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ROUTLEDGE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM

# Waterways and the Cultural Landscape

Edited by  
Francesco Vallerani and  
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## **The Fonséranes Lock on the Canal du Midi: Representation, reality and renovation of a heritage site**

Federica Letizia Cavallo and Dominique Crozat<sup>1</sup>

*Lorsque toutes les portes sont ouvertes,  
on voit un fleuve d'eau roulant à gros bouillons,  
& formant la plus belle cascade artificielle qu'il y ait au monde  
(Joseph Jérôme de La Lande, 1779)*

**Abstract:** *In the twentieth century the Fonséranes Lock shared with the entire Canal du Midi the passage from commercial tool to tourist attraction. Since then, the lock has been celebrated and recognized as a heritage site, both at national and international level. However, full awareness of its tourist potential was shown more in promotional strategies than in management on the ground. Until 2015, problems in accessibility, lack of safety and poor infrastructure negatively impact on the tourist experience. The site is now(2016) undergoing a renovation project which aims to offer a quality tourist experience through a sustainable valorisation, but still leaves some problems unresolved.*

### *Introduction*

Despite the substantial amount of literature available on the Canal du Midi in Southern France, both from a geo-historical perspective and as a tourist attraction (see, for example: Bergasse, 1983; Adgé, 1992; Sagnes, 2000; Mukerji, 2009; Sanchez, 2009; Marconis et al., 2012), little has been written about one of the canal's most remarkable hydraulic junctions: the staircase lock of Fonséranes (Béziers).

This chapter considers the Fonséranes Lock a hydraulic heritage site and a tourist attraction, which is undergoing important transformations in an ongoing renovation project. This chapter aims to reconstruct the situation of the lock before renovation, when official discourses and representations of the site were far from reality; furthermore, it also conducts a critical analysis of the renovation project. In this case study, we reflect on the challenges of the sustainable valorisation of hydraulic heritage sites to offer a quality tourist experience.

First, we recall Canal du Midi's transformation from being a commercial tool to becoming historical and technical heritage (inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1997). This transformation, along with the attractiveness of the landscape of this watery greenbelt, has enabled the generation of significant tourism flow. Then, we focus on the staircase lock of Fonsérannes, which underwent an "heritagisation" process and became a tourist icon and local symbol. Later, we reconstruct the state of the lock before October 2015: a mismanaged site, with limited accessibility and maintenance and a lack of tourist infrastructure. Finally, we analyse the ongoing renovation project, launched by the local administration, and show its strengths (e.g. new spatial organization, the management of tourist flow and "edutainment") as well as its weaknesses, comprising some unresolved problems (such as the pests menacing the plane trees and the lack of tourist integration between the lock and the city centre).

To write this chapter we used a variety of sources: scholarly literature on the canal and historical documents (maps, books), as well as old and new tourist materials (guidebooks and websites), but we prioritised direct observation of tourist flow and behaviour on the site (until October 2015) and official documents related to the renovation project.

### *The Canal du Midi from commercial tool to heritage dimension*

The Canal du Midi in Southern France (originally called Canal Royal de Languedoc, the "Royal Canal of Languedoc") stretches 240 km from the port of Sète, on the Mediterranean coastal pond of Thau, to the city of Toulouse. Thus, the canal creates a link, via the Canal de Garonne, the Garonne River and the Gironde Estuary, between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean (which explains why it is also known as Canal de Deux Mers, the "Canal of the Two Seas").

The waterway was built on the initiative of Béziers-born entrepreneur Pierre-Paul Riquet, owing to the support of Jean Baptiste Colbert (Minister of Finances under Louis XIV), between 1667 and 1681. The work was completed in 1693, owing to Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban's engineering work (mainly on canal bridges). It has been noted that, rather than being the faithful fulfilment of a single engineer's project, "the Canal du Midi was a product of a collective intelligence—the work of groups with both formal and vernacular expertise in land measurement, construction and hydraulics" (Mukerji, 2009, p. 5).

