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Public places and empty spaces: dislocation, urban renewal and the death of a French plaza

Abstract: This article examines the dislocations and tensions produced when competing understandings around the meaning and function of public space come into contact. Focusing on Montpellier, France, where an urban renewal program has seen significant portions of the city-centre renovated, the article considered the breaking apart of a North African commercial cluster under the guide of French heritage protection action. Arguing that such action is tied not only to municipal urban politics, but also to wider trajectories that place diverse identities in a separate category, I will trace the process through which one of the plazas encompassed in the urban renewal program has come to be labelled as ‘empty’ and ‘dead’ space by neighbourhood and municipal actors alike. Suggesting that the relocation of a well-used, diverse outdoor food market is an instance in which public space has been deliberately emptied of its social and civic function, the article concludes by arguing that such sites are better defined as ‘municipal spaces’, entities that are firmly in the real of the state, rather than local publics.

Keywords: public space, urban redevelopment, empty space, heritage protection, food markets, France.

Introduction:

This paper examines the dislocations and tensions produced when competing understandings around the meaning and function of public space come into contact. My focus is Montpellier, France, where a city-centre plaza – known as the Plan Cabanes – has become a point of public contention in the municipality’s heritage-protection led urban renewal program. A key node for Montpellier’s North African community, and important public space for the surrounding neighbourhood, the Plan Cabanes and its diverse outdoor food market had been the social and commercial link of a wider network of ethnic stores, cafes, restaurants, and cultural activities (Faure, 1998). The relocation of the market to a nearby parking lot in 2005, and subsequent installation of an antiques and used book market in its place, had seen relations fractured between plaza users and the municipality, and witnessed the neighbourhood’s affiliation with ethnic commerce and cultural activities disjointed. Particularly in an instance when heritage protection-led urban redevelopments in France have been associated with the homogenization of neighbourhoods (Bacqué, 2006; Clerval, 2008) and realignment of public space function with state objectives (Tomas, 2004; Bosredon and Dumas, 2013), events in Montpellier’s Plan Cabanes plaza are revealing of the disparate visions and competing power dynamics embedded in production of such spaces.

Taking this case study as a starting point, this article will consider the rhetoric surrounding French urban renewal programs and how they intersects with conceptualizations of who constitutes the ‘public’ that public spaces are designed to serve. Montpellier’s Plan Cabanes is poignant in two respects. First, the relocation of ethnic commerce in favour of French antiques, and the resulting erasure of certain cultural uses (reference to be inserted after peer review), situate the Plan Cabanes within wider French debates on the racialization of public space (Simon, 2003; Dikeç, 2007) and

the assiduous labelling of immigrant identities as problematic in the public sphere (Jennings, 2000; Weil, 2010). And second, the process of urban renewal has arguably failed in Montpellier. As will be outlined in this article, following the relocation of the outdoor food market in 2005, the previously dense usage of the Plan Cabanes collapsed, with the refurbished plaza and its new antiques market persistently identified as ‘dead’ space and ‘empty’ space by community members, municipal actors, and market goers alike. Still a point of contention many years after the renovations, the beautifully finished limestone-lined Plan Cabanes plaza is claimed by a range of local groups, yet it is seemingly used by few.

Arguing that the relocation of the outdoor market is a political act, one not only tied to municipal urban renewal politics, but also to wider trajectories that place diverse identities in a separate category (Ross, 1996; Simon, 2003; Wacquant, 2006), this article will interrogate the labels of ‘empty’ and ‘dead’ space attached to the Plan Cabanes as indicative of a public space being deliberately emptied of its civic function. The article will first consider how urban renewal programs in France have dealt with public space redevelopment, and will contextualize these into broader discourses surrounding heritage-protection measures and the function of outdoor food markets to the formation of community spaces. Drawing on ethnographic, interview, and archival materials, I will then examine the process of market relocation in three phases. First, the function of market spaces as sites of social and cultural activity – what market goers describe as ‘animation’ – will be outlined in relation to the Plan Cabanes. Then, the logic informing municipally-led redevelopment will be delineated, with attention to the vocabulary deployed by urban planners in relation to public space. And finally, the labels of ‘empty’ space and ‘dead’ space, as used by those adamant that public space no longer exists in a meaningful way in the Plan Cabanes, will be examined. The article concludes by arguing that emptiness is a political category, one indicative of broader French political visions of public space as ethnically-blind (Nacu, 2012), which in this case have led to the death of the Plan Cabanes as a public plaza.

