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Arts and culture in the city: Peripheral centrality, cultural vitality, and urban change in inner suburbs

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to contribute to the conceptual framework of arts in the city so as to improve the understanding of the role of arts and culture in urban spaces and the tensions that run through them, by dealing more specifically with the artistic and cultural dynamics in inner suburbs. Using the case of the Canal de l'Ourcq in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, the article addresses three issues: (1) the way in which the arts contribute to the creation of centralities in the inner suburbs, (2) the role they play in the local cultural and social life of these spaces, and (3) their connection to urban production and transformation. Two main findings are highlighted. Firstly, the Canal de l'Ourcq is experiencing a spatial clustering of cultural venues, collaborative art-world networks, events and other artistic activities, which are changing the atmosphere of the area, attracting audiences, and producing a positive image that radiates out to Paris and beyond. This brings out a form of centrality associated with an area usually categorized as a periphery – both spatially as well as socially, symbolically or culturally – and allows the concept of peripheral centrality to emerge. Secondly, the identification of this peripheral centrality in the case of the Canal de l'Ourcq highlights the ambivalence of the role of arts and culture in the city. On the one hand, they contribute to the local cultural vitality, to the social ties and to the well-being of the residents in order to build an inclusive and cohesive city. On the other hand, they contribute to enhancing the attraction of urban spaces and to their insertion into the rationale of real estate and tourism development and the phenomena of gentrification – caused by urban projects and public and private investments – which feed the socio-spatial fragmentation of the neoliberal city. These results raise new conceptual perspectives for urban studies. Peripheral centrality calls into question the traditional center-periphery model in urban studies and provides a conceptual and empirical framework for understanding “peripheral” spaces, their forms of centrality, their realities, and the issues at stake, particularly in their reciprocal relations with the “central” areas.

1. Introduction

The city is often regarded as the privileged place for arts and culture,¹ with a concentration of artistic and cultural activities and venues in central urban spaces (Hall, 1998; Scott, 2000). The arts thus strongly influence cities on various levels, contributing particularly to their centrality, cultural vitality, and urban and social transformation (Boichot et al., 2014; Guinard & Molina, 2018; Markusen, 2014; Redaelli & Stevenson, 2022b; Stevenson, 2017). This is especially visible in the spontaneous or planned development of cultural and creative quarters, which at the same time concentrate artistic and cultural activities, are subject to urban change, and reveal themselves as driving forces in the city's development and attraction (Evans, 2009b; Michel, 2021;

Mommaas, 2004). In so doing, the artistic and cultural concentration in urban centers feeds the center-periphery model that has long been dominant in urban studies and which systematically associates centrality with the historical centers of cities, which are said to concentrate populations, wealth, powers, etc., and dominate their respective peripheries, relegated to the rank of polarized and dependent spaces (Dumont, 2017, 2021; Van Meeteren, 2021).

Yet, as in many other aspects of economic and social life (Gündoğan, 2021; Gururani et al., 2021), artistic and cultural dynamics develop and flourish in urban peripheries (Bain, 2013; Balti, 2017; Flew et al., 2012; Gibson, 2012), thus challenging the center-periphery model. Peripheries are, for example, the location of cultural clusters which produce centrality and influence the urban, social, economic, and cultural

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¹ In this article, the arts are considered in all their diversity – visual arts, performing arts, etc. – and culture is understood as activities, venues, facilities, practices, institutions, actors and projects in the support, promotion, dissemination and mediation of artistic creation and heritage.

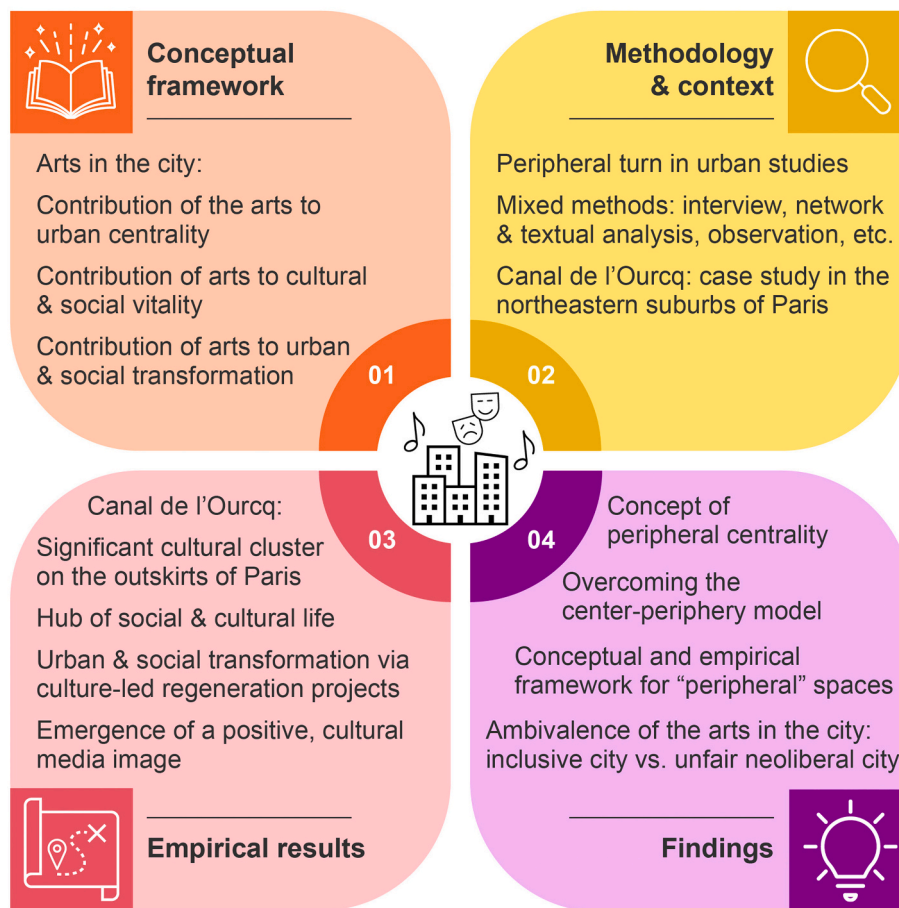
development of these spaces, following spontaneous and/or planned dynamics (Michel, 2022b; Mommaas, 2004). This is the case, for instance, in the eastern fringe of Beijing, where a large contemporary art community has settled, giving rise to the Songzhuang Art District (Keane & Wen, 2013). This is also the case in the nearby suburb north-east of Paris, along the Canal de l’Ourcq, which has been the subject of empirical research for this article. Numerous artistic and cultural venues have recently been established there, attracting audiences and tourists, contributing to changing the image and atmosphere of the area, and creating a peripheral centrality on the edge of the French capital. This former industrial area constitutes an emblematic example of the artistic dynamics that are emerging in inner suburbs and which put into question the center-periphery model, particularly as it is part of a context historically marked by the center-periphery dichotomy between inner-city Paris and its suburbs.

In general, literature highlights urban regeneration, image transformation, enhanced attractiveness, economic and tourism development, social cohesion, and gentrification as the main issues and ambivalences of the arts in the city (Landry, 2020; Markusen, 2014; Michel, 2021, 2022a, b). In a systematic review of the literature, however, Eleonora Redaelli & Deborah Stevenson (2022a) indicate the need to broaden the range of geographic contexts of the study cases both at the national level – going beyond the major countries observed such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia – and at the city level. This encourages analysis of the links between artistic dynamics and cities through the prism of urban peripheries – rather than urban

centers as is most often the case – joining the more general scholarly observation of the value of a “peripheral turn in urban studies” (Ren, 2021) which, by changing the focus from centers to peripheries, can offer new conceptual perspectives and allow for empirical advances. In addition, analyzing the case of the Canal de l’Ourcq, located in France, where the analysis of arts in the city is underdeveloped in the international literature (Chapain & Sagot-Duvauroux, 2020; Redaelli & Stevenson, 2022a), promises to complement findings from other countries.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to develop the conceptual framework of arts in the city and to contribute to the understanding of the role of art and culture in urban spaces, their tensions, and their trajectories, by focusing more specifically on inner suburbs. This creates an intersection of the conceptual framework of arts in the city (Molina & Guinard, 2017; Redaelli & Stevenson, 2022b) with approaches to urban peripheries (Gündoğan, 2021; Ren, 2021). Three conceptual aspects will be studied through the lens of the Canal de l’Ourcq case: (1) the way in which the arts contribute to the creation of peripheral centralities in the inner suburbs, (2) the role they play in the local cultural and social life of these spaces, and (3) the way they combine with urban transformation and real estate development in the city. Beyond the Canal de l’Ourcq case, the article aims to contribute to the international literature by bringing out new global knowledge, and particularly by defining the concept of peripheral centrality. This concept highlights the diverse realities of the arts in cities worldwide: firstly, it questions the center-periphery model by revealing the emergence of centralities in spaces traditionally described as “peripheral” under the influence of cultural

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Realization: Basile Michel, 2024.

Fig. 1. Article diagram.

dynamics; secondly, it reveals the ambivalence of the effects of these cultural dynamics on urban societies, fueling both an inclusive city and an unfair neoliberal city. Examining these issues is enlightening for urban studies, as the arts are powerful indicators of the challenges and tensions facing contemporary cities (gentrification, socio-spatial inequalities, real estate and tourism development, social cohesion, etc.), not to mention being in themselves a key element of life in society as a source of emancipation, imagination, creativity.

