

“Spatial practices and renewal policies in peripheral large housing estates. A case study of Lyon”

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Abstract. The paper analyses the inhabitants' perceptions and representations of a neighbourhood in Saint-Priest, a municipality of Lyon metropolitan area, France. This neighbourhood is currently undergoing an urban renewal, within the Urban Policy (*Politique de la Ville*) national framework. Using a qualitative approach – comprising interviews, observations and workshops, during a five-month fieldwork – I focused on the senses of place of two large housing estates (*grands ensembles*). While the dwellers developed an attachment to these residential areas, other citizens convey a negative image, comprising perceived insecurity and criticism of spatial practices. It is found therefore that, within an Urban Policy unit, diverse and conflicting local identities coexist. This is relevant as long as the rationale of the renewal is to foster the emergence of a new, shared identity for the neighbourhood. Finally, this case study allows to put forward the hypothesis that the phenomenon of conflicting senses of place was under-estimated during the policy-making process.

Key-words: sense of place; local identity; Lyon; urban renewal; *grands ensembles*; *Politique de la Ville*

Abbreviations:

ACSE: *Agence nationale pour la cohésion sociale et l'égalité des chances* (National Agency for Social Cohesion and Equal Opportunities)

ANRU: *Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine* (National Agency for Urban Renewal)

CUCS: *Contrat Urbain de Cohésion Sociale* (Social Cohesion Urban Contract)

DSU: *Développement Social Urbain* (Urban Social Development = Urban Policy local office)

HLM: *Habitation à Loyer Modéré* (Rent Controlled Housing = public housing)

INSEE: *Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies = official statistical institute)

ORU: *Opération de Renouvellement Urbain* (Urban Renewal Operation)

PNRU: *Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine* (Urban Renewal National Programme)

ZUS: *Zone Urbaine Sensible* (Socially Sensitive Area)

1. Introduction

This paper presents a research undertaken between February and June 2012 in the town centre of Saint-Priest, a municipality of Lyon metropolitan area, France. My role there was that of a researcher – in the framework of my Master's thesis project – and of an urban practitioner – as I was collaborating with Robins des Villes, a Lyon-based association. Since 2003, Saint-Priest town centre had been undergoing a vast public-led renewal, within the Urban Policy (*Politique de la Ville*) national scheme. This Policy identified a nationwide “priority geography”, composed of all the neighbourhoods presenting issues of poverty, social exclusion and access to rights. The paper's area of study is concerned by two different policy frameworks, the *Contrat Urbain de Cohésion Sociale* (Social Cohesion Urban Contract, *CUCS*) and the *Opération de Renouvellement Urbain* (Urban Renewal Operation, *ORU*). The former is directed to tackle social issues, while the latter is related to physical renewal. The director of Saint-Priest town centre's Urban Policy office is charged with the implementation of a territorial strategy (*projet de territoire*) built both on *CUCS* and *ORU*. The *ORU* involved the demolition of six residential buildings, the local primary school, and twelve single houses¹; the refurbishment of public spaces and private residential estates; the construction of a new school, of denser residential blocks (with an expected increase of 2000 inhabitants), and of a 700 m soft mobility avenue. The urban renewal of Saint-Priest town centre was first approved in 2001, works began in 2003, and the project was refunded in 2007 by the newly-born National Agency for Urban Renewal (*ANRU*), within the Urban Renewal National Programme (*PNRU*); it is a long-term process, as the delivery of the new residential blocks is predicted for 2020 (Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine & Commune de Saint-Priest, 2007).

Within this context, Robins des Villes was given the responsibility by the Urban Policy local office (*DSU*) to set up an intervention to foster resident awareness about the ongoing urban renewal. These actions go under the name of *accompagnement à la transformation urbaine* (which stands for “accompanying [inhabitants] towards urban transformation”), a policy that is implemented in parallel with urban renewals and that aims at softening the negative

1 Demolitions implied the relocation of 450 households, who were proposed different solutions according to socio-demographic features, until they agreed on a new place to move to. Around one third of them moved to the other Urban Policy neighbourhood of Saint-Priest, one third remained in the town centre and one third moved to other neighbourhoods of the town or other towns of the metropolitan area.

impacts on everyday life and social cohesion of those who live in the area. According to this objective, the *DSU* wanted to know more about the “sense of place” and the “local identities” attached to the neighbourhood by the inhabitants (Veschambre, 2008; Scarpelli & Romano, 2011; Bertier, Marchal & Stébé, 2014) . The *DSU*, in fact, lacked a precise knowledge about the ways in which residents had been developing their attachment to the space and to perceived landmarks. Their knowledge was limited to the observation that the neighbourhood, as a whole, lacked a clear identity:

The town centre and even the whole of Saint-Priest – It is more about the juxtaposition of sub-neighbourhoods rather than a real collective identity. And it is indeed our concern, to go from juxtaposition to a town centre appropriated by the entire population of Saint-Priest. [...] Thus the *ORU* and the actions accompanying urban transformation [*accompagnement à la transformation urbaine*] are opportunities to enable people to express themselves and say that they too, have something to share, even if it isn't pretty, even if it is not recognised, visible... that there are identities after all, but one has to reveal those identities².

(N. Rochette, Urban Policy officer, 29 February 2012)

In other words, the idea is to redesign a satellite town's centre, seeking to transform it from a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood – yet hosting administrative and commercial “central” functions – to an attractive area for all citizens, more socially mixed (Blanc, 2010; Lelévrier, 2013) and renewed in its physical outlook. The desire to grasp a local identity is thus functional both to the current situation – to help residents preserve *their* sense of the place – and to the forthcoming one – to prepare the context in which this sense of place will interact with that of newcomers.