Municipal interventions, outdoor markets, and public space:

In the intersection of public space management and French heritage-led urban renewal, outdoor markets play a particular role. Often seen as integral to the formation of coherent and lively public spaces, outdoor markets are used by municipal governments to draw out residents and visitors into key public spaces (Mayol, 1998; Mazzella and Roudil, 1998), allow for economic, social and cultural exchanges (Peraldi, 1999; Bava, 2002; de la Pradelle, 2006), and encourage active interactions with neighbours and the space of the city more broadly. The market as a municipally governed entity is a representation of local policy and politics, and a place where neighbourhood engagement is formed. Taking up these points in a wider study of identity, cultural politics and urban renewal in France, Chevalier (1994) details the redevelopment of Les Halles in central Paris from a wholesale food market into a shopping mall. While in some instances municipal involvement in public space planning can produce well frequented public spaces centred on outdoor markets (Black, 2005; Chevalier, 2007), in Chevalier’s (1994) view the relocation of Les Halles had the opposite effect: a cultural practice that permitted the assimilation of a diversity of local and regional actors with a focus on food

selling, bartering, informal exchange, and discount commerce, was replaced with one centred on clothing sales, higher price-point goods, tourism, and the semi-public spaces associated with malls (Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo, 2009). Friction between municipal policy and the lived experience of the city unseated a defined form of cultural usage and produced what Ross (1996), following Chevalier (1994), describes as a more exclusive form of public engagement.

A similar trajectory is outlined by Zukin (1995) in her examination of a redeveloped New York City market. Describing the contest as one of street-peddlers versus the municipality, Zukin (1995) details the conversion of an informal Harlem flea market into a more strictly controlled and monitored indoor vending site made up of defined stalls, controlled entry points, and closer oversight of vendors. Through this, Zukin (1995) forms two key conclusions: that a certain social order is implicitly being set out through the renovation process; and that the seeming attack on street and market vendors puts to question who actually belongs in the public sphere of New York City. Considering the daily struggles of book vendors on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village in New York, Duneier (1999) further suggests that the introduction of private security, and attempts to discipline the 'chaos' of sidewalk life by moving on those selling lower-price point goods, speaks to a narrow vision of how public life should be structured. It would seem that in both the New York and Paris cases, the municipal bodies who initiated renovations sought to create a new form of public space which carried a single usage, function, and arguably meaning. The complex relations resulting from tourists meeting legal and illegal vendors in Harlem and Greenwich Village, and the layers of socio-economic interaction between wholesalers, working-class, and middle-class residents in Les Halles, speak to the sort of multi-level, nuanced function of public space promoted by Jane Jacobs (1961). This vision of a messy and not easily regulated public sphere stands in stark contrast to the types of interactions expected of the shopping-mall-like atmosphere created in each location following municipal intervention.

If public space can be understood as a site open to a diversity of users (Mitchell and Staeheli, 2006) and one through which different groups can establish a visible and viable presence in the public sphere (Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri, 2014), the reordering of such sites through municipal intervention raises questions about how notions of 'the public' are envisioned (Mitchell, 2003). For Smith and Low (2006) the state has a central role in promoting a broad definition of 'the public', and as Staeheli, Mitchell, and Nagel (2009) outline, this may lead to a conflation of political goals and civic visions. Drawing on a case study in Berkley, Mitchell (2003) argues that the complicity of the local authorities in limiting access to those labelled as 'inappropriate' users forcefully demonstrates the exclusive nature of public spaces. Taking up Lefebvre's (1996) notion of right to the city, Mitchell (2003) suggests that unequal access to public space prevents some from staking a claim to the city, and by extension to the political, social, and legal rights entailed in civic citizenship. The right to the city – or the right to occupy, use, and appropriate public space – means not only being able to shape the aesthetic appearance of urban space (Mattila, 2002) but also being able to influence political decision making (Harvey, 2003) and claiming a right to an identity that may differ from the mainstream (Dikeç, 2002).

In France, where urban renewal programs frequently include provisions for the redesign of public spaces, questions around who is imagined as the intended audience for

such alterations are notable. Examining the Goutte d'Or neighbourhood of Paris, Bacqué (2006) argues that political involvement in the urban renewal process has narrowed the range of users: the superimposition of a French heritage theme on this well-established, diverse market area has seen the visible presence of immigrant groups reduced and the Goutte d'Or subsumed into the wider Parisian housing and tourist market. Focused on heritage protection processes in Bordeaux, Tomas (2004) notes that such designations too readily allow public space to be identified with state interests, which Boserdon and Dumas (2013) view as the first phase of purposeful and wholesale neighbourhood change. Similarly, Clerval (2008) details the disruptions of so-termed 'exotic' commerce in Paris through the selective enforcement of municipal public space bylaws, and argues that such reorganizations of city spaces amount to a form of state-led gentrification (Clerval and Fleury, 2007; Clerval, 2011) – a viewpoint also adopted by Linossier, Russeil, and Zepf (2004) and Gillot, Maffi, and Trémon (2013), amongst others (Poirrier, 2003; Devisme and Nicolas, 2013). In these contexts, social or physical exclusion from public space narrows the definition of citizenship through spatial disenfranchisement (Ross, 1996), and makes the public sphere more the purview of municipal interests than a site which reflects the ideas, experiences, and desires of citizens (Purcell, 2006; Smith and Low, 2006).

