



Deafening Discord: Reclaiming Residents' Anger in Working-Class Neighborhoods

Pierre Chabard

Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

We recently published an article showing how, in Roubaix in northern France, elected officials took steps to “prevent the creation of a cohesive residents’ collective seeking to challenge an urban-renewal project that risks being imposed upon their neighborhood.” Pierre Chabard revisits this interpretation of the situation and shows that, while it is true that the association studied by the author of this article was systematically hindered, it was not the only initiative that tried to give a voice to residents. The role that architects can play in this regard is highlighted here, raising the question of whether counterpowers are the most effective form of participation.

Resident participation is listed as a priority in France’s New National Urban-Renewal Program (Nouveau Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine, or NPNRU, for 2014–2024), which even talks about “co-construction”. At local level, however, such ambitions are far from a foregone conclusion. In his article on the neighborhood of Le Pile in Roubaix, currently undergoing regeneration, sociologist Julien Talpin decries the strategies employed by the city council to manage and control the fragile processes involving, or originating with, citizens (Talpin 2016).

Why react to this long and well-reasoned article? Julien Talpin presents indisputable diagnostic elements. The area in question, Le Pile—the product of a textile industry that disappeared a few decades ago—is a very dense (more than 120 dwellings per hectare/50 dwellings per acre) multicultural working-class neighborhood with a strong identity, composed mainly of tiny workers’ houses, that contains within its boundaries the main social problems of our time: unemployment, situations of precarity, poor housing, inequality, etc. For this reason, Le Pile was selected, along with 25 other sites in France, to benefit from the PNRQAD (Programme National de Requalification des Quartiers Anciens Dégradés – National Program for the Rehabilitation of Deprived Inner-City Areas) (Raad 2015), a proactive state program funded through ANRU, France’s National Urban-Renewal Agency (Agence Nationale de Rénovation Urbaine), and ANAH, the National Housing-Improvement Agency (Agence Nationale d’Amélioration de l’Habitat). Of the five sites selected in the Lille conurbation,¹ Le Pile received the greatest amount of funding (€42.7 million), to be used for a major urban-renewal operation initiated in 2013 and set to continue until 2020.

However, this fragile and vulnerable area, marked by extreme poverty, nevertheless calls for a measured, careful and precise approach from those who tend to its needs, whether through action or through analysis. This is why Julien Talpin’s criticisms cannot go unanswered. As researcher and lecturer at Lille-2 University specialized in urban struggles and citizen mobilization processes (particularly in the case of the Alma-Gare neighborhood, also in Roubaix (Cossart and Talpin

¹ The other four sites are: the Route d’Houplines neighborhood in Armentières; the Simons neighborhood in the south of Lille; the Bayard neighborhood in Tourcoing; and the Créтинier neighborhood in Wattrelos.

2015)) who is personally engaged in the field in Le Pile (alongside the UPC association²), he models the situation as a binary power struggle between the planning authorities on the one hand and “residents,” presented as victims of the developments imposed by these authorities, on the other—or, to put it another way, as a clash between top-down and bottom-up approaches. The current urban regeneration program in Le Pile, he maintains, is motivated by a resolutely spatial approach (eradication of unsanitary housing, de-densification, renovation or demolition of houses, beautification of public spaces) and by an “explicit objective [...] [of] ‘social diversity’ by attracting middle-class populations to this poorly regarded working-class neighborhood” (Talpin 2016). Residents’ anger in reaction to this gentrification approach, driven by a contracting authority that had “provided for only minimal consultation on the project” (Talpin 2016), was supposedly channeled by a “neighborhood roundtable” (*table de quartier* in French) created in May 2015 and run by independent local associations, which achieved certain victories (on rehousing and consultation issues in particular) but apparently endured “silent suppression” (Talpin 2016) on the part of the public authorities as a result.

Missing links

Although based on certain tangible facts, this interpretation remains partial and does not reflect the complexity of the situation, which is viewed as though through a magnifying glass, with excessive importance attached to the neighborhood roundtable system, directly inspired by the community organizing methods that Julien Talpin has observed in North America and promoted in France (Balazard and Talpin 2016). However, this partial view leaves a major player in this story—present in Le Pile since the summer of 2012—in the shadows, namely the urban project-management team. This team, led by architect Pierre Bernard and landscape architect Axel Vénacque, was selected in March 2013, after a long consultation,³ to steer the urban-regeneration operation in Le Pile over a seven-year period. It was as an architectural critic that I became interested in the proposals of this multidisciplinary team called “Pile Fertile”, which were less about constructing an urban project than about developing a method of action. I observed the developments in the field between autumn 2012 and summer 2014, in preparation for an article published in the journal *Criticat* (Chabard 2014).