The aim of the paper is to question, through a ground-based approach, the major hypotheses held by the local Urban Policy office (*DSU*): that (a) residents have developed an attachment to the places – albeit not publicly recognised – and that (b) this attachment is not homogeneous for the whole neighbourhood but rather fragmented in “sub-neighbourhoods”. Due to time constraints, I have not focused on the whole neighbourhood but on a part of it. The object of study has been defined as *the senses of*

² All translations from French and Italian into English by the author.

place of Saint-Priest town centre, whereas the complete study area corresponds to the neighbourhood as established by the *Politique de la Ville*. Besides the main argumentation, another hypothesis will be finally put forward about the role that the specific action of *accompagnement à la transformation urbaine* fulfilled within the overall urban renewal policy.

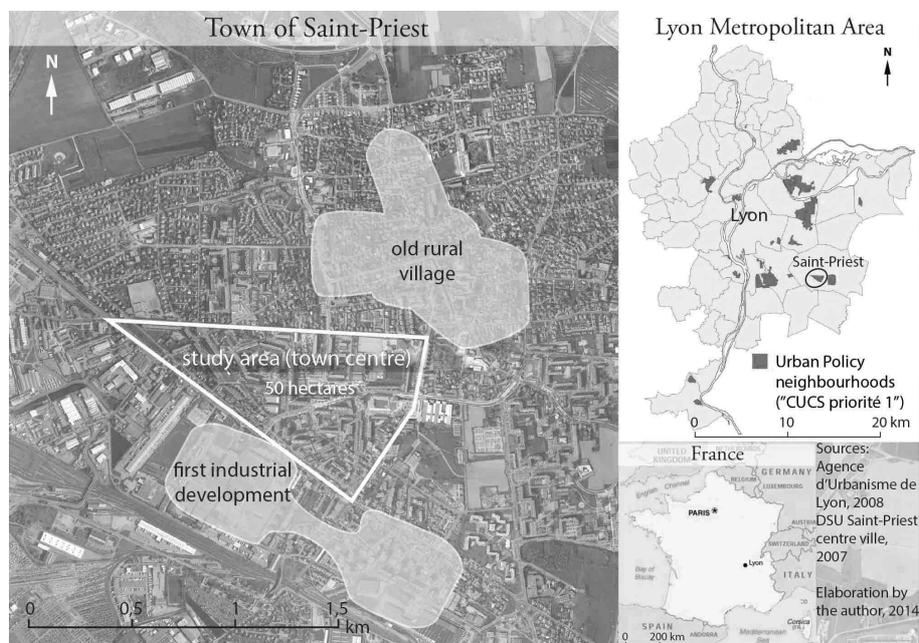
The paper is divided into six parts. In section 2, the study area will be put in context with its main geographical and social features. In particular, attention will be devoted to urban typologies and socio-demographic profile. Section 3 explains the methodological approach, detailing the procedure followed and the techniques adopted. Section 4 illustrates the results of the empirical research. Section 5 analyses the results, showing how different and sometimes conflicting senses of place coexist in the same neighbourhood. Section 6 concludes the paper summarizing the main findings and suggesting further paths of research.

2. Framing the study area

Lyon metropolitan area has around 1.5 million inhabitants and is the second largest urban agglomeration in France. The town of Saint-Priest counts some 40,000 inhabitants and is situated in the south-eastern part of the metropolitan area, 13 km from Lyon city centre. The study area is 50 ha (123 Acres) wide and hosted – before relocations – nearly 7,000 inhabitants (17 % of municipal population). It is called town centre (*centre ville*) even though it doesn't have many features generally associated with this denomination: in fact, it is the geographical and administrative centre of the town, but not the most lively or the most ancient part. As shown by Image 1, Urban Policy neighbourhoods are concentrated in the first-ring municipalities (the so-called *banlieue*), where large-scale residential developments were built in a relatively short period of time, between the 1960s and 1970s, to accommodate important flows of immigration and urbanisation. The typical form that these developments took was the *grand ensemble*, a combination of repetitive, massive and sometimes high-rise buildings, where factory workers and immigrants – especially from former colonial territories – were concentrated. Phenomena of socio-spatial segregation, social weakness and discrimination developed in and towards these places, which eventually also led to violent demonstrations. Lyon metropolitan area has a major role in this history, as what occurred in 1981 in Vénissieux is remembered at the national level as the first

important riot in a *quartier* (literally “neighbourhood” but often standing for “deprived neighbourhood”). At the same time, the *Politique de la Ville* was started by the national government, in order to tackle the difficulties of these residential areas (Epstein, 2013) .

Image 1 – Localisation of the study area at different geographical scales



Nevertheless, the study area's main features are not wholly exhausted by those of *grands ensembles*, as the area is also influenced by the peculiar evolution of Saint-Priest territorial identity: originally a rural settlement in the Dauphiné plain, Saint-Priest eventually found itself in the orbit of Lyon urban area (this was formally sanctioned in 1968, when the town, entering Lyon Metropolitan Area, shifted from *Isère* to *Rhône* County). The area chosen for Saint-Priest's urban development – which first began as an answer to the *Pieds-Noirs* (French citizens who fled Algeria after its independence in 1962) housing emergency – was located half-way between the two historical poles: the rural settlement and the industrial development (since the 1920s, two factories settled there, operating in the textile and automotive sector) and became the materialisation of the town's new “urban” identity. Coherently with this view, the Town Hall was eventually moved from the rural settlement to this area. The study area's territorial identity is thus at the intersection of two trajectories: on the one hand, the nationwide development of *grands ensembles*, on the other hand, Saint-Priest's shift from rural village to urban periphery.

