

## **Two images of Nantes as a ‘Green Model’ of Urban Planning and Governance: The ‘Collaborative City’ Versus the ‘Slow City’**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines how the city of Nantes, European Green Capital in 2013, came to promote plans for a new international airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes. Deploying poststructuralist discourse theory, it analyses how the highly politicised struggle against the airport reveals the limits of the Nantes model of urban sustainability and collaboration, giving rise to a counter model, which we provisionally characterise as the ‘slow city’. While the struggle against the airport can be understood as a rural social movement, we show how its ideals and logics have been progressively displaced to Nantes itself, disclosing new images and possibilities of urban governance.

The city of Nantes was named the European Green Capital in 2013 and was widely acclaimed for its 'exemplary' practices of sustainable urban development and climate change mitigation. The Nantes 'brand', which has been developed and fine-tuned in the last decade or so, conjures up the image and story of a 'renaissance city' that has emerged from the closure of its shipyards in the 1980s through a model of 'reasoned and shared development' by all its citizens. It is a model that is underscored by commitments to public transport, cultural revitalisation, urban regeneration and collaborative working. Indeed, in its bid to the Green Capital jury in 2010, the Nantes delegation rehearsed a well-worn storyline in which the city had successfully transformed itself 'from an industrial city towards an eco-metropolis'. It confidently declared itself to be a 'responsible city', ready and able to 'assume its share of responsibility towards the main ecological challenges (climate, biodiversity, waste water treatment, water quality, agricultural land protection)' (Ville de Nantes and Nantes Métropole, 2010).

Yet, as its political leadership celebrated international recognition for its model of sustainable urban living, it was embroiled in a long and highly politicised campaign to build a new international airport – Notre-Dame-des-Landes (NDDL) - in the countryside to the north of the city. This large infrastructure project carried far-reaching environmental dangers and social impacts, which ran counter to the declaration of Nantes to be a 'responsible city'. Emissions from aviation are one of the fastest growing sources of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, while the construction of the airport itself required the destruction of over 1, 650 hectares of hedgerows and wetlands, as well as the removal of local peasant farmers from their land, threatening local biodiversity, wildlife habitats

and water tables (Commission nationale du débat public, 2016; Dessens et al., 2014). Intense opposition to the planned airport grew up around a coalition of local residents, peasant farmers, environmentalists, and radical activists, who constructed alternative spaces of democratic organisation and new forms of farming and community living. Such elements were condensed together in the symbolic appeal of the ZAD - the *Zone à Défendre* - the renamed *zone d'aménagement différé* or deferred development zone of the proposed airport site, in which protesters brought together a camp prefiguring new social relations and ways of living. Moreover, the judgement of the Green Capital jury was not without its other detractors too. For example, the Nantes correspondent for the national newspaper *Le Monde*, Yan Gauchard, highlighted the irony of the building of an international airport in a supposedly sustainable city, and he noted acerbically: 'You might have thought that this [Nantes' Green Capital award] was a joke, but it was nothing of the sort' (*Le Monde*, 11 December 2012).

Such interventions were symbolic of a broader clash between two competing narratives of the city, metropolitanisation and urban development in Nantes. On the one hand, the official narrative of the Nantes leadership resonated with a metropolitan discourse of urban competition, growth, and the re-scaling of the French state (Faburel, 2018; Geppert, 2017). Here, the city, or rather the core of local municipalities in the built-up urban agglomeration, was repositioned as a 'big player' or 'engine' of economic growth (Geppert, 2017, p. 227) in the global and European competition for employment, in which urban entrepreneurship, attractiveness and place-branding are foregrounded. On the other hand, opposition to NDDL couched its demands in an alternative narrative that

dismissed metropolitanisation as an increasing neoliberalization of the city in which the myth of sustainable urban growth concealed a retreat from a political commitment to address social and territorial inequalities. In such narratives, metropolitanisation was thus equated with increasing disparities between the urban core and the periphery; the limits of ecological modernisation; and the depoliticization of local democracy and decision-making (Guilluy, 2010, 2017). With respect to the latter, protesters against NDDL occupied the proposed site of the airport, taking over the properties of evicted farmers and constructing their own dwellings, while prefiguring new social relations and ways of living which invested in novel modes of community and the relationship to the land. In fact, representations of mobility and transport very much defined the boundaries of these competing narratives, for to oppose the airport was to oppose mobility, and this in turn was to oppose metropolitanisation (Faburel, 2018, p. 242).

This strange juxtaposition of competing narratives of the city thus gives rise to a series of interesting questions. How was the European Green Capital able to promote this project in light of its much-vaunted green credentials, as well as its desire to foster greater democratic collaboration and citizen participation? How was it to remain committed to the project, despite long-standing, widespread and intense community opposition before the plans were eventually abandoned by the French government on 17 January 2018? What does this highly politicised struggle tell us about the dominant model of urban governance and environmental sustainability in Nantes? What alternative strategies and visions for the ‘green city’ are prefigured in the struggles to oppose the proposed airport? Put more broadly, what do these competing narratives of Nantes tell us about the

dynamics of emergent metropolitan spaces of collaborative governance and their capacity to act as politicised ‘public spaces of opposition’ (Negt (2007) cited in Cadiou, 2016, 190)?

In exploring these questions, we critically discern and evaluate the complex *interaction* between the different narratives that constitute ‘the city’ of Nantes, and we examine how these representations shaped urban sustainability and collaborative governance in the city. Deploying the resources of poststructuralist discourse theory to characterise the city as a political object, reproduced and brought into being by multiple and (potentially) competing narratives, we discern the emergence of two models of the green city in Nantes. Our critical assessment of these two models foregrounds how the reproduction of collaborative practices rests on the drawing of boundaries and internal and external exclusions. But we also underline the (potential) and actual politicisation of practices of consensual governance and their transformation into ‘public spaces of opposition’. Indeed, we reveal how different practices of collaboration are contested and transgressed by those social forces, whose very exclusion helped to forge the collective identity of collaboration in the first instance. As such, we argue that the campaign against the new airport came to function as a popular and symbolic struggle against the narrative of metropolitanisation, economic boosterism, public-private partnerships, and internationalisation more generally. We thus reveal the emergent tensions and contradictions in the dominant model of urban governance, while also exposing the democratic limits of collaborative governance *à la Nantaise*.

