

Plaine Commune in Grand Paris: Culture-led Development Planning in the Paris *Banlieue*

Introduction

The scope of this paper is to critically examine the transformation of part of the northern suburbs of Paris – namely, *Territoire Plaine Commune* - into a “*Territory of Culture and Creativity*” of the Parisian metropolis. This project takes place in the context of the replanning of the Paris metropolitan area, which has been launched since a decade, named as *Grand Paris*. In the first place, the proclaimed state intention is to enhance the international competitiveness of the Paris metropolis, attempting through this process to extend the Parisian administrative and symbolic space beyond the boundaries imposed by the *Périphérique (Paris intra-muros)* (see also Enright, 2014, Subra, 2012). This encapsulation of the suburbs of the *petite couronne*, beyond its administrative end aims also at the emergence of poles of local specialization and development in specific cutting-edge economic sectors¹ (Gallez, 2014).

In this context, one major objective of the *Grand Paris* planning is the emergence of a pole for the cultural and creative economy in the metropolitan area of the french capital. Interestingly, for the production of this new creative pole has been chosen the up- until now “backyard” of the metropolis, the area of the former industrial suburbs of Plaine Commune. Therefore, the question that arises is the way in which Plaine Commune is being involved in the planning process for Grand Paris, through the cultural and creative economy, and the possible impacts of the “*Territory of Culture and Creativity*” project. This study is based on a research carried out a combination of examination of relevant documentation, participatory observation and ten (10) interviews with key informants from local government and cultural and creative spaces, conducted between April and July 2016.

Cultural and creative economy in the global city

Culture and, in a broader context, the activities of the so-called creative economy form nowadays a well-established pattern of urban development strategies. On the one hand, culture-led urban development policies present widespread cases of implementation in the major cities of the developed capitalism, which in their turn tend to mobilize more peripheral cities (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). On the other hand, it could be argued that this type of urban development strategies is a consolidating process of the entrepreneurial city paradigm, by enhancing cities’ attractiveness and by contributing to the city-branding formation. Nowadays, the city is being experienced as a place attributed to tourism, entertainment, and consumption (Harvey, 1989), while culture is, in general, being commercialized and integrated into urban development planning, as a growth driver (Peck, 2005). In

¹ In the early '00's, the dominant french political and economic circles became importantly concerned regarding Paris steady back off in the world cities classification -particularly compared to New York and London- along with potential risks face in Asian mega-cities (Shanghai, Tokyo). In this context, the french political and economic elites called then for a strengthening of french economic competitiveness, "relying on an open, dynamic, attractive Capital-Region, producer of wealth and jobs" (Blanc, 2010).

addition to this, cultural development projects are often being associated with gentrification processes and tendencies of legitimization of the conditions of uneven development of the urban space (Zukin, 1996), in various ways which certainly depend on local features, local government policies, the existence of local resistances and other factors (Shaw, 2005).

In the Grand Paris context, the original state intention was that Plaine Commune should be integrated as a “cluster of the creative economy” developed in the area of Carrefour Pleyel Metro Station, in Saint-Ouen (Blanc, 2010). However, local authorities rejected such a proposal for a new creative city, as leaving aside the rest of Plaine Commune area, and also for the one-dimensional economic logic implied (Lebeau, 2014). Since then, an active debate has occurred among the actors and local institutions, concerning urban culture and the particular identity of the area, in which its multicultural and popular physiognomy is of paramount importance. As Marie Bokapenga, at the time responsible for the “Atelier de Plaine Commune” emphasized,

“The project for a ‘cluster of creative economy’ was proposed at the time by the state. At that time, local artists, actors and representatives of the local government said that we do not want creative industries, we do not recognize ourselves in that, that this is a very few people and does not represent the region. Then began the debate about urban cultures, hip hop, about a specific identity of the region where there are people who have come almost from everywhere. And so the “Region of Culture and Creation” emerged as the outcome of the proposals and the correlation of forces” (Extract from an interview with the author in 13/06/2016, translated by the author).