At the time of its construction, the canal, an expensive public-works enterprise, was conceived, at the same time, as a demonstration of land-reshaping power of the State (on this topic see: Smith, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991; Swyngedouw, 2015) and as a technically modern commercial waterway for freight transport (even though it served also for passenger transport, mail delivery and, later on,

irrigation purposes). Like every route of long-distance transport, the canal divided the territory it passed through into two parts, “but, with time, the waterway gradually became incorporated into the region, so well integrated with the local green features that it became inseparable from the landscape” (Adgé, 1992, p. 48). A leading role in landscape construction was played by the combination of water with the plantations (mainly of plane trees) on its shores, creating a characteristic greenbelt.

The apogee of commercial activity was reached in approximately 1850, when the canal served mainly for the trade of wheat and wine produced in the Languedoc Region. Thanks to the canal, “the high Languedoc that abounds in wheat spreads it in the lower Languedoc that lacks it; wines and everything coming from the Lyon area are sent” (besides) “wool from the French mountain areas and Spain and ammunitions are passed through the waterway.” (De la Lande, 1778, p IV).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the canal began to suffer from the competition of railway transport. The situation worsened in the twentieth century owing to the cessation of activity imposed by the two world wars, the growth of road transport and the modest dimensions of boats allowed by the canal. The Canal du Midi became secondary, even if it continued to be used for freight until the 1960s. In 1983, as a last attempt to relaunch freight navigation, a water slope was built to bypass the Fonséranes Lock, which was considered too labour intensive to pass. The slope never worked, owing to design failures and, in 1989, freight transport on the canal definitively stopped. Similar technical upgrades, intended to modernise the canal, had been discussed since the second half of nineteenth century, when some locks were lengthened to accommodate longer boats, fitting the standards of the so-called Freycinet length (from the name of the Public Works Ministry) (Sanchez, 2016, p. 46).

From that decade, on the other hand, the canal began to be regarded as a historical and technical heritage site. Key dates in this process are 1996, when the canal was classified as a site at a national level, and 1997, when the Canal du Midi was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Cotte, 2003). Significantly, among the factors motivating its inclusion on the list, it was mentioned that “the Canal du Midi has become, from its construction, the most remarkable element of the territory it flows through, even better integrated since it gently shaped the landscape” (Voies Navigables de France, 1995). This was, therefore, the consecration of the canal as a landscape icon of Southern France.

As for river tourism, the canal gradually began to prompt interest as a means of travel through the Midi, mainly for British travellers who appreciated the sweetness of its tree-lined waterscape (Euser, 2006). Even though the first tourist boat started its tours in 1951, it was only in the 1980s that the importance of the canal for both tourist and leisure activities became clear.

At the same time, the recognition of the potential of river tourism at national and regional level grew. For its part, *Voies Navigables de France*, the administrative board in charge of the national internal navigation network, gradually improved its commitment to empowering river tourism. In the 1980s, disputes over the use of the water of Canal du Midi during the summer shallows were still often resolved by prioritising crop irrigation and closing down recreational boating; in the 1990s, owing to the recognition of the importance of tourism, the opposite occurred. As a result, nowadays “the difficulty consists in conciliating the protection of a major architectural work...with the accomplishment of the function which it has been built for: that is transport—originally of freight, but also of people—and today of tourists and hikers, frequenting both the waterway and the towpaths” (Prats, Chassel and Fortier-Kriegel, 2003, p. 8).

### *The Fonséranes Lock between celebration...*

Although the Canal du Midi was completed in 1693, hydraulic improvements were added later to ameliorate the efficiency of the waterway. Among the latest of these is the staircase lock at Fonséranes, southwest of Béziers, completed in 1697. This impressive lock system closes up the so-called Grand Retenue: an originally 58-kilometres (now it measures 54 kilometres) flat stretch, without any lock, at a constant altitude of 31.54 metres above sea level (Adgé, 1992).