At issue is not simply the invisibility of certain users from all public spaces in the city, but rather their seeming exclusion from the central, high-frequency sites which link key political, economic, and social venues. The sense of 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996) publics, of a form of public space usage which is not suited for city-centre locations, intersects in France with specific visions of the racialization of public space (Ross, 1996; Bava, 2000; Dikeç, 2002; Clerval, 2011). The relocation of the Belsunce market away from Marseille's historic city centre in 1984 can provide a useful glimpse into the interaction of urban policy, the right to appropriate key city spaces, and the politicization of ethnic identity. An important Mediterranean port and France's second largest city, Marseille underwent extensive redevelopment in the 1980s and 1990s that saw interventions in housing, economic, and social conditions, and the application of new heritage-protection codes in the city centre (Savitch, 2011). The relocation of the Belsunce market, which occupied several buildings and streets in the city-centre, to a more peripheral location, featured prominently – and controversially – in the process. The market generated considerable turnover and profit (Tarrus, 2002), and was a key reception site for migrants from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa (Koné, 1995), frequently providing a first employment opportunity in France that allowed individuals to become regularized in one way, that is to enter, occupy, and legitimately use public space (Mazzella and Roudil, 1998). Yet while the market evidently fulfilled a social, economic, and community function (Peraldi, 1999), these values were not recognized in the Marseille's urban renewal discourses. Rather, Belsunce was labeled as 'economic blight', and the surrounding neighbourhood associated with insalubrious housing and living conditions (Tarrus, 1995; Mazzella and Roudil, 1998; Peraldi, 1999).

The relocation of the Belsunce market, and the breaking apart of this community node, speaks to the homogenization of public space in France, and the capacity of heritage-led urban renewal programs to purposefully erase urban diversity (reference to be inserted after publication). In an instance where immigration discourses in France are increasingly polarized and politicized (Mitchell, 2011), and notion of 'ethnic difference'

regarded with considerable scepticism (Freedman, 2004), this re-ordering of public space also demonstrates the increasing marginalization of diversity from key public spaces (Weil, 2005). Marseille's Belsunce market is not unique in this regard, with similar process at play in Paris (Ross, 1996; Bacqué, 2006; Garbin and Millington, 2012), Lyon (Devisme and Nicolas, 2013), amongst others (Amiriaux and Simon, 2006; Bresson, 2007). The processes afoot in Montpellier's Plan Cabanes neighbourhood are, therefore, indicative of wider trends that seeks to divest public space of its diverse identities, and use the notation of urban renewal and heritage-protection to create a singular vision of form and usage. The unique aspect of Montpellier as a case study is in the evident failure of such processes to achieve their goal, with 'renewed' space labelled 'dead' space, and the Plan Cabanes plaza seeing its status in the city decline.

Setting the context:

Montpellier is situated in south-central France, set between the Mediterranean coast and the brushlands of the Cevennes Mountains, two hours west of Marseille. It is the 7th largest city in France with a population just over 250,000 – or 430,000 in the greater Montpellier area – and has an economy based on tourism, the high-tech sector with Dell and IBM present, viticulture, tertiary education, and medical and agrarian research. It is one of the fastest growing urban areas in France, frequently outpacing other large cities, with the result that managing growth has become a key focus for municipal politics. In addition, Montpellier spends nearly €60-million annually on cultural planning (Abrial, 2016), and has made the insertion of new artistic, athletic, and cultural amenities into existing neighbourhoods a key facet of its urban redevelopment strategy. My interest in Montpellier stems from the overlap of these factors: rapid urban expansion, paired with considerable attention to cultural programming, have meant that in the last few decades Montpellier has witnessed a wholesale physical and cultural re-imagining of its urban landscapes (Volle, Viala, Négrier, and Bernié-Boissard, 2010).

Amongst the more recent of Montpellier's municipal urban redevelopment programs is the expansive Mission Grand Coeur project, whose impact on the city's Plan Cabanes plaza is under consideration in this paper. Initiated in 2002, the Mission Grand Coeur seeks to intervene in the residential, commercial, and cultural fabric of the historic city-centre and its surroundings (Mission Grand Coeur, 2016). As part of this program, new heritage protection measures have been introduced in the *faubourg* – the 19th century neighbourhoods surrounding the medieval city centre, including the Plan Cabanes – with a view to preserving Montpellier's architectural heritage. This has included the introduction of mandatory façade renovation programs, the careful management of building colour schemes, and the synchronization of street furniture and public space amenities, amongst other initiatives. The Mission Grand Coeur has also introduced subsidies to support the upgrading of residential units, new directives to encourage the establishment of what it terms 'high-quality' commerce, and put in place infrastructure for a new tram line. The program's mandate is the effective expansion of Montpellier's historic centre, a processes which has subsumed the previously distinctive *faubourg* into the already renovated medieval city. This has led to considerable tensions between residents, local businesses, and the municipality, particularly in the Plan Cabanes where well-established ethnic commercial and social networks have been disrupted. The result

has been a divisive situation that has played out in the media and regional political discourse, with questions raised around whose heritage is being recognized in municipal policies, and the emblematic Plan Cabanes plaza – renovated by the Mission Grand Coeur in the late 2000s – labelled a site empty of meaning.

