Citizen's words are not just idle talk:
Collecting stories for giving ground to the project

Jean-Michel Roux[1, 3], Nicolas Tixier[2, 3]

[1]UMR CNRS PACTE, Institut d'Urbanisme de Grenoble, France
[2]Laboratoire Cresson – UMR CNRS - Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Grenoble, France
[3]BazarUrbain, collectif pluridisciplinaire d'action et de réflexion sur l'espace urbain, France

ABSTRACT: This paper is concerned about the way we go into project on ordinary urban spaces. Changing such spaces take more than a clear political vision guided by a strong architectural design. People are already there, settled and the land is a *palimpsest* of buildings and personal stories. We make the hypothesis that better design needs to take into account this existing. Giving an account of the place and its inhabitants can help reaching it. This story telling of the *genius loci* is both singular and plural. It gives an account of social practices, atmospheres, history(ies). It mixes past, present and future. It gives voice to ordinary citizens in the same way as politicians or urban managers.
We make the hypothesis that hybridizing techniques and expertise from practical and research fields in architecture/urban design can help getting into project. Many methods coming from research world can be adapted to urban design: "commented visits", observations, etc. Speaking, photographing, drawing or filming can express the story telling. Every place, territory or project needs its very own set of techniques. This voice, ordinary and expert in the same time, is given on the spot. These methods make possible the characterization of a place. They make possible a better mutual understanding between all stakeholders of a project. If they are not the project yet, they give it stronger foundations.
The following papers presents the results of 8 years of research and urban projects and develop, as an example, one of our projects for a 300 social dwellings neighbourhood in Hem, France, for which we been awarded the price of "Young urban designer of the year" by the Ministry for Sustainable Development and Planning in 2007.

Conference theme: Collaborative and interdisciplinary research, education, and design
Keywords: ordinary spaces, stories, project, urban design

INTRODUCTION

It is not an ordinary thing that getting interested by ordinary things.
Going into project on ordinary urban spaces such as brownfields, derelict lands, suburbs, urban fringes needs special tools and attitudes. Changing such spaces take more than a clear political vision guided by a strong architectural design. People are already there, settled and the land is a *palimpsest* of buildings and personal stories. Giving an account of the place and its inhabitants can help getting into project. This story telling of the *genius loci* is both singular and plural. It gives an account of social practices, atmospheres, history(ies). It mixes past, present and future. It gives voice to ordinary citizens in the same way as politicians or urban managers.
Better design on such spaces needs to take into account the existing. We make the hypothesis that hybridizing techniques and expertise from practical and research fields in architecture/urban design can help getting into project. The following papers presents the results of 8 years of research and urban projects and develop, as an example, one of our projects for a 300 social dwellings neighbourhood in Hem, France (BazarUrbain 2007).

1. *IN SITU…* FIRST OF ALL

For us, being *in situ* is a *sine qua none* both for analysis and project purposes. Being in situ is about visiting places or meeting their users. It is also about making a place a necessary third party for every project participant… residents, designers, project managers.
This position, which we use for all our studies, entails developing specific methods to help "reveal" the place through a multi-faceted prism: account, observation, measurement taking, urban reading. This methodology is further supported by analysis concepts that enable us to name and organize these sensitive, technical and practical *corpora*.

1.1. Telling the story of a place

Being sensitive to Perec's attempts (Perec 1974) and Pierre Sansot's early researchs (Sansot 1986), the account appears as one of the necessary modalities for apprehending a place (Thibaud and Tixier 1998). The Cresson laboratory has developed many space-recounting techniques, from Jean-François Augoyard's PhD in the seventies on the Villeneuve neighbourhood in Grenoble (Augoyard 1979) to the "commented visit" method theorized by Jean-Paul Thibaud (Thibaud and Grosjean 2001), and we applied them to the project to recount the place and involve its actors.

A "situated account" consists in describing a place and its customs orally while being on the spot, thus allowing a confrontation between an oral representation and the "reality" of the land. The "shared account" which takes place inside a group helps introduce time, bodies and customs in real-life situations. It also makes people aware of individual and collective representations and permits laying the foundations of a common experience.

