

Urban Maestro

New governance strategies
for Urban Design

Nantes: from a creative to an experimental city

The example of the Île de Nantes
urban project by SAMOA (FR)

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UN HABITAT
UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

BOUWMEESTERMAITREARCHITECTE

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research
and innovation programme under grant agreement n° 831704



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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this case study is to understand, through an analysis of the Île de Nantes projects, how the urban development agency SAMOA (Société d'Aménagement de la Métropole Ouest Atlantique) and its project management team¹ have been able to use governance tools to experiment in public spaces. Tracing the project's development since its inception reveals three distinct approaches: a public space approach that involves forming partnerships with cultural actors; a more traditional programming policy that provides for a project to establish a "creative cluster" of facilities; and, finally, a desire to develop the processes of engagement of and direct contribution by citizens (limited, however, to one area of the island). These three approaches are driven by clearly stated political impetuses (and are thus relatively top-down in nature, including in their participatory aspects).

1. BROWNFIELD SITES: DRIVERS OF EXPERIMENTATION ON THE ÎLE DE NANTES

Since the end of the 1980s and the closure of its shipyards, the city of Nantes has undergone a radical and continuous transformation, embodied by, among other things, the urban project launched on the Île de Nantes. This 350-hectare island, located south of the historic city centre, is surrounded by branches of the Loire river. Today, it is made up of three parts. Regional administrative and tertiary activities are concentrated in the east of the island, which is also home to a shopping centre and apartment blocks built in the 1960s and 1970s. The République district in the centre of the island is the former residential area for shipbuilding workers. Port and shipbuilding activities were carried out in the west of the island. In this district, now known as the "*Quartier de la création*" ("Creative Arts District"), there were many disused brownfield sites before events began to be held there in the 1990s. The Festival des Allumées is perhaps the most emblematic of that period: between 1990 and 1995, the Festival welcomed artists from six major foreign ports for six days, from six in the evening to six in the morning. The performances took place in hidden parts of the city and allowed the people of Nantes to discover the island's industrial

¹ The project management team for the Île de Nantes urban project changes approximately every seven years. Between 2003 and 2010, the project management was entrusted to

Ateliers de l'île and Alexandre Chemetoff. From 2010 to 2016, it was handed over to the Smets/uapS team, comprising Marcel Smets and Anne-Mie Depuydt. Since 2016 it has been entrusted for a period of eight years to a group led by the Atelier Jacqueline Osty and Claire Schorter.

heritage. Later, from 2005 onwards, many facilities were created on those sites: cultural facilities designed to showcase current and emerging music or contemporary art (such as Stéréolux, Tremolino and HAB Galerie), tourist facilities (the Dubigeon shipyard houses the Grand Éléphant and the Galerie des Machines), schools (Les Beaux-Arts) and business incubators in the vast field of cultural and creative industries (Karting, La Centrale, Labo Diva and L'Agronaute).

SAMOA purchased the sites from the Port Authority or from industrialists, enabling it to test and give a foretaste of initiatives while the urban project was being carried out, before repeating or even institutionalizing the exercise. The abandoned spaces, colonized by artistic endeavours, have become testing grounds for the urban project, thanks to a close partnership between three main actors: the city council, the urban development agency and cultural actors (in particular Jean Blaise² and the company La Machine).

Today, through the Arbre aux Hérons (Heron Tree) project, and almost 15 years on from the inauguration of the Grand Éléphant,³ the city seems to be perpetuating this way of doing things, at the risk of being less innovative and less concerned with current issues. The challenge for Nantes is no longer to reconquer the public spaces on its island, to attract more tourists or to make it onto the European map of "creative" cities. Its objectives now are to find new methods (less top-down, more bottom-up) and a means of inventing the city or even building it together with its citizens. Lastly, it needs to design the levers of the environmental transitions needed to guarantee its resilience.

² Jean Blaise is the artistic director behind several projects in Nantes and elsewhere in France. He was Director of the Centre de recherche pour le développement culturel (Cultural Development Research Centre) from 1987 to 1999 and founded the Festival des Allumées (1900–1996), Le Lieu Unique (2000) and the biennial contemporary art exhibition Estuaire (2007–2012). Since 2012, he has been director of Le

voyage à Nantes (The journey to Nantes). In 2002, he served as artistic director of the first Nuit Blanche in Paris.

