

## The Use of Sustainable Development in Urban Creative Transformations: Analysis of Chalucet Creative Neighbourhood in Toulon (Southeast of France)

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### Abstract

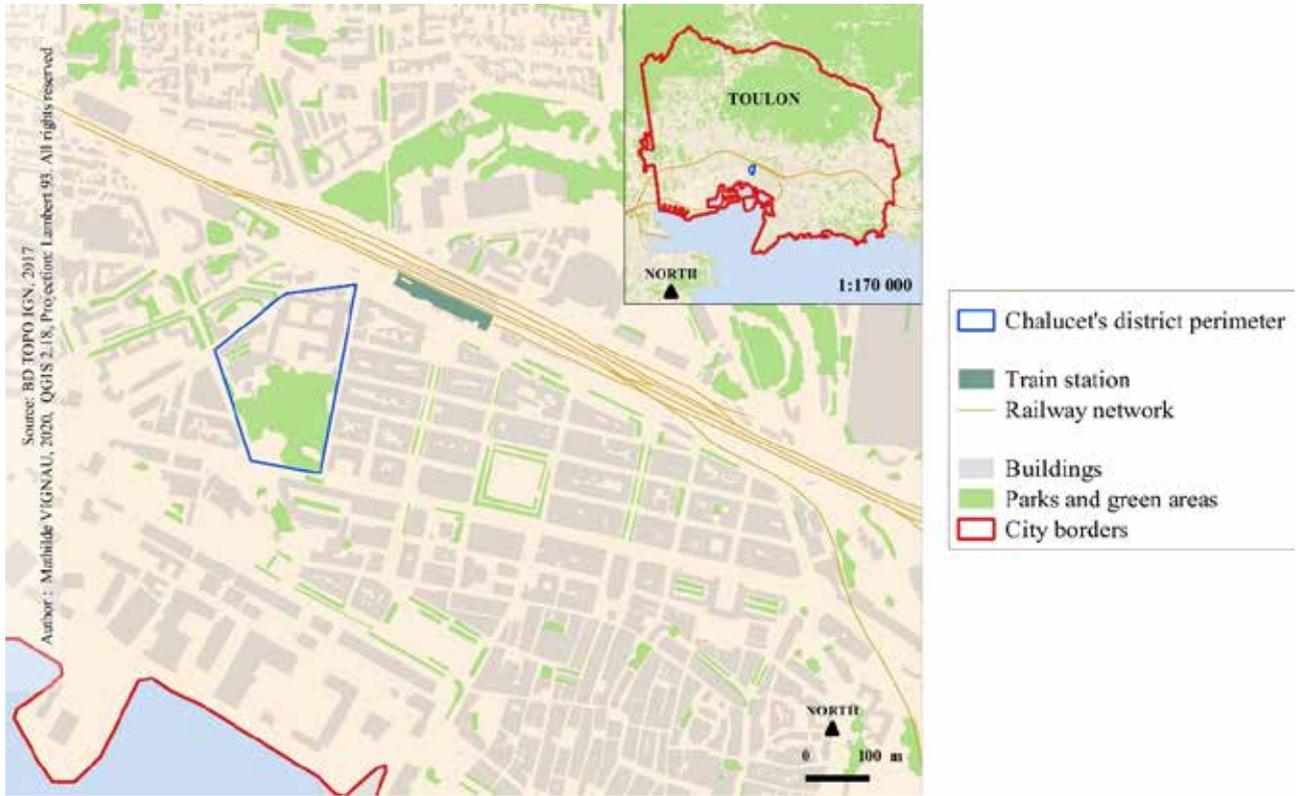
For several decades now, creativity has been presented as a new tool for urban rehabilitation projects. Through a large number of scientific works published since the end of the 1980s, academics from all over the world pointed out the positive effects of culture and creativity on local economic development and urban attractiveness. Even if some of them have also demonstrated how limited these new tools can be by increasing gentrification, neoliberalism and socio-spatial injustices, it is quite clear now that the optimistic and enthusiastic statements coming from some scholars have undoubtedly affected urban and political decisions taken within cities worldwide. Concerning this analysis, this paper aims to present the specific case study of Toulon, a city located in the Southeastern part of France. It refers more precisely to Chalucet neighbourhood, a brand-new creative and knowledge district inaugurated in 2019, which is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, it focuses on what may be called “institutional creativity” that differs from the current idea that we often make of urban creativity through a large variety of arts, including graffiti and street art. Secondly, this specific example allows us to develop a strong connexion that exists between urban creativity and sustainability (Krueger and Buckingham, 2009, 2012). Indeed, it seems that we can sustainability consider as one of the significant factors regarding the emergence of creative cities which mainly depend on the environment and quality of life. From 2011 to 2019, the use of sustainable argument ran through the creative and knowledge district project in Toulon. For these reasons, this paper aims to present this project by underlining the links between urban creativity and sustainable development preoccupations. Moreover, it also demonstrates that the Chalucet neighbourhood in Toulon can affect local development both positively and negatively.

