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Sophie Hasiak. Promoting The Attractiveness Of Peri-urban Residential Areas Through Public Transport Services - The Strategy Of French Real Estate Professionals. Transportation Research Procedia, 2023, TRA Lisbon 2022 Conference Proceedings Transport Research Arena (TRA Lisbon 2022), 14th-17th November 2022, Lisboa, Portugal, 72, pp.1499-1506. 10.1016/j.trpro.2023.11.616 . hal-04356570

HAL Id: hal-04356570

<https://hal.science/hal-04356570>

Submitted on 20 Dec 2023

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Transport Research Arena (TRA) Conference

Promoting The Attractiveness Of Peri-urban Residential Areas Through Public Transport Services - The Strategy Of French Real Estate Professionals

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Abstract

Limiting urban sprawl has been a key challenge for European metropolises for several years. It aims to both structure periurban living and manage periurban mobilities through sustainable policies. The presence of a railway station in periurban areas is at the heart of territorial strategies. It concerns three types of stakeholders: public and private stakeholders, and individuals. This paper explores the strategy of one of them: the French real estate professionals. It shows that these agents include the principles of territorial sustainable challenges in their promotion marketing to some degree. They are aware that a railway station provides a useful asset to highlight the residential attractiveness of a periurban area. However, they adopt a cautious strategy since the station may be considered as a source of nuisance by future buyers.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the scientific committee of the Transport Research Arena (TRA) Conference

Keywords: real estate professionals; strategy; promotion; rail station; periurban areas

1. Introduction and literature review

Limiting urban sprawl and peri-urbanization has been a key challenge for European metropolises for at least the last thirty years. These urban sprawl phenomena generate car dependency of people living in these areas (Orfeuill 2008; Motte-Baumvol et al. 2012). This issue is still on the agenda of public policies because of metropolisation strengthening and climate change challenge. It more concerns the structuring of the periurban living instead of limiting its expansion. It also aims to both structure periurban living and manage periurban mobilities through sustainable policies consistent with challenges of energy transition and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Defining territorial

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strategies based on the valuation of railway stations is considered as a possible lever of action when these periurban areas have a rail connection. It has also been at the heart of public policies for several decades. It aims to act on both densification around railway lines and urban re-conquest of station areas considering that this could induce residents to take the train.

The valorization of the rail system concerns at least three types of stakeholders. In France, rail stations areas generate renewed interest from public stakeholders, as they may be strategic areas with an interesting urban development potential. This topic has been the subject of much scientific work dealing with analyses of these public stakeholders' strategies, with a new emerging focus on rail challenges in medium-sized cities or periurban areas (L'Hostis et al. 2013; Maulat 2014; Menerault 2014; Roudier 2019). The second type of stakeholders is individuals. Indeed, it invites us to question if living near a rail station is a well-reasoned choice for these inhabitants. Some studies (Bentayou et al. 2014; Hasiak et al. 2014) emphasize that the presence of a railway station does not seem to have a real impact on the choice of housing location. It rather seems to be an asset for alternative travels. The third type of stakeholders relates to the private sphere. These stakeholders are also involved either directly or indirectly in this issue but there are very few evaluations of their strategies. To what extent may the private sphere also act in favor of sustainable periurban areas? Has it also taken up this challenge of promoting the station as an asset in these areas?

The private sphere gathers many types of stakeholders. It seems interesting to focus on a specific profile, the real estate professionals (agencies, notaries, real estate developers), for whom the primary strategy corresponds to economic foundations and territorial opportunities (Bonneval 2008). Do they consider political aspirations of rail promotion in their real estate development strategies? How do they value the presence of a periurban rail station in their promotion arguments? The spatial location greatly influences the attractiveness of properties (Bonneval 2008), so that its promotion has to include both its technical characteristics and its environment. Consequently, the idea seems to emerge that real estate professionals would indeed consider transport accessibility, but the lack of scientific work on this subject (Pollard 2011) invites us to analyze their strategy and position about valuation of railway services.