Figure 1: "Collective visit" – Saint-Etienne. Source: (BazarUrbain 2001)

"Commented visits" resulting from research led to "collective visits", which we almost systematically organize with actors associated with a given place: city officials and technicians, people working in urban management (lenders, teachers, postmen, city policemen, garbage collectors, people in charge of parks and green spaces and road maintenance etc.), users, representatives of associations or residents.

Figure 2: "Collective" visit with technicians of urban management. Source: (BazarUrbain 2007)

Words delivered are a way to name practices, perceptions, desires, the attachment to a place, complete dissatisfaction etc. Photographs are systematically taken and selected at the end of a collective discussion by those who took part in the visit. "Visit albums" are then put together to restitute words and pictures under various forms depending on the actions: portfolios, ABC books, flip books, urban albums, etc.

The principle always consists in returning something to those who accepted to give some of their time. These "albums" may be handed over at a public meeting. Individual presentations are multiplied by those delivered by the others, and thus become polyglot. The experience is shared; the knowledge of the place is built up in small touches that will then be refined through other approaches.

Figure 3: "A square for three neighbourhoods" - 2007 - Djamel Klouche's and Jan Kopp's project following the BazarUrbain study (2005). Source: (BazarUrbain 2007)

Telling the story of a place enriches the project as it finds its seeds in the territory competences (original practices, know-how and imagination, heritage etc.).

Far from slowing things down, taking the time to speak accelerates the project as the actors' different views are rapidly absorbed. Without being an extravagant or even unnecessary expenditure, recounting gives the possibility to involve residents in the project rather than apply the project to them. With such an approach, the sponsor is a priori assured of a better project feasibility in due time while reducing risks of being at odds with the residents.

1.2. Observation, statement and measurement through urban reading

Being *in situ* is also a way of observing and measuring, a way we apply through the notion of territory reading. In French, reading (*lecture*) implies an analysis or a rigorous, progressive interpretation of a text, road or landscape. For that matter, read and link have the same Indo-European root, *leg*, meaning to gather, to choose. When we read a map or an urban landscape, what we do is decipher its constitutive elements to link them one to another in order to arrive at a general meaning.

Although reading city maps is crucial to urban analysis, one should not forget to read a place with one's own eyes by going on the spot, pacing up and down and "measuring the site". As Bruno Queysanne noticed

> To our wonderment, the Latin meaning of the word read, before taking on today's underlying meaning, also means going through space, wandering, sailing along the twists and turns of the coast. Thus, there would be a first reading which would not merely decipher signs deriving from a two-dimensional plan but which would entail exploring a three-dimensional space with adventurous connotations as whether by land or by sea, space would be read along winding routes. Therefore, reading space would imply gathering it by walking through it, by travelling its length and breadth. The spatial form cannot be given in one go, but won over little by little (Queysanne 1983: 4-5).

As far as we are concerned, visiting/reading occurs at different speeds, depending on the means of transport (on foot, by bus, by car), in order to apprehend territorial scales ranging from site to territory. This kind of reading helps ascertain whether such or such a neighbourhood is far away from or close to the city centre or shopping areas, how much time is gained and how much energy is saved by walking through pedestrian passageways or by walking up stairs, whether a given public transportation line is efficient or not etc.

2. PAYING ATTENTION TO THE ORDINARY MAKING OF A CITY

It is necessary for us to look closely at how a city is designed and continuously re-designed. Rather than the work of an architect, an urban planner or a politician, a city is made day by day, by capillarity, through an anonymous accretion of actions resulting from a vast number of individuals. Understanding the

city so as to work on it requires paying attention to the ordinary making of urbaneness.

This attention even leads to the following action postulate: the territory carries in itself the qualities and elements that are necessary for building up a project, in particular in its urban fabric, its customs or its ordinary heritage.

2.1. The urban fabric

Making the urban fabric a subject of research, analysis or a project entails taking interest in the context, the site, the trivial things just like Marcel Poëte (Poëte 2000) or Philippe Panerai (Mangin and Panerai 1999) invite us to do. The urban fabric is not interested in exceptionalness or in great urban works, *i.e.* remarkable features such as monuments, palaces, churches etc., but in the very structure of the city. It means understanding how an urban organization shows a strong solidarity between its various elements as well as a capacity to adjust, alter or transform oneself.

