

FRANCIA Clermont-Ferrand «Nudge City»

Pleading for a non-omnipotent project

Saint Jean is an area in the south of Clermont Ferrand, near the future TGV station. Affected by industrial decline, this place is called for another future. But it is far from being empty of a rich present and a complex identity. Like any other area waiting for an ambitious urban project, the question is: how can we implement here a mere sustainable approach? Our answer is, at first, built on a critical vision of sustainability, as it is often promoted today.

Prescriptions, obligations and behavioral norms do not make a sustainable city: a normative approach can only create a desert city. There can be no sustainability without versatility and space's ability to arouse desire in the long run. Desire generates uses, uses bring value, value opens way to qualitative change. In a sustainable approach, norms and building technics can never be a goal for its sake. Uses must be the first raw material for our project.

In this project, we placed uses at the center of a true tactic reflexion. The mere question for us was: "How can the project build on desires and incentives to have the actors, places and practices evolve altogether?". We can't decide for change, especially in a context where public action is weakened by budget cuts and administrative division. But maybe then we can make that people's reactions nourish global change. In our project, we referred to a sociological and political theory, made famous by Barrack Obama during his presidential campaign: the Nudge. Thaler and Suskin, in their book*, describes how public action can help people make the best decisions, without compromising their freedom of choice, simply by designing the context of choice and action they act in. They called themselves their theory as "libertarian paternalism". In our approach: the urban project cannot be a goal in itself but a frame of incentives, building on the territory's reality to attract energies, leaning on individual aspirations to create a sustainable city. **Nudges are sparks**: public interventions which, designing one use, open way for a tree of possibilities. For instance, there is a very large parking lot, associated to a very powerful commercial center, along the main boulevard of the area. The transformation of this place is strategic to create a new identity for the whole area. But how can public authorities force a commercial holder to transform a parking lot whereas the whole system is very efficient and cash-making? There is no incentive for change. We propose to create on the existing parking a very simple sport center: in the night, where there is no clients anymore and no cars,

4 spotlights and paint markings on the ground are sufficient to create a sport centrality for youths just in front of the future highschool. The presence of youths creates in the long run an appetite for new businesses and the idea that this parking lot could be more profit-making with the installation of new commercial functions on it. Introducing new uses, even very simple, are therefore a way to provoke site densification and diversification where it seemed to be impossible.

The project details initial purposes which actors will embrace before creating other new purposes. Conjuring interactions and having them intertwined is to generate sustainable value: it must thus be the mere goal of public policies.

For instance: how can we have people long for collective housing in the dense city whereas many people leave the center for the nearby countryside and individual housing? Maybe we should try from the beginning: promote a new pride for habitants to leave in collective buildings. This means at first that private investments should aim at collective spaces in the future buildings, whereas gateways, pathways or courtyard are often the less qualitative spaces in today constructions, due to the fact that they do not represent commercial value in themselves. Placing the collective spaces in the center of residents' sights could help to keep them regulated, well-maintained and appropriated at last. Similarly, we think that individual desires to embellish his own place could simply contribute to collective pride: all private spaces open to collective sights, like loggias and balconies, can be turn towards the courtyard, creating therefore a collective and positive emulation.

We think that value and aesthetic of a place are not a frozen state: more than designing it, we should aim at promoting the condition of their collective improvement in the long run. There is one vital condition for that: land, whether public or private, should be considered as a common good, and be the prime target of any investments or actions.

* Nudge, Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness (Thaler et Sunstein, 2008),

About Author



gda

[See author's posts](#)

[+ Condividi](#)