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Paris and the Seine: An Anthropological Approach

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Abstract
Based on urban and political anthropology research centered on Paris, I have developed an approach focusing on the dynamics of "heritagization," that is, the use of spaces, metropolitan transformations and their relationship with globalization, particularly as seen through the lens of tourism. The Seine, considered as a public space, constitutes a privileged entry point for thinking about the systems that reorganize the relationship between city dwellers and the city. The relationship between Parisians and the river is shaped by historical representations, everyday use and planning policies, which continuously reconfigure this urban space. My analysis focuses on three emblematic projects that reconfigure the relationship between Paris and the Seine in different ways: Paris Plage, Voies sur Berge and the redevelopment of the area around Notre-Dame. These cases reveal the political logics underlying the production of public space, balancing event-based gestures with lasting transformations, "heritagization" with accessibility and urban memory with future experimentation. The analysis highlights the tension between urban planning, political representations of the river and social practices in a city where public space is a stage, a resource and a symbol.

KEYWORDS

Paris
Seine
waterfront
public spaces
urban ethnography

WATER ICONS





Policy Recommendations

- A social science approach grounded in close, empirical fieldwork makes it possible to understand the many issues involved in reconnecting a city with its water.

< Fig. 1 Paris-Plage in Paris, one of the first edition (Source: Emmanuelle Lallement, 2003).

Introduction

My research is situated within contemporary and urban anthropology, as well as the anthropology of Paris and political anthropology. From these perspectives, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork and analyses of the city, focusing primarily on Paris and its processes of "heritagization," that is, the use of places and urban events, metropolitan transformations and their relationship with globalization, particularly through tourism.

As Walter Benjamin's famously stated in *Images de pensée* (2011):

> If [...] human beings experience their greatest sense of freedom while strolling along a river, then the most refined form of flânerie — and consequently the most joyful — leads us back to the book and into it." For centuries, the ivy of learned pages has clung to the quays of the Seine. Paris is the great reading room of a library through which the Seine flows.

France is one of the most attractive city thanks to its French heritage.

Although I consider public swimming, my object of study is not swimming, but rather, the relationship to the Seine – understood as an issue of public space, design, and use, as well as an issue of social gathering and, consequently, of urban forms.

From an ethnographic standpoint and within a pragmatist perspective, I have examined various urban situations, such as planning operations, festive events and policies of urban reappropriation in public space. It is in this sense that the flagship summer operation Paris Plage might be understood – as an initiative that led to permanent developments such as the public space now known as Voies sur Berge, as well as heritage management within the city, such as the emblematic redevelopment project of the surroundings of Notre-Dame following the huge 2019 fire at the cathedral.

Within this framework, I examine three operations that reconfigure the relationship between Paris and the Seine, each according to a different modality. First, Paris Plage illustrates an event-based, festive and temporary approach to urban space, in which the river becomes a stage for the inversion of ordinary uses. I will argue that the project marks a turning point in municipal policy. I consider a development that partly resulted from Paris Plage, known as Voies sur Berge, which reflects a lasting transformation and a reconfiguration of mobility in favor of pedestrians and leisure. Finally, I focus on the redevelopment of the surroundings of Notre-Dame, which takes place in a context of strong constraints related to heritage projection and to issues of reappropriation of a highly symbolic urban space.

The trajectory I am concerned with begins with an ephemeral event that is repeated annually and presented as playful and summery. It then moves on to a heritage-centered and permanent project that transforms the heart of the capital. Finally, it concludes with an urban planning project that contributes to the transformation of Paris's river banks into leisure spaces. The proposed hypothesis is that each case sheds light on a way of reconnecting the city with the river. Through these three cases, I aim to examine the mechanisms of urban space production. How does the city negotiate its relationship with the river, whether direct or indirect, material or symbolic? How does the city balance the logics of celebration and conservation, event and permanence, rupture and



^ Fig. 2 First edition of Paris Plage (Source : Emmanuelle Lallement, 2002).

historical continuity? The analysis highlights the appropriation of public spaces and the tensions between urban planning, social uses and political representations of the river.