The article is structured as follows (Fig. 1): firstly, the conceptual framework of arts in the city is defined around issues of cultural centrality, cultural vitality, and urban transformations. Secondly, the questions arising from this conceptual framework, the methods employed, and the geographical and cultural context of the northeastern suburbs of Paris are specified. Thirdly, the case of the Canal de l'Ourcq is presented, focusing on how a cultural cluster has been formed there and its effects upon this area. Fourthly, the Canal de l'Ourcq is exposed to the conceptual framework, revealing the emergence of a peripheral centrality, contrasting effects in terms of cultural life and social cohesion, and an interweaving of artistic, urban and real estate dynamics that influence the development of the city's inner suburbs. Finally, the conclusion will highlight the issues of peripheral centrality regarding the arts in the city and from a more general and conceptual perspective.

2. Literature review: arts in the city

Concerning the role of arts in the city, the literature highlights a wide variety of effects which I propose to address under three aspects: first, the contribution of art and culture to urban centrality; next, to local cultural and social life; and finally to urban transformation.

2.1. Contribution of the arts to urban centrality

Artists and other actors of art worlds have historically tended to be attracted to the city because of the number of urban amenities – e.g. density of relational networks, proximity to the audience, presence of cultural institutions (Foord, 2008; Grésillon, 2014; Lucchini, 2010; Markusen, 2014; Ovidio & Ponzini, 2014). This leads to a spatial concentration of art venues and artists in the cities, especially in the global metropolises. This concentration contributes to the centrality of cities, as art and culture are recognized as constitutive elements of a city's influence, reputation, and attraction (Boichot, 2012; Guerisoli, 2017; Lucchini, 2002), and sometimes even as a major element of their metropolitan status, as in Berlin (Grésillon, 1999, 2002). The agglomeration of arts in the cities creates a polarizing effect with respect to surrounding areas and thus contributes to reinforcing the importance, structuring functions, and influence of urban centers. Moreover, arts reinforce centrality of urban spaces on various levels: aestheticization of atmospheres and landscapes (for example through artworks in public spaces), image transformation (in local collective representations, in the media), enhancing the attraction and development of new practices (like the attraction of museums and creative districts for tourists), economic development (direct and indirect employment, artists' human capital contribution in various economic sectors), etc. (Lloyd, 2002, 2006; Markusen & King, 2003; Michel, 2021, 2022b). These effects are particularly potent due to the very nature of art itself, since a work of art only exists if it is seen by an audience and is the object of cultural dissemination and mediation. Artistic and cultural activities therefore spill over from dedicated venues to become visible in the city and online through signage, events, mediatization, artworks in public space, etc., and thus contribute to the visibility and centrality of urban spaces (Boichot, 2014; Debroux, 2017).

But the arts are not just a component of a city's overall centrality, they also construct differentiated artistic centralities on an intra-urban scale that are indicative of both the historical organization and contemporary dynamics of a city. Camille Boichot (2011, 2012) proposes to distinguish four such types. Firstly, heritage centralities

correspond to the historical and central agglomeration of cultural and heritage places strongly linked to the city's tourist and recreational activity. In the case of Paris, they are embodied by the clustering of museums and other heritage sites in the historic center around the Seine. Secondly, established centralities refer to those central agglomerations of commercial cultural places which enjoy a good reputation and a stable geographic anchoring over time, such as the Marais district in Paris, which has been considered as a renowned area for art galleries since the 1970s until today (Quemin, 2022). Thirdly, ephemeral centralities come into being temporarily with cultural events (Finkel & Platt, 2020; Quinn, 2005) and with temporary and cultural use of space (Pinard & Morteau, 2019) that spread across the urban spaces of Paris and elsewhere as urban and cultural policies become more event-based. Fourthly, emerging centralities are developing outside of inherited artistic centers with a strong and recent growth of art venues and their visibility. Compared to other artistic centralities, they are, on the one hand, more oriented towards artistic creation than cultural dissemination and consumption, and on the other hand, located more on the outskirts of the city – like the art gallery hubs and street art dynamics emerging in the inner suburbs of northeastern Paris (Blanchard, 2017; Michel, 2022b).

This last type of artistic centrality refers to the figure of the artist as a city creator, contributing – along with other players in the art world – to the emergence of new urban centralities. Urban history is revealing with respect to this role of the arts in the city, as shown in Paris in the 1860s when a massive and spontaneous movement of painters into the Plaine Monceau district transformed vacant lots on the outskirts of the capital into a showcase quarter and emblem of the arts, where the bourgeoisie would come to visit artists' studios (Charpy, 2009). The transformation of contemporary and post-industrial cities also points to a similar role for the arts, for example through the transformation of former industrial districts and working-class neighborhoods such as Hoxton in London (Pratt, 2009b), Wicker Park in Chicago (Lloyd, 2006), SoHo in New York (Zukin, 1982), M50 in Shanghai (Michel, 2021) and many others around the world (Michel, 2022b). Following complex trajectories, a number of urban districts abandoned in the wake of the industrial crisis of the 1970s have become, partly under the impetus of artists, gallery owners, and other actors from the art world, epicenters of artistic creation and dissemination and, more broadly, urban centralities that resonate on a local level (and beyond in best-known cases), enjoy an attractive image as a “creative quarter”, and attract the general public, creative businesses, media attention, tourists, etc.

2.2. Contribution of arts to the cultural and social vitality of the city

In the literature, arts and culture are generally recognized for their social and cultural role in the city.² They contribute to the improvement of the quality of life and the enhancement of local social life, encourage civic engagement of city dwellers, and constitute levers of social protest, a greater sense of community, and social bonding and cohesion (Jackson et al., 2006; Klein & Tremblay, 2016; Markusen, 2006, 2014; Michel, 2019; Stern & Seifert, 2013, 2017). This relates, on the one hand, to the ability of arts and culture to offer alternative views of the world and sensitive experiences that are sources of individual and collective emotions which fuel the emancipation of each person. While on the

² The social impacts of the arts are sometimes too hastily assumed as positive, without basing them on anything other than assumptions and beliefs (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). However, some research goes beyond these beliefs and shows the real existence of social effects of the arts (Klein & Tremblay, 2016; Michel, 2019; Michel & Bioteau, 2020). According to context, policy choices, etc., these effects are not systematic and can have positive consequences – e.g. strengthening social cohesion – but also negative ones – e.g. gentrification or social disarticulation, when the arts are harnessed to urban and cultural projects for the elites.

other hand, it relates to the ability of arts and culture to constitute a space of sharing and meeting where the social and cultural diversities which constitute our societies can be expressed, confronted, heard and brought together. In this context – and in addition to social, economic, and educational actions moving in this direction – arts and culture can contribute, to a certain extent, towards a more inclusive and cohesive society in districts and cities.

This approach to arts and culture in the city leads to a redefinition and reorientation of the “creative city” as it was initially presented by Richard Florida (2002) and then applied to urban policies around the world – with elitist strategies mobilizing culture for the purposes of city attractiveness and urban branding, a concentration of investments in large cultural facilities in central districts, and effects in terms of gentrification and reinforcement of socio-spatial inequalities which have been widely criticized in the literature (Klein & Tremblay, 2010; Peck, 2005; Shearmur, 2006). In contrast, this approach – which could be described as a sensitive, territorialized approach to urban development through the arts and culture – advocates the free expression of artistic creation and dissemination capable of contributing to the cultural vitality of neighborhoods and the city by making arts and culture a component of the daily life of local communities (Jackson et al., 2006; Klein et al., 2019; Michel, 2019; Michel & Ambrosino, 2019). This culture of proximity is based on the presence of artists, cultural institutions, and decentralized cultural venues, in networks and with both formal and informal statuses, linked to other local actors, as well as being articulated on a broader geographic level to open itself out to the world and to cultural diversity (Klein et al., 2019; Michel & Bioteau, 2020). From one perspective, this approach invites a consideration of the various forms of artistic practices and the active cultural involvement of citizens (amateur arts practices, arts education, etc.) without reducing their participation in the arts to one of simply passive attendance at cultural venues, i.e. the public as spectators and ticket buyers (Jackson et al., 2006; Jackson & Herranz, 2002; Klein & Tremblay, 2016). From another, it permits one to overcome the discriminating divisions between arts considered as “fine” versus “craft”, “professional” versus “amateur”, “formal” versus “informal”, so as to recognize with equal dignity the diverse cultures that make up cities and societies (Markusen, 2014; Michel, 2022b).

