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# The “ Palais des enfants ” (Children’s Palace) in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez (France): Towards a history of current and future uses of former holiday camps

Amélie Nicolas

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## **In Bo**

### **Abstract EN**

Although the history of vacation camps is well documented, their future is yet to be explored. Looking back on the results of a research project that mobilized a multidisciplinary research team from the Nantes School of Architecture, this paper focuses on the future of a former vacation camp called in French “Palais des enfants” (Children’s Palace). The camp is located in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez, a seaside town in Vendée, on the French Atlantic coastline. The specific case of the “Palais des enfants” in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez offers an ideal case study for the many issues that affect the future of these heritages: who are the stakeholders playing extended roles in managing the future of this camp? What are the legal, social and environmental constraints affecting these heritages? Which economic strategies should be implemented to develop tourism in a coastal town marked by social tourism? This site, as well as its future, have led us to ground our analysis in a set of spatial, political and social perspectives. They have above all opened up new horizons for joint research initiatives informed by design and by art.

### **Abstract ITA**

Sebbene la storia delle colonie per l’infanzia sia ben documentata, il loro futuro deve ancora essere esplorato. A partire dai risultati di un progetto di ricerca che ha mobilitato un gruppo di lavoro multidisciplinare della Scuola di Architettura di Nantes, questo articolo si concentra sul futuro di una ex colonia nota come “Il palazzo dei bambini”. La colonia si trova a Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez, una città balneare della Vandea, sulla costa atlantica francese. Essa un caso studio ideale per le numerose questioni che riguardano il futuro di questi patrimoni: chi sono i soggetti interessati che svolgono ruoli nella futura gestione di questo edificio? Quali sono i vincoli giuridici, sociali e ambientali che incidono su tale patrimonio? Quali sono le strategie economiche da attuare per sviluppare il turismo in una città costiera caratterizzata dal turismo sociale? Questo sito, così come il suo futuro, ha portato a fondare questa analisi su un insieme di prospettive spaziali, politiche e sociali. Soprattutto, questo caso studio ha aperto nuovi orizzonti per iniziative di ricerca congiunte legate alla progettazione architettonica e alla sperimentazione artistica.

### **Keywords**

French Atlantic coast; social tourism; seaside urbanization; ethnography; research by design; research by art

## **The « Palais des enfants » (Children’s Palace) in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez (France): Towards a history of current and future uses of former holiday camps**

In France, the built heritage of vacation camps is on the wane. Postcards showing large groups of children gathered amidst nature, by the sea or in the mountains are images of the past. Only a few vacation camps are still operating today.

The weakening of this model is an undeniable fact. It is not only about the drop in the number of children going to these institutions, but it also bears witness to a symbolic evolution in the attractiveness of this kind of holidays. Besides, this weakening is also due to the material decay of buildings that have been resold or converted. Sometimes, they simply disappeared.

In 2013, a French ministerial report dedicated to this issue voiced concern about this situation.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the collective childcare sector remained dynamic, the social ideal of a “right to vacation for all” associated with these camps seemed largely undermined. In 2015, 50% of the children from lower-income households (less than 1500 euros per month) did not go on vacation.<sup>2</sup>

In 2018, a regional research program aiming to understand the fragilities and decline of social tourism (and mainly children vacation camps) on the Atlantic coast was set up.<sup>3</sup> This multidisciplinary team’s investigation considered both the political and social history of works councils or municipalities that have promoted children’s right to vacations. In the French case, the decline or withstanding of vacation camps is closely linked to the history of municipal socialism or communism, to the history of state-run worker supervision on the social and family level, and to their contemporary metamorphoses.<sup>4</sup>

The research group has also examined the history of economic and tourist development in several Atlantic coastal municipalities.<sup>5</sup> Another aspect of this history is that of municipalities tending to specialize in social tourism. What will happen to them once the many vacation camps which developed within their territories shut down?

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<sup>1</sup> *Rapport parlementaire sur l’accessibilité des jeunes aux séjours collectifs et de loisirs*, submitted by Michel Ménard for the Commission des affaires culturelles et de l’éducation on 2013, July 10.

<sup>2</sup> Saskia Cousin and Bertrand Réau, *Sociologie du tourisme* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016 [2009]).

<sup>3</sup> “Holi-D” was a four-year regional research program (2018–2022) about the history and future of social tourism on the French Atlantic coastline (RFI Tourism – University of Brittany and Loire). It was co-coordinated by Amélie Nicolas, sociologist, and Laurent Devisme, professor of urban studies at the Nantes School of Architecture – Ambiances, Architectures, Urbanity research unit (AAU\_UMR CNRS 1563). It also involved researchers in geography, architecture and urban planning, as well as art.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Lee Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land: Working-Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2002); Jean Houssaye, *Le livre des colos. Histoire et évolution des centres de vacances pour enfants* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1989); Emmanuel Bellanger and Julian Mischi, *Les territoires du communisme. Élus locaux, politiques publiques et sociabilités militantes* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The study focuses on coastal towns in Loire-Atlantique and Vendée that have hosted vacation camps.