The findings presented in paper are based on 10-months of research in the Plan Cabanes neighbourhood. This involved ethnographic fieldwork in the Plan Cabanes plaza, surrounding public spaces, and key neighbourhood social and commercial areas, along with 21 semi-structured interviews with market vendors, municipal actors, local business owners, community activists, local artists and cultural actors, and residents. Fieldwork also involved the analysis of urban renewal documents, and research in the municipal archives to examine the trajectory of urban redevelopment policy in Montpellier. While in the Plan Cabanes, I frequently took a walking-while-talking approach (Anderson, 2004), where residents, vendors, shop owners, and plaza users lead me on a tour of their neighbourhood, detailing their personal memories of the area and commenting on how the Plan Cabanes neighbourhood and their relationship with the plaza have changed. As Crane and Kusek (2014) note, the ethnographic process reproduces a form of reality, and one which has the potential to perpetuate stereotypes (Small, 2015). With these points in mind, interviews and walking tours were also opportunities to discuss research approaches and speak about the representation of participants' quotidian realities in academic text (Clark, Holland, Katz, and Peace, 2009). All interviews were conducted in French and have been translated to English by the author.

Market relocation and public space disruptions

Set north-west of the city centre, the Plan Cabanes plaza has functioned as a market space for over a century. It is the meeting point between two *faubourgs*: its namesake Plan Cabanes neighbourhood, with Haussmannian-style mid-rise apartment buildings; and Figuerolles, made up of former agrarian houses with distinctive loft barns and garden water-wells. Originally home to agricultural labourers and managers, these neighbourhoods welcomed political migrants from Spain and Portugal in the mid-20th century, repatriates from Algeria in the 1960s, and labour migrants from North Africa into the 1970s. As the *faubourgs* transformed, so too did the Plan Cabanes plaza and its long-standing market, with the appearance of diverse foodstuff and household goods into the 1970s, and the addition of more market stalls into the 1980s. By the 1990s the Plan Cabanes outdoor market had gained a reputation for an unparalleled variety of merchandise and affordable prices (Besombes-Vailhe, 1995), and developed into a key node for the city's North African community (Prat, 1994). With upwards of 50 market stalls, and a surrounding network of bakeries, restaurants, halal shops, hair salons, and cafes, the Plan Cabanes effectively functioned as a secondary city-centre for Montpellier (Faure, 1998).

Prior to redevelopment, the plaza and its market were a commercial and social hub, as this interview participant explained:

It [Plan Cabanes] was the heart of the neighbourhood, we could say, it was the centre of the village. In the morning there was the market, and then in the

afternoon when the vendors from the market left, the plaza was used by lots of people, the *Chibanis*¹, the workers who came out [...]. There was an incredible surge of people. (Neighbourhood business owner, Montpellier).

The Plan Cabanes and its market was not simply part of the neighbourhood fabric, but rather the heart of the neighbourhood – one indivisible from the other. The attraction of the space lay in its ability to draw in people, create a “surge” as the speaker describes, that included vendors, shoppers, those who stopped by to socialize, others who strolled through the market, and a diversity of cultural, economic, and social uses. On busy weekend shopping days, the stalls would fill the length of the plaza, with vendors inching onto sidewalks, and local cafes stretched their tables to border the stalls.

Long-time vendors noted that the Plan Cabanes attracted shoppers from surrounding villages seeking diverse products, with the market offering a range of halal foods, and an array of consumables and household items not available in Montpellier’s farmers markets, nor in supermarkets. On a walking-while-talking tour in the plaza, one resident explained that she could arrive in the Plan Cabanes on any given day and expect to see fresh produce and cheese, olives and breads, and also wholesalers who offered almonds by the kilogram, and others who sold consignment clothes and discounted electronics, alongside many other items. With the loss of the market, her experience had become more disparate, sending her to other corners of the city in search of products, which rarely proved as affordable. Several vendors noted that the length of the plaza allowed them to set up wider and longer stands and bring in an even greater variety of merchandise, resulting in considerable turnover and profits, especially on weekends when additional cashiers were brought in to help. Many participants emphasized that there were lots of people, not just shoppers, but many others who would hang about and chat, using empty produce pallets as seating, and converting plaza features (steps, curbs, tree borders) into social nodes. As one vendor noted, this build up of people and activity was seen as a particular benefit of the Plan Cabanes:

Because the market is a public space you see. Even, even, the vendors, even the produce vendors, what I mean is it gives them a very good image. Because if you, you are passing by [the Plan Cabanes], you pass by and you see all these people in the middle of the market. You are going to say to yourself, hey, maybe there is something to see. (Produce vendor 1, Montpellier)

In this vendor’s view the crowds of people attract more people, leading to increasing foot-fall and a heightened sociability. Residents and former Plan Cabanes vendors echoed this sentiment, with many noting that the attraction of this market centred on two, interconnected factors: a wide selection, in terms of the variety and price range of goods on sale; and an informal mode of sociability, with many market users expecting to see friends and acquaintances, and stop for a chat or coffee. Commodity exchange in effect functioned as a vehicle for social exchange (Jackson, 1998), and the flexibility of the space – the expanse of the plaza and its ability to accommodate both formal and informal trading – further contributed to cementing this as a key neighbourhood site.