Paris Plage: Between Political Gesture, Urban Performance and the Creation of Public Space

Is Paris Plage a Political Beach?

From its inception, Paris Plage has been a local political project. Inspired by a similar initiative implemented in Saint-Quentin-en-Picardie in 2000, Paris Plage is an act of urban reconquest that aims to reclaim a space previously dominated by automobile traffic. It was the emblematic summer operation of Bertrand Delanoë's first term in 2001 as mayor of Paris. The decision to entrust the project's organization to the communications department rather than the urban planning or culture department clearly reveals its strategic scope. Paris Plage is as much a public event as it is a tool for transforming the city's image (fig. 1).

As early as 2002, the city commissioned a team of young scenographers to design an "urban beach" along the banks of the Seine. The chosen location for this transformation was highly symbolic: the Georges Pompidou expressway. Built in 1967 under President Pompidou, the expressway reflected a modernist vision of the city in which automobiles reigned supreme. Each summer since 2002, from mid-July to mid-August, municipal teams set up an impressive display: sand, palm trees, lawns, deck chairs, open-air cafés, climbing walls, a swimming pool, misting systems, a water maze, trampolines and a pétanque court.



^ Fig. 3 Paris Plage, children's activities (Source : Emmanuelle Lallement, 2003).

From its first edition, Paris Plage was presented as a democratic, inclusive space intended for Parisians, suburban residents and tourists. The question of inclusivity, accessibility and security for women in urban public spaces emerged during the first Paris Plage. Bertrand Delanoë defined it as a "convivial, popular, festive and civic" place, emphasizing its purpose of restoring universal access to the Seine. Over the years, the event has evolved. Having become an annual rendezvous, it is now an urban practice rather than an event in itself. This in no way precludes the controversies that accompany each edition of this significant media and political event. Critiques of Paris Plage have focused on the allocated budget, the promotional dimension of municipal policy and the symbol of an artificially designed city "drawn with colored pencils," as Rachida Dati once stated during a municipal council meeting.

Since 2002, Paris has hosted not one, but several Paris Plages. Each summer, the event extends to the Bassin de la Villette, on the Canal Saint-Martin in Paris, and unfolds as multiple beach scenes across the city. Each edition introduces novelties, such as a new theme, new locations and new activities. However, the founding principle no longer surprises. Media coverage of Paris Plages reflects this shift. Whereas the early editions made headlines, the event is now simply commented upon, illustrating its progressive banalization within the Parisian landscape. Beyond its festive nature, Paris Plages has always been conceived as a project to reappropriate public spaces. From the first edition, Bertrand Delanoë claimed the reconquest of the riverbanks, articulating a discourse rooted in Paris's historical memory and prospective urban vision.

The reference to the past is explicit: Reopening the riverbanks to pedestrians and leisure activities reconnects Parisians with a time when the Seine was fully integrated into their daily lives, whether in relation to work, transportation or



^ Fig. 4 Water games at Paris Plage (Source : Emmanuelle Lallement, 2005).

recreation. This initiative also aligns with the contemporary trend of temporary urban space appropriation, including impromptu picnics on Parisian bridges, weekend closures of the quays to cars for cyclists and rollerbladers, concerts during Fête de la Musique and artistic installations in unusual locations during Nuit Blanche.

However, Paris Plage is not limited to a nostalgic reading of the city's past. It also sparks reflection on the future of mobility and urban space usage. From the beginning, some have suggested that this temporary project may foreshadow a more permanent and radical transformation of the Seine's banks. These speculations were confirmed in 2012–2013 when the Voies sur Berge project definitively pedestrianized the riverbanks. The idea of removing automobile traffic from this central area sparked intense political and economic debate. After being voted on in May 2012 by the Paris City Council, the measure was initially suspended by the Fillon government, but then reinstated under President François Hollande. Despite resistance from several economic actors, such as MEDEF Île-de-France, which filed legal appeals denouncing the impact on traffic flow and accessibility for businesses and employees, it was ultimately inaugurated in June 2013.