These dynamics lead to an urban landscape dominated by massive and serial buildings, called *grands ensembles*. In these large housing estates, single buildings are in relation among themselves to shape common spaces at the ground level, but the estates as a whole are spatially unrelated between each other. Consequently, public space is not articulated on traditional elements such as streets and squares, to the point that it is possible to speak of “absence of streets” (Raulin, 2007: 96) . Indeed, the architectural inspiration of this urban typology is Modernism, whose adversity to “street” – in the sense of a clearly oriented physical structure characterised by buildings on both sides – is explicit since the 1933 Athens Charter. However, two additional urban typologies can be observed within the area: “alignments of single houses” and “dense urban fabric”, for the most part pre-existing the great shift to urbanisation that took place between 1962 and 1977.

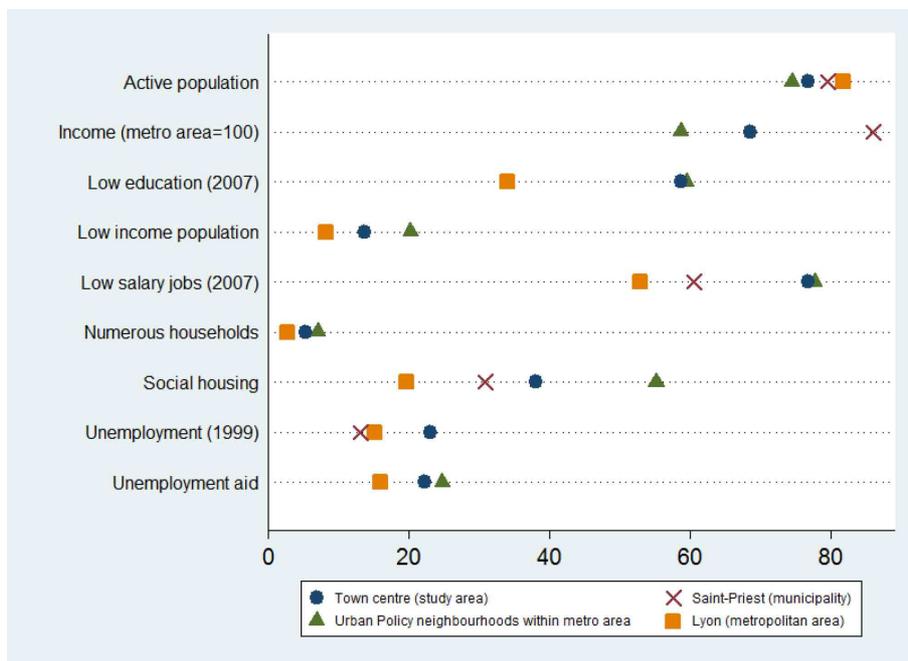
Image 2 – Urban landscapes shaping Saint-Priest town centre (2012)



As visible in Image 2, the provision of public facilities is not negligible: the area hosts the Town Hall, the civic library, the post office, a primary school, two civic centres, a stadium with a sport centre and a municipal theatre. Besides this, a considerable amount of *HLM* is present. There are fewer privately-run services here, especially commercial ones. Although two weekly street markets are held within the town centre, yet the number and

quality of shops and leisure activities is generally low. The dependence on the core city Lyon is thus very strong for spare time activities, such as shopping, leisure, cultural activities; less pronounced for access to public services such education, health, welfare. As for the job offer, the town is highly integrated within the metropolitan area: only 36 % of the resident employees work in Saint-Priest. This mobility is not due to a lack of jobs in Saint-Priest, as the town hosts 4,4 % of all the jobs present in the metropolitan area, against 2,7 % of the population.

Chart 1 – Multidimensional profile of the study area (percentages, 2009)



Sources: INSEE, "Indicateurs clés des quartiers de la politique de la ville (quatrième mise en ligne)", 2011; census, 1999, 2008, 2010; Directorate General of Fiscal Services, 2009.

Data explanation: Active population: calculated on the population aged 25-64. Income: median, per capita, in €. The denominator (number of people) is calculated as follows: the first adult of each household equal to 1, other members older than 14 equal to 0,5, other members younger than 14 equal to 0,3. Low education: share of the population aged 15-34, not pursuing education and with an education level lower than high school. Low income: share of population with an income lower than the threshold calculated as the first decile of the income distribution in all French urban areas with at least one Urban Policy neighbourhood. Low salary jobs: share of clerks and factory workers on employees. Numerous households: composed by six or more people. Social housing: share of dwellers living in HLM. Unemployment aid: share of households receiving this aid.

To give a precise picture of the study area from a quantitative point of view is not straightforward: despite the available data, only one dataset, referred to 2007-2009, provides information based on the current Urban Policy perimeter³. This dataset compares

3 In the *Politique de la Ville* webGIS, data for this neighbourhood are not available (<http://sig.ville.gouv.fr/Territoire/8269058>, page viewed on 3 November 2014). Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the geographical units used by the census do not exactly overlay with Urban Policy

all the Urban Policy neighbourhoods of the metropolitan area and contains variables that are often different or differently measured from those used by the census, that is why some values are lacking at the municipal level. We observe in Chart 1 that the values concerning family structure, income and education level constantly reveal a worse situation for the study area, in comparison with the municipality and the metropolitan average. The high level of unemployment also represents a frailty and furthermore, among the employees, the share of less remunerative and lower skills jobs is well above the municipal and metropolitan average. These combined data suggest that the town centre is affected by remarkable social weakness. However, we also observe that the study area's per capita income is higher than the Urban Policy neighbourhoods' average, which conveys a more faceted image of its socio-economic conditions: although enduring difficulties, the neighbourhood displays some vitality and dynamism. The French survey system excludes measures related to ethnicity; nevertheless, historically the neighbourhood was populated by displaced people (*Pieds Noirs*) and immigrants. The Saint-Priest “mosaic” (Roussé, 2000) is composed of mostly North Africans (Algerians, Tunisians, Moroccans) along with people of Turkish, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and sub-Saharan descent.