This involves thinking about how elements can be renewed and continuously substituted without distorting the coherence and efficiency of the city as a whole. Lastly, working on urban fabrics amounts to admitting that several fabrics co-exit next to one another in the city, thereby making up a whole. At least in theory, this inevitably raises the standing issue of how links can be woven between urban fabrics of different times or natures.

Figure 4: Residents reading Echirolles' urban fabrics – "visit album". Source: (BazarUrbain, 2004)

2.2. Customs and ordinary heritage

The city is not only one or several urban forms; it is also one or several social forms. Understanding one of them entails taking an interest in the other. When a city is made through men's anonymous and daily actions, it is essential to take their ways of living into account. We postulate that residents and users are "experts of their daily lives", and that they are able to shed light on users' competences and on the ordinary heritage of places.

Through adequate techniques (walks, guided visits, free-conversation style speeches), it becomes possible

to put residents in a situation where they can say what makes sense in their living places. Gradually, they manage to expose elements of an apparently very ordinary heritage such as views, allotment gardens, celebration moments or "insignificant" buildings that are in fact loaded with meanings (craftsmen's houses, factories etc.). This is how heritage professionals acquire elements of conservation and of enhancement projects.

This questions the very nature of the act of inscribing something on a heritage list. We manage to stay away from the traditional great works and artefacts, which are usually identified through classical listings. Heritage is not only about beautiful freestone, but everything which, in a city, results from layouts that are full of meaning and remarkable for their spatial, sensitive and user-friendly qualities (view, sound, insulation…). Naturally, it can be spaces or, more exactly, sensitive configurations as well as temporalities and customs: so many heritage elements that are difficult to express, qualify and acknowledge.

The techniques used enable us to conduct inventories by noting down what lies there - in its ordinariness - and makes our urban daily lives delightful… They allow us to consider inscribing users' customs as a heritage in an active and respectful manner. They give us the possibility to project a future without denying today's customs or falling into automatic conservatism. By using users' competences the right way, by making residents the guardians of a place's imagination, we are trying to come close to the genius loci.

This way, we hope that inscribing a place or a building on a heritage list does not involve what could be caricaturized as a "murder of customs" aimed at rediscovering an image of the past or setting up a new function that is disconnected from the existing situation and local customs.

3. BEING IN PROJECT… THREE MODES OF ENTRY

We usually enter in a project by considering the three following modes: customs, atmospheres and the play of scale.

3.1. Mastery of custom, mastery of customs - (*Maîtrise d'usage, maîtrise des usages*)
With consultation having legal force in France, residents and users are gradually seen as a possible third mastery for projects alongside the usual contracting authorities and architects. Accepting such an attractive but dangerous idea of "mastery of custom" entails knowing exactly what consultation should (and should not) be about and which balance ratios should be reached among the three parties.

The will to see the residents participate in urban projects is not enough. Participation is not something that can be decreed. A clear position must be adopted about the whole project, just as about its available tools and process of realization. The willingness of local councillors is often undermined by inexperience.

Furthermore, the overflowing enthusiasm of young architects / urban planners who supported participation architecture during the urban struggles of the 70s gave way to scepticism among professionals as to the interest of consultation when putting together a project. First of all, when conceiving of the residents' participation, elected representatives, professionals and residents must learn to get to know each other and work together, but also to preserve their exclusive territories. Even if a resident is involved in the life of his/her city (e.g. as the head of an association or a member of a neighbourhood authority), even if he/she can boast a professional experience in city management, he/she cannot expect to play the role of an elected representative or urban planner. It is up to elected representatives to make decisions, which will be binding on the community, and up to the urban planner to implement the territory project.

That said, conducting a survey on customs helps understand the possibilities of a territory on a large range of scales from the house and its backyard to the road systems. "Mastery of custom" enables us to relativize the way we look at project management and project ownership.

Users dismantle some myths and planning reflexes. Their aesthetic vision may surprise taste experts. The same goes for the way people look at the "necessity" of standardizing a road. Although no driver is against road improvement, some will mention the pleasure they feel when driving on old highways, as opposed to being driven on new highways.

