# Medium-sized cities are the star pupils of urban regeneration: model operations and development recommendations based on examples taken from Bretagne

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In 2003, Jean-Louis Borloo, who was then Minister for Urban Areas, presented the *Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine* (PNRU – National Programme for Urban Renewal) as "the biggest urban-planning programme of the 20th century". The PNRU has greatly transformed and fashioned some territories and ways of thinking about (action on) cities and urban areas. Urban renewal supported by the *Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine* (ANRU – National Agency for Urban Regeneration) went together with a widening of the scope of work, and spread gradually across the whole of national territory. Thus, medium-sized cities largely incorporated and contributed to the programme's "success" in media, political, and operational terms. Not only are the transformations visible and experienced by inhabitants on the ground, but a taboo also seems to have been lifted in relation to the choice of actions and work in the neighbourhoods concerned. In particular, demolition work is not quite a sanction any more, or a sign of failure; it has once again become part of the selection of tools for taking action in the city, a means – amongst others? – of acting on the urban and social dynamic.

Just as the PNRU's second phase is being launched, questions are raised by the review of the first operations, which were initiated 10 years ago: why such a radical choice, and, above all, what is the point of demolition work? The PNRU was set up explicitly to deal with weighty urban and social questions: the obsolescence of the housing stock of HLM (*Habitation à Loyer Modéré* – Low-Income Social Housing) bodies, concentration of impoverished populations in areas described as relegation areas, and discrimination based on nationality or on geographical origin. Those populations being mostly resident in social housing concentrated in the largest cities, it follows that the PNRU is based on challenges that are specific to the upper stratum of French urban hierarchy.

However, a look at the distribution of operations shows that cities that are very different in size, shape, and history have launched themselves into such operations. In 2012, 40% of credits committed by the ANRU were aimed at Ile-de-France, 13% at 20 large cities outside Ile-de-France, and 47% at small and medium-sized cities. In the context of so-called secondary, intermediate, or medium-sized cities, reputed for the quality and tranquillity of their living environment, recourse to such methods has been surprising. How can one explain and understand the desire on the part of local players to use such operations? Has the PNRU been the reflection of an expectation that has remained hidden within those territories, or has it acted as a windfall effect on cities deemed non-priority with respect to current action criteria? Finally, do those cities gradually, but as a trend, experience the same change as large metropolises?

Our research took root and meaning from two great inseparable questionings. One concerns, in a pragmatic manner, the interpretation and meaning to be given to the participation of medium-sized cities in programmes that are national in scope and that are redesigned on different scales. By asking the question abruptly, one wonders what pushes players to act and to make themselves part of such operations. The other questioning relates to observing the workings and motivations of an action that uses space – and its transformations – as a setting, engine, and support. In sum, to what extent does space form a transaction or even a negotiation challenge for players that take part in urban-regeneration programmes? That transaction reveals the challenges attached to the tangible transformations of some operational sectors, and they position players in interaction between each other, between various institutional levels, and with the public and media sphere.

Our choice was also motivated by the complex intertwining that seems to bind two notions that have vague definitions and outlines and that have a rarely-explored association: urban regeneration and medium-sized cities.

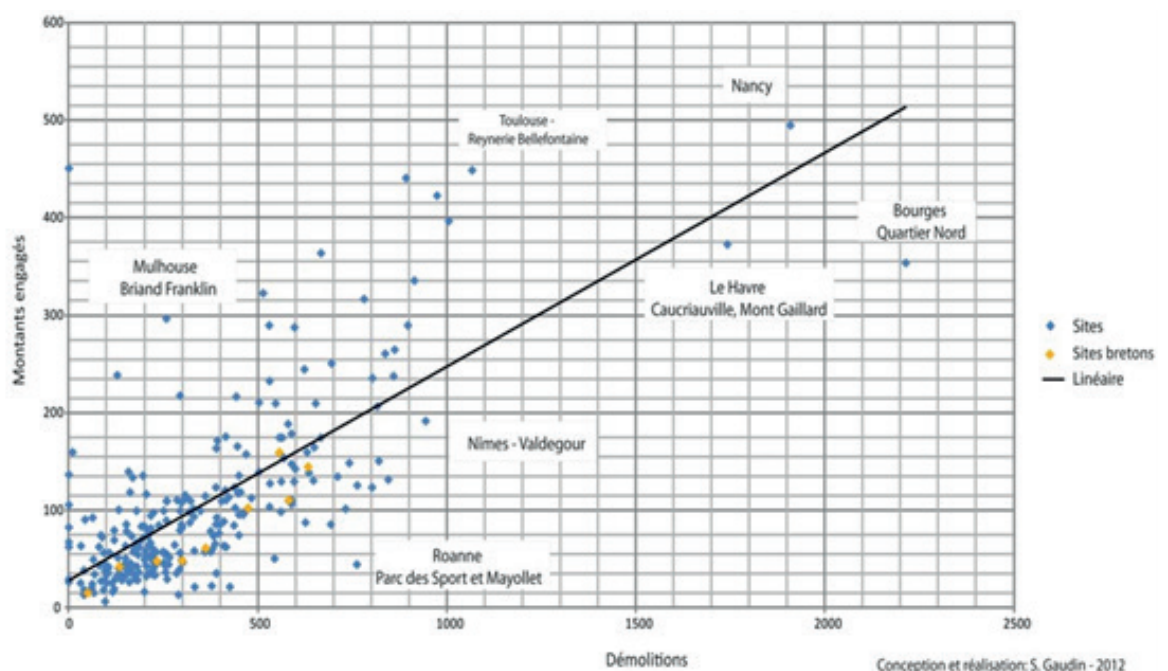In order to more closely determine the perception surrounding those cities as well as the

