

Dunkirk as a New “Laboratory” for Free Transit

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

From September 2018, the public transport network in Dunkirk, France, will be free of charge for all users. Henri Briche and Maxime Huré’s research into the zero-fare system already in place in the city at weekends affirms the feasibility of a public policy that encourages urban development and benefits working-class populations – but is often decried as being unrealistic and costly. How was this policy forged locally, and what is the current state of the art in fare-free transit in France and elsewhere?

Free urban transit is a growing trend. In 2016, there were no less than 107 entirely fare-free public transport networks around the world, including over 30 just in France (CGTPAG 2016; Keblowski 2016). It is also a measure that has been implemented episodically as part of efforts to combat air pollution in cities such as Paris and Grenoble. Whether applied on a continuous or occasional basis, this is a public policy that transforms the representations and uses of mass transit. And yet, despite more than 10 years of impassioned debates in France (UTP 2004; CERTU 2010; Robert 2015; Sagot-Duvauroux 2016), the question of free public transport has yet to be subjected to detailed scientific scrutiny. Here, we shall consider the case of Dunkirk in northern France, a city with a metro-area population of 200,000, and where the intermunicipal body (the Communauté Urbaine de Dunkerque, or Dunkirk Urban Community; hereafter CUD) is the passenger transport authority. By choosing to make its transit network entirely free of charge, the CUD will become the largest local authority in France to adopt such a measure.

The study that we have conducted (Briche 2017), with the support of the CUD,¹ seeks to evaluate the initial effects of free public transport in Dunkirk.² It also facilitates more general thinking about the new tools available to develop urban alternatives and regeneration strategies for industrial urban areas.

Dunkirk: free transport as a territorial marketing tool

Free public transport – which has been in operation at weekends and on public holidays on an experimental basis since September 2015 in the 17 municipalities that make up the CUD – is set to become the norm seven days a week from September 2018. As a keynote measure in the manifesto of current mayor and CUD president Patrice Vergriete and his municipal team during the

¹ This research was also supported by AGUR (Agence d’Urbanisme et de Développement de la Région Flandre–Dunkerque – Flanders–Dunkirk Regional Urban Planning and Development Agency), which made its technical and political resources available to us for the purposes of the study.

² This study involved around 60 interviews with bus users, drivers and ticket inspectors, as well as with technicians from the CUD’s transport department, board members of the public-service delegation, and local elected officials. These interviews were complemented by a questionnaire distributed to some 400 people, and an analysis of CUD deliberations since 2010.

2014 municipal election campaign, the promise of free buses across the urban area seeks to respond to a number of challenges that affect this industrial territory. For Vergriete, the primary aim was to boost the purchasing power of residents in an area affected by a slow and painful transition towards the post-industrial economy,³ and where over a quarter of households do not have a car. This measure was also envisaged as a key lever for increasing the residential attractiveness of an area that, on average, has been losing 1,100 residents each year since 1999 (CUD 2013). Lastly, free public transport is one tool among others as part of a wider policy to improve the image of a declining urban core in the hope of stemming the demographic haemorrhage. The CUD is also working to completely overhaul its bus network, whose configuration dates from the late 1970s. Bus routes have remained practically unchanged since 1976, and today only a third of the CUD's population is served by high-frequency bus services (i.e. with headways of 10 minutes or less). Two thirds of households therefore do not have access to a high-performance public transport system, including a large proportion of working-class residents, for whom running a car represents a very significant percentage of their household budget. The comprehensive plan for a bus rapid transit (BRT) system⁴ – the “DK'Plus de Mobilité” plan – will come to fruition in 2018, and will offer a new and entirely free public transport network to residents of greater Dunkirk. Five key lines⁵ with a high level of service, and benefiting from numerous dedicated rights of way, will structure this future network. These key lines will be complemented by around a dozen minor lines⁶ (Figure 1).

