

## **Urban polycentrism and housing policy**

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France is seen from abroad as a centralised country, but urban research in France have developed in relation with political efforts to decentralise the country and to meet needs of citizens inhabiting in all regions.

Those efforts were linked at first after the Second World War with the rebuilding of the country, and with the attempt to develop industrial sites everywhere possible. Social housing became a key issue in such a project, for gathering workers from the rural surroundings, and for housing teachers, nurses, and other people needed by local services.

In 1967 plans about land use became compulsory in all urban centres more than 10 000 inhabitants, or having important variations of occupation between the seasons because of tourism. Any little town was asked to look for industries or enterprises to come in, and pay taxes, to design a zone for activities, and to choose the zones in which housing will be developed private or public.

The result is a country which can be seen half as very centralised, with three regions producing 45% of the GDP, and having an individual income quite above the national average; and half as a polycentric network of towns of different sizes. Urban research has shown that this big difference in outcomes is linked with the past histories of the territories. Urban and economic policies cannot overcome this and must deal with. Social cohesion is brought through national welfare redistribution, but this does not change the competitive positions of the territories. What is important is the quality of life for everybody. A new urban model appears: the town for all, with equity at all levels. Polycentrism is the spatial aspect of such a model.

The shift from an industrial economy and polarised urban model to a service economy leaves the cities with the material basis to think themselves as nodes in the urban polycentrism, with still an industrial basis, but with the project of new activities, and new ways of life. The city presents itself as a centre giving education to youngsters as much as possible, and ensuring the best quality of life possible for all. The theme of “quality of life” in towns appeared at the end of the seventies as a demand for a new way of managing the urban fabric for the inhabitants.

Efforts have been made at all levels to implement this important move. Municipalities who used to be tightly lead in their development, have won a greater autonomy since the laws decentralizing political power in 1982. But their financial means are often too small to give them enough power; they have been obliged to make alliances at the local level and to create new entities, made of several commune. Urban polycentrism needs to strengthen the local centres by decentralisation of former national activities; it needs also to strengthen each centre by an adequate housing policy.

## **Strengthening local centres by decentralisation and coalitions**

France, as the rest of Europe, has an old network of many localities, that history has developed in a rather centralised manner, but which remains ready for new developments. In the last years the rural communes, near the big urban centres have received all the demographic development. Concentration seems no longer a fatality, as citizens are looking for new ways of life, with more space, more nature, more comfort. Two contradictory movements seem to affect the urban fabric: the concentration of money and ownership in the economy, the search for space in urban life. Urban polycentrism tries to conceal those two trends. Here are listed some of the French experiences about it, quite quickly, as the French regional planning is already mentioned in the Slovak document introducing the conference.

After the Second world war France decentralized the Paris industry: the aircraft industry was moved to Toulouse for instance, and several plants of car industries were created in the regions, with social housing for industry workers and for workers in the services generated by the urban development. About 200 medium size towns benefited of this policy.

In 1963 was created DATAR, Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'aménagement régionale. This new administration was in charge of mobilising the others through studies and distribution of incentives. Its first task was to create "**métropoles d'équilibre**", to transform into growth economic engines the big towns in the regions with enough inhabitants, and enough diversity of economic activities. Paris decentralized some research institutes or some qualified service activities to those metropolises. The old regions capitals became those metropolises and tried to develop as full towns, with a large set of activities. Since the decentralisation laws of 1983 regional capitals have developed urban projects to become attractive to international investment, using cultural events to appear on the national and European agendas. Urban research showed that the dependency of the region activities to those towns has increased.

At the same moment France was confronted to the coming home of a million and a half French people from Algeria, and of some Algerians too. Those people could not be welcomed in the usual social housing estates linked with industry. Something new had to be thought of: **new towns** near the main big towns in which they will be able to find jobs: five new towns near Paris, one near Marseille, one near Lyon, one near Lille. Those new towns were organised carefully to avoid the problems already met by the "grands ensembles" of social housing. The balance between jobs and housing was searched, with a nice design of zones for activities and a great care for the design of the housing zones. To-day the new towns around Paris welcome the new activities; they are the poles of the regional polycentrism. All new towns have created references in a new urban way of life and in the debate about the best form of suburbanisation.

**Middle size towns** seemed not attractive enough for consumers and tourists, the national government offered incentives to renovate the shops and the housing in the centres of those towns, and to make value of heritage. This program gave a wealthiest aspect to those towns, but specialised their centres in retailing and tourism.

After the laws of 1983, the national planning system was decentralised and the regions elaborated the new plans. In Poitou-Charentes appeared the first **Réseau de villes**. The main towns of this rural region, Poitiers, Angoulême, La Rochelle, Niort, Chateauroux, created an

union of towns employing urban researchers to make a specific urban part in the regional plan. DATAR recommended building such urban networks everywhere.

The development of education at all levels, and at the **University** level specially, has opened the country to urban polycentrism. Regional metropolises were university towns in the middle age already. But the Napoleonic organisation had centralised the French university on a unique model, driven by Paris University. Since the sixties the universities have won their autonomy and the right to develop in different professional perspectives with the participation of enterprises and private bodies. The plan Université 2000 at the beginning of the nineties has created new universities in second rank towns, the new towns around Paris, and middle size towns in regions. Going to university and participating in the knowledge economy becomes a possible prospect for any citizen.

The transition from a very hierarchical urban model to a more equal one is of course very difficult. For 20 years the policy for towns tried to give more to the deprived neighbourhoods but did not succeed to bring them back in the main stream. The idea came little than little that the urban mix would be the best way to realise social equity between communes.