Our argument unfolds in the following steps. Our starting point is the problematisation of existing accounts of collaborative governance and the risk of drawing binary oppositions between, on the one hand, collaboration as an alternative form of stakeholder dialogue and innovation, and, on the other hand, collaboration as a form of coercion and depoliticisation. We then focus on the plans to build a new international airport at NDDL, where we examine efforts to render this project environmentally sustainable by what we call the logic of reframing. We then explore the environmental campaign against the new international airport, showing how this campaign reveals the flaws and limits of the Nantes model, while running counter to its representation as an ‘eco-metropolis’. Indeed, we argue that the struggles have given rise to a counter model of urban sustainability, which we provisionally name and characterise as the ‘slow city’. Our conclusion thus reflects on the democratic and environmental limits of the Nantes model, and we consider how the exemplary case of Nantes can inform broader debates about alternative models of the green city. We shall begin by problematising existing accounts of practices of collaborative governance.

## **THE COLLABORATIVE CITY: THEORY, METHODS AND ARGUMENTS**

The emergent logics of urban collaborative governance are increasingly (and correctly in our view) characterised as ‘messy’ practices and processes, which are forged by the interactions between local urban contextual configurations, the layering of multiple institutional rules and norms, and the politics of competing identities and hegemonic

projects (Cadiou, 2016; Parès, Broda, Canal, Hernando and Martínez, 2017; Skelcher, Sullivan and Jeffares, 2013). Seen in these terms, ‘cities’ and urban boundaries are produced and reproduced as political objects; they are therefore best viewed as hybrid assemblages of plural technologies, governance practices, institutional and economic resources, multiple histories and identities (Cole and Payre, 2016). As cities are constructed and reshaped by complex political practices, competing narratives and discourses offer a means to reproduce order across urban spaces, albeit of a partial and temporal kind (see Bradford, 2016; Barbehön *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, the repetition of storylines across multiple arenas and dialogues builds and authenticates shared histories. At the same time, such reiterations constitute the interdependencies, common norms and interests that bind actors together and underpin different modes of collaboration (Pinson, 2006, 643-4; Dormois, 2006, 360).

In exploring the ‘messy’ politics of urban collaboration in this empirical case, we shall draw upon the resources of poststructuralist discourse theory (e.g. Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2013; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). This approach assumes that all objects and social relations – particular systems of urban planning, for example, or city-regions - are radically contingent, symbolic and articulatory. They are *radically contingent* because they can be constructed in a variety of ways in different contexts; *symbolic* because the meaning and significance of objects, whether physical, linguistic, or cultural, depends on their constitution and appearance within particular discourses; and *articulatory* because different elements are linked together to produce particular objects and systems. What is more, the unity and identity of any discursive object or system is produced by the

political exclusion of certain elements, the creation of insiders and outsiders. Yet such divisions render the resultant orders precarious and vulnerable to challenge by elements that are excluded. Challenges of this sort presuppose the construction of social antagonisms between different agents and subjectivities, as well as the installation of political frontiers that divide social spaces into two camps. The logic of competing hegemonic practices – combining demands and identities into chains of equivalence or the decoupling of demands into separate and individual elements that can be managed within systems of power – provides a grammar of related concepts with which to map the play of urban governance practices and politics in a given context (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

Particular cities, places in the countryside – indeed all spaces and their attendant relations and elements - are thus conceptualised as political constructions that can be articulated or brought into being in different ways. More concretely, this means that our attention is directed at the internal and external exclusions that are constitutive of urban politics and planning: which groups, subjects and identities are affirmed, and which are foreclosed in such practices? In turn, this requires us to focus on the construction of social antagonisms and power relations in particular milieux, as well as the role of ideological myths, images, and narratives that purport to represent and conceal the diverse practices of urban politics and governance that are at work (cf. Fricke and Gualini, 2018). We thus seek to disentangle the binary oppositions between narratives of collaboration that embrace collaboration as an alternative form of stakeholder dialogue, resource coordination and innovation (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2015; Torfing, Peters, Pierre and Sørensen 2012), and



those that portray practices of collaboration as generating coercive and depoliticised consensual spaces of decision-making, thus masking novel forms of hierarchy (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009; Davies, 2011; Swyngedouw 2010). In short, collaboration is both touted as a model of ‘good practice’ in the building of a more democratic, efficient and ‘green’ city, *and* as a vehicle to facilitate post-political ‘consensual’ patterns of decision-making and greenwashing that excludes and coerces certain groups and citizens.

In evaluating such claims, Nantes offers a paradigm case of decentralised collaborative governance - the so-called “Nantes model” – which is explicitly understood by its proponents and practitioners as a form of pragmatic-collaborative governance (Cloutour, 2016). We focus primarily on the logics of collaborative governance - bundles of practices that bring about a particular regime or state of affairs - while grappling with the storylines and interpretations that act as the ‘glue’ between rival modes of collaboration and discourse coalitions. Our empirical analysis thus draws primarily on two related datasets, which are composed of stakeholder interviews, a repository of policy documents and campaigning materials, and notes from site visits and observations of neighbourhood and public campaign meetings. Both datasets directly explore alternative interpretations of Nantes as a ‘responsible’ and ‘collaborative’ city. The first arose from our investigation of the practices of collaborative governance in Nantes, and comprises 39 semi-structured interviews with public officials from the city, metropolitan and departmental councils (9), local politicians (7), neighbourhood workers (5), members of community associations, including housing and tenant associations (6), trade unionists (3) and citizen representatives and campaigners (9). Fieldwork for the construction of this

dataset started in November 2015 and ended in May 2017. The second dataset arises from our research into the protests and campaign against the proposed construction of an international airport at NDDL. It involved 22 interviews with local campaigners and organisers (9), politicians (4), farmers and members of the ZAD (8) and a representative of the promoters of the new airport (1). Fieldwork for this second dataset is ongoing, having begun in June 2013.

All texts, interview transcripts, and notes were coded and analysed through iterated readings (Keller, 2013, 97). After identifying the genre and the historical contexts within which the texts were produced and disseminated, the research team used their situated judgements to extract different problematisations, statements, arguments, and framings from the corpus of materials. Here we paid attention to the creation and articulation of demands, as well as their combination and separation, and we analysed the different discursive tropes that divided ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’. We then applied Foucault’s criteria for identifying statements so as to describe the core statements that operated in different contexts (Griggs and Howarth, 2019; Griggs, Howarth and Feandeiro, 2020). And when mapping the production and reiteration of statements in different arenas, we concentrated on two defining criteria: the way statements performed an ‘enunciative function’, which constituted a particular domain of connected objects and subjects, while shaping debate and contestation, and the degree to which statements were related to other statements, thus chiming with other practices and objects of governance and contestation.