This article aims to contribute to a history of current and future uses of children's vacation camps, from an ethnographic architectural perspective. It focuses on the specific case of the “Palais des enfants”,<sup>6</sup> a holiday camp for children (referred to as a *colonie de vacances* in French) located in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez on the Atlantic coast. This camp opened in the early 1950s. It closed in 2001 and was put up for sale. We will focus on the history of this disused holiday camp, a period which lasted from 2001 until today.

This article will first provide an overview of the latest developments in the field of vacation camps, particularly in France. This will allow us to identify the outlines and the relevance of research on the decline and fragility of social-tourism-oriented territories. We will then focus more specifically on the future of the “Palais des enfants” in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez. Our aim is to outline an architectural, political and social ethnography of a camp whose future seems undetermined and largely uncertain. Finally, we would like to show how these specific blockages and deadlocks could be used as opportunities to think up and launch an initiative of research by design and by art, exploring what the future uses of this specific camp could be; an innovative initiative that breathes a new dynamic into our investigation. (Fig. 01)

### **Cross-historiographies of vacation camps in the French context**

In the French context, children vacation camps have been widely researched with different approaches. Consequently, it is possible to draw cross-historiographies of the topic of holiday camps and more generally of social tourism.

The first historiographical approach focuses on the history of childhood and youth as paralleling with the implementation of collective educational proposals and structures. The work of American historian Laura Lee Downs is worth mentioning here. Her monography *Childhood in the Promised Land. Working Class Movements and the colonies de vacances in France, 1880-1960* was published in 2002, and translated into French in 2009.<sup>7</sup> Cross-referencing a wide range of sources (municipal archives, local newspapers, correspondence telling both of the lives of young people in the camps and of the care institutions themselves), this book offers a social history of youth and a history of institutional youth care that goes beyond a single history of education. Along the same line, we should also mention American historian Susan B. Whitney’s *Mobilizing Youth: Communist and Catholics in Interwar France*, published in 2009,<sup>8</sup> in which youth supervision is shaped by a climate of tension between clerics and anticlerics. These books are dedicated to the history of “open air” policies and of youth movements. They detail the changes in childcare within these camps (even from a gender perspective) from a hygienist vision of vacation camps towards a more

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<sup>6</sup> The expression “Children’s Palace” (*le palais des enfants* in French) was used by the people in charge of the vacation camp as well as by the inhabitants of the town.

<sup>7</sup> Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land*, 439.

<sup>8</sup> Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2009), 318.

pedagogical outlook from the 1920s onwards.

The second historiographical trend is quite similar to the first one and revolves around socio-political history. More specifically, it focuses on state or municipal policies and the history of trade unionism. The Center for the Social History of Contemporary Worlds, a research unit from the University of Paris 1 – CNRS, developed specific studies on vacation camps and how the history of local governments may have shaped them, such as the history of socialist or communist municipalities.<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is worth mentioning the recent work of Julien Fuchs, a French historian who documented the development of a youth-centered state public policy.<sup>10</sup>

The third one pertains to studies conducted quite early in the field of architecture history or as part of heritage conservation programs. In this case, not only was knowledge produced in this scientific field, but it was also transferred towards public debates, which results in the disclosure and qualification of a heritage. The expected outcome is the implementation of *ad hoc* heritage policies. Following on from the international research network led by Valter Balducci in 2007,<sup>11</sup> Bernard Toulhier, a French architecture historian of hired as an expert in 19th and 20th century architecture by the Ministry of Culture, greatly contributed to revealing the issues stemming from this heritage in France.<sup>12</sup> The “20th Century Heritage” label, which is *not* a protection with regulatory constraints, aimed to identify a body of significant buildings of this century (with a focus on its second half). It mostly aimed at promoting the identified heritage to the broad public, but also and more especially to the elected officials and the developers of the concerned municipalities. These local players can then engage in protecting twentieth-century architecture as part of their Local Urban Masterplan (*Plan local d’urbanisme* in French). In 2009 this national context goaded the Pays de la Loire Regional Office to order a study on the regional heritage of vacation camps on the Atlantic coast.<sup>13</sup>

Then there is a fourth – more general and contextual – historiographical path centered on seaside or mountain urbanization, thus crossbreeding urban and tourism studies. Of note are the works on the sociology of tourism-driven urbanization,<sup>14</sup> on demographic changes and on the sociology of

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<sup>9</sup> Bellanger and Mischi, *Les territoires du communisme*.

