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Business parks: an overlooked urban object?

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Introduction

- ¹ Business parks (*zone d'activités économiques*)¹ contribute to contemporary urbanization in Northern and Southern countries, where there are ever more industrial, technological, logistics, and business parks (Leducq & Liefoghe, 2007; Renard-Grandmontagne, 2007). They fashion urban landscapes through their sheer size, atypical architecture, and oversized road infrastructure. They generate urban mobilities, for the transport of goods and labor, as well as for purchases and leisure. They also contribute to suburbanization via urban sprawl and the development of secondary hubs. Yet business parks present a paradox: while actively shaping contemporary urban environments, they are largely overlooked by urban planners and development officers. (Lejoux, 2018). This is surprising, given the extent to which business parks have been examined by other disciplines, such as industrial ecology (Gibbs & Deutz, 2005) and geography, which from an early stage studied the development of industrial zones (Mérenne-Schoumaker, 1974), technology parks (Benko, 1991), and retail parks (Beaujeu-Garnier & Delobez, 1977; Péron, 2004). How are we to explain that scholars and practitioners working in urban development and planning have largely neglected business parks? A first answer seems obvious: it is because they are unattractive. Admittedly, in comparison to other urban objects such as museums, stations, stadiums, tramways, and eco-districts, business parks do not set hearts racing. For any researcher or practitioner, working on these areas on the outskirts of towns, accessible solely by car, with row after row of box-like sheds, is not an appealing prospect. But this seems too short an answer to explain why urban planning and development has failed to pay attention to this object. This article sets out to provide some answers, looking at the extent to which business parks have been studied or overlooked as an urban object. The term “urban object” needs to be

understood in two ways. First, abstractly, as a research topic. In this case it is a matter of understanding why researchers working in the fields of urban planning and development have failed to address business parks, and how they could do so in the future. Second, in its concrete meaning, designating the materiality of urban space. Drawing on a definition of urban planning and development as the technical interface between space and society (Barles, 2018), this object-centered approach seeks to shed light on perceptions presiding over the development of business parks, thereby revealing the rationales underpinning how these urban spaces are made.

- 2 For the purposes of this article, business parks are defined as portions of urban space, outside town centers, especially developed and equipped to site businesses. Two components of this definition need further clarification. The use of the generic term “business parks” may seem surprising given the many different realities it covers: in terms of function (for trades, industry, retail, etc.), location (inserted into the urban fabric, or surrounded by fields), form (logistic platforms, business parks, eco-parks, etc.), and investigation (retail parks have been more extensively studied). However, this term presents the advantage of drawing together a set of urban objects which, however varied they may be, have a point in common: the fact that they are largely neglected in the field of urban development and planning. Reference to their location “outside town centers” may also be surprising in that certain business parks are now central in “emerging towns” (Chalas & Dubois-Taine, 1997). Nevertheless, they are rarely considered as of first-order economic centrality, capable of rivalling with the central core. After going over the extent to which business parks are largely invisible within urban spaces (1), this article sets about analyzing the reasons for this. These relate both to the processes governing the fabrication of urban space, and to the way research into urban planning and development works (2). Lastly, it brings out how increasing the visibility of business parks would be beneficial for both research and practice (3).

1. Are business parks an overlooked urban object?

- 3 Far from being omnipresent across the field of urban planning and development, business parks seem to fall into the category of unseen urban objects. This transpires in the fact that business parks are rarely present in urban space (1.1), in the difficulty researchers and practitioners have in defining them (1.2), and in the limited number of academic and professional publications focusing on them (1.3).