¹ Chibani(a)s: a term used to refer to elder North African men and women who migrated to France in the 1960s.

The relocation of the Plan Cabanes market in 2005 was met with vocal opposition on the part of users and local actors. Initially, the move to a nearby parking-lot-turned plaza was presented as temporary, a necessary shift to allow for renovations to the Plan Cabanes' tarmac, and technical updates to support an expanded tramway network (Midi Libre, 2006). However, several months and multiple municipal debates later, the relocation was made permanent, and the Plan Cabanes market re-established two blocks away from its namesake plaza². In the process, the market was reduced in size – from 50 vendors in the Plan Cabanes, to a dozen in the new location – and the range of foodstuff and goods on offer noticeably reduced. Some neighbourhood residents described the process as a painful breaking apart of an established social milieu, one that has seen not only the loss of an important shopping space, but also the associated cultural practices. The impact on the Plan Cabanes neighbourhood, and on the vitality of individual market stalls, has been considerable, as a relocated produce vendor explained:

We enliven the neighbourhoods, it's true that by moving us from there [Plan Cabanes] to here [parking-lot-turned plaza], the vendors have, they had to pay for it. They felt a drop in activity, they did lose, it's true. We dealt with a lot more business back there [Plan Cabanes], there was a neighbourhood dynamic that is, that, that is dead, back there the neighbourhood, the shops, they, little by little they close. (Produce vendor 3, Montpellier)

The relocation of the market, and the loss of associated social synergies, has in the perspective of this interviewee killed ("dead") the neighbourhood itself. This downward dynamic has been recognized by the municipality who have, in an effort to retain some form of commerce, installed a new antiques and book market in the newly renovated Plan Cabanes in 2007.

The replacement of diverse food stuff with French antiques, particularly in view of broader French cultural politics and exclusionary discourses (reference to be inserted after peer review) has been viewed with considerable suspicion. Rather than support a comparable social and commercial hub, the handful of vendors who take part in the new antiques and used books markets have suggested that their venture attracts few clients, with those who do pass through rarely making notable purchases (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 around here]

Many explained that they joined the new antiques and book market out of sense of camaraderie – many vendors are part of the same book sellers' association, and lunch together at a communal table in the middle of the plaza – and because there are few other trading spaces open for this sector in Montpellier. In response to my question on how the antiques market functioned in the renovated Plan Cabanes plaza, one vendor commented with considerable sarcasm: "It's not your bread and butter, if I lived off this I might even get thin"(Antiques vendor 2, Plan Cabanes). For several other antiques and book vendors, participation in this new Plan Cabanes market complimented a much more profitable

² In the summer of 2016, more than a decade after the initial relocation, the city of Montpellier suggested that the outdoor market may be permitted to return to the Plan Cabanes plaza at some point in the near future (Midi Libre, 2016).

online business or participation in larger, professional antiques fairs. Most of them had known the plaza for many years, and readily commented on the silence of their antiques market in comparison to the way the Plan Cabanes had been used before renovations.

While commercial activity can sometimes enclose public spaces, converting them into semi-public exclusively used sites (Németh, 2009), the overlay of shopping and social interaction outlined in this section suggests that this is not always the case (cf Low, 2010). The presence of market stalls and vendors instead opened up the Plan Cabanes, encouraging levels of participation in the pre-2005 food market that are simply not reproduced in the newly established antiques market – even though both of these occupy the same plaza. The renovation of the plaza, along with changes to the type and expanse of vending, has seemingly altered the function of public space itself.

Re-designing public space

Residents, vendors, and local shopkeepers draw on similar vocabulary to describe the markets: enlivened space, heart of the neighbourhood, with emphasis on shoppers, gawkers and people passing through, and a heightened sense of sociability. These depictions of public space have less to do with the physical structure of plazas, and much more with the socio-cultural milieu produced through the intertwining of market commerce and informal interaction. The vocabulary deployed by urban planners and municipal actors relies on a different set of factors: it emphasizes the legal codes associated with the renovation of plazas, streets, and parks, and issues of aesthetics, transportation links, and landscape continuity through the network of public spaces in Montpellier. As a result public space is conceived, to draw on Lefebvre's (1991) vocabulary, in terms of technical and physical requirements – an approach that seems to have limited intersections with the interaction-filled descriptions of many market users.

The term 'public space' crops up frequently in municipal documents. The *Plan Local d'Urbanisme* (the local urban planning guide, hereby PLU) notes that "quality public space planning contributes to the social and economic vitality, and animation, of the city-centre" (PLU, 2011, 37; my translation) and that nodal public spaces "constitute important urban symbols from which the surrounding neighbourhood can draw a further sense of identity" (PLU, 2011, 52; my translation) by facilitating "residents' appropriation of their daily space" (PLU, 2011, 53; my translation). While the terms 'neighbourhood', 'vitality' and 'appropriation' hint at a social element to public space planning, the details that follow provide some curious directions on how this may be achieved. The focus is on ensuring uniformity throughout the city-centre, renovating facades, improving the sites that will welcome new tram stops, and establishing water fountains and public artwork. The implicit suggestion being that careful design is central to developing successful public spaces, and further, that good design would lead to the sort of neighbourhood vitality outlined in the PLU.

