Shrinking to Survive? Demolition and Energy Transition in Small-Town France

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Faced with a process of advanced decline, public and private actors in the town of Vitry-le-François, in eastern France, have developed an original strategy built around the acceptance of their town's demographic decline. This strategy, focused on energy transition, shows that contexts of urban shrinkage can foster the emergence of alternatives to conventional business-redevelopment policies.

Although urban shrinkage is still generally tackled through business-led redevelopment strategies (Martinez-Fernandez *et al.* 2012), it is a context that increasingly appears to be fertile ground for the invention of alternative politics and policies (Béal and Rousseau 2014). International debates around planned shrinkage, particularly in certain cities in the North American Rust Belt (Popper and Popper 2017), have highlighted the ambiguity of these policies: by demolishing without rebuilding like for like, and by often proposing "green" uses of freed-up land, they seem to break with more conventional forms of urban entrepreneurialism; however, the contribution of these debates to social and spatial justice still needs to be evaluated (Béal *et al.* 2016; Paddeu 2017). Similar debates have not yet developed in France – but does this mean that French cities in decline are not implementing such strategies? Through the example of the mid-sized town of Vitry-le-François, in the Champagne region of eastern France, this article seeks to demonstrate that similar strategies do exist. But while it is possible to identify redevelopment measures in France comparable to those implemented in North America, they are not presented, let alone discussed, in these terms.

A territory in decline that has long suffered from weak capacity for public action

Vitry-le-François is a town and *commune* (municipality) of 13,000 residents situated in the Champagne region of eastern France. It forms the urban core of a functional urban area (FUA) of 35,000 inhabitants. This wider area is organized, in institutional terms, by two tiers of collaborative structures: the first is an indirectly elected intermunicipal body – the Communauté de Communes Vitry, Champagne et Der (CCVCD), with 35 member municipalities and a population of around 25,000 – which, owing to the demographic weight of the urban core, pools and redistributes resources for the provision of almost all public services within its area; the second is a more informal structure called a *pays* – the Pays Vitryat – which covers a wider area (comparable in size to a US county) comprising three rival intermunicipal bodies with a total population of around

45,000.[1] The municipality of Vitry-le-François has been led by a centre-left mayor since 2008, in a *département* and region historically dominated by right-wing and centrist parties, and where the far right has been making significant inroads since the early 2000s.

In this formerly industrial area, demographic shrinkage above all concerns the core town of Vitry-le-François (where the population fell by 32% between 1975 and 2014, compared to 10% in the FUA as a whole), while its suburban and rural hinterlands continue to experience gradual growth. This process is fuelled above all by net out-migration, linked to slow deindustrialization, which is only partially compensated for by a small number of job creations in the service sector. On the scale of the FUA, the number of industrial jobs has fallen by 50% overall, while the total number of jobs decreased by 9% between 1982 and 2012.[2] Another effect of these changes has been the gradual impoverishment of the town's population: almost 21% of economically active individuals are unemployed, and 27.5% of residents live below the national poverty line.[3]

The social and political organization of Vitry-le-François has long been built around paternalistic employers operating in traditional industrial sectors (wood, construction, agri-food) and, more recently, in sectors targeted by national policies of industrial dispersal (e.g. metalworking). As a result of this, 54% of housing stock in the town belongs to a single social landlord, Vitry Habitat, itself a product of the paternalism of previous decades. Consequently, the municipality has traditionally been a relatively weak actor in a local fabric dominated by Fordist approaches that has only begun (gradually) to fray and unravel in more recent years (Demazière and Daviot 2011; Édouard 2014). But capacity for local public action has recently been reinforced, following the implementation of innovative measures that seek to encourage energy transition and urban shrinkage – two fields of action that contrast starkly with the canons of urban entrepreneurialism. We analysed this process by conducting 15 or so interviews with different actors (municipal and intermunicipal departments, the social landlord, local business leaders) between July 2015 and March 2017; this was complemented by a literature search.