1.1 The (in)visibility of business parks in urban space

- 4 A first aspect in the process rendering business parks invisible is their location outside central spaces. This might at first seem to be chosen to meet business criteria. Businesses look for cheap available land with good road access, leading them to turn their backs on central spaces and opt massively for peripheral areas. These territories view this most favorably, for businesses represent a source of jobs and tax revenue. Nevertheless, this siting is also a burden, in that these businesses are not welcome in central spaces. Often in industry, wholesale, and logistics, they are viewed as creating major disturbance, congestion, noise, pollution, and industrial risks. In central spaces where land is rare and expensive, they are also seen as not really profitable given the

size of the sites they require, and so are rapidly outbid in competition for land. This phenomenon is particularly visible in old industrial districts undergoing rehabilitation in cities, where small and medium-sized firms in industry, trade, and logistics and independent businesses are progressively hounded out by the headquarters of large companies, high-tech businesses, retail, and the hospitality industry. These businesses are encouraged to leave and relocate elsewhere, particularly in business parks constituting the back office of city economies.

- 5 These places are not easy to access. First due to the dearth of transport connections. Road infrastructure, of good quality, admittedly, but increasingly congested, is generally the only means of traveling to and around business parks. Despite the development of some public transport connections, cycle paths, and pedestrian walkways in retail parks and eco-parks, business parks stand out for their lack of transport options (figure 1). The poor accessibility of business parks is also reflected in the scale of their private footprint, with fenced-off plots, closed gates, CCTV, and security firms filtering access, even to certain retail parks. According to David Mangin, business parks are like “franchised territories”, that is “private or public places with large, guarded footprints accessible only under certain conditions” (Mangin, 2004, p. 25). It is rare to go to a business park other than to work or buy something. But people often get lost there. In business parks it is particularly difficult to read space, another aspect of accessibility. The sheer size of the plots precludes any overall vision, the oversized winding roads test people’s sense of direction, the uniformity of the buildings means there are no landmarks, and the signposting lacks any overall coherence.

Figure 1: sensory experience of footprint and traffic flows



- 6 Lastly, the invisibility of business parks within urban space means these urban objects receive but little attention, and so deteriorate, slowly but surely. Many business parks

built in the 1980s and 1990s are facing problems of obsolescence and how to reinvent themselves (Cerema, 2014). They lose their attractivity due to their ageing buildings, deteriorating roads, lack of services for businesses and employees, and so on and so forth. These problems stem from the lack of attention public and private stakeholders accord to managing business parks, which do not have a dedicated manager or specific maintenance budget. The neglect of business parks does not transpire solely in the urban environment, it may also be seen in the difficulty researchers and practitioners have in providing a clear definition.

1.2 Are business parks impossible to define?

- 7 Before being able to define business parks, we first need to know what to call them. There are various names for this type of urban object, including business, or industrial, or retail, or logistics zone or park. Names change depending on the country. American “industrial parks” are not exactly the same as British “industrial estates” and “business parks”. The French term “parc industriel”, does not include the various activities covered by the German term, but only “specifically industrial activities”. Although it is possible to trace a shift in French from “zone” to “park” (Linossier *et al.*, 2014), the coexistence of these names and difficulty in selecting a generic term for business parks shows they are not clearly identified as an urban object within urban planning and development.
- 8 In addition to these difficulties in naming, there are problems of definition. French-language dictionaries used by urban planning and development researchers do not have any entry for business parks and attendant appellations (Lejoux, 2018). The same applies to English-language dictionaries. And when they do include definitions, they seem very vague: “Industrial estate: a planned area devoted to a variety of industrial uses”, or “Business park: a development of mainly office buildings” (Cowan & Rogers, 2005, p. 46).
- 9 This problem in defining business parks also transpires in the professional field. Noting that there was no definition for business parks, the Centre d'études et d'expertise sur les risques, l'environnement, la mobilité et l'aménagement (CEREMA),² suggested one in 2014: “business park refers to the concentration or grouping of economic activities (in the trades, tertiary sector, industry, or logistics) within a perimeter corresponding to a development conducted by a public project owner or private developers/investors who sell or lease land and buildings to businesses” (Cerema, 2014, p.7). In the context of the 2015 law revising French territorial organization, in which the management of business parks was transferred from municipalities to groupings of municipalities, the Assembly of French Communities (Assemblée des Communautés de France (AdCF)) likewise reached the conclusion that there was no legal definition of business parks. The AdCF thus put forward certain components which could be used to define or identify such zones (FCL-AdCF, 2016). However, despite these proposals, practitioners have not alighted on a shared definition of business parks. For example, the Rhône DDT (Direction Départementale des Territoires, the body responsible for land management in each *département*) which runs a business park observatory, put forward its own definition: “the partner observatory for business parks in the Rhône defines a business park as a space constituted of one or several urban planning zones exclusively dedicated to economic activity”.

