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Failing projects: disarray and derealization

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About the intentions

- 1 In many ways, while becoming hegemonic in the workplace, the “city by project” gained a foothold that goes beyond the only spheres of design. While it was accompanied by clear enthusiasm, ad hoc and severe crises (e.g. the pandemic and lockdowns), as well as an horizon questioning certain characteristics of modernity — caring, slowing down, repairing — have fostered a context conducive to the questioning of projects’ promises. However, research has under-documented “failures.” Hence the challenge of exploring the “run-off-road moments,” of grasping the failed projects. This observation led to the proposition to the *Cahiers de la recherche architecturale, urbaine et paysagère* of a call for contributions focusing on failed projects¹.
- 2 Our initial questioning was based on a reflection around the nature of the project activity, spanning over different fields and highlighting the interest of recent works, in particular in sociology of sciences and techniques and in environmental history. Expectations were formulated regarding the ecological dimension of project trajectories; the challenge was to turn failure into an analyser of a certain number of phenomena, which would allow us to better reflect upon the logics of congruence, friction, mismatch, renunciation, desynchronisation, disengagement, disruption... In short, the prism of derealization was suggested.
- 3 The point of our heuristic approach in the form of a call for contributions was not so much to label successes and failures, but rather to question the categorisations of reality, and to chronicle project evaluations. For some considered a failure — we can mention the decade-long project of the new Grand Ouest airport for the Notre-Dame-des-Landes site in France — but for others a success — the mobilization against a pointless large-scale projects proving that the defensive nature can create an anti-

narrative and a contribution to another possible world. What can we remember of the steps to the realisation and derealization of projects?

- 4 Our call targeted proposals regarding the development of typologies of failures, the analysis of conditions of derealization or re-composition of projects, or it was meant as a review by authors who had studied and conceptualised the disarray and failures of projects². This last line of research was not chosen in the answers received, and thus such anthology remains to be compiled.
- 5 What emerged from this? First, the prevalence of case studies and the absence of solely theoretical or hermeneutical proposals. With each paper, we are brought into specific contexts, mainly from the 20th century, without excluding the most contemporary one or a perspective of over two centuries. We were also interested in the variety of materials examined: large-scale equipment for equally large-scale events (Olympic Games, Universal Exhibition, new capital of a country...), the planning of transportation infrastructures (Paris railways, port), urban projects (in France, Switzerland, Italy, India), landscape developments.
- 6 While most papers are descriptive, they also refer to analytical and interpretative frameworks, rather discreetly. Let us now have an overview of the content in four permeable subsets before we raise questions regarding the ensemble it creates for future research on the subject.

From mismatch to potentiation

- 7 **Nacima Baron and Yacine Khelladi's** paper, entitled "*Réinvestir dans les réseaux ferrés d'Île-de-France pour surmonter leurs défaillances : de l'échec technique à l'impensé politique*", questions stakeholders dealing with a public transportation line in the Parisian region that is often considered as the most defective one. Through three frames of analysis of mainly English-speaking public policies – policy failure, learning policies, network governance – the paper examines the coexistence of attempts to modernize with the preservation of a status quo regarding the accessibility of Parisian territories in the periphery. The case study allows us to measure what a railway regeneration is, with no urban nor territorial narrative: the failure is taken as a discursive and performative object, which still allows us to see the work of a scheduler, or to consider the difficult relationships between elected representatives and engineers. The reader dives into different aspects of the expertise. The challenges of technical credibility and institutional legitimacy are visible at all times, as well as the question of trust, of the necessary informality in the complex regulation of a public transportation line in the Parisian region. We need to oil the wheels as institutions face one another.
- 8 By updating the mismatches between information, expertise and decision-making processes, the authors interpret the blocking of the process of shared governance of the line as the result of a status quo. The partners know how to invest in the infrastructural regeneration, but they avoid reallocating the accessibility advantages of Paris to the close, mid-, and large periphery.
- 9 **Tiphaine Abenia's** paper, "*Construire un autre regard sur l'abandon, réactiver la charge de potentialités d'un projet,*" offers a look that differentiates failure from disengagement, based on doctoral considerations regarding unsuccessful trajectories of a project (and relying on a large corpus of abandoned constructions). By exploring built situations,

