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WINNING BACK GREEN AREAS TO REVIVE TOWNS

by

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Overview

In the 1990's, with fifteen square meters of green areas per inhabitant, the "Communauté urbaine de Lille" was one of the towns which had the least green spaces in France, on top of this there were vacant industrial sites and abandoned canals. Pierre Mauroy, president of the town district and Mayor of Lille, launched a program with ambitious political, administrative and technical magnitude which resulted in the creation in 2002 of a new jurisdiction for the "Communauté urbaine de Lille" and its own management system : the Lille Metropolis Green Areas Joint committee. ("Syndicat mixte Espace Naturel Lille Métropole"). This committee succeeded in developing a management system for two thousand hectares which preserved the fragile natural environment, allowed free movement for visitors and met the the farmers' demands. This success was rewarded by the National Landscape Prize/"Le grand prix national du paysage" (France), which was awarded to the "Parc de la Deûle".

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TALK : Pierre Dhenin

My studies lead me to be a journalist but I also studied natural history as it was called in the 70's and which is now called ecology and sustainable development.

Working as a journalist and communication director for the County Council, I was called, in 1992, to deal with the deficit in green areas by Pierre Mauroy, mayor of Lille and President of the "Agence de développement et d'urbanisme de Lille". During the next 10 years, this Agency built a management system assigned to the green areas of the "Communauté urbaine", called "Espace Naturel Lille Métropole" which was established five years ago. I manage this body since its creation.

The rising public awareness of the lack of green areas

From the 80's up to the beginning of the 90's, the main concern of regional development around Lille concerned the construction of infrastructures of transport and business including the junction of two TGV lines and the creation of the Euralille business centre. This gave an economic boost to the area, but the political and economical leaders realized that it wouldn't make it really attractive : it had an image problem that the construction programmes didn't help. In simple terms, we can say that the construction satisfied the husbands who had to work there but not their wives who were more attracted by the lifestyle of other big centres such as Lyon.

It soon became clear that increasing the quality of local green spaces would be a good thing as it would improve the quality of life. The comparison between the public green spaces per habitant was indeed enlightening : La Haye had 79 square meters per person, Cologne had 60, Essen had 44, Brussels had 28 and the district of Lille only 15.

Even when compared to towns which are socially, economically climatically similar such as the German towns of Cologne or Essen in the Ruhr area, Lille metropolis was very badly rated.

For this reason, it was necessary to design a green area project, to put into place an administrative structure and to find the way to bring together all the concerned parties to bring the project to fruition.

From the 60's up to the turn of the century

If you observe a map of the south east of the Lille area, you will easily see that there are two towns which are particularly dense : that of Lille and that of the old mining area, separated by a strip of land of about 20 km around the Deûle river which is more agricultural and less populated. This land strip appeared ideal for the location of a large green area close to Lille.

The management failure in the 60's

Since the 60's, this area has been identified as requiring particular ecological attention. Indeed, it was a major water reserve for the town water supply but it was fragile and easily polluted by human activity because the water tables were not very deep under ground. At the time, the prefecture had thought of creating a new natural protected area, but they hadn't managed to complete the project due to managerial problems.

At the time, the local government official (le Prefect) called upon public advisors who produced scientific conclusions. These were then presented to the local leaders with the idea that the simple logic of the arguments would automatically lead them to agree. I am unaware if this method has had a lot of success elsewhere, but it didn't work here. When confronted with the results which necessitated the closing of a certain number of economical activities,

the mayors and the pressures groups protested and managed to put up a strong resistance. They were tied up in this conflict for 10 years and the project was finally abandoned.

A new attempt in the 90's

In the early 90's, the "Agence de développement et d'urbanisme de Lille Métropole" became interested in the correct management of this territory and took another look at the subject. In 1995, it launched an international competition, financed by the urban district contract concerning the following question : how could the idea of the "Parc de la Deûle", imagined in 1968, some day become reality.

Four teams took up the challenge ; one of the projects, lead by two architects and landscape gardeners the French Jacques Simon and Belgian Jean-Noel Capart, was chosen.

Two areas, three landscape plans, to make a whole

This project distinguishes two types of areas and defines three different landscape plans. The first type of area is that to be managed by the public authority, the second preserves private property, notably farmland, but requires to be added to the first through landscape improvements. The three themes are rediscovered nature, which involves wildlife restoration on industrial sites, domesticated nature which is farmland, and nature the way people imagine it, showing animal and plant diversity and, at the same time offering reception areas and commercial services. All together it is a 2 000 hectare territory with a global concept.