³ The Grand Éléphant is a mechanical tourist attraction and mobile structure conceived by François Delarozière, founder of the company La Machine. It is 12 metres high, 8 metres wide and 21 metres long and weighs 48 metric tons. The inauguration of the elephant in 2007 coincided with the creation of the Parc des Chantiers, a 13-hectare public space located to the west of the Île de Nantes on the site of a former car park. L'Arbre aux Hérons is another François Delarozière project aimed at tourists that will complement the delivery of an urban project in Bas-Chantenay, located to the west of the city centre.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF SAMOA AND THE INVENTION OF A METHOD

Nantes, dubbed “the Venice of the West”, is a port and trading city that owes part of its wealth to triangular trade. The city grew during the 18th century on the back of the shipbuilding industry. Following the closure of its shipyards in 1987, the city suffered an unprecedented economic crisis. In 1989, Jean-Marc Ayrault was elected leader of the municipal council, with his first task being to make the city desirable to its inhabitants. To that end, the mayor surrounded himself with figures from the world of culture and gave them carte blanche. With the help of Jean Blaise, Nantes was then “gripped by culture”. Thanks to the *Festival des Allumées* (a forerunner of the Nuit Blanche in Paris),⁴ the city took centre stage and its residents were able to discover forgotten local sites. It was a first experience that gave birth to the special relationship that exists between the people of Nantes and culture and art in public spaces. It was the direct result of risk-taking and a political gamble.

A few years later, in the early 2000s, the Île de Nantes urban project began, led by Laurent Théry at SAMOA and managed by the Ateliers de l'Île de Nantes in the shape of Alexandre Chemetoff (renowned landscape artist and urban planner, winner of the Grand Prix de l'Urbanisme in 2000). Soon, a method and some unshakable principles were established: a belief in being governed “by the project and not by the rules”, as embodied in the guide plan, which promoted the preservation of the most remarkable buildings belonging to the city’s industrial-port heritage, a promise of public spaces that were as permeable as possible, reclaiming the banks of the Loire, an eclectic approach to construction and a requirement to use high-quality materials. **A two-fold experiment was being carried out, involving, on the one hand, the method chosen for the urban project and, on the other, artistic intervention in public spaces. The ambitions of the two sides aligned and fed into each other in what has often been described since as a collective “Nantes style”.** It was very much the site that made everything possible by adapting to the proposals of the cultural actors. Building on what was already there (landscape quality of the site, history, heritage and existing actors), the project gradually took shape within a framework of “revelatory urban planning” (“*urbanisme de la révélation*”) (Fromonot, 2011). That agility, which enabled the project to evolve, was what led to the opening of the Parc des Chantiers, roaming ground of the Grand Éléphant, and the Hangar à

⁴ The Nuit Blanche is an event, conceived for the city of Paris by Jean Blaise in 2002, in which cultural venues open their doors for an entire night once a year.

Bananes (Banana Warehouse), renovated in 2007 for the first edition of the biennial art exhibition Estuaire.

The example of the **Parc des Chantiers** is emblematic of this way of doing things. Alexandre Chemetoff retained the Dubigeon warehouses and gave prominence to their structure. He also preserved, to the extent possible, traces of industrial activity on the piazza (rails and the slipway). By creating gardens and footbridges along the banks of the Loire, he encouraged visitors to go for a stroll and renew ties with the river. As part of the project, François Delarozière⁵ designed and produced, in collaboration with Pierre Orefice, Les Machines de l'Île.



Parc des Chantiers. Garden of Journeys. 06/2009. © Jean-Dominique Billaud/SAMOA

The Machines de l'Île consist of several structures. The Carrousel des mondes marins ("Marine Worlds Carousel") was installed on the piazza of the Parc des Chantiers in 2012. Conceived as a nod to Jules Verne's adventure novel "Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea", the Carousel displays dozens of mechanical marine creatures over three levels. The Éléphant had a different origin: François Delarozière initially created it as a performing machine for a Royal de Luxe show entitled "Visite du sultan des Indes" ("The Sultan's Elephant") in 2005. Through street theatre and ambulatory performances, public spaces were not only exalted; they became the central characters. François Delarozière then seized the opportunity presented by the urban project and proposed stationing the elephant in the Dubigeon