The Pile Fertile team immediately displayed strong social ambitions, going beyond the scope of the initial brief, and adopted critical positions regarding contemporary urban-renewal procedures, confirming that these measures had failed to solve the area’s problems. Le Pile is a borderline case in terms of urban policy: it has been both a beneficiary (through a succession of studies, reports, initiatives and urban projects since the 1980s) and a victim—the main consequence of the initiatives implemented was the acquisition of land by the public domain, which led to the bricking-up of houses over a long period of time, accentuating sense of abandonment among the local population.

Aware of this difficult legacy, the Pile Fertile team sought to rethink both the ends and the means of renovation. The former were embodied in a number of key principles that often went against ANRU’s expectations: working with existing social diversity rather than “creating diversity”; avoiding gentrification and instead transforming the neighborhood for and with its residents; focusing not just on buildings but also on other issues where different kinds of action can be implemented and combined (e.g. vegetation, waste management, public spaces, energy transition, cultural development); not subscribing to the “density at all costs” philosophy beloved of the public

² The Université Populaire Citoyenne (UPC; a “citizens’ university for all”) in Roubaix was founded in 2004 with the aim of promoting democracy and citizenship, and sharing knowledge and expertise (see, in French: <http://upc-roubaix.org>). Julien Talpin, a participant observer of the neighborhood roundtable and other initiatives of the UPC, gave a presentation of his book at Roubaix library as part of a UPC “night class” on January 21, 2016.

³ This consultation process, conducted between June 2012 and March 2013, involved a competitive dialog procedure between three multidisciplinary teams: the “Pile Fertile” team (represented by Atelier Pierre Bernard); the “STAR” team (represented by the Dutch agency STAR), and the “Le Pilomètre” team (represented by the agency PARC).

authorities (in particular through the “ZPPAUP” provisions⁴ in place in Le Pile) and allowing the demolition of certain houses in order to expand a particularly narrow public space with lots of hard landscaping, dominated by cars and litter bins. In terms of how these principles were put into action, the Pile Fertile proposed the most open and inclusive operating methods. Rather than designing the whole project beforehand (as requested in the brief), the team developed a method of action involving the neighborhood’s residents. This went beyond the simple “consultation” required by ANRU and involved inhabitants not just in a process of participation but also in co-producing Le Pile’s transformation, in particular through regular public workshops (three or four times a year) since the summer of 2013.

Figure 1. An exploratory walk in Le Pile, organized by the Pile Fertile team, July 10, 2013



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After a day of “exploratory walks” (on July 10, 2013) in which residents were both participants and co-organizers, these public workshops—which attracted several dozen people on each occasion—took place at quite a sustained pace (first monthly and then more spaced out during the long slowdown period that occurred when the political control of Roubaix city council changed following local elections in 2014⁵) and focused on two main themes: the shared design of a park co-managed by residents on the site of an old textile dyeing plant in the center of the neighborhood;

⁴ ZPPAUP: *zone de protection du patrimoine architectural, urbain et paysager* (architectural, urban and landscape heritage protection zone). The ZPPAUP in Roubaix was defined by orders passed on July 16, 2001, and July 8, 2002, and covers 90% of the city’s area.

⁵ On March 30, 2014, Guillaume Delbar (from the right-wing Les Républicains party) won control of Roubaix City Hall from the outgoing left-wing Parti Socialiste candidate. Roubaix was the first ever socialist city in France (following the election of Henri Carette in 1892) and remained left-leaning throughout almost the entire 20th century (except for a notable centrist period between 1983 and 2001).

and methods of renovating the neighborhood's run-down houses. "Pilés"⁶ were invited (via leaflets or word of mouth through existing family, social and association-based networks) to interact with the Pile Fertile team, either at the "Maison du Projet" (an institutional space for consultation between residents, architects and public authorities on the project, which operated between December 2012 and September 2016⁷) or directly on the ground, in order to co-produce the transformation of the neighborhood. Among other initiatives, a sample of the future park in Le Pile, protected by fences, was cultivated by a group of residents with the support of landscapers from the Pile Fertile team. Rather than decreeing what this park should look like on their drawing boards, the landscapers felt that the form taken by the park "should resemble its form of management."⁸