Given that the research area is very narrow, such a multi-dimensional contextualisation is important in order to put in relation the micro-phenomena observed with broader dimensions. Having done this, in the next section I will present the research undertaken, starting from the methodological approach.

3. A multi-step qualitative approach

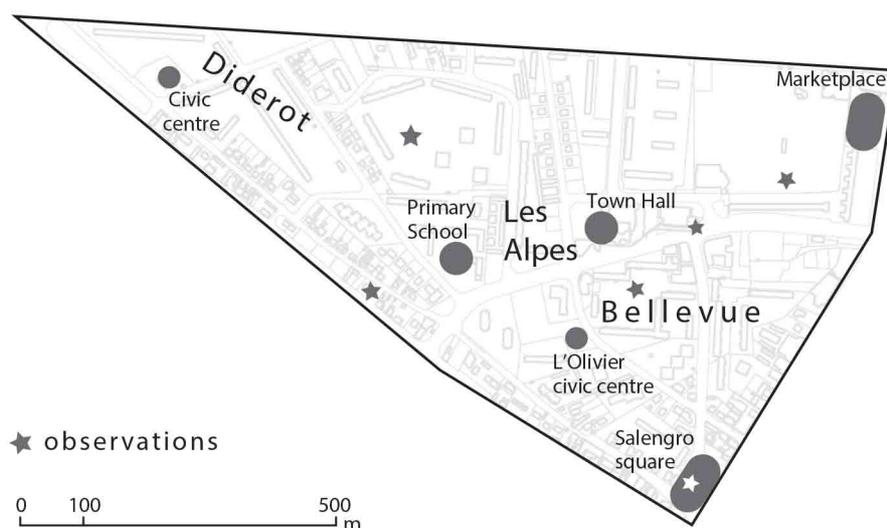
The fieldwork lasted five months, during which I was living in Lyon city and I spent, in average, two days a week in the study area. Given that the research had tight time constraints, I needed to select a portion of the neighbourhood to concentrate my analysis. In fact, the in-depth, qualitative methodology used by Robins des Villes – and adopted by me – was time-demanding and it would not have been possible to enquire about the whole neighbourhood in the duration imposed on the research. So, as a first step I approached the study area by myself, through observations and ethnographic interviews, seeking to

units, making data from census not wholly reliable to describe this area, and that the Urban Policy zoning was originally smaller than the current one, many pieces of information being available only for the previous perimeter.

identify some particularly relevant places. As a second step, I took part in the workshops organized by the urban practitioners team and I used them to verify whether, and how, the places previously singled out could be considered socially meaningful and identity loaded for a broader public.

As for the first step – observations and interviews – I designed and carried them out independently. The places to observe (Image 3) were selected according to the urban landscape analysis (see Image 2) and I adopted the observation grid proposed by C. Caniglia Rispoli & A. Signorelli (2008), which focuses on the physical characteristics of the place, the type of people frequenting it and the interactions occurring among them. This system helps structure the notes taken throughout the day by the observer. Afterwards, following informal contacts with users of the places, I carried out some ethnographic interviews, mostly of common people (Pavanello, 2010).

Image 3 – Localisation of the fieldwork's main places



The interviews were non-directive and that is why not all of them turned out to be relevant for the research, because not all of them dealt with the research object, i.e. *perceptions of places comprised in the study area*. Through the interviews, I singled out two places that appeared to have a special relevance: the residential estates of Bellevue and Les Alpes; both of them were built in the 1960s and are exemplary of the *grands ensembles* urban typology. To select the portion of neighbourhood on which to focus the research, I gave

importance to the results of ethnographic interviews rather than observations, because in this way I did not select the “relevant” places according to my interpretation, but I had them singled out directly by neighbourhood users (Caniglia Rispoli & Signorelli, 2008: 67) . To counter-balance the risk that this “sampling” be biased by the partiality of the interviewees, on the one hand I deepened, as much as possible, the analysis of the selected places through qualitative data collection, on the other hand I broadened, as much as possible, the context where to locate them through the afore seen quantitative indicators, so that my observations – so limited in their actual extent – could be put in relation with much wider phenomena.

The second phase of the research, the professional workshops, was organised and conducted by the urban practitioners team. Not only did Robins des Villes work as a team, but the association itself implemented the actions in agreement with Urban Policy officers and other local partners (civic centres, local school, etc.). It was so decided that, through the workshops, three main different public would be approached: residents of the town centre, residents of Saint-Priest and Municipality representatives. The workshops used varying techniques, adapted to the public and the situation, yet the use of one tool was constant, that of photo-elicitation. This tool proposed a set of pictures of different places within the study area and asked the participants to freely pick one or two and explain their choice, on a dedicated blank space below the image. The visualization of a familiar place helps “elicit” ideas much more easily than verbal techniques (Cuisenier, Conord, Piette et al., 2007) . The pictures, selected by the team from a photographic database produced by a professional photographer, were conceived not as mere supports of recognition but as evocative images, capable of reviving memories, emotions, and experiences. This is why the analysis has not been based on a simple counting, but on the combination of the image and the comment accompanying it, explaining the reasons for the image choice.

Having seen what methodology I adopted, to which techniques I had recourse and how they were used in different phases, I will present the results of the fieldwork in the next section.

