

## The ambiguous ecologization of french spatial planning

**Nacima Baron-Yellès,**  
Chercheur Senior Institut Universitaire de France  
Université Gustave Eiffel

---

**Abstract :** At the time of the signing of the European Charter, the European horizon was still a source of hope and fitted well with the French government's efforts to continue providing the region with a "modern" object. Institutional security depended on prosperity, and infrastructure was what marked the modernization of French space. At that time, the economic perspective seemed more central than ever to the development of planning policies in France and Europe. The idea of ecological planning emerged in the mid-2010s. On the one hand, it was intended to preserve the bases of economic activity, on the other, it has been expressed, especially since the Paris COP in 2015, that climate change and its effects due to catastrophic events represented new challenges for security and sovereignty. The figures of water, soil and air protection, decarbonization, sobriety and the circular economy are among the pillars of this new spatial planning discourse. The text attempts to demonstrate that this public policy maintains a stable doctrinal framework, despite the emergence of new concepts and approaches and the variability of political tools, located at different institutional levels but always heavily financed by the central state

**Key words:** Spatial Planning ; Ecological Transition ; Planning doctrine ; France ; European Union

## Introduction

Planning schools are like museums: they preserve works of the mind and pass them on to future generations. They also celebrate anniversaries. In the United States, Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses presented in the afterwar period two opposing views on the future of cities. Jane Jacobs wins the battle and saves New York from the bulldozer that 'mayor-builder' Moses had prepared to unroll a motorway carpet strewn with skyscrapers (Flint, 2009). Jane Jacobs would have been 100 years old in 2016. On that date, planning associations issue a powerful reminder of the extent to which Jacobs's vision had sparked a revolution for urban sustainability that continues to this day (Rocco, 2023). To take another example of an anniversary in planning thought, London planners are celebrating in 2024 the publication, exactly 60 years ago, of a book on the transformation of the capital that introduced a concept that has since made the rounds of the world's metropolises, that of gentrification (Glass, 1964).

This introduction highlights two facts. On the one hand, many planning concepts emerged at the turn of the 1960s, and these events deserve celebration. On the other hand, urban planning action and principles are also legitimated in retrospect to an original event and period. In this paper, I propose a twofold approach on the evolution of planning doctrines in France. I will reflect on the planning foundational moment (1962-63), and on the way the doctrinal corpus was consolidated and adapted in the 1980's (1983, the year in which the Charter was signed), and then in the way this conceptual heritage is being updated in the present, with the emergence of French ecological planning (from 2022-2023).

First of all, the early 1960s represented a period of creative ferment in French planning thinking. In retrospect, it was a glorious period for France. In the entourage of General de Gaulle, senior civil servants introduced the concept and practice of «Aménagement du Territoire» (Guichard, 1965). This term refers to institutions, ideologies, public policy instruments and imaginaries of territorial action that have never completely disappeared, but which the turning point of the European Spatial Planning Charter already led to redefine, reorientate and reinvent.

It is well known that the French planning doctrine is part deeply rooted in French political and institutional model. I will demonstrate how the recent move towards ecological planning decreed by President Macron in 2022 is part of an adaptive governance framework. It retains many structural principles of the former ideology while performing a turn toward the green.

My main theoretical framework is the analysis of public policy discourse, and I therefore consider that planning doctrine is performant when it produces convincing stories and citizen engagement. My sectoral prism is on long term transport and mobility planning policies and I will introduce the concept of space 'infrastructuration' (in the first decades of «Aménagement du Territoire» and the concept of nature's 'infrastructuration' (in the recent adaptive turn). The chapter develops as follows. First, I provide a few keys to the political project underlying the doctrine of regional planning in France in the early 1960s (part 1). I then examine the way in which this political project changed at the time of the Charter during the 1980's (Part 2). Finally, I look at the meaning and scope of ecological planning and consider the links between this project and the two previous frameworks.

## 1. Gaullist planning: spatial infrastructure to protect the territory

Under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle (1958-1969), France was transformed by a vast regional planning program that produced motorways, airports, rail networks and more. The aim was to embody a certain idea of modernity through facilities that symbolized the idea of progress for a middle class that was becoming urbanised and aspired to prosperity and consumption (Welch, 2023).

