By Yonah Freemark

Vive Rive Gauche

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Parc Rive Gauche is France's most important urban planning effort since Baron Georges Haussmann rebuilt the city in the 19th century. With more than 100 structures, dozens of roads, five parks, and many other public amenities planned for the site, it is fundamentally remaking Paris's southeastern corner.

As is often the case in the U.S., the process of creating such a huge project—it covers 325 acres and has been in the works, in some form or another, for almost 30 years—is complicated and controversial. It also has changed the way major developments have typically been undertaken in Paris by institutionalizing a citizen committee that remain in place after the project is completed.

The new MK2 movie theater in Paris Rive Gauche illustrates the way the project and policy have shifted in response to local objections. Originally, the 700-foot-long building would have presented a blank wall to the development's main street. In the process, it would have cut off the new national library from the neighborhood's principal axis and underused prime real estate.

After residents loudly protested, the project changed dramatically. Today, a path cuts through the center of the building, interrupting the facade with a small garden. A cafe at each end borders the street. What could have been a dull, depressing monolith is now a popular center of activity in Paris Rive Gauche.

"We successfully challenged the developer's initial plans," says Françoise Sasmain, president of the community group known as ADA 13. She proudly points to the theater as evidence of the influence of her organization and other volunteer groups.

Meetings designed to encourage community participation are a staple of development in the U.S. Yet these sessions only occasionally extend beyond the planning phase. In contrast, Paris officials have appointed a permanent consultation committee for Paris Rive Gauche. So far, the group has convinced the developer to reduce the number of offices in the project, increase the amount of subsidized housing, and add parks—all actions that occurred after the plan was approved by the city council.

An ambitious vision

Sitting on the edge of the 13th arrondissement, one of the city's 20 districts, the complex is being built on one of the last developable spots in Paris. It is being constructed on a massive concrete platform above the rail yards behind the Austerlitz train station, on the southern bank of the Seine River. Once complete, Paris Rive Gauche will include 11 million square feet of office and commercial space, a new university campus, and 5,000 apartments-half of which will be affordable units subsidized by the local, regional, and national governments. So far, about two-thirds of the neighborhood has been completed.

In the 1970s and '80s, the site had been considered for a single big event—the 1985 World's Fair, which never took
The Grand Scheme

Hoping to realize "the true, the beautiful, the great, and the just" through the creation of "a city in which each inhabitant simply would be happier to live," French President Nicolas Sarkozy in September 2007 put forth a romantic vision for a "Grand Paris" whose boundaries would expand far past the limits of today's capital.

The dramatic riots in 2005 highlighted the increasing tensions between wealthy central Paris and the poor, outlying suburbs with their inadequate housing and limited public services. The wide peripheral highway that traces the city limits is physical evidence of the divide. For years, local politicians have been trumpeting reform, hoping that coordination and cooperation could soothe the pains of the balkanized metropolitan area, of which Paris itself represents just one-fifth of the total 11 million population. Sarkozy's plan is a response to this situation.

Last year, a committee of former politicians recommended merging the city with the three surrounding jurisdictions, a move that would create a megalopolis as big in area as New York City. Concurrently, Sarkozy invited 10 groups of architects and planners, headlined by Pritzker Prize winners Jean Nouvel, Richard Rogers, and Christian de Portzamparc, to rethink the region's ecology, culture, and economy. They envisioned Paris as a polycentric, interwoven metropolis with improved transportation, office districts, housing, and parks.

However, Sarkozy's recent pronouncements on the subject have been markedly narrower in scope. They focus on the still formidable idea of a $50 billion circumferential rapid transit network that would connect the suburbs and the city's Metro subway with 40 new stations in an 80-mile, figure-eight pattern.

The Grand Paris plan is not without controversy. Left-wing officials have denounced the president's involvement in what they perceive to be a local matter. Worries abound over plans for redevelopment around the proposed transit stations. The project remains in the early stage. Construction wouldn't begin until 2012, the year Sarkozy will be campaigning for a second term.

place because it did not receive adequate funding, and later for the 1992 Summer Olympics, for which the city applied but ultimately lost to Barcelona.

Once it was clear that neither project would pan out, Jacques Toubon, the mayor of the 13th arrondissement from 1983 to 2001, resolved to link residents of his neighborhood with the Seine by overlaying the rail yards with new buildings and running an expressway underneath. In 1991, he helped convince the city to create Semapa, a public development authority, and provide it with significant start-up funds.

"My priority was primarily to incite business activity," he says. "Projects in Paris all had privileged housing and public amenities and left the construction of offices to private initiatives." Toubon saw city-initiated construction as a way to attract jobs to his district and to lessen the inequality between the city's wealthy western quarters and the poorer, eastern neighborhoods, some of which he represented.

Toubon's critics, however, saw his push for offices as an exercise in self-promotion. Marc Ambroise-Rendu, one of François Samain's associates at ADA 13 and a former journalist for Le Monde, disputes Toubon's characterization. To Ambroise-Rendu, the mayor's initial blueprint for a district comprised mostly of office space was a self-promoting exercise in attracting "the biggest companies." He noted as evidence Toubon's decision to name the district's main street the pompos "Avenue de France" and early plans that indicated the district would principally be made up of office space.

Yet, no matter his motivation, he must be credited for having an ambitious vision. The Paris Rive Gauche project is comparable in size to New York's proposed Atlantic Yards, and like that development, it is made more complicated and expensive by the fact that many of its buildings are being constructed above an active railroad. Building supports must be positioned between tracks, with streets floating on platforms some 20 feet above ground.

The site quickly attracted wide government interest. French President François Mitterrand suggested that the site house his pet project, a national library that was completed in 1995. The locally controlled transit authority decided to route a Metro subway line through the area, whisking commuters in just 10 minutes to wealthy northwest Paris and the St. Lazare train station. There, travelers can make a quick transfer to trains heading to Europe's largest office district at La Defense, in the city's western suburbs.

