

Quality and Safety of Urban Spaces

Growing social demand and recent regulatory requirements

The theme of safety in urban space design is a major concern of both the State and local authorities in France. The actions of the French Ministry of Territorial Equality (METL) in terms of preventing delinquency are mainly directed towards "situational prevention", which constitutes one of the priorities of the National Delinquency Prevention Strategy. A target has been set to improve the prevention of malicious acts in everyday living areas, involving identifying vulnerabilities and anticipating risks, in particular by the increased use of public safety studies.

Since 2007, the largest planning and development projects are subject to prior public safety and security studies. This is used to assess the risks encountered by the operation and to plan corresponding measures in terms of the construction, development and management of spaces. Jointly set up under interministerial supervision, this French law has transformed development professionals (contractors and contracting authorities) into stakeholders in co-producing safety.

These public safety studies are an opportunity to defend project sustainability and urban quality requirements and to intervene during the operation design phase. The safety principle in development projects is also a means of assessing quality of life in the awarding of the EcoQuartier label.

These studies provide the opportunity to divide responsibilities between the forces of order and development stakeholders and to obtain an approach designed to suit the context and local issues, highlighting urban development quality and social ties. They consequently play a role in one of the largest forms of equality of access to the city, where urban safety issues particularly affect the more underprivileged and fragile communities.

The implementation of this policy therefore particularly requires these studies, conducted by experienced professionals, and their operational implementation. State services assist local authorities and urban development professionals in this task. A National Support Desk has been created within CEREMA, used as a resource centre, observatory support centre and methodological supervisor. Furthermore, the real foundations and conditions for implementing this policy undergo recurring scientific and operational questioning.

Focus on PUCA research on urban safety

How can professionals meet this new requirement? How can you design urban projects integrating safety from the point of view of resource allocation, architecture and urban planning without compromising the virtues of urban life? In other words, how can you reconcile the quality and safety of urban spaces? This complex question requires working on two complementing fields, emblematic of the methods of the Architecture and Development Plan (PUCA) led by the French Ministry of Territorial Equality and Housing: research and experimentation.

From research to experimentation

We firstly had to extend our knowledge on urban safety phenomena. This is why the PUCA launched a research tender enquiry in 2007 in partnership with the "Club Ville Aménagement" (grouping together tens of major development operators) to question researchers on space and its design, use and maintenance. These works, conducted by 11 research teams, led the way to a new premise: current "defensive" urbanism forms can be surpassed by a more open form of developing and managing public spaces. We believe that by promoting traffic fluidity, urban activities and site visitations, professionals will contribute to improving safety conditions.

To continue these important research works, PUCA sought to launch an experimentation programme in 2010. Conducted in partnership with the French Forum for Urban Security (FFSU), the "Quality and Safety of Urban Spaces" programme was drawn up to develop innovative urban projects providing solutions to the insecurity issues faced by local authorities in developing and managing public spaces. It more specifically concerned the relationship between space and safety. It openly focused on improving comfort when visiting spaces, the well-being of residents and solving real problems, whether concerning the direct consequences of malicious acts or – more generally – of conflicts of use, "strained" situations, and even discomfort. How can you design and implement urban projects integrating safety without compromising the virtues of urban life? What alternative solutions to defensive urbanism can be implemented to tackle safety issues?

The objective was to gain the support of the contractor / contracting authority for joint reflections on the difficulties encountered by inhabitants and users, and ultimately to define tailored urban and architectural actions. Ten local authorities and one private contracting authority proposing thirteen study sites were selected to represent a wide range of real, varying situations: shopping centre, districts undergoing urban renovation, train station district, underground car park, sensitive zones... Teams of experts worked with local authorities for one year to draw up innovative operational proposals.

Outcomes of such an approach

The experiments clearly confirm that the feeling of insecurity is not always – and is even rarely – a problem resulting from the "field of safety" in terms of solutions and public stakeholders. In other words, it is as much an issue concerning the living environment, quality of space and management problems as incivilities or delinquencies, including on sites where delinquency levels are particularly worrying. During a workshop, one elected official stated that the daily concerns expressed by the inhabitants of their municipality, despite suffering from acute delinquency problems, were just as frequent as topics concerning the maintenance and treatment of spaces.

Second outcome: this urban project approach focusing on safety requires redirecting designer works to a small degree towards identifying and handling real issues. The works conducted by the "Réussir l'Espace Public" group in

Lille clearly highlighted the added values of the association of safety and management professionals, more directly focused on solving real issues. In a sense, the experiment showed a different way of designing an urban project, taking into account the everyday nature and attempting to provide open spatial solutions, not necessarily involving the "stars" of urban renovation (creation of residential areas, creation of a "new centrality", functional diversity, etc.). Safety provides a very real opportunity to think about space and building use and to provide solutions to the difficulties encountered by residents. With modest solutions which do not necessarily involve the complete reorganisation of the district according to the general principle dictated by current urban planning trends: we were able to recommend shifting entrances in some cases, the simple clarification of properties in other cases, and even keeping a district square near a small shopping centre despite everything suggesting it should be removed for concentration purposes and for "improved access". In consequence, multiple proposals drawn up within the scope of this programme ask designers to expand conventional urban planning action categories, which are often very general and sometimes poorly suited to strictly local issues (improving access, providing functional diversity, recreating centrality, etc.). Without calling the former into question, particular attention paid to resident comfort and to safety issues occasionally results in contractors and contracting authorities conceiving solutions in an entirely new register.

Finally, several teams came up with the idea of working on the project duration to go beyond the before/after vision. Worksites are very long and are often the source of nuisances and forms of insecurity. The tangible implementation of urban projects must be rethought by creating progressive transformation conditions based on on-site resources, using existing practices and allowing for progressive adjustments. The "worksite strategy" defined by Paul Landauer in Strasbourg is exemplary in this respect, however this thought is also at the very heart of the works conducted at Le Havre and Sevran. Philippe Pane-rai in Aubervilliers also introduced the time variable and proposed instant developments to the Villette zone in addition to other, more distant evolutions. These first immediate actions are announced, discussed and implemented relatively quickly to re-establish a climate of trust that no longer exists today. In all cases, these redirections go far beyond simple "worksite management". It is above

all a way of democratising the urban planning approach, no longer designed in the form of a conventional consensus-building process but involving making use of the project time, during which it is sought to become a publicly accepted transformation. Based on resident and user skills, often "disappointed" with public actions, this involves overcoming the inevitable feeling of relegation, and therefore of fragility and insecurity.

Within the scope of the Medellin Urban Forum, the French Ministry of Territorial Equality and Housing is organising a networking event on the topic of "Establishing a sustainable city: presentations and discussions on innovative international experiences in the sector of sustainable and participative urban production". This event will take place on Tuesday 8 April from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. in the yellow pavilion.

For more information:
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