Since the participative turn, some artists and promoters of cultural projects and cultural policies have adopted this approach and are seeking to embed their actions more firmly in neighborhoods and cities, to interact with residents, to mobilize and involve local communities, and to contribute to the well-being of individuals (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Langeard, 2015; Michel & Bioteau, 2020; Sibertin-Blanc, 2020). They engage in various forms of territorial embeddedness – through informal relationships with local residents, local art world networks, partnerships with social and educational organizations, participatory cultural projects – in order to leave a positive cultural and social footprint on the local territory (Michel, 2022a). Thus, the number of outdoor artistic projects, festive cultural events, amateur creations, performances in public spaces, participatory and collective workshops, etc., is increasing. These actions allow for a more direct encounter with the public and the residents and contribute to (re)creating communal spaces for artistic and intellectual interaction in a society dominated by commercial exchanges, consumption, and individualism (Auclair, 2011; Michel, 2019). This contributes to the construction of a “creative city” for all, where the issues of cultural vitality and social cohesion are more important than those of attractiveness and urban marketing (Klein & Tremblay, 2010; Michel, 2022b). However, the realities of cities and culture-led urban regeneration policies – still largely dominated by urban neoliberalism (Hackworth, 2007; Rossi & Vanolo, 2015; Zimmerman, 2008) – reveal that these positive effects in terms of cultural and social vitality are counterbalanced by the insertion of the arts into dynamics of urban regeneration, gentrification, and real estate and tourism development.

2.3. Contribution of arts to the urban and social transformation of the city

Since the end of the 1990s, the potential role of the arts in aestheticizing urban environments, in strengthening cities’ attractiveness, and in changing their image has been widely acknowledged by international institutions (e.g. United Nations, European Commission), by local public authorities and by the private players involved in city planning. As a result, various political, economic, and urban strategies have been developed using arts as a tool for the purposes of urban regeneration, marketing, attractiveness, and tourism development (Bayliss, 2007; Evans, 2009b; Michel, 2021). This is the case, for example, of the many urban policies following the Bilbao model to establish large cultural venues – with widely varying success and notably several failures (Grodach, 2010; Markusen & Brown, 2013; Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019). This is also the case for many projects temporarily occupying wastelands, which are made available to artists’ collectives by real estate developers waiting for the onset of work for new housing and office construction (Correia, 2018; Michel, 2022b; Vivant, 2022). Another example is the labeling and planning of cultural and creative districts in place of former industrial zones (Evans, 2009a; Keane, 2009, 2011; McCarthy, 2005; Michel, 2022b).

These different forms of instrumentalization of arts and culture refer to the “creative city” policy field (Pratt, 2010). They are frequently subject to policy transfer, with a serial replication of such strategies around the world, at the risk of homogenizing, normalizing and standardizing cities (Guinard & Margier, 2018; McCarthy, 2005; Michel, 2022b; Pratt, 2009a). The primary objectives of these strategies are often economic and urban and less artistic, cultural and social. The spin-offs hoped for by local public authorities and the private sector are more for economic growth, the increase of real estate value, and tourism development than for the stimulation of artistic projects, the encouragement of social engagement, and the social inclusion of local populations (Bayliss, 2007; Michel, 2021; Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019; Zebracki, 2018).

As a consequence of these objectives, such strategies can have negative effects on social cohesion and contribute, on the contrary, to social exclusion within the cities. Whether in the context of spontaneous clusters of artists or culture-led urban policies, the establishment of artists or cultural facilities in urban and industrial wastelands facilitates the change of image and atmosphere of the city and its real estate value (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Lloyd, 2002; Mathews, 2010; Zukin & Braslow, 2011). The aesthetic discourse of the “creative city” mobilized by public authorities and private players thus serves as a front for the marketing and development of the city to attract elites and tourists, leading to a transformation of urban landscapes and the economic and commercial fabric, as well as a displacement of poor and marginal populations through higher property prices (Gainza, 2017; Lund et al., 2001; Peck, 2005; Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019; Shearmur, 2006; Zukin, 1982).

This inserts the arts into the social and urban transformation of the city, and particularly into processes of gentrification (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Currier, 2008; Gainza, 2017; Mathews, 2010; Murzyn-Kupisz & Działek, 2017). In light of the work of Sharon Zukin (1982), the connection between artists and gentrification has been the topic of numerous debates, artists being perceived by some as pioneers of the influx of the middle and upper classes into working-class districts (Ley, 2003), and by others as tools of the real estate promotion strategies of public bodies and private investors (Smith, 1996). The reality is often to be found somewhere in between. Most importantly, the role of artists in gentrification, and of the arts more generally, needs to be put into perspective (Grodach et al., 2018). Indeed, artists are often outstripped by the rationale of the real estate market or instrumentalized within public and private urban projects, and as such play only a minor role in the process; it is the free real estate market, public and private investments, and wealth inequalities that create gentrification (Markusen, 2014; Michel, 2021).

These urban transformations produce tensions within the city between its artistic and cultural attributes on the one hand, and its commercial, real estate and tourism dimensions on the other (Currier, 2008; McCarthy & Wang, 2016; Michel, 2021; Pratt, 2010). The increasing commodification of urban spaces is detrimental to the dynamics of artistic creation, resulting in a “leisure city” (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013) dominated by cultural tourism, consumption, entertainment, and real estate development. In a context of real estate pressure and rising property prices, where economic profitability is prioritized, lucrative commercial and tourist activities are proliferating on the ashes of underground artist-run spaces, alternative cultural venues and non-profit cultural organizations. Evidence of this can be seen in the trajectories of many cultural districts, which have experienced a dilution of artistic production activity and other related effects of gentrification in relation to major outcomes in terms of city branding, real estate development and tourism (Gu, 2014; McCarthy & Wang, 2016; Michel, 2021; Zukin & Braslow, 2011).

3. Theoretical questions, methods, and context in the Canal de l’Ourcq case

3.1. Triple analytical approach: centrality, cultural vitality, urban transformations

This article seeks to question, test, and inform the conceptual framework presented above by applying it to a case study of the inner suburbs around the Canal de l’Ourcq, in the north-east of Paris, thereby contributing to our understanding of the role of arts and culture in urban spaces, and more specifically through the prism of urban peripheries. This requires following the peripheral turn in urban studies (Ren, 2021) to analyze the role of the arts in the city not from the centers – as is most often the case – but from the urban peripheries such as the Canal de l’Ourcq, while considering the reciprocal relations and influences between centers and peripheries. This peripheral approach, by freeing itself from the dominant vision of the center, can allow for advances, on the one hand, in terms of conceptualization, with the emergence of new concepts or the improvement of existing ones and, on the other hand, in terms of empirical knowledge, by contributing to a better understanding of the realities of peripheral spaces (Ren, 2021). The permitted diversity of analytical points of view seems crucial in the context of an expanding and diversified urban world (Robinson, 2016). It also avoids a hierarchical and normative approach that would place peripheries at a lower level than areas usually categorized as “centers” (Depraz, 2017). Following this peripheral approach, the key components of the conceptual framework that the case study of the Canal de l’Ourcq will serve to illuminate are as follows:

- (1) The ways in which the arts and culture contribute to the centrality of urban peripheries and challenge the traditional center-periphery model, particularly by participating in changes in the geography of the arts, urban atmospheres, social practices, and images of peripheral spaces, thus allowing the concept of peripheral centrality to emerge;
- (2) The role played by the arts and culture in the cultural vitality of urban spaces, in this case located on the periphery, with cultural venues and projects that oscillate between seeking to be embedded in the local territory and the local community on the one hand, and seeking to attract wider audiences and tourists on the other;
- (3) The interweaving of arts and culture in the processes of urban and social transformation of inner suburbs and the tensions that this reveals between artistic and cultural dynamics that are conducive to a more inclusive city or, on the contrary, to a neoliberal city within which social inequalities and socio-spatial fragmentation are increasing.

3.2. Combining methodological tools to investigate the cultural dynamics of the Canal de l’Ourcq

This article is based on a field investigation conducted from 2020 to 2023 on the artistic and cultural dynamics of the Canal de l’Ourcq. This investigation relies on a mixed methods approach to data collection, using both qualitative (e.g. in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation) and quantitative (e.g. network analysis, textual analysis) research tools to gather primary data. Mixed methods research is characterized by methodological pluralism, which often leads to superior research results compared to monomethod research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This approach allowed for deep research engagement to ensure main findings from the Ourcq study would be relevant to other cases worldwide. The field investigation contains several aspects and objectives.

Firstly, a geo-localized database of cultural venues was created by exhaustively registering information in the field and online. Over one hundred and thirty cultural venues³ have been registered and integrated into an Excel spreadsheet, with various attributes (location and type of venues...). Field observation over several days made it possible to identify the presence of cultural venues. The location of each was GPS collected. Online searches were used to complete the database. This enables the nature and degree of the cultural and artistic presence along the canal to be assessed and the existence of the spatial clustering of cultural venues in this area to be mapped (using QGIS software, Fig. 2). The study area around the Ourcq was defined based on the spatial concentration of cultural venues and the consistency of the architectural and urban fabric.

Secondly, 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted with artists and other cultural players (gallery owners, theater directors, mediation officers, etc.). Purposive sampling was undertaken to obtain a diverse and representative range of artistic fields and types of organizations. The pool of respondents consisted of 64 % well-known public or private institutions, 22 % intermediary venues, and 14 % underground artist-run spaces. They were involved in contemporary art (41 %), music (12 %), dance (7 %), or were multidisciplinary (40 %). Interviews lasted over an hour on average and were conducted face-to-face. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically and cross-sectionally. These interviews made it possible to understand the dynamics of cultural networks at the heart of the Canal de l’Ourcq, the reasons for the cultural venues being located here, the projects, actions, and artistic events they engage in, and the type of public they cater for.