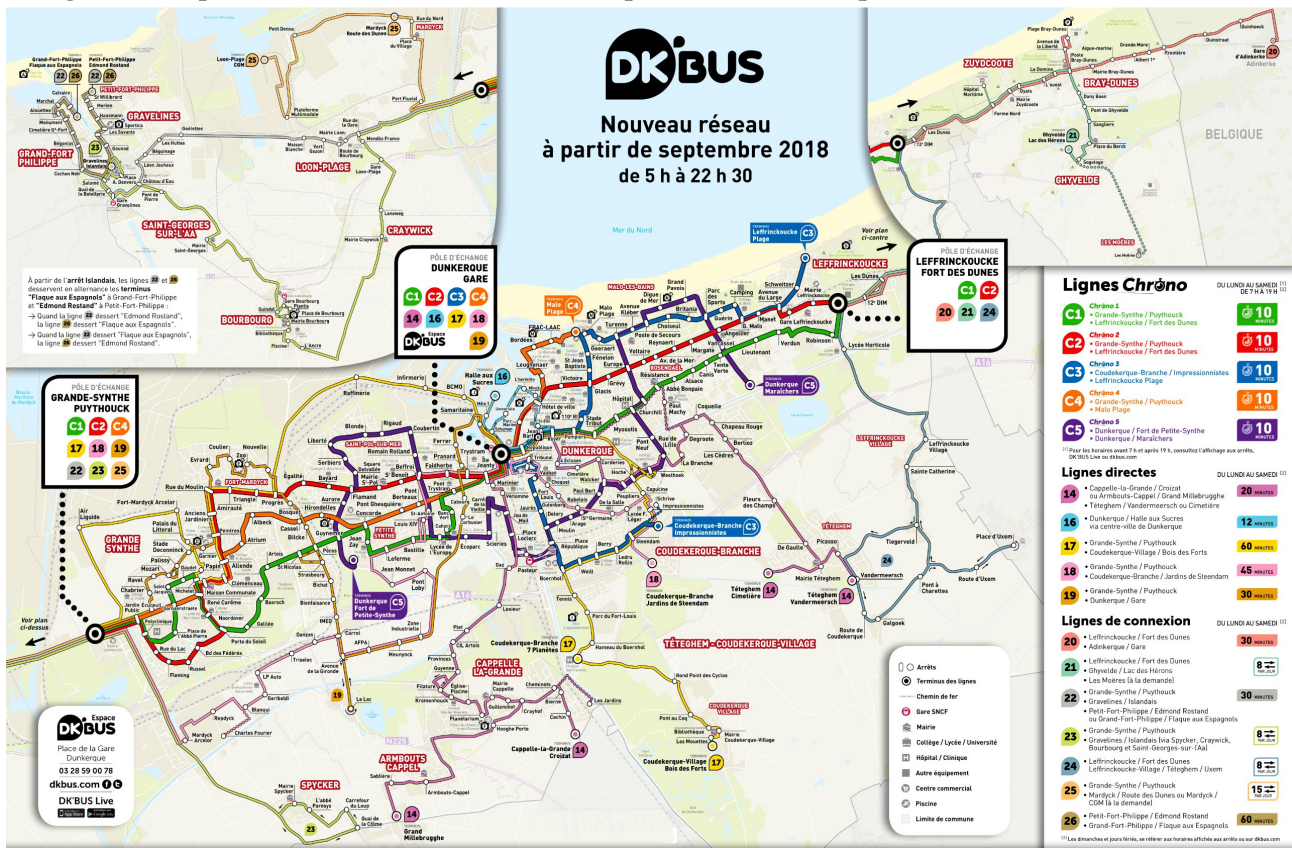
³ Figures from French national statistics office INSEE, published in 2016, attest to the social and economic difficulties of the CUD area. For example, the annual median fiscal revenue in 2013 was €18,161 per consumption unit, or €1,950 less than the average for mainland France and Corsica. Furthermore, the poverty rate stood at 17.7% in 2013, compared with 14% nationally: pockets of poverty were concentrated in particular in the municipalities of Grande-Synthe (28%) and Dunkirk proper (20%). Finally, the unemployment rate for the CUD area in 2013 was 18.7% (INSEE 2016). In light of these statistics, Patrice Vergriete called upon presidential candidates, on 18 September 2016, to develop a “Marshall Plan” for France's former industrial heartlands in *La Tribune*: www.latribune.fr/opinions/tribunes/apres-le-brexit-trump-une-colere-sourde-qui-monte-en-france-617797.html.