she considers disengagement and abandon as pivotal moments that can both stem from a choice, an incompleteness or escheat. To the universality of the concept of failure, we can oppose the relativistic view of disengagement and the challenge of creating a prism of the state of patrimonialization of a society and its ability to read spatial potentials. In her typology of disengagements, she focuses on the deliberated ones. The Sicilian case mentioned by Tiphaine Abenia is put in dialogue with the history of the Port of Bosa, examined by Nathan Brenu (*infra*). Here, derealization is a synonym of potentiation, and disengagement can reopen a space of potentialities within the (architectural structure): “The potential architecture of an abandoned structure could, then, be confronted with the variety and the embodiment power of recorded scenarios.” The author proposes a delineation of the variations in potentiality and in realisation. This is a contribution that resituates disengagement as a turning point for the project, although discarded from the design mechanisms. Disengagement can reopen potentialities: those are the foundations for a non-linear review of the biography of contemporary built situations.

Comparative approaches of urban projects: drifts, catalysts, and alterations

- 10 **Nadia Arab and Yoan Miot’s paper**, “*Le projet de l’Union, à l’épreuve de la décroissance et de l’idéal métropolitain. Chronique d’une dérive*,” focuses on the challenge behind a description of the stages of derealization. Often, a new story is necessary to understand the blind spots of the old success stories of urban projects. This article aims to develop a comparative approach within the agglomeration. Using the concept of drift³ instead of derealization, the authors focus on the challenges of building capacities. The project of the Union in Lille, France, is analysed by the authors as a typical example of big urban projects carried out by public authorities since the 1990s in Europe and northern America, in order to redevelop downgraded territories. It experienced a series of setbacks and difficulties that do not stem from contingencies. Facing the particular context of urban decrease, its operational mechanisms for revaluation are stuck by the great complexity to build, even when building is one of the major conditions of the urban project. Such difficulties, although anticipated, were dismissed by the continuation of an agglomeration project aiming to stimulate metropolisation, triggering the derealization of the feasibility conditions of the initial project. Therefore, this case study questions both the importance of context, its consideration and the possible distortions between a desired future and the actual production conditions of the project.
- 11 **Sébastien Lambelet’s paper**, “*Reculer pour mieux sauter. Les projets en échec comme catalyseurs du développement urbain*,” reconsiders the dialectic of failure and realisation from the analysis of a series of Swiss urban projects carried out in Zurich and Winterthur between 1980 and 2020. With a problem statement regarding the evolution of urban planning during the *Trente Glorieuses* period and at the turn of the millennium, the author shows how the failed projects of the 1980s-1990s benefited those of the 2000s. Indeed, they became catalysts of the urban development to come. Sébastien Lambelet is particularly interested in the way project managers of new projects managed to “capitalise on the failures of past decades.” Beside the importance of the narrative written to make projects converge with the “spirit” of a time, studying the

stakeholders' strategies thus reveals the ability to abandon certain symbolic dimensions of the project so that it can come to fruition. The author concludes that "the failures of the 1980s-1990s create windows of opportunity that considerably accelerate the changes of these neighbourhoods", a way to remind us that a project might not fully get derealized but rather creates other conditions of realisation, whether further in time or in space.