1.3 Business parks as an object neglected by urban development and planning

- 10 The fact that business parks are largely overlooked in the field of urban development and planning also transpires in the small number of academic and professional publications about them in French. A quick survey inputting the keywords “zones d’activités” and “parcs d’activités” in the *Cairn* and *ScienceDirect* search engines reveals that few articles specifically focus on this research object. Likewise, searching the number of PhD theses indexed under the keyword “zone d’activité économique” on the French website *thèses.fr* only produces 5 results for the past 10 years. Lastly, though there is the occasional article on business parks, few special issues have been devoted to them by international journals. One exception to this is the 2007 issue of *Territoire en mouvement* on suburban business parks.
- 11 The same observation applies to practitioners. For example, the journal *Urbanisme*, which presents contemporary urban objects, has not devoted a single issue to business parks over the past ten years. Only the *Etudes Foncières* journal has devoted an issue, significantly titled: “Foncier économique; le mal aimé?” (Unloved business property?) (Lonchambon *et al.*, 2010 et 2011). Lastly, in a sign of urban stakeholders’ growing preoccupation with problems relating to business parks, CEREMA has recently produced three books about business parks (Cerema, 2014; Cerema, 2017; AdCF-Cerema, 2018). Now that we have seen that business parks are largely absent from the field of urban development and planning, we will turn to examining the possible reasons for this. Given that business parks play an active part in contemporary urbanization, why are they not a clearly identified urban object within this field of research and practice?

2. An analysis of how business parks are rendered invisible

- 12 The processes by which business parks are rendered visible often stem from unconscious choices, both in research and in the practice of urban development and planning. There are three aspects at work: business parks are considered primarily as an economic phenomenon, not as an urban object (2.1); they are often associated with functionalism, which researchers and practitioners of urban development and planning have rejected (2.2); and understanding and regulating residential suburbanization tends to be emphasized, to the detriment of economic suburbanization (2.3).

2.1 Business parks considered primarily as an economic phenomenon

- 13 The fact that business parks are overlooked in urban development and planning is attributable, first, to their rarely being envisaged as urban objects, that is, as objects which may partake in producing urban spaces, and influencing their functioning and structure. For many researchers and practitioners, business parks are primarily a matter of business sites. They are places that are specially laid out and equipped to site businesses, and are thus considered as an economic phenomenon.

- 14 The few works of research focusing on business parks pay more attention to their role in local economic development than their urban characteristics. Though this is not the place to conduct an exhaustive literature review, a few representative studies may nevertheless be mentioned. Certain studies explore local economic development by focusing on a particular type of business park: logistics platforms (Bounie, 2017), industrial zones (Imbach, 2011), or science and technology parks (Cheng *et al.*, 2014). Others have more specifically studied how producing business park building plots (Lambotte, 2008; Louw *et al.*, 2012; Vandermeer, 2016; Gillo, 2017) or properties (Cheshire & Hilber, 2008; Van der Krabben & van Dinteren, 2010; Vandermeer & Halleux, 2017) may impact on local economic development. Lastly, certain studies examine business parks as a way for public stakeholders to intervene in local economic development (Demazière, 2005; Crague, 2009; Linossier *et al.*, 2014).
- 15 Among practitioners, this predominance to view business parks as an economic phenomenon results in their being managed by services in charge of economic development, rather than those in charge of urban development. This flows from the dichotomy instituted between local economic intervention on the one hand, and urban development on the other (Crague, 2009). This is justified by the fact that the prime purpose practitioners assign to business parks is to attract jobs and generate tax revenue for the territory. But this impacts on ways of thinking about the urban development of business parks. Despite current changes, this is often limited to simply providing road and utility infrastructure and developing business properties. The services in charge of business parks, drawing primarily on the skills of economic developers rather than urban developers, pay but little attention to how they are placed within urban spaces, and to matters such as their impact on urban organization, integration in the site, the architectural quality of the buildings, and the services available to users.
- 16 Practitioners' and researchers' overlooking of business parks thus stems partly from economic issues being granted precedence over urban issues. Another element may also explain this situation: researchers' and practitioners' lack of interest is often connected to attitudes towards functionalist urban planning.