Keywords: urban creativity, creative city, sustainability, urban transformation, urban

### Introduction

Environmental preservation, as well as sustainable development, are one of the most critical issues in the 21st century. It becomes even more important with the global pandemic hardly experimented worldwide for various months. In this context, this short essay tries to question the role of urban creative regeneration projects towards sustainability. About this topic, several issues appear. For instance, we can wonder, what can be the links between these two notions? How the creative city integrates sustainable preoccupations? Is the environment only a new narrative discourse serving green marketing to valorize urban creative projects? Finally, despite its positive aspects, is the creative city genuinely sustainable?

For several decades now, creativity has been presented as a new tool for urban rehabilitation projects (Bianchini et al., 1988; Landry and Bianchini, 1995; Landry, 2000; Scott, 2006). Through a large number of scientific works published since the end of the 1980s, academics from all over the world have pointed out the positive effects of culture and creativity on local economic development and urban attractiveness. On the other hand, some researchers have also demonstrated how limited these new tools can be by increasing gentrification, neoliberalism and socio-spatial injustices (Glass, 1964; Smith, 1979; Zukin, 1982, 1991; Peck, 2005; Sager, 2011). Nevertheless, it is quite clear now that the optimistic and enthusiastic statements coming from some scholars (Florida, 2002, 2004, 2005) have undoubtedly affected urban and political decisions taken within cities worldwide.



Map 1- Location of the Chalucet neighbourhood in Toulon, Southeast of France.

Concerning this analysis, this paper aims to present the specific case study of Toulon, a city located in the Southeastern part of France. It refers more precisely to the Chalucet neighbourhood, a brand-new creative and knowledge district inaugurated in 2019, which is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, it focuses on what may be called “institutional creativity” that differs from the current idea that we often make of urban creativity through a large variety of arts including graffiti, street art... Secondly, this specific example allows us to develop a strong connexion that exists between urban creativity and sustainability (Krueger and Buckingham, 2009, 2012). Indeed, it seems that we can sustainability consider as one of the significant factors regarding the emergence of creative cities which mainly depend on the environment and quality of life.

From 2011 to 2019, the use of sustainable argument ran through the creative and knowledge district project in Toulon. For these reasons, this paper aims to present this project by underlining the links between urban creativity and sustainable development preoccupations. Moreover, it also demonstrates that the Chalucet neighbourhood in Toulon can affect local development both positively and negatively. We use several methodologies, among which are interviews, photographs, and press reviews.

### **The role of the environment in urban creativity theories**

Many of the scientific statements and theories about urban creativity consider that the environment plays a pivotal role to transform some abandoned urban areas and to attract and keep new urban users or inhabitants. For instance, it is mainly the case with the creative class concept partly based on what Richard Florida has called the “people’s climate” which includes quality of place through the development of parks and green areas among other environmental amenities. Moreover, some academics also consider that the creative city itself can produce innovative solutions to regenerate urban territories in a more sustainable way (Sepe, 2010; Fusco Girard *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, there is, in theories, a kind of two-ways relationship between creativity and sustainability.

