

The School of Urban Renewal: A New Ideological Mishmash?

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The Borloo Act of 2003 is said to have marked a major turning-point in French policy concerning so-called “critical” urban areas. That assertion is now challenged by a study on the École de la Rénovation Urbaine, which was set up two years later to train urban renewal project managers. The training provided by the “School of Urban Renewal” is more of an ideological composite, combining legacies of 1980s urban policy with a present-day approach to city management.

The Borloo Urban Renewal Act of 2003 (*loi Borloo sur la rénovation urbaine*) is often hailed as a turning-point in the recent history of public policy approaches to so-called “critical” urban areas. Urban renewal is said to have superseded an urban policy that was smothered in red tape and running out of steam, uncertain (Jaillet 2000), listless and adrift, by closing the controversial case of the 751 *Zones Urbaines Sensibles* (i.e. critical urban areas) that had been wide open for over 20 years. With a single stroke of the pen, the discourse of political decision makers and experts is said to have written off a policy deemed “soft” and “ineffective”, based as it was on the “erroneous” principle of redressing social injustice and putting up buildings in problem neighborhoods. That “hard-to-assess” policy was having a hard time curbing the violence and poverty endemic to those neighborhoods. So this was supposedly the dawn of an ambitious urban renewal program that would “erase the erring ways of the past”. The program was to be put together by a new state agency (l’Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine, ANRU: i.e. National Agency for Urban Renewal) and, drawing on the 1 % business tax [a levy for social housing introduced after World War II, the actual rate is now only 0.45 % – translator’s note], it was to provide effective funding for “real projects” that would be concretely visible on the ground: viz. the destruction of outsized housing projects and high-rise tenements and the rebuilding of mixed-population neighborhoods².

Now, however, several years since the inception of the urban renewal program, we may well call into question its supposed ideological break with the past. As a matter of fact, a recent study on the networks of stakeholders revolving around the *École de la Rénovation Urbaine* and the skills imparted there suggests that that portrayal needs to be revised³. *L’École de la Rénovation Urbaine* is a training center for social housing agencies, funded chiefly by the ANRU itself as well as the

1 This article is based on research for the program PICRI Île-de-France (*Partenariat Institutions–Citoyens pour la recherche and l’innovation*, Institutional Partnership – Citizens for Research and Innovation), coordinated by Agnès Deboulet, the object of which is to take a “new practical approach to urban planning: to listen more closely and involve urban planning professionals, associations and citizens in Ile de France”.

2 Senate deliberations of July 22-24, 2003, on Act No. 2003-710 concerning urban planning and orientation and urban renewal.

3 For the purposes of that study, we interviewed several people who taught in 2009, in various professional fields, at the *École de la Rénovation Urbaine*. We also sent questionnaires in December 2009 to a total of 296 professionals working for social housing agencies, most of whom had undergone training in urban renewal, and we received 51 responses. The sample group was made up of professionals holding posts as “urban renewal director or officer” at their local agencies and referenced as such in the directory of the *Union Sociale pour l’Habitat* (Social Housing Federation).

Union Sociale pour l'Habitat (Social Housing Federation) and the *Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations* (CDC, a government-owned banking institution for economic development, among other things). This school, being a forum for exchange between national decision makers, experts and local stakeholders, seems a prime observation post from which to assess the coherency of the new dogma – if the existence thereof is borne out – and the ways in which it has spread. This study shows that, contrary to all expectations, urban renewal does not break with so much as reuse the ideological registers of preexisting urban policy. The convictions and know-how of the teachers and students of urban renewal there borrow extensively – more than one could have imagined – from the old urban policy. It should be emphasized that our object here is not to examine the practices but the discourse of those implementing the programs in question.

A large-scale partnership around the ANRU

The *École de la Rénovation Urbaine* was started up in 2005, two years after the founding of the ANRU, by the *Union Sociale pour l'Habitat* along with the leading partners in national urban renewal policy: the ANRU, CDC, ESSEC business school (which runs a two-year program for certification as “urban renewal project manager” in conjunction with the *École de la Rénovation Urbaine*) and the *Caisse de Garantie du Logement Locatif Social* (CGLLS, Social Rental Housing Guarantee Fund). Located in Aubervilliers, at the heart of the département of Seine-Saint-Denis, but close to Paris, this institution was initially set up to provide social housing agencies with the tools they need to carry out urban renewal projects, particularly a “broader understanding of urban culture”. To that end, the school joined forces with the IFMO (*Institut de Formation de la Maîtrise d'Ouvrage de la Ville*, Training Center for Urban Project Development), an old school for senior staff at the Public Housing Offices that was founded in 1983 on the initiative of the *Union des HLM*⁴, the CDC and the ministry of housing, which were joined by the ANRU, the *Fédération des SEM*⁵ (Federation of Semi-Public Companies) and the municipalities.