⁴ Rapid transit systems, and bus rapid transit (BRT) systems in particular, have inspired the concepts of THNS (*transport à haut niveau de service* – “transport with a high level of service”) and BHNS (*bus à haut niveau de service* – “buses with a high level of service”) in France. These terms refer to the transit infrastructure necessary for the implementation of a high-performance transport service: dedicated rights of way, high service frequencies, automatic ticket machines, priority at traffic lights, etc.

⁵ In Dunkirk, these key lines are branded *lignes Chrono* (conveying the idea of rapid, timely bus services) and correspond to the five primary urban bus routes that will connect towns across the CUD area with a high frequency of service (headways of 10 minutes or less) and with significant sections of these routes running on dedicated rights of way (i.e. reserved bus lanes).

⁶ One of the key aims of the €65 million “DK'Plus de Mobilité” project is to reconfigure the transit network in such a way that 60% of the urban area's population – 120,000 inhabitants – will be within 300 metres (1,000 feet) of a bus route with 10-minute headways. The area's rapid transit system was first launched in 2010, when the previous municipal council won the French environment ministry's second call for reserved-lane public transport projects, resulting in a subsidy of €9 million for the CUD.

Figure 1. Map of the future DK Bus network, operational from September 2018



Source: CUD 2015, p. 48.

The environmental argument, often raised when a public transport network is made free of charge, was brought up only more recently. It is an issue particularly close to the heart of the CUD vice-president for transport, and mayor of Grande-Synthe, Damien Carême (from Europe Écologie–Les Verts, France’s main green party). In his view, the expansion of fare-free transit in Dunkirk should “make the urban area a figurehead for industrial territories undergoing environmental transition.”⁷ This means reducing the modal share of car use, which accounted for 67% of all daily journeys made in the CUD area in 2015 (CUD 2016, p. 47), and doubling the modal share for bus use, from 5% to 10% of all journeys made in the area, by 2020.

The two eras of free transit: from the 1970s the present day

The CUD is not the first local authority in France, nor indeed the world, to use free transit as a policy to combat urban decline. Since 1962 and a pioneering experiment in the city of Commerce, in the eastern Los Angeles suburbs, free transit has seduced many towns and cities around the world and is today rapidly spreading. Two key periods in history can be identified: the first is the 1970s, a decade in which the first measures in favour of fare-free access to public transit flourished, both as a means of reducing car use and as a tool for promoting what were then rapidly expanding transit networks. In the United States, following local initiatives in 1973 in Seattle, Washington, and Dayton, Florida, a federal law passed in 1974 provided \$40 million in funding over two years for experimental projects in Trenton, New Jersey, and Denver, Colorado (Scheiner and Starling 1974; Studenmund and Connor 1982).⁸ In Europe, fare-free public transport was not something

⁷ Interview with Damien Carême, December 2016.