⁵ François Delarozière is the artistic director of the company La Machine, known in particular for having created the monumental Machines de l'Île in Nantes. He was also the

creator of some of the performing machines of the street theatre company Royal de Luxe, with which he worked closely until 2005.

warehouses and creating the Galerie des Machines. This museum was established in the warehouses and exhibits the prototypes spawned by his imagination. Thus, the performing machines became mobile structures that help to reveal public spaces and weave a narrative. In her thesis, Emmanuelle Gangloff (2017) describes how street artists have taken the city of Nantes and transformed it into a setting. She also highlights the shift experienced by these artists, who have become actors in the process of city-building and its manifestations.



Parc des Chantiers. Marine Worlds Carousel. 04/2017. © Valery Joncheray/SAMOA



Parc des Chantiers. The Grand Éléphant 06/2009. © Jean-Dominique Billaud/LVAN

Finally, she analyses the way in which **the city authorities have themselves taken the lead in launching urban scenography initiatives and projects**. That is the case with the city's Green Spaces Service, which works together with artists (Claude Ponty, Johann Le Guillerm, Jean Julien, etc.) and involves its gardeners and other workers in the creation of works of art. Urban life and culture beat to the same rhythm. In the Parc des Chantiers, SAMOA occasionally plays the **role of scenographer**, managing time and space. The agency works throughout the park on the links between artist, public and urban project by developing a scenographic *modus operandi*. Public spaces are viewed as reversible, with the potential to be transformed from time to time into a stage.

This approach has been replicated in different parts of the Île de Nantes and in the city centre. The biennial contemporary art exhibition Estuaire,⁶ founded by Jean Blaise in 2007, became a good reason to expedite work on the western tip of the island. The new public spaces designed by Alexandre Chemetoff in the **Banana Warehouse** were chosen to host the exhibition's monumental works. The agency's cause and those of culture and event management found common ground on the island. As a result, **the urban and artistic projects converged in the same places at the same time in a kind of synchronicity** (Morteau, 2016).



The Banana Warehouse promenade and the Anneaux de Buren (Buren's rings). © Marlène Page

⁶ <https://www.estuaire.info/en/>

3. TOOLS AND GOVERNANCE TO SUPPORT THE URBAN PROJECT

3.1. The guide plan: early experiments

Let us briefly reconsider what made these unprecedented partnerships possible. The experts agree that they can be explained by a variety of ingredients: the **trust** and **political continuity** of the city council, the informal alliance of individuals behind the urban and artistic projects and the spirit of the guide plan, which encouraged a kind of experimentation in the actors' actions.



Excerpts from the Île de Nantes guide plan. Source: SAMOA.

According to the project plan for the creation of the *zone d'aménagement concertée* (mixed development zone),⁷ the formulation of a guide plan for the Île de Nantes project was the hallmark of the approach taken by the Ateliers de l'Île de Nantes, which was responsible for project management. The guide plan was “the map of the island in a future state of completion, reflecting with equal care its **current state and a projection** of its appearance at a given future date”.⁸ The plan was a **living** tool of urban design. “More than an illustration of the project, it is an element of its method. It shows all the blocks, occupied and available, **sets the ambition and determines the constraints**. It depicts everything with the same precision: what exists, the likely hypotheses, the more forward-looking ideas; it is a **living document**”.⁹ It took into account all the sectoral policies of the city and the urban area and defined the framework for every action undertaken. The guide plan revealed the coherence of this complex territory by proposing to combine the old and the new, what existed and what was created. **It did not define rules or procedures**, but adapted to the initiatives that would be introduced there. It was a reference document that guided short-term action within the framework of a long-term vision for the territory. It was much more of a strategy than a plan in the strict sense of the word, which made it possible to involve a certain number of actors in the urban project without setting its contours in stone. More than a classic urban planning instrument, the guide plan kick-started open governance of the urban project.