The question of how to renovate workers' houses in Le Pile—a significantly less consensual issue than co-managed gardening—was subjected to the same participatory process, with an initial workshop taking place in autumn 2013. These brick row houses, built on long, narrow plots (less than 4 meters/13 feet wide) that look out on to a small courtyard at the rear, were each intended for a single household, who usually owned rather than rented the house. Each of their three floors has a surface area of around 20 square meters (215 square feet) and comprises two small rooms separated by a steep staircase. The top floor is located in the roof/attic space, with the only natural light coming from tiny skylights. These houses, built in rows of four or five, form long, narrow islands in close rows. While now home to residents with extremely diverse profiles from a social, ethnic and generational point of view, the 200 or so workers' houses in Le Pile are nevertheless very regular in their spatial configuration and in the problems affecting them: disrepair, unsanitary conditions, a lack of thermal insulation, cluttered courtyards (reducing the amount of natural light), and a concentration of domestic functions toward the rear of house rather than looking out on to the street.

⁶ "Pilés" is the informal demonym for inhabitants of Le Pile (cf. Serge Leroy and Raymond Platteau, c. 2005, *Le Pile à cœur : histoire du quartier*, Roubaix, no publisher, no distributor (work funded by the Fonds de Participation des Habitants de Roubaix and Le Pile neighborhood committee), p. 10).

⁷ The closure of the Maison du Projet was supposedly due to a clash of personalities between the city employee responsible for the day-to-day running of the Association Nouveau Regard sur la Jeunesse (ANRJ), which had provisionally been relocated to the Maison du Projet, and the lead coordinator of the neighborhood roundtable, which also used the Maison du Projet (see, in French: www.lavoixdunord.fr/63822/article/2016-10-24/la-maison-du-projet-du-pile-est-fermee-depuis-un-mois-et-une-altercation-0).

⁸ Interview with Axel Vénacque, December 18, 2013.

Figure 2. Public workshop on the renovation of housing in Le Pile, organized by the Pile Fertile team, November 13, 2013



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The Pile Fertile’s clear and simple objectives, established following public workshops, were as follows: to avoid any form of expropriation; to buy houses only with residents’ agreement and with a guarantee that those who wish to remain in Le Pile would be rehoused in the neighborhood; and to renovate houses with and for residents. These aims sat uneasily with the centralized and fragmented operating methods imposed by ANRU, which created as many problems as they solved: their recommendations to repurchase and extensively renovate houses lead to inflated resale prices; and the cumbersome rent-to-buy procedure (known as *accession sociale à la propriété* in French) that is a condition for renovation work to begin leads to houses being “frozen” indefinitely, thus preventing the rehousing of “Pilés” in these dwellings.

Forced to find room for maneuver within this system, the team’s architects combined their spatial design work with an economic analysis. In their view, the final cost of renovating these homes could be reduced by 25% to 30%. To achieve this, it would be necessary to shift from a case-by-case approach to a more hybrid approach whereby reproducible prototypes could be developed for various building components (service ducts, staircases, dormer windows, etc.) in order to amortize these costs, before then inviting residents to contribute directly to the later stages of the renovation process (finish work, gardens, etc.). This last aspect—delivering an unfinished house in order to reduce its sale price—has much in common with the theory of incremental housing (Aravena and Iacobelli 2016) proposed by the architect Alejandro Aravena, curator of the 2016 Venice architecture biennale, which he implemented on a large scale in his native Chile in order to give social classes living below the poverty line access to housing and home-ownership.⁹

⁹ See in particular the well-publicized project in the Quinta Monroy neighborhood of Iquique, Chile, designed by Alejandro Aravena in 2003 in accordance with this incremental-housing principle, whereby 100 homes can be built for the price of 30. In the 2010s, the Chilean geographer Rodrigo Cattaneo Pineda identified around 2,500 homes

Admittedly, in Le Pile, these proposals have had little effect so far: despite the extensive technical studies produced by the designers and the creation of a pilot site, no houses have been renovated in this way to date.¹⁰ The Pile Fertile team has not yet been able to convince the contracting authority to depart from the ANRU procedures and initiate experimentation of this kind, let alone share it with residents. In Pierre Bernard's view, "it's impossible until the city's technical departments take ownership of it."¹¹ Nevertheless, the constant, day-to-day commitment of the Pile Fertile team to redefining its role and going beyond the simple provision of services requested by the city is too rare an occurrence to be ignored.