## **THE NANTES MODEL: THE ‘GREEN CAPITAL’**

Situated on the Loire river estuary, some 50 kilometres from the Atlantic coast, Nantes is a city with a population of approximately 300,000 people. After the closure of its shipyards and other factories during the 1970s and 1980s, it underwent something of a transformation, generating new employment in the tertiary or service sector, notably information technology, banking and cultural industries. Indeed, from the 1990s, under the leadership of Jean-Marc Ayrault, who was Mayor of Nantes for almost 25 years, the city council drove forward an agenda of economic boosterism and international competitiveness, focussed mainly on flagship urban regeneration projects (notably the redevelopment of the Île de Nantes shipyards). Such redevelopment was accompanied by a strategy of metropolitanisation, which positioned Nantes as a regional growth city. Since 2001 Nantes has thus increasingly coordinated its policies and shared services within the intercommunal or combined authority of Nantes Métropole. In 2001, under the leadership of Ayrault, 21 municipalities in the Nantes area were brought together to create the *Communauté urbaine de Nantes*, the Nantes Urban Community, thereby cementing forms of collaboration around what had been called a ‘district’ authority for the conglomeration from 1992 onwards. The Urban Community subsequently morphed into ‘Nantes Métropole’ in 2004, with shared planning schemas for Nantes and Saint-Nazaire in early 2003. In 2015, Nantes Métropole was designated a formal metropolitan authority. It thus became one of France’s 17 designated metropolitan authorities, bringing together over 24 local authorities, and covering a population of some 600,000 people.

The development of the so-called Nantes Model has been well documented (Bossé et al, 2013; Devisme et al, 2009; Luneau, 2003; Masson et al, 2013; Renard, 2008). In many respects, Nantes is a paradigmatic case of collaborative municipal governance operating within the French context, and the statements and official discourses made in its name consistently bolster its self-image as a ‘collaborative city’. This unfolding story of Nantes thus resonates with various theoretical and official narratives about the shift from hierarchical and centralised forms of government towards new patterns of urban governance, which have emerged in response to globalisation, marketisation, new interdependencies and increasing uncertainties. Of course, Nantes is also immersed in the particular traditions, institutions and styles of governance characteristic of French republican democracy. Such logics and influences have powerfully informed the emergence and form of the Nantes model of governance, which has been interpreted as a process of pragmatic adaptation and problem-focused learning (Dormois, 2006; Pinson, 2005, 2006, 2009).

At the same time, Nantes is strongly marked by its position as a ‘sustainable city’, committed to a range of environmental goals and policies. For example, in its presentation to the Green Capital jury in September 2010, the Nantes team made much of the so-called “‘à la Nantaise’ lifestyle”. It drew attention to the accessibility of the city’s public transport system and green spaces, claiming that 95 per cent of residents lived less than 300 metres from public transport facilities, while also noting that there was a ‘green space’ less than 300 metres from every home. The bid also trumpeted the city’s commitment to carbon reduction, its territorial climate action plan, as well as its vision of

Nantes as a ‘compact and dense city’, which was at the forefront of innovation in sustainable land use, biodiversity, air quality, waste management, and noise pollution. Finally, the regeneration of the Île de Nantes was held up as an eco-district and exemplar of ‘consultative implementation of sustainable development policies’ (Ville de Nantes and Nantes Métropole, 2010).

Yet, as Béal (2014) argues, the discourse of sustainable development only began to resonate strongly within the leadership circles of the city from the late 1990s onwards. Such ideas were stimulated by the city’s engagement in European urban policy networks and the leadership of Jean-Marc Ayrault, notably after his re-election in 1995. It fully percolated down to the planning activities of urban regeneration projects such as the Île de Nantes from the mid-2000s and gained further ground because of the demands of European Union and national funding programmes (Béal, 2014, 313). In fact, the sedimentation of the discourse of sustainable development into Nantes’ governance practices was only accomplished, when equivalences were forged between the demands for sustainability, on the one hand, and for urban attractiveness on the other (Béal 2014, 307-9).

In this novel discursive articulation, ‘sustainability’ was resignified as a means of advancing the *attractivité* or urban attractiveness of Nantes, which was a key strategic goal in the global competition to lure investment into the city. ‘Sustainability’ thus became defined as a ‘value-added’ in the global positioning of Nantes, offering a ‘softer’ entrepreneurial strategy that tackled the negative outcomes of urban growth in order to

maintain the ‘liveability’ of the city. Moreover, as more elements were added to the chain of demands and aspirations organised around the idea of sustainability, the latter came to operate as the universal representational glue that enabled different groups and actors with divergent views and interests to collaborate and work together in local partnerships. In our theoretical language, it became an empty signifier that, on the one hand, was progressively emptied of the particular contents and meanings which it gathered together, while on the other hand conferring the new meaning of sustainability to each of the demands it condensed. ‘Sustainability’ thus differentiated a range of demands and goals from more unsustainable forms of planning and practice. In short, the discourse of sustainability offered strategic advantages to the Nantes leadership by legitimising its entrepreneurial efforts to increase the attractiveness of the city for investors. It also facilitated demands for more funding from the central state by facilitating local partnership working, while ultimately reinforcing the alliance of the Socialist-led Ayrault team with its Green Party municipal partners (see Béal, 2014; Epstein, 2013). But just as the signifier of sustainability increasingly resonated in the official rhetoric of the city, the leadership faced a key challenge to its green credentials: the reactivation of plans to build a major piece of urban infrastructure, a new airport, at NDDL.

## **THE AIRPORT**

On 10 February 2008, the French Ministry for Ecology and Sustainable Development, and the Council of State, finally approved the construction of a new airport at NDDL to

replace the existent Nantes Atlantique infrastructure. The new airport, which had been under discussion since 1965, and brought back onto the political agenda by Ayrault in the early 2000s, was expected to become a reality by 2015. Its construction was planned to begin in 2012 and the new two-runway airport would be situated about 30km northwest of Nantes in sparsely populated marsh lands, beyond the boundaries of the member authorities of Nantes Métropole.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Unsurprisingly, the environmental consequences of the construction of the new international airport at NDDL were initially downplayed by the Nantes political leadership. Over time, however, as its construction seemed more likely to materialise, Nantes Métropole was determined to show that the planned infrastructure dovetailed with the policies and safeguards of a Green Capital. Most importantly, apart from environmental mitigation and the sustainable design of the airport itself, the leadership of the Métropole sought to legitimise the planned airport by mobilising arguments in support of shifting flights paths and the alleviation of low-level flying over the city. In this view, such measures would bring about noise and air pollution reductions, as well as opportunities to advance social justice and the vision of a compact city.