2.2 A wish to downplay functionalist urban planning

- 17 Among the principles of functionalist urban planning as set out in Le Corbusier's Athens Charter in 1933, two are often associated with business parks: the wish to rationalize the occupation of space based on specialized functions, and the primacy accorded to organizing circulation. Business parks materialize this wish to affect a portion of space to a function via the concentration of business activities they engender, and the separation they maintain from housing and leisure zones. One only has to walk around a business park to see to the extent to which circulation is dominated by traffic: wide roads with no pavements, large distances to travel, oversized roundabouts, and a nearby landscape of interchanges and motorways. Nevertheless, it may be noted that these principles have been applied to caricatural extent in certain business parks, Le Corbusier's initial vision having been far more nuanced: "business parks need to stand in green areas chosen for their orientation, view, and, primarily, in immediate contact with the canals, highways, and railroads for bringing in raw materials [...] Industrial areas and residential areas need to be

separated from one another by a zone of vegetation, but so situated in relation to each other that it will generally be superfluous to envisage mechanical means of transport for people” (Le Corbusier, 1959, quoted in Linossier *et al.*, 2014, p. 18).

- 18 While many architects and urban planners were guided by the principles of functionalist urban planning after the Second World War, these went on to be extensively questioned in the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, they have been considered by urban developers and planners as the antithesis of what a “good town” should be (Bourdin, 2015). Researchers’ and practitioners’ lack of interest for business parks thus seems attributable to their viewing them as one of the remaining traces of functionalist planning. Why should one grant visibility to an urban object conceived in accordance with principles now universally rejected? This anchoring of business parks in functionalist urban planning means that researchers are at best indifferent to this object, and at worst reject it. The few studies looking at business parks view them very negatively (Mangin, 2004; Garcez & Mangin; 2014). Pierre Merlin and Françoise Choay are particularly strident in their criticism: “[business parks] are characterized by the mediocrity and lack of unity in their architecture, the scale of internal roadways, especially carparks, and their use of cheap materials, banal shapes (“shoeboxes”), and garish colors [...]. Yet these disordered zones provide the first image visitors have of the town around which they lie” (Merlin & Choay, 2015, p. 298) (figure 2).

Figure 2 : car park and shoebox (C. Charieau, 2018)



- 19 For practitioners, designing business parks is still associated with functionalist urban planning, for it is primarily the work of economic developers, not urban developers. As Gilles Crague has shown (Crague, 2017), the cognitive frameworks used by economic developers are in fact little rooted in economic theories, and they tend to sideline the role businesses play in local economic development. For want of an alternative, they

adopt the cognitive frameworks of urban development, drawing on the notion of “functional equilibriums” inherited from functionalist urban planning. For economic developers, creating business parks is thus seen as a way to intervene in the local economy to maintain its economic function, or a certain type of economic function (industry, craft, etc.), within a territory’s overall set of urban functions. And the principle of spatial planning they work with is often that of specialized zoning.

- 20 The downplaying of business parks in urban development and planning seems to be linked to the rejection of functionalist urban planning. It is also linked to broader debates in the field of urban development and planning, as we shall also see via the issue of suburbanization