To achieve this, the French space, within the confines of the post-imperial hexagon (the Algerian war ended in 1962), appeared to be both the means and the end of a highly ambitious political project. The French landscape, with its rugged mountains and valleys, began to be seen as an abstract, smooth space that could be equipped, i.e. built and modernized. The State financed new towns and all infrastructure connected to speed (motorways in the 1960s, followed by the TGV in the 1970s). Fast traffic was a central objective, as it promised greater efficiency of movement and greater economic productivity (Virilio, 1977). Olivier Guichard, the first director of the DATAR (the name of the central government administration in charge of this project) stated that with the all French people were moving towards a happy future (Guichard, 1965). The Gaullist period was part of a long political culture known as 'Transport Statism' (Keman & Woldendorp, 2020). The philosopher Foucault (2004) explains that by producing space through constructive activity, the French State sought to 'police' (the word has the double meaning of controlling and making more polite, then civilised) a population that was quick to contest and protest. Hence, in the planning culture of the French state, 'social order is equated with traffic control (of people and goods), while revolution or riot is associated with traffic jams, illegal parking, pile-ups and collisions'. (Virilio, 1977: 22).

The French planning doctrine of the 1960s was therefore based on the idea of space could be produced and that it was exactly the role of central State. This left a deep imprint on people's minds and in long-term policy practices. The French planning doctrine was also dual in its end goals. One was economic. The massive production of infrastructure was the response to an increase in the standard of living (the individual car, the family home, etc.), particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The second was strategic. The emergence of planning thinking in France was perfectly synchronised with the country's efforts to acquire a nuclear force. More broadly, transport was linked to the search for energy autonomy. In giving France the atomic bomb, General de Gaulle declared that he wanted to 'protect the functioning of our industrialized society, which is based on a number of specialised installations: energy sources, transport infrastructure, means of telecommunications' because 'we are setting up our national soil as a "sanctuary"'. (De Gaulle, 1959)

## 2. Adaptations of French state planning doctrine in the Charter's period

The early 1980s represents a historic turning point, both for France and for the spatial and institutional construction of our continent. The integration of Spain, Portugal, Greece in European market coincided with the publication of the European Charter that this issue celebrates. The two processes converged. The Charter declared and thereby proved (this is its performative dimension) the alignment of the values and principles spatial planning through-

out countries and beyond national spatial configurations and conceptualizations. At this time, France opened up to international experiences of spatial planning: the technocrats looked at garden cities movement in the United Kingdom, they studied the polycentric Randstadt city model in Holland. In addition, the Charter cannot be understood without reference to the growing importance of the concepts of local territorial development, good governance and subsidiarity. The concepts entered French planning discourse and action. Under François Mitterrand's first term in office (1981-88), the French government embarked on a process of decentralisation (Masquelier, 2020). It developed now infrastructure projects in partnership with towns and regions. The objectives assigned to the construction of infrastructure and networks also changed. In a France that was rapidly de-industrialised, State and local stakeholders no longer build facilities to meet social needs, but in the hope of attracting businesses. It was a first adaptation of infrastructuration in its close articulation to economy. Offner (1993) has explored the consistency and genealogy of the belief in the 'structuring' effect of transport infrastructure from the 1960's to the 80's. He articulates it with the rise of European funds and with the mobility of ideological models between academics, planning experts, policy makers and regional economists. For the latter especially, planning policy no longer served to build a necessarily better future, as it did in the 1960s, but as a tool for redistributing public funds to limit the impact of the crisis (Desportes & Picon, 1997). At the time the European Charter was signed, the European horizon was still a source of hope, and it fitted in well with the French government's efforts to continue providing the region with a 'modern' object, but the mass unemployment was darkening the opinion's mindset. Some emblematic infrastructures of the 1980's (such as French high speed train) retrospectively appear as tools that helped to conserve the promissory dimension of State-led Aménagement du Territoire. This high-speed train, inaugurated in 1981 also bridged the national and the European planning policy discourse. The extension of the TGV network in the 1990s towards England and Germany seemed to herald, for those who believed in the virtue of transport spatial structuring effects, a rapid levelling out of territorial inequalities (de Ureña *et al.*, 2021).