Thirdly, in order to further the understanding of the dynamics of art worlds’ networks at the heart of the Canal de l’Ourcq, an analysis of the collaborative networks was carried out on the basis of the relationships and partnerships identified during the interviews. Respondents were asked to list the local cultural players with whom they exchange, work, and collaborate, and to specify the type of links they maintain. The database was completed with additional research, such as the analysis of activity reports of cultural venues. All identified relationships were coded and integrated into an Excel spreadsheet for network analysis using Gephi software (1366 relationships between 172 cultural organizations). This made it possible to determine the nature and density of the collaborative relationships forged between the canal’s cultural players and to visualize the network (Fig. 3).

Fourthly, in situ observation and interviews were carried out in public spaces, in cultural venues, and during events. Observations were performed over a period of three years at various times of the day, week, and year to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. This allowed for immersion in the field and a better understanding of its realities. Note-taking and photography were used for field data collection (Figs. 4, 5, 7, 8 & 9). This observation work focused upon the study of spatial

³ Each venue can accommodate several cultural organizations, such as the artist-run spaces often composed of a dozen or so independent artists.

configuration, the atmosphere, and the social and cultural practices of the Canal de l'Ourcq. 61 face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants (residents, general public, passers-by, tourists) to enhance knowledge of the concrete practices of the canal (particularly at the cultural level) and to understand the social representations with regard to this area. Respondents were 61 % females and 39 % males, aged 15–29 (37 %), 30–44 (39 %), 45–59 (9 %) and over 60 (15 %). Ten of them were interviewed in depth as participants in a cultural project of the National Center for Dance (Assemblé), which will be analyzed in the results section. These interviews helped to identify the process and benefits of such a participatory cultural project.

Fifthly, a range of methodological tools were used to identify the dynamics of urban regeneration of the Canal de l'Ourcq, the role that culture plays in it, and the social transformations that this gives rise to. A systematic analysis was conducted on official documents pertaining to recent, current, or future urban regeneration projects in the study area. Statistical analyses of the area were carried out on real estate prices (using the Notaires du Grand Paris and MeilleursAgents databases) and on changes in the social profile of the population (using the French National Institute of Statistics database). Participant observation was conducted as an invited scientific expert at official meetings of cultural players involved in the labeling of the Canal de l'Ourcq as a “cultural and creative district”. Observations were carried out at five meetings, with descriptive and analytical note-taking of the discussions and positions of the players, in order to capture the objectives of the project as well as the strategies and actions developed.

Sixthly, an analysis of the media discourse concerning the Canal de l'Ourcq was carried out to understand its image and popularity in the media. This refers to the method of discourse analysis, which is a useful complementary approach in empirical studies and feeds into critical social science research (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Using the Factiva database, a corpus of 206 press articles mentioning the Canal de l'Ourcq (for 39 of which it is its main subject) was compiled for the year 2022. The Iramuteq software package for statistical analysis of textual data was used to facilitate the interpretation and analysis of this corpus. This software automatically divides a corpus into coherent text segments and classifies them into distinct types of discourse. It also provides the percentage of associated text segments for each type of discourse (representing its share in the corpus) as well as typical keywords. The analysis is then performed by the researcher and illustrated by a discourse classification diagram (Fig. 6).

The data collected using these different methods were cross-referenced through the entire analysis process, following the triangulation principle (Greene et al., 1989), with the aim of producing a systemic, holistic and cross-disciplinary analysis of the Canal de l'Ourcq case. This is part of a territorial approach, in which the territory is considered as a lived space, an evolving social construction resulting from the interactions between the different players who live, work and pass through it (Del Biaggio, 2015; Di Méo, 1998; Vanier, 2009). This provides the basis for an analysis of the Canal de l'Ourcq in terms of its artistic dynamics (artistic presence, cultural networks and projects), the impacts on cultural vitality (atmospheres, social practices, cultural participation, etc.), and the related urban transformations (media image, urban regeneration, gentrification, etc.).

3.3. The center/periphery divide in the Paris metropolis in general and in northeastern Paris and the Canal de l'Ourcq in particular

The Canal de l'Ourcq is located in the inner suburbs of the Paris metropolis, a metropolis characterized by a strong divide between its center (inner-city Paris) and its periphery (*les banlieues*) despite intensive interdependent links. This divide is first of all spatial, with the very marked presence in the urban landscape of the ring road (*le boulevard périphérique*) – a major roadway encircling the inner city of Paris that replaced the city's ancient ramparts – which many Parisians are still reluctant to cross, such that it represents a barrier in real space (it is not

easy to traverse) and in the space of socio-cognitive representations (for many, it constitutes the historical limit of Paris) (Michel, 2022b). This divide is also symbolic – with social, political, and economic dimensions – resulting from a long history of hostilities and inequalities between the capital and the suburbs (Albecker, 2015; Le Galès, 2020; Montagné Villette & Hardill, 2007; Ronai, 2004; Subra & Newman, 2008). The anonymity of the latter contrasts with the image of prestige, luxury, arts, and power of inner-city Paris. This image is inherited from its history as the “city of lights”, its monuments, and the historic concentration of political and economic power as well as artistic and cultural functions, while space-consuming activities and nuisances that Paris did not wish for were left to the suburbs (e.g. industries, cemeteries, waste treatment). This center/periphery divide has become ever more pronounced from the second half of the 20th century to the present. The deindustrialization experienced by some of the suburbs – under the influence of the crisis of the 1970s and the French state's industrial decentralization policy – has caused the appearance of numerous industrial wastelands there, a drop in industrial jobs, a massive and perennial rise in unemployment, and an impoverishment of the population in certain geographic sectors (Albecker, 2015). At the same time, inner-city Paris has experienced a sharp rise in property prices and massive gentrification that is driving out modest and poor populations (Clerval, 2013; Le Galès, 2020).⁴

This divide is particularly marked in northeastern Paris, where the capital borders Seine-Saint-Denis (93), the poorest department in metropolitan France, widely stigmatized in the media and in collective representations as a “banlieue” (Sedel, 2009), in other words as a marginalized, impoverished, peripheral urban area that concentrates immigrant populations and is plagued by social problems (e.g. delinquency, drug trafficking, unemployment). The Canal de l'Ourcq, on both sides of the ring road, is included in this context, crossing the 19th arrondissement of Paris, one of the most working-class districts in the capital, and several communes in Seine-Saint-Denis (Pantin, Bobigny and Romainville for the studied area), thus creating a fluvial continuity between Paris and its suburbs. The canal has historically been dominated by industrial activity (metallurgy, flour milling, storage and transportation of goods...) whose gradual decline since the second half of the 20th century has facilitated the establishment of numerous cultural venues and activities and the development of urban regeneration projects (Blanchard, 2017; Michel, 2022b).

It is interesting to analyze this case study for three main reasons. Firstly, the canal is experiencing a phenomenon of spatial clustering of cultural venues that puts into question the center-periphery dynamic given its singular peripheral geographic position. Secondly, positioning these cultural venues on the periphery questions their potential contribution to the cultural vitality of the urban peripheries. Thirdly, the artistic and cultural dynamics generated by these venues play a role in the overall transformation of the Canal de l'Ourcq, raising questions concerning the urban and social implications of the cultural development of urban spaces. This makes it an emblematic example of the role that arts and culture can play in the city and more particularly in the inner suburbs.

4. Results: cultural and urban dynamics of the Canal de l'Ourcq

It is now necessary to describe how arts and culture influence the realities and developments of the Canal de l'Ourcq.

⁴ This divide continues to exist today, even with the establishment of Greater Paris as a political entity encompassing Paris and its inner suburbs (Le Galès, 2020), as well as the diversification of the urban, social and economic profiles of the inner Parisian suburbs (Montagné Villette & Hardill, 2007).

4.1. The Canal de l'Ourcq: from industrial activity to cultural cluster

Following the decline of industrial activity along the Canal de l'Ourcq, which accentuated the impoverishment of the local population, numerous artists and other cultural players clustered in this area during the 2000s and especially the 2010s, investing, in part, in the industrial and urban wastelands. They were attracted by real estate prices that were much lower than in Paris, the availability of larger spaces to pursue their activities, and a desire to contribute to the extension of Paris outside its historical limits, evoking the role of the urban pioneer for artists and other actors of arts:

“I am very excited about the future of Greater Paris, which means that Paris can no longer be confined within its borders, behind the ring road. So, I am determined to contribute to opening the doors of Paris to the suburbs, and to changing the way these suburbs are considered, through artistic expression and cultural engagement. Of course, the space available and the rent, that's also why I am here, it's beyond compare with what I could have in Paris” (2021 interview, gallery owner).

Many such cultural players historically located in inner-city Paris have moved to the nearby suburb, like several influential contemporary art galleries (e.g. Air de Paris, In Situ) that collectively moved to a former industrial site in Romainville, from having previously occupied spaces in the capital's traditional gallery districts (e.g. the Marais, Belleville, and Rue Louise Weiss). They joined forces along the canal with other artistic and cultural players stemming from the Seine-Saint-Denis area, such as the numerous street artists from Pantin and its surroundings.

