

The man who redesigned Bordeaux

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It's a city in process which the ex-mayor of Bordeaux, Alain Juppe (UMP), will try to reconquer on October 8th during anticipated elections. A city where, on his own, he has directed the changes during his stay at City Hall, from 1995 to 2004, before ceding his place to his deputy-mayor Hugues Martin due to ineligibility. A city which has been fighting for 10 years in constructions and traffic jams, but a city which now lives again, for its pedestrians, for its suburbs and for its right bank.

Behind this spectacular rebirth, there is a man whose profession is virtually unknown: an urbanist. Francis Cuillier, 62, is the director of the a-urba, Bordeaux Urbanism Agency. He will receive in December the Grand Prix of Urbanism 2006. This prize is not limited to his work in Bordeaux alone. Francis Cuillier had also prescribed the same medicine to the city of Strasbourg, from 1990 to 1995, working with an official from the leftist party, Catherine Trautmann. In each case, the tramway was the fundamental ingredient.

It was when he was elected mayor, in 1995, of a city dedicated to the automobile during the reign of Jacques Chaban-Delmas (1947-1995) that Alain Juppe met Francis Cuillier, also newly arrived as director of the agency of urbanism. Quickly, a comprehensive subway project is abandoned for a vast tramway plan evaluated at 1 billion euros. The first part of it began service in December 2003. The work still continues.

"The tramway should not be seen simply as a method of transit, says Francis Cuillier. Rather, it's a means to requalify public space and recompose the urban setting, which sets a different scene for the city. The tramway is in opposition to the subway, which doesn't change anything on the surface and doesn't force us to make choices, especially to limit the influence of cars."

In Bordeaux, the tram had another advantage: it could offer this urban face lift in spite of an almost empty treasury. By which miracle? The tram, being a community project, made it possible; the embellishment of public spaces of the downtown area and along the tramway lines was financed by all the region. "We decided that the architects in charge of the urban developments would be independent of the industrial grouping which makes the tram, Mr. Cuillier recalls. We organized contests for all emblematic spaces: quays, places, etc. Each time, the jury was a place of debate on the type of city to build; officials and technicians, made progress in their urban culture."

THE RIGHT OF IMPERTINENCE

This kind of change is a collective work. In Strasbourg, with the Adeus, and then in Bordeaux with the a-urba, Francis Cuillier had a team of 40 people to lead the studies and define the conditions of work. In Gironde, the agency works for all the urban community, that is to say 27 towns, 660,000 inhabitants unequally distributed on 55,000 hectares on both sides of the Garonne. They elaborated many prospective maps, unintelligible for uninitiated eyes, with

barbarian acronyms: PLU (local urbanism plan), POS (ground occupation plan), SCOT (scheme of regional coherence), PLH (local habitat plan), and PDU (urban trips plan)...

"To plan a city is not a work that you can do alone, says Francis Cuillier. You need a lot of knowledge and experience. I would dream of having a philosopher and an historian in the team! I support the vision of an urban agency as a battle ground of ideas with a right to be bold." The debate elaborates the idea of the city: this is the motto of Francis Cuillier who likes to remind us that *the Greek "polis" not only gave us the concept of the city but also the concept of noble politics.* The debate with whom? Officials, employees, engineers, realtors and architects. The stakes are high. We have to change the old centers of Bordeaux and of its suburbs, to invent from nothing new neighborhoods in the area of Belcier, of the Bastide or of "Le Lac". *"We have to anticipate the future needs in land, equipment, transport; to foresee what we will do with industrial zones; to try to create real towns where inhabitants are able to be proud to live in less desirable areas..."*

The urbanism agency supervises and organizes the growth of the Urban Community, where the local urbanism plan has been adopted in July. Vertical growth: the plan allows, in some neighborhoods, construction with three or four floors in a town historically built on low height. Horizontal growth too, when urban areas nibble away the country to Libourne and Arcachon. *"We haven't always won* underlines Francis Cuillier. *It's a compromise with the Mayor of each town."*

However, the Mayor is going to be supplanted by an actor with surprising weight, worries Francis Cuillier: the private sector. *"Because of a lack of public money, the city capital is more and more private. We have to define a regulation mode in which the public power negotiates with the private actors to set the rules which defend urban equity and projects which added value is not only economic but also social, cultural or educative. The city should not be left to the market place."*

Who said that the urbanist was a simple technician?