<sup>10</sup> Julien Fuchs, *Le temps des jolies colonies de vacances. Au cœur de la construction d’un service public (1944-1960)* (Villeneuve-d’Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Valter Balducci and Smaranda Bica, *Architecture and Society of the Holiday Camps: History and Perspectives* (Timisoara: Editura Orizonturi universitare, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Toulhier, “Les colonies de vacances en France, quelle architecture ?,” *Revue In Situ*, no. 9 (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Romain Grimaud, “Le patrimoine des colonies de vacances sur le littoral de Vendée et de Loire-Atlantique,” *Final report of the Pays de la Loire Regional Cultural Affairs Directorate (DRAC Pays de la Loire)* (unpublished), 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Cloutour, “Sociologie de l’urbanisation touristique. Enquête sur la production du cadre bâti touristique sur le littoral vendéen et son usage social par les vacanciers” (PhD diss., EPHE- Paris Descartes University, 1976); Johan Vincent, *L’intrusion balnéaire. Les populations littorales bretonnes et vendéennes face au tourisme (1800-1945)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007).

tourism practices;<sup>15</sup> on a socio-economic approach to local economic development policies for tourism and more specifically, studies on social tourism that cast light on the ongoing social and territorial specialization of tourism.

### **Towards a history of current and future uses of vacation camps**

This wide array of studies proved quite stimulating and in 2018 we initiated, a research program whose goal was to combine issues pertaining to the decrease or fragility of territories and issues related to contemporary social tourism. Taking all these historiographies into account allowed us to offer a specific and new research perspective. We decided to focus on current uses of holiday camps on the French Atlantic coast, where camps are mostly declining. The future of these sites lies at the center of complex and various strategies including takeovers by public stakeholders, privatization with new private uses, or negotiations over vacant or disused buildings.

Our team worked in the fields of tourism studies and urban studies, and we mostly observed the heritage of holiday camps through socio-economic and socio-political perspectives. We took note of a highly mutating context in social and family tourism, as well as a very tense land market and economic, social and touristic dynamics affecting coastal territories in multiple and contrasting ways. To this end, we started with listing all holiday camp sites on this part of the Atlantic coastline. Our main input was to document how exactly those buildings were used. We had various data sources to start drawing up this inventory (for example, Romain Grimaud's report ordered by the Regional Cultural Affairs Directorate) but our own investigation enabled us to feed a lot of sites into the database. We also searched through works councils archives<sup>16</sup> and postcards, for example.<sup>17</sup> We were able to locate and provide information on the current state of the buildings at more than a hundred vacation camps. Thanks to cartographic work based on all these first data, we understood the territorial and urban contexts that could explain the current uses of vacation camps.<sup>18</sup> The spatialization of vacation camps and this reading of territorial and urban situations have enabled us to select a corpus of a few singular situations that we deemed relevant to investigate further. Indeed, three coastal towns known for hosting numerous summer camps have caught our attention; Saint-Brévin-les-Pins, Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez and La Plaine-sur-mer. (Fig. 02) Saint-Brévin-les-Pins is undergoing a process of metropolization (being very close to the Saint-Nazaire metropolitan area

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<sup>15</sup> Cousin and Réau, *Sociologie du tourisme*.

<sup>16</sup> We have consulted the archives of the SNCF (National French Railway Company) and the "Métiers de l'énergie" (National French Electricity and Gas Company), in particular vacation camp catalogs from the 1960s onwards.

<sup>17</sup> Each summer camp published a large number of postcards (often depicting the camp's buildings and facilities) to be sent by the children to their families.

<sup>18</sup> Jeanne Leman and Amélie Nicolas, "Démarche de recherche publique et production contemporaine du patrimoine. Un questionnement par les cartes sur le devenir des colonies de vacances du littoral de Loire-Atlantique et de Vendée," *Nouvelles lectures patrimoniales*, by J-R. Morice, G. Saupin, N. Vivier (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, to be published in 2023).

and its employment basin), we have found that the former vacation camps had mostly been transformed into private residential areas. Contrastingly, since the 1950's Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez has developed a specialization in tourism (an economy based on summer seaside mass tourism, which boasts numerous private campsites, for example, today): in this case, vacation camps tend to be converted into campsites after shutdown, unless they were located on state-owned forest parcels. Indeed, vacation camps built in forests owned by the "Office National des Forêts" (National Forest Office) must be demolished if they close down. This is stated in the "nature restoration" clause of the Forestry Code. La Plaine-sur-Mer is a special case, a true counterexample: it's a coastal town set along a rocky coastline, with no national forest and no beach to claim. In fact, its town center is located in the hinterland. The few vacation camps that had been set up here, and which have now fallen into disuse, prompted the municipality to develop a range of public facilities to meet the needs of its inhabitants, half of whom are secondary residents (51% according to INSEE in 2017). The cartographic tool is more than a mere illustration of the situation; it also provides a dynamic which spurs the ethnographic investigation itself. We simultaneously conducted a series of interviews with people in charge of urban and tourism policies in coastal municipalities, with local historians and architectural heritage defenders, and with the heads of regional and national social tourism institutions. We also visited many sites: converted, abandoned, or demolished vacation camps. Of course, we also visited the facilities that have survived and still accommodate groups of young children.