This paper aims to complete the knowledge about stakeholders' strategies concerning the challenge of rail promotion. First, it presents the method used to explore the strategy of real estate professionals, the field of study and the data gathered. Then, it discusses how the stakeholders act in favor of valuing rail accessibility among a strategy including benefits and warnings. Finally, it concludes on their real mobilization in favor of rail services' promotion supporting sustainable land use planning for periurban areas even if this challenge is not yet achieved and may be questioned by the consequences of the health crisis linked to the Covid 19 epidemic.

2. Methodology

2.1. Focusing on periurban fringe of the metropolitan area of Lille (France)

The field study is composed of three periurban communities (Templeuve, Phalempin and Libercourt) of the metropolitan area of Lille, a territory of 3.8 million inhabitants located in Northern France (Fig. 1). They are under the influence of the conurbation of Lille, which gathers the main metropolitan amenities and employments. They are particularly attractive in terms of housing. Two of these communities are characterized by a low population density and a predominantly suburban fabric, which is composed of more than 85% of individual houses (Table 1). This sample essentially includes municipalities for which the standard of living is higher than the one in the urban centre, even if there is an exception with the case of Libercourt. Resident households are multi-motorized, and still make little use of public transport to go to work. They are still car-dependent.

Some regional train services, named the Express Regional Trains (TER), serve these periurban areas. The level of the rail service is attractive to reach the centre of Lille, both in terms of frequency and access time (Table 2). On the contrary, road accessibility to the centre of Lille from this suburban fringe is quite difficult at peak hours due to a mix of local and transit traffic, which uses the primary road network, composed of highways converging towards Lille, and the lack of structured secondary road network.

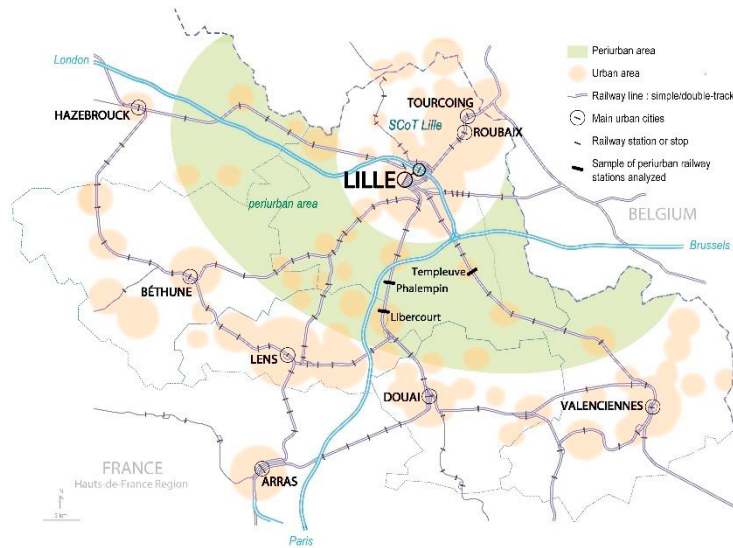


Fig. 1. The metropolitan area of Lille and the 3 periurban communities studied – conception Cerema Hauts de France

Table 1. Main characteristics of the periurban communities' sample – 2018 (source: INSEE, the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Research)

Community	Number of inhabitants	Population density (inhabitants /km ²)	Proportion of individual housing	Poverty rate	Share of active people using public transport to go to work	Share of households owning at least two cars
Libercourt	8,337	1,263	91%	25%	6%	43%
Phalempin	4,780	603	88%	5%	9%	57%
Templeuve	6,196	391	90%	6%	8%	54%
Lille (city)	233,098	6,692	31%	25%	18%	19%

Table 2. Railway services (source: SNCF, the French historical railway operator)

Railway station	Railway link	Number of daily train services (2019)	Access time by train to Lille	Radial distance from Lille	Daily attendance in 2019
Libercourt	Douai-Lille	87	18-24 min	22 km	3,358
Phalempin	Douai-Lille	42	19-20 min	18 km	1,324
Templeuve	Valenciennes-Lille	56	11-17 min	18 km	2,954

2.2. Building up an adapted corpus of data

The analysis is based on the implementation of a substantial body of data. On the one hand, we chose to work on both advertisements published on websites and leaflets of new properties since real estate advertisements are the substrate of valuation practices (Bonneval 2008). We explored different websites (estate agency websites, notary's office ones, online classifieds ads). This method required to have a specific focus on the multiple ads for the same property published on different sites in order to evaluate if the content differs from one site to another. It turned out that the ads for a same property were very often presented in the same way, reflecting the principle of standardization of the way of promoting a property (Bernard 2012; Bonneval 2008). As a result, we collected more than 600 property advertisements related to old properties published from April 2019 to March 2020, just before the breakdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic and concerning the three periurban communities. We also collected 10 promotional leaflets of new properties distributed in the mailboxes by the real estate developers during the same period.