Thus, Paris Plage retrospectively appears as a full-scale test of Paris's policy of pedestrianization. It is not merely a festive, temporary space, but rather a laboratory for urban experimentation preparing the city for a permanent transformation of its public spaces.

Paris Plage as a Work of Scenographic Creation

Reducing Paris Plage to a mere political gesture would be inadequate. The originality of this project lies in its creation context: It was not entrusted to urban planners or landscape

architects, but rather to scenographers from the fields of visual arts and theater. Since its very first edition, the agency Nez-Haut has designed the event, engaging in a genuine work of staging. The objective was not to produce a simple urban layout, but rather to invent the concept of an "urban beach." Furthermore, this beach does not resemble any existing model. As Jean-Didier Urbain has demonstrated, beaches are always abstractions, spaces composed of signs and symbols. Yet, nothing is more artificial than Paris Plage. It is not a Mediterranean beach, despite the presence of potted olive trees. Nor is it a Normandy beach, despite the striped cabins reminiscent of Deauville. It is not a seaside resort either, since it offers no direct access to the river.

The designers assembled a seaside landscape using the most emblematic stereotypes: sand, deck chairs, palm trees, pétanque and colorful huts. The goal is not to recreate an existing beach but to create an environment that immediately conjures the idea of a beach. Water plays a unique role in this setup: It is central, yet swimming is not possible. Unlike at a conventional seaside resort, where access to the sea is essential, water here was long presented in diverted forms, such as giant misting systems, water games and floating swimming pools. Until recently, no one swam directly in the Seine. However, the issue of swimming returned to the forefront with the developments linked to the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which promised Parisians a highly symbolic legacy – the possibility of swimming in the Seine. Nevertheless, water remains an element of staging, a symbolic presence charged with political meaning rather than a genuine bathing space.

Paradoxically, the absence of the sea is precisely what makes Paris Plage work. The event is based on a playful inversion; it consists of creating a beach without a sea in a place that could never be a beach. This impossibility gives the event its full strength. Visitors are not merely passive users: they participate in a collective performance. The event only functions because everyone agrees to "play at the beach" without the sea. Thus, Paris Plage is not merely a temporary leisure space but rather a genuine urban performance in which everyone – consciously or not – becomes an actor within this scenography. This performative dimension undoubtedly explains the success and longevity of Paris Plage, extending far beyond its political and urban planning aspects.

Voies sur Berge: From Urban Highway to Reinvented, Playful Public Space

A Major Transformation of the Parisian Urban Landscape

Since 2012, Parisians and tourists alike have witnessed a profound and lasting transformation in the heart of the capital. After decades in which automobiles dominated urban planning, the Voies sur Berge have gradually transformed into spaces for strolling, leisure, and rediscovering the river. The Berges de Seine project was one of Bertrand Delanoë's last major undertakings before the end of his second and final term as mayor.

From the moment it was announced, the Socialist former mayor emphasized the project's revolutionary scope: "This is the face of Paris, offering a new way of experiencing the city and fulfilling the expectations of a great capital: dynamism, attractiveness and influence." This statement clearly expresses the ambition to make the riverbanks a central component of twenty-first century Paris. The riverbanks will

simultaneously serve as public space, an urban showcase and a symbol of the city's becoming less dependent on automobiles. The project targets the Voies sur Berges, a paradoxical space described as an "urban highway at the very heart of the city." Regarded by some as an emblematic piece of modern Parisian infrastructure and by others as an urban anomaly – a rupture in the city's fabric, a "scar" inherited from the triumph of automobile-centered modernity – they have long been seen as a form of heritage. Their transformation therefore goes beyond a simple planning operation. It constitutes a societal choice that reveals tensions surrounding new urban models. More broadly, the future of this space raises questions about the trajectory of contemporary metropolises engaged in transitioning to less congested, more livable urban centers.