At that time, the economic perspective seemed more central than ever to the development of planning policies in France and Europe. Networks enabled marginal regions to catch up and mitigate economic shocks. At a time when the European Union was being enlarged to the East, the 2005 Lisbon Agenda refocused the European project even more on competitiveness objectives (Bouba Olga, 2020). European territorial policy then gave a central place to global metropolises, which would enable Europe to exist in the famous triad that it forms with Asia and America. In this sense, the vision of a metropolised European space centered on powerful networks (high-speed rail, motorway corridors) served a strategic continental vision that was distinct from but compatible with the maintenance of a territorial strategic approach of aménagement within a "radiant" French State (Hecht, 1998).

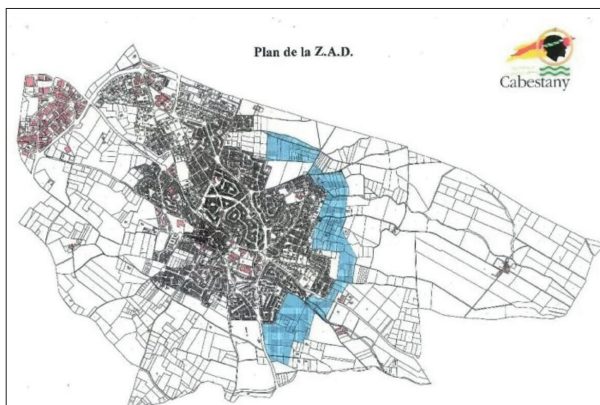
### **3. Ecological planning: a case of adaptative updating of the French planning doctrine**

The creation of an Inter-Ministerial Commission for Ecological Planning in 2022 echoes the institution of the same name that operated from 1959 to 1966 - except that, in the 1960s, the word ecological did not appear (Massé, 1965). In this third part, I'm asking whether there is

a claimed continuity or, on the contrary, an announced break in the principles and practices of French Aménagement du Territoire. I will also consider whether this new name and this apparent reorientation of the art of planning towards an environmental perspective reconfigures the relationship between scales and strategic approaches of national sovereignty.

I postulate that this green occurs because the central State has lost citizen's support and adherence to the 1960's policy discourse. The average person in France - and even more so that of young people - no longer accepts the post-war modernist poetics of infrastructure (Larkin, 2013). Man's domination of nature and the production of liveable space through the deployment of technical means is no longer an evidence. The changeover took place in the 2010s (Newsome, 2009; Bess, 2011) and an emblematic case illustrates it.

The Notre-Dame des Landes airport development project, to the north of Nantes (Auxiette, 2011), appeared in 1963 and disappeared in 2018. The project failure is the result of some fifteen years of local and more conflicts that can be interpreted as the signal of a growing gap between the modernist elite's vision and the orientations of a significant part of the population. Let's look at how this gap came to light and how the State tactically used this defeat to rebuild a new doctrinal framework.



**Source:** ZAD de la commune de CABESTANY  
<https://terranota.fr/zone-damenagement-differe-zad/>

From the 1990s onwards, the French government undertook the legal and technical processing of this major infrastructure. There appeared not to be necessary to justify and legitimate this project. An airport was 'necessary' because western France faced metropolisation trends. The State had set aside farmland using a system known as the 'Zone d'aménagement différé' (deferred development zone) from the early 1960's. In the 1990s, when farmers were threatened with expropriation, they built a coalition with environmentalists and the

supporters of a more endogenous development model (locally and on a national scale). The controversy was not confined in a discursive arena (Welch, 2018). A community was occupying the countryside and resisting the police. This grassroots community demonstrated the environmental, social and economic benefits of small-scale mixed farming. It showed that the infrastructures of speed were no longer the tools for securing a collective future. On the contrary, the airport and the carbon it would emit was the cause of an existential insecurity of current and future generations.

The idea of ecological planning emerged in the mid-2010s. Since the organisation of a COP in Paris in 2015, the French government published a long list of reports and regulations that demonstrated its commitment to rebuilding public policies in areas such as biodiversity (creation of a French Biodiversity Agency in 2016), carbon emissions reduction (energy transition law for green growth in 2016), atmospheric pollutants control (decree 2017), sustainable transport (law on mobility 2019), etc. The storytelling was still dual: on the one hand, it

was meant to preserve the foundations of economic activity; on the other, it considered that climate change and its catastrophic effects represented the new challenges for security and sovereignty (Throgmorton, 2020).