- 12 Furthering Sébastien Lambelet's reflection, landscape architect **Denis Delbaere** reviews one of his projects to question the concept of "metaproject," which is often referred to in urban political sciences. Here, it has another meaning⁴. In "*Le parc des Caudreleux, malgré lui. Une défense et illustration du concept de métaprojet*," the author first retells the different stages of the project and highlights the concept of alteration. Then, he considers that maturation and mutation are connected dialectally and proposes the "metaproject" term to reflect upon the continuity of projects beyond their implementation and through the effects of actors' interactions. With a distance of twenty years since the initial conception of this park in the north of France, he then questions the theoretical foundations of his thesis, in particular regarding anthropology, archaeology and landscape ecology. This inter- if not transdisciplinary effort brings him back to issues regarding the treatment of the territory, regarding which Michel Marié had put forth the first steps by reviewing development projects and their varied prosperity⁵. In that case, Marié recalled, the more a project faces roughness, resistance and even conflicts, the more likely it would be to find potential uses and to be realised. The worst thing for a project would then be to be carried out like a knife through butter... While parks are usually considered in architecture as empty spaces (see also Camille Michel and Julien Paulré's contributions in the section *Research News*), what about the ultra-publicised full spaces designed for European or global events?

Big events as problematic triggers

- 13 **Marie Beauvalet-Boutouyrie's** paper, "*L'aventure olympique. Les architectures des Jeux d'hiver d'Albertville 1992: des projets inaboutis?*", focuses on the mechanism of the effective derealization of several sport equipment projects. Looking back at the Albertville Games thirty years after the event reveals the weakness of the architectural narrative, as well as the fragmentation of places highlighting sites that are more prestigious than the organising city. The author also points out the prevalence of equipment-related and financial considerations. She is interested in the overshadowing of the actual architectural dimension, to the frustration of architects and the crisis of confidence of relationships between project development and management.
- 14 What mattered the most was the promotion of French savoir-faire in terms of engineering, and it is difficult to find traces of Olympic ideals. Moreover, shortened deadlines (which are always the case for each edition) argue for simplification and optimisation, which mostly stem from budget cuts. Another interest of this case deals with the experiment of new contractual modalities, with the implementation of design-and-construction competitions (which can once again be found in Camille Michel and Julien Palré's paper in the *Matériaux de la recherche* section). The author revisits many exchanges and interactions, which are as many sleights of hand, relationships of power, disenchantment, last chance calls... The hypothesis of a general crisis of confidence

between the actors is easy to perceive. What lessons have been learnt and used to change things up in more recent editions of the Games? It is still too early, of course, to talk about Paris 2024!

- 15 However, we can still fortunately mention a similar case (of big projects), which is that of Milan's Universal Exhibition in 2015. The paper proposed by **Luca Gaeta** and **Stefano Di Vita**, "Planning Disaster, Successful Event, and Uncertain Future: The Twin Cases of the World Expo 2015 and Innovation District in Milan", examines, more than five years after the end of the event, the two projects for the exhibition's site, and its post-event transformation into an innovation district. The competitive background to win an international competition remains a structuring element in large cities. The urbanists retell the story of the succession of projects and failures within ten years. The planning was not considered as a responsible strategy, but rather as a process of conflictual mediation.
- 16 In their cross-referenced chronicle of two projects regarding the same site – one for a temporary global event (2015 Exhibition), and the other to build a new part of the city, including structures for a hospital, education, and research – the authors show the difficulty, if not impossibility, of general planning, fragilized in particular by the competition between the different big urban renewal projects. We can see coalitions between public and private actors; we discover the processes of conflictual mediate carried out within the stratified system of a big city. Interrelation and coordination are issues that can be found at every level, and the analysis clearly leads to a lack of integrated metropolitan vision. Therefore, the authors argue for a more systemic approach, at the scale of metropolitan areas.