Montpellier's *Charte de l'Espace Public* (public space charter, available for consultation in draft format as of 2012) assumes a similar approach, and emphasizes the creation of a seamless visual impression of the city through the use of specific materials, colours, and types of vegetation. What the *Charte* denotes as 'public space vocabulary' includes subsections on locally sourced marble, trees characteristic of southern France, the use of the city's emblem on street furniture, along with notes on sidewalk height,

spacing between trees and benches, and discussion of appropriate street-side potted plants. The *Charte*, together with the PLU, specifies a hierarchy of urban spaces for Montpellier: there are level-1 spaces which includes main plazas and streets, level-2 for shopping streets and transport axis; and level-3 for locally used streets and smaller shopping districts (Archive de la Ville de Montpellier 625W4, July 2003). Examples of each level's material and colour schemes are on display at the city's urban redevelopment office, where subcontractors, architects, and residents are encouraged to interact with blocks of limestone and paint samples. With the Plan Cabanes redevelopment, the plaza's original asphalt tarmac and concrete edging (comparable to level-3 spaces) has been replaced by sandy coloured limestone and branded street furniture that matches the materials used in the medieval city-centre (a level-1 space). Through the redevelopment process the Plan Cabanes has thus seen its ranking in the city's hierarchy of urban spaces increased, and the plaza effectively usurped by the historic city-centre. If the PLU defines public spaces as having symbolic value for Montpellier, the changes witnessed in the Plan Cabanes plaza speak to the municipality's desire to alter the way this space relates to the historic centre and to the urban landscape more broadly.

Yet, the public space vocabulary of the *Charte* has a notable gap: there is scant mention of people alongside the pages and pages of notes on design requirements, and little sense of how residents might perceive the selected materials. In an instance where a key goal of the PLU is to encourage residents to appropriate their neighbourhood (PLU, 2011, 53), the strict rules governing the materiality of public space seem to leave limited opportunities to do so. Graffiti is certainly banned, but so is the usage of bright storefront signs, visible air conditioning units, and colour schemes that contrast with the golden-rose theme of the city. While an approach that stringently governs the physical appearance of the public sphere is certainly not unique to Montpellier (cf. Charbonneau, 1997, on Lyon) the PLU and *Charte* provides a specific understanding of public space: it is tangible, it is imagined as homogeneous, and it is suspiciously devoid of people. If public space is intended to aid with the creation of a neighbourhood identity, then this is an identity derived from the physical components of the surrounding streets and plazas, rather than the more difficult to direct social and cultural interactions.

In an interview with a senior urban planner, I asked for clarification of what public space means for the city of Montpellier. Their answer outlined how public space and the public domain are created through the republican principles governing French politics and property: public space is inalienable (*inaliénable*), non-transferable (*incessible*), and enduring (*imprescriptible*), and an outgrowth of Jacobian revolutionary thinking which sought to set clear limits on ecclesiastical and monarchical infringements into state space. As this interviewee went on to explain:

So the streets at the start are not part of the public sphere. It's a line that we make on a city plan. Then we build it. Our building society creates the street, makes the sewers, makes the sidewalks. And once everything is built we turn it over to the public domain. Meaning, that the street takes on the status of public space with all the requisite judicial protections. That's it. (Urban planner 3, Montpellier)

The creation of new public space is a legal and technical process. It starts with a line drawn on a map, followed by the arrival of construction equipment to convert that line

into a concrete (and limestone) covered street, and ends with the transfer of this new material space to the public sphere via a judicial process. Public space is both materially defined and legally protected, and above all, it is a creation of the urban planning department and state laws.

At least in the case of Montpellier the creation of *new* public space is very much linked to urban development and the establishment of new housing and commercial districts, with social events introduced by the municipality's cultural department only once the new locations are constructed. The Plan Cabanes is not a new spaces, at least in the sense that it has existed as named lines on a map and tarmac on the ground for many years. Yet the same legal protections apply: once declared as 'public space' such plazas cannot be folded over to the private sphere and taken out of circulation. However, the materiality of public space can be redefined – or re-qualified (*requalifier*) in the vocabulary of French urban planning. While maintaining public space as a legal and physical entity, the re-qualification process in Montpellier's city-centre seeks to alter the ways in which public space is used by introducing the elements outlined in the *Charte de l'Espace Public* and PLU.

This highlights several points: the municipality has a central role in determining how plazas look, function, and how they are used. It further suggests that the Plan Cabanes is not a singular space. Rather, it is envisaged as one amongst many other plazas whose role is being recast as part of a wider matrix of motions and efforts to create a coherent and homogenous city fabric. There is friction between this desire to create an integrated network of public spaces in the city, and the goal of using plazas as symbolic neighbourhood spaces (as outlined in the PLU). Yet in both instances the form and function of public space is seemingly dependent on municipal agendas. Public space is thus equated with municipal space, becoming a site which is much more the representation of the city's goals and interests than the lived experience and expectations of current users. While the public sphere is inalienable, non-transferable, and enduring, it is not exempt from certain forms of material (and arguably social) change.