Some observers¹⁰ have emphasized the qualities of such a tool, conceived as a challenge to the planning and rules that predominate in urban planning: the openness associated with the concept of an open block, the flexibility of evolving programmes (implemented by SAMOA in conjunction with the city authorities) and the negotiation of the scale of construction (which, in this case, made its way into the urban rules, the Local Planning Regulations). These elements are marked by an originality that is reflected in the design. Lastly, for Laurent Devisme, the guide plan's strength was above all **dependent on the contractual relationships** that were negotiated, namely the contract governing the **project management** of the public spaces (in order to test the concepts laid out in the guide plan), **but also an assignment to provide advice and assistance**. This assignment allowed the project management team (the Ateliers de l'Île) to participate in the work of the city's planning commissions and in the selection meetings for stakeholders/investors and

⁷ In France, a mixed development zone is where a public operation is undertaken to develop an urban space pursuant to the Urban Planning Code. Such zones were established by Town Planning Act No. 67-1253 of 30 December 1967 and are areas in which a competent public authority or institution decides to step in to develop land and construct facilities thereon, or arrange for that to be done, in particular land that the authority or institution has acquired or will acquire, with a

view to selling or ceding to public or private users at a later date.

⁸ Extract from the project plan for the creation of the mixed development zone, p. 36.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See the writings of Laurent Devisme: <http://www.popsu.archi.fr/sites/default/files/nodes/document/830/files/les-instruments-plan-guide.pdf>.

architects, contractors, etc. It was the sum of those prerogatives and levers of action that gave strength to the guide plan.

This tool, which could be replicated in other contexts, no longer exists. Nevertheless, it has left a legacy to SAMOA, which has indeed served as an ambassador for a kind of experimentation in how to carry out the urban project. It embodied – and still does – an “innovative *fabrique urbaine*” [this uniquely French term has been described by H  l  ne Noizet as “a socio-spatial process of development of ordinary towns and cities”], whether in its tools, its governance or its work. Its approach is always to take advantage of opportunities and external projects that arise, translating them in its own way in public spaces.

3.2. SAMOA, an evolving legal structure

SAMOA thus went from being a *soci  t   d'  conomie mixte* (part state-owned company) to a *soci  t   publique locale d'am  nagement* (publicly owned local development company) and finally a *soci  t   publique locale* (publicly owned local company). Those changes of status enabled it to take on new projects. Let us first look at the specifics of that model. In France, a *soci  t   d'  conomie mixte* (abbreviated to SEM) is a public limited company whose capital is held mainly by one or more public entities (namely, the state, a local authority or a public body; in the case of SAMOA, Nantes M  tropole is the majority stakeholder). That majority public shareholding is capped at 85 per cent of the total capital in accordance with the Act of 2 January 2002. At least one private entity, which may be another SEM, must have a stake in the company. **The SEM model is a guarantee for the public authority, as shareholder and contracting partner, that the public interest will effectively be taken into account in the company's objectives and that the private company will be flexible.**¹¹ Indeed, SEMs are public limited companies in which the public authority must own between 51 and 85 per cent of the capital. The authority has at least one representative and half the votes on the board of directors.

Since its establishment, SAMOA has adapted its legal form to the needs of the project. It was set up on 2 October 2003 to lead, in the context of the development of the Nantes Saint-Nazaire metropolitan area, all urban development and renewal initiatives, actions and programmes on the   le de Nantes. By a decision of 18 December 2008, the SEM was transformed with effect from 9 February 2009 into a

¹¹ The legal regime for SEMs is determined by articles L1521-1 et seq. of the General Code on Local Authorities, as amended by Act No. 2002-1 of 2 January 2002 on the modernization of

local SEMs, and articles L225-1 et seq. of the Commercial Code resulting from the codification of the Commercial Companies Act of 24 July 1966. By virtue of those instruments, SEMs are subject to the rules of private law.

publicly owned local development company and then on 1 July 2011 into a **publicly owned local company**.

Publicly owned local companies¹² have characteristics that set them apart from other local public enterprises such as SEMs. The first advantage is **political control. In such companies, the local authorities are in sole command**. They hold all the capital and all the seats on the board of directors, which appoints and dismisses the managing director. SEMs must have at least seven shareholders, including at least one private entity. Having such control gives local authorities the assurance that publicly owned local companies will fully take on board their strategic and policy guidance. The second advantage is the time and money that can be saved as a result of their status. Considered to be internal operators, **publicly owned local companies do not have to be subject to competitive procedures** by their public shareholders, in full compliance with European Union law. The absence of such procedures means that significant time and money can be saved when implementing projects. Over time, the projects and jobs entrusted to the companies may evolve without affecting the nature of the contractual relations or the regime governing them. The status of these companies therefore allows them flexibility to respond more directly to the needs of the territories. It should be noted that this status is a truly atypical tool: it lies between private law (the Commercial Code) and public law (the General Code on Local Authorities). Publicly owned local companies are founded as companies, but operate within a clearly defined administrative framework.¹³

