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The Port–City–River Relationship in Paris: The Challenge of Mixed-Use Development

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Abstract
The relationship between Paris and the Seine has been undergoing a process of reconnection. Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, the development of new public spaces along the river has been a central focus of municipal policy. This shift marks a recreational and ecological turning point in the city–river dynamic, characteristic of the postindustrial river city. Nevertheless, a few urban ports remain in operation, managed by a port authority that negotiates with the municipality and industrial stakeholders to better integrate these sites into the urban fabric. Based on selected examples, this article considers the challenges of integrating these ports within the city and the coexistence of economic and urban functions in light of sustainability objectives.

KEYWORDS

port
city
Paris
transport
sustainability

WATER ICONS

Policy Recommendations

- City governments should provide greater support for mixed-use urban planning measures based on waterways in light of congestion and pollution issues.
- Port authority and City governments should cooperate more strongly through city–port charters that improve the landscape and architectural features of this integration.
- Residents and associations should be more involved in partnership charters for urban integration in ports. Such charters already exist, but they should be strengthened, generalised and discussed by participatory committees involving residents and associations.
- Port authorities and City government should give greater consideration to combining logistics and port activities with other social and economic functions. This combination requires the support of public policy.

< Fig. 1 The city–river relationship in Paris shifting toward recreation (Source: Jean Debrie, 2025).

Introduction: The Evolution of the City–River Relationship in Paris

In Paris, the history of the relationship between city and river resembles that of other major river cities in Europe. Although Paris was born from its connection to the Seine, this connection was severed in the eighteenth century by major public works and the gradual industrialization of the riverbanks (Backouche 2000; Guillerme 1990), separating Parisians from the river. The development of road infrastructure along the Seine that began in the 1950s further reinforced the separation. But since the early 2000s, city leaders have made reconnecting the city with the river a priority (APUR 2010). The riverbanks, both right and left, have been redeveloped, signaling a recreational turn in the city–river relationship. The closure of roadways has enabled new public spaces to emerge, including sports venues, bike lanes, restaurants and bars, floating gardens, cultural spaces and a beach. Although flood risks require these facilities to be impermanent, they do not prevent the development of public spaces as part of the Parc Rives-de-Seine project launched by the Paris municipality (fig. 1). However, most riverbanks in Paris still fall under the responsibility of the port authority (HAROPA), which is committed to maintaining small port sites in Paris for productive and logistical activities. This raises the question of how port activities can be integrated within urban space.

Ports as Drivers of Sustainability? The Challenge of Port Integration in Central Paris

Port functions are not very visible in central Paris. Yet these functions exist and are essential for certain economic sectors, particularly construction and building. Major port platforms like those at Gennevilliers and Bonneuil-sur-Marne are located on the outskirts of the city. However, several small port sites are maintained in the city center along the Seine, the Canal de l'Ourcq and the Canal Saint-Denis, to supply Parisian construction sites and stores (e.g., cement plants and logistics centers). In a context of urban congestion and pollution, these small river ports contribute to sustainability objectives by reducing road traffic and offering available sites for managing urban supply chains (waste, construction materials, goods). However, these port spaces raise integration issues within the urban environment to ensure their acceptability. The port authority has progressively implemented a charter to improve ports and a set of architectural and landscaping guidelines (HAROPA 2021). This charter is the subject of negotiations between the port authority, municipalities and industrial companies operating within the port domain for various economic activities. The objectives of the Port Improvement Charter are to implement measures to reduce port-related nuisances, secure port sites and temporarily open quays to shared uses. A port audit method enables assessments and action plans to be drawn up to promote the urban, architectural and landscape integration of ports and aid public information and participation.