The administrative planning

In 1995, the "Communauté urbaine de Lille" didn't have the necessary jurisdiction to manage green areas. In the Lille district, no administrative entity had this jurisdiction. To start with, the green areas management met with some administrative set-backs. On the other hand, there were no snags when putting it into place.

Initial administrative tribulations

To find a way round the fact that nobody held the official jurisdictions and to move the project forward, Pierre Mauroy decided to make use of existing inter-communal jurisdictions and use them for green areas management. It was sometimes verging on illegality. For example, the "Communauté urbaine" held the jurisdiction of the water resources in the "Parc de la Deûle". By claiming to protect this resource, we considered that it could finance tree plantating in this sector through an ad hoc committee. Between 1995 and 2002, seven committees were finally created, within numerous but small sized communes (about forty in number), and this permitted a better understanding of the projects that we wanted to develop.

Unfortunately, this system found its limitations when the project began to take shape as the committees lacked the necessary financial means ; in the Lille area, only the "Communauté urbaine" held substantial financial resources. To get round this Pierre Mauroy took a new initiative in September 2002 by making use of the reform of jurisdiction instigated by the law "Chevènement" of 1999. He proposed to attach the jurisdiction of "Espace Naturel de Lille Métropole" to the "Communauté urbaine". To my knowledge, it was the first time in France that a local council had taken the jurisdiction of landscape development. The following month, backed by a certain political unanimity, the "Communauté urbaine" unified the seven committees, took over the control of the groupe, called "Espace Naturel Lille Métropole" and gave it a budget for it's needs : sixteen million Euros, whereas the budget sum up of all the previous committees had only came to four million¹.

¹ The operational budget has stabilized at about 10 millions euros; including 7.2 million which comes from the Urban Council (which corresponds to about 1.2 % of its budget) seven hundred and fifty thousand comes from the other communes. The extra comes from fee paying activities and other small services. The urban community has invested 6 million per year in land and building works.

A timely association

Contrary to the previous stage, the practical achievement didn't present any problems from an administrative point of view. Indeed, the outcome of the reflexion on the lack of green spaces and the setting-up of the project to solve it, which took place in the planning agency and joint committees, came about at the same time as the development of a new master plan for the Lille district. This enabled them to include the result of the green areas in this new master plan right from the start, which constituted, to my experience, a massive element of administrative simplification.

From a technical viewpoint, a map of the green areas which needed to be developed was included in the "SDAU" (Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme), precursor of the 'SCOT' (Schéma de cohérence territoriale which is a comprehensive structure plan) with the following objectives :

- increase the woodland area,
- increase natural areas,
- valorise the natural countryside,
- build ecological continuity,
- promote low impact transport and movement in line with this green line of action,
- manage and restore the countryside.

In the following months, the "Communauté urbaine de Lille" succeeded in including the State, the region and the county in its objectives. In 2004, these four major territorial participators signed a common charter. From then the main political and administrative questions were resolved.

Setting parks with the people who live there

One of the elements at stake was the creation of a degree of unity and to bring together all the people concerned in spite of their diversity and that of the areas to be transformed.

With this objective, we set-up projects and plans of action adapted to all parties, whether they be farmers with a farm inside the proposed park, visitors coming from surrounding urban district, or staff from "Espace Naturel Lille Métropole".

A partnership proposed to the farmers

In order to build a good quality landscape it was indispensable that the farmers living in the territory accept to include their farms within this scheme. We offered them a voluntary agreement. If they were interested in being part of the landscape planning, we offered them a initial introductory period of five days with the landscape architects. If they continued to be interested, we allocated them a landscape architect for three days whose mission was to propose ways to enhance the landscape while in no way restricting their farming activities. Finally, if they accepted these projects we signed a contract with them in which we agreed to pay two thousand euros in supplies (for example trees to plant) three times over five years along with instructions for carrying out the necessary work.

On this subject, I was surprised to see that young farmers didn't necessarily know how to plant a hedge. A small story illustrates this. We had delivered trees of different size and type to one of them so that he could plant a pleasing mixed hedge. When a few days later, I went to see the result, I discovered that he had planted them by type and size as they are found on display in garden centres. We had to explain what we had in mind and do all the work again. Since that incident, we give very clear instructions of what we want.

