate the ever-increasing flow of programs and capitals into the Ile de Nantes. Under circumstances that still need to be clarified – the move of the general hospital is often mentioned, the assignment of Chemetoff and Henry came to an end in 2010. As the Ile de Nantes got more and more densely built – and generic somehow, the new team of architects and planners that was then hired did not went on with the logic of the plan-guide, nor did the SAMOA people referred to it anymore. Théry actually left Nantes not so long after Chemetoff to become the new *aménageur* of Euralille.

However, elsewhere in France, the concept of plan-guide was reclaimed. To mention just one example, in 2013 the urban renewal of Caen harbor in Normandy was undertaken through a plan-guide. Significantly, it came out as will of the public-private development company Caen presqu'île rather than as a choice of the architects of MVRDV in charge of the urban design – as I interview the Dutch project leader he was not aware of Chemetoff work in Nantes. For a few years a plan-guide was developed to gather the many public and private players and to set up progressively the program. Implemented in Caen as an open-ended design method, it seems nevertheless deprived of Chemetoff's will to "reconcile the demand for renewal with attention to existing things". The investment in public spaces gave way to building as usual, that is to say as much as possible. One can hardly talk about a site-specific design.

To finish, I would like to highlight again the fact that the plan-guide born as a design tool proved to be the ultimate tool for the negotiation process that is nowadays at the center of making of cities. Aside the *aménageur* who is without any doubt is the key man, the architect have to and could reinvent his role. Chemetoff gave a try by closing the gap between representation of urban form and things as they actually are and evolve on the ground⁹. He drew plans to guide and not to master, and for a while was quite successful in this. One more time, my research is in its early stage, and I have to investigate how concretely the dialogue between the actor took place around the plan-guide.

⁹ See : Panayotis Tournikiotis, « La terre et le papier », in Frédéric Pousin (ed.), *Figures de la ville et construction des savoirs*, Paris : CNRS éditions, 2005.