The Fonséranes staircase lock consists of eight egg-shaped basins (and nine doors) that allow boats to overcome a difference in elevation of 21.5 metres in just 300 metres (the majority of staircase locks on the canal have one or two basins). Only six basins are now in service due to the connection of the new reach with the seventh basin (1856) and the abandonment of the passage of the canal to the Orb river bed during the twentieth century (Base de donnée international du patrimoine du génie civil, 2016). The technical needs of this number of locks depend on the impact of water on the doors; it becomes too strong to permit an opening manoeuvre when the lock chamber is deeper than three metres (Marfaing in Marconis et al., 2016, p. 20).

Together with the St. Ferréol Basin, north of Carcassonne (the first large reservoir in the world, intended to feed a waterway) and the nearby Malpas Tunnel at Nissan-les-Ensérunes (the first canal tunnel ever built for navigation), this staircase lock represents one of the most ambitious and innovative hydraulic achievements of the seventeenth century (Marconis et al., 2012), studied by engineers, architects, philosophers and politicians.

The Fonséranes lock is not the result of a project by an engineer, however: it was created by two illiterate subcontractors of Riquet (the Medailles brothers) and thanks to the work of masons, stonecutters and peasants, including women, mainly from the Pyrenees. It has been argued that the

success of this ambitious hydraulic junction relies on the adaptation of a traditional Pyrenean technique used to float timbers through a staircase of temporary reservoirs (Mukerji, 2009). The lock quickly became a symbol or icon of the canal. “All the curious spirits passing by Languedoc at that time went to see the works” (Adgé, 1992, p. 45).

John Locke (Locke, [1681] 2005) was probably one of the first visitors, in 1679. In 1789, Thomas Jefferson, by that time United States’ ambassador in France, visited the lock with the view to replicating them between the Potomac River and Lake Erie. The encyclopaedist, Joseph Jérôme de La Lande (1779), and the archaeologist, Millin de Grandmaison (1807), studied it. As for travellers, in 1848, the passage of Algerian Emir Abd-El-Kader with his *smala* (family, servitors and equipage) after his defeat, on the way to exile in Pau, was a great spectacle (Bergasse and Viennet, 2006, p. 165).

The lock was put into music (Bergasse, 2000, p.192) and pictured in drawings and paintings; it was well-known, despite the above-mentioned vernacular matrix, to hydraulic engineers all over Europe (for exemple, see: Forest de Bélidor, 1737) and was described in travellers’ tales, revealing its early tourist value: Bergasse and Viennet (2006) collect some texts about journeys on the canal taken by Stendhal, Flaubert, Andersen and a dozen other writers. Georges Simenon (1937) considered writing a detective novel set on the spot. Travel literature on the Canal du Midi became a literary genre, stimulating contemporary pastiches, such as the one, probably from J. L. Marfaing, written under the pseudonym I. Tymaiev (2002). More recently, four plays in the last three decades have been set on the lock (Bergasse, 1983).

Even a geographical game similar to snakes and ladders, le *Jeu de l’oie du Canal Royal du Languedoc*, created by cartographer, François Landrossy, in 1682, emphasises Fonsérannes, attributing to it ten locks (while it never had more than nine): this can be considered a surprising mistake for the main engineer of the project, close to Riquet and who, at Riquet’s death, led the building site (Figure1).

*Figure 1. Jeu de l’oie du Canal Royal du Languedoc, by François Landrossy (1682). Box 61 is dedicated to the FonsérannesLock (Toulouse, Musée Paul Dupuy, reproduction by Rodolphe Carrera).*

...“heritagisation” and iconic reproduction.

Even if various single elements of the canal (bridges, sculptures) underwent heritage protection between 1947 and 1996, it was necessary to wait until the most recent decades for the Canal du Midi to be considered a whole. The lock has shared this process of “heritagisation” at an

international level (thanks to the UNESCO World Heritage List) as well as at a national level, being recognized as a historic monument of France; while, in 1996, the lock also became a member of the *Grands Sites de France*, an official category (Sudouest, 2016).