Those attending courses at the school are of every age group and now include practitioners of other professions as well: e.g. regional administrations and such state institutions as the *Direction Départementale des Territoires* (i.e. interministerial regional agencies). So the school, like the ANRU itself, which arranges courses of training and opportunities for exchange, and the AFPOLS (*Association pour la Formation Professionnelle des Organismes de Logement Social*, Association for the Professional Training of Social Housing Organizations), constitutes one of the leading centers for training in urban renewal. Attending courses at the *École de la Rénovation Urbaine* legitimizes the qualifications of senior staff in the social housing sector, both for purposes of internal organization and for various partnerships on the ground, which is why attendance may be recommended in the interest of advancing one's career. The school is directed by a founding head teacher with the aid of a pedagogical council and about 40 part-time instructors. The faculty are urban planning professionals, including a small number of academics, some researchers with practical experience, particularly from the structural engineering center CSTB (*Centre Scientifique et Technique du Bâtiment*), and above all experts and private consultants who deal with day-to-day matters in the field, as well as teachers firmly established in consulting, on average after about 20 years of practical experience.

Four professional sectors are represented at the school, reflecting the intersecting backgrounds and cultures there. The first is close tied to social housing agencies. *Habitat et Territoires Conseil* (Housing and Regional Consulting), the successor to the CREPAH, the USH's former engineering consulting office, is heavily represented among the faculty. It works closely together with the human sciences-oriented branch of the CSTB (French Scientific and Technical Center for Building), championing mediation and social engineering, in particular, together with the firm of

4 Which in 2002 became the *Union Sociale pour l'Habitat* (USH).

5 Which in 2008 became the *Fédération des Entreprises Publiques Locales* (Federation of Local Public Companies).

ACT Consultants. A second professional sector comprises ESSEC-affiliated teachers and speakers who espouse a managerial approach to regional planning and economic development. Their involvement in the school should be viewed as reflecting a desire to train “managers accountable to their company and to the society in which their company operates” (Loche and Talland 2009). The third group is made up of architects and urban planners, who focus on architectural and urban housing projects, on local trade and the rehabilitation of city centers, as expressions of a formal return to the ordinary city. Finally, the fourth professional domain represented on the faculty comprises specialists in finance and real estate, who seek to optimize capital gains on the redevelopment of these urban areas.

In practice, the curriculum is organized around several main areas of study: the first relates to architectural and urban planning issues; the second concerns “urban strategies”, project definition and management; and the third is about methods of supervising and managing urban renewal projects. The use of business terminology at the school is particularly telling: witness the prevalence of terms like “management” and “toolbox”. The more specifically architectural side emphasizes sustainability issues, the “environmental and urban quality” of these areas, and even security issues. The strategic side of the training concerns project implementation, communication, “economic dynamics”, and financial strategies involved in the operation. The most heavily managerial aspect of the training concerns “tools for the consultation” of residents, local urban management, and the “social and urban workings of neighborhoods”.

These large domains are supplemented by a substantial number of specialized courses on legal, technical and financial tools needed for the practical implementation of urban renewal operations. There are also courses on inter-stakeholder relations, which are vital to the whole project: the instruction emphasizes the mutual comprehension of the underlying rationale, each participant’s command of their positioning and, above all, a pragmatic approach in which stakeholders put their own values aside in order to advocate a *techné* geared towards effectiveness and refrain from assessing the programs – that assessment is entrusted by law to an interministerial institution, the *Observatoire National des Zones Urbaines Sensibles* (National Observatory of Critical Urban Areas).

Between resident participation and outside management

This curriculum reflects the various currents within the *École de la Rénovation Urbaine*, a focus on management and on the economic development of these urban areas along with a desire to implement a policy jointly with the wide range of stakeholders concerned. Most of the faculty members I met feel the school represents shared references both in terms of methods and approaches and in terms of professional outlooks. One teacher brought up the idea of a “community of people who can relate to one another through a range of similar professional reflexes [...], even if each develops his own approach with his own special sensibilities” (excerpt from an interview). The *École de la Rénovation Urbaine* seems to be at the core of a whole network of professionals who identify with a common realm of methods, *modi operandi* and ways of thinking.