In this context, the ethnographic investigation focused on several singular situations and specific vacation camp sites. We wanted to understand, by tracing back local and specific histories of the sites under consideration, which dynamics and pressures had an impact on them. Consequently, we decided to adopt a pragmatic stance, i.e. an ethnographical perspective on architecture.

Indeed, our first hypothesis for this research program was the following: in France, holiday camps are strong markers of social policies both for the works councils of national companies and for the municipal governments defending their citizens' right to holidays. Thus, understanding specific holiday camps stories and their current uses may reveal larger changes such as economic, political and social ones. The fate of those buildings spawning from social tourism over time makes it possible to renew our questions on the very transformations of our societies.

This means accepting the relevance of micro-sited descriptions. Indeed, we were interested in the empirical theories of micro-history (referred to as *microstoria* in Italian, particularly after the pioneering work of Carlo Ginzburg), which relies on analyzing details, signs, traces and expressiveness, rather than on a purely quantitative perspective.

We were able to retrace the specific and/or emblematic trajectories of certain sites thanks to *in situ* investigation, interviews with people in charge of social action in works councils, with elected officials and local authorities in the greater Paris area or on the seaside. This in-depth investigation on several vacation camp sites enabled us to tackle the issue of the future of holiday camps at

different levels: territorial, urban, and we even took the parcel sizes and architectural aspect into account.

The micro-analyses of the sale, disuse or withstanding of these *colonies* tell a lot more than the story of a real estate heritage. They reveal changes in tourism, social and labour organizations, and reflect the political strategies of the municipalities that hosted and welcomed them.

To assess the relevance of this hypothesis, we had in mind the challenge of an international comparison of these issues and approaches. During an international conference organized at the Nantes School of Architecture (Laboratoire AAU\_CNRS) in July 2022, we outlined the relationships between site trajectories and the socio-political contexts specific to each region or country.<sup>19</sup> We chose to raise the issue of the future of architectures resulting from materialized ideologies. This was done for the built heritage and vacation architecture of the German Democratic Republic after the reunification process;<sup>20</sup> the abandoned vacation camps built in Italy since the beginning of the twentieth century;<sup>21</sup> the socio-spatial contexts of vacation camps for Flemish or Walloon Belgians;<sup>22</sup> the legacy and reappropriation of Spanish vacation union towns.<sup>23</sup> Each area has its own specific characteristics and we thought it would be very revealing to study these phenomena on a very small scale, as a catalyst for the various forces at work in each particular place. It could open a multi-sited ethnography perspective.<sup>24</sup>

### **Ethnography of a deadlock: Architectural, political and social trajectories of the “Palais des enfants” in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez**

We propose to develop the specific trajectory of the site of the “Palais des enfants” in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez. In July 2018, in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez, on the French Atlantic coast, in Vendée, we met Jean-Paul Bouffet, a retired forester from the National Forest Office, who also authored a book about the local history of the Pays de Monts forest. Bouffet knows all about the history of the vacation camps located in the heart of this forest. At the end of a long path, located at 16 avenue de

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<sup>19</sup> “Architectures of social tourism: history/ies and futures,” International Conference, July 4 and 5, 2022 (Nantes University, ENSA Nantes, UMR Ambiances, Architectures, Urbanités).

<sup>20</sup> Markus Böick, *Die Treuhand. Idee-Praxis-Erfahrung. 1990-1994* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018); Daniela Spiegel, *Urlaubs(t)räume des Sozialismus. Zur Geschichte der Ferienarchitektur in der DDR* (Berlin: Wasmuth & Zohlen UG, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Valentina Orioli, “Colonie e riqualificazione urbana: il caso di Cesenatico,” in *Architetture per le colonie di vacanza*.

<sup>22</sup> Hilde Heynen and Janina Gosseye, “Campsites as Utopia? A socio-spatial reading of the post-war holiday camp in Belgium, 1950s to 1970s,” *International journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 1, no. 1 (2013): 53–85.

<sup>23</sup> Antonio R. Montesinos, “Ciudades Sindicales Vacacionales: la organización del ocio obrero,” *Arquitasa* July 2021, <https://arquitasa.com/arqticulos/ciudades-sindicales-ocio-obrero/>; Ricardo Carcelén Gonzalez, “Cuando la clase obrera se hizo turista. Las ciudades de vacaciones de la Obra Sindical de Educación y Descanso, estudio de un modelo incabado 1955-1975,” *Arquitectura y tecnología de la Edificación*, Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena (2017).