At the same time, the image of the lock began to appear as a landscape icon in printed tourist material and on websites. For example, on the tourist website of the Hérault Department, it is stated that the lock is “the third most visited tourist site in Languedoc-Roussillon, after the roman Gard Bridge and the citadel of Carcassonne” (Hérault Tourisme, 2016). This is quite a new statement, since, until the second half of the 2000s, the lock was considered less important than other sites, such as the above-mentioned Gard Bridge and Carcassonne. Even in the town of Béziers, Saint Nazaire Cathedral (or the bullfighting arenas) was more likely to be considered worth visiting than was the lock<sup>ii</sup>. It was considered a pleasant place for a spare time walk for locals, rather than a proper “first class” tourist site.

However, things change and, according to recent data, the lock officially receives 450,000 visitors per year (Chambre de Commerce de Béziers, 2014), which would be one-third of the visitors to Pont du Gard (1.25 million) and only a little less than the number of visitors to Carcassonne. The tourist website of the Hérault Department reports a more probable 320,000 visitors per year. A first attempt to count visitors to the lock was undertaken in 2011 (published in 2012): its results were unreliable since the automatic counter was placed on the western gate while the entrance was from the east. Only some visitors went to this part. These data refer to land-based access, but water-based visits must be also taken into account: 7000 to 9500 rented boats every year, implying 25,000 to 30,000 passengers, with the same number again taking cruises.

Unsurprisingly, the Fonsérannes Lock is a remarkable experience for those practising water tourism by rented houseboat, and they are also one of the highlights on the classic one-day or half-day cruises seasonally offered by local tour operators. The lock is around the twentieth-most-visited heritage site in France (Atout France, 2014); nevertheless, its potential for tourist improvement (compared with these two reference sites) remains considerable, in terms of both attendance and economic recovery.

It is also worth noting that, in 2008, the lock stairs have been reproduced twice: first by private initiative, as a fountain within the commercial space of a local shopping mall (the Polygone, whose two floors are called “Canal” and “Locks”) (Figure 2). In the second reproduction, the lock was monumentalised (this time, by public initiative) in the centre of a roundabout at the Western entrance to the city of Béziers. These are two hyperreal references with no direct relationship with the real lock. However, the roundabout will reconnect with the real heritage of the canal, since the road to the lock will start from here, in the renovated system of access to the site.

*Figure 2. Reproduction of the lock at Polygone shopping mall, Béziers.*

In conclusion, we can state that, after late heritagisation, tourist-promotion policies and marketing strategies (shared by the local government, official tourist bodies and tour operators) have converged in celebrating the Fonséranes Lock as a major heritage site, a symbol of local identity and a primary tourist attraction, at least on a regional scale.

However, full awareness of the tourist potential of the lock was shown more and earlier in promotional strategies (and tourist preferences), than in management on the ground. In 2003, an official report on the state of the Canal du Midi pointed out that the canal as a tourist development opportunity did not necessarily imply architectural or landscape enhancement: among the worst examples, “the ‘management’ of the Fonséranes Lock” (Prats, Chassel and Fortier-Kriegel, 2003, p. 11) was highlighted. The significant divergence between official discourse and the reality of difficult accessibility and the poor enhancement of the site (especially apart from the summer tourist season) was still evident until October 2015, when work on a two-year renovation of the site began.

#### *A site mismanaged for a long time*

Despite the popularity of the Fonséranes Lock, until October 2015, there was a significant divergence between official discourse and the reality of management and accessibility of the site, for tourists and residents alike. There was a low intensity of tourist exploitation and a lack of coordinated tourist policy by local authorities and economic actors. The main points of criticism were:

*Lack of accessibility to the site.* By road, the way to the lock is tortuous and was not well signposted; until 2015, the site was not linked to the city of Beziers by public transport. Accessing the site by road (or going from it to town), one would pass through the old harbour (Port Notre Dame), which is used as an illegal dump and is frequented by the marginal population; its buildings are partly ruined or burnt out. By water, in peak season, the high concentration of tourist boats slowed down passage through the lock (the supplementary water slope, built in the 1980s, has never worked due to technical gaps).