Contested space as empty space

In the two sections above, a seeming dichotomy is built up: conceptualizations of public space differ noticeably between urban planners (who speak about technical requirements) and market users (who comment on social uses), a contention based on the material gathered through interviews, ethnographic work, and analysis of municipal documents. This split of 'urban planners/technical vision' and 'market users/social vision' is a brute simplification – not least because the same planning experts who deployed technocratic vocabulary to describe their understanding of public space also commented on their more personal experience of the sociability of outdoor markets, while market users engrossed in discussions of cultural exchange flippantly critiqued the technical failings of the plazas. But in the context of the Plan Cabanes renovations, considering this difference has proven useful: the mismatch between the intentions and expectations of municipal actors, and the expectations of many other users in relation to the function and meaning of the plaza has, ultimately, led to the space being declared empty (*vide*) and dead (*mort*) by both groups.

Speaking with an elected official involved with urban planning, I asked about the intent behind the Plan Cabanes renovations. Explaining that the plaza had been

reconstructed to accommodate a new tramline and to function in tandem with the city-centre, this elected official noted that the renovations had, in reality, failed to achieve the municipality's goals:

I am in support of the Plan Cabanes taking back its own identity, an identity for this plaza. [...] Because we can't leave this large expanse of stone empty like this. For me it doesn't function like this, it's not useful for the city. (Elected official in charge of urban planning, Montpellier).

That the renovated Plan Cabanes is not useful and lacks a distinct identity is an interesting proposition. Considering the plaza as an 'empty' is a sentiment echoed by two urban planners working on the renovation process, who in a joint interview commented that, "we have lifted the life from the Plan Cabanes, and for the moment we haven't been successful in putting back some life, but we haven't forgotten this goal" (Urban planner 1, Montpellier), and further that, "we've been turning in circles, eh, to find the role of the Plan Cabanes" (Urban planner 2, Montpellier). For all three speakers, the Plan Cabanes cannot be viewed as a success unless it is enlivened, to borrow from the vocabulary of market users. It must be more than just beautifully finished tarmac and newly planted trees, despite the emphasis on these elements in the PLU, and must instead become a (living) neighbourhood organism. There is also an admission that the municipality has intentionally removed one form of public life from the plaza by relocating the market, and equally, that the city has had limited success in infusing the renovated Plan Cabanes with a purpose, a role, or an identity. Evidently, the newly established antiques market has failed to create the sort of social and commercial dynamic hoped for by these municipal actors.

Nowhere is this lack of success more apparent than in the comments of antiques and book vendors themselves. Everyone in the new antiques and book market had an opinion on what has happened in the Plan Cabanes plaza, aware that a produce market has been pushed out – their terms – and that they are there because of special circumstances. As one book dealer explained, "we are here to animate the village, to give it some life" (Book dealer 2, Montpellier). The opinion that book and antique market vendors are simply 'animators' (*animateurs*), purposefully installed by the municipality to enliven public space, was frequent amongst the vendors. A running joke during their communal lunches centred on 'punching out' for a municipally-subsidized break, a play on the sense amongst many that although their formal role was bookselling, in reality they felt like unpaid municipal cultural employees. The overall impression is of an antiques market installed to meet the need for public space activity, rather than a specific neighbourhood desire for books and antiques. Most professional antiques markets are privately run – on private grounds, organized by a company that specializes in trade fairs. The Plan Cabanes market is a rare municipal antiques market and for that reason, dealers argued, there is little control on the type of merchandise, few checks on the authenticity of antiques sold. The entire thing, one book vendor said, looks more like a flea market than a real antiques fair.

[Figure 2 around here]

Although the new Plan Cabanes meets the technical requirements for a Montpellier public space, and through the introduction of the antiques market and its animators theoretically fulfils the socio-cultural role as well, the site appears desolate (Figure 2). Or, desolate in comparison to the vivacity outlined by participants and vendors in the former produce market. The shift from high-frequency produce market to low-frequency book/antiques has noticeably altered the way the plaza is used. Amongst all interview participants, local shopkeepers were most vocal about this point, perhaps because their own clientele depended on the crowds attracted by the markets. When asked to comment on the new Plan Cabanes one shopkeeper noted:

Me, I find it sad that a beautiful plaza like this, so, today you've visited and there is a spectacle going on [a small performance]. But afterwards it'll be empty. It's empty. And today the plaza that you have, it is for me, for me, it's no longer a public entity (*bien public*). It's used mostly by the driving school. (Business owner 2, Montpellier)