<sup>24</sup> George E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117.



la Pège, stands the modernist and imposing building of the “Palais des enfants”. The vacation camp has been closed since 2001, when the municipality of Argenteuil, the owner, and its new mayor, Georges Mothron, decided to release it for sale.<sup>25</sup> Christophe Berthomé, a civil employee of the municipality of Argenteuil who has worked on this site since 1991 was alone in charge of the care and maintenance of the former camp.

As we just mentioned before, Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez is a very special seaside town on the Atlantic coast. Indeed, mass holiday camps can only be found in a few coastal towns in France. The reason for this is a social specialization of tourism on this coastline brought about by the touristic and economic policies of coastal municipalities.<sup>26</sup> In this town, we identified over 30 holiday camps, either within the state forest or on private plots. There is a strong relationship here between the existence of state forests and national policies. Indeed, when the *Front Populaire* – a left-wing coalition – ruled France in the 1930s, the Administration of Water and Forests was encouraged to welcome holiday camps and any new holidaymakers – such as workers and employees who had just obtained two weeks of paid leave – in state forests. In 1932, the first summer camp to be established in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez was that of the national railway company, just as the town was being equipped with railway connections.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, other camps belonging to national companies or public institutions, such as those run by communist and socialist municipalities, notably around Paris (the famous “red suburbs” of Paris, including Argenteuil), were set up in the Pays de Monts forest.

All these camps mainly opened in the post-war years and started to shut down around the 1990s. Today, very few of them are still open.<sup>28</sup> The vacation camp of the city of Argenteuil in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez welcomed between six hundred and eight hundred children every year on a plot of just over 100,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Despite a decline in attendance from the 1990s onwards, the communist municipality of Argenteuil decided to invest and maintain the camp in Saint-Hilaire. In 2001, a new liberal mayor was elected in this traditionally communist city. Almost immediately, he decided to close down and sell the holiday facility. No agreement signed before the end of this mayor's term. In 2008, a new socialist mayor was elected, and he decided to revive the *colonies*. In 2014, the former liberal mayor was re-elected, and the site was permanently closed and put up for sale once again. During our investigation in 2018 and until very recently, we met only one person on this site: the former gardener of the holiday camp, who later became the keeper of the site. He lived there in total

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<sup>25</sup> Argenteuil is a town close to Paris and was a communist municipality of the former Red belt suburbs of Paris.

<sup>26</sup> Following a project to open a vacation camp, the town of Pornic published a decree on May 3, 1947. This decree stated that the installation of a vacation camp could “compromise the existence of Pornic as a seaside town.” It specified that “the entire territory of Pornic is prohibited to any group of vacation camps” (Municipal Archives of Pornic).

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Bouffet and Alain Auffret, “La décolonisation en forêt domaniale des Pays de Monts,” *RDV techniques ONF*, 22 (2008): 17–20.

<sup>28</sup> Eve Meuret-Campfort and Amélie Nicolas, “Du tourisme social aux perspectives d’un nouveau développement économique et urbain. Le devenir des colonies de vacances sur le littoral vendéen,” *Noréis* 261 (2021): 23–38.

isolation, almost forsaken by the public administration of the city of Argenteuil which employed him. We decided to focus on the history of this closed and disused holiday camp, a period which lasted from 2001 until today. (Fig. 03)

What happened to the “Palais des enfants”? The architectural, political, and social trajectories of this specific site helped us identify three types of deadlocks that explain its predicament.

First, we identified an architectural deadlock. This former holiday camp is a huge building typical of monumental communist architecture. The three-floor building includes a vast hall, a cinema, a dining hall, kitchens and two wings – one for boys and one for girls – with dormitories on the second floor and staff rooms on the third. The cost of renovating this immense building, complete with asbestos – a toxic material – is prohibitive. There is a certain paradox here: Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez is known today as a popular-tourism-oriented town that houses many campsites. Indeed, the local economy is exclusively based on tourism and takes the form of campsites or vacation villages (36 campsites for 6,805 pitches and 2,064 beds in vacation villages) for only five hotels with 145 rooms. The local population increases tenfold in July and August, which indicates a very significant seasonality, quite similar to other coastal cities. The tourist offer in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez has been privatized, especially since the 1980s. This is a reality that can be observed everywhere else in relation to the social diffusion of tourist practices.<sup>29</sup> Jean-Paul Bouffet told us that “before, there used to be 30 vacation camps and 3 campsites, and now there are 30 campsites and 3 vacation camps.”<sup>30</sup> This new direction in the private sector of the tourism market sparked off a mobile home economy which represents a very lucrative market of touristic accommodation.<sup>31</sup> However, this touristic offer is not based on an upmarket approach but continues to address and attract working class holidaymakers. Not only do private campsites and vacation villages suit tight budgets but, above all, they are in keeping with the values and ways of life associated with tourists in popular holiday cultures.<sup>32</sup> (Fig. 04) In this context, converting the “Palais des enfants” into a luxury hotel, as had been considered by some players, is not an economically and socially appropriate project for this territory. Indeed, the great size of the building and its forest location led the elected officials of Argenteuil to believe it would be a perfect way to convert the deserted building into a five-star hotel. Thus, the size of the building (and its potential uses) creates confusion as to the real economic and touristic situation of the territory.