4. Reaching out to the inhabitants

Given the methodological procedure, among the material collected, I will only present

what is relevant in relation with the portion of neighbourhood selected. Similarly, the workshops' outcomes covered many places throughout the study area and also outside it, but I will present only the perceptions referring to Les Alpes and Bellevue residential estates. As the former was under demolition, it was possible to carry out an observation session only in Bellevue, which I will illustrate below.

4.1. Observations and ethnographic interviews

Monnet square⁴, where the observation took place on the 11 and 12 April, is a public space in Bellevue residential estate and is formed by six long and four-storey buildings, arranged in a closed, rectangular disposition. This space is open to public access, but functionally, it is strictly linked with the buildings surrounding: it seems to be more a residential facility. Flats are private: these are not social housings but condominiums. The open space is publicly owned and constituted by a street enclosing a small garden with a playground for kids. Thus, the voices and behaviours that I observed and interacted with are those of residents or habitual users of these spaces.

The first interesting observation was that only a few cars went through the square, which made the environment safe for children to play, not only in the playground but also in the street. An important and unexpected fact was the presence of informal economical activities. These consisted of small drug deals by some youngsters⁵, and washing and fixing cars by some adults. The first phenomenon gave rise to other specific social interactions: starting from 11 am and throughout the day, some “sentinels” watched the main accesses to the square; while at the centre of it, in the garden, others gathered. The central position of the youngsters in the space works as gathering or greeting point. Some other young men come and stop there for some time, while others simply say “hi” from the side-walk. This naturally constitutes a form of spatial control by the youngsters in the garden. It must be noted how I was an object of different attempts at “classification”, as residents wanted to understand who I was and what I was doing there (Fava, 2013) . A man who was washing cars asked me if I was a surveyor. Later, as some young men gathered in the middle of the garden, one of them came quite aggressively towards me accusing me of being a

4 In the context of Robins des Villes intervention, “Square Monnet” has been renamed “Square des Couleurs”.

5 It seems unlikely that they deal important amounts of drug, as the local police station and the town hall are only a few steps away.

policeman. The very first thing that he told me after I replied I was not a policeman, was: “We are working people, we do work”. This gives a suggestion of how they think “ordinary” people think of them: as jobless and wasting their time (Tucci, 2010). I was invited then to join his friends in the garden and, even if not so easily, I was finally “re-classified”, as a student and somebody in contact with the municipality. Once I joined them, I was able to see how they behave and what they usually do there: listening to French rap music, chatting and smoking hashish. They were curious about me, especially about my education level and employment perspectives.

The observation and the interaction with users of Monnet square/Bellevue, revealed that this is a lively place, where some noteworthy social interactions occur. It can be defined as a “closed” space towards the outside, and an “appropriated” space inside. Closed in a physical sense, because the spatial organization favours interactions within these six buildings, but is unrelated to the surrounding urban fabric, but it is also closed in a social sense, because barely anybody, be it pedestrian or car driver, goes *through* the square: the great majority of people visible in public space are residents. Within the residential estate, a phenomenon of *appropriation* of space was highlighted, defined as “practical utilization of the places” (Caniglia Rispoli & Signorelli, 2008: 54) . The young men occupying part of the playground, as well as the men fixing and washing cars, are turning some portions of the space from their original functions into something else, more useful to their own purposes or needs.

The time spent on the field and the interactions with locals, such as the ones described above, gave me the possibility to get in touch with users of the places and ask them for an ethnographic interview, during which I first enquired about the interviewee's personal and family history, his/her residential trajectory, and in a second time, I proceeded to ask whether he/she feels attached to some particular places in Saint-Priest, whether there are places where he/she feels at ease or unease and so on. Here, I will present the two most relevant interviews, in which places comprised in the study area were spontaneously cited as meaningful.

The first one was with a man of French origin, former owner of a commercial activity in Salengro square, born around 1950, who was raised and lived for around thirty years in Saint-Priest. After he got married, in 1980, he moved with his family to Saint-Pierre de Chandieu, a suburban smaller town 10 km away. His workplace remained in the town

centre: he had taken over the management of the shop from his father and had passed it over to his children in 2008. In 2012, he kept coming to the shop to help. He voices the opinions of a resident and a retailer until his thirties and since then only of a retailer. What was interesting in his case, was the representation he gave of Bellevue estate, which is a few hundred meters away from Salengro square; nevertheless, he spoke explicitly of a divide between the square and Bellevue, using the words “cut” (*coupure*), “frontier” (*frontière*) and “barrier” (*barrière*):

Let's take Bellevue, that used to make up the countryside before. In the beginning there were immigrant workers - Portuguese, Italian, Spanish - good people. Now that there are other occupants, they have kind of stripped this place of its essence, which was quite lively, with their actions.

The essence? In what sense?

The environment is unhealthy... They have group meetings, and then they are kind of monopolising places that we... we are a little uneasy passing by and then, you have the fact that it's badly maintained, the alleys are dirty sometimes, the iron doors are falling apart...

(G., male, 62, retailer and former dweller, 11 May 2012)

He clarified that this “cut” divides two places that he perceives as more comfortable: Salengro square, where his shop is, and the town hall. Since Bellevue is on the route from the square to the town hall, he feels a sense of insecurity as he goes through it. Asked about this “cut”, he was even able to identify where it starts: “from the cobbler shop”.