The example of the Port of Tolbiac in the 13th arrondissement of Paris illustrates this attempt at port integration (fig. 2). The port developments result from negotiations between the port authority and the cement company CEMEX and discussions with a local committee of residents and municipal officials. The agreement allows for use of the riverbanks to be shared between productive activities during the day and urban promenades outside the cement plant's operating hours. They improve the port's integration both aesthetically (with an unobstructed view of the Seine, nighttime

^ Fig. 2 Urban port integration at the Port of Tolbiac (Source: Jean Debrie, 2025).

lighting design and green walls) and in terms of accessibility (cement tanks on stilts, secured access, lighting). A certification process was also carried out, resulting in the first concrete plant certified for high environmental quality. While the case of the Port of Tolbiac is exemplary – it won the 2008 Grand Prix for Environment in the Urban Planning, Heritage and Sustainable Development category – similar urban integration efforts are now being implemented at most port sites in the Paris region. Photos of cement plants in Paris and the suburbs illustrate this effort at port integration. This integration requires a participatory process to maintain these port sites, which contribute to reducing CO_2 emissions and congestion through the use of river transport, which for the Port of Tolbiac involves 280,000 tons of cement per year.

^ Fig. 3 Magasins Généraux (Source: Jean Debrie, 2025).

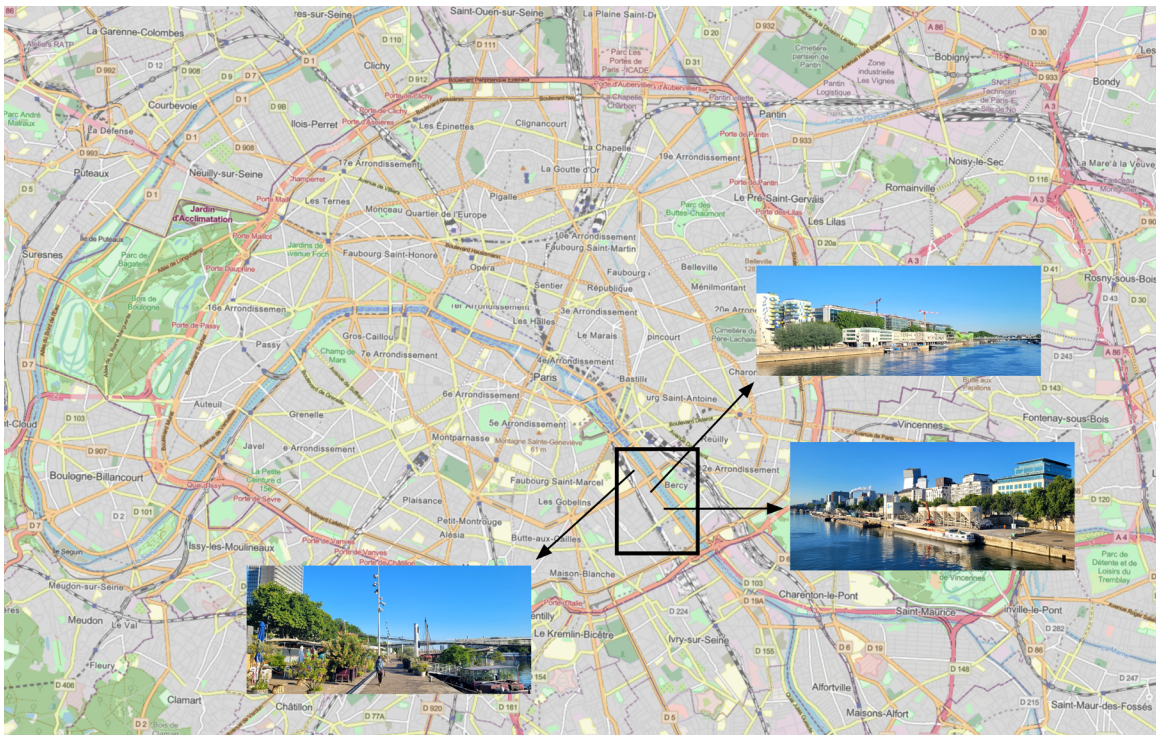
Toward a Mix of Urban Functions?