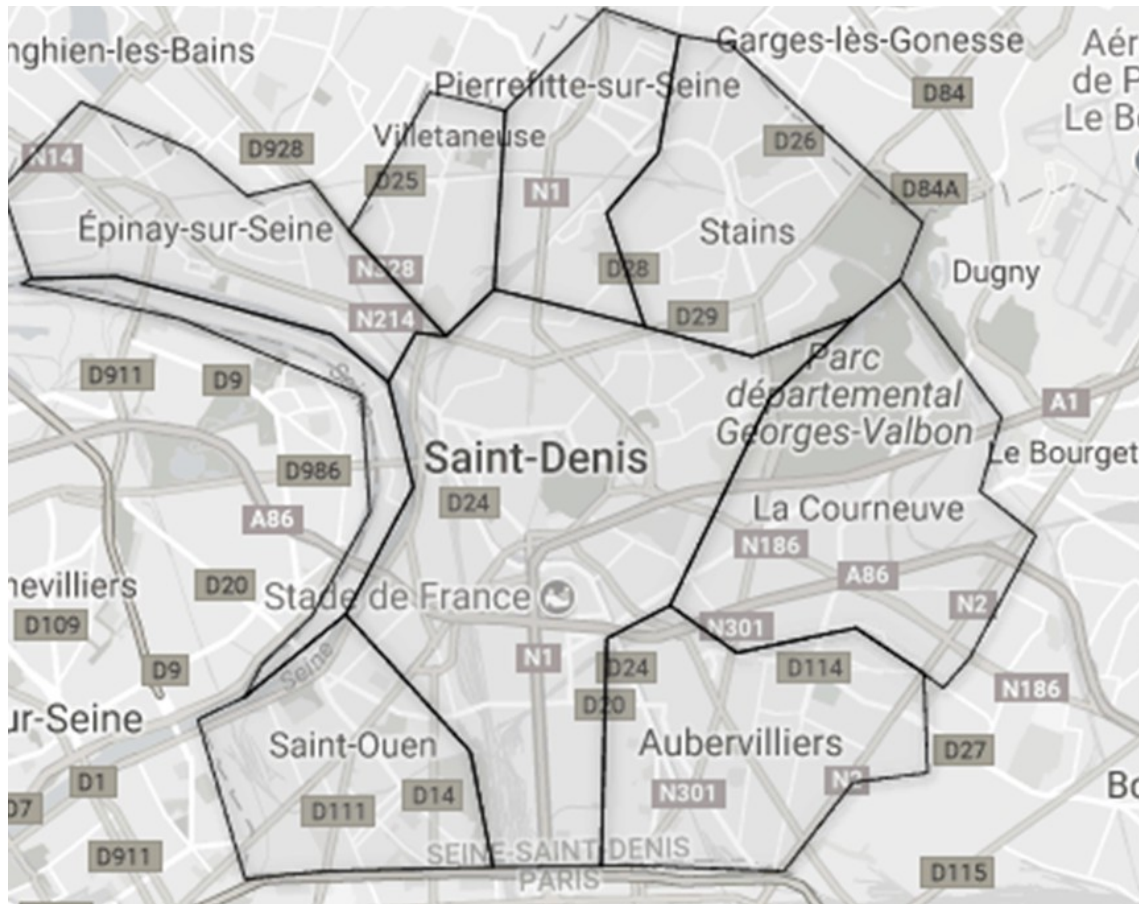
On this basis, Plaine Commune has negotiated with the government institutions with a view of promoting a more inclusive model of local development, which resulted in the signing of the *Contrat de Développement Territorial* (CDT), named as “*Plaine Commune: Territoire de la Culture et de la Création*” to be implemented in the 2014-2030 period.

Plaine Commune: The “edge of the city” from the industrial era to the Grand Paris

Plaine Commune is a new inter-municipal entity in the north of the City of Paris, which was officially founded in 2016, covering a land of 47.4 km² with a population of 414,121 inhabitants. In its administrative boundaries, nine municipalities are included, namely: Aubervilliers, Epinay-sur-Seine, L’Île Saint-Denis, La Courneuve, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen, Stains, and Villetaneuse.