A Political Battle: Between Urban Utopia and Social Resistance

The Voies sur Berges became the site of an intense political and ideological confrontation after their examination by the Paris City Council on February 8, 2011.The session during which the measure was put to a vote offers a unique opportunity to observe the creation of the city in both its material (infrastructure and transformation of public spaces) and symbolic (discourses, representations, and political struggles) dimensions. The debates reveal multiple, conflicting visions of the city. One vision is of a sustainable and "pacified city" (that is, a Paris without car traffic). Supporters of the project argue that it aligns with a logic of urban "renaturation," promoting a greener and more accessible city. However, ecologist representatives have regretted the lack of boldness and called for a more ambitious integration of biodiversity and ecological infrastructures.

The theme of the exclusionary city also appears. Right-wing opposition figures have accused the municipal government of promoting an elitist vision of Paris that neglects the needs of suburban commuters who rely on these roads for their daily travel. One elected official denounced a project that, in her view, creates a Paris that thrives along the Seine while more distant streets are overrun with rerouted traffic. Some described the project as an unrealistic utopia. An opposition councilor criticized the municipal government for promoting an idealized vision that is disconnected from social and economic realities: "Is the mayor of a global city meant to make people dream or be realistic? Paris must not become a leisure center." The intensity of these criticisms attests to the project's political significance. As the 2014 municipal elections approached, it was perceived not only as an urban planning issue but also as a political one. Yet, despite the controversy, the project was ultimately approved and began implementation in 2012.

Notably, the Voies sur Berge project was approved by the Paris Prefecture only on the condition that the development be reversible, after numerous political reversals that took place throughout Anne Hidalgo's first term and up until 2018. Reappropriation and reversibility appear to go hand in hand, as seen with the opening and requalification of Paris's former railway line, the Petite Ceinture. The decision to permanently close the quays to automobile traffic and transform them into spaces designated for strolling and leisure is based on the idea that they could revert to their initial state at any moment, or rather, with any change in political majority. This is a particularly illuminating metaphor for contemporary conceptions of time and how time is used in the city. Here, we are no longer dealing with the ephemeral, but rather, a form that claims to be "reversible."

Ultimately, the Voies sur Berges extend the logic of Paris Plage, turning a temporary, festive diversion into a permanent urban project. This raises a central question: How can a city reappropriate its river sustainably? The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games represent the culmination of this process. The Seine is the central character of the opening ceremony, which was conceived by Thomas Jolly, one of the leading figures of French live performance. From a sporting perspective, the Games further highlight the river with events such as open-water swimming competitions. The river is now swimmable, and local authorities have succeeded in making it that way, a landmark achievement in the city's history.

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The Redevelopment of the Surroundings of Notre-Dame: Between Heritage Crisis, Appeal to Tourists and the Reinvention of Public Space

Heritage Crisis as Accelerator of an Urban Project

The project to redevelop the area surrounding Notre-Dame did not begin with the 2019 fire. In fact, the transformation of the Île de la Cité district was first discussed in 2016 in the Perrault–Belaval report, which was commissioned by François Hollande. The report proposed a comprehensive redefinition of public spaces, raising the question of how to balance heritage preservation, attractiveness to tourists and the daily practices of citizens. The objective was to redevelop the area by reestablishing connections with the Seine. However, the cathedral fire radically disrupted this trajectory. The urgency of restoration precipitated a project revision and generated strong political tension between the French state and the City of Paris. While Notre-Dame itself belongs to the state, its surroundings, particularly the parvis (the square in front of the cathedral), adjacent squares and Seine riverbanks, fall under the City of Paris's responsibility. Furthermore, this area is located within a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which complicates the arbitration process.