The impression of consensus thereby engendered is accompanied by an effacement of any underlying ideology, which tends to reduce any differences of opinion that actually do obtain between the various participants. Moreover, the school itself, which seeks to clarify the terms, expectations and means of the whole urban renewal project, remains silent on the subject of the ideological foundations of urban renewal and its possible consequences. References to history are infrequent in the training provided, as are references to foreign examples such as the UK. Ultimately, the question of divergent practices tends to dissolve in the problems of operational management, supervision, and the adaptation of residents in order to “shift from day-to-day *ad hoc* management to a strategic and differentiated approach to regional management”. The idea is to embrace a system geared toward “making do with what is available”. As to the notion of a “project” aimed at “transforming these neighborhoods”, the latter serves above all to support “the inhabitants”

demands for a different urban planning from that of the 1970s⁶ and to shore up a single alternative to that authoritarian form of urban planning: the vision of an ideal city based on the principles of sustainable development and favorable to “green” or “ecological” neighborhoods, waste management, high-quality outdoor areas and economic competitiveness.

In the teaching at the school, one finds every disposition of mind, values and terms that constitute the *Cité par Projets* (“The Projective City”) envisaged by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) to describe a networked professional world combining the impetus of social and spatial transformations (in the spirit of urban policy) and day-to-day management (as practiced by social housing agencies) with a view to adapting to current political requirements: the networking, connectivity and reactivity of stakeholders, mediation, regulation, readjustment, flexibility. Thus, far from being a dogma that is driving a change in ways of thinking about public policy in critical urban areas, urban renewal increasingly appears to be an unprecedented methodological and ideological composite, a hybrid approach indicative of ongoing changes within the state. From this point of view, urban renewal may be construed as an attempt at an unprecedented combination of socioeconomic standpoints drawn from various professional realms: that of French social housing administrators, that of heirs to the sociological approaches developed in the 1970s and 1980s that are mindful of residents’ customs and practices, and that of an economy governed by considerations of policy effectiveness. The first are concerned about budgetary rigor and harmonious population planning, the second about the users’ appropriation of the inhabited space and their competency, and the last about the efficacy of public-private partnerships. These various worlds converge in a highly original manner around concepts such as “project management”, “participation” and “the uses of housing”.

The instructors endeavor, each in their own particular way, to hold together the legacy of a way of thinking from the 1970s and 1980s that is marked by the ideal of social transformation by and with the local population, as well as a pragmatic, managerial and economic approach heavily influenced by service sector management. It is the sharing of this hybrid culture, as well as their commitment to the world of expertise, that goes to make up the common culture of those recruited to teach at the *École de la Rénovation Urbaine*.

One can well imagine that bringing together these different references and the social worlds that maintain them will not be without some contradictions: the managerial approach, on the one hand, and regional development carried out with and for the inhabitants, on the other, are far from converging naturally (Deboulet 2006; ANRU Assessment and Follow-up Committee Report 2007). Depending on the instructors and their ability to build a coherent discourse, the tensions between these diverse ideological and professional poles seem to be handled more or less effectively. And we occasionally found these professionals at pains to justify their pedagogical discourse in view of the conflicting expectations, which at a broader level reflect a reconfiguration of political terms of reference.

These remarks suggest that we should temper the claims of a rift between urban policy and the national urban renewal program, which, it turns out, are not borne out in the educational sphere or in the expansion of a new “demolition dogma” in the religious sense (Epstein 2007), which is purportedly sweeping away in its path the old convictions linked to the urban policy that had been pursued since the 1980s (attention to architectural and social context, to populations and efforts to assist them). Nonetheless, one finds unprecedented ideological combinations favoring the development of novel professional standpoints and practices, such as the management of housing situations and the strategic use of participation.

6 From the course guide.

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For more information:

See the *École de la Rénovation Urbaine* website: <http://www.ecoledelarenovationurbaine.com/>

To quote this article:

Yankel Fijalkow & Claire Carriou, « The School of Urban Renewal: A New Ideological Mishmash? », *Metropolitiques*, 18 May 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-School-of-Urban-Renewal-A-New.html>