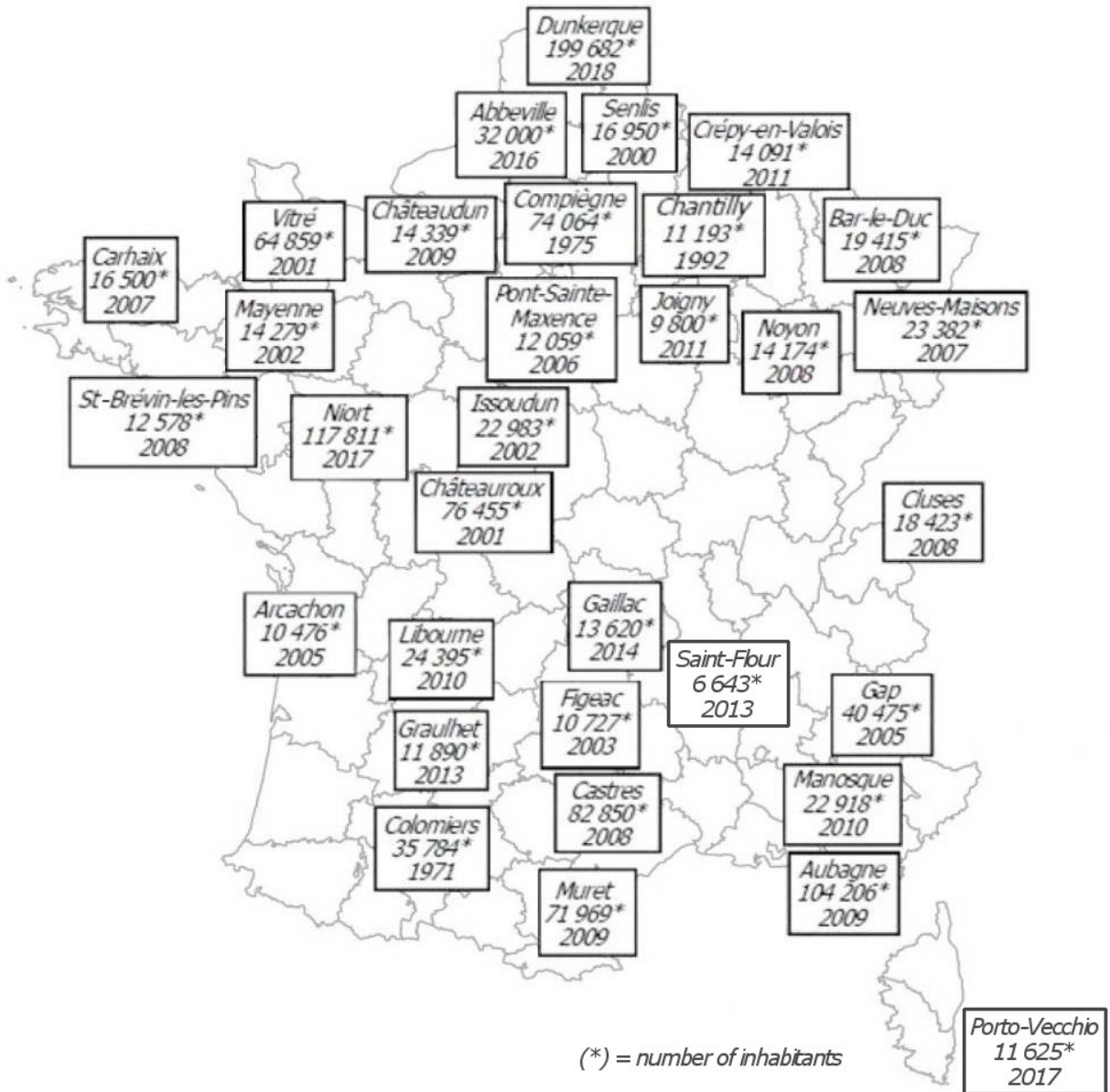
⁸ In the United States, following these experiments, fare-free transit primarily spread to college towns (Figure 3). Thanks, to a large extent, to the exorbitant tuition fees paid by students, college towns were able to offer free public transportation services to all their residents. Amherst, Massachusetts, was a pioneer in this respect as early as 1976. Since 2002, Chapel Hill in North Carolina has been the largest university city to adopt free transit among the 60 or

encouraged by national governments; rather, such projects spread in response to the actions of certain towns and cities. For example, in Italy, cities as large as Rome or Bologna began to examine the issue of public transport, and make commitments to work towards making their networks free of charge (Hofmann 1971, 1972; *Transportation* 1972). In France, this type of measure was adopted in the medium-sized towns of Colomiers, in the inner suburbs of Toulouse, and Compiègne, 45 miles (70 km) north-east of Paris. Despite significant increases in ridership, most of these experiments were rapidly abandoned, owing to the negligible effects recorded on modal share and the increasing budgetary pressures that began to affect local finances from the 1980s onwards (Perone 2002).