More than one hundred and thirty artistic and cultural venues are thus clustered around the Canal de l'Ourcq today, constituting a cultural polarity on the outskirts of Paris (Fig. 2). They include, at one and the same time: public cultural institutions, such as the Centre National de la Danse (National Center for Dance) and the Parc de La Villette⁵; well-known private institutions, like the Magasins Généraux and the Thaddeus Ropac gallery; intermediary cultural and festive places, e.g. the temporary place La Cité Fertile and the cultural barge Metaxu; and more informal and underground artist-run spaces, such as the Atelier W or Le Ventre de la Baleine. These are places for creating and exhibiting or performing in diverse artistic disciplines: music, theater, contemporary art, etc.

This spatial clustering of cultural venues is accompanied by the emergence of a collaborative artistic and cultural network spatially embedded in the perimeter around the Canal de l'Ourcq (Fig. 3). Artists, gallery owners, theater crew and other cultural organizations along the canal develop diverse cooperative relationships with each other. There are two main intertwined types of relationships at the heart of this cluster: firstly, in-depth partnerships and collaborations aimed at developing joint cultural actions and projects (e.g. joint cultural programming, organization of communal events); secondly, informal links of knowledge sharing, mutual aid, and exchange (e.g. exchange of ideas, communication around events developed by other venues). The network is highly dense (an average of 7.9 relationships per organization), linked to the clustering of artists in artist-run spaces (with sharing, mutual aid, etc.) and to the numerous partnerships among cultural venues. For these cultural venues, one of the priority objectives of these collaborative relationships is to increase their attraction to the public and tourists by creating the image of a cultural and festive hub at the edge of Paris. Beyond this objective, they are also linked by a common feeling of belonging to a territory on the outskirts of Paris whose cultural and artistic richness they seek to enhance, as evidenced by the remarks of the director of a cultural venue:

“On the banks of the canal, there's a real sense of community among the cultural players behind the périp'h [ring road], who want to cooperate with each other, because we realize that to attract someone who lives in Paris, it's better to work together. It also allows us to cross-fertilize our audiences” (2021 interview).

4.2. Change in urban atmosphere and stimulation of cultural vitality along the Canal de l'Ourcq

The presence of this cluster induces a change of atmosphere and a stimulation of the cultural vitality along the Canal de l'Ourcq, which has long been associated with poverty and illegal and marginal activities. The rehabilitation of wastelands into cultural venues is transforming urban landscapes and encouraging new cultural and social practices in this area. Street art, performances, art exhibitions, musical concerts, and cultural events⁶ attract visitors and participants for cultural or festive events (Fig. 4). This attraction for the general public is all the stronger as the cultural offering is both diverse and spatially concentrated, and as the collaborative networks of cultural venues causes its visibility to be enhanced. This is achieved, for example, through organizing collaborative events in public spaces, such as the Été du Canal, which brings together various cultural venues in the area (Metaxu barge, Fiminc Foundation, Magasins Généraux, etc.) to offer concerts, exhibitions, street art cruises and other artistic activities along the Ourcq and its banks, inviting the public to move back and forth between inner-city Paris and the suburb. Thus, even though many residents of the capital have long been reluctant to cross the ring road, a cultural center like the Magasins Généraux in Pantin welcomes a public from Pantin (30 %), Paris (30 %) and elsewhere (40 %); contemporary art galleries in Romainville manage to keep part of their Parisian collectors; cultural centers are attracting artists-in-residence from all over the world (e.g. Fiminc Foundation and Artagon); and the public spaces along the canal are attracting people from all different kinds of geographic backgrounds, not least for cultural purposes.⁷

Contribution to the local cultural vitality can also be attributed to cultural projects involving residents from the area – in the form of socially-engaged art or community-based art – that some of the cultural venues along the canal are developing (30 % of the venues surveyed). This is the case, for example, of the Centre National de la Danse (CND) which is engaged in, among others, the Assemblé project (Fig. 5). This project offers free participatory dance workshops to local residents with the aim of producing collaborative choreographic creations drawn from their own cultures, with the support of an artist and a cultural mediator. The goal is to create local dancing communities, i.e. to expose the residents to dance, to put them in a situation of artistic co-creation, and to allow for them to connect with each other. The creative workshops and choreographic performances in public space positively affect the local social dynamics. First of all, it allows for the establishment of friendly relationships between the participants, which contribute to the development of social links between the inhabitants of the area – particularly thanks to the mutual commitment inside a collaborative creation (participants surveyed all noted this benefit). Secondly, it changes the way passers-by and spectators look upon their everyday spaces through the poetic rewriting of the places used during performances – invoking the capacity of dance to reveal spaces and enrich them with an artistic and sensitive signification (Torrent, 2015). Finally, this allows for the stimulation of interaction between local fields of action and encourages

⁶ In 2022, more than 1000 cultural events were registered around the canal (festivals, concerts, live shows, exhibitions, etc.).

⁷ For the sample surveyed, 49 % of canal users come from Seine-Saint-Denis, 25 % from inner-city Paris, 18 % from the rest of Île-de-France and 8 % from the rest of France and from abroad. They mainly use the Canal de l'Ourcq for strolling (56 %) and cultural activities (40 %). They perceive it as a friendly place to relax (83 %) and as an artistic, cultural and festive place (37 %).

⁵ La Villette is a vast park hosting numerous cultural venues and events (concert halls, theaters, philharmonic, music festivals, etc.).

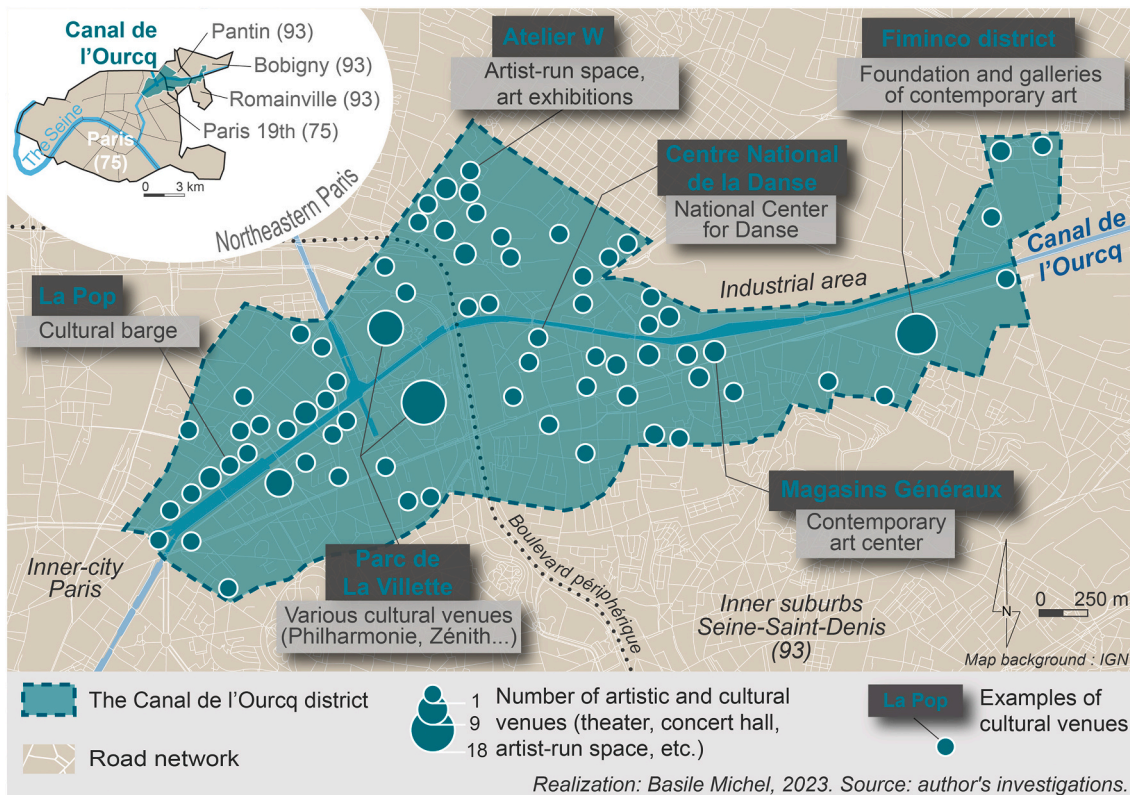


Fig. 2. The Canal de l'Ourcq as a cultural district.

a greater openness by the residents towards the cultural – the CND associating itself with diverse cultural, social, and educational structures in the development of the project (seeking out participants, hosting workshops and performances, etc.).