Another interview was with a man of Algerian origin, born and raised in Saint-Priest. He changed six different neighbourhoods within the town, first with his parents and then after marriage with his own family: Les Alpes (where his parents entered in 1965, as soon as it was built), the railway station neighbourhood, Diderot, Bel Air (the other Urban Policy neighbourhood of Saint-Priest), Bellevue and in 2012 he had been living for two years in a single house in the town centre. His workplace was also located in the neighbourhood, since he was a watchman of a municipal premises located there. He voices the opinions of a resident and worker of the town centre. Among all the different neighbourhoods where he has lived, he stressed a special attachment to Les Alpes, a high-rise building that, just in

spring 2012, in agreement with the *ORU*, was being demolished. He recalls his life at Les Alpes as a very positive period because there was mutual help between dwellers, everybody knew one another and it was, definitely, a “family atmosphere” (*ambiance famille*). However, he added that when he, with his parents, left Les Alpes (in 1985), this “family atmosphere” had gone, it had changed for the worse:

It was over. After that, it was each one for himself. [...] When I left, there were others who left as well. Who were about to leave. Others whom we didn't know came by, they didn't have the same mentality.

(M., male, 41, dweller, 13 May 2012)

The kind of social relations that he experienced successively were always contrasted with Les Alpes' positive exception. Let us retain this particular identity associated with Les Alpes estate, and see if and how it was shared by other people. More generally, in the next sub-section I will proceed to illustrate the second step of the research, in which the results emerged from the ethnographic interviews will be analysed through the results of the workshops, having in mind two questions: Are these places (Les Alpes and Bellevue) relevant for a broader public? If so, how are they represented by different groups of citizens?

4.2. Urban practitioners workshops

Two workshops were held in L'Olivier civic centre: one with undifferentiated users and one with a group of teenagers. In the first one, around 40 people, of all ages, took part. This civic centre is considered to be the “community centre” of Bellevue and Les Alpes estates. Thus, the voices collected in this workshop are mainly those of current or former residents or users of these residential estates. Since the total number of commented pictures was 88 within a set of 23 pictures, the “random” possibility that each picture be chosen was 3.8 times. We can argue that, if the number of choices is remarkably higher, a clear preference for those pictures (NB: pictures, not places) is manifested. Four images stand out: those reproducing “greenery and pedestrian path” (9 choices), “street market” (8), and two images representing Les Alpes (7 each). However, both pictures with 7 choices showed Les Alpes estate only in the background and choices split between those

commenting on Les Alpes and those commenting on the content in the foreground. On the other hand, one comment was made about Les Alpes on a picture not showing it. For the picture showing greenery, most comments (7 on 9) praised trees and grass, without recognising the place. In the case of street market, all comments referred to the subject of the picture. Another picture showing Les Alpes (the demolition site) collected 5 comments, all related to the content of the picture. A similar number of comments (5 or 4) was attributed to other places: two commercial activities, the town hall, Bellevue (square Monnet) and a wooden single house. We infer that the two most relevant pictures were not chosen primarily for the place displayed; instead they represented either a wish (to have more green spaces in the neighbourhood) or a periodical event marking local life (weekly street market). Taking into account comments that instead referred to places, we find various places of everyday life, among which Les Alpes and Bellevue residential estates.

Let us turn now to the comments associated with Les Alpes (12 comments) and Bellevue (8 comments). The former was a place present only in occupants' memory, as they had been relocated and the building was being demolished right then. The latter, on the other hand, was a lived-in place, only marginally involved in the renewal program. Consequently, many comments about Les Alpes mentioned the memories linked to it, though with varying attitudes: 4 comments contained regret or criticism; 3 of them expressed acceptance of the transformation and openness towards the future. The importance of the building was also affirmed as a visual landmark. As for Bellevue, comments were mostly limited to a recognition of the place and, in a few cases, told something of the everyday activities of residents. What we found then among users of L'Olivier civic centre is an attachment especially to Les Alpes. The demolition is more or less accepted but in any case raises sentiments and memories.

The second workshop at L'Olivier was organised with a group of eight teenagers, who frequented the civic centre for diverse activities on a weekly basis. The set of pictures was made up of only 11 pictures out of the initial 23, mostly because the first workshop was also used as a test, after which a further selection of images was done. Since the total of commented pictures was 16, the "random possibility" of each image being chosen was 1.5 times. All comments but one were related to the place represented in the pictures. The most chosen image was that of Bellevue (3 choices). The comments expressed a positive feeling linked to the recognition of the place. Five other places were recognised as places

of everyday activities: another picture of Bellevue, the street market, the greenery (whose location was this time recognised), the playground near Les Alpes and another residential estate, Alpes-Azur. Only one picture representing Les Alpes estate was present here, and when it was selected it was not for Les Alpes but for the foreground. This confirms the intuitive result that the attention of teenagers focused more on the present than on the past, as long as they had not directly experienced relocation.

Image 5 – The graffiti as a process of *appaesamento* by teenagers



Teenagers were also invited to draw a “mental map” of the town centre, displaying the places they knew, how they liked them and what they did there (for instance, whether they met friends). The outcome was very heterogeneous, nevertheless the place represented by all of them was the place of residence, Bellevue. Two mental maps expressed the attachment to it by reproducing a graffiti that had been drawn by them on a wall of the residential estate (Image 5). This can be seen as a process of *appaesamento*: “a process through which a portion of space is invested with value by a human subject” (Caniglia Rispoli & Signorelli, 2008: 55) . The perception of teenagers is quite coherent with that of L'Olivier users: the residential estates are positively depicted, as environments of everyday life; at the same time they are not the exclusive contexts of “public life” within the neighbourhood.