There is a particularity linked to the periurban communities studied. Indeed, the sample of ads includes a greater proportion of properties offered for sale than for rent (Fig. 2). The high proportion of owner-occupiers in two of the cities studied may explain this situation. Moreover, the supply of proposed properties essentially concerns individual dwellings linked to the characteristics of the housing supply in these cities (Table 3).

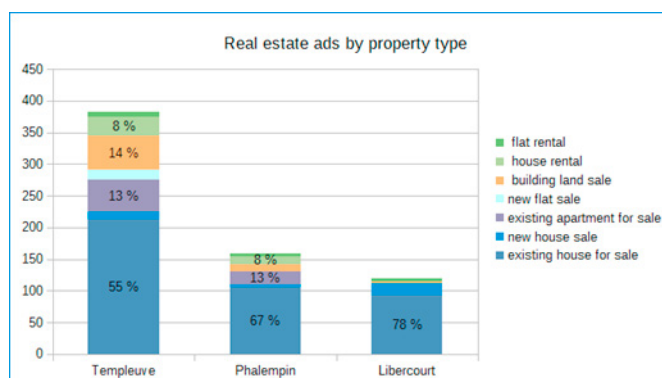


Fig. 2. Real estate ads sample by type of property

Table 3. Characteristics of households and housing – source: INSEE 2016

community	share of owner-occupied households (%)	share of renter households (%)	share of households housed free of charge (%)	Proportion of houses (%)
Libercourt	41.0	55.6	3.4	89.5
Phalempin	72.7	25.4	1.9	88.0
Templeuve	71.4	26.7	3.4	89.8

On the other hand, we completed our data collection by the face-to-face interviews of 10 real estate agents and notaries who work on these areas. It aims to complete the analysis by gathering their opinion on the interest of highlighting the railway system to attract new buyers.

The analysis of the topic of promoting rail stations in property sales ads is mainly based on a textual data analysis of the lexical field used in them. We didn't take the item of parking availability in or close to home into account since there is no parking pressure in this type of municipality while it is the case in more densely areas. It makes it possible to underline how real estate stakeholders take the accessibility issues of the territory into account and reflect the valorization of the rail service.

3. Main results

3.1. A real awareness of rail challenge or only a marketing argument?

According to real estate agents, accessibility is seen as an important expectation of future owners, even if it is not their priority criterion. This point of view is confirmed by the results of a specific survey of periurban residents living near a railway station we carried out in 2016 for an exploratory work. Indeed, the main criteria of individuals who want to live in a periurban community are the characteristics of the dwelling and its location. However, transport consideration seems to be also influent, and especially train services (Fig. 3a). Indeed, nearly one interviewee in two of this survey spontaneously says that the existence of public transport services (train or bus) has influenced his residential choice.

Moreover, as the interviews revealed, real estate professionals are aware that the presence of a rail station in communities located in the suburbs of urban centers constitutes an undeniable asset for their residential attractiveness. This factor ranks among the other attractiveness factors such as territorial reputation, generally induced by the social