one attached to urban-renewal operations, we gave precedence to an approach relating to the analysis of discourses. By way of framework and location of research, we opted for a variety of sites and configurations by selecting 16 medium-sized Breton cities that are involved in or that have had plans to initiate urban-regeneration operations, whether subsidised or not at national, regional, or local level.

## THE REASONS FOR THE PNRU'S SUCCESS IN MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES

At the end of our work, we explain medium-sized cities' enthusiasm for urban-regeneration operations using several processes.

To begin with, for nearly 30 years, there has been the absence of a national policy – and a development doctrine – thought out and / or adjusted to the scale of medium-sized cities. Since the policy on medium-sized cities was initiated in the 1970s, the latter have successively attempted to join national guidelines with unequal degrees of success. Medium-sized cities have fewer resources than large cities, so they are more constrained by and dependent upon national policies and guidelines whilst undergoing sweeping changes both *intra muros* and *extra muros*.

**Graph 1: Panorama of demolition operations in areas covered by ANRU-approved agreements (except Ile-de-France)**



Conception et réalisation: S. Gaudin - 2012

Next came the fear that those cities would suffer social and spatial downgrading that accentuates the idea of a need to act and to focus on an anti-urban model of the big city and its shortcomings, whilst using the same tools and, in a certain way, the same methods and reference frameworks. That logic is all the more significant since peri-urbanisation is strong and traditional planning tools cannot curb it. Competition from the peripheries has encouraged medium-sized cities to focus on extra-territorial partnerships (agencies, the state, regional councils, etc.). Because of that, since urban policy was implemented, it has found therein a historic and experimental field of application. Hence, in the context of the PNRU, it can be observed that the number of demolitions carried out in medium-sized cities is relatively higher than the amounts committed. In other words, those cities have, in their majority, been more receptive to demolition as a choice. The radical nature of the choices made can be interpreted as the reflection of an ideological commitment by local players to the guidelines encouraged by the ANRU. However, it is also an opportunity to initiate a process of urban reconquest. In that sense, urban regeneration is not only a process of "remote government" (Epstein, 2005a etb) but also a marker of action and political will in the field. Thus, the discourses analysed take stock of the appropriation and effects of "demonstration" (Lussault, 1996: 100) engendered by the operations. The financial argument that is often raised to justify the choice to demolish relative to the cost of refurbishment can also by questioned in light of the amounts committed. In other words, medium-sized cities are indeed committed, in terms of intensity of and number, to urban-regeneration operations, but they have, in their majority, also been more receptive to demolition as a choice.

Finally, the opportunity to join a vast national programme is explained by the respective interests of the players involved. At national level, it is a matter of showing the size of the change expected across all priority sites. The dispersal effect is never far away, but it has been necessary to satisfy local political arrangements and compromises. At local level, contractual agreements (with the ANRU or the region) offered an opportunity to establish the local partnership scene and to go beyond (or at least try to go beyond) political differences at intercommunalité level, especially since the urban solidarity and regeneration act and the enforceable right to housing.

Finally, between the two scales is a complex but very real intertwining, which is another facet of the transaction: by carrying out regeneration operations that are scarcely polemical, with deadlines and financing that are under control and that are complied with, medium-sized cities have contributed to giving a positive image of the PNRU, of which the assessment today is nonetheless difficult and controversial. Medium-sized (Breton) cities appear at that level to be model operations that have complied with the timeline, partnership commitments and, especially, financial commitments. Through those initiatives and their ability to carry out territorial "DIY" (Béhar, Estèbe, 2009), those cities wish to recall the role that they are likely to play at national level in relation to social and territorial cohesion. It is also through their inertia and their potentials that they form an essential step in territorial-planning policies.

## ON URBAN ACTION IN MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES: TRANSACTION VERSUS INNOVATION?

How do space and spatiality constitute symbolic resources for determining the arguments and conditions for a political and social transaction? It is that shift from a space that is successively a framework, a means, and a symbol to a challenge-object of exchange and legitimation that we propose to describe as a spatial transaction. It is in the implicit portion of conventional, broadcast, publicised discourses, both direct and indirect, as well as in the exchange that we feel able to grasp the workings of the spatial transaction that is initiated when carrying out regeneration operations, especially when demolition is the choice made. It is not a matter of questioning the reconstruction projects that follow on from demolition work, but of understanding the time, reasons, and logic behind carrying out demolition work.