Urban shrinkage under duress: a social landlord in crisis

The first action undertaken by the municipality to combat demographic decline dates back to the mid-1990s. These measures sought to create the conditions necessary to generate competition on the local housing market by diversifying the housing stock in terms of both its urban forms and its tenure status, while also bringing new actors on to the local scene. However, this policy was implemented at a time of growing crisis for the main social landlord: in 2002, when it submitted its candidacy for an urban-renewal operation, the vacancy rate in its housing stock stood at around 10%; three years later, when the urban-renewal project (*projet de rénovation urbaine*) was signed, it had reached 15%.[4] In light of this, ANRU – the French national agency for urban renewal – agreed to waive the usual rule imposing identical numbers of demolitions and reconstructions: for every three dwellings demolished, only two would be rebuilt. A form of planned shrinkage was therefore implemented under the radar.

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[1]   The Pays Vitryat is made up of the three following intermunicipal bodies: Communauté de Communes Vitry, Champagne et Der; Communauté de Communes Perthois-Bocage et Der; and Communauté de Communes Côtes de Champagne et Val de Saulx. This territory (1,270 km²/490 sq. mi.) is covered by a shared planning instrument known as a SCOT (*schéma de cohérence territoriale*, or territorial coherence scheme) that is managed by a joint association called ADEVA Pays Vityrat.

[2]   Source: INSEE (the French national statistics office), 2012, *Fichier analyse fonctionnelle des emplois par communes – 1982 et 2012*.

[3]   That is, below the threshold of €964 ($1,140 or £866 at the time of publication) per month for a single person. Source: INSEE, 2012.

[4]   Sources: Communauté de Communes Vitry, Champagne et Der (CCVCD), 2002; Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine (ANRU) and CCVCD, 2005.

However, this approach conflicted not just with policies implemented at intermunicipal level – where two local housing programmes (*programmes locaux d'habitat*) described as "optimistic" and "proactive" had as their stated objective a return to growth – but also with policies implemented nationally promoting tax exemptions and access to home-ownership (Dormois and Fol 2017). As a result, while many low-income households were able to purchase homes in surrounding rural municipalities, the social-housing vacancy rate in Vitry itself continued to increase (35% in 2012), along with the impoverishment of its tenants. This continued erosion of Vitry Habitat's management model led it to seek the assistance of the Social Rental Housing Guarantee Fund (Caisse de Garantie du Logement Locatif Social, or CGLLS) in 2012, in order to avoid bankruptcy. This assistance was contingent upon an overhaul of the organization and its operations: a new shareholder (a regional social-housing body) was to be appointed; demolitions were to continue, particularly of apartment complexes (tower blocks and slab blocks), resulting, for instance, in the planned demolition of 844 out of 1,350 dwellings in one neighbourhood; housing stock was to be refocused on the core town of Vitry; and Vitry Habitat was to refocus its activities more generally on its primary function – providing housing.

This context of crisis also resulted in the municipality and the intermunicipal body working more closely with the social landlord. This involved substantially restructuring the area's housing offer and conducting a shared diagnosis of the situation. This diagnosis linked the town's redevelopment to maintaining and increasing numbers of middle-class residents. As one manager from the social landlord commented, "we were losing population, so we wanted to keep what we had by fostering loyalty among the middle classes" (manager, Vitry Habitat, July 2015). In this respect, the social landlord's diagnosis, based on an objective of economic rationality, converged with that of the municipality, which considered the town to be structurally challenged because for too long it was shaped by local companies fixated on a specialization in working-class housing. This cooperation between the social landlord and the municipality led, in 2012, to one housing estate – Le Hamois – being designated a neighbourhood of national interest (*quartier d'intérêt national*) as part of France's New National Urban Renewal Programme (*Nouveau Programme National de Renouvellement Urbain*, or NPNRU).

Energy transition and boosting capacity for public action

A few months later, the mayor of Vitry brought the municipality, the intermunicipal body and the *pays* together via a project for a decentralized energy system (DES) in partnership with energy provider EDF. This project took root in a dual context: the installation of wind turbines that was under way at the same time, and the existence of an ageing biomass neighbourhood heating network belonging to the social landlord. This network was a vital component of the project for two key reasons: first, it was a network that was soon to become available, as Vitry Habitat was obliged to give it up as part of the CGLLS protocol intended to refocus its activities on housing provision; and, second, it provided cheap, green energy for Vitry Habitat's tenants and for most of the town's public facilities, following opportunistic connections to the network in an effort to offset progressive reductions in the number of social-housing customers since the 1990s. Saving this heating system would make it possible to both maintain the supply of inexpensive, clean energy and give credibility to the local energy-transition strategy.