4. THE “CREATIVE ARTS DISTRICT” CLUSTER, THE EMBODIMENT OF THE “CREATIVE CITY”

The change in status described above entailed a change in functions that it would be helpful to explain in greater detail. According to one project manager at SAMOA, “we removed the ‘D’ for development in order to build Le Karting.¹⁴ In reality, SAMOA has no intention of managing office space or of building with a view to having its own tenants. A traditional developer seeks to buy land, divide it up, group it back together, develop it and sell it on to a property developer with a clear project, but we

¹² Sources: www.lesepl.fr and www.nantesmetropole.fr.

¹³ <https://www.lagazettedescommunes.com/111600/es-avantages-et-limites-des-spl/>.

¹⁴ Le Karting is a temporary facility created by SAMOA in 2011 that allows it to rent workspaces to companies in the creative industries on tenancies at will and at reduced costs. That enables it to attract and accommodate “creatives” on the island and makes the “Creative Arts District” cluster project that it has been running since 2010 a reality.

have been able to give ourselves the means to foster agility by having the right legal, institutional and financial framework” (Morteau, 2016).

In 2010, the team changed and injected fresh economic ambition into the project. Jean-Luc Charles took the helm of SAMOA and surrounded himself with a new urban project management team in the shape of architects Marcel Smets and Anne Mie Depuydt. Meanwhile, the city joined European creative city networks, namely the European Clusters for Cultural Enterprises and, subsequently, the European Creative Industries Alliance. Through its contact with those international networks and spurred on by an ambition to make culture an economic driver, the city identified the concept of the cultural cluster as the obvious choice for the western tip of the island and, with it, a new vision for the project. In the Creative Arts District, considered to be the showcase of the urban project, a large number of public facilities were built to receive students, academics and cultural and economic actors. The juxtaposition of those different actors and facilities in a small area created the friction necessary for life in the area and for the economic development of the small cultural and creative businesses that were set up there. Having a spatial arrangement that would create an economic and social dynamic: that was the challenge. In order to bring the cluster to fruition, the developer created a programme that provided for educational institutions (the school of architecture, the school of fine arts, the graphic arts centre, Halle 6 West of the University of Nantes and the school of design), project incubators (Les Écossolies, Le Karting and La Centrale) and cultural facilities (La Fabrique, Stéréolux and Trempolino). The brownfield sites still scattered throughout the Creative Arts District gradually became tools for economic development used by the developer to house **a multitude of companies and groups from diverse sectors** (cultural and creative industries, digital and health). In that second phase of the urban project, the developer no longer focused solely on public spaces, but also on facilities. The majority of the sites became part of the programme. **The developer systematized a way of doing things and, in contrast to the previous period when the site had made the programme, now it was the programme that made the site. It was a time of programmatic urban planning** (Fromonot, 2011).

5. A SHIFT TOWARDS PARTICIPATORY URBAN PLANNING?

5.1. Change of course

Having involved artists in the process of building the city and then creative businesses with the “Creative Arts District” cluster project, **since 2013**, SAMOA has been trying to open up the urban project to new stakeholders, including residents and users of the island, who have taken part, through a range of channels, in a **more participative urban planning process**.

This transformation must be interpreted in the light of changes taking place at the metropolitan level. Johanna Rolland, elected leader of the municipal council and president of Nantes Métropole in 2014 and 2020, has adopted a novel approach to citizen dialogue that enables her to engage with them extensively¹⁵ in all public policies: transport, gender equality, public facilities, schools, security, energy transition, etc. During an interview, a director at Nantes Métropole commented on this tipping point: “I don't know how, but they (referring to those taking the baton from Jean Blaise and SAMOA, etc.) are going to have to reinvent themselves. As I see it, the city authorities... Johanna Rolland needs to invent her system, and she is looking for one. We are still coming to the end of Jean-Marc Ayrault's system. The other system is not here yet. What Johanna Rolland is trying to do is to work, as in Barcelona, from the bottom up, together with the citizens. With the common people, with civil society.”