Finally, most of the farmers accepted to join in with the countryside plan. This can also be explained by the fact that the help we brought them was well adapted and also because there was a great deal of pressure from the population. They realized they couldn't pretend they

were isolated from the rest of the regional community. To continue to be accepted and recognized, they had to be actively integrated, one way or another, into the creation of the common green areas.

Overall, to integrate them into the scheme of the park, we initiated activities which could be of economic interest to them. Thus, we suggested they offer horse and cart rides for visitors. We would finance the investment in the cart and they would finance the horses and the maintenance costs. Two of them now pursue this activity. What's more, we have proposed to those owning suitable fields that they rent them to us to turn them into places of special interest. Once again, five farmers have accepted the proposition.

Mosaic, the garden of different homelands

While planning the project we had the intention of transforming an area of a hundred acres situated in the middle of a group of very polluted ponds, into a garden where families from the city of Lille area could enjoy coming to let their children enjoy the countryside. So that town people would adopt the area we tried to create a theme. After having discussed it thoroughly under the supervision of a specialist sociologist (who later became director of the garden) we realized that a major characteristic of the region was the large and varied immigrant population coming from countries either to the North, East or South ; in fact we found Italian, Polish, Arabic, English, Asian and Belgian, communities etc. We told ourselves that these inhabitants maybe had memories of flower or vegetable gardens from where they came from and that they would enjoy rediscovering them in a contemporary garden. Through representative associations we asked each identity group to design their own garden within a common overall plan.

The people really adopted the subject and built gardens according to the dreams or the memories they had from their ancestors : the Polish asked for a bandstand, white lilacs and cumin, the North Africans wanted a fig tree and a chess game the Asians were very particular about the species of plants – we went to get them directly from the Viet-Nam or Laos, the Italians were very keen to make sure that all the produce from their garden was edible, etc.

Training the staff for informing the public

It seemed important for the park maintenance staff to be able to speak with the public because it ensured everyone was at ease. It is motivating for the staff to be able to explain what they are doing and what their role in the ecosystem is, and it's pleasant for the visitors to be able to ask questions that come to mind during their walk. What's more, this avoids the staff seeing the visitors as being the creators of the damage they have to repair afterwards and it makes the visitors be naturally better behaved out of respect for the staff.

We have trained the sixty members of our staff who work on site to be able to answer the visitor's questions about their job, its effect on the park life, and on the park in general.

We have employed ten "eco-wardens" that is to say people with four years of further education whose role is to check on the ecological aspects of the park ; one third of their timetable is dedicated to education, another third to the park's security and another to the ecological actions such as the observation of animal migrations or hedge construction.

Apart from the increase in everybody's pleasure, the presence of staff capable of speaking with the visitors lowered the feeling of insecurity. In 2002, only 50 % of the people declared really feeling safe in the park. Today this proportion has risen to 81 %.

Pleasant/unpleasant *versus* forbidden/allowed

Once we had an attractive offer of green spaces, a major challenge was to closely orientate the visitors, because even without intending to do harm, they have a powerful power of destruction over wildlife. The park manager is confronted with a paradox : he has to preserve the feeling of freedom and fresh air which attracts people to the outside, and stop them from going anywhere anyhow. Our solution consists in not setting rules, but making the places where we don't want people to go unpleasant and, at the same time, making places where we want them to go attractive.

We have taken this solution from the experience of other parks and anthropological studies. Basically, we can say that modern Frenchman is rebellious but lazy, if he sees something forbidden, he will want to do it, but if everything is open for him, he will automatically go to the easiest place. If, what's more, it's a pleasant place, he won't even think of going anywhere else.

In simple terms, we never forbid people from leaving the path to go towards the field. On the other hand, when we don't want them to, we make large grassy borders, then a hawthorn hedge with a shallow ditch. People then have the feeling that the space is open, but the effort that he will have to make to go in the field will prevent him from leaving the path. At the most, he will go on the border and will sit down. The price to pay for this form of gentle control is the maintenance of about thirty meters for a path that measures four. But the result is attractive and efficient.

Special areas with an entrance charge

In some sites there has been a major effort to suit the needs of families which permits a better control of the type of visitors. In the Mozaic garden for example, we offer a zoological, as well as a botanical theme. Of course, children aren't interested in plants whereas they are fascinated by animals. They can therefore see rabbits, goats, pigeons and many other species related to each cultural identity that we have already mentioned. We had also planned fun areas that enable families to enjoy themselves. There are small electric cars for moving around in a restricted area, or deckchairs in which to relax or read books from the small library.