*Lack of safety and inadequate maintenance of the site.* These are the most critical points, especially the poor state of the walkway and, until 2012, the absence of a security railing along the water basins (which can make the site awkward and dangerous, especially for children and the elderly). The only security element recently added is a rope, easy to pass over. Some days the site receives

more than 10,000 tourists: most of them stop on the shores of the 30 feet deep lock, without any barriers or protection; in the lock, there could be ten-tonne boats manoeuvring and generating violent flows. The frequent presence of rubbish in the water and the decay of the abandoned water slope should also be mentioned.

*Poor tourist infrastructure.* The small tourist office on the site is not sufficiently visible or signposted to function even as a simple information desk. The office is located in an old postal stall (used to change horses) and its last major maintenance dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, just after the end of postal service by boat. In 2013, a small addition to the stall allowed the addition of commercial activities: wine and other local products were sold in the office and an old scale model of the lock was set out here (with great success).

*Lack and seasonality of tourist usability.* The above-mentioned small tourist information office, as well as the snack bar, was open only in summer. The lock was open only from April to October, which limited visits by water. The plan is marginally to extend navigation season on the canal. However, a further extension of this seasonality might prove difficult, because of the regional lack of water: all the mountain water reserves that could provide more water for the canal are situated in Natural Parks and UNESCO World Heritage Sites and have restrictions on their use. Currently, a long winter is necessary to refill the Saint-Ferréol dam and other smaller tanks built by Riquet when the climate was rainier. Until the end of the 1980s and the development of tourist navigation, the canal was also used to provide water for agricultural activities (especially corn crops) and now farmers resist giving more water to the canal to allow a significant extension of the touristic season. For these reasons, boat companies have asked for a renovation of the water slope, which would save time and water. Another option would be the connection of the canal to the Philippe Lamour Aqueduct, formally built to send Alpine water to the orchards of the Languedoc plain. Any option, however, would not cancel the fact that tourist uses of the canal compete with other uses, including high-priority ones (drinking water, agriculture, etc.).

Moreover, there is a problem of tourist devices, particularly in terms of retail. Even during peak season, apart from the rental of small electric boats and tourist train rides from town, there are no activities offered to visitors coming in by road.

### *The renovation project*

In 2014, the local administration approved a wide project for the lock: a renovation of the site and its insertion into the broader framework of the national campaign, known as *Opération Grand Site de France* (Ministère de l'Environnement, de l'Energie et de la Mer, 2016). The logic of the

requalification project of the site of the lock (now in process) focuses on five axes (Communauté d'Agglomération Béziers Méditerranée, 2016)

(<sup>iii</sup>Figure 3):

*Figure 3. Map of the new site.*

1. The setting of three great spatial entities:

- tree alignment along the Canal du Midi and the top esplanade (*esplanade du coche d'eau*)
- line of basins and the cypress lined bank
- esplanade of the great basin;

2. The efficient management of tourist flows through three entry gates;

3. The development of structures to welcome visitors (parking, reception, exhibition, restaurant, snack bar and night itinerary) and securing them through distance from the lock;

4. To balance this distance, to turn the site into an “edutainment” show: an audio-guided walking tour with virtually animated stations, a virtual reality cabin to evoke in immersive 3D the context of the construction of the canal, rest stops and scenic viewpoints from the right bank;

5. A (small) expansion of the site to include a contextual perspective, creating an outdoor didactic itinerary leading to the lock, telling the history of the Canal du Midi and the relation between the site and its territory.