Little by little, “dialogue-based city-building” was introduced on the ground before being established in 2019 as a model to be followed by all the metropolitan services involved in city-building in the 24 communes of the Nantes metropolis. That made it possible to change the work culture within local government and publicly owned local companies such as SAMOA, which need to develop their methods. **Consequently, efforts are being made to reinvent cultural and urban development policies by supporting nascent artistic creation processes or by focusing on residents, participation and collaborative construction.** It is a methodology in transition.

¹⁵ According to figures reported in assessments drawn up by the *Pôle Dialogue Citoyen* (Centre for Citizen Dialogue), more than 200 processes were conducted to promote dialogue during the term of office (2014–2020) at the metropolitan level;

50,000 people took part in each *Grand Débat* (general debate), either in person or online, 87 initiatives concerned public policies; and 120 initiatives were implemented in Nantes' 11 districts.

Today, in the words of Laurent Devisme, “There is a need to be more modest and closer to everyday urban planning”.¹⁶ By looking at two examples of initiatives launched in public spaces, we will consider that shift and its consequences for the urban project on the Île de Nantes.

5.2. Green capital and its offshoot, Green Island

In 2013, Nantes was awarded the European Commission’s European Green Capital Award. SAMOA organized a series of event-based experiments in public spaces in connection with the conferral of this European prize, thereby reaffirming its ambition to act as a laboratory for experimentation in the Nantes metropolis. Taking advantage of the Green Capital event, it launched a call for projects aimed at exploring new ways of intervening in public spaces, namely through pop-up installations and participatory entertainment activities. Following the call, 80 proposals were received, around fifteen were screened and five selected for implementation in the various neighbourhoods on the island. These “stops”, which supplemented an existing series of emblematic locations, formed a temporary route, available from 15 June to 28 September 2013: the Green Island itinerary.¹⁷ A large proportion of the projects carried out were the result of collective efforts, either in their conception or in their realization on the ground. *Écoles supérieures* (specialist higher education establishments), sixth form colleges, associations, companies and residents contributed to the creation of these atypical installations, which “launched a movement in the area”.¹⁸ Examples included a collaboration between the Nantes *École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture* and the *École Supérieure du Bois* [an engineering school specializing in wood science and technology], which involved the installation of a fixed stage to host concerts, plays and conferences, and of street furniture that could be adjusted to meet different needs. Alongside it was placed a second installation: *L'Arche des Gallinacées*, an interactive henhouse. Another project, “Aires de contes” (“Storytelling areas”), was carried out in collaboration with the island’s residents and users. Writing and craft workshops were held to mobilize volunteers for the project. Five intimate spaces served as the backdrop for stories inspired by the island’s history and geography, and others shared by participants of the writing workshops. Not far away lay the *Écosphère* site, an experiment in a form of community gardening.

¹⁶ Remarks made at the Nantes Innovation Forum on 9 October 2020.

¹⁷ http://www.ustensiles.info/greenisland/ROADBOOK_GREEN_ISLAND.pdf.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*



Écosphère, Île de Nantes, summer 2013. © ECOS Nantes

This project, brainchild of the associations ECOS (an urban environmental laboratory) and CAMPO (a landscaping workshop), brought together a group of people of goodwill, attracted by the highly collaborative approach of this type of gardening.

An initial assessment was made of this **participatory exercise**.¹⁹ It was stressed that insufficient weight had been given to the entertainment dimension (to the benefit of the construction and installation dimensions) in the project leaders' budgets; that the interventions had, on the whole, cost more than expected; that **most of the "respondents" to the call for projects had not been residents, but voluntary sector workers, activists or even semi-professionals, often with a close connection to architecture and design circles; and that the engagement of residents with the activities had generally been disappointing.** Lastly, the predominantly event-based nature of the interventions had produced interesting images and communication materials, but had ultimately had **little real effect** on the planning process for public spaces. The experience can therefore be described as event-driven rather than participatory. It made it possible to bring public spaces to life and enabled SAMOA to draw conclusions about the constraints and requirements of participatory urban planning.

In the broader deliberative metropolitan context,²⁰ the Green Island experience allowed SAMOA to identify its own challenges: to involve residents on an operational level with the aim of creating a tangible impact on development projects. The

¹⁹ BOC and SAMOA, "Bilan de Green Island, série d'entretiens" ("Taking stock of Green Island: a series of interviews"), 2014.