More fully, the justification of the airport rested on a number of strategic decisions. In the first place, it was claimed that the transfer of the airport would put an end to the low-altitude approach of planes over the south of Nantes, reducing the number of people

affected by aircraft noise from 42,000 to 900 (Fabrice Roussel, Mayor of Rezé, *Ouest-France*, 29 September 2013). At the same time, a second argument asserted that the transfer of flight paths would mean that noise regulations preventing housing development across the city, particularly on the Île de Nantes, would no longer be applicable. In other words, the building of the new airport would firmly support Nantes' aspirations to become a 'compact city', and this in turn would increase the density of housing within the boundaries of the town, while preventing urban sprawl out into the surrounding peri-urban and rural areas (a measure which was further ensured by the construction of a set of green belt planning measures to avoid ribbon development out towards the new airport).

Characterised through the lens of attractiveness and citizen benefits, the sustainability of the proposed airport at NDDL was consequently reframed. Now the new infrastructure project was no longer an obstacle to Nantes' environmental credentials, but a pivotal element of its sustainable development policies and vision. It was thus rearticulated as a necessary component of the Green Capital bid, and an integral part of the city's efforts to reduce urban sprawl, tackle noise pollution and regenerate the Île de Nantes as an eco-district, while privileging property developments 'designed to keep the middle-classes in the city or encourage them to return' (Béal 2014, 313). In other words, the equivalential relations between sustainability and attractiveness served partially to negate the antagonisms between the project for NDDL and the city's green capital status, so that the airport could be represented as a 'green solution'. Indeed, when reviewing its year as the



Green Capital of 2014, Nantes Metropole devoted its second chapter to ‘attractiveness’, which it subtitled ‘a metropolitan drive’ (Nantes Métropole, 2014, 32).

In fact, this logic of attractiveness and the demands of the compact city were reiterated in different arenas and organisations. For example, one representative of the ‘Wings of the West’ - the pro-NDDL lobby – argued that the ‘problem now is urban sprawl and mobility ... if we are to bring people back into the city centre where there are transport networks, we cannot protect farm lands and make people put up with noise [from planes].’ He cemented this logic with an appeal to the interests of the majority, adding that at NDDL, ‘there is in effect no-one there’ (Interview with representative of Wings of the West).

Viewed in this way, NDDL was not just the sustainable option for development, but also the ‘fairest’ option in terms of its impact on local communities (if not for those communities living in and around NDDL). Indeed, Jacques Auxiette, president of the Loire Regional Council, reproduced such claims to environmental and community justice in his pamphlet in support of NDDL. Negating opposition to expansion, he again reframed the construction of the airport and its impact on communities in NDDL through the rhetoric of sustainability and fairness such that ‘to make Nantes a dense and compact city by transferring the current airport, could accommodate 15,000 inhabitants inside the Nantes city limits rather than in the [surrounding] peri-urban areas where they would consume ten times more space (5,000 hectares of agricultural land!), avoid more than 40,000 people being exposed to the pollution linked to flights over the main centre of Nantes, find solutions to the concentration of air traffic around Paris airports where again there is talk of expansion ... It seems to me that these are very much ambitions that any

sincere ecologist can only share' (2013, 11). He was equally quick to dismiss 'the retrograde model proposed by the occupants of the ZAD [...] made of wooden cabins, workshops on the construction of slingshots, bows and arrows, and fields of swedes' in which he did not see 'the "radiant pathways for a shared future" defended [as they were] by a few intellectuals with no knowledge of the realities of the dossier and the territory' (2013, 13).

## **THE ZAD**

Like other recent campaigns against airport expansions, most notably at Frankfurt, Heathrow, Manchester, Munich and Stansted, the protests and resistances at NDDL engaged citizens in a wide array of different groups, movements and arenas. In fact, as the plans for the new airport were first mooted in the 1960s and 1970s, the ongoing struggles against NDDL form part of a very long and sustained campaign against the infrastructure project, exhibiting numerous twists and turns. Yet the campaign assumed a renewed and radical intensity following the resuscitation of the plans in 2000. Its strategic leadership body, the *Coordination des opposants*, which was formed in 2003, brought together over 40 groups against the planned airport. The broad coalition included ADECA, the *Association de Défense des Exploitants Concernés par l'Aéroport*, which is an association of farmers affected by the proposed development that was established in 1970, and ACIPA, the *Association Citoyenne Intercommunale des Populations Concernées par l'Aéroport*, which is a broad citizen association that was founded in

2000. The movement also embraced pilots, over 1000 politicians in collectives opposed to the new airport, and more than 200 support groups in cities and towns across France (Griggs and Howarth, 2014).

In an important twist, the Coordination worked to facilitate the engagement of a wide range of citizen networks, including radical activists from across France and Europe, who in 2009 increasingly began to occupy land earmarked for development. Activists occupying the land sought to work alongside local farmers and citizens, determined to ‘make use of abandoned spaces to learn to live together, to cultivate the land and to be more autonomous from the capitalist system.’<sup>1</sup> In the process, they transformed the land and its designation, re-interpreting its established planning definition as a *ZAD* or *zone d’aménagement différé* or deferred development zone, into a ‘zone à défendre’ or ‘zone to be defended’, thereby giving a new meaning to the concept of the ‘ZAD’ (Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Ross, 2018; Lindgaard, 2018). Indeed, after the heavily mediatised and violent confrontations of *Opération César* in October 2012 - the massive police operation to evict protesters from the site of the proposed airport - the struggle against NDDL became embroiled in a series of judicial appeals, which were punctuated by mass demonstrations and direct action in support of the ZAD. ZAD support groups were established throughout France as protesters re-occupied or rebuilt the dwellings from which they had been evicted.