As mentioned above, the project also includes the integration of the Fonséranes Lock in the larger frame of the operation *Grands Sites de France*, intended to create a tourist system with four other sites along the canal, less than 15 kilometres West of Béziers. Three of these five sites are part of the Canal du Midi: the Tunnel of Malpas (20,000 visitors each year), the Canal Bridge in Béziers and the Fonséranes Lock (320,000 visitors each year); the others, very close to the canal, are the Oppidum of Enserune (35,000 visitors each year) and the dried pond of Montady.

The great sites of operation France includes exclusively major patrimonial or natural sites with a solid reputation and a strong tourist attendance (Grand Sites demarche, 2016). They must present an exceptional character from an artistic or historical point of view. This is a sort of an implicit labelling, placing the sites of the Canal du Midi on the level of major French tourist icons, such as the Pont du Gard, Mount Sainte-Victoire, the Pointe-du-Raz (Grand Sites membres, 2016).

### *Some unresolved problems*

The renovation project aims to give new life to the site of the Fonséranes Lock. However, despite proactive language by local authorities, some problems remain unresolved. We can say that there are two levels of criticism:

- On the one hand, the tourist valorisation of Fonséranes has not developed, as was claimed by project proponents.
- On the other hand, the entire Canal du Midi remains a fragile heritage, still under rehabilitation.

This project deals with the heritage dimension of the lock, especially with the architectural and landscape features of the site. Nevertheless, the specific tourist attractions and businesses are modest: no restaurants (only a seasonal snack bar), no entrance fee and scant entertainment activities. We can appreciate this restraint, since such activities can be intrusive, especially at a UNESCO World Heritage List site. At this regard The Pont du Gard site is highly representative, with its 15-euro parking and an alley of boutiques leading to the entrance.

However, the question of the profitability of heritage tourism remains unaddressed, especially if we consider that most visitors to the site do not stay overnight in Béziers or even visit the city (only 10% do). Despite being an important mediaeval and modern city centre, having an historical garden as well as shopping and leisure facilities, Béziers suffers from a lack of valorisation in a very frequented region that receives around 10 million tourists per year, mainly on the coast, but also in the backcountry (for wine tourism, rural tourism and ecotourism). Furthermore the difficulty of access to and from the town centre remains debatable, with no dedicated public transport, except for an urban bus line, which runs with low frequency (even if it is more frequent in summer), difficult parking, steep slopes and automobile traffic. The renovation project was presented to the population as a way to enhance urban tourism. In fact, the new spatial organization of the site is oriented to the West, closing the old way to the east except by boat or foot along the canal bridge to the new harbour (15 kilometres), but out of the historic centre. This limits the old city to a landscape view: the car park and the new entry invert the spatial organisation of the site, making access from the West, before entry to the city. At the same time, its labelling as a *Grand Site de France* orients the visitors twenty kilometres west of Béziers with a coherent full day of visiting.

Local authorities have presented another project as the next challenge for 2018–2022: a cable car linking the site of Fonséranes to the city. It could appear attractive, liable to become an extraordinary experience itself and to foster visits to the town. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to

implement; the city's skyline and the landscape of Fonséranes are protected: how to build this equipment without any visual impact on them?

Beyond these unresolved issues, we must mention the critical state of the plane tree line bordering the canal, which is not only an architectural heritage but also an environmental challenge. Coloured fungus is a plant disease that arrived from the United States in 1944 through contaminated wooden ammunition boxes that arrived in Marseille. Appearing in the early 1980s on the canal, nothing was done to control it and the disease has spread 100 kilometres West since then. Over ten years, 14,000 of the 42,000 plane trees along the Canal were infected, and, given then 30 year delay in treating them, every year 2000 century-old trees must be cut down and, hopefully, replaced, often by other species.<sup>iv</sup>

On the Fonséranes site, 95 olive trees and hackberries will replace the lost plane trees, but, beyond the site, over a considerable distance, the banks are bare. Cutting down plane trees increases water evaporation and weakens the canal banks (strengthened by the roots). Moreover, losing its plane trees, the canal loses a mark of its identity and icons of its landscape. Besides it is usually said that the 250-kilometre double alley of plane trees is visible from space. In the first years of this century, a promotional slogan by Tourism Office of Béziers was 'Enter the longest garden of the world'. Many mayors of the towns and villages along the canal spoke out against the loss of attractiveness that this could generate, as well as the risk of a downgrade by UNESCO. Therefore, from 2016, important vaccinations of trees are in process, to avoid having to cut down more.

