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Viewpoint : Fringe belts and planning : a french example

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Urban morphology has been neglected by the French *nouvelle géographie*, having been adjudged too traditional and empirical. This reflects, in part at least, a lack of awareness amongst French researchers of the theoretical dimensions of urban morphology that have been developed in other countries. A notable instance of this is the fringe-belt concept, which has been unexplored in France save for its brief consideration in relation to Clermont Ferrand by an English-speaking geographer (Whitehand, 1974, pp.44-5). This concept has theoretical – including deductive – dimensions that could help to revive urban morphology within francophone geography. The pertinence of the fringe-belt concept to French cities has become evident in my current research on the city of Rennes (Ducom, 2003), and aspects of this work, not least its relevance to urban planning (cf. Whitehand, 2001, pp. 107-8; Whitehand and Morton, 2003), merit sharing with an international readership.

Fringe belts are composed of a mixture of land-use units initially seeking a peripheral location, as was clearly demonstrated by M.R.G. Conzen (1960). The fringe-belt concept was linked to land-rent theory by J.W.R. Whitehand (1972a, pp.52-3; 1972b) who associated the creation of fringe belts with slumps in residential building and periods of low land values. It has been shown that these dynamics, combined with geographical obstacles, generate an urban area in which compact residential growth zones alternate with more loosely-structured fringe belts.

An application of the fringe-belt concept to Rennes (Britanny, France)

The chronology of residential building in Rennes can be reconstructed from a number of sources: the various censuses, the number of houses and flats approved and actually constructed during the last 25 years as revealed by the *direction régionale de l'équipement*, and statistics on the year of construction of houses and flats as specified by owners when paying the land tax. Analysis of fluctuations in the building of houses and flats in Rennes between 1800 and 2000 reveals two slumps in residential building, lasting from about 1855 to 1870 and from 1910 until the early 1920s. The second of these corresponds to the most formative period in the creation of Edwardian fringe belts in Great Britain. As in a number of other French cities (Darin, 2000. pp.7-8), the belt in Rennes is associated with the town wall and boulevards encircling the old town. It is composed of military and health institutions, the jail and new railway station to the south, schools, industries and green spaces. This belt, formerly at the edge of the built-up area, but now embedded deeply within it, survived despite renewed residential growth, although parts of it have been alienated and, as a consequence, the belt is now discontinuous.

However, a similar phenomenon has more recently emerged at the current urban fringe. But, whereas the 'Edwardian' fringe belt seems to have developed spontaneously, the fringe belt at the current urban fringe has been strongly influenced by the city's green belt policy since about 1960.

Fringe belts and planning

In broad terms, there was practically no urban planning policy in France until the Second World War. 'Le Cornudet' law (March 1919) dealt with the '*Plans d'aménagement, d'embellissement et d'extension*', the first of which were vague and mostly limited to the city centre. Outward extensions of urban areas were largely unregulated.

However, after the Second World War, the first planning policies were established. The '*plan Lefort*' of 1946 was the first city-wide plan for Rennes. Planners tried to 'densify' the inner urban area so as to reduce the need for the city's further outward extension, and favoured the development of the surrounding towns with a view to creating a polycentric city with an emphasis on efficient movement between places. Thus it is often said that until the 1960s Rennes was a city without suburbs.

A successful green-belt policy was associated with the presence of a ring road (built between 1968 and 1995) which strongly influenced the formation of a fringe belt at the current edge of the urban area. The green belt and the ring road play the role of a fixation line, like the *boulevards* did in the nineteenth century. This outer fringe belt is composed of large military zones, allotments, the eco-museum of La Bintinais to the south, green open spaces like Cleunay and the lakes of Apigné to the south east. It forms a barrier to urban growth.

The future of this planned fringe belt has, however, been brought into question. Beyond it, urban sprawl has been encouraged in peripheral towns. It has favoured movement by car. The recent law on Urban Solidarity and Redevelopment, however, seeks to replace the former goal of mobility maximization by accessibility optimization. This change encourages compact cities, throwing into doubt the efficacy of the polycentric city. From this standpoint, the outer fringe belt constitutes an important reserve of building land – should it not be used for residential building? The first alienations are already planned: for instance, the residential extension project in la Courrouze, to the South, on 140 hectares of land mostly used for military purposes along the ring road.

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