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As it has emerged, the ZAD can best be characterised as a space - or rather a collection of spaces - which has challenged the divisions between work and political action, and rejected market exchanges, while prefiguring novel practices of self-sufficiency, cooperation, and alternative democracy (Pruvost, 2015, 2017). Pruvost thus describes how its practices of 'eco-construction' and 'light living' bring alternative lifestyles into being (2015, para. 63). In this way, 'everyday' practices are thus moments of politicisation. For example, the construction of huts or dwellings fulfils a material and symbolic function, providing shelter but also bringing into being the alternative future society that is advocated by the ZAD (2015, para. 64). Pruvost also underlines the complexity of the ZAD, recognising its plurality of experiences and flows, as people move in and out of its different spaces. Indeed, the ZAD is criss-crossed by clashes or cleavages, notably the different viewpoints of 'deep' and 'light' green ecologists about the use of trees for construction or the hiving off of electricity generated by nuclear power (2015, para. 69, 76).

## **STATE INTERVENTIONS**

Set against these campaigns and counter-discourses, which also challenged the logics of metropolitanisation and the very legitimacy of the French state, the national public authorities were drawn into the conflict. In order to address the growing political divisions that followed in the wake of the 2012 police eviction of the ZAD, Ayrault, who had been appointed Prime Minister in May 2012, announced the creation of a

Commission for Dialogue. The Commission duly reported in 2013, coming out in support of the new airport, provided additional environmental measures were put in place. During the next two years, local residents and campaigners launched a series of judicial and planning appeals, with each appeal challenging the proposed airport while strategically delaying its progress. In January 2015, François Hollande, the then president, announced that the construction of the airport would go ahead once all legal challenges had been exhausted. Six months later, following the rejection of all outstanding legal challenges, which had contested the impact of the proposed airport on water quality and protected species, the state began procedures to evict the ‘traditional’ residents of the ZAD. Further protest and widespread national debate about the proposed plans ensued.

So once again the national political stakes of the proposed development provoked a further presidential intervention. In February 2016, Hollande announced on national television that there would be a local referendum on the construction of the airport. Highly contested, the referendum, open to 975,000 voters across the department of Loire-Atlantique, was held in late June 2016 delivering a 55.17 per cent majority in favour of the ‘transfer’ of the existing Nantes Atlantique airport to NDDL. But, in a final twist, with the defeat of Hollande at the 2017 presidential elections, the incoming president Emmanuel Macron announced in June the launch of a national mission of mediation, which reported in December 2017. In its report, the mission did not come out in favour of any option, but it recognised the limitations of both expanding the existing airport and transferring it to NDDL. In other words, it put in place the ideological cover for Macron and his Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, to put the final nail in the coffin of the

proposed airport.

After receiving the final report, Édouard Philippe, Macron's prime minister, summarily abandoned the project on 17 January 2018, putting an end to over 50 years of struggle. Philippe immediately informed protesters to open up the barricaded roads and to end their occupation of the site by the Spring or be forcibly evicted by police (*Le Monde*, 17 January 2018). Evictions of the site began on 9 April 2018, with the ZAD calling for further mobilisations to defend the camps across the site. In its words, the ZAD declared that 'the government's political message is very clear this morning: It will allow no possibility for spaces where alternative experiments can take place' (Zone à Défendre, 2018). With this in mind, we now turn to our discussion of the relations between the ZAD and the urban renovation of the city, which was spearheaded by the city's collaborative governance. What do the struggles at NDDL add to our understanding of collaborative governance in the case of Nantes, and the model of the 'collaborative city' more generally?

## **RIVAL GREEN MODELS IN NANTES: THE 'SLOW CITY' VERSUS THE 'COLLABORATIVE CITY'**

The campaign at NDDL focused on the threats and dangers of lost farmland, biodiversity, water basins, and more importantly the collapse of a valuable form of peasant lifestyle and agriculture. Protesters and campaigners conjured up visions of a voracious and

encroaching modernisation and industrialisation that would destroy the *bocage*, its farmlands and hedges, and the valuable practices it sustained. Indeed, one activist, writing of his experience of participating in the campaign, equated the proposed airport as a crime against humanity, for ‘to follow the path of industrial development, the devourer of our nourishing lands can today be compared to a crime against humanity and against the planet Earth’ (Paysan Nantais, 2011, 4). And at NDDL, campaigners equally took issue with the lack of democratic decision-making, characterising the Public Debate in 2004 as being ‘without any real debate’, while also suggesting that the *Commission d’enquête publique*, the public inquiry, ‘totally ignored the 80 per cent of contributions opposed to the project’ (Paysan Nantais, 2011, 3). One campaigner summed up the experience of public engagement over time as ‘the setting out of points of view, but no confrontation of [these] views’, continuing that ‘there was no dialogue [...] everything was decided in advance’ (Interview with lead campaigner in ACIPA).

Significantly therefore, and in contrast to the campaigns against expansions at for example Frankfurt, Heathrow, and Munich, the issue of aviation’s impact on climate change, set alongside concerns about noise and air pollution, was not a primary mobilising demand of the movement against NDDL.<sup>2</sup> As one leading campaigner and local councillor argued, aviation’s impact on carbon emissions was ‘used very little, because it is difficult to convince [others]’ (Interview). Rather, campaigners chose repeatedly to characterise the project to construct an international airport as a ‘useless project’ and a ‘project without a future’, labelling plans ‘a Pharaoh-like project from the last century’ or ‘a project from another era’, which will be abandoned given the

constraints of peak oil for example on air travel (Coordination, 2011; Interview with local councillor). Such appeals and statements were part of an anti-statist discourse against a *dirigiste* French state, which campaigners frequently portrayed as a source of ‘waste’, both in terms of public funding and agricultural land (Solidarité Écologie, 2005; Coordination 2012). For two opponents of the new airport, the French state was indeed best characterised as a ‘crazy machine [which once] it had been started up, it was difficult to stop’ (Interview with two local green party councillors).

In fact, as relations of ‘solidarity’ began to emerge and solidify between local communities and the *Zadistes* after *Operation César*, part of the ‘glue’ that came to hold the campaign against expansion together were the intense popular demands against the establishment – struggles that are usefully characterised in terms of the ‘fight for the values of the Republic’ (Interview with leading ACIPA campaigner). In her account of the campaign against NDDL, Françoise Verchère (2016), former Mayor of Bouguenais - the site of the current Nantes Atlantique airport – thus dismisses NDDL as ‘the making of a lie by the State’. One activist thus embraced such rhetoric declaring the ‘dossier’ of NDDL to be ‘carried forward by lies’ (Interview with local activist). This anti-establishment rhetoric also evoked the spectre of narrow and closed networks of decision-making, and collusion between the state and private interests, notably Vinci, the global construction company that had won the franchise to build the proposed airport (Kempf, 2014). Advancing such claims, local campaigners acknowledged widely what they saw as closed interactions between senior civil servants and representatives of Vinci, with one campaigner stating that ‘we felt surrounded, with no way of questioning the ministry’



(Interview with ACIPA campaigner).