Plaine Commune is a historical part of the parisian, and overall french industrial past, one of the most heavily industrialised areas in Europe, between the mid-19th century and up until the late ‘60s. This industrial glory past was certainly accompanied by the development of a dynamic labor movement that played a key role in the social history of France in the 20th century. At the local political level, the influence of the communist left contributed to the emergence of the “banlieue rouge”, while the local authorities contributed very importantly in shaping its ‘paradigm’ (Rustenholz, 2015). The main goal of the “banlieue rouge” was the improvement of the working and living conditions of the working class, with a particular focus on

social housing, as well as other types of local infrastructure to enhance access to collective goods (APUR, 2017).



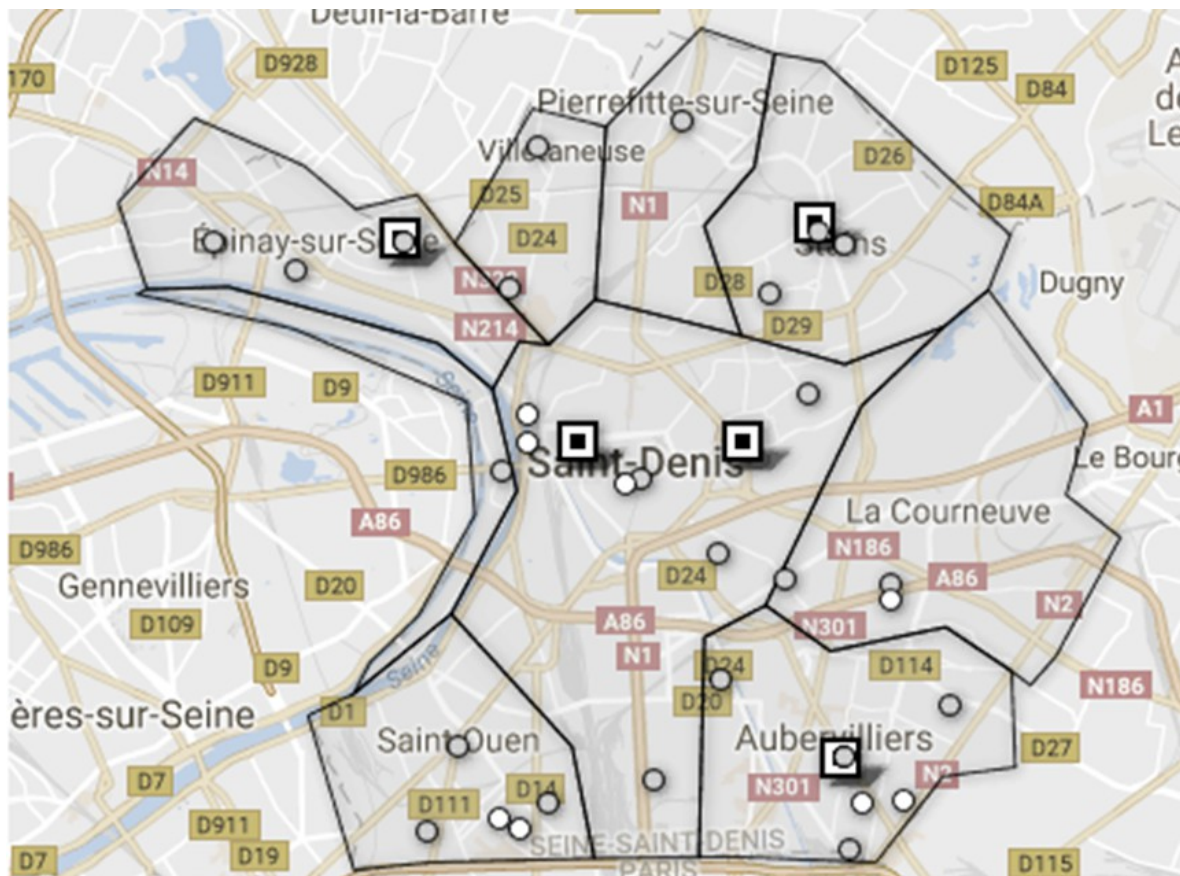
Map 1: Administrative map of Plaine Commune. Sotiris Koskoletos and Katerina Stamatopoulou©