²⁰ Shaped by public dialogue during public debates, meetings of citizens' boards, etc.

formulation of its doctrine with regard to participatory expectations was accompanied by a critique of **existing mechanisms of participation in use in the rest of the city, which were deemed to be, in turn, “procedural, cumbersome, unattractive and ineffective” and/or “marketing, overly focused on political or communication games”**. In an attempt to employ its own method, SAMOA launched the “Île de Nantes Expérimentations” programme.

5.3. Île de Nantes Expérimentations – Ilotopia

The Ilotopia project (a spin-off from “Île de Nantes Expérimentations”) was set up in 2017 in République-Les Ponts, a district in the west of the Île de Nantes, symbolic of working-class suburbia that was once inhabited by workers from the former shipyards. Until the urbanization of the 1970s, it was the only inhabited area of the island. A high proportion of its residents are in precarious situations and have modest incomes. The suburban landscape is run down and the housing rather old and cramped, with most people renting. The developer had previously had little involvement in this architecturally disparate suburb owing to a lack of impetus and a context in which land transfer is difficult and most of the housing stock is privately owned. At a time when participation by residents was being encouraged, “SAMOA saw this area as an environment conducive to **experimenting** with local participation” (Vigne, 2019). Taking the area as its starting point, the developer **sought to use an original method** to “empower” residents so that they might take ownership of the urban renewal project, and in order to build a “community”.

To meet those challenges, an agency contracted by SAMOA, What Time Is I.T., developed an original method: experiment management assistance. Headquartered in a former garage converted into a co-working space, What Time Is I.T. established the Wattignies Social Club, which became the “lifeblood” of the Ilotopia project²¹ in the heart of the area. Led by the anthropologist Stéphane Juguet, the team completed the project in four phases. The first phase was **diagnosis**. Anthropologists, town planners and other experts analysed the characteristics of the population in the area and constructed sociological profiles. Building on that work, a series of so-called “outdoor” **encounters** was staged. The objective was to reach out to residents by initiating discussion about the development of the area at the school gates and in the streets, to inform them about the participatory project to develop public spaces. That approach sparked public debate in public spaces that made it

²¹ <http://www.ilotopia.fr/>

possible to sound out conceptions and wishes, but also to gather concerns and ideas to feed into project proposals. A third phase, devoted to the **organization of collaborative construction workshops** with residents, made it possible to identify the most appropriate proposals for the development of public spaces to be tested before a final decision was made. **Participatory construction sites** and prototyping measures were introduced in response to the ideas put forward by residents. Several proposals were implemented in the form of prototypes that gave temporary indications of a future townscape. Then, based on the three ideas considered to be “the most remarkable”, three construction sites were selected by the residents. The whole method was built around the concept of prototyping to “make the link between resident participation and development project according to the following theoretical sequence: communities > conceptions > identities > prototypes > development” (Vigne, 2019).

The limitations and ambiguities of the method were pointed out in a doctoral thesis (Vigne, 2019). They related mainly to a **criticism of the service provider’s method of consultation, which left little room for the voices of residents and failed to deliver on the promise of a genuine residents’ dynamic**. In addition, while SAMOA had hoped that, in developing public spaces with residents, attention would also be paid to the “hard” elements (such as parking and budget management), What Time Is I.T.’s input shifted the focus of the work more onto the “soft” dimensions, such as programming, activities, and equipping public spaces with various objects and tools. For Vigne (2019), that was partly because the service provider envisaged public spaces as “technical platforms”, such as one might find in the spheres of culture or event management. The prototypes were often treated as an end in themselves, when in fact their purpose was to foster the development of an urban planning programme in collaboration with residents.

Specifically, the “experiment management assistance” approach resulted in the opening of three citizens’ construction sites on Rue Biesse, the neighbourhood’s historic thoroughfare: the Square Biesse participatory site; the urban artwork on Rue Biesse; and the mobile “play” bus and its adjustable terrace in Place Wattignies. Around the terrace, which has become a meeting place, various activities have emerged, including a juice bar, a play area for young children, shared meals and an open-air classroom for migrants. This series of activities has breathed new life into Rue Biesse and helped to change the atmosphere of Place Wattignies. These sites have produced functional rather than spatial prototypes. However, they have helped to liven up the neighbourhood, develop neighbourly ties and create a brand image around the notion of a “suburban identity”.