Multiple fronts

For the project-management team, embarking along these alternative paths meant venturing outside the framework of the brief, taking the risk of upsetting the contracting authority, calling into question their own tools (in particular the tool that is the "project" approach), and changing their own status (from designer to mediator). Above all, though, it meant seeking to change practices, procedures and operating methods from within.

Julien Talpin's engaged text only considers the alternative from the outside, on the margins of professional practices. He conceives of citizen action only in a context of tension, between power and counterpower, between the dominant and the dominated. By alternating between the immediateness of discussions with the people of Le Pile and the longer timescale involved in developing a strategy for the physical transformation of the neighborhood, the Pile Fertile team negotiates, by contrast, with a reality that is both more complex and more productive. Although, for the time being, Pile Fertile has been more successful in planning the park and developing sociocultural action¹² than in renovating houses, it nevertheless brings to the table a critical voice with regard to current urban-renewal methods. As Pile Fertile was appointed to its role by the city council, it does not represent a counterpower. However, the flexibility provided by its position as project manager allows it to steer the renovation project toward practices that are more open to residents. In performing this task, the project-management team must first overcome the mistrust of elected officials, who, in France, often view citizen participation as a measure that risks eroding their power. But the team must also deal with the inertia of technical and administrative staff at city hall, who do not risk being voted out of their jobs at the next election, and are generally skeptical about involving residents in any way at all, be it in the design, production or—above all—management of their own living environments. In a climate of budget cuts, the city's technical departments, responsible for presenting Pile Fertile's co-management proposals to elected officials, seem to fear that the entire project may eventually fall to them. Citing the precautionary principle, they oppose it, at the same time justifying their unique expertise to their superiors. In fact, since November 2015, the contracting authority that appointed Pile Fertile have been blocking funds—which were already available—to organize participatory workshops on different crucial themes for the neighborhood (housing, public space and energy transition).

that had been produced according to this model (see his interview on March 28, 2016, with Béatrice Durand on the website *Architectures à vivre*: www.avivremagazine.fr/alejandro-aravena-un-pritzker-indigne-a758).

¹⁰ The Pile Fertile team was assisted in this research by Soning, an engineering firm providing project-management support at the time, which conducted innovative thinking on energy- and heat-related issues.

¹¹ Interview with the author, April 6, 2016.

¹² In partnership with the Pile Fertile team, the association Hors Cadre conducted a sociocultural project in Le Pile whereby residents of all ages were invited to use audiovisual tools both as a vector for the construction of their identity and memories and as a vector of internal and external mediation. Hors Cadre has already succeeded in getting some 800 residents involved in producing a dozen or so films (for more information, in French, see: <http://horscadre.eu/actualites/565-le-pile-fertile-a-lhonneur->).

Figure 3. Public workshop on the theme of urban co-management in Le Pile, organized by the Pile Fertile team, March 11, 2014



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This in no way prevented the Pile Fertile team from continuing to produce studies, furthering its field observations and increasing interaction with “residents”, a broad term that masks a heterogeneous array of population groups whose internal lines of tension (social, generational, religious, etc.) it has learned to map more precisely. This was the case during door-to-door surveys conducted in October 2013 and May 2015 by Myriam Brique (from HB Études & Conseils), the team’s sociologist, but also more generally in the other team members’ almost daily experience of the neighborhood from 2013 to 2015.