However, it was also an economic development project, as it included broader reflections on the circular economy, industrial ecology and the development of new economic sectors. Furthermore, this change of tack also helped to sway local politicians' opinions about sustainable development, which was now seen as "a means of increasing the population's discretionary income and of changing the local societal model" (interview with a manager in the municipal and intermunicipal technical services departments, February 2016). The DES also played a role in urban planning and development, by helping to transform local development projects into eco-neighbourhood projects. In this way, the town benefited from the Sustainable Cities of Solidarity (*Ville Durable et Solidaire*)

component of the government's Future Investments Programme (*Programme d'Investissements d'Avenir*).

In parallel, the DES project has also radically changed the way local technical services function. This transformation is built on the principles of New Public Management (Buhnik 2017), promulgated by those involved in promoting sustainable cities (state agencies, private energy providers, etc.) and which have trickled down to local political and administrative organizations. Since then, project-based approaches have become central, and new appointments of administrative staff have been better targeted, with the aim of responding to calls for projects in order to maximize funding.

> For us, the DES is a working model. It has changed the way we do things. Before, action was highly compartmentalized. […] We couldn't keep on operating on a six-yearly basis, treating each [municipal] election as a project review, while businesses had a continuous vision of how to improve their action. […] We respond to everything [all calls for projects], because everything is relevant to the DES. In addition, this triggers co-financing (manager in the intermunicipal technical services department, July 2016).

Lastly, the DES has brought about a reconfiguration of the local political organization. In an area marked by competition between municipalities, the DES project appears as a lever that could actually change relationships between the core town and the surrounding areas: "the energy system brought with it the idea of halving consumption through strong interaction on the scale of the whole *pays*. This also meant rethinking the role of the core town. It couldn't be an effective system if it didn't take account of the surrounding *pays*" (manager in the municipal and intermunicipal technical services departments, July 2016). Politically, this project has also strengthened the mayor's leadership. For example, the DES has required a comprehensive revision of local planning processes, as well as the creation of a public–private energy company whose role is not only to manage the neighbourhood heating network but also to coordinate more generally the energy transition of the Vitry area. In capitalizing on this "green" strategy, the mayor of Vitry-le-François has become increasingly involved in national networks and organizations, taking on the role of deputy chairman of the French network of eco-mayors in November 2014.

A silent and incomplete alternative politics?

In Vitry-le-François, the conflict between the social landlord and the municipality was ultimately resolved through measures combining a reduction of the housing stock and a move towards energy transition – an approach that bears similarities to policies currently being debated in North America. However, the issue of demolition has not yet been truly incorporated into a redevelopment strategy. Furthermore, the question of how to use the land freed up by these demolitions remains unresolved, even though it lies at the very heart of the town's smart-shrinkage strategies. This incomplete "planned shrinkage" is, moreover, "silent" to a large extent: neither the state nor local actors wants to explicitly take credit for it.

While it is true that the specific local context in Vitry goes some way to explaining the respective social and environmental characteristics of the redevelopment measures implemented, bearing in mind that social considerations can often constrain the development of in-depth environmental policies (North and Nurse 2014), these measures have undeniably helped to increase the capacity for action of local authorities in the area, and of the mayor of Vitry in particular. In this respect, they seem particularly instructive, as they appear to show that, in a context of urban shrinkage and intermunicipal competition, local public actors who were long subservient to the priorities of local industry can succeed in creating a local dynamic aimed at endogenous redevelopment while also pursuing environmental and social objectives.

Nevertheless, it is still too soon to measure the social, economic and environmental effects of the action currently implemented in Vitry-le-François. On the one hand, it is still dominated by a top-

down approach, in which residents have barely any say. On the other, the ambiguities of the redevelopment implemented so far (is this definitive shrinkage or merely a setback before an upswing? Is dedensifying a means of ensuring a better quality of life for the local population or an instrument for winning back the lost middle classes?) facilitate the creation of a local consensus that lies midway between the invention of an "alternative" endogenous development model and a straightforward *aggiornamento* of classic entrepreneurial policies.

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