From President Macron's second term in office (2022-27) onwards, this legislative edifice takes shape in a new institutional system. Under the slogan 'France, a Green Nation', an Ecological Planning Secretariat under the authority of the Prime Minister coordinates all ministries in order to achieve macroeconomic targets in seven areas (mobility - housing - ecosystems - production - food - consumption - adaptation to climate change). The figures of water, soil and air protection, de-carbonisation, sobriety, circular economy are among the very pillars of this planning discourse.

It is not the purpose of this article to assess whether it is possible to achieve the very ambitious objectives of ecological transition, nor is it my intention to judge whether this reorientation is justified and adapted in scale and scope. Rather, I underline that the underlying structure of French Aménagement du Territoire is not changing, despite the appearance of its aggiornamento. Let's precise what is changing, and what is not.

What is really changing is the conceptualization of space in French spatial policies. Ecological planning takes a much less abstract approach to French space than it did in the 1960s. It does not assign to this policy a mere geographical allocation of infrastructures and social redistributive dimension in order to balance development inequalities and develop superstructures.

Another change is that this policy no longer seeks to defend spatial limits, perimeters, whereas zoning was a constitutive part of its practices for decades. Effectively, can we now stop the effects of climate change drawing lines on a map? (Latour & Weibel, 2020).

I consider that State has made a transfer from a planning object - space - to another - natural elements and resources. Ecological planning reveals a longstanding attachment to the idea of technical rationality that marked the Gaullist infrastructuration era, yet, it reorients this practice toward nature's infrastructuration. Rivers, forests and even the air are supposed to produce 'ecosystem services' whose contribution to the production of wealth and security is now modeled and in a process of 'assetization'. Territorial planning was based on the belief that regulating movement was a strategic goal and a State function. Today, State-led ecological planning ambition is - as least in its own terms - to securitize the environment in terms of thermodynamic flows. In this, a very broad list of objects and movements take place: floods or heat waves anticipation, carbon tree production and urban carbon consumption, e-car and sustainable mobility... The State uses the same obsession legitimization discourse as is used in the postwar era. Planning serves to save the Nation from a spiral of decline, here associated to climate geopolitical risks.

The new ecological planning framework is in harmony with the current merging of European Spatial Planning and the Green Deal. The economic vocation of both public policy currents is underlined, in terms of a necessary and urgent re-industrialisation aimed both at 'greening' territories and lifestyles and at securing the energy future. It can also be

said that, at both French and European level, the investment flows associated with the greening of planning targets the maintenance and renewal of grey inherited and fragilized infrastructures.

Major uncertainties remain at the time of writing. At both European and French level, it is not certain that this effort has achieved its political objectives (rebuilding a pact between disillusioned populations and a State that provides an imaginary sense of prosperity and security), as much as its economic (green re-industrialization) and ecological goals (mitigation and adaptation to new environmental conditions). It is not certain that local planners will be able to absorb European and French financial flows in the short term because our sociotechnical environment, devices, habits and ways of life (our cars, our homes) are not completely adapted to the targets of the green planning framework. I suggest that the political, production and administrative structures are not yet in phase with, and not always in demand of, this transition. In practical terms, there's no point in increasing the number of electric charging points of roads until users switch from petrol motorized vehicles to electric cars. Nor is it certain that this policy will be maintained long enough to achieve the transition, since the reconstruction of national and European defense will compete with green planning in the medium term.

In conclusion, I have outlined three distinct but interconnected moments in the history of planning thought and policy in France. I have shown how the production of space was achieved through a process that I have called 'infrastructuration'. Institutional security therefore depended on prosperity, and prosperity was a function of speed, speed was being achieved through infrastructure, and infrastructure was what marks the modernization of the French space. This process consisted of linking the provision of major facilities, associated with movement (a guarantee of freedom) and speed (a time-saving factor), with the shaping of a moderate, hard-working, healthy social-democratic society, more focused on consumption than on the fight against capitalism (Fourastié, 1979).