Therefore, the redevelopment must address multiple, overlapping challenges. First, there is a historical and heritage challenge: The site is emblematic, so its transformation must be inscribed in Parisian history. Second, it is a political and institutional challenge, given the tensions between the state, municipal authorities and international heritage protection bodies. Third, the tourism-related and economic challenges are considerable since Notre-Dame is one of the most visited sites in the world and a key driver of Paris's cultural attractiveness. Fourth, there is an urban and social challenge: The need to reintegrate this space into the daily lives of Parisians at a time when mass tourism tends to monopolize it. Finally, an ecological challenge has become central since the place in front of Notre-Dame is one of the city areas with the most pronounced urban heat-island effect. The parvis's impermeability, lack of vegetation and high concentration of people, especially in the summer, make it an intense heat zone that raises public health concerns.

A Multi-Stakeholder Urban Project: Between Heritage, Ecology and Social Adaptation

On April 15, 2021, the Paris City Council approved funding for a major transformation with a budget of €50 million. The project aims to restore a protective "setting" (*écrin*) for Notre-Dame. The project encompasses several areas, including the parvis and its underground spaces (such as the archaeological crypt and a two-level parking facility), the Jean XXIII and Île-de-France squares (extending to the tip of the island), the upper and lower Seine quays and the surrounding streets (including rue du Cloître-Notre-Dame, rue de la Cité and quai de l'Archevêché). The stated objective is to "completely rethink the site's reception, the



^ Fig. 5 The cathedral forcourt in construction, Notre Dame de Paris (Source: Emmanuelle Lallement, 2022).

management of flows, continuity with the Seine and vegetation."

As with the Perrault–Belaval project, the redevelopment plan is structured around two main objectives: "Bringing Parisians back to the cradle of Paris" and "welcoming large numbers of visitors (12 million each year) under improved conditions." One of the project's major challenges is transforming the hardscape parvis into a space more resilient to climatic challenges. Since the current parvis is a vast stone surface that functions as a heat island, the redevelopment must incorporate solutions involving vegetation and access to water. On 27 June 2022, the selected project was made public by a jury chaired by the mayor of Paris and including representatives from the public body responsible for the conservation and restoration of Notre-Dame Cathedral (EPRNDP) and the Diocese of Paris. The Bas Smets office designed the landscape component, the GRAU agency designed the architectural and urban planning aspects, and the Neufville-Gayet architecture firm designed the heritage dimension.

Similar to the Perrault–Belaval project, the award-winning Bas Smets proposal incorporates the objective of establishing a relationship with the Seine, enhancing the cathedral's façade, developing a pathway beneath the parvis, and revitalizing the surrounding public spaces, particularly the Jean XXIII square. Despite the similarity of objectives and challenges, the Bas Smets approach "stands out for its sobriety and prudence, thus offering a more restrained yet equally effective vision for enhancing this emblematic site." One of the project's most notable elements is a shallow water feature – a linear body of water – intended to cool the parvis and potentially accommodate uses that are not specified. The references to these uses remain ambiguous. It is unclear whether this feature is reminiscent of the water mirrors introduced along the Garonne riverbanks in Bordeaux in 2006 or the one installed on Place de la République in Paris following its redevelopment in 2013.

Conclusion

In conclusion, reconnecting the city with its river is an anthropological question concerning the relationship to water in urban environments. It sheds light on the political, social, economic and symbolic dimensions specific to contemporary urban production. The three projects analyzed here reveal different approaches to reappropriating the river. First, Paris Plage presents water in a form evocative of the sea and practices associated with seaside leisure; however, it remains inaccessible. This corresponds to the logic of urban "eventification," which is experienced each year as a celebration of the present. However, it has also become a recurring moment in which the city encounters itself.

Second, the Voies sur Berge redevelopment restores water's place within the urban experience without altering its accessibility. Here, we encounter the tension between permanence and reversibility in urban space. Finally, the water feature at Notre-Dame reintroduces water as a landscaped, sensory element, reinscribing the river within the heritage space. Here, the climatic challenge engages with the heritage crisis triggered by the Notre-Dame fire, creating a sense of permanence, or even eternity, within a sense of urgency.

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