2.3 An overemphasis on residential suburbanization

- 21 Business parks contribute actively to suburbanization. Economic activity (businesses, retail zones, and warehouses) occupy 30% of urban areas in France, and between 2006 and 2014 the increase in business land use increased more rapidly than housing land use, despite a slowdown after the 2008 economic crisis (INRA & IFSTTAR, 2017). As J. Cavailhès notes: “it is no longer individual houses which are encroaching on natural spaces, but offices, retail parks, factories, roads, and leisure spaces which are encroaching on agriculture” (Cavailhès, 2015, p. 7). This phenomenon may also be observed in other European countries, such as the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, Belgium, Latvia, and Slovakia (CGDD, 2012). Nevertheless, the role played by business parks in economic suburbanization has been understudied in comparison to residential suburbanization: “there is surprisingly little literature on the consequences [of the tendency to site businesses in suburban zones] of land use by business, and hence its contribution to land take, in comparison to the proportion of business land use in total land take. The impact of “large economic objects” such as retail parks or logistic platforms, which consume large quantities of land, is also understudied” (INRA & IFSTTAR, 2017, p.7). Why have business parks not been taken up as an object of study by researchers and practitioners working on suburbanization, in the same way as housing estates have?
- 22 The downplaying of business parks in suburbanization may be explained, first, by the way research into urban development and planning functions. Hitherto, funding and dissemination have tended to favor research on residential sprawl rather than on economic sprawl. Taking the case of France, consultations proposed over recent years by PUCA (Plan Urbanisme Construction Architecture) on the theme of suburbanization have never directly addressed the phenomenon of economic suburbanization.³ Since the early 2000s, there have been four research programs: *Mobilité et territoires urbains* (Urban mobility and territories, 2000-2004), *La mobilité et le périurbain à l’impératif de la ville durable; ménager les territoires de vie des périurbains* (Mobility, the suburbs, and the need for sustainable towns: developing suburban territories for living 2009-2014), *Du périurbain à l’urbain* (From the suburban to the urban, 2011-2013), and *La ville ordinaire et la métropolisation* (The ordinary town and metroplization, 2013-2017). While research has clearly delivered better understanding of suburbanization in all its diversity, helping to change often critical ways of viewing the people who live there, their residential choices, and their travel practices, no attention has been paid to the types of businesses found in these territories, their siting criteria, or the types of mobility and

urban forms they engender. Aware that research focuses on residential suburbanization, PUCA launched a research program in 2010 called *Localisation des activités économiques et développement durable des territoires* (Location of economic activities and sustainable development of territories, 2010-2014), in which only two studies tackled the issue of the links between business and suburbanization.

- 23 Among practitioners, policies to combat urban sprawl have also focused mainly on housing, omitting the role played by business. J. Comby, the founder and former editor of the journal *Etudes foncières*, is wholly unambiguous in his remarks: “in almost all cases, combating urban sprawl only concerns housing, and especially individual housing, the sole cause not to say scapegoat of urban sprawl. It is forgotten that, according to national statistics, housing only represents half the square footage built each year, sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less. The other half is comprised of large retail areas, storage warehouses, agricultural buildings, industrial premises, offices, and so on. But nobody seems worried about these programs’ major contribution to urban sprawl” (Comby, 2008, p.18). This results in contradictory policies. While practitioners seek to limit residential sprawl, they continue to allocate vast peripheral areas for economic development, with ever more projects to create business parks in ever more distant territories. Practitioners’ wish to downplay business parks’ contribution to suburbanization may be attributed to the scale of the economic issues at stake, via the jobs and tax resources they generate (Demazière, 2015), and to the fact they are not a political issue, in that businesses do not vote (Gillio, 2017).

3 The issues at stake in giving greater prominence to business parks in urban development and planning

- 24 Why should urban development and planning give greater prominence to business parks? Treating them as urban objects in their own right could provide a new approach to analyzing three components of this field of research and action: the spatial organization of urban spaces (3.1), the materiality of urban spaces (3.2), and the factors driving the actions of stakeholders fashioning spaces (3.3). That would entail drawing on knowledge and techniques from geography, sociology, political science, history, ecology, economics, and political science, as well as architecture, engineering, and urban design. Business parks thus illustrate the interdisciplinary aspect of this field of urban development and planning.