framework, living environment and area dynamism. The main reason they talk about an asset is that the rail station offers the opportunity to avoid road congestion to reach the urban centre at peak hours. As one agent says, "the periurban community is at 13 minutes from Lille by train, this proximity is a great asset for this area anyway". Furthermore, another agent points out that the expectations of future buyers often include the criterion of the railway station because "precisely those who go to work in Lille are looking for this in order to avoid traffic jams". Considering this way of thinking and acting, we can therefore conclude that talking about rail station also represents a marketing argument. This result is consistent with the findings of Delage (2013), who highlights that the presence of a railway station is a commercial argument, widely put forward in the marketing materials of properties. However, it is difficult to conclude on their complete awareness of this challenge of valuing the rail system considering the gap between the discourses and their translations in the promotional supports. Indeed, our survey shows that only 42% of real estate supports include transport accessibility in their wordings (Fig. 3b). This proportion therefore seems to show that the effective mobilization of these actors in this challenge is still low. However, we urge caution in drawing a conclusion too hasty since our sample is composed of a majority of old properties published on websites. Ads on the net have to be short and concise. The limited size of the ads suggests that only the most important elements are presented, so that professionals have to choose the right vocabulary for their description (Bonneval 2008). Nevertheless, transport facilities still appear to be at most the third criterion considered by professionals after the ones related to the characteristics and the location of the property.

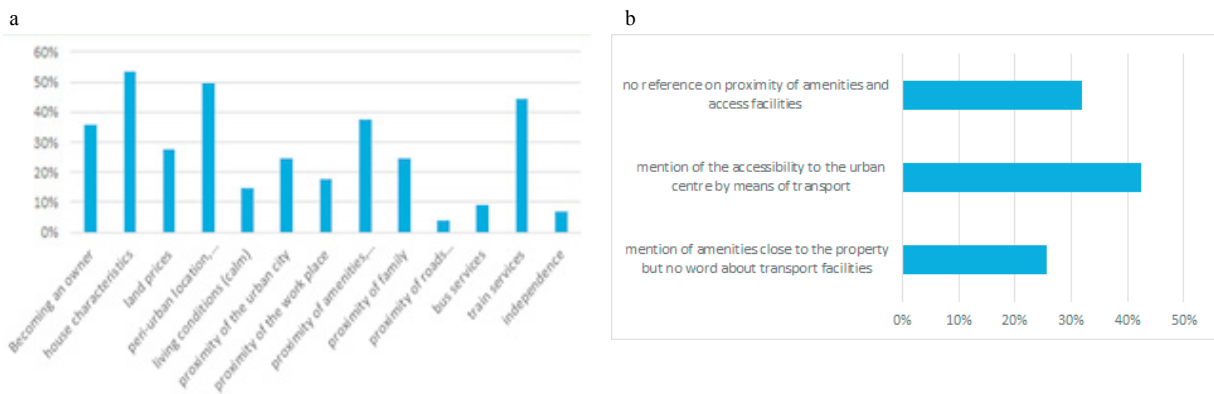


Fig. 3. (a) Main choice criteria mentioned by individuals aspiring to live in periurban communities (N=103) – source: Cerema 2016; (b) Proportion of ads including the mention of transport facilities

3.2. How is rail accessibility valued in real estate ads?

We have seen previously that transport accessibility of a property is only integrated, more or less completely, by 42% of the ads' sample. The analysis presented below is based on this volume of ads. The objective is to examine how professionals qualify accessibility in their ads or promotional documents and also how they value the rail system. It aims to see if there is some form of standardization of the language of accessibility, as it exists for the current practices for describing the components of the property (Bernard 2012).

3.2.1. Using the notion of proximity

According to our sample, accessibility of a periurban property is described by the notion of proximity to amenities in the community and to the urban centre. Professionals can either make the choice to talk about amenities without specifying what this notion covers or to list these amenities, including railway station. Overall, the professionals give priority in their ads to the arguments of proximity to services, including amenities, school, shops and city centre: this corresponds to 464 occurrences. The proximity of rail station criterion ranks second with 273 occurrences. Proximity

to road infrastructures is much less often mentioned. Thus, 80% of the ads with a mention of transport facilities include the word railway station. 24% of the property ads highlight road accessibility, mostly in addition to rail accessibility.

There may be some differences in these proportions among the periurban communities. They are linked to the fact that they are more or less close to a motorway junction providing access to the metropolis (Fig. 4). In any case, real estate professionals therefore seem to place more emphasis on a rail connection than on a road connection, thus following a policy of sustainable periurban areas.

