



## **Renovation and consultation: Parisian approaches to redeveloping public spaces**

**Bruno Gouyette**

*When renovating its public spaces, how does the city of Paris implement consultation processes required by French law and requested by certain residents? Bruno Gouyette, an urban planner who has worked for the city council, considers two recent projects – Place de la République and Boulevard Diderot – in order to show how the city's technical departments and councillors have found new ways to redevelop urban spaces.*

Bertrand Delanoë's first term as mayor of Paris (2001–08) was marked by the need for consultation with regard to urban development in the city. His second term, under way since March 2008, has not only seen the consultation process extended to all projects as a matter of course, but also highlighted the diverse range of measures used by city councillors and council departments.

Two examples of local consultation are presented here to illustrate this diversity: the first is the redevelopment of Place de la République,<sup>1</sup> and the second is the new road layout on Boulevard Diderot.<sup>2</sup> These two projects are not of equal importance in political terms – the first is the result of an initiative led by the city council, while the second is coordinated by the council of the 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*. What kind of resources are mobilised for each project, and at what scales? What impacts can these resources have on the final result? As work is still in progress on one of the projects (Place de la République), a certain degree of caution is necessary with regard to future phases of consultation that may take place.

### **Consultation and sharing public spaces**

The obligation for consultation is today combined with a second requirement concerning the equitable distribution of space between different users and different modes of transport. Reconciling these two demands raises a certain number of questions concerning the realisation of projects: does sharing public space among users and implementing consultation processes lead to projects where everyone benefits in some way according to a principle of even distribution rather than a principle of hierarchy? Does the priority given to certain users and modes of transport risk being considered an appropriation of public space by some groups, raising suspicions that consultation is used by elected officials as a tool for obtaining a predetermined outcome from the decision-making process? Other issues are likely to further complicate this combination of consultation processes and promotion of new ways of sharing public space, such as the question of how to reconcile *journeys* and *uses* within the same space.

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<sup>1</sup> Place de la République is a large public square and major road junction located immediately north-east of the centre of Paris, at the point where the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements* (city administrative districts) meet.

<sup>2</sup> Boulevard Diderot is an important road in the 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* (south-east of the centre of Paris) that runs eastwards from the banks of the Seine and the Gare de Lyon to Place de la Nation.

These issues are present, implicitly, in the first edition of the “Baromètre de la concertation et de la décision publique” (literally “Barometer of consultation and public decision-making”), a survey that was recently made public by the agency Respublica-Conseil.<sup>3</sup> This survey shows a certain degree of familiarity with consultation practices among the French people questioned (66% of respondents had heard of the term consultation), as well as a relatively favourable opinion regarding the development of such approaches (90% considered consultation a good thing, and 80% were in favour of developing practices involving consultation and the participation of the public as a whole, especially respondents from groups that are still somewhat distanced from these processes, such as young people or underprivileged populations). However, respondents were less confident regarding the way in which consultation methods are used, with roughly equal proportions of respondents (two thirds) feeling that consultation is used both “to give the impression of listening to citizens while actually bypassing them in the decision-making process” (66%) and “to ensure that elected officials take citizens’ opinions into account before taking decisions” (68%). Although the respondents surveyed formed a representative sample of people from France as a whole, it is fair to assume that their opinions are broadly typical of users and residents in Paris.

### **Place de la République: an attempt at metropolitan consultation**

Owing to the geographical and political position of Place de la République in Paris, as well as its importance as a traffic junction, the redevelopment project necessarily called for a public debate on a citywide scale. Furthermore, while a number of public spaces of historic and symbolic importance had been transformed considerably under Jacques Chirac’s mayorship (1977–1995), this was the first time Bertrand Delanoë had expressed his intention to redevelop a major historic square. The choice of this square in particular, on the boundary between the historic core of the city and the traditionally working-class districts of eastern Paris, was highly symbolic in political terms, as it was likely to echo the fact that it was chosen by the Republicans in 1879–80 as the place to erect an effigy of the then still young French Republic.

Place de la République therefore has a number of characteristics that, in theory, one might expect to generate considerable interest and mobilisation among citizens and users – especially given that its location, at the meeting point of three *arrondissements* with left-wing majorities, each of which claims to attach great importance to local democracy, suggests that the three *arrondissement* mayors and local residents would be closely involved in the project.

In the event, the participation of residents and users in the consultation process confirmed these hypotheses, but to a lesser extent than expected. The consultation regarding the project was divided into three key sections: determining the aims of the project; inviting the submission of development outlines; and presenting the selected project to residents of the Paris region.