One workshop was organised at the weekly street market in Buisson square (see Image

3), which attracts customers from the whole town and is considered to be mainly frequented by customers from Saint-Priest, whereas the Sunday street market, in Salengro square, attracts customers from neighbouring towns as well. The opinions collected at the market can be regarded then as those of residents both of the town centre and of other parts of Saint-Priest. The same set of 11 pictures was used, the total of commented pictures was 20 and the “random possibility” to be chosen 1.8. The most chosen pictures were again those showing Bellevue residential estate (4 and 3 choices). However, not all comments were about the specific place shown, there were more general comments concerning the neighbourhood, if not the whole city. Some asked for more and safer places for children, others criticised the *grands ensembles*’ urban typology. The most commented place turned out to be the town hall, with 3 comments about it. Remarkably, the same picture in which teenagers spoke of the playground, the adults commented about Les Alpes. On the other hand, the wooden single house received positive comments. If we look at the number of comments recognizing places, none of these stood out as particularly relevant. Several places were recognised, among which the town hall, Les Alpes, Bellevue and the wooden single house.

Nevertheless, the comments related to Bellevue were quite interesting, since they expressed different points of view on the place. Some criticised the presence of satellite dishes on the balconies. One resident gave her explanation of what was going on in Bellevue: “They let the neighbourhood rot. They will tear us apart, same as Les Alpes”. These comments shared the perception of Bellevue as a problematic area, with issues at stake, but framed the problem differently: some focused on the normative (“they should forbid all this”) and more visible part of it, whereas others described the social dynamics negatively affecting the area. Many criticisms on the *grands ensembles* urban landscape were collected: this perception clung to the architectural features of a specific building (the town hall), to a widespread spatial practice (installation of satellite dish in the balconies) and was made explicit in some general statements (“too much concrete, too many high-rise buildings”). However, this was not completely unanimous, as some commented positively on the images of the *grands ensembles*. The image emerging from this workshop is ambivalent: on the one hand, an attachment to the places is again manifested, even if quite diverse (from a positive attachment, to regretting the demolition, to the account of problematic social dynamics). On the other hand, several criticisms were expressed towards

the low architectural and urban value of the *grands ensembles* and towards some spatial practices of its occupants.

The last workshop that I will present was organised with representatives of the Municipality: one employee from the Local Democracy Department, the elected Deputy for Social Cohesion and 4 neighbourhood councillors⁶, whose opinion is that of residents of the town centre who, at the same time, are involved in the administrative process. The set of pictures this time was formed by 13 of the initial 23, plus 3 new pictures, added following the suggestions of the participants of the previous workshops. The commented choices were 17 and the “random possibility” 1.1. The most relevant pictures were Les Alpes and the town hall (3 choices each). In this workshop all choices were motivated by the place shown in the picture. In the case of the image showing Les Alpes and the tramway, all comments pointed at the building. The most relevant places were thus the town hall – expectable as the participants were representatives of the municipality – and Les Alpes. All comments about Les Alpes stressed the positive aspects of the urban renewal program, which included the demolition of the building. These comments revealed a quite detailed knowledge of the *ORU* and a perspective projected in the middle-long term. The same point of view can be found in the comments about Bellevue. The municipality representatives showed good knowledge of the situation, which according to them needed the attention of public actors. Similarly, Les Alpes building was mainly looked at not as a place where people had actually lived, but as a part of a broader public intervention aimed at renewing the whole town centre. Municipality representatives view Bellevue and Les Alpes as places that needed or need to be transformed. In the case of Les Alpes, the image is a detached one, compared to the sorrow and regret expressed by its former occupants. A sense of relief was observed, for having finally removed a sign of social and urban failure, to be replaced by a much more attractive urban environment.

Having gone through the perceptions of place expressed by different groups of inhabitants, I will summarize the main findings in the next section and try to sketch out the *sense of place* or local identity attributed to the area analysed.

6 The city of Saint-Priest is divided into eight administrative districts, each of them having a Council, a consultative body formed by voluntary residents not elected. Its role is to foster democratic participation, by debating neighbourhood-scale spatial and social improvements.

5. Conflicting senses of places

Two estates of Saint-Priest town centre were selected, through in-depth, non-directive interviews. Analysing the choices made by inhabitants/users during the workshops, through photo-elicitation, it was observed that both estates (Les Alpes and Bellevue) can be counted among the meaningful places of the town centre, such as other places of “public life”: shops, the town hall, the marketplace that are not subject to urban transformation (Robins des Villes, 2013) . The second question was: How are these places represented by different groups of inhabitants/users? To answer this we need to summarize the various *senses of place* that emerged during the research.

An attachment to these places was expressed by those who had lived and were still living there. In particular, concerning Les Alpes, the ongoing demolition raised feelings of regret and sorrow, linked to the memories of growing up, living or frequenting the place. These feelings did trigger diverse reactions: from refusal and criticism to acceptance and openness towards the future. On the other hand, at the marketplace where inhabitants of other neighbourhoods gathered, several criticisms were expressed towards the *grands ensembles* urban landscape, of which Les Alpes and Bellevue are an example. Some negative comments were recorded about Bellevue; however, these were not related to the architectural features but to a particular spatial practice judged unsuitable. The shift from a purely architectural criticism to a remark concerning the dwellers' behaviour contributes to shape a negative image of the place as a whole. Another negative representation of Bellevue bore the fear of being robbed when going through this area and the worry of “slipping into lateral streets”. This perception can easily be associated with the illegal activities that I observed in the area. However, the representation of “insiders” (dwellers and habitual users), among which teenagers, was strikingly opposite to this, in the sense that the place was never described as dangerous or unsafe. As for residents who are involved in local administration, their perception of these places was shaped by an implicit affirmation of the public institution's responsibility to intervene and reinvigorate social cohesion in socially weak areas. Les Alpes and Bellevue were considered as relevant issues calling for public intervention: in the case of Les Alpes this was under accomplishment, whereas Bellevue still stood out as a public issue and was defined “a challenge for the municipality”. A “barrier”, a “cut” between Salengro square and Bellevue was also