The question of port–urban integration calls for a broader reflection on the shared use of riverbanks. In a context of intense land pressure in central Paris – marked by high population density and concentrated economic activity – the inclusion of port functions within mixed-use urban development has become a central issue in debates concerning the "productive city." The riverbanks have increasingly become the setting for residents to reconnect with the Seine, primarily through recreational uses that define riverbanks as public spaces. Yet maintaining productive river activities remains essential for achieving environmental sustainability (by reducing CO_2 emissions and urban congestion) as well as economic objectives (notably in relation to employment).

The challenge for the productive city is not unique to Paris and is shared by other European urban ports. The city–port relationship requires renewed forms of negotiation to preserve productive functions such as logistics, transport, construction and waste management. Research by Kristel Mazy (2021) on city–port relations in Brussels and Lille, along with the AIVP (2015) guide to best practices in port–city relationships, illustrate this new agenda.

These broader European trends can be seen in Paris in recent experiments that seek to reconcile productive and recreational river uses. An example is the Magasins Généraux (General Warehouses). This historic port site, a reinforced-concrete structure built in 1907 to handle freight linked to the Austerlitz train station (fig. 3), was a major economic hub until it gradually lost its function beginning in the 1970s, as central Paris underwent deindustrialization. The righthand section of the Magasins Généraux was redeveloped in the first decade of the twenty-first century as part of a large urban project known as "Les Docks." These former freight warehouses were transformed into an institute of fashion and design and now also house bars and restaurants.

However, the lefthand section of the warehouses remains to be redeveloped, and a new project there signals renewed interest in maintaining productive activities along the river. In 2021,



^ Fig. 4 Case study locations (Source: Jean Debrie, 2025. Basemap © Esri and © OpenStreetMap contributors, 2025, licensed under the Open Database License [ODbL]).

the port authority (HAROPA), in partnership with the City of Paris, launched a call for proposals to redevelop this section of the Magasins Généraux (pavilions 1 and 2) for river logistics. The company Sogaris won the tender with a project called "Les Amarres" which combines a variety of urban functions across the building's levels: logistics activity on the quay and ground floor, shelter for vulnerable populations on the first floor, office space on the second floor, and recreational uses (bars and restaurant) on the top floor. This "logistics hotel" concept is supported by a semi-public company (Sogaris), with public capital (including from the City of Paris) in partnership with a social and solidarity association (Aurore) and a logistics firm (Fluidis). Although the project is set to open in 2027 and it is too early to assess its outcomes, it represents a pursuit of economic diversity that allows logistics activities to remain in central Paris while integrating them with other social and economic functions. It also demonstrates strong public-sector support through investment and subsidies.

Conclusion: Urban Ports as a Political Agenda

The city–river relationship in Paris is undergoing a process of reconnection. Since the 2000s, riverbanks have once again become accessible to residents, and the creation of new public spaces has responded to strong social demand. At the same time, sustainability objectives call for reducing pollution and urban congestion, and the river can play a key role in achieving these goals. The Seine's contribution to achieving Sustainable Development Goals

is relevant for several economic sectors, including construction, distribution logistics for shops and offices, and waste management.

Addressing the challenges of urban congestion and pollution requires mixed river-based urban planning strategies in which the river assumes a greater role in managing urban flows. Small urban ports are therefore instruments of sustainability. Embedded within densely built environments, these ports must be redeveloped to better integrate them in the city.

In Paris, as in many European cities, port authorities and municipalities have, since the early twenty-first century, developed new frameworks for negotiation and cooperation. These evolving partnerships represent an important aspect of urban governance in port cities (Debrie and Raimbault 2016). The dual challenge of ensuring public acceptance of port activity in a context of citizen participation, and of advancing the sustainability of port development, has led to a rethinking of port integration. Cooperation between port authorities and municipalities should be strengthened through city–port charters that improve the landscape and architectural quality of these spaces. Such charters already exist and should be extended and discussed through participatory committees involving residents.

Deepening public dialogue around the city–port relationship constitutes an important democratic challenge. The presence of ports in the city can be legitimized through mixed urban uses (fig. 4). Combining logistics and port activities with other social and economic functions remains a relatively underdeveloped approach but is one that could signal a new era in the city–port relationship – an evolution that will require sustained public policy support.

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