After two decades where free transit disappeared from local political agendas, it made a comeback in the early 2000s when the towns of Hasselt in Belgium and Templin in Germany chose to prioritize the development of their public transport networks by making them free of charge (Storchmann 2003). Now back on the radar, fare-free transit began to enjoy a resurgence in Europe. Whether in Sweden, Poland, Romania or France, the adoption of this policy is motivated by the growing importance of environmental concerns and ambitions, and more locally by the decline in attractiveness of urban cores in favour of car-oriented suburban or periurban spaces. In France alone, for example, over 30 networks chose to abolish transit fares, primarily in the 2000s (Figure 2). These policies have mostly been initiated by medium-sized towns and cities, the best-known example probably being the Aubagne urban area, near Marseille, in 2009 (Giovannangeli and Sagot-Duvaurox 2012; Huré 2012).

so cases identified (Brown *et al.* 2003; Volinski 2012).

Figure 2. The 33 entirely free public transport networks operating or planned in France in 2016



Source: CGTPAG 2016⁹.

⁹ Colomiers, a suburb of Toulouse, was forced to cease offering free public transport in August 2016 owing to rules concerning the powers and functions of the Toulouse metropolitan authority, created in 2015, of which Colomiers is a member. Under the previous intermunicipal body (the Toulouse urban community), it was possible for municipalities to run transport networks within their boundaries; however, following the change in status in 2015, this function is now the sole preserve of the metropolitan authority. A similar fate could befall the transit network in the Aubagne urban area, which is currently in negotiations with the transport department of the Aix-Marseille-Provence metropolitan authority, which Aubagne joined in 2016.

Figure 3. The 39 entirely free public transport networks in the United States in 2012



Source: Volinski 2012.

Tallinn, the driver of fare-free transit in 21st-century Europe

The growing number of fare-free networks in Europe has led to exchanges between municipal governments keen to obtain the best possible results from these experiments. In this context, Tallinn has become something of a reference as the “capital of free public transport” (European Commission 2013). With some 440,000 residents, Tallinn is today the largest city to have adopted fare-free public transit. Implemented in 2013 following a citywide referendum, free transit is available only to residents officially registered at addresses in the city, and who therefore pay municipal income tax. In just four years, 22,000 new registrations were recorded,¹⁰ enabling the city to more than cover the loss of fare revenue¹¹ and invest in new transport facilities and infrastructure. From its privileged position as a standard-bearer for fare-free transit, Tallinn city council, in partnership with Aubagne and Hasselt, launched the creation of a European body to promote free public transport. Meetings of this organization have been held in Brussels (2012 and 2014), Grenoble (2015), Dunkirk (2015), Tallinn (2012, 2013 and 2016), Rakvere in Estonia (2015), Erkner in Germany (2014), Żory in Poland (2014), and Avesta in Sweden (2015). As a result, these meetings have led to the development of a network of cities based on the notion of fare-free transit.

¹⁰ As the register of city residents is updated monthly, it can be seen that there was an unprecedented increase in the number of registrations in the first few months after the implementation of free public transport.

¹¹ Fare revenues generated by registered Tallinn residents totalled approximately €12 million per year, or 30% of the annual operating budget for the city’s transit system. The city council estimates that each new resident registration brings in, on average, an extra €1,750 per year in municipal income tax.

A fare-free “laboratory” to counter received wisdom and devise urban alternatives

Despite the significant spread and adoption of fare-free transit measures in France, the initiative in Dunkirk is being implemented in an institutional context that is highly critical of free public transport (UTP 2004, 2011, 2016a; CERTU 2010; GART 2013; FNAUT and UTP 2014; FNAUT and GART 2015; Cour des Comptes 2015). The bodies cited in the preceding reference¹² are united in their views regarding the financial challenges created by free transit, the limited impact it has on modal share, the symbolic and physical devaluation of a public service that it allegedly causes, and its inability to respond to users’ primary concerns, namely the quality – rather than the cost – of service provided.¹³ However, this theoretical hostility to free public transport should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there exist very few recent scientific studies that have sought to measure the effects of zero-fare policies.