After some discussion during the planning stage, it was decided that the entry to the site would be paying. To give an idea, full entry to the Mozaic garden costs six euros and reduced prise (that is easy to obtain) costs four euros.

As these sites offer free activities once inside and they are maintained on a permanent basis, nobody has complained about the price. In fact, I often receive thank you letters and the number of subscriptions is increasing.

A much appreciated place to go close to hand

A major objective of the park was to offer the people from the Lille metropolis a chance to get out in the country not too far away. This objective seems reached : although we haven't got a precise ideas of visitor numbers beyond the paying areas (which had two hundred and eighty thousand people last year), we can estimate that two to three million people walk there each year, of which 65 % live less than five or six kilometres away. The park has a great deal of success with the press, and the elected representatives are satisfied : since it opened, more than seven hundred articles have been published in the regional and even national press. The park has even had the acknowledgement of experts, since it received in 2006 the National countryside prize ("le grand prix national du paysage") from the Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development.

These results have naturally encouraged us to continue with the original project : the “Parc de la Deûle” was only the first step. It is wholly dedicated to developing outdoor activities. We have already developed the area known as “Les Prés du Hem” which centres on water and the uses of water, or the Open Air Museum of local history at “Villeneuve d’Ascq”. Currently, we are finishing the creation the “Parc de la Lys”, a long strip of land which goes along the river Lys by the Franco-Belgian border.

Debate

Question : *You develop a space that you call natural. But what kind of natural is it ? It appears to be an environment worked by man. Is there a real environment and do you try to make the visitors discover it ?*

Pierre Dhénin : In fact my presentation made it look that way because I concentrated on the farmed areas but in fact these only cover 10 % of the area. The park contains a large proportion of wild areas. By wild I don’t mean extraordinary, we don’t found big carnivores, just blackbirds and mice. But, these are the things we have stopped looking at. To get to know them, we propose walks on Sundays at seven o’clock in the morning which attracts about one hundred people, which is remarkable considering the day and the time of day. What’s more, we propose night walks to observe bats and listen to them with bat detectors. These evening events are really successful.

Keeping control of where people go

Q. : *If we leave them alone, the visitors of French public gardens take away all the flowers... What policy have you taken regarding flower picking ?*

P. D. : With regard to the walks, we avoid forbidding things. Certain walks are made in such a way that they finish near a place that we make attractive for flower picking by regularly replanting attractive flowers. We even organise flower picking at the end of the walk... on specialized sites cultivated for that. Not only that, but it’s more practical to pick yourself a bunch of flowers just before going back home, the walkers automatically leave the flowers that they find elsewhere. If you allow it in one place, you can ban it elsewhere.

Q. : *The French like green spaces and fresh air, but don’t even think of moving around other than by car. How do people go to your park and move around inside ?*

P. D. : That’s right, the French are sometimes contradictory. Four years ago, a survey showed that what 90 % of the visitors like meeting the least, during their walks, was cars, but that they never considered using any another means of transport. Nevertheless, we must admit that we didn’t offer many other possibilities because the public transport system wasn’t adapted.

Since then we have made progress, a bus line coming from Lille should soon been opened. We have also developed a wildlife path that links the train station and the park. People can therefore come by train and then continue on foot straight away. To increase the apparent distance, we also worked on the parking and on the other side of the park, people had to get past a bridge and a hedge to get to the other side. In this way, once they were in the park, not only couldn’t they see the cars any more, but also, they had left them behind and therefore could forget them.

Inside the park, people prefer to move around on foot. We have made major efforts to make it easy to get from one village to another, using pleasant and well signposted paths. Thanks to the rehabilitation of many canals and the introduction of canal boats it is also possible to move around by boat over large distances. Forty-two thousand people used them last year. Finally, in certain specific areas, there are special means of transport, like the electric cars of the Mozaic garden.

Q. : *As a walker I am regularly confronted with dogs and their deposits. They are a real nuisance. What is your answer ?*

P. D. : From the point of view of the visitors who don't have a dog, they are indeed a great annoyance. The problem with dogs is that there are a lot of them, on average, one visitor in five comes with a dog. Even if most of them know how to keep control of their animal and accept to meet the constraints of mutual respect. There are still lots of owners walked by there dogs who couldn't care less. For the time being, we haven't found a solution. We are looking for one. This summer, we will attempt to offer these incompetent owners a half an hour course with the dog trainers that we will hire.