Citizens have their say

Citizen reaction, however, was not enthusiastic despite—or perhaps because of—the project's big objectives. Community groups questioned Semapa's funding. They asked if there were market demand for so many new offices and wondered whom the development would serve—the neighborhood or workers commuting in from elsewhere. A group of artists squatting in abandoned structures on the site also joined together to protest the potential loss of their residences and studios, arguing that the industrial landscape was prime ground for creative output.

The protests were loud enough to convince a court in 1993 to force the city to alter the plans to include affordable housing and to spare, at least temporarily, the artists' buildings. Still, a group of citizens sued Semapa in 1995, arguing that the efforts to involve community groups in the public discourse had been inadequate. French law called for some citizen input, but only in the form of large public forums, with no negotiations required between the developer and those affected.

In 1996—in a decision that drastically altered the rules by which Paris conducts its urban planning—an administrative court judge ruled in the community groups' favor, giving them more than they had hoped for. Beyond ordering additional public forums and another reworking of the project plans, the judge called for the creation of a committee made up of representatives of community groups and city officials to oversee the project's construction. In a country that has long centralized development decisions in the hands of quasimonarchical presidents and their local subordinates, this was a radical paradigm shift. Later that year, the French parliament passed a law that extended the same process to all of the country's major projects, making Paris Rive Gauche a test case for what had become mandated policy.
The 30-member committee, designed to be permanent, will continue its work even after construction ceases. It has access to all relevant documents, an office in Semapa's headquarters, and editorial control over a section of the project's monthly magazine. Small working groups set up to tackle transportation, housing, and other areas have been especially successful at redesigning minor elements of the project to meet the needs of the area's future residents.

The initial conversations between community groups and the public developer produced a reworked master plan that ramped up the supply of housing, increased park space, and preserved more industrial buildings. Additional affordable housing and parkland came in 2001, following the election of Socialists to head the city and the 13th arrondissement—a reflection of the popular sense that the conservatives formerly in power had not been adequately responsive.

When asbestos problems exiled the Paris Diderot University from its campus, a new campus was added to the plan, and the community groups fought to prevent it from becoming isolated from its surroundings. Labs and lecture halls were interspersed with housing and office space while academic buildings were opened to community use for public meetings and social events. Bike lanes were added and a road was rerouted. The idea for an underground highway was permanently excised. Each of these changes had previously been suggested by community groups, but until 1996 they were ignored by decision makers.

**Lasting influence**

The stability and success of the democratic planning process in Paris Rive Gauche is ensured by the presence of a neutral moderator who plans committee meetings and runs public forums. This mediator, who chooses which groups can join the committee, asks questions of all sides and demands answers from everyone. Because of the transparent nature of this arrangement, it is difficult for politicians to ignore citizens' demands. Meanwhile, those who have demonstrated their interest in the project are given a feeling of meaningful inclusion.

Of course, the structure of this new relationship is fundamentally unequal. As the developers, Semapa and the city remain in charge. Citizen groups only have a role only if the politicians are willing to hear them out. "When everyone has good will, the committee works," says Fabrice Piault of the community group TAM-TAM, highlighting the limitations of the process. Initially, "it was a dialogue of the deaf," he remembers of the committee's first steps in 1997. At early get-togethers, community groups rounded up their objections, only to be shouted down by politicians. "They weren't psychologically prepared at all," agrees Ambroise-Renu.

The role of the organizations is limited by their volunteer status. "Associations aren't always ready and cannot necessarily produce effective counter-propositions," recognizes ADA 13's Samain. Community groups are doubly disadvantaged: Politicians are predisposed to ignore their demands and groups are often incapable of expressing their ideas coherently.

But the consultation has matured. There is now a definite sense among Parisian community groups that their influence matters, and they remain wholeheartedly engaged in the consultation process. "There were some important changes as a result of the work of the associations," says Jean-Paul Reti, an artist who works in an old refrigerated storage building that has been converted to studios. Some of the citizen committees' most important contributions, such as the division of the MK2 theater into two parts, might seem minor in the abstract but in fact have contributed greatly to the livability of the neighborhood as a whole.

The area's rapid growth demonstrates that community involvement and development are not mutually exclusive. In contrast to what often happens in the U.S.—where a lawsuit brought by citizen groups can disrupt development activity for months or even years—there have been no major construction delays or significant ill will between Semapa and the community groups over the decade or so they have worked together.

Today, the Paris Rive Gauche citizen committee is involved with an extension of the development into the bordering suburb of Ivry. A new neighborhood, named Massena-Brunescau, will connect the two cities with a tramway and new structures tunnelled under Paris's Peripherique ring road, which now divides the two. Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë has promoted building 500-foot high rises on the site; in response, neighborhood activists have held a number of events questioning whether the city should have any towers at all and have made their opinions known during committee meetings. Over the next year, with significant public input, the development's form will be determined.

Not all of this increased citizen involvement has been good for Paris Rive Gauche's bottom line. Jacques Toubon argues that the decision to reduce office space in the project "made it so that Paris couldn’t profit from the office market boom” of the 2000s. Indeed, the substantial growth in commercial space experienced by the rival La Defense district during that period suggests that Paris could have expanded its business tax base similarly and it reserved less land for housing in the 13th arrondissement.

The concentration of public services in the area, such as the university, the parks, and the library, means a less economically fertile use of the land.

One indisputable success is that the participation process first formulated in Paris has become the standard throughout France. While the law has enshrined the values of direct citizen involvement in every major development project there, Paris Rive Gauche has become a model for the incorporation of the public's ideas in the planning structure.

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