4.3. Culture-based public and private strategies for urban and touristic development along the Canal de l'Ourcq

The spatial concentration of cultural venues along the Canal de l'Ourcq is part of the overall urban transformation of this area, which is largely driven by a policy of urban regeneration and real estate development carried out by local public authorities and private real estate operators. This is reflected in urban projects that are redeveloping public spaces and constructing new residential, commercial, and office buildings to attract new businesses, companies, and wealthier populations: e. g. the Zone d'Aménagement Concerté du Port in Pantin and l'Horloge in Romainville, namely urban regeneration projects that are radically transforming urban landscapes and increasing real estate prices along the canal.⁸

Real estate developments are thus flourishing along the Ourcq, progressing from Paris to the suburb over time. Some of these operations are the result of a political will to promote a culture-led urban regeneration of the area, particularly in the commune of Pantin, whose municipality has sought to help set up cultural and creative enterprises since the early 2000s in order to recover from the industrial and social crisis, facilitating, for example, the establishment of the Magasins Généraux private cultural center or the Hermès leather-goods workshops (Kern, 2015). In this context, private initiatives mixing cultural activities with real estate development have proliferated along the

canal. This is the case, for example, of the real estate group Fiminc, which, in agreement with the municipality of Romainville, was able to acquire an industrial wasteland and transform it into a cultural hub bringing together its contemporary art foundation, private galleries, and other cultural venues open to the public, while building new residential buildings and erecting a shopping center nearby. Projects of cultural temporary use of spaces are also being developed to transform wastelands into cultural and festive spaces while waiting for the real estate projects to begin, with the joint involvement of cultural players, local public authorities, and private investors. In Pantin, one example among many, a former freight depot was transformed for 4 years into a cultural place (La Cité Fertile) by a cultural enterprise (Sinny & Ooko) with the financial support of a bank (BNP Paribas), while waiting for an eco-neighborhood project to be implemented by the local authority (Est Ensemble).

In addition to these urban projects, there is a marketing and branding strategy for the Canal de l'Ourcq as a “cultural and creative district where the Paris of the future is coming into being.”⁹ This strategy is supported by the local tourist development agency (Seine-Saint-Denis Tourisme) and some twenty cultural venues, which promote the Ourcq as “the new area outside the historic center that is the heart of artistic creation in Greater Paris” (2021 interview). The aim is to change the image of the canal, through joint communication and collaborative programming, imbuing it with an artistic buzz and turning it into a cultural and tourist attraction.

4.4. The emergence of a cultural media image of the Canal de l'Ourcq

This shift in the image of the Canal de l'Ourcq is already perceptible

⁸ In Pantin, the real estate prices have undergone an increase of 30.8–42 % over the last five years, especially in the vicinity of the Ourcq (Notaires du Grand Paris and MeilleursAgents).

⁹ Website dedicated to the cultural and creative district of the Canal de l'Ourcq, <https://www.tourisme93.com/lourcq-grand-paris-culturel-et-creatif.html> accessed 03/12/2024.

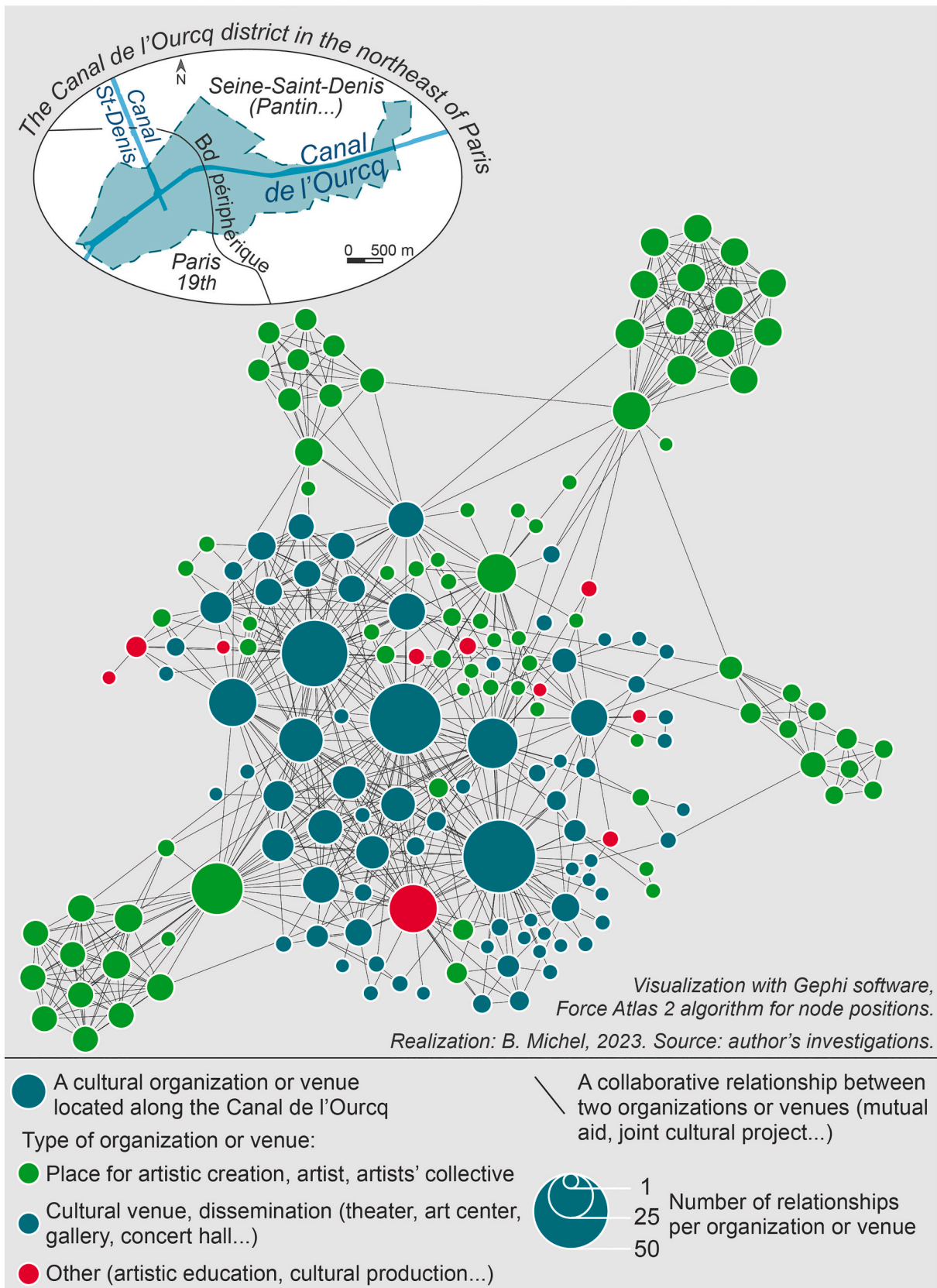


Fig. 3. Collaborative networks of artistic and cultural players along the Canal de l'Ourcq.



Fig. 4. A cultural event along the Canal de l'Ourcq.
Photo by Basile Michel, 2023.

in the media. Indeed, the media are propagating an image of a dynamic and attractive area in terms of culture and art. It is thus featured in the press as “one of the most fashionable places to go out in Greater Paris”¹⁰ thanks to its cultural barges, street art, concert venues, bar terraces, festivals, etc. This contrasts with the negative stereotypes commonly associated with Seine-Saint-Denis and the “banlieues” in general. An analysis of the articles published on the Canal de l'Ourcq shows the predominance of arts and culture in the media images and portrayal of this area (52 % of ECU)¹¹ although its industrial history (in association with the bicentenary of its construction) and the various events that have taken place there (e.g. the evacuation of migrant camps) are also part of the symbolic realities associated with it (Fig. 6). This latter category of discourse reveals a heterogeneous media image that mirrors the reality of the canal, marked by both social inequalities and cultural dynamics.

5. Discussion: challenges of the arts in the inner suburbs

It is now appropriate to consider the case of the Canal de l'Ourcq within the conceptual framework and the questions identified earlier, to discuss it in the light of the international literature.

¹⁰ Lieures A., 2021, “Sa transformation est spectaculaire: longtemps délaissé, le canal de l'Ourcq est devenu très branché”, *Le Parisien*.

¹¹ ECU (Elementary Context Units) are segments of coherent text obtained using Iramuteq software. The percentage of ECU associated with each type of discourse indicates its relative weight in the corpus.

5.1. Defining peripheral centrality and questioning the center-periphery model

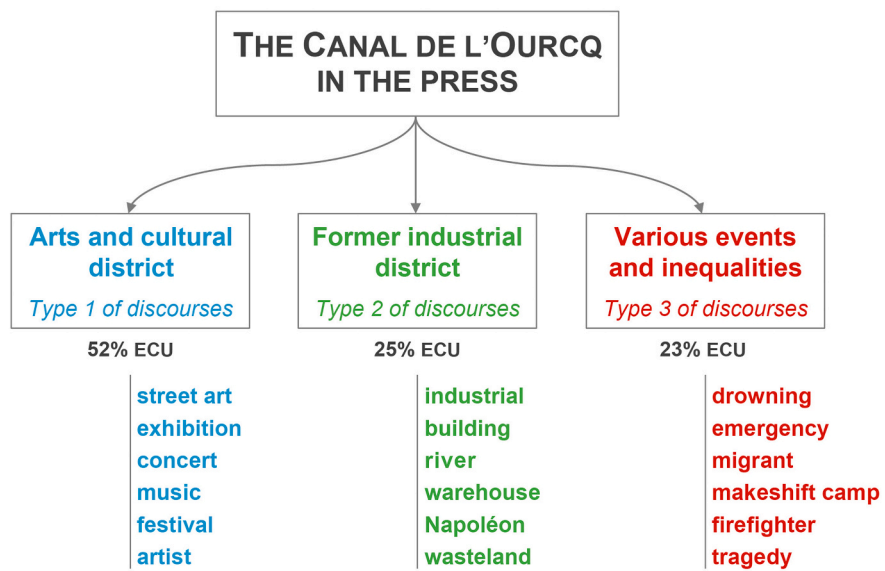
The case of the Canal de l'Ourcq allows us to put into question the traditional center-periphery model, long dominant in spatial analyses, by demonstrating the emergence and affirmation of a cultural and urban centrality in a territory historically positioned on the outskirts of Paris (spatially, symbolically, culturally, etc.). This centrality is based on five main features of the Canal de l'Ourcq. Firstly, the affirmation of a spatial clustering of diverse artistic and cultural venues and activities which assures its cultural function. Secondly, the embedding of art worlds' networks along the Ourcq, which allows for the circulation of information, ideas, and artistic practices. Thirdly, the attraction of culture on offer for a public both local and from further afield (notably from inner-city Paris) whose concrete practices make the canal a nexus of social and cultural life. Fourthly, the attractive image of the canal, positively perceived as an artistic, cultural, and festive space by the media. Fifthly, the existence of reciprocal links and influences between the canal and Paris, which are reflected, for example, by the relocation of contemporary art galleries from the capital to the suburb or the retention of a major cultural and heritage centrality in the historic heart of the city.¹²

These different features of the Canal de l'Ourcq correspond to the fundamental aspects of centrality as defined in the literature, namely the structuring influence of certain areas on others due to the presence of polarizing functions, the structuration of flows of people, goods and

¹² The capital still concentrates 60 % of the cultural venues of the Greater Paris metropolis (APUR, 2023).