During the first phase – the determination of objectives – Paris city council launched a number of studies, which accompanied and structured local consultation. The first of these<sup>4</sup> was commissioned in 2008 by the city’s planning department and entrusted to architect and historian Géraldine Texier, with the aim of providing a historical context for the public debate, in particular regarding the square’s creation between 1850 and 1883. In parallel, a diagnostic analysis of the way the square functions was carried out by APUR (Atelier Parisien d’Urbanisme),<sup>5</sup> the city’s urban planning agency. Finally, a diagnostic analysis of uses was carried out by a group of planning students,<sup>6</sup> in

<sup>3</sup> Online survey conducted by Harris Interactive from 29 June to 6 July and from 13 to 20 July 2011, with 1,370 respondents aged 18 or over, all of whom live in towns of at least 3,500 inhabitants. See: [www.barometre.respublica-conseil.fr](http://www.barometre.respublica-conseil.fr).

<sup>4</sup> Texier-Rideau, Géraldine. 2009. *République, histoire d’une place*, Paris : Mairie de Paris, Direction de l’Urbanisme.

<sup>5</sup> APUR. 2009. *Projet d’aménagement de la place de la République. Diagnostic. Pistes de réflexion pour le programme du concours*.

<sup>6</sup> Students from the vocational master’s degree programme at the Institut d’Urbanisme de Paris (Paris Urban Planning Institute), Université Paris-Est Créteil Val-de-Marne.

conjunction with the city council's highways and transport department, responsible for the technical coordination of the project. For this part of the process, the "guided tours" method (Thibaud 2001) was used for the first time in Paris in a project of this size. Following the success of this approach, city councillors and council departments decided to make a dozen guided tours available during the winter of 2008–09, aimed at different target groups (residents, council staff, city councillors, etc.) and organised by a collective of architects and urban planners called Bazar Urbain. In the event, this first phase was marked by a considerable mobilisation of resources, partially local and above all knowledge-based, that provided invaluable information for public meetings, neighbourhood council meetings and the inter-neighbourhood coalition set up for this project. The dialogue that took place within this consultation process was rich and animated, but cannot truly be said to constitute a citywide debate.

The second key period was the submission of development outlines, in 2009. At this stage, the amount of consultation involved was very limited, as the submission/selection process and public participation have little in common: anonymity of candidates *vs* publicly recorded debate; confidential deliberations of a jury *vs* informational transparency; absence of candidates at the presentation of projects *vs* open discussion of opposing points of view. Nevertheless, the selection process does increase the likelihood of a project being chosen that is surprising or which may divide opinion. The work of the Trevelo/Viger-Kohler team, designated the winning project in January 2010, is certainly a design that breaks with the past. Although it challenges certain conventions through the use of new materials or by relocating trees and vegetation, it is a design that pleased those who favour symmetry and which won over the jury thanks to the image of a streamlined space that is open to multiple uses. This choice will have the effect of displacing a considerable number of recurrent questions within the consultation process.

Next came the third key period, namely the presentation of this promising but unconventional project to the residents of the Paris region. Paris city council entrusted this task to urban planning agency Ville Ouverte (literally "Open City") in the second half of 2010. Here again, expert opinions were necessarily sought, but this was combined with the usage-based expertise of inhabitants living in both the immediate area and further afield. Some of these opinions were volunteered by residents, while others were actively solicited by Ville Ouverte. The consultation workshops, held in June and October–November 2010, dealt with both operational issues (traffic, transport interchanges, cyclist and pedestrian journeys, accessibility) and questions relating to more leisurely uses of the square. This specific organisation of the consultation process resulted in the focus of the public debate being shifted from the issue of traffic to the issue of how different activities could be integrated into the future redeveloped square.

In this way, the different phases of consultation concerning Place de la République involved mobilising resources from outside the immediate neighbourhood for the most part, with the key aim of channelling the very strong participatory energy of the local area, which could otherwise have forced the city council to slow down or divert the dynamics of the project. Control of the consultation process therefore remained largely in the hands of City Hall, which made intensive use of digital information resources<sup>7</sup> in order to make expert analyses and reports, images and minutes of meetings available to a greater potential readership extending beyond local residents and directly affected users. This was therefore an exercise in broadening the audience of the project in order to make it a truly Parisian and metropolitan project. Work on the square began in January 2012, and it will be interesting to see how this dual dimension – metropolitan and local – is taken into account in the next phases of consultation.

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<sup>7</sup> The documents cited in this article are available (in French) on the website dedicated to the Place de la République project: <http://www.placedelarepublique.paris.fr/la-concertation/textes-de-references>.