Figure 5: "embedded journey" with the patrolman on the motorway. Source: (BazarUrbain, 2007)

3.2. The notion of atmosphere as a principle of disciplinary crossing
Our desire to cross masteries' or disciplines' points of view raises the question of the principles of hybridization. This step can be taken thanks to the notion of architectural and urban atmosphere, which is forged through research.

Figure 6: Multi-actor workshop. City of Saint-Etienne. Source: (BazarUrbain, 2001)

Atmospheres lie at a crossroads of various dimensions that help apprehend and understand them. This concept, which was developed at the Cresson and Cerma laboratories, in particular by Jean-François Augoyard (Augoyard 2007) or Pascal Amphoux (Amphoux 1998), identifies either a phenomenon or a place to be analyzed at a crossroads of several dimensions: the sensitive dimension (what appeals to our senses, what we feel), the technical dimension (buildings, road system, technical engineering) and the social dimension (practices, imagination of a place).

This concept is particularly interesting for projects because if we position ourselves at a crossroads of different dimensions for the reading of a place and the development of its project, decisions are made by taking into account the complexity of the existing situation rather than in favour of an exclusive dimension that would only correspond to a partial vision of things. Building up a project by using all these data is more complex but also richer and more interesting as regards proposals, insofar as every actor can play a role in relation to his/her competences.

3.2. Interscalarity: principle of multi-scale action and reflection

Approaching a site whereby actors play their own roles leads us to enter a project on a scale where the body becomes rooted into the territory by taking on various postures and moving itself. It is the scale of the body and sensory modes, the immediate scale, the scale of the plot, of the block of houses, or even of the neighbourhood. It is the scale of proximity, of the users' competence for which their daily expertise is relevant. When using the scale of the body, we are not necessarily in a public space, but maybe in a private space, a collective space, or in the street, close to where we live and work. This type of scale uses methods such as wandering, movement, walking, talking while walking.

Even if this scale is extremely important to us, we do not, however, ignore the other scales, which refer to neighbourhoods, cities, suburbs or even territories.

From the closest to the furthest, the project must take into account the experience acquired at these various scales in order to propose and build up a coherent system by alternating between these different scales. A project on a block of houses should not ignore the coherence of the neighbourhood nor its inscription within a larger scale…

CONCLUSION

Such an expert though ordinary presentation takes place *in situ* most of the time. The place then acts as a third party between the person who gives the presentation and the investigator. Although such methods are not really consultation tools, they are first used to mention the characteristics of a site together with its atmospheres and customs, revealing the various elements of its ordinary heritage. Words delivered also enable all the stakeholders to get to know everyone's representations and challenges. Lastly, synthesizing them allows to generate challenges, identify levers and make an inventory of ideas for the project.

However, words delivered take on special meaning when, some time later, they are materially returned to their "owners". This is done according to three methods: the transcription of their own stories (full text, pictures etc.), the editing of the elements making up the stories of others (ABC book, photo albums with comments, polyglot itineraries, etc.) and the thematized synthesis that generates characteristics and challenges for the location. Attention given to these words, the possibility of reading one's stories again or those of others and of reacting again turns the investigator into the investigated person. And that might also be part of a project.

CASE STUDY: HEM (FRANCE)

Recitation, exhibition, and design: 3 modes of action for a neighbourhood

Figure 7: Hauts-Champs neighbourhood before renovation. Source: (BazarUrbain 2005)

The Hauts Champs neighbourhood is made up of strips of house blocks, which belong to the Logicil (CMH group) social landlord and is located in Hem, in northern France. Right in the middle of the blocks, more than 400 garages were built as mineral, closed spaces and dead ends. These dilapidated garages, separate from the houses, are sometimes used for unlawful activities. The way they are positioned has contributed to develop a feeling of insecurity that has been slowly enhanced by the garages left vacant.