The second element we identified is a legal deadlock. Indeed, the “Palais des enfants” is located in a state forest managed by the National Forest Office. For some unknown reason, this plot was sold in

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<sup>29</sup> Philippe Violier, Philippe Duhamel, Jean-Christophe Gay, and Véronique Mondou, *Le tourisme en France*, volume 1 et 2 (London: ISTE éditions, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Jean-Paul Bouffet, February 2019.

<sup>31</sup> The 53 campsites in the town are mostly owned and operated by two or three local family companies. However, we are observing the rise of large tourism companies (such as Capfun, Odalys, Yellow! Village).

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Périer, *Vacances populaires. Images, pratiques et mémoire* (Rennes: PUR, 2000).

the 1950s to the city of Argenteuil (unlike other *colonies* which are just concessions in the form of long leases to municipalities or companies). As we have mentioned before, when you are just a tenant in the state forest, you must “return the parcel to nature” if the holiday camp closes. On the site of the Children’s Palace, the forest code is null and void because the plot has been sold. Thus, this obligation of demolition is not applicable. However, the City of Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez may enforce other regulations (such as the National Littoral Law<sup>33</sup> or the local urban plan) to determine the future use of the site and keep playing an active part in its transformation process. Considering these geopolitics of the land, the already mentioned paradox remains: this legal and regulatory control by public stakeholders does not allow potential buyers to freely imagine an architectural project — let alone one that may be profitable for them. As a result, any project aimed at converting the holiday camp will be faced with these difficulties.

Finally, we also identified a political deadlock. We analyzed two local policies as mirror images. On the one hand, Argenteuil seemed to lose interest in the “Palais des enfants” until a social movement appeared to defend the inhabitants’ right to decide upon the future of the facility. The Argenteuil residents’ collective is made up of a core group of 5 former camp users. They raised people’s awareness via social networks and encouraged other former users to join them.<sup>34</sup> The action and the arguments of this collective “Save the Colonie de Saint-Hilaire De Riez” have been taken up by the city’s communist party. As a result, and until this summer, the former holiday camp was at the heart of a local and political controversy in Argenteuil. On the other hand, the municipality of Saint-Hilaire settled for a complex strategy to curb mass tourism in the summer. Indeed, this town’s population swells from 11,000 inhabitants all year round to 110,000 inhabitants in the high season. The aim of the municipality is to extend the period of tourism in the city. To do so, the local government believe in the model of the Residential Leisure Park:<sup>35</sup> as regards the “Palais des enfants”, they expected an investor to be able to convert the building of the *colonies* into a residential leisure complex with private apartments and common leisure facilities. Hence the municipality’s amendments to the local urban masterplan regulations for using the plot. Thus, the divergent and sometimes conflicting relations between all stakeholders turn into spatial controversies. These relationships explain, in our case, a status quo situation in the future of the vacation camp.

The way these three types of deadlocks add up highlights the economic, political, social, and touristic dynamics impacting both a coastal town and a town in the working-class Parisian suburbs. The future of these heritages is thus interwoven in their local environments and gives specific

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<sup>33</sup> The *Littoral* (coastal) law of 1986 seeks a balance between land use, preservation and promotion.

<sup>34</sup> Thibault Chaffotte, *Le Parisien*, January 2, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> The Residential Leisure Park (*Parc résidentiel de loisirs* in French) is a site that hosts light leisure dwellings (HLL) and mobile leisure residences (RML), which are owned by individuals, but who have to pay a rent to the park owner. It is sometimes open all year round and offers commodities and facilities such as swimming pools, restaurants, etc. The private market for tourism is really rooted in this model.

political, economic, social, or regulatory strategies concrete expression.

## **Learning from the future of holiday camps: urban and architectural research by design and by art as a continuation**

Strangely, this dead-end period enabled us to think up futures for this former holiday camp. Nothing was happening, and the lonely keeper always opened the door to welcome us. When we wrote this research project, we wanted to consider the specific context of architectural and urban research as offered by a school of architecture and its laboratory. Although our research team is mainly composed of social science researchers, we wanted to open up the issues, processes and results of our work to the possibility of deploying an architectural and urban research by design.