Transforming the neighborhood for and with the people who live there means not only getting to know them and learning to listen to them, but also building long-term relationships of trust. This also implies creating the conditions for “empowerment” (Bacqué and Biewener 2015). In French this term is a fashionable neologism that is ambiguous depending on whether it is translated as an increase in political power (*pouvoir*) or physical power (*puissance*). Between “power over” and “power to”, the architect Pierre Bernard has clearly made his choice: “giving people the [physical] power to act does not necessarily imply giving them [political] power. The most fruitful aspect of collective action is not the antagonism between powers and counterpowers, but the transition from power to action—the actualization of power’s potentiality. Participation is easy when it comes to thinking collectively about action; it gets complicated when it comes to realizing [this action]; it gets even tougher when it comes to co-managing [action]. It was co-management problems that got the better of [the] Alma-Gare [project]...”¹³

Although the neighborhood roundtable in Le Pile is financed by urban-policy funding (€15,000 per year), it is clearly defined as a counterpower, as a place where “channeling anger” or even “the

¹³ Pierre Bernard. Interview with the author, April 6, 2016.

emergence of protest action” takes place (Talpin 2016). It is “run by a youth association called ANRJ (Association Nouveau Regard sur la Jeunesse, literally ‘Association [for a] New Vision of Youth’)” (an association founded in November 2004 and run by young people from Le Pile) and managed “with the support of the Université Populaire et Citoyenne de Roubaix”¹⁴ (UPC). ANRJ and the UPC—politically close to the Green party—were both partners in Pile Fertile’s activities in the beginning, but became its opponents as soon as control of the city council shifted to the right and the new municipal team developed numerous initiatives to exclude them from the process. Since then, the UPC has provided a voice for the resentment expressed by “Pilés” in the face of the slow progress and difficulties encountered in renovating their neighborhood. It recently contributed to the publication of the first issue of *À Table !*,¹⁵ the newspaper of Le Pile–Sainte-Élisabeth neighborhood roundtable, whose content is one-sided and sometimes falls into caricature: “still no public consultation, no meetings in the neighborhood, or at least [...] not with the main stakeholders,” “we find ourselves [...] put before a *fait accompli*,” “not only was the project decided without the residents but, worse still, homeowners and tenants are to be displaced, even expropriated,” and so on. It is possible that Pile Fertile’s participatory initiatives may have escaped the notice of some residents. But the UPC, which participated in these very initiatives for a while, could not possibly be unaware of them. The action of the Pile Fertile team is imperfect and experimental—and subject to the risk aversion of its contracting authority—and deserves to be analyzed critically, like any intellectual and practical engagement; nevertheless, its existence, its ambitions and its effects must be acknowledged.

Power vs counterpower or top-down vs bottom-up: these binary models work like distorting glasses. They provide ammunition for the legitimate denunciation of municipal obstacles to citizen participation, but also leave in the blind spot certain intermediaries who try to make participation happen on a daily basis. Beyond the specific case of Le Pile, this denial—or, at the very least, this omission—illustrates more generally the potential risk of competition between the different categories of actors involved in participation. At a time when participation is becoming a priority in urban policy, the political, institutional, professional and association-based actors involved have sometimes divergent interests when it comes to asserting their hegemony in these participatory processes, at the risk of bringing them to a halt altogether.

The recent history of Le Pile also illustrates the structural difficulties that weigh on urban-renewal operations: ambiguity on the part of ANRU (which centralizes the resources of public authorities while advocating participation, and thus the sharing of these resources), the instability of the local political scene, the inertia of technical and administrative procedures, various dependencies within civil society, and tensions between general and individual interests. Finally, it illustrates the ambiguous role of architects, who are not just actors in the transformation process, but also specialists who tend to be conflated with the interests of their clients and critical intellectuals whose ambitions often go far beyond (and sometimes challenge) the strict framework of their remit.

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¹⁴ See (in French): <http://expetablesdequartier.centres-sociaux.fr/tag/roubaix-le-pile>.

¹⁵ *À Table !*, no. 1, October 2016 (see: <http://fr.calameo.com/read/004978476e07d7e0b931a>).

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Pierre Chabard is a French state-certified architect (*diplômé par le gouvernement*, or *DPLG*) and a doctor of architecture. He is an assistant professor at the Paris–La Villette architecture school (École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Paris–La Villette) and a member of the AHTTEP laboratory (Architecture, Histoire, Transport, Territoire, Patrimoine – Architecture, History, Transport, Territory, Heritage) within the AUS^{SER} mixed research unit (Architecture, Urbanisme, Sociétés : Savoirs, Enseignement, Recherche – Architecture, Urban Planning, Societies: Knowledge, Teaching, Research; UMR CNRS 3329). His research focuses on the social and cultural history of modern and contemporary architecture. He is also a co-founder of the journal *Criticat* (website: www.criticat.fr).

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