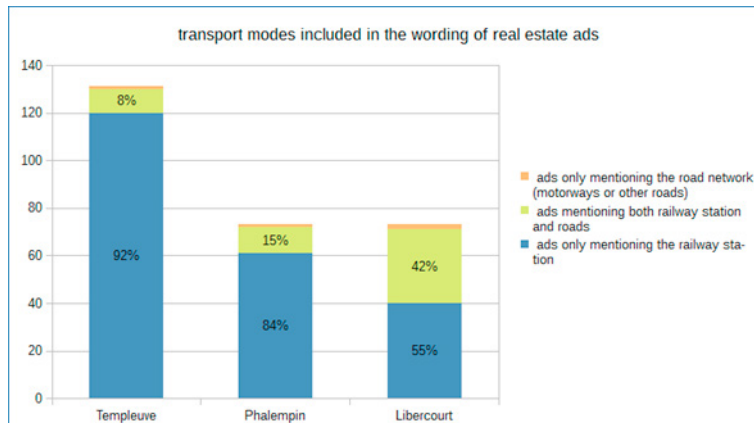


Fig. 4. Transport modes of transport mentioned in the advertisements integrating transport accessibility

3.2.2. How is proximity to transport promoted?

The notion of proximity is relative and depends on each person's interpretation. It is therefore a delicate argument to describe for professionals. Considering our sample, we can say that the practices appear to differ according to the type of property. Thus, for new properties marketed as part of a property program, developers attach importance to describe the accessibility of the property in their promotional leaflets. The ten leaflets analyzed all include this accessibility item and evoke it with an intermodal point of view.

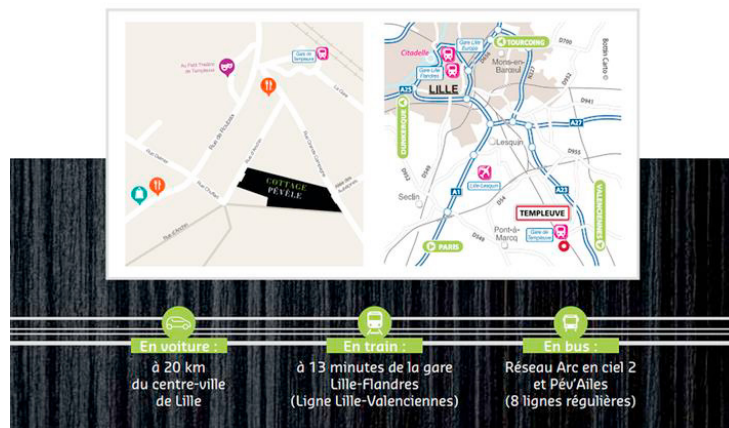


Fig. 5. Extract from a promotional leaflet about accessibility from a new property located in the community of Templeuve

The value of the presence of a rail station is seen as important. Indeed, on the one hand, the location plan of the property program (Fig. 5) outlines the location related to the neighborhood road network, by integrating the local road network and also by positioning the railway station. On the other hand, the promotional text mentions accessibility by using two different methods of evaluation of it: time and distance.

Considering older properties, online advertisements do not allow to talk about transport accessibility in the same way. The small size of the online ads forces real estate professionals to adapt their promotional text to their online tools. Consequently, advertisements of old properties published on the net will rather favor a global wording based on the notion of proximity to all amenities, the station being one in the same way as a school, as personal services, or any other amenity.

3.2.3. Proximity: what does it mean?

Secondly, it is interesting to focus on the notion of transport proximity, which is widely used by professionals in their communication materials. The analysis of the semantic field of proximity to transport used in ads and leaflets reflects the strategy adopted by real estate professionals. It shows differences between advertisements on the net and promotional leaflets of new properties. Concerning online ads, they essentially use the words "proximity", "close to", "near" and "just a few steps away". This notion may seem both explicit and vague since each individual will interpret this notion and give it a value. On the contrary, for new properties leaflets, proximity is explained and professionals distinguish road accessibility from rail accessibility. Indeed, road accessibility to the urban centre is more often expressed in terms of kilometers while access by train is evaluated in travel time. This strategy of speaking about accessibility may be explained by the fact that developers may consider the difficulty of car accessibility to Lille due to traffic jams on main roads. They then consider that it is more judicious not to promote a quality of car accessibility expressed in time.