3.1 Business parks and urban spatial organization: the issue of economic suburbanization

- 25 The purpose of urban development and planning is to understand and influence the spatial organization of human establishments (Merlin & Choay, 2015). This organization has evolved over time and, historically, suburbanization was one such form. It is characterized by spread, low density, discontinuity, and multiple centers, and embodies the shift from the town to the urban. Researchers and protagonists in the urban development and planning have long been interested in this phenomenon, but as seen previously, they have primarily sought to analyze its residential dimension. It seems necessary to pay greater attention to its economic dimension, enquiring into the role business parks play in suburbanization. Three angles could be explored.

- 26 The first angle is to measure the extent to which business parks contribute to suburbanization, a task which presents real methodological difficulties as pointed out by J. Cavailhès: “While the consumption of farmland by urbanization is an observable process, assessing its extent may vary by a factor of two depending on the names and definitions used” (Cavailhès, 2015, p.5). Quantifying the impact of creating and extending business parks in terms of land take raises numerous questions. What definitions are we to use? What data sources? With what objectives? What indicators? These questions concern researchers, and practitioners too, who have recently been endeavoring to set up a common national structure to harmonize methods and data, given the many different local schemes to observe business parks (Cerema, 2014, 2017).
- 27 The second angle is to gauge the role business parks play in structuring suburban spaces through the development of secondary centers. Yves Chalas and Geneviève Dubois-Taine were among the first to identify business parks as components structuring “emergent towns”: “While [old town centers] continue to exist and gain in strength even [...], this occurs alongside new emerging centers, linked to consumption (retail parks), transport (urban exchange hubs), work (suburban business parks), leisure (parks and cineplexes), or green centers” (Chalas & Dubois-Taine, 1997, p. 257-258). Nowadays, these trends tend to result in secondary centers being built up around logistics platforms (Bonnin-Oliveira, 2013) or retail parks (Foucher, 2018).
- 28 The third angle is to assess the status of suburban spaces in urban development and planning, that is, the way business parks influence how these spaces are envisaged. Suburban spaces were long treated solely in terms of dependency on a center, but have progressively acquired a status as an urban object in their own right thanks to works on residential suburbanization. But analyses in terms of center-periphery relations are still fruitful when examining suburbanization’s economic dimension. The approach taken by urban development and planning to business location still focuses heavily on issues relating to central spaces. Recent interest for questions of logistics is illustrative of this. Despite studies pointing out how logistics platforms are major contributors to urban sprawl (Dablanc & Frémont, 2015; Guerrero & Proulhac, 2016), researchers and practitioners seem to focus primarily on urban logistics (Gardrat, 2017) to the detriment of suburban logistics (Heitz, 2017). Equally, current debates on the issues raised by the development of suburban retail parks stem mainly from the threats they pose to central spaces. As illustrated by France’s “Action cœur de ville” program, the issue is treated primarily a matter of rethinking the place of retail in medium-sized town centers, rather than coming up with new ways for business to locate in suburban spaces, other than as retail parks.

3.2 Business parks and the materiality of urban spaces: the issue of urban form

- 29 The field of urban development and planning, envisaged as the technical interface between space and society (Barles, 2008), is interested in the materiality of urban spaces. Business parks, conceived in accordance with the precepts of functionalist urban planning, are now an urban object of the past. They materialize a vision of space-society relations guiding how urban spaces were designed in the early 1930s, a vision which has since been called into question. Should this urban object thereby be considered as a museum piece of urban development and planning? Or is it possible to

envisage changes to it? To what extent is it possible to take the principles currently guiding the idea of what amounts to a “good town” (Bourdin, 2015) and apply them to business parks?