Without the daily hum brought by the larger produce market, the Plan Cabanes has lost its long-time function. The sentiment across interviews was of a site that cannot be considered a public space unless it allows for a social, cultural, or economic engagement. While in Lefebvre's (1991) lexicon spatial practice and urban design combine to produce a lived, representational space, in Montpellier friction between these elements has resulted in a very different entity. Even local actors who supported the renovations acknowledge the difficulty of deciding what to do with the plaza:

There are a lot of people who are saying that the [renovated] plaza is magnificent, which is true. And it's empty, there is no life. No animation. There are some who aren't happy. And others who are. You know you can't make everyone happy. (Neighbourhood association member 2, Montpellier)

The process of lifting one meaning from the plaza and attempting to install another has seemingly produced a desert, an empty space that meets neither users' desires nor municipal goals, and hasn't done so for years. The near silence of the Plan Cabanes is made all the more obvious by a fringe of activity: across the street from the plaza are several informal vendors, some with crates of mint propped up against the building walls, others with cardboard boxes of household goods, belts, and other items spread out on plastic sheets and cloth carpets. The cafes and restaurants across the street are also brimming with people drinking coffee or tea. A cafe-turned-pizzeria on the southern edge of the Plan Cabanes is encroaching on the plaza, with permission from city hall, and another restaurant at the northern edge of the plaza spreads out and welcome diners with a daily menu. The arrival of Montpellier's new tramline has added a further dimension, in the form of people waiting by the rows of trees and benches for the tram, and a line of city rental bikes tucked behind the transport platform. Apart from the activity created on some week days by the antiques market, the centre of the Plan Cabanes is, however, relatively undisturbed.

Conclusion

That on most days the Plan Cabanes looks empty is difficult to dispute. People do cross the plaza, on foot and on bikes, and twice daily students from the Catholic high school bordering the plaza fan out from the front doors. Yet in most instances, the Plan Cabanes lacks the density of activity which used to shape this space before the food market's relocation. That food market has been described by users and residents as a social and commercial hub, and an expansive retail experience simply not replicated in the antiques market that followed. Through the food market commercial activity supported the creation of an active social space, with the presence of market stalls encouraging lingering and conversation, producing a fluid neighbourhood life (de la Pradelle, 1995; Black, 2005). An overview of the municipality's public space vocabulary reveals a different register, with a focus on the technical components of plazas, streets, and parks, and the limestone and vegetation used to construct the city. The uniformity of materials used throughout the historic centre of Montpellier, and the insistence of re-qualifying the Plan Cabanes plaza so as to conform to city-centre aesthetics, overshoots social uses and desires.

The notions of 'empty' space and 'dead' space, as applied to the Plan Cabanes by users and municipal actors, speak to the tensions encapsulated in this process of re-qualifying. Yet this is an empty space of a particular quality and materiality. Unlike the abandoned plots that form 'dead zones' as detailed by Doron (2000), and the 'dead spaces' that Sennett (1992) identifies around certain urban structures, the Plan Cabanes has not arrived at its 'empty' status by accident. Rather, it falls within the category of public spaces that see a decline in function through the purposeful insertion of design elements that dissuade certain uses (van Melik, Van Aalst, and Weesep, 2007) and social policy that results in what Sevilla-Buitrago terms "dispossession without privatization" (2014, p. 153). The 'empty space' status of the Plan Cabanes is outcome of spatial re-organization to meet municipal urban renewal needs. It is the product of a push to expand the boundary of the city-centre by subsuming the *faubourgs*, and one which places urban design – colour palettes, street furniture, texture, and materiality – about social and community uses. While Hoskyns (2014) sees value in empty urban spaces, particularly if they allow a range of civic uses to flourish, such appropriations of empty space can come to fruition only when a range of actors are able to assert their right to such sites (Mitchell, 2003). Without attention to the social processes that underline the usage of public space, that space will simply not exist in a meaningful way.

In an instance where market relocations in Marseille (Mazella and Roudil, 1998; Peraldi, 1999), and commercial redevelopment in Paris (Bacqué, 2006; Clerval, 2008; Chevalier, 2007) and Lyon (Charbonneau, 1997; Devisme and Nicolas, 2013), have also seen the removal of diverse public space activities, events in Montpellier are at once representative of a broader trend in French urban planning and demonstrative of the limits of such approaches. Processes in the Plan Cabanes intersect with wider urban renewal systems that have sought to remove ethnic diversity from French city-centres (Clerval, 2011), and drawn on heritage-protection measures to enact this homogenize of the public sphere (Bacqué, 2006; reference to be inserted after publication). The rhetoric of empty space puts to question the 'public space' status of the newly renovated plaza, and raises some points about the broader understanding of public space. While the legal definition of the public domain as inalienable, non-transferrable, and enduring suggests

that public space cannot (theoretically) be usurped for another usage – the ability to re-qualify public space, and to lift certain meanings from a plaza in order to install a new socio-cultural usage, indicates that the usage of public space can be purposefully altered. If space is rendered public when a variety of actors can negotiate usage, access, alter and occupy a site, then the ability of municipal actors to enact drastic change in the Plan Cabanes queries whether this site is perhaps better defined as ‘municipal space’, as an entity that is in the realm of the state rather than one shaped by local publics.

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