The first components of our study into the impact of free public transport at weekends in Dunkirk tend to dismantle certain ideas broadly shared by actors in the field of urban transport. First of all, antisocial behaviour has not increased on buses in Dunkirk. There has even been a reduction in the number of acts of vandalism at weekends, despite an increase in ridership: one might have expected the larger number of passengers to lead systematically to an increase in the amount of damage caused, but the opposite was in fact true. Second, although a little more time is required to be able to evaluate the data in the long term, free public transport does not seem to pose a significant financial risk for the CUD: fare revenues only covered 12% of operating costs – or €4.5 million out of a total of €37.5 million. Compensating this loss of revenue is above all a political choice in terms of how the CUD’s public resources are used, and does not constitute a threat to local finances.¹⁴ To put it another way, fare-free transit is made possible by transferring public funds that are raised from local taxes or ring-fenced within the local authority’s budget: it therefore results from a political desire to invest in transport. In the case of Dunkirk, fare abolition has proved technically and financially possible for this urban area of 200,000 inhabitants, undermining the theory that free transit is only suitable for networks in medium-sized towns. Finally, the attractiveness of Dunkirk’s urban core seems to have been enhanced by this initiative: many respondents reported that they took greater advantage of central Dunkirk’s retail and leisure facilities during the weekend as a result of fare-free transit. The decision to shun the car in favour of free buses made it possible, for example, to enjoy a leisurely stroll around the city without having to worry about the time constraints associated with car parking.

The need for further research into free public transit

The initial conclusions of this study highlight two main effects among residents: an increase in mobility among older and younger people, and increased sense of freedom resulting from greater

¹² The UTP (Union des Transports Publics et Ferroviaires – French Union of Public and Rail Transport) is a professional organization representing public transport and rail companies (such as Transdev, Keolis, SNCF, and the RATP Group). CERTU (Centre d’Études sur les Réseaux, les Transports, l’Urbanisme et les Constructions Publiques – French Centre for Research on Networks, Transport, Urban Planning and Public Works) was, until its abolition in 2014, a public body responsible for conducting research into transport and urban planning for the French state. FNAUT (Fédération Nationale des Associations des Usagers du Transport – French National Federation of Transport-Users’ Associations) is a consumer body, accredited by the French state since 1978, comprising 160 local associations. Lastly, GART (Groupement des Autorités Responsables des Transports – Association of [French] Passenger Transport Authorities) encompasses 250 passenger transport authorities, each composed of elected officials and representatives of local authorities.

¹³ Although it is interesting to note that, during a presentation of data from its mobility observatory in 2016, the UTP reported that respondents wished to see transit become the first free public service, ahead of water, energy and refuse collection (UTP 2016b).

¹⁴ It should also be borne in mind that the *versement transport* (transport contribution levied on companies and public administrations with more than 11 employees and used to fund public transit) in the CUD area is not currently set at the maximum possible rate (1.8% for provincial intermunicipal bodies) – it has been fixed at 1.55% since 2011.

autonomy when it comes to urban travel. Clearly, the data calls for more research in this field, but the results obtained to date nevertheless already lay the foundations for a real scientific debate on the contributions, benefits and limitations of fare-free transit. While extremely varied objectives are ascribed to free public transport, depending on the local sociopolitical context, the motives observed in Dunkirk highlight the role this measure can play in the regeneration of a territory undergoing industrial restructuring. The growing number of European towns and cities choosing free public transport and the increasing integration of this choice into strategies to reinvigorate declining urban cores mean that Dunkirk has an important role to play as a “laboratory”, until such time as fare-free transit is finally recognized as a subject worthy of urban research.

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