The relationship between academic knowledge and knowledge of action is an important topic in the debate on research within French architecture schools.<sup>36</sup> The design studio is a place where research and design are interconnected, with a view to researching by design. For researchers in social sciences who take part in architectural and urban design studios, it's important to understand that the design approach requires us to think through the investigation with a view to transforming the space. So the link to the future is obvious and can be understood as “an exploration of the consequences on space of a chain of hypotheses.”<sup>37</sup> The approach is an inductive one, combining description, scenario writing and projection.<sup>38</sup> In this perspective, the tools used in fiction are welcome, to supplement scientific methods. We are thinking of the “potential fictions” proposed by Camille de Toledo, who explains that “unlike fictions that defend, support, build and preserve reality, potential fictions work on unfinished stories, stories in which we have a part to play.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, imagining futures for former vacation camps through urban and architectural design approaches enabled us to freely explore unrealized potentials in the present.

During a design workshop held as part of the Master’s degree of the Nantes School of Architecture, we introduced the future of the “Palais des enfants” as a global research topic for all student projects. This workshop gathers students from the departments of Law and Geography from the University of Nantes and students from the School of Architecture. Three sets of issues were submitted to the students. The first one consisted in working with a landscape that was coastal,

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<sup>36</sup> Particularly in considering a PhD in architecture. Cf. Chris Younès “From Thesis to Project: Disquiet in the World of Architectural Research,” *Hermès, La Revue* 72, no. 2 (2015): 85–90.

<sup>37</sup> Paula Viganò, *Les territoires de l’urbanisme. Le projet comme producteur de connaissance* (Genève: Metis Presses, 2016). Also English version: Paola Viganò, *Territories of Urbanism. The Project as knowledge Producer* (Lausanne: Routledge-EPFL Press, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> André Corboz, “La description, entre lecture et écriture,” in *Le territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais* (Paris: éd. de l’Imprimeur, 2001); Bénédicte Grosjean, “Entre recherche et projet: définir un territoire transfrontalier. De l’intérêt des situations d’entre-deux” (HDR diss., accreditation to supervise PhD research, University of Lille, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Camille De Toledo, “Manifester des possibilités,” in *Les potentiels du temps*, eds. Aliocha Imhoff, Kantuta Quiros and Camille De Toledo (Paris: Manuella, 2016), 19–67.

partly covered in woodlands and connected to the productive retro-littoral marshes. We challenged the participants to propose ways of living in the “Palais des enfants” that would bypass the current regulatory restrictions. The second one proposed to consider political, economic, and social alternatives for a coastal town that had so far only developed a monofunctional touristic industry. Finally, the third assignment was to imagine what the – programmatic and architectural – future of the former Argenteuil vacation camp would be like by thinking of it as a lever for activating the urban and territorial strategies proposed by the students. Within a week, five multidisciplinary teams (made up of Law, Political Science, Geography, Architecture, Urban Planning and Landscape Design students) worked intensively on these topics. We guided them through the implementation of contrasting scenarios at all these levels. The five teams were able to trigger renewed interests for this territory, with considerations including non-humans in the project, risk and coastal vulnerability acceptance, redeployment of an economy based on social tourism, and proposals for architectural deconstruction. The most interesting part of the project was to present this work to the public stakeholders of the area and of the municipality. Indeed, these territories are run by complex governance schemes and intricate project engineering patterns due to a lack of administrative and operational organization. In addition, the architectural and urban project culture in these small cities is still grounded in large-scale metropolitan models which require human and financial resources that these peripheral territories do not have. The feedback of our five “small urban planning agencies” initiated a substantive debate at the heart of the municipality whose representatives were keen to be offered a younger point of view. (Fig. 05) All the documents, reflections and representations produced during the workshop were discussed with all the city's stakeholders; this situation was therefore a new set-up that allowed the field investigation to be pursued. This led to the idea of cross-fertilizing ethnographic and photographic research. We integrated an artist into the research project, namely an artist-photographer. Indeed, we were eager to keep on working on the new perspectives of investigation, crossing distinct "arts of observation" between the artist as investigator and the ethnographer.<sup>40</sup>

Working with Anne-Lise Seusse, an artist, photographer, and a teacher at the Paris Malaquais School of Architecture, we have been composing a photographic narrative of the future of the *colonies* intertwined with a socio-narrative written work. (Fig. 06) The dead-end situation and uncertainty over the future of the “Palais des enfants” was the starting point for this cross-disciplinary investigation.