Our analysis above shows a difference in practices on how to promote the accessibility of a property to transport infrastructures, and thus to a railway station. Property developers of new buildings seem to more integrate the promotion of transport accessibility into their commercial leaflet than real estate agencies of old properties. However, these differences can be explained in part by the nature of the promotional support, between advertising on websites (old properties) and promotional brochures (new properties). For the old properties, the reference is to talk about the accessibility of amenities by using the notion of proximity, and therefore the promotion of the presence of a station, when it is clearly mentioned, will be translated by the inclusion of two words: proximity station. For new properties, we find a qualification of the proximity to infrastructures with notable differences in the valuation methods between road and rail. This writing choice may reflect the fact that real estate professionals take road congestion of the main axes converging to Lille into account. They therefore consider that it is wiser not to sell car accessibility to the urban centre in terms of travel time

3.3. A strategy between valorization and mistrust

This analysis shows that real estate professionals make efforts to contribute to value the railway system but at the same time the interviews show that they need to be cautious. This way of speaking evasively about the notion of proximity may be considered as a strategic choice since professionals want to avoid the parallelism between proximity of a rail station and disturbance. Indeed, the interviews testify the existence of a certain mistrust or cautious from people looking for accommodation concerning the proximity of equipment that could cause some pollution or noise nuisances. Professionals note that future buyers are attentive to all the criteria of their residential choice and analyze them from all the angles. Thus, the agent from the agency C reports: "nowadays, they try to find a dwelling without any nuisance, far from a busy road, a train [...]. They are more cautious and more sensitive to environmental nuisances. This is a fairly new phenomenon". The real estate agent D is even more cautious: "This can be a double-edged strategy because if we say "proximity to the station", people might believe that if it is very close to the station, it will be noisy, so we have to be careful". Another agent completes this strategic position: "All the means of transport may be an advantage and at the same time a disadvantage. [...] From a certain budget, people don't want to have train running at the end of the garden". Therefore, the choice not to specify more precisely the notion of proximity to a rail station in ads might be interpreted as a way to manage this distrust. Besides, it is important to remember that the primary interest of these professionals using websites is to catch the attention of future buyers, as underlined by the agent F: "It's true that we don't necessarily mention the proximity to public transport. You have to understand that the aim is to generate attention, and then when we meet together, to see the criteria of future buyers and to guide them to the good products".

4. Conclusion

This work underlines that real estate professionals working in the metropolitan area of Lille seek to include the principles of valorization of the territorial opportunities in their real estate promotion marketing to some degree. This result can be transposed to all metropolitan areas of France, since scientific work has underlined the standardization of the content of real estate promotion tools (Bernard 2012; Bonneval 2008). Real estate professionals have now become aware that valuing periurban properties for sale according to their accessibility conditions to the urban centre is necessary. Besides, a railway station located in a periurban area provides an interesting and useful asset for promoting periurban housing and therefore, for emphasizing residential attractiveness of the community.

This strategic position may be interpreted as a certain consideration of the challenge of adapting their economic strategy with the ecological transition issues driven by French laws. However, as they well know the behaviors of future buyers, they adopt their strategy of promotion according to new or old properties, by taking care to attract the attention of purchasers without making them flee. Hence, they ensure that their wording of accessibility promotion will not be a barrier to the sale of assets.

This strategic position may be questioned with the situation induced by the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020. Indeed, we have noted a certain disaffection of public transport since the beginning of the epidemic. These transports have lost many users and still struggle to recover their pre-crisis attendance levels. Moreover, some French populations, especially those who lived in the Paris Region, expressed their desire to live in the countryside at the end of the first confinement period in May 2020. A research program currently analyses the impact of the crisis on residential mobility. The first published findings (PUCA et al., 2022) show that, contrary to the point of view of media, there is not a massive urban exodus in France. Small and medium-sized towns, periurban and rural areas are more attractive by the health crisis, however this attraction existed before the crisis. Will this pandemic have really effects on location choice of residential housing? Might people consider no more dependency to public transport for their residential choice? These are all questions that invite further research by exploring possible changes in the relationship between the attractiveness of a territory and the provision of public rail transport.

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