Temporal and cultural decentralisation

- 17 Western megaprojects are nowadays well documented and analysed, but what about cases "from afar"? One paper sheds light on the importance of the political dimension of projects, as well as enables the revisit of the fascinating history of new city projects, of which some have never come out. **Louise Jammet's** paper, "*Amaravati, une capitale pour l'Andhra Pradesh : construction et déconstruction d'un projet de ville*", questions the implementation of a new city for a new state in the 2010s. How can a new capital of a federated state can be planned and built when electoral mandates do not last more than five years? That is the question asked in the case of the new state of Andhra Pradesh, redesigned after the territorial partition of 2013, from which emerged Telangana and disappeared its multicultural capital, Hyderabad. The ruling Prime Minister of the remaining Andhra Pradesh, N. C. Naidu, then tackled the construction of an ex-nihilo city as early as 2014, in order to meet the need for a capital. However, the political changeover that took place in 2019 destabilised the initial ambition of the "city project", running the risk of making it fail. Connections between land development and political programmes are thus revealed, as well as the consequences of their failures.
- 18 With this case, we follow the strength of issues regarding the readjustment of countries (we can mention Brazil, some seventy years ago, with the decision, planning and realisation of Brasilia). Everything is present in the argument to use Amaravati's project as an analyser of contemporary fantasies. The point is no more no less to reterritorialize a local elite, like in South-East Asia (Singapore), by combining the

horizon of world-class cities and the smart city model: the call for international investors is unambiguous. The paper retells the components of a total city project, a quest for the legitimacy and the acceptability of urban composition. The author writes an idyllic story of a new city where we can feel strong logics of dominance. The country's "rice bowl," where this region is located, is denied, and landowners are robbed and forced to pay a speculative game. The political disengagement from the project does not solve the problem of farmers who stopped their activities. In question, the combination of an authoritarian regime with economic liberalism.

- 19 Lastly, historian **Nathan Brenu**'s paper, "*Le port de Bosa : l'Unité italienne au reflet d'un projet en échec ?*", enables a reflection from a case in the second half of the 19th century. It questions both the trials and tribulations of big public projects and what can be found in archives when one focuses on what did not happen (thus questioning the effects of intellectuals and dignitaries writing history). The project of a new trade port at the anchorage of Bosa (Italy), as it was envisioned in the 19th century, is a complete failure. The Bosa case is far from being unique (other port projects were part of the public development programme during the Italian Unity and never came out), but it allows Nathan Brenu to analyse, with the help of historical archives, the mechanisms of a large-scale project: political, legislative and financial means implemented for the realisation; methods used to win or simulate assent; necessary concessions to its emergence; modalities of its "communication" or presentation to avoid any anachronism... The study allows us to understand how this enterprise was carried out, and what it can teach about the state context to which it belonged. In short, Nathan Brenu invites us to read a heuristic form of disarray; the focus on a development policy teaches us about the pitfalls that lead it nowhere.
- 20 Another decentralisation, though within the journal this time (and the reader will have to move to the *Research News* section). It proposes a dialogue, already mentioned previously, in which we tackle the loss of substance for projects with a failure typology carried out by an architecture agency: the fight of egos, the disagreements with a company in a conception-realisation context, the verdict of an Excel table are mentioned by the *Vous êtes ici architectes* agency. While mismatches have different natures, we can highlight the very constraint configuration, for architects, of the conception-realisation processes: echoing Tiphaine Abenia's paper, it also invites us to reflect upon the criticism of the "architectural party" and suggests that a central idea must remain invisible to have a chance of living.

Failure, a prism for the analysis of project dynamics

- 21 The overview of the papers selected for this issue shows how the narratives of failure can represent potent tools for analysis, even if they are more difficult to use compared to those regarding success stories that are saturating professional publications. Indeed, these narratives allow to better grasp the projectual dynamics in that they necessarily include "recoveries and losses"⁶. Whether they consider the project as potentiation, or they aim to understand how stakeholders prepare to move ahead, or even they describe how the spatial project is often a project on the project, the authors of this issue invite us to consider failure as a moment within a larger temporality, that of the long history of a site or processes of building space. In a way, most of these papers see contextualization as an element playing a role in the problematisation.