Q. : *Another cause of annoyance is the motor bikes and quads which drive along the tracks as if it were a race track.*

P. D. : Motor bike sports are very annoying, but riders are quite rare and there are certain points which are negotiable : you can propose to leave them alone in certain areas at certain times, if they respect the area at other times. In fact, they are bit easier to manage than the dogs and their owners !

Q. : *Not far from the Lille area, there is the vast and superb natural area of the Opale coast. It must be particularly attractive for the public. How do you place your green area compared to the one of this region ?*

P. D. : Firstly our facility is very near to hand. But, we can see that this is more and more what people want and we can expect it to continue considering the increase in fuel prices. Our area is also special because it has not only the preservation of good ecological equilibrium but also the capacity to receive a large number of visitors all year round. It is not easy because the environment is a fragile reality and demands a lot of attention. You need very good management and maintenance. The Opale coast can only offer this during summer thanks to the work of large numbers of seasonal workers. But when, by chance, there is a nice week-end during the winter or spring and the people of Lille rush there in mass, the whole area is overrun. Considering the number of visitors the our parks can accommodate, it would be logical that the town's habitants get used to going to the Opale coast only during the holidays.

Local colour and originality

Q. : *The Mozaic garden illustrates perfectly a change in the French mentality that I have observed in many sectors. Forty years ago, what appeared to be progress was to create projects which were supposedly suitable for anybody whatever or whoever they were. There was, for example, the triumph of functional architecture. This garden shows that the modern way of thinking is much more at ease in a world that carries the history of individual communities from which they were born. We can also find proof of this trend in the extraordinary success of the film "Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis", which is deeply anchored in local customs.*

P. D. : I don't have your wide insight, but on a smaller timescale, I have observed something that goes in the same direction : the way families are much closer together and people are getting involved with local activities. People are going back to small scale social and cultural groups

Q. : *You have told us the story of the creation of the garden but not its name. How did you choose the name Mozaic ?*

P. D. : At the beginning of the project, there was no particular name. And then, when its official opening came closer, without much thought we called it the community garden, since it showed the character of the communities that made it.

During the press meeting, Pierre Mauroy presented it this way. But a journalist pestered him about the community theme, a politically dangerous name. At the time, Pierre Mauroy defended the reason for the choice of this name by pointing out that he wanted a patchwork garden like the population that he saw in the streets of Lille. Nevertheless, just after this press conference, he told me that it would have to change. A few weeks later, he chose Mozaic.

Generating ideas

Q. : *You are very concerned about carefully suiting the needs of all types of visitors. For that you probably need to find new ideas all the time. How do you do it ?*

P. D. : We don't hesitate to get inspiration from ideas that work in other places. The organisation of flower picking of which I talked about for example comes from something similar in the Arche Nature Park near Le Mans ; the Mozaic garden was inspired in part by the Albert Kahn garden of Boulogne-Billancourt ; from an idea taken from a Holland garden, we are designing a "totoche" tree, that is to say a young tree on which children will be able to hang their dummies when they decide that they are old enough not to suck on it anymore and that they will be able to watch it rising up as the tree grows.

To spot interesting ideas, we have set up work groups called "elsewhere, composed of several volunteers from the staff members whose aim is to see what is going on elsewhere.

More broadly, we have set up eight workgroups (including the one just mentioned) to meet and think for three days per year about possible improvements to make on the following themes : domestic animals, wild animals, landscapes, visitor's security, sustainable development, communication development and events. As the hundred and nine members must take part in one of the groups, whatever their function in the organisation, there is a very rich exchange of ideas. What's more, any staff members who have brought a major innovation in the year are thanked by an educational trip to a famous foreign park. Still with an aim of developing team spirit, we are putting into place a management scheme in which all the managers will radically change position every three years.

Presentation of the speaker :

Pierre Dhénin : graduated from the High School of Journalism of Lille (ESJ) in 1972 ; journalist and reporter from 1972 to 1982 ; communication director in the North County Council (1982-1992) ; Deputy Manager of the Agence de développement et d'urbanisme de Lille Métropole (1992-2002) ; since 2002, Managing Director of the Espace Naturel Lille Métropole ; closely involved in local organisations and associations.