- 30 For example, how are we to integrate mixed function into ways of thinking about business parks? It would be interesting to see how, at various points in time and place, mixed function has been taken up within ways of thinking about business parks, and to understand why this occurred. Was it a matter of genuine doctrinal choice, or simply a response to the dictates of profitability, with the presence of housing and offices being used to finance the presence of industrial firms in mixed-function blocks (Linossier *et al.*, 2014; Crague, 2017)? To integrate business parks, we need to stop thinking of them as mere economic enclaves, and instead view them, in their own right, as components of contemporary urban spaces. Should the principle of zoning be called into question? What new ways are to be invented for integrating business parks into the urban fabric?
- 31 We also need to think about the opportunities and limits of mixed function. What are the best ways of residing in the vicinity of businesses, and what are the best ways of producing alongside housing?
- 32 Is economic densification destined to remain the blind spot of urban development and planning (Linossier, 2017) (figure 3)? More generally, is it possible to come up with new urban forms in business parks? Avenues worth exploring already exist, as illustrated by morphological changes in certain business parks via the densification and verticalization of buildings, the creation of high-quality public spaces, and landscaping (Gasnier, 2010; Foucher, 2018). Is it also possible to envisage reversible developments, to make it easier to adapt sites over time, converting premises into housing, for example, or adapting to new working practices (such as teleworking, co-working spaces, and fab-labs)?

Figure 3; Uniformity and horizontality of current urban forms in business parks (C. Charieau, 2018)



- 33 In the spaces characterized by dependency on motor transport, is it possible to make way for other mobility practices? Would it suffice to export alternative mobility solutions developed for city centers (public transport, car sharing, shared and active forms of transport, etc.)? Aren't there other solutions to be found, specific to each territory, concerning the transport of both people and goods? The best transport solution might ultimately consist in thinking upstream about where to locate businesses depending on their transport needs. Businesses requiring accessibility (industrial logistics) might be destined to choose sites in major peripheral parks; businesses requiring centrality (wholesaling, business services) in parks closer to the agglomeration; and businesses looking for proximity to their market (tradesmen etc.) in parks dotted around within urban spaces (Mérenne-Schoumaker, 2007).
- 34 Lastly, what role can business parks play in the metabolism of urban centers? As shown by the old example of Kalundborg, in Denmark, business parks can provide places for applying the principles of industrial ecology, where the resources consumed or emitted by certain businesses are reused by others. More generally, it seems necessary to think about the role business parks play in transitioning towards energy-efficient and environmentally friendly practices: are eco-parks the economic equivalent of eco-districts? Are they simply a matter of greenwashing? Or do they reveal that business parks have the potential to become places of innovation where new ways of producing are invented?

3.3 Business parks and factors driving action: what role for public and private stakeholders

- 35 The field of urban development and planning has close links with action. It pays particular attention to stakeholders involved in fashioning urban spaces (Arab, 2018). Business parks have many different stakeholders: the public authorities at national and/or local level, businesses, developers, promoters, investors, associations, and, on occasions, inhabitants. They constitute a “scene” which could throw light on the reasons driving stakeholders’ action, as well as on power relations within urban spaces.
- 36 It would be interesting, for example, to study how public bodies regulate business parks. Promising studies have already been conducted on this topic, particularly about logistics platforms (Hall & Hesse, 2013; Raimbault, 2014; Heiz, 2017). These studies analyzing the governance of logistics development note that logistics activities are largely unregulated at city level, and granted freedom at the local level, resulting in the strong regulation of central spaces and the weak regulation of suburban spaces. Other studies confirm the significance of the local echelon in managing business parks in France in comparison to other European countries (Douay & Adoue, 2016). Comparative analysis of France and Britain enables C. Demazière to show that the way national authorities interact with local authorities may explain the differing degrees to which sustainable development criteria are taken into account, particularly restrictions on land consumption when developing business parks (Demazière, 2015). This issue of public stakeholders’ regulation of business parks could also be interesting against the backdrop of the 2015 legal changes transferring authority over business parks from municipalities to groupings of municipalities.
- 37 The role played by private stakeholders in regulating business parks could also be a topic of enquiry. Research conducted recently on the neo-liberalization of urban policies (Harvey, 1989; Brenner & Theodore, 2002) and the financialization of the production of urban space (Lorrain, 2011; Halbert & Attuyer, 2016) has moved beyond the classic “public/private” opposition, providing new frameworks of analysis for interpreting how urban production has been privatized. But these studies have focused primarily on central spaces (Guironnet, 2016). Enquiring into business parks could supplement these works. As shown by Nicolas Raimbault, these processes are also at work in suburban spaces via the financialization of logistics property, with privatization processes significantly influencing the production of logistics space (Raimbault, 2014).
- 38 Lastly, the role played by inhabitants and associations in regulating business parks, a little studied topic, offers a promising line of research. The issue at stake for research and for urban practitioners would be to look beyond NIMBYism to explore more generally the extent to which business parks are socially acceptable to urban inhabitants.