Of course, this is not to deny that the campaign against the airport was grounded in environmental demands, especially those concerning the alternative vision of ‘slow agriculture’, the protection of farming lands, and biodiversity. But this alternative narrative proposed a ‘more global reflection’ on an alternative mode and means of production, at least in agriculture. It was an alternative that advanced lifestyle change, new practices of food production and distribution, and the conservation of farming lands. As one ACIPA campaigner pointed out, this was a project that would ultimately tackle aviation’s climate change, but it was not about the ‘specific aspects of air transport’ and its contribution to rising carbon emissions (Interview with local campaigner). Indeed, within the campaign, the ZAD came to exercise a symbolic function as a space in which alternative lifestyles can be put into practice through taking over abandoned farms and ‘seeding the ZAD.’ Here the campaign against the new airport thus constructed its heritage and tradition through direct appeals to the famous French campaign at Larzac in the 1970s, which gained national attention as local farmers and activists sought to prevent the taking over of some 100 farms by the French army (Paysan Nantais, 2011). Indeed, one local farmer and leading campaigner at NDDL spoke of his personal engagement at Larzac with José Bové, the internationally known anti-globalisation and peasant activist (Interview with campaigner). Bové himself has publicly recognised his engagement with local farmers at NDDL since 1973 and protests at Larzac (*Libération*, 18 February 2018).

Importantly for our analysis, such demands and claims progressively tied the protection

of peasant farming or alternative models of ‘slow farming’ to a discourse of anti-modernisation, which stood in opposition to an ‘outlived logic: always further, quicker, bigger and fatter’ (Coordination, 2011). Here the ZAD and the campaign against NDDL directly challenged one of the fundamental building blocks or ‘anthropological fetishes’ of metropolitanisation, namely the ideological commitment to the acceleration of time and space. This ideology of acceleration translates in practice into a commitment to mobility, which is ‘almost promoted to the standing of a fundamental right’ (Faburel 2018, 250). As one opponent of expansion was keen to point out, ‘before they [the elites] constructed cathedrals, now they construct airports’ (Interview with opponent of NDDL airport). Advancing ‘slow living’ and ‘slow farming’, the campaign against the new international airport thus undermined the economic model of development promoted by the leadership of Nantes, articulating a rival critique of its neoliberal model of urban sustainability and its portrayal of the collaborative citizen.

### **THE ZAD IN/AGAINST THE CITY: *NANTES NÉCROPOLE* AND THE *COLLECTIF NANTAIS CONTRE L'AÉROPORT***

As environmental concerns were extended to questions of governance and political power, so the ZAD came to directly challenge the Nantes model of collaborative governance. Barbe (2017), for example, views the ZAD and Nantes Metropole not as two separate spaces, but as a ‘couple in crisis’. He underlines the complexity and ambiguity of the relations between these two political spaces, pointing to the different forms of

diffusion, circulation and transfer between them. In other words, the ZAD and Nantes Métropole influence one another in a form of ‘co-evolution’, which leads Barbe to suggest that if the ZAD ‘acts as a form of regulation of the metropole’, it would be misguided ‘to want to see nothing of the Métropole in the ZAD’ (Barbe, 2017, 1,7).

Indeed, he likens the development of NDDL to an act of colonialism, whereby the appeals to urban density and the project of a ‘compact city’ generate colonial logics in which the city provides the infrastructure for its own connectivity by exporting their negativities and externalities into areas and spaces that are not its own. So, while the two images and narratives of Nantes seemed increasingly divided and in opposition to each other, as the rhetoric on both sides of the divide became increasingly antagonistic, Barbe argues that many people in Nantes have also crossed over into the ZAD and *vice versa*. Citizens and protesters have thus moved in and out of these different spaces, while crossing and transgressing boundaries. Cultural and political forms thus circulate and migrate, rather than being confined to one particular location or milieu (Barbe, 2017, 7).

The displacement of the ZAD’s opposition to the airport into a questioning of the dominant narrative of metropolitanisation was voiced by members of *Nantes Nécropole* and the *Collectif Nantais Contre l’Aéroport* (CNCA) which regrouped informal networks of militants who regularly visited the ZAD but remained living in the city. CNCA – the Nantes collective against the airport – was formed in 2010, with the aim of bringing the struggle against NDDL into the heart of the practices of urban governance across Nantes (Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Ross, 2018, 24-5). Having organised demonstrations in

the city in support of the ZAD and the campaign of local residents against airport expansion, the CNCA broadened its struggle in 2016 to challenge what it deemed to be the logic of metropolitanisation or ‘the planning of the city and the discourse that drives it forward, as well as the planning of the rest of our lives.’ This strategic transformation positioned NDDL as part of a broader project to transform the city of Nantes and its leadership of the city-region, with the CNCA accepting that ‘you cannot fight against this airport without fighting against the world that goes with it’ (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (a)). The politically-charged naming of its mobilising campaign forum, *Nantes Nécropole*, a deliberate play on Nantes Métropole, the collaborative vehicle of Nantes and surrounding municipalities, denigrated the aspirations of metropolitanisation. Indeed, the Nantes project was equated to that of a ‘necro-polis’, literally a ‘city for the dead’, an ancient cemetery with large tombs and monuments (arguably epitomised in this case by regeneration projects such as Ile de Nantes and the planned airport at NDDL).

In this way, the supporters of *Nantes Nécropole* have drawn equivalences between the struggles against NDDL and the various demands that have contested the new urban project for Nantes, which was instigated by the Ayrault system. The proposed construction of the new airport was defined as ‘only a little part, a symptom of a much larger project: that of the [...] métropole engaged in the [project of] territorial competition, itself induced by global capitalism’ (*Nantes Nécropole*, spring 2013, 2). Opponents to expansion foregrounded the alleged ‘collective intoxication of politics and the economy’, arguing that the ‘real economic reason [for the project] ... is the real estate operation [to redevelop the Ile de Nantes]’ (Interview with opponent of NDDL

expansion). Put in these terms, leading campaigners dismissed the growing economic concentration in France's metropolitan areas, and they underlined how NDDL represented the outcome of an ideological and political decision, which was backed by the French state, to combine 'urban metropolises [and] large infrastructural projects', so as to 'equip the territory' against global competition (Interview with ACIPA campaigner; interview with Green councillor).