Behind the technical act, two postulates can be discerned:

- expressing places and operations and putting them into words contribute to a form of smoothing representations that render the use of demolition acceptable Action on, by, and in space constitutes what we designate the "ideological framework of urban regeneration". For local players, controlling space (and the visibility of actions relating to it) has gra-

dually become a skill that has contributed to stabilising networks of players, and to anchoring a consensus around those types of operations, including, as is the case with demolitions, recourse to radical, strongly symbolic modes of intervention. The manifestations of that discourse with a strong spatial connotation (using metaphors, metonymy, implicit language, or, more openly, various forms of spatialism) appear in all the interviews carried out and documents analysed (press, studies and diagnoses, memoranda, and speeches).

- those positions play a role in stabilising social roles through the emergence of a common reference framework that is anchored in those achievements. Space is designed as a tool, or even as a vector of intervention, and some players do not hesitate to consider the "active" character given to urban forms and planning in their capacities of providing structure to social life.

Thus, development prescriptions in Breton PRUs (PRU: *Projet de Rénovation Urbaine* – Urban Regeneration Project) function as instruments "[to which] are attributed virtues that regulate a heterogenous collective that one wishes to set within previously-prescribed values and of which they are the vehicle" (Ferguson, 2008). Through urban-regeneration operations, space once again enters fully into the field of political discourse and its strategic challenges, as well as the field of social control.

| | | PLAYERS IN A TRANSACTION SITUATION...* | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | **WEAK** | **STRONG** |
| **SPACE AS...** | **SUPPORT** | **(Re)developing the site** Highlighting the project's qualitative aspects, desire to improve the lives of inhabitants, modernisation | **Repairing errors and malfunctions** Identifying issues and negative aspects, low-level euphemisation, upgrading |
| | **TOOL** | **Priority given to the housing aspect** The PRU is justified by the need or desire to initiate operations on housing structure and types - initiative from financial backers | **Linkage with the urban project** The choices made relate to the urban project and to the overall laying-out of the neighbourhood - initiative from municipal departments |
| | **PRETEXT** | **Spatialist discourse** Metonymic references to space, regeneration likened to therapy and the social body to urban diagnosis | **Searching for an impetus** The vocabulary of change and disruption, operations given high visibility |
| | **CHALLENGE** | **Routinising practices and a tradition of intervention** History of urban policies, the PNRU is an additional step, targeted objectives | **Affirming a competence to act** Adjustments and convergences with the CIRU (*Comité Interrégional des Usagers* – Inter-regional User Committee), widening the objectives pursued |

*Design and implementation: S. Gaudin, 2012*

*A transaction is deemed weak when setting up the PRU leads to a moderate gap between local practices and usages and the commitment of actions for urban regeneration. A transaction is deemed strong when the discourses that accompany PRUs mark a distortion relative to previous situations and projects. Depending on the discourses, the transaction relationship can be both strong and weak, depending on the ways of highlighting the relationship with the space and with the action on the space.

Transaction relationships that are established tend to limit local players' capacities for innovation. In our judgement, that is due to the form taken by public action, which is partly focused on a hazy vision of the "medium-city" category, as well as being focused on the issues and challenges that exist therein. Territorial-planning policies have considered the new social and territorial dynamics (metropolisation, dilution of urban territories, the new economies of territories, etc.), and they have successively promoted competitiveness (in particular through a policy of excellence, contributing to the promotion of ultra-concentration by increasing the use of calls for tender, excellence awards, and benchmarking) and support for territories in crisis (based on a principle of social emergency against a background of economic and territorial crisis). Without a specific policy applied to them, medium-sized cities try to emphasise other advantages: urban quality, cost of living, employment, etc. However, those actions suffer from a lack of support from opinion and in public action, especially in the face of peri-urban and metropolitan tropisms.

Breton cities particularly illustrate the "star pupil"[1] sites of the first PNRU. That acknowledgement has only been possible at the cost of a sometimes-excessive formalisation of projects. Today, it is possible – especially given the mounts invested – to regret the lack of innovation in operations, particularly if one considers that "[social] innovation is precisely a transgression of rules that may lead to a transformation of order. It is then for the state to offer the support needed for innovation, by easing or readjusting public policies as well as financial and information resources, and by leaving room for players to be independent in order to reveal their transformational potential and offering the latitude needed to pursue the process of innovation"[2]. It is in that regard that it should be recalled that creativity, experimentation, and daring are not the preserve of metropolises; even into recent times, medium-sized cities had made themselves their supporters and even their instigators. That urban and social daring that can be expected is an essential condition of the development and attractiveness of the medium-sized cities of tomorrow. Subject to national equalisation and an objective of social cohesion, the challenge for medium-sized cities would then be to come out of a situation of "path dependence" (Pierson, 2005) to follow their own path.

1.   Extract from one of the interviews conducted with an ANRU representative
2.   Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales (CRISES - Centre for Research into Social Innovations), 2013, "*La transformation sociale par l'innovation sociale*", Call for Papers, 4th International CRISES Colloquium, UQAM (University of Quebec at Montreal), Montreal, 3 and 4 April 2014, 2 p.

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