mentioned, that would begin past a shop at a crossroad. Indeed, in the landscape analysis, the change from “dense urban fabric” to “*grands ensembles*” occurred precisely at that point: from a wide, open square, surrounded by shops at street level and residential buildings organised around streets and a square, one passes abruptly to a completely residential environment, with serial and massive buildings, mostly unrelated to street orientation. Moreover, the highest level of social weakness, within the town centre, is concentrated in this area (Bellevue). Since 1997, this, in fact, has made up the previous, smaller Urban Policy zone (*ZUS*). Therefore, three different spatial descriptions converge to mark a shifting-point within the neighbourhood: a socio-institutional analysis by the *Politique de la Ville* previous to 1997; a study of urban landscape as visible in 2012; and a perception of a long-lasting user of the place.

All the evidence gathered shows that Les Alpes and Bellevue are object of diverse and conflicting representations by different groups of citizens. For instance, Les Alpes building was defined by L'Olivier users as a “landmark” or a “monument” condensing the history of the place, whereas other citizens compared it to the Chinese Wall, as a suffocating element that impedes the view. Municipality representatives' gaze, looking at *grands ensembles* mostly as containers of social and urban issues, is also inconsistent with residents' positive attachment, hardly regarded as a potential contribution to social development. The evidence also highlights that the *ORU* operational perimeter is cross-cut by other perceived boundaries that might have social implications.

What is remarkable is that, as in the first urban development of the 1960s and 1970s this area was born marked by social heterogeneity, fifty years later, it is still characterised by a fragmented identity. The evolution of the population dwelling in this area seems to have followed a path-dependent trajectory: what initially could have been “simple” differences of social conditions and national origins seem to have *fossilized* into well differentiated local identities – embodied in different spatial practices and perceptions of place – and coexisting close to each other but hardly mixing. Bellevue estate could sustain the hypothesis of a path-dependent social evolution: since it was built to accommodate a displaced population (*Pieds-Noirs*), it is plausible that it was perceived as a temporary housing solution and consequently it endured a lack of involvement in the management of common spaces. Today, the phenomenon of appropriation of space witnesses a persisting

carelessness towards common spaces by the residents⁷.

6. Conclusion

This research has brought to light two main findings related to the initial hypothesis of the Urban Policy local office, which wanted to know more about the attachment of residents to the town centre, that is, about its *local identity*. As far as two important residential estates are concerned – Les Alpes and Bellevue – it was found that residents have indeed developed a remarkable attachment to these places, notwithstanding the low architectural and urban value of the buildings and the social difficulties of a higher-than-average share of residents. However, it was also found that the representation of these places is not unanimous and shared, but rather a contrasted one. In fact, other representations pointed at negative features of these residential estates, such as perceived insecurity and aesthetic decay. The differentiation between positive and negative representations followed rather blurred edges: negative comments were expressed both by residents/users of the town centre and non residents/users; the neighbourhood councillors expressed mostly negative representations but also a few positive images related to the *grands ensembles*. The only homogeneous perception was that of *grands ensembles* dwellers, who expressed positive comments about “their” place.

Since these two estates make up only a part of the study area, they can not be representative of the senses of place of the whole town centre. Nevertheless, they are representative of a characteristic dynamic: that of the coexistence of conflicting senses of place within a narrow area, in spite of which it has been selected as an Urban Policy unit. This fact is relevant as long as one of the urban renewal objectives is to overcome urban and social fragmentation and foster the emergence of a new, shared identity for the town centre. If the actions of *accompagnement à la transformation urbaine* aim at accompanying the physical renewal with the mingling of a less fragmented identity for the neighbourhood, then the state of things that I observed is not encouraging, it is instead rather problematic for the achievement of this objective.

If in 2012, well after the beginning of the works and several “participative” actions (Donzelot & Epstein, 2006; Bresson, 2007) , the Urban Policy local office felt the need to

⁷ The appropriation is likely to be favoured by the peculiar (closed) spatial organization and by the property regime of the (publicly owned) common spaces.

get a more precise idea of the neighbourhood's "local identity", then one can put forward the hypothesis that the phenomenon of conflicting senses of place was under-estimated, if not ignored, during the policy-making process. Indeed, without a cognitive frame stressing the importance of self-representation as a developmental tool, the role of actions such as the one described in this paper can be only ancillary in regards to the supposedly "real" transformation, i.e. the physical renewal (Blanc, 2006) . In a context of urban and social transformation, having an insight on how inhabitants represent themselves and the environment they live in can be a key-element of a successful development policy: "[L]ocal agents' awareness of their knowledge and preferences is a primary driver of development – both of its economic and social dimensions, and both in the deprived areas of agglomerations and in lagging regions" (Barca, 2011: 219) .

However, since the research was carried out, the ground reality has been transforming: demolitions have continued, public spaces have been renovated, and construction sites have been opened. There is still time for this urban renewal to meet its goals, both the physical and the social ones. In the French administrative and professional world the debate around the "renewal" of the *Politique de la Ville* itself has been very lively. The challenge is there; and is a relevant one not only at the national but at the European level, as demonstrated by the recent "Cities of Tomorrow" Conference, held by the European Commission to debate the implementation of an Urban Agenda for the European Union, where the French minister in charge of the *Politique de la Ville* was among the speakers of the opening session. Will this policy succeed in creating the conditions for shared new identities to emerge and for new opportunities to arise for the socially weak populations; or, instead, will it favour a gentrification-like process, concentrating disadvantaged people in other deprived districts – these are open questions that deserve future research and evaluation.

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