### **Housing in the new urban model**

In the former industrialist urban model, social housing was created near the new plants. The distribution of social housing on the national territory was quite uneven: some communes may have 40% of their flats or houses as social housing, and others may have nearly none, the average being 20%. When industries and housing were in the same commune, the inhabitants could use services created with the products of the tax on professional activity. When they were not, inhabitants had to pay to get more than the legal minimum of services. Inside social housing, which was supposed to be a public national good, the real situation was great inequity from one neighbourhood compared to another.

In the former industrialist urban model, social housing was supposed to meet the needs of all workers. Out of the 500 000 houses which were built in 1975, the pick for housing building, 350 000 were social housing. The idea was that around 2/3 of the population would someday live in social housing to get near the places in which the job market was the best. But in 1977 a new housing policy gave a new image of social housing. Families were helped by the state to buy their house, or to rent a house owned privately. Social housing remained for people who definitely could not go elsewhere, or were already in and could not move out.

Communes, who obtained in 1983 the urbanism competency, began to develop a new idea of social housing. Social housing should be considered as a social service delivered by both the communes and the state, a compulsory service from all communes, for people unable to afford private housing. Then the unequal distribution of social housing between the communes should disappear, and all communes should contribute to social housing by 20% of the local stock. Then no commune would be specialised in social housing, no commune would be considered as the working class commune or as the poor commune.

This new concept of social housing, and of urban communes as all equal in sharing the social burden, appeared in the 80s, and is one of the main issue of the law “Solidarité et renouvellement urbain”, voted in 2000. New means have been given to the communes in the meantime to be able to shift towards the new urban model. They receive more money from the State if they join in “agglomérations”, and create new territories made of several

communes, inside which the specialisations of neighbourhoods may be kept, with the agreement of others. Building agglomerations have given them some resources to employ urban specialists to think the new policy on the territory. Agglomerations have been urged to make local plans for housing to push new housing towards social mix. The debate between researchers is going on in France to evaluate if social mix is more competitive or not.

Social mixed neighbourhoods, social mixed communes, social mixed agglomerations are the local cells of an urban polycentrism. Social mix is asked for in France by all urban actors, even the former working class inhabitants, or local representatives. This social-mix/urban-move ideal leads people to different places, depending on their resources: the wealthiest can go gentrify the urban centres, the middle classes move horizontally towards the suburbs and the poorest find left in the social housing.

Those moves inside the urban fabric are based on the income, but do not imply economic specialisation. A good intra-urban transport network, either with buses, or private cars, gives access to the whole agglomeration, to the jobs specially. Equity has still to be fully realised for this access, as some neighbourhoods remain remote; tramways have been set up in some agglomerations for that.

This new urban model of local cells, socially mixed, with no leading speciality, differs strongly of the former industrial model, in which one big industry was ordering the neighbourhood or the all town. The first break of the paternalist model appeared in the fifties when the social housing for the iron industry or the car industry was not realised directly in the communes where the plants were settled. The social housing was built in between, at the edge of the central town of the agglomeration. Researches showed that this new way of settling social housing was linked with the already idea that the industry may not last very long there. So the housing was turned towards two directions: towards the plant and towards the town. The social housing in this in-between position is central to-day in urban social renovation.

This conversion period in industry appealed the women in the labour market, who feared a loss in income from their husbands. They did not work in the industry, but in other services, quite often in the central town of the agglomeration, or in the first fringe. Double income husband-wife, coupled with allowances for home-owners have given the opportunity for moving to more suburban areas. On the other hand aging people, students and all people alone have tried to join the town centre. Housing is not longer close to work. Enterprises on the contrary gather, using the zones prepared for them, and using some common services together. Workers come from all the agglomeration to the working zones or places.

Some researchers have stressed the fact that in towns many people live from money coming from national redistribution (civil servants, allowances, pensions). Those people asked for services which create service jobs. Employment is well developed through redistribution, but enterprises from the competitive branches are burdened by the charge of this redistribution. Researchers debate about the part that should have the residential economy in the whole.

In the urban polycentric model, communes are on the edge, and communication with inhabitants becomes a key issue. A local plan too difficult to read may create the belief that no one can build here; a local plan too easy may push a development demanding too much in services. The law from 2000 says that plans must be debated with inhabitants, and that a plan for local sustainability must justify the rules for land use and right to build. Those debates are

organised everywhere, but with insufficient time and means to make people fully conscious of the urban culture they are participating too.

Resistance to the new urban model comes from communes who do not bother about social housing, and are urged by the new law to contribute. With citizens wealthier than the ones from working class communes, they prefer to pay their part in the national solidarity, than to welcome people with social problems. The law gives the choice: to build or to pay; but the payment is quite small compared to the price of the land which would be necessary to build its share in social housing. In those communes people ignore the ones who work on their territory and need perhaps a house near their work. In wealthy communes, people use a lot of services; they grow aging, and need more services to keep home. The lack of social housing makes difficult the recruitment of low paid workers to work in the rich parts of the agglomeration, and contributes to transport congestion. New industries also like to settle near the wealthiest part of the agglomeration, for their employees to have a nice environment; the shortage of affordable housing for the less paid of their workers may be a problem.

The urban polycentric model raises the need for social housing in renewed terms. Housing for workers in local services like education, health, administration, retail, repairs, should be available in all urban communes, in all communes of an urban agglomeration. This means new ways of furnishing social housing, in small amounts, adapted to flexible demands.