Conclusion

- 39 Business parks, a routine component of urban landscapes, play an active part in contemporary urbanization. Nevertheless, urban development and planning downplay their importance as an urban object. There seem to be three reasons for this: business

parks are considered primarily as an economic phenomenon, not an urban one; they are often associated with functionalism, which urban planners have rejected; and the role of business parks in suburbanization tends to be underestimated in comparison to housing. Treating business parks as urban objects in their own right could provide new interdisciplinary approaches to three components of urban development and planning: the spatial organization of urban spaces through economic suburbanization; the materiality of urban spaces with the invention of new urban forms; and the factors driving the action of stakeholders fashioning spaces, paying particular attention to power relations between public and private stakeholders. The example of business parks shows that the extent to which urban development and planning engages with a given object is not necessarily proportional to its contribution to urbanization processes. It stems from choices which are often unconscious, relating to our representations of the urban. Employing the idea of (in)visibility to analyze urban objects in this field of research and action thus seems a prerequisite for guaranteeing that researchers and practitioners alike approach their practice reflexively.

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NOTES

1. There is no clear definition of a “zone d’activités économiques” in French, a point examined in more detail later on in this paper. It is a general term for zones on a town’s outskirts which have been developed for various types of business activity (industry, logistics, retail, etc.). It covers mixed zones as well as those specializing in an economic activity. There is no direct equivalent in English, in which such zones tend to be referred to via their specialized activity: industrial parks, logistics parks, retail parks, science parks, etc.
2. The Centre for Studies on Risks, the Environment, Mobility, and Urban Planning is a public body dedicated to supporting public policies, under the dual tutelage of the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Ministry for Regional Cohesion and Local Authority Relations.
3. PUCA is a national research and experimentation agency in the fields of urban planning, construction, and architecture, overseen by the Ministère de la Transition Ecologique et Solidaire and by the Ministère de la Cohésion des territoires.

ABSTRACTS

The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which business parks (*zones d'activités économiques*) are visible in urban development and planning. It examines a paradox: while business parks play an active role in contemporary urbanization, they have been largely neglected by researchers and those involved in urban development and planning. There seem to be three reasons for this: business parks are considered primarily as an economic phenomenon, not an urban one; they are often associated with functionalism, which urban planners have rejected; and the role business parks play in suburbanization tends to be underestimated in comparison to housing. Giving greater prominence to business parks is a major issue for researchers and urban planners. It would pave the way to examining new rationales underpinning urban sprawl, to studying the development of new urban forms, and to exploring ways to manage business zones.

L'objectif de cet article est de questionner la visibilité et l'invisibilité d'un objet urbain, la zone d'activités économiques, dans l'aménagement et l'urbanisme. Il vise à expliquer un paradoxe : alors que la zone d'activités économiques participe activement aux processus d'urbanisation contemporains, elle reste un objet faiblement investi par les chercheurs comme par les praticiens en aménagement et urbanisme. Cette situation semble s'expliquer par l'existence de trois processus : la survisibilisation de la zone d'activités comme objet économique, l'invisibilisation de l'urbanisme fonctionnaliste auquel elle est souvent associée et la survisibilisation de la périurbanisation résidentielle. La mise en visibilité de la zone d'activités économiques pourrait représenter un enjeu important pour ce champ de recherche et d'action. Elle permettrait d'interroger de nouvelles logiques qui sous-tendent la fabrique de la ville comme la périurbanisation économique, le développement de nouvelles formes urbaines ou les modalités de gouvernance des espaces dédiés aux activités économiques.

INDEX

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Mots-clés: zone d'activités économiques, aménagement, urbanisme, périurbain

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