Later, the two synchronic processes of deindustrialisation ('inside') and decolonization ('outside') have come to transform the region's physiognomy in the late 20th century. On the one hand, deindustrialisation contributed to a degradation in the life condition of the local industrial working class, which at a next stage resulted in a massive exodus from the northern suburbs of Paris, ending in a population shrinkage in Plaine Commune by the end of the century (Lebeau, 2007). While the white, french working class, abandoned Plaine Commune, new entrants settled in the area coming mainly from the North and sub-Saharan Africa. Although, "new migration" contributed in the multicultural regeneration of the northern Parisian suburbs, this development has not been actually embraced by the state apparatuses, resulting steadily to the negative signifier of the Paris *banlieues* as "badlands" (Dikeç, 2013, see also Wacquant, 2008).

This process of deindustrialisation created conditions for a local productive transition, mainly because of the emergence of an urban void, becoming attractive for new uses, especially for the tertiary sector. In this context, the tertiarisation of Plaine Commune has been significantly associated with "creative industries". Gradually, the

area became a pole for the audiovisual industry at a national level, clustered in two local sites –*Cité du Cinéma* and *Entrepôts et Magasins de Paris* (Lebeau, 2013). However, it worth mentioning that except creative industries there exists a real diversity of cultural spaces, ranging from the presence of institutional and entrepreneurial spaces to “non-typical” cultural spaces developed in the once upon a time industrial sites.

These “non-typical” spaces host artists of the area or others coming from anywhere else of the metropolis attracted firstly but not only, by the cheap rents. They also attract an avant-garde Parisian audience, fascinated by the “cool” and “alternative” artistic creation, as well as by youngsters in their discovery of alternative modes and places to entertain themselves (see also, Raad, 2015). As depicted on the map, the distribution of this variety of cultural spaces in the area implies a spatial concentration in the municipalities flanking Paris.



Map 2: Cultural sites in Plaine Commune. White circles depict “non-typical” cultural spaces, grey circles hold for municipal cultural spaces, while squares are for other ‘typical’ cultural spaces (like major theaters and dance halls). Sotiris Koskoletos and Katerina Stamatopoulou©

Contrat de Développement Territorial - 2014-2030

The “*Contrat de Développement Territorial*” signed between the State and the local authorities included extensive interventions in several fields: improvements in

local transport -mainly linked to the construction of the Grand Paris Express- environmental interventions, renovation of the housing stock -accompanied with a construction of about 70,000 new residences- local actions to boost employability for the most vulnerable social groups and, certainly, actions to support cultural production, as well as “beautification” actions (CDT, 2014).

Certainly, possibilities for a more ‘positive’ perception of Plaine Commune and its inhabitants for the French public opinion are being recognized. In the words of Wael Sghier, at the time contact person of the local cultural network MAAD 93,

“I hope that this project would change the image of the region, to show the various things that take place in here, that the inhabitants of the area are like all the others (in the Paris region), and that there are also people who are fighting, who have interesting things to say, as well that there are cultural spaces and people who do ‘positive’ things” (Extract from an interview with the author in 01/06/2016, author’s translation).

However, these objectives being ambitious on the one hand, they remain largely in line with state priorities, posing significant challenges to local authorities, as well as for the popular physiognomy of the area. As noted in an interview with Lilia Santana, at the time Plaine Commune official responsible for local and participatory democracy,

“[For instance] it is not the City of Courneuve to decide the construction of 5,000 new residences in its land. It is the state that has recognized the existence of a major housing crisis and decided that a certain number of dwellings must be built. But to build 5,000 homes in a city of 23,000 people means you’re going to reproduce the city.” (Extract from an interview with the author on 27/05/2016, author’s translation).