## Consultation on Boulevard Diderot: local dynamics at play

The second case studied here – the renovation of Boulevard Diderot, initiated and coordinated by the council of the 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*<sup>8</sup> between 2008 and autumn 2012 – illustrates a different type of consultation, in a context that is very different in terms of timescale and budget from that of Place de la République. The project is the fruit of a joint construction between the council of the 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, Nation–Picpus neighbourhood council and Paris city council, in a delicate financial context. As the project was not the subject of a dedicated budget envelope in the city council’s investment plan, it was necessary to combine several complementary sources of funding in order to arrive at a significant sum that would make it possible not only to respond to a local demand concerning a small, particularly run-down section of the boulevard (between Place de la Nation and Rue de Reuilly) but also renovate a much greater section of road almost 2 km (1¼ miles) long.

An initial diagnostic phase was coordinated by the *arrondissement* council in conjunction with Nation–Picpus neighbourhood council in 2009. “Continuous evaluations” enabled the identification of different uses and dysfunctions along the particularly run-down stretch of road. The objectives defined, formalised by the *arrondissement* council, consisted of: improving the living environment and travel conditions for pedestrians and cyclists; revitalising this part of the boulevard, including its shops and businesses; and incorporating the project into an overall vision for the boulevard. This phase was followed by a diagnostic analysis of the local technical departments, in order to provide the neighbourhood council with the necessary technical elements to back up their own objectives. The principal outcome at this stage was obtaining the neighbourhood council’s approval to remove the service roads along this section of the boulevard – the only way to widen the footpaths. The inclusion here of consultation of inhabitants in the immediate vicinity made it possible to bring residents on side with regard to these objectives. Ultimately, they accepted the removal of parking spaces in these service roads, once it was clear that it was the very presence of these service roads – used exclusively for parking, in fact – that was the main reason for the poorer quality of this part of the boulevard.

In parallel, the political consolidation of the project was organised by councillors from the 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, who presented their project to Annick Lepetit, the deputy mayor responsible for transport, who approved additional credit lines to complement the initial budget, thus enabling major repairs of footpaths and a *schéma de développement des continuités cyclables* (cycle network continuity development plan). The pushing of local consultation to the fore and well-managed financial engineering by the *arrondissement* council were the two complementary tools used to guarantee the existence of an overarching project for the whole of the boulevard.

Thirdly, the *arrondissement* council enlarged the consultation perimeter to include all residents and businesses on the boulevard: this part of the consultation was to take place over a very short period (the first half of 2011) once the technical and financial aspects of the project had been confirmed. A more conventional approach was then once more adopted. The *arrondissement* council’s knowledge of the different stakeholders involved meant it was able to give the project a firm foundation based on strong local approval and involvement, resulting from the first phase of consultation, and on the notion of “adjustments” rather than a wholesale transformation.

Overall, the approach to this project was characterised by a very limited mobilisation of competencies from outside the *arrondissement*. The majority of skills and know-how implemented were the result of user expertise originating from the local neighbourhood councils and residents,<sup>9</sup> together with internal competencies within the city’s highways and transport department. The

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<sup>8</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* extends south-east of Place de la Bastille and south of Place de la Nation, covering areas such as Bercy, Reuilly, Picpus, Bel-Air, the south of Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and the Bois de Vincennes.

<sup>9</sup> In particular, a local resident – a wheelchair user – who gave a demonstration, in the presence of other residents, of how footpaths that are especially narrow due to the space occupied by service roads are difficult to use for persons with reduced mobility and, more generally, for families with pushchairs or shopping trolleys.

coordination of the project owes a great deal to a handful of councillors from the 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* – including the deputy mayor responsible for mobility and public spaces – who all highlighted the modest and practical nature of the redevelopment while at the same ensuring that the project complied with the majority of elements of city policy regarding the sharing of public spaces (facilitating “active transport”,<sup>10</sup> managing motorised traffic flows, seeking alternative parking arrangements with social landlords, etc.). From this standpoint, the project could be seen as an illustration of what landscape architect Alfred Peter calls the “product of crisis” (2011) in relation to projects he has developed in Strasbourg, where priority is given to experimentation, subtlety, restraint, the needs of different users, and “active” mobility – in other words, undertaking urban projects that have little in the way of prior plans and financial resources, but which involve significant consultation and dialogue.