## **Conclusions**

The situation of the Fonséranes Lock before October 2015 clearly showed how the gap between the representation and reality of a heritage site could negatively affect its conservation, as well as the tourist experience. Generally speaking, the proper valorisation of a hydraulic heritage site, beyond its rhetorical celebration and iconic reproduction, should involve:

- Sustainable and efficient handling of the hydraulic junction for tourist–recreational purposes
- Multiple-experience usability, for different tourist and recreational targets. A central issue is the conciliation of, strictly speaking, water tourism (visitors that directly experience the site in its hydraulic functions and perceive the surrounding landscape from the water), and non-specialized tourism, that is, visitors looking at the hydraulic heritage “from the shore”. These visitors, in particular, should be facilitated by easy accessibility and supported with interpretation and collateral experience tools
- Last, the economic profitability of the site itself, as well as its capacity to generate positive effects on linked activities and on the local tourist system.

As for the first two points, the project of the renovation of the site launched by the local administration seems to point in the right direction (even if some problems, as seen above, remain to be solved, hopefully according to a wider perspective, considering the whole Canal du Midi and its region).

Nevertheless, the outcome of the renovated site on Béziers' economy is uncertain. The Canal du Midi is the main pole of French river navigation with nearly 10,000 boat rentals and if rental costs per week (for up to four people) can range between 1000 and 3000 euros, hiring more luxurious houseboats, like Savannah or Espérance, costs more than 20,000 euros per week for six to eight people. The historic economic recovery of the canal is paradoxical. Between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, it was not as valuable as expected. Traffic remained regional, and, despite its privileged position, Béziers "did not fully seize the opportunity that this artery was" (Bergasse, 2000, p. 193). Although the comparison is difficult, we can estimate that the canal now currently generates greater economic activity through tourism than it did in the centuries of freight transport. In spite of the fact this generates an activity of 200 million euros per year and 1000 direct or indirect jobs (Voies Navigables de France, 2016), economic recovery in the territory that the canal crosses is yet to be seen. Canal-side activities remain secondary, compared to river navigation, and the renovation of the lock site does not seem to have the potential to significantly influence Béziers' tourism economy.

Moreover, the project favours, on the one hand, the historic and technical side of the lock and its recreational functions, on the other. Thus, it does not allow another possible interpretation of historic canals, that of being "cultural heritage"; we are referring, especially, to the memorial and human heritage related to everyday life on the canal and to traditional canal jobs and skills (lock-keepers, boatmen and washerwomen). This vernacular canal memory deserved a better place in the renovation project.

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<sup>i</sup>The authors entirely share responsibility for the contents of the paper. However, sections 2, 3 and 4 are by Federica L. Cavallo and sections 5, 6 and 7 are by Dominique Crozat. Sections 1 and 8 are by both.

<sup>ii</sup> For example see: Caraman (1836), Cros (1888), Marfaing (2002), Bergasse (1983 and 2006) and Roure (2001)

<sup>iii</sup>[http://www.beziers-mediterranee.fr/panneau\\_explication\\_fonseranes.pdf](http://www.beziers-mediterranee.fr/panneau_explication_fonseranes.pdf)

[http://www.beziers-mediterranee.fr/renovation\\_des\\_9\\_ecluses\\_de\\_fonseranes.html](http://www.beziers-mediterranee.fr/renovation_des_9_ecluses_de_fonseranes.html)

<sup>iv</sup>The situation in June 2016.