I have shown that this agenda was dictated, at least in France, by a singular positioning of the central State in three respects. Its authoritarianism was inherited from the monarchy that unified French territory (Fourquet, 1982). Its desire to regulate movements was based on a rational organization and in the faith in science and technology, which were legacies of the Enlightenment and the Revolution. Finally, the vision of planning policy from above, in which the State was pacifying intra-territorial relations through redistribution (coastal, mountain, metropolitan, medium-sized town policies, etc.) and the strategic security of the territory with a monopoly of the production of energy, considered as the source of movements. I have tried to show that this public policy, despite its changes, is maintaining a stable doctrinal framework that the accelerated conceptual turnover (decarbonisation, circular economy, etc.) and the variability of the policy tools (positioned at different institutional levels but always heavily financed by the central State) generally tend to mask.

## References

- Auxiette, Jacques, (14 February 2011). “Déménager l’aéroport de Nantes: “un choix raisonné et responsable”, *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/02/14/demenager-l-aeroport-de-nantes-un-choix-de-raison\\_1479881\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/02/14/demenager-l-aeroport-de-nantes-un-choix-de-raison_1479881_3232.html)
- Bess Michael, (2011), *La France vert clair. Ecologie et modernité technologique, 1960-2000*, Champ Vallon.
- Bouba-Olga Olivier, (2020), Sortir de la CAME (Compétitivité, Attractivité, Métropolisation, Excellence) pour mieux penser et mieux accompagner les territoires in Laudier Isabelle, Renou Lucie, *Prospective et co-construction des territoires au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Hermann.
- De Gaulle Charles, (1959), Allocution prononcée à l’École militaire, le 3 novembre 1959’, In *Discours et messages*, 1970, Paris, Plon, III vol, p.125–129 (p. 127).
- Desportes Marc, Picon Antoine, (1997). *De l’espace au territoire: l’aménagement en France, XVI<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Presses de l’École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées.
- de Ureña José, Chen Chia-Lin, Loukaitou-Sideris A., (2021), *Spatial Implications and Planning Criteria for High-Speed Rail Cities and Regions*, Routledge.
- Flint Antony, (2009), *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took on New York’s Master Builder and Transformed the American City*, Random House.
- Foucault Michel, (2004). *Sécurité, territoire, population: cours au Collège de France, 1977–1978*, Seuil - Gallimard.
- Fourastié Jean, (1979). *Les Trente glorieuses, ou la Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*, Fayard.
- Fourquet, François. (1982). L’Accumulation du pouvoir ou le désir d’État, *Recherches*, vol 46, p. 9–85
- Glass Ruth, (1964), *London: Aspects of Change*. MacGibbon & Kee.
- Guichard, Olivier. (1965). *Aménager la France*, Laffont-Gonthier.
- Hecht Gabrielle. (1998). *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II*, MIT Press.
- Keman Hans, Woldendorp Jaap, (2020), *Transportation and the state : governing the public domain*, Elgar.
- Larkin Brian, (2013), The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, 327-343.



- Latour Bruno, Weibel Peter, (2020), *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*. MIT Press.
- Masquelier, Charles. (2020). Theorising French Neoliberalism: The Technocratic Elite, Decentralised Collective Bargaining and France's "Passive Neoliberal Revolution", *European Journal of Social Theory*, n° 24 vol 1, p. 65–85.
- Massé, Pierre. (1965). *Le Plan, ou l'anti-hasard*, Gallimard.
- Newsome, Brian. (2009). *French Urban Planning 1940–1968: The Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System*, Peter Lang.
- Offner Jean-Marc, (1993), Les «effets structurants» du transport : mythe politique, mystification scientifique *L'Espace géographique* vol 22, n° 3, p. 233-242.
- Rocco Roberto (ed), (2023), *Jane Jacobs is still there.: Jane Jacobs 100, her legacy and relevance in the 21st century*, TU Delft.
- Throgmorton, James. (1996). *Planning as Persuasive Storytelling: The Rhetorical Construction of Chicago's Electric Future*, University of Chicago Press.
- Virilio Paul, (1977), *Vitesse et politique: essai de dromologie*. Éditions Galilée,
- Welch Edward, (2018). Objects of Dispute: Planning, Discourse, and State Power in Post-war France, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 36.2: 103–25
- Welch, Edward. (2023). *Making Space in Post-War France: The Dreams, Realities and Aftermath of State Planning* NED-New edition, Vol. 69. Modern Humanities Research Association. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.667670>