The overriding demands of neoliberal globalisation thus feature strongly in the popular rhetoric of *Nantes Nécropole* (see *Nantes Nécropole*, spring 2014, 19), where it is asserted, for example, that the logic of metropolitanisation is firmly linked with the city's desire for 'attractiveness' and competitiveness, such that 'our history, our desires to celebrate, to cooperate, our creativity and even our ways of living are put forward to attract the investor, the "high tech" enterprise, the tourist and the senior manager and his good family' (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (b)). More precisely, the fight against NDDL has become one particular struggle against the general practices of urban development and planning, where the latter are then equated to struggles against the 'state of emergency [imposed by President Hollande after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris], colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism' (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (a)). Indeed, it is claimed that such logics even penetrate to the production and regulation of the self, in which 'our spirits are little by little contaminated by this mercantilist ideology that transforms us all into little investors wearing ties' (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (b)).

In turn, the CNCA campaign has contested the very myth of the 'Nantes game' and the

'brand' associated with the rejuvenation of Nantes. Anything or anyone, particularly the poor and migrants, which did not fit into this neoliberal vision, it argued, were subject to a 'repression without mercy' and punitive forms of securitisation in and across the city (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (b)). Its populist rhetoric thus dismisses Nantes' view of itself as an 'entrepreneurial city', making much of its aims to redesign the city to attract 'young dynamic managers' while portraying the city as a 'city that wants to be as clean and smooth as the population it wants to attract' (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (a)). This external branding of Nantes and its promotion as a 'successful city', rather than any economic regeneration, is deemed by *Nantes Nécropole* to be the most significant achievement of the Ayrault system, with the 'coherence of its metropolitan narrative making more than one advertising agency drool' as politicians are themselves reduced to leaders of a 'vast communications agency' (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (b)). Indeed, it directly challenges the Nantes myth, arguing that 'for us, Nantes is not the leading city where it is good to live. It is but a town like any other' (Nantes Nécropole, n.d. (a)). In short, the demands against neoliberalisation and metropolitanisation were not framed simply as an extension of the campaign against NDDL – a supplement of the real thing as it were - but as the *essence* of the campaign itself.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our article has discerned the emergence of two models of the green city in Nantes during the last two or three decades. Our analysis of these two models challenges the dominant

interpretations of urban governance. On the one hand, we put into question overly optimistic accounts of the inclusionary outcomes of urban collaborative governance. Instead, we have underlined the ‘messy’ and contingent hegemonic politics of collaborative governance, while drawing attention to the place-based narratives, competing identities and projects that are part and parcel of its constitution. In doing so, we have stressed the political construction of collaborative rules and norms, and how the reproduction of collaborative practices rests on the drawing of boundaries and internal and external exclusions. But, on the other hand, we have also highlighted the (potential) and actual politicisation of practices of consensual governance and their transformation into ‘public spaces of opposition’. Indeed, we have demonstrated how the different practices of collaboration are contested and transgressed by those social forces, whose very exclusion helped to forge the collective identity of collaboration in the first instance.

We first described how the political leadership of the Green Capital of 2013 used its novel articulation of sustainability and attractiveness to try and negate opposition to the construction of the new airport at NDDL. We also showed that although the ‘Nantes model’ contains a number of democratic potentialities, which can yield important environmental benefits and advances, it is also marked by new hierarchies and exclusions that may run counter to its eco-egalitarian ideals. We then focused attention on the highly politicised environmental campaign against the building of a new international airport at NDDL on the outskirts of the city. In our view, the campaign against the new airport has come to function as a popular and symbolic struggle against economic boosterism, public-private partnerships, and internationalisation more generally. It thus reveals some

of the emergent tensions and contradictions in the dominant model of urban governance, while also exposing the democratic limits of collaborative governance *à la Nantaise*.

But we have also shown that the struggles at NDDL have begun to *prefigure* alternative models of living, organisation, and sustainable urban development, whose new ideals and patterns of social life run counter to the vision of the Nantes metropolitan authorities. In one sense, of course, talk of the ‘slow city’ in this context is paradoxical. This is because the genesis of the ‘slow city’ emerged outside the ‘normal’ urban context of Nantes. In certain respects, therefore, the struggle against NDDL could be characterised as a rural social movement that was opposed to the city. Nonetheless, at the same time, its ideals, logics and organisational forms – ideas of ‘the commons’, slow living and slow food, organic production, new forms of exchange, and so forth – have been progressively taken-up and displaced to Nantes itself, in which case the movement of the countryside has led to a questioning of the dominant logics of urban governance and policy. We have also shown how various resonances and equivalences have been established between the ZAD and social movements within the citadel itself.

Yet here, inevitably, new questions begin to appear. Is the counter-discourse of the ‘slow city’ that arises from the long-standing protest movement a feasible and viable vision of organising social relations in an age of neoliberal globalisation? Or is its significance restricted to the more realistic function of problematising and bringing about a rethink of the dominant logics and ideals of urban governance? In this way, the ‘slow city’ would cast new light on its tensions and contradictions, thus making possible changes in the



current visions of the collaborative city. The answers to such questions are currently being answered in the daily struggles and self-organising practices of the denizens of Nantes themselves. How they will evolve – and which model will become hegemonic – will be shaped by the intersection of the new configuration of local, national and global forces that are now shaping Nantes and French society more generally.