Fig. 5. A choreographic performance as part of the CND’s Assemblé project. Photo by Basile Michel, 2023.



The statistical analysis of the corpus of press articles (compiled from the Factiva database) was carried out using the Iramuteq software. Each type of discourse is associated with a percentage of Elementary Context Units (ECU, which characterizes its relative importance in the corpus) and six significant keywords from the corpus (which illustrate the nature of the discourse). The meanings and attributes given to the types of discourses result from the researcher’s analysis.

Realization: Basile Michel, 2023.

Fig. 6. The media image of the Canal de l’Ourcq in 2022.

information, and a symbolic appeal (Gaschet & Lacour, 2002; Marchal & Stébé, 2014; Monnet, 2000). This contradicts, however, the center-periphery model, which exclusively associates centrality with the urban center, developing a radial and dual vision of territories and center-periphery relations, with an unequivocal domination of the former over the latter (Dumont, 2017, 2021; Van Meeteren, 2021). The peripheries have thus been considered dependent on the center around which they are organized in a concentric manner. This model comes out of a long tradition of research, from the spatial theories of Johann Heinrich von Thünen and Walter Christaller,¹³ right up to the work of Henri Lefebvre (2000), which identifies in a binary way, on the one hand, the historical center of cities as the place of concentration of power and wealth, and on the other hand, the periphery as a space of economic and social relegation. Today, however, it appears outdated, particularly in the face of the development of urban and suburban peripheries, which have been accompanied by the emergence of diverse centralities (innovation, leisure, work, commerce, etc.) and which have led to a more reticular, rather than radial, structuring of space (geographical, social, economic...) and a dissociation of centrality and historical urban centers (Dumont, 2017; Gündoğan, 2021; Marchal & Stébé, 2014).

For this reason, I formulate the conceptual proposal of peripheral centrality – drawing from a combination of the notion of centrality defined in the literature, the peripheral turn in urban studies, and the role played by the arts in the emergence of new urban centralities, such as that exemplified by the case of the Canal de l'Ourcq. Peripheral centrality is defined here as the impact on, and the structuring and polarizing influence on, the surrounding spaces and/or the distant places of a territory characterized as “peripheral” – from a spatial, social, economic, cultural, symbolic and/or political point of view – in the traditional center-periphery model. The peripheral centrality of a territory is based, at one and the same time, on the presence of functions and resources within it (populations, economic activities, services, etc.), its capacity to structure material and immaterial flows, and its symbolic and practical significance and appeal in relation to social representations and the specific habits of populations. It is multidimensional (cultural, commercial, etc.), evolving in time and space (emergence, decline, displacement, etc.), multi-scalar (from local to international) and relative (i.e. interacting with the impact of other territories).

With its intentionally paradoxical overtones, peripheral centrality is of interest on two levels. First, it highlights the existence of centralities in spaces categorized as “peripheries” according to the traditional center-periphery model, so as to better characterize the realities and issues at hand. In doing so, it then encourages us to go beyond this model and its dual, unequivocal, and radial vision of socio-spatial organization, in favor of a reticular approach that questions the reciprocal relations and influences between “centers” and “peripheries”, from a dynamic perspective that is sensitive to the changes that are taking place in the territories.

5.2. Between stimulation of local cultural vitality and consideration of territorial attractiveness

The Canal de l'Ourcq highlights the potential contribution of the arts to the cultural vitality of the local area, as a favorable element for the emergence of a “creative city” for all. The spatial clustering of numerous cultural venues, their diversity in terms of degree of institutionalization and artistic domains, and their collaborative networks for producing cultural events and activities, produce a wealth of opportunities for encounters with the general public and contribute to the accessibility of the arts for all (Fig. 7). This is further enhanced by the development of various cultural projects committed to promoting local communities, with the active participation of residents and the prioritizing of cultural

and social objectives (personal growth and well-being, expression of cultural diversities, etc.) – as exemplified by some of the initiatives of the CND.

The canal thus combines the various components of the cultural vitality of a territory as defined in the literature (Jackson et al., 2006; Klein et al., 2019), and in particular: the presence of diverse organizations, events, and cultural amenities (non-profit, public, informal, commercial) accessible to residents and offering opportunities for cultural participation, networks of artists and cultural players open to other fields of local action, cultural venues and projects for both amateur and professional arts practices, and a willingness of cultural venues to contribute to local social life. This cultural vitality of the canal reinforces the rethinking of the center-periphery model in a context historically marked by the peripheral position of this territory and the concentration of the culture on offer in inner-city Paris. It reflects the perceptible, but largely incomplete, bifurcation of culture-led urban development, with a growing consideration of the issues of emancipation, emotion, and personal well-being that go beyond considerations centered on the attractiveness and prestige of cities (Sibertin-Blanc, 2020). This cultural vitality of the canal also refers to the role of artists in the cultural and social life of the neighborhoods, some of whom are involved in actions in favor of tolerance for minorities, integration of troubled youth, openness to cultural diversity, etc. (Markusen, 2006; Michel & Bioteau, 2020).

In an ambivalent manner, the Canal de l'Ourcq is also shaped by the rationale of attracting spectators and tourists and fostering the prestige of the area. First of all, this is evidenced by the establishment of flagship cultural facilities along the canal – for example, at the Parc de La Villette, which hosts mega concerts at the Zenith Paris and blockbuster exhibitions in the Grande Halle (Fig. 8). This is in line with the many public cultural policies that since the end of the 19th century have favored the establishment of large cultural institutions (large museums, opera houses, concert halls, etc.) which dominate the cultural proposals of cities for tourists and residents and increase the distance between creators and audiences (Markusen, 2014). Secondly, it is perceptible through the marketing strategy aimed at developing a brand image around the Canal de l'Ourcq as a “cultural and creative district”. This illustrates the policy transfer of this urban model, harnessed in urban policies throughout the world to increase the touristic appeal of cities, at the risk of a disappearance of artistic dynamics (Michel, 2021). Finally, it is highlighted by the proliferation of cultural events along the canal, especially during the spring and summer period. This testifies to the event-based consideration of cultural policies, with increased support for festivals, concerts, meetings, and other event-based cultural forms, as they respond to the objective of distinction and competitiveness of cities by creating a highlight capable of attracting both a media spotlight and the public to the area (Teillet, 2019). The proliferation and the perpetual and rapid renewal of events thus make it possible to maintain the “buzz”; however, they place artists and other cultural players into a system that no longer allows for the long time frame emblematic of artistic creation, dissemination and cultural mediation but rather cuts cultural life into a succession of isolated occurrences.

This ambivalence points to the coexistence on the banks of the Ourcq of a consumptive, spectacular culture, on the one hand, and an unspectacular, non-profit culture of proximity, standing in contrast to market and brand logics, on the other. This observation has also been made in other urban peripheries, such as in the case of Canadian suburbs, where the strategies of large cultural facilities to attract tourists and to compete with the main urban centers contrast with smaller, community-based arts projects that are more likely to contribute to the quality of life and cultural vitality of the suburbs by supporting art creation and practice (Bain, 2013).

5.3. Arts and culture in the urban development of the neoliberal city

The case of the Canal de l'Ourcq is revealing of the interweaving of arts and culture in an urban development that feeds the rationale of a

¹³ For a recent analysis of these theories, see Van Meeteren, 2021.



Fig. 7. Contemporary art exhibition at the Fimenco Foundation with free admission and cultural mediation program. Photo by Basile Michel, 2021.