Similar considerations regarding local development are shared by other members of the local authorities or those who are active in the field of culture. It worth mentioning that among local actors there is a high awareness regarding gentrification processes, which they decisively reject. As Valentine Roy, Plaine Commune executive, responsible for cultural policy,

“We do not want to become what we call a ‘creative city’, Plaine Commune is not pursuing such a development. We will remain popular cities, emphasizing everyday life. There is no intention of gentrification, on the contrary we want to preserve social housing and social services” (Extract from an interview with the author in 20/07/2016, author’s translation)

Whilst any intention of activation of gentrification processes is explicitly rejected by local government officials, at the same time it is considered that a certain “change”- induced by social mixing to be brought by an increased presence of middle-class residents - is almost inevitable. As mentioned by Clément Aumenier, at the time Communication Director of the City of Saint-Denis,

"The area shows signs of degradation and therefore rents are far from considered to be high, so it is possible that Parisians might begin to settle here, but this would take time. Certainly, this may concern people linked to the creative industries. This is not yet the case, but in 10 years it could be possible, as the image of the city will change." (Extract from an interview with the author on 23/06/2016, author's translation).

It seems that the implementation of a cultural-led planning could gradually attract middle class newcomers, possessors of cultural capital, who may pull more well-off strata at a later stage. Besides, data from the real - estate market are indicative of the existence of a significant rent gap between Plaine Commune and its closest parisian arrondissements. According to Meilleurs Agents data for the first semester of 2016 (www.MeilleursAgents.com - last access 02/06/2017), the average purchase prices in the 18th and 19th arrondissements were estimated 8000 euros/ m² and 7000 euros/ m² respectively. At the same time, the relevant data for Plaine Commune show that the average house purchase price does not exceed 5300/ m² in Carrefour-Pleyel, its most expensive district. In this case, a re-imaging of the area could shine a signal for Parisians to move to the north, so as that they could make profit of a "cool" lifestyle in affordable housing prices. As a consequence, the local social housing and generally recompensing social measures should contribute enough, so that the numerous vulnerable groups of the area would not be exposed at risk of displacement.

Concluding remarks

In the light of the above, the question of the integration of Plaine Commune in the planning process for Grand Paris could be understood as an exercise of local policy in a pre-determined framework. The rejection of the one-dimensional "cluster" approach and the encouragement of a pluralistic artistic creation, as well as the inclusion of critical local issues is certainly a positive aspect of this project. Besides, it is also positive that the signed contract included policies for the strengthening of local cultural production, as well as provisions for an increased access of women, the youth and immigrants in employment and collective goods. Lastly, it should be noted that the construction of new residences considers that social housing (HLM) is being kept at 40% of total local housing, maintaining the current share of social housing in the total housing stock of Plaine Commune. This action is being highly valorized by the local authorities, as consisting "a form of resistance", in the words of Antonio Aniesa, at the time member Plaine Commune official, in charge of Grand Paris (Extract from an interview in 06/07/2016, translated by the author) .

However, despite these positive predictions, signs of change in the area's physiognomy could already be traced. For instance, a further internal spatial polarization in the area may occur, as the majority of actions are planned to take place in the municipalities next to Paris. Moreover, it is uncertain that people of the area -most of the times lacking high cultural capital- could be integrated creative industries. In addition to these, the existing rent gap between Plaine Commune and the nearby Parisian arrondissements could trigger gentrification processes at key places, around Grand Paris Express metro stations, or major regenerated sites, often

close to 'creative' poles, or 'non-typical' cultural spaces (e.g. Néaacité housing complex). In any case, the "alternative" atmosphere of the area makes Plaine Commune already appealing to Paris middle classes. These newcomers –most of them high cultural capital possessors, lacking economic capital- could reinforce sporadic marginal gentrification processes (see also, Raad, 2012). Finally, actions that aim in the absorption of slums and insalubrious dwelling without addressing effectively (at the time of the research, see also Legros, 2010 for a history of the topic) the resettlement of their current residents (Roms, or undocumented immigrants) could be considered as a signal of an -although undeclared- actually existing alteration of the popular physiognomy of Plaine Commune.

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