Concerning this first point, the specific case of *Chalucet* neighbourhood in Toulon is exciting to study. Toulon is a city located in the Southeastern part of France, and the neighbourhood called *Chalucet* refers to a new district

located near to the train station in the city-centre of Toulon (see Map 1). As Map 1 below shows, *Chalucet* neighbourhood, inaugurated in January 2020, is the blue perimeter that covers more than 35,000 m<sup>2</sup> dedicated to creativity and knowledge. This case is particularly relevant mainly because it shows the use of the environment, green areas and more generally sustainability in all the phases of this project from the architects’ plans to the recent attribution of a new ecolabel, which rewards the high environmental performance of this urban regeneration project.

### **The *Chalucet* neighbourhood creative transformation:**

The *Chalucet* neighbourhood host several essential amenities, many of them are creative resources such as the media library, the school of fine arts or the international school of business, management, and design. It also includes around 200 housings. It is a historical place that is still full of memories for the inhabitants. But the most interesting point concerning the urban regeneration of this neighbourhood started from 2011 when the *Chalucet* hospital area was sold to a regional public land institution by the city that wanted to get funds to build a brand-new hospital in another district. The question of urban regeneration raises quickly after the former hospital’s sale and closure. In January 2012, the local decision-makers signed a land intervention agreement on the *Chalucet* site between the city of Toulon and the regional public land institution. This agreement determines the preliminary study phase (concerning the security of the site and the feasibility of the urban regeneration project), which led to the validation of the first project in December 2013.

Thus, this territory was never abandoned and became so to say a “wasteland” only for a brief period contrary to other industrial wastelands as the ones in Marseille for example. This district was immediately considered as a land of opportunities by several political decision-makers. Indeed, during a town council in June 2014, the urban project called “reconversion of the former *Chalucet* Hospital” was clarified and the elected representatives highlighted its vocation to “[...] participate in the revitalization of downtown and [to] materialize Tomorrow’s Toulon by turning it towards future.”<sup>1</sup> Then, to carry out this project, a call for applications was launched in October 2014 to determine the candidates

1 - Quotation extracted from the town council report in Toulon in June 2014 (translated in English).

admitted competing as potential project managers. In March 2015, the local decision-makers selected four agencies and architect's offices to compete. Finally, in September 2015, the jury appointed as the winner of the competition and project manager, the architect's office *Vezzoni & Associés*, led by the renowned French architect Corine Vezzoni and the building works started until the official inauguration last January.

Moreover, the study of several official documents and reports coming from Toulon's council town put forward a relevant strategy of communication around the notion of creativity. Indeed, at the very beginning, political decision-makers considered that the critical resource to develop within this new neighbourhood was the one knowledge through digital and new technologies. Between 2012 and 2015, the word "creativity" did not appear in the official name of the urban regeneration project. In fact, until the first quarter of 2015, the official documents from the town council referred to the Chalucet neighbourhood as the "knowledge and digital district." The specific use of the term "creativity" appeared quite lately in September 2015. This name's change may seem trivial, but, according to us, it reflects the will to highlight communication around the project by using the more inclusive and significantly improving concept of creativity.

According to the architect C. Vezzoni, this notion not only appears through the future facilities that will host the *Chalucet* neighbourhood but also through the sharing of common spaces also called "third places" in various scientific publications (Oldenburg, 1989; Dubus, 2009; Burret, 2013, 2018; Pineau, 2018). In this regard, she stated: "We have shared spaces [...], and that is creativity too. [...] In *Chalucet* housings, we offer rooms, which could be shared. So, when you have a friend or family who comes, you can host them, but they will stay in a place that you would have booked in advance. In the same way, we have planned a shared dining room and a communal kitchen."<sup>2</sup> If the concept of creativity has played a crucial role within this urban regeneration project, the latter was also firmly connected with sustainability and the environment, which are two fundamental concepts in this example.