Fig. 8. Blockbuster Napoléon exhibition at the Grande Halle, La Villette. Photo by Basile Michel, 2021.

neoliberal “creative city”. The urban regeneration projects carried out by the public authorities have combined with a multiplicity of cultural and temporary use of space projects by private investors to enhance real estate value in the area. As a result, the artistic and cultural dynamics of the Canal de l’Ourcq are intertwined, voluntarily or not, with the urban transformation of the area. This is reminiscent of culture-based urban policies for the purposes of urban, real estate, economic, and tourism development (Michel, 2021; Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019; Zebracki, 2018), which fall under the umbrella of urban neoliberalism and contribute to the reinforcement of social inequalities in cities (Peck, 2005; Zimmerman, 2008). This also echoes the generalization of cultural and temporary urbanism to promote the temporary use of wastelands into cultural venues, often mixing artistic and festive programming with more commercial proposals such as bars, restaurants, and privatization of the premises (Michel, 2022b; Vivant, 2022). In this way, public authorities and private investors seek to contribute not only to the revitalization of cultural life but also to generate financial profit through the commercial activities that take place there and the increase in value of future real estate operations linked to the new reputation of the area.

The specific context of inner suburbs plays a role in how these dynamics of the neoliberal “creative city” unfold along the Canal de l’Ourcq. In the north-east of Paris, as in other metropolises worldwide (Lee & Leigh, 2005; Salet & Savini, 2015), they have recently been identified by public authorities and private investors as opportunities for urban, economic, and real estate development, in particular because of their specific characteristics: a geographical position close to the historic center, the presence of vacant, industrial spaces, lower real estate prices than in the center, the proximity of transport networks and other infrastructures (Albecker, 2015). This leads to a strong dynamic of construction, promotion, and real estate speculation, especially in terms of residential buildings and offices for service companies (Fig. 9).

One of the consequences of such real estate activity is the social transformation and the advance of gentrification in inner suburbs. In the case of the Ourcq, a poor and culturally diverse resident population is being maintained for the time being, thanks to the large presence of social housing and the reduced commitment of private real estate investors in certain sectors (those furthest from the canal).¹⁴ But gentrification is well underway, especially along the canal, where public and private investments in the reshaping of public spaces and in real estate construction are concentrated, attracting a more affluent population.¹⁵ While improvement in the urban living space and the image of the area also benefits the working classes – at least for the time being – their place here is in doubt, both symbolically and financially (Demoulin et al., 2022). This evolution leads to a juxtaposition of spaces integrated into the dynamics of economic and real estate growth on the one hand, and spaces of relegation and social exclusion on the other, which feeds – as is the case for other inner Parisian suburbs (Lebeau, 2014) – the socio-spatial fragmentation of this territory. A context in which the cultural vitality generated by the artistic venues appears both determinant in the creation of social ties and cohesion (although insufficient in itself), and itself jeopardized by the increase in real estate development which gradually leads to a loss of available spaces for the most precarious artists and other alternative players of artistic creation.

¹⁴ In Pantin, for example, the poverty rate is 27 % and 26.4 % of residents are foreigners, compared to 14.5 % and 7.1 % respectively for metropolitan France (Insee, the French National Institute of Statistics, 2018 and 2019).

¹⁵ In Pantin, for example, the share of upper class in the working population rose from 15.3 to 21.8 % between 2008 and 2019, while that of working class reduced from 22.6 to 18.3 %. Furthermore, from 2010 to 2020, the top decile of annual income increased from €32,567 to €41,850 (Insee).

6. Conclusion: the peripheral centrality of the inner suburbs through arts and its challenges

This article highlights the principal aspects and challenges concerning arts and culture in the cities, and more particularly in the inner suburbs. In particular, it defines the concept of peripheral centrality in order to reveal the affirmation, in areas classically characterized as “peripheries”, of a structuring influence and impact on nearby and distant spaces, which can be due to local artistic and cultural dynamics. Such centrality is based on five components, always considered from an evolutionary, reticular, and multi-scalar perspective:

- (1) A territory with a “peripheral” position following the traditional center-periphery model,
- (2) The presence of functions and resources within this territory,
- (3) The ability of this area to attract and structure material and immaterial flows,
- (4) The attraction of this territory in terms of the concrete practices of its inhabitants and other users, making it a hub of social life,
- (5) The symbolic significance and attractiveness of this area, as reflected in media images and social representations.

In the case of the Canal de l’Ourcq, the emergence of a peripheral centrality is clearly linked to the spatial clustering of cultural venues, their collaborative networks, events, and other artistic activities, which are attracting audiences and producing a positive image of the area that radiates out to Paris and beyond. The identification of this peripheral centrality brings to the fore one of the major issues of arts and culture in the city, which are at the heart of tensions between dynamics conducive to an inclusive and cohesive city and those fueling a more fragmented and unfair neoliberal city (Klein & Tremblay, 2016; Michel, 2022b). On the one hand, the affirmation of a cultural centrality in the inner suburbs, like in the Canal de l’Ourcq, contributes to local cultural vitality, with the presence of numerous artistic and cultural venues, activities, and events embedded in the area and working (in some cases) for the common goals of engaging with the public and promoting the participation and well-being of the residents. This can then contribute – together with coherent actions in the social, educational, and economic fields – to social cohesion through the creation of meeting places open to cultural diversity. On the other hand, the affirmation of a peripheral centrality through the arts contributes to the urban transformation of the area and enhances its attractiveness, notably through the effect of marketing strategies and influential cultural amenities and events. This new attractiveness inserts areas like the Ourcq into the rationale of real estate and tourism development and the phenomenon of gentrification – caused by the combined impetus of urban projects and public and private investments – feeding social injustice and socio-spatial fragmentation of the cities.

The Ourcq case in north-east Paris offers insight into international literature beyond the aforementioned tensions. It confirms the strong tendency of artistic and cultural dynamics to embed themselves in former industrial areas, whose atmosphere, image and social practices they help to transform, as in Shanghai (Michel, 2021), Chicago (Lloyd, 2002), London (Pratt, 2009b) and many other cities around the world. Above all, this case study provides further evidence of the development of arts and culture in the inner suburbs and, more broadly, in “peripheral” spaces. These spaces welcome players and venues for artistic creation and cultural dissemination that may not have a place in institutionalized, gentrified, commercialized, and touristified central districts, such as in Bombay (Ithuride, 2014), New York, London, Paris, or Tokyo (Gréillon, 2017). This contributes to changing the often negative image associated with the suburbs and to boosting their creative economy and cultural life (Bain, 2013; Brennan-Horley, 2010; Curtis, 2010; Phelps, 2012). Culture in the suburbs relies on both the presence of cultural players and venues committed to a culture of proximity focused on the cultural participation and practice of local residents, and on the presence of a spectacular culture oriented towards



Fig. 9. Recent real estate developments along the Canal de l'Ourcq.
Photo by Basile Michel, 2023.

the market, consumption, and place branding (Bain, 2013). The latter indicates that the dynamics of urban neoliberalism are expanding in the inner suburbs, which are the focus of public and private real estate investments (Albecker, 2015) and, more specifically, of culture-led urban regeneration driven by policy transfers such as flagship cultural venues and events and designated “cultural and creative districts” (Michel, 2022b). The resulting dynamics and effects (e.g. rising real estate prices, commodification, touristification, and declining artistic creation) highlight the challenges of the life cycle of cultural urban spaces and the ongoing evolution of the geography of arts in the city and its margins (Zukin & Braslow, 2011).

The identification of the peripheral centrality in the case of the Canal de l'Ourcq also raises a conceptual issue. Indeed, the traditional center-periphery model is largely challenged by the process of emergence and affirmation of a cultural and urban centrality in an area with a historically peripheral location which, without calling into question the influence of Paris, shows the evolution of centrality over time (recent emergence in this case) and space (outside the historical urban center). This reassessment is also due to the reciprocal relations and influences between Paris and the suburb along the canal with, for example, the symbolic and practical dismantling of the border separating them (through the attraction of the general public and cultural events aiming to create a continuity beneath the ring road), or an intermingling (which is the basis of the Ourcq's centrality) of endogenous dynamics from the periphery (e.g. the presence of street artists from Seine-Saint-Denis) and exogenous dynamics from the historic center (e.g. the movement of contemporary art galleries from Paris to Romainville). Combined with the still marked divide between Paris and its suburbs, these reciprocal relations and influences demonstrate that, far from being a dependent periphery or a simple extension of the historic centrality, the Ourcq is currently asserting itself as a centrality in the inner suburbs.

In conclusion, beyond the theme of arts in the city, the concept of peripheral centrality opens up more comprehensive perspectives for research on the socio-spatial organization of societies and the place that peripheries hold within them. This concept provides a theoretical and empirical framework for analyzing the forms of centrality that exist in

“peripheral” spaces. It can be useful for examining centralities of different natures in various contexts, such as the cultural centrality of certain rural areas (Delfosse & Georges, 2013) or the concrete centralities of the suburbs (Marchal & Stébé, 2014). On a conceptual level, peripheral centrality makes it possible to focus the analysis on spaces that are often marginalized in urban studies and urban policies, and to show the existence of centralities within them, calling for the overcoming of classical center-periphery approaches. On an operational level, peripheral centrality is also of interest to highlight the risks associated with the emergence of centrality in a peripheral context, given the spread of the dynamics of urban neoliberalism and its undesirable effects (gentrification, socio-spatial fragmentation, etc.). As part of the peripheral turn in urban studies (Ren, 2021), this concept allows for the forms of centrality of “peripheral” spaces to be revealed and analyzed, in order to better understand their realities, their diversity, and the issues at stake, particularly in their relative, reciprocal, evolving, and multi-scalar relationships with “central” areas.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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