- 22 These narratives also inform us about the energy that feeds the projectual engine. A project is a multi-dividend mode of action: it targets several objectives and articulates heterogeneous metrics. Whether we are dealing with the Olympic Games, a Universal Exhibition, a port infrastructure, a new neighbourhood, a new capital, the redevelopment of a wasteland, the project is a tool with which we use resources in order to transform a limited perimeter while targeting other objectives at the same time: to promote French engineering, to ensure the coordination between several large-scale metropolitan urban projects, to symbolise Italy's unity, to reterritorialize an elite... Of course, the antagonism between these different goals can sometimes result in failure. Rather than the radicality of the conflicts between antagonistic objectives, the monographies compiled here show that we should not neglect the ordinary "frictions," which undermine the credibility of a project, leading to a progressive derealization of the feasibility conditions. Here, we can argue for the challenge of research to allow itself to define this ordinary element of construction. Are the tools and positions of pragmatic approaches not essentials to finely explore articulations as the maladjustments of regimes of commitment expected by projects? As the sociology of sciences and techniques highlighted in the early 1990s the challenge of situating objects and techniques within the action⁷, we can continue this push regarding architectural, urban and landscape projects.
- 23 Lastly, these narratives carry a more general message. They invite us to consider with the necessary distance disengagement, failure and other figures related to it regarding projects, so that we do not obliterate what deals with the general processes that orient the forms of life. In that, this issue pulls away from the declinist and catastrophist theses⁸. Failure is not a euphemism for death, but rather a moment of denouement, during which the heart of the story unfolds, opening to other possibilities and allowing us to weave different threads of the long history while remembering the detours resulting in our artefacts. In that, this issue is a sort of manifesto for the constitution of an archive of failure, as opposed to the tendency in digital capitalism identified by anthropologists and sociologists A. Appadurai and N. Alexander⁹, which consists in purging the conscience of failure to better feed the promises of a glorious future. It translates also in the apologia of failure, which we see mentioned in the start-up world, and which seems to be essential so that "unicorns" can appear! *Failure*, relying on contrasted schools of thoughts (business studies, queer studies, research on infrastructures) places the concept of promise at the centre of the analysis, and it specifically argues for better knowledge of the "workings of the promise machine." The reflections gathered in this issue contribute to that effort, we hope. Beyond a deconstruction of this machine, several papers also invite us down the path of a right to tinker, which deviates objects from their trajectory at the same time that we repair and transform them, in order to remove them from their planned obsolescence: some food for thought!

NOTES

1. See the full text of our call, which was accompanied by several references: <https://journals.openedition.org/craup/4487>
 2. See for example John Forester, *Planning in the face of power*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988; Peter Hall, *Great planning disasters*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, or more recently Bent Flyvbjerg, *Megaprojects and risk: an anatomy of ambition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
 3. Proposed by Michel Callon. See Michel Callon, “Le travail de la conception en architecture”, *Les Cahiers de la recherche architecturale*, n° 37, 1996, pp. 25-35.
 4. See for example: Gilles Pinson, “Le projet urbain comme instrument d’action publique”, in Pierre Lascombes and Patrick Le Galès (éds.), *Gouverner par les instruments*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2004, pp. 199-233.
 5. Michel Marié, “De l’aménagement au ménagement du territoire en Provence”, *Le Genre humain*, n°12, 1985, [online] <https://www.cairn.info/revue-le-genre-humain-1985-1-page-71.htm>
 6. Françoise Collin, « Ces études qui sont pas “tout”. Fécondité et limites des études féministes », *Les Cahiers du Grif*, n° 45 « Savoir et différence des sexes », pp. 81-93.
 7. See for example Madeleine Akrich, « Les objets techniques et leurs utilisateurs. De la conception à l’action », in Bernard Conein, Nicolas Dodier and Laurent Thévenot, *Les objets dans l’action*, Paris, EHESS, 1993, pp. 35-57.
 8. Largely at the foreground these past years (thanks to collapsological stories) and that can be seen, even recently, in one of the summer series produced by *Le Monde* on the collapse of the Roman Empire – and relativizing the very idea of a collapse!
 9. Arjun Appadurai, Neta Alexander, *Failure*, Polity, 2019.
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