## Adapting consultation to projects and pursuing experimentation

These two Parisian case studies suggest that a certain homogeneity exists among the consultation tools used, in terms of scale, procedures and resources. First of all, consultation processes are proportional to the (variable) importance accorded to the project by political leaders. Second, few projects benefit from a dedicated consultation budget, which reduces the capacity for innovation in this domain. Finally, the degree of freedom in terms of practices permitted by article L.300-2 of the French urban planning code<sup>11</sup> must often be combined with other procedures, which can lead to several overlapping forms of consultation being implemented for a single project<sup>12</sup> as soon as it achieves a certain degree of importance.

These experiences of consultation, despite their diversity, are part of an evolution in project design processes, which traditionally have been top-down and technical, valuing various forms of professional expertise over user experience. The classic response to this has long consisted of reclaiming the notion of general interest,<sup>13</sup> presented as the expression of the general will (voluntarist approach), as opposed to the sum of private interests that may be promoted by inhabitants or resident businesses (utilitarian approach to public interest). But this classic approach

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<sup>10</sup> Walking and cycling (as opposed to motorised transport modes) are often described in French as *modes doux* (“gentle modes”, i.e. kinder for the environment) or *modes actifs* (“active modes”, implying a physical activity that has health benefits). In English, the terms “active transport” or “human-powered transport” can be used.

<sup>11</sup> Article L.300-2 (Urban Planning Code): “1 - The municipal council or legislative body of the public establishment for intermunicipal cooperation shall deliberate on the objectives pursued and on the methods of consultation, throughout the formulation of the project, that involve residents, local associations and other persons concerned, including representatives of the farming profession, before:

a) enacting any formulation or revision of the *schéma de cohérence territoriale* (SCoT – territorial coherence plan) or the *plan local d’urbanisme* (PLU – local urban development plan);

b) enacting, at its initiative, the creation of any *zone d’aménagement concerté* (ZAC – mixed development zone);

c) enacting any development operation to be undertaken by or on behalf of the municipality if this operation, by dint of its size or nature, might substantially modify the living environment or economic attractiveness of the municipality and if it is not located in an area that has already been the subject of deliberation in accordance with points a) or b) above. A decree of the Conseil d’État (French Council of State) shall determine the characteristics of development operations that are subject to the obligations of this subparagraph.”

<sup>12</sup> In its last public report (June 2011), the French Council of State (Conseil d’État) suggested that public participation should be proportionate to the importance of the project and the stakes involved. It added that projects can benefit from the combination of two forms of consultation, namely open consultation upstream of projects and the more formal consultation procedures stipulated by laws and regulations. To this end, the Council of State proposed some 20 practical suggestions for achieving these objectives. Conseil d’État. 2001. *Rapport public 2011. Consulter autrement, participer effectivement*, Paris: La Documentation Française.

<sup>13</sup> Conseil d’État. 1999. *Réflexions sur l’intérêt général. Rapport public 1999*, Paris: La Documentation Française. Retrieved on 23 May 2012, URL: [www.conseil-etat.fr/fr/rapports-et-etudes/linteret-general-une-notion-centrale-de-la.html](http://www.conseil-etat.fr/fr/rapports-et-etudes/linteret-general-une-notion-centrale-de-la.html).

will no longer do: the responses of political and technical decision-makers are now moving in new directions.

Two particular situations – which are not mutually exclusive – can be outlined. The first involves going beyond the “conventional” audience for consultation (local residents) by seeking the opinions of other groups, as exemplified by the Place de la République redevelopment project (or indeed the Seine riverbank redevelopment project). It would be interesting to consider this case in greater detail in order to determine whether it could be applied to smaller projects as well. The second case is more forward-looking and appears to favour an integrated view of the project: diagnostic analyses, general objectives and the planning, design and management of spaces and local life are now all taken into account in the consultation process. However, in both cases, technical departments need to acquire greater skills and competencies (internally and/or externally); for the time being, these responses are still clearly very much the reserve of only the largest projects.

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- Thibaud, J.-P. 2001. “La méthode des parcours commentés”, in Thibaud and Grosjean (eds.), *L’Espace urbain en méthodes*, Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses, pp. 79–99.

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### **Further reading:**

Presentation of the consultation process and redevelopment of Place de la République in Paris (in French): <http://placedelarepublique.paris.fr> and <http://www.paris.fr/pratique/amenagements-de-paris-concertations/place-de-la-republique/p9025>.

Redevelopment of Boulevard Diderot (in French): [http://mairie12.paris.fr/mairie12/jsp/site/Portal.jsp?page\\_id=470](http://mairie12.paris.fr/mairie12/jsp/site/Portal.jsp?page_id=470).

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