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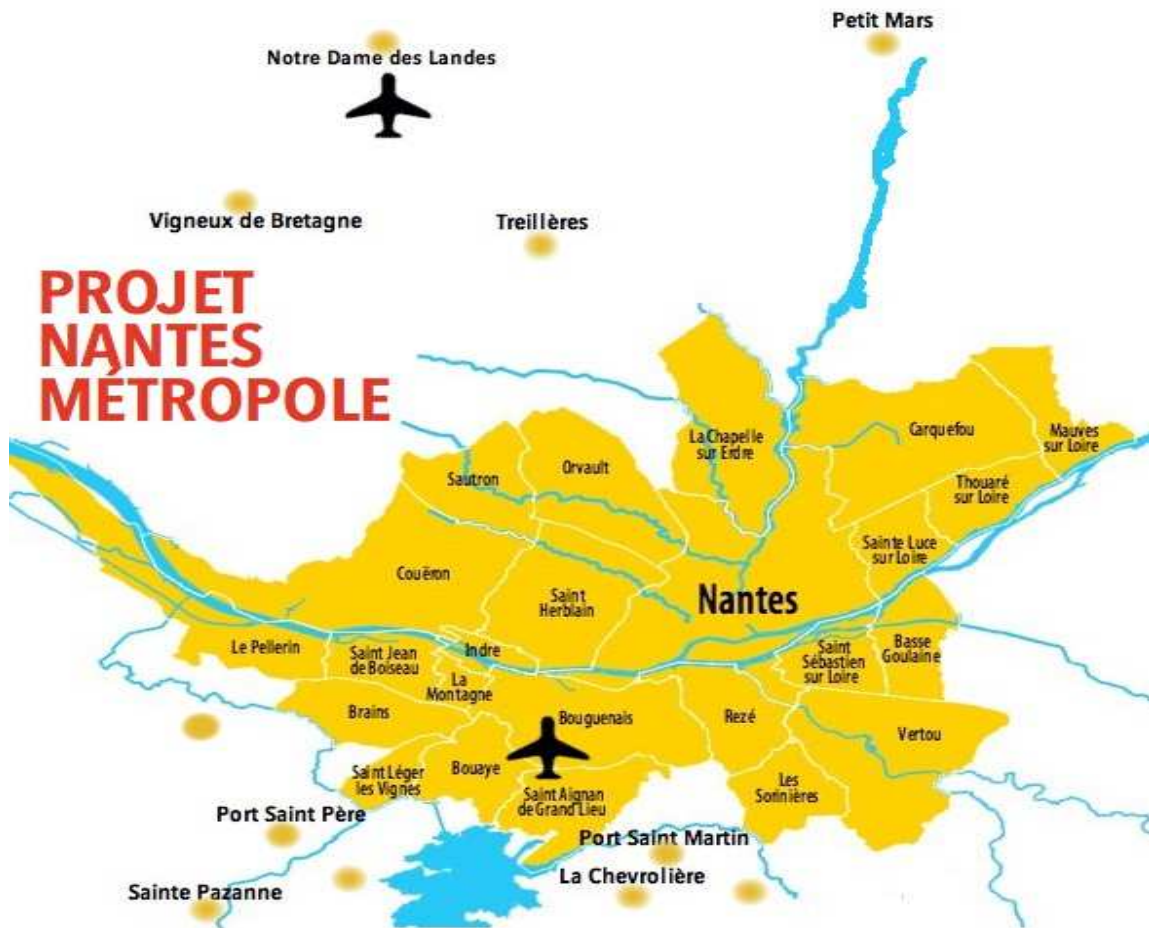
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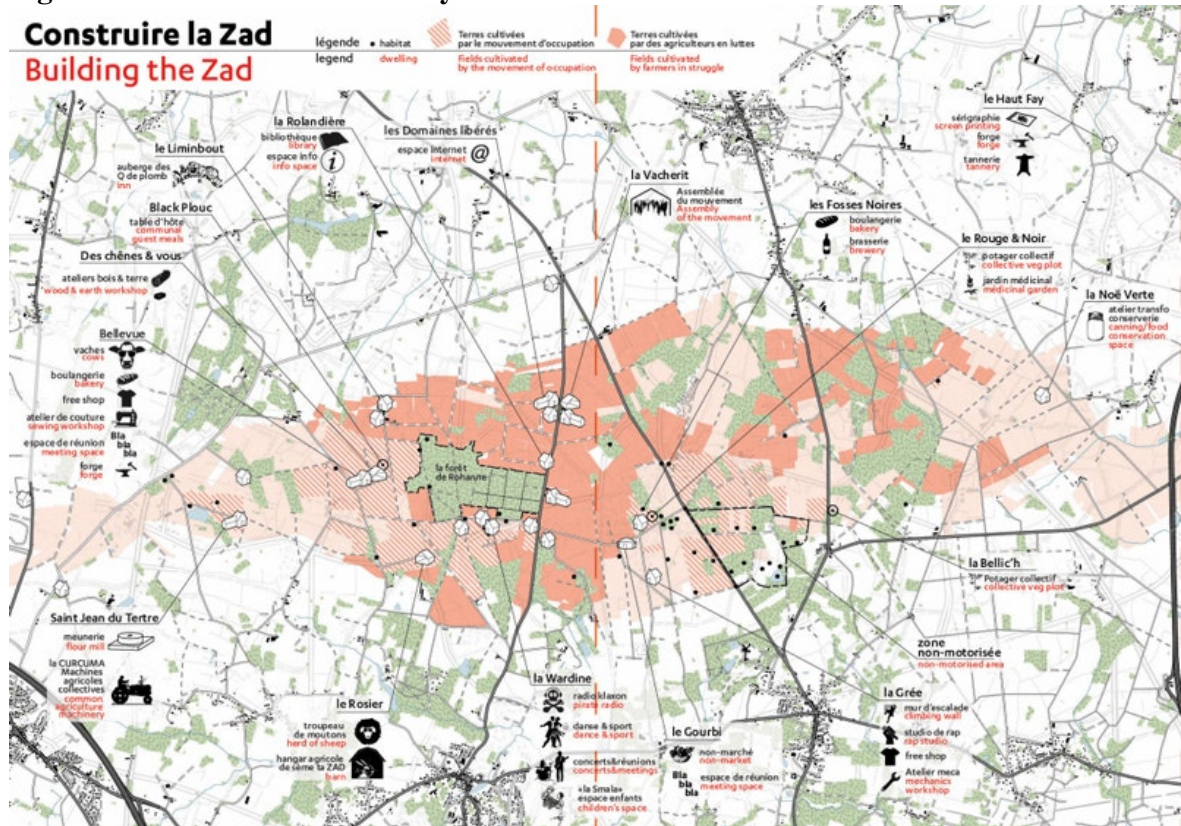


Figure 1: The Proposed Transfer of Nantes Airport to Notre-Dame-des-Landes



Source: Gilblog; shaded area depicts the boundaries of Nantes Métropole

Figure 2: The Zad in the Countryside of NDDL



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the website of the ZAD occupation, <http://zad.nadir.org/?lang=en> (accessed 09 August 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The struggles at NDDL are thus more akin to those at Sanrizuka/Narita in Japan and the campaigns at Manchester and Stansted, i.e. more rural campaigns concerned with the impact of aviation on the land and countryside.