This work in progress is based on a collection of traces and archives of the activity of the vacation

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<sup>40</sup> We should mention: Frédérique Aït-Touati, Jean-Michel Frodon, Bruno Latour, and Donato Ricci, *Puissances de l'enquête. L'école des arts politiques* (Paris: Les liens qui libèrent, 2022); Laurent Demanze, *Le nouvel âge de l'enquête. Portrait de l'écrivain contemporain en enquêteur* (Paris: Corti, 2019). We also refer to the collective research we carried out within the Ambiances, Architectures, Urbanités research laboratory (AAU\_UMR CNRS 1563) in collaboration with Nantes School of Beaux-Arts: Anne Bossé, Christiane Carlut, Emmanuelle Chérel, Amélie Nicolas, Elisabeth Pasquier, Julia Ramirez Blanco, and Véronique Terrier Hermann, *Thinking from the Border – Methodological and Epistemological Experimentations between the Arts and the Human Sciences* (Paris: Dis Voir, 2019).

camp (children's drawings left on the site, painting on rocks, small outdoor huts, for example). We are also interested in all the material traces related to the solitary work of Mr Berthomé, keeper of the site: boards and padlocks that he added in the building, patching of the fence that delineates the camp's grounds, etc. The written piece is based on the life story of this guardian (a non-directive interview) and the photographic narrative report on micro-histories that have become invisible. If this research has clearly documented the topicality of this shutdown vacation camp, new questions with a wider perspective on the territory could ensue: for example, we could study the traces left by the tourist activity during the high season, but especially the traces of the accelerated littoral erosion. Indeed, the situation in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez captures the very expression of an interrelation between social and environmental processes. Walking through the forest with Jean-Paul Bouffet, we discovered a particular landscape marked by a specific social and environmental archaeology; in the vicinity of the "Palais des enfants", there used to be many other vacation camps, now destroyed, which left their mark. Indeed, we observed specific vegetation indicating former boundaries between the vacation camps and the national forest area (vacation camp gardeners are not foresters); we also found traces of built-up areas buried under the sand and now rendered visible by erosion.

Envisioning the future of holiday camps led us to think about a new crossed historiography: a social and spatial history of holiday camps; another social and spatial history of mass and capitalistic tourism targeting working classes (i.e. the already mentioned mobile home and campsite economy); and a new history of the environment relating to rising waters, the risk of marshes flooding, the moving of the dunes and the erosion of the coastline. Finally, this empty and abandoned building could be the precursor for the future of many similar buildings. Rather than coming up with a project for this building, could we not see its fall into disuse as an opportunity to generate a debate about an alternative history of the coastline? We may need to give some thought about sea-front buildings falling into disuse. This is a hot topic: in Soulac-sur-Mer, on the French Atlantic coast, in the Gironde estuary, the now well-known Signal building is being demolished. It is the first complex in France to be demolished due to the imminent retreat of the coastline. This has become a key event in the debate on the future of touristic coastal towns.

## **Conclusion**

As part of a French and European historiography of children vacation camps, this paper aims to propose a new historiographic perspective on the history of vacation camps and their future. Such was the challenge taken up by the regional research Holi-D (Horizon of declining coastlines) that we conducted for four years.

This research has documented various typologies of reconsideration or transformation of vacation camp sites: very often at the center of complex and various strategies, we have observed processes of privatization, fall into disuse, municipal interest, or disinterest, etc. The specific case of the

“Palais des enfants” in Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez, a closed vacation camp whose transformation project is constrained on all sides, constitutes an ideal vantage point for the many issues that affect the future of these heritages: stakeholders playing extended roles in the administration of two municipalities that are in complete opposition; regulatory, social or environmental constraints on both sides; economic strategies for the development of tourism in a coastal town marked by social tourism (and which can only rely on a shift to the working-class-centered private tourism market.). Observing current uses and envisioning the future of this site has incited us to work with a graduated reasoning. To do this, we accepted the relevance of a micro-sited ethnography. The study of the future of vacation camps along the Atlantic coast refers to the political history of the municipalities of the former *red suburbs* of Paris. It also refers to the history of coastal towns saturated by mass tourism. It has paved the way to new research perspectives veering towards research by architectural and urban design as well as research by art. For researchers in social sciences, these intersections shift and recompose the spaces of ethnographic observation and raise new epistemological challenges: in particular through a critical socio-environmental history combined with an *archaeology of remains*.

In conclusion, and because a future seems to be coming on regardless of our research outcomes, we should mention the very recent history of the “Palais des enfants”. A local and family-owned camping company just bought the former vacation camp with a view to converting it into a residential leisure park. This new project tells the story of how this piece of forest is being reintegrated into the tourist private market sector of this coastal town. The loyal keeper had to leave the site overnight, without notice. He was forced to leave his beloved vacation camp to go work in parks and gardens maintenance in Argenteuil, a city that he and his family know absolutely nothing about.

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