Some temporary initiatives will be made permanent, including the decoration of the facades. Some shopkeepers have played along by taking the initiative to paint their

facades in the suggested colour scheme. Landscape architect Jacqueline Osty and town planner Claire Schorter, who head the team responsible for the final designs, have thus received the results of the experiments. These will have to be taken into account, but how they will be translated “when push comes to shove” remains uncertain for the time being and is subject to the outcome of a new citizens’ workshop “to collectively decide the future development of the square”.²²



Temporary constructions in Place Wattignies in 2018. © SAMOA



Signage on Rue Biesse. © Maison Mäj 2020

²² <https://www.iledenantes.com/atelier-citoyen-wattignies/>

The anthropologist Stéphane Jugué has drawn a number of conclusions from this experience.²³ In his view, the problem faced by the residents was the scant room for manoeuvre to experiment with practices and uses in public spaces. “Public spaces have become very normative and there is a need to reconcile public safety with an opening up of more spontaneous living spaces in which citizens' initiatives can blossom”.²⁴ **For SAMOA, this has been a learning experience on the road towards more participatory urban planning.** It is another “innovation” in the implementation of the Île de Nantes urban project and in SAMOA’s governance tools.

6. WHAT SHOULD WE RETAIN AND WHAT IS TRANSFERABLE FROM THE NANTES EXAMPLE?

For 20 years, SAMOA has had carte blanche to innovate with regard to city-building. Today, the matter extends far beyond this developer and the Île de Nantes urban project. The topic of “innovation” is seen as cross-cutting; it is more a question of “innovation by citizens for citizens”, in line with the stance taken by the Nantes metropolis when the city was named European Capital of Innovation in 2019.²⁵ Having tried to apply to the letter the template for creative cities (in particular by establishing the Creative Arts District cluster), the city authorities are turning to new, more participatory methods in the shape of dialogue with citizens. For its part, SAMOA has proposed, through the examples described above, its own participatory urban planning strategy. It claims to have a different way of doing things and is freeing itself from the rules and processes prescribed by the authorities. Moreover, it is simultaneously implementing another innovative city lab-style project, “Quartier Démonstrateur” (“Demonstration Quarter”), through which it exhibits, in public spaces, full-scale prototypes of products designed by partners and private companies so that they can then be tested by users. Thus, through these projects and tools, SAMOA covers a wide range of possible city-building experiments.

From the Île de Nantes example, we can take some transferable elements: political trust, daring, having faith in individuals who defend pioneering projects, and setting

²³ <https://www.demainlaville.com/ilotopia-chantier-participatif-utopique-nantes/>.

²⁴ Remarks made by Stéphane Jugué, as reproduced here: <https://www.demainlaville.com/ilotopia-chantier-participatif-utopique-nantes/>.

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/ip_19_5789.

up flexible governance mechanisms that are open to actors who do not subscribe to the traditional city-building model.

The Île de Nantes urban project is one of the largest in Europe. It has managed to stimulate interest and every year receives a large number of foreign delegations who come to draw inspiration from the “Nantes model”. The fact that SAMOA has been involved in European projects since its inception is a major factor underlying this international reputation. The tried-and-tested Nantes method of involving artists and cultural operators closely in the city-building process was devised on the Île de Nantes but stretches far beyond it. One of many examples is Rezé (a commune south of Nantes), which is the site of a transitional urban planning project: the Transfert project, carried out by the association Pick Up Production, which puts a new generation of artists with links to city-building in the driving seat. Outside the metropolis, the methods are discussed and appropriated, but hard to replicate. As can be seen from this brief analysis, these innovative methods are employed by individuals and groups in situ. It is possible to transfer methods, but difficult to do so with individuals, and even more so with contexts of action.

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URBAN MAESTRO

This paper was drafted as an external contribution to the Coordination and Support Action “URBAN DESIGN GOVERNANCE - Exploring formal and informal means of improving spatial quality in cities across Europe and beyond”, also known as “Urban Maestro”. The Action was funded by European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 831704 and implemented from 2019 to 2021 by a consortium comprising the University College London, Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte and UN-Habitat.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA)