Figure 8: Entrance of a collective backyard. Source: (BazarUrbain 2005)

The aim of the study for which BazarUrbain was appointed is to achieve, starting from the garage issue, a "shared project" with a view to improving the neighbourhood by drawing up a report on the way

blocks are run, devising organization scenarios as well as an overall plan.
This approach is based on three work principles:
- A *principle of scales*: working on the project by using several scales: object – building – block of houses – neighbourhood – city
- An *interdisciplinary principle*: analyzing and suggesting courses of action by counterbalancing social dimensions (customs), sensitive dimensions (atmospheres) and technical dimensions (built-up structures) in the best possible way
- A *principle of involvement*: implementing a process in which contracting authorities, architects and mastery of customs can be involved, expressed and heard.

Three modes of action make up the project. Every action is defined in close relationship with the contracting authorities and gives rise to a public meeting during which a document is handed over to all actors, including residents.
- The *recitation* consists in reading and telling about the location so as to lay the foundations of the project. It is about drawing up an inventory of urban and social places through urban reading (forms, regulations, customs), organizing collective itineraries which specifically concern contracting authorities, architects and customs and setting up interview-based visits at the residents' private homes. Every block of houses is subject to a report synthesizing the three different readings of the place (data base, topic mappings, thematized speeches) and announcing the challenges of the forthcoming project.
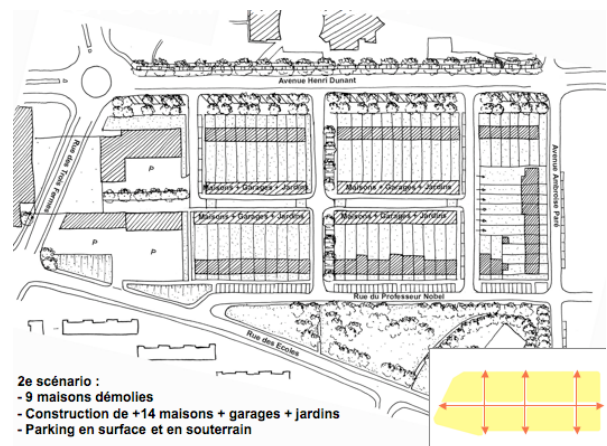
Figure 9: Plan of a scenario - project. Source: (BazarUrbain 2007)

- The *exhibition*, which aims at reversing images, consists in collecting the story of a place and the memories of its residents and actors (local communities, lender…) in order to help improve the neighbourhood and its residents. This activity, which runs across every block of houses, will be completed in Spring 2009 and a book including living words, a photographic look and a return to archives to present

the initial urban project (in the late 50s) with its developments will be published.

Figure 10: Photo extract from a family album – exhibition book. Source: (M. Arnaud and BazarUrbain 2006)

-    Design consists in producing scenarios to develop the hearts of the blocks and mass plans taking into account both the residents' ways of life and urban reality with its developments on every scale (urban organization maps, cross section of a street, housing approval proposals). Regarding this phase, the residents' contribution was crucial to subtly identify local issues (e.g. the need for storing spaces), rely on existing practices (rainwater collection…) and pinpoint the challenges and scales caused by inevitable transformations.


Figure 11: Overall plan - project. Source: (BazarUrbain 2008)

From public meetings to participative workshops
As regards the housing scale, we set up workshops in collaboration with the residents to best define the specifications of two objects which are useful for everyone and contribute to change the neighbourhood image: a multi-function console for house fronts and a garden shelter at the backs. The latter, which can be used in different ways (storing space or DIY, additional

room etc.) permits collecting rainwater and according to sky conditions, even dew water.
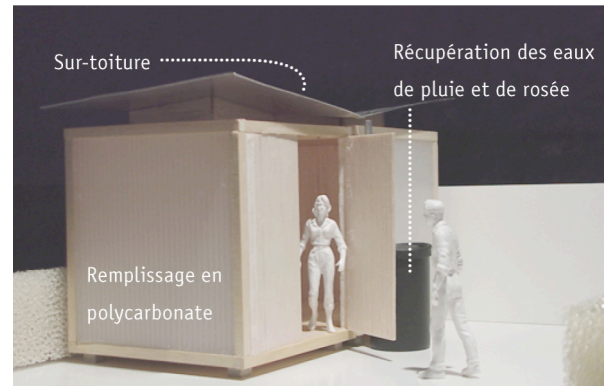
Figure 12: Garden shelter - project. Source: (BazarUrbain 2006)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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