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2 - Interview with architect Corine Vezzoni in Marseille on 06 June, 2017.

### **The importance of sustainability in all the project's phases:**

From 2015 to 2019, sustainability became a strong argument that ran through the creative and knowledge district project in Toulon. According to the planners and political decision-makers involved in this project, the environment is entirely part of what a creative city or district must be. This idea reminds us of some academic works that have underlined the crucial role of gardens, parks, and nature within cities' regeneration (Swanwick *et al.*, 2003; Kabisch and Haase, 2013). At the heart of the Chalucet neighbourhood, the urban regeneration project stands the *Jardin Alexandre 1er*, which is the green area visible within the blue perimeter (See Map 1). This public park is the core of the creative and knowledge district. Its regeneration is significant within the whole architectural project defended by architect C. Vezzoni who stated: "Our goal was to extend the park to make it crosses the entire neighbourhood. We wanted nature to penetrate the district and do what the 19th century was unable to do that is: connecting the city with nature."<sup>3</sup> To sum up, in the *Chalucet* urban project, three phases show how urban creative regeneration and sustainability are linked. During the first phase, the architect C. Vezzoni and her team wanted to improve sustainability in the project's plans and during all the building works. This ambition passed through several concrete actions such as the extension of the *Jardin Alexandre 1er* which has been extended by 5000 m<sup>2</sup> (total size: 20.000 m<sup>2</sup>) and where gardeners planted 153 new trees (total number of trees, bushes, and plants: 14.838). The installation of birdhouses also preserved biodiversity. Concerning the building works, a charter was signed to implement an environmental approach, which minimizes noise pollution, dust, and vibration. To achieve that, the workers were, among other actions, constantly spraying water on the buildings' rubbles to avoid dust dispersion. Finally, the workers paid peculiar attention to waste sorting. The method used for this research consisted of the analysis of local and regional press journals and articles' study. These specific documents have shown that many press articles present this new creative and knowledge district through the promotion of its sustainable features. The local and regional press often suggests that the *Jardin Alexandre 1er* is a "green lung" to preserve in the city, no matter the costs.

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3 - Interview with architect Corine Vezzoni in Marseille on June 06, 2017.

Moreover, using green areas photographs, the political decision-makers want to convey complimentary messages about sustainable progress within the city-core of Toulon. Finally, the third phase starts with the éco-quartier labelling of The Chalucet neighbourhood. This label is a French award rewarding several positive criteria such as a pleasant living environment, a diversity of urban functions (housing, education, culture), the presence of natural spaces, the valorization of historic monuments or the protection of biodiversity as well as the existence of water points. Overall, the criteria rewarded are both parts of the urban creativity and sustainable city.

### **Is this project genuinely sustainable?**

#### **Some possible future threats:**

Even if the urban regeneration of the creativity and knowledge district seems to be very positive from various points of view, there are some possible threats, which could jeopardize the global sustainability of the whole project. Indeed, this urban regeneration project is still very young, and until now, we do not gather enough scientific data to measure its real social or territorial impacts. However, when we analyzed this perimeter at a broader scale, we realized that this project participated in the whole city-core regeneration, which is not sustainable, especially at a social level. One of the biggest threats could be the fear of the gentrification process that slowly but surely appears, around the *Chalucet* neighbourhood. For instance, less than 500m far from it, a private firm has built a four stars hotel which is part of the group Okko Hotels and which contrasts with the social inclusion of sustainable objectives.

Moreover, some citizens currently fear the death of other neighbourhoods with the opening and concentration of big creative amenities in the same area. Finally, if the positive effects of this urban regeneration are apparent, more studies and scientific analyses are now needed to explore its real impacts in terms of social and economic inclusion to prove that this case is a real example of a creative and sustainable urban project. That is why it could be interesting to focus on the potential movements of resistance or rebellion against this kind of urban transformation.

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