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### ► To cite this version:

Jean-Baptiste Frétigny, Marion Magnan, Juliette Maulat, Mathilde Pedro. “Airport city” or “VIP” urbanism? Questioning the market-led land development strategies of airports. *Human Geography*, 2024, 17 (3), pp.262-277. 10.1177/19427786241251723 . hal-04553788v2

**HAL Id: hal-04553788**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04553788v2>**

Submitted on 1 Nov 2024

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Frétigny, J.-B., Magnan, M., Maulat, J., & Pedro, M. (2024). “Airport city” or “VIP” urbanism? Questioning the market-led land development strategies of airports, *Human Geography*, vol. 17, n° 3, p. 262-277, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786241251723>

*Accepted version*

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## “Airport city” or “VIP” urbanism? Questioning the market-led land development strategies of airports

**Abstract:** Airport authorities are gradually shaping urban spaces through their property development: hotels, business parks, conference centers, etc. This article challenges these development strategies pursued by increasingly financialized and privatized airports in the name of “airport city” policies. It shows that the changes underway are a vivid expression of a VIP model of urbanism, in which the airport authority, maximizing its revenues and land value, naturalizes its emphasis on high-end real-estate projects, trivializing their social reach. The analysis draws on the case of the Paris city region, characterized by land scarcity and housing issues, and its airport authority, Aéroports de Paris (ADP), one of the largest landowners in the region. Using documents from ADP, a press corpus, and interviews, we highlight how the distinctive geography at play in air terminals changes scale by being projected onto real-estate “diversification” projects, as ADP opts for urbanization centered around the upper fractions of the flying public. This market-led development leads to a form of elite capture that seeks to dwarf or endogenize other existing and potential uses and users of airport land. This article further deconstructs this urban model by shedding light on the multiple tensions it generates and pleads for a more critical debate on airport land uses and planning.

**Keywords:** airport-led development, real estate, financialization, privatization, urban capture

### 1. Introduction

Airport-led urbanization has been depicted as “the way we’ll live next” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kasarda and Lindsay, 2011). After seaports in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, railroads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and highways in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, airports would be the staple of future urban developments. They are envisioned as key drivers of multiple industries, aeronautics, logistics or e-commerce, and services such as business and R&D parks, retail and entertainment venues or conference centers. Airports would no longer merely be “fly-buy” places, but cities in their own right: multimodal and multifunctional “airport cities” (Appold and Kasarda, 2013; Conway, 1980; Güller and Güller, 2003), giving rise to large aviation-based metropolitan areas or “aerotropolises.”

This mindset has been very popular in the industry and among local governments, prone to embracing the enticing promises of economic development, as well as in academic circles (Corrêa Pereira *et al.*, 2023), echoed in the notions of “airport corridors” or “airport regions” (Conventz and Thierstein, 2015). The hub airport is seen as “anchor[ing] and sort[ing] growing airborne flows of high value products and high value people” (Kasarda 2019: 2), producing an “aerotropolis 4.0,” drawing “world-class talent” and “recognized by the international financial community as a site that will successfully grow new businesses” and “profitable, safe returns” (Kasarda 2022: 18).

Few studies adopt more critical approaches to this dominant framing of airport-driven development. Historical investigations tend to situate it within the long-standing imagination of aerocities that planners and architects have developed since the dawn of aviation (Roseau, 2011). The (un)sustainability of the airport city business model – underpinned by the growth of aviation – and of its low-density urban form has attracted some attention (Charles *et al.*, 2007; Freestone, 2009), a line of questioning that the climate emergency has made more salient than ever today (Ryley *et al.*, 2020). Various scholars have shown that the prevailing approaches to aerotropolises bear the risk of overpromising and lack an empirical basis (Cidell, 2015; Goetz, 2019; Kamruzzaman *et al.*, 2021). They have called for more inclusive and context-specific conceptions of “airport urbanism,” favoring “people-focused” approaches (Hirsh, 2019) that are more aware of the challenges raised by dominant “normative airport-centered models” (Kasioumi, 2015). Drawing on the case of Durban’s international airport, the aerotropolis has also been more bluntly described as a neoliberal venture of commercial entrepreneurialism, leveraging major investments of public funds for uncertain results (Crosby and Maharaj, 2021). Criticisms of aerotropolises also emerge in civil society, as in the case of the Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement (GAAM, 2024),

coalescing various activist groups (Queens Quiet Skies; Auckland: The Plane Truth; Oregon Aviation Watch; etc.), and in NGO literature (Pleumarom, 2017).

Much less attention has been paid to the – just as crucial – social and political dimensions of this airport-led urbanism, upon which this article seeks to shed light. To be sure, airports have long been an identified focus of critical academic inquiry, in (aero)mobility studies and beyond. Existing works underline their environmental implications – noise, air pollution, land use, climate-change exacerbation – and decision-making processes, in which surrounding communities customarily have little say (Freestone *et al.*, 2006; Lassen and Galland, 2014; Pascoe, 2001). Scholars have demonstrated that the design and day-to-day operations of passenger spaces predominantly focus on kinetic elites at the expense of others (Frétigny, 2022; Hirsh, 2016). However, it is not far-fetched to argue that the social, but also political, nature of airport-led urbanism has not been fully addressed beyond air travelers and terminals. Who is this “we” in the expression “the way we’ll live next”? How does the urban development undertaken by airport authorities, subsumed under the umbrella term of airport-city policies, generate tensions between “VIP” urbanism and other activities?

The notion of “VIP” urbanism, coined by John Laueremann, Zoe Alexander, and Khoulood Mallak in this special issue, helps us to critically examine the systemic nature of a distinctive and exclusionary geography that extends beyond the clearly identified spaces and figures of airports to encompass airport-led urbanization as a whole and its targets. Envisioning airport-led development through the analytical lens of VIP urbanism allows us to deconstruct the dominant and one-dimensional framing of the airport city and conceptualize it as a social and political capture for a few that makes sense within a larger assemblage of urbanistic narratives, policies, practices, and stakeholders. VIP urbanism pertains to urban privileges granted according to social status or spending power, in a context of glaring and rising inequalities, and overarching processes of neoliberalization and financialization benefiting the super-rich in global cities. As critical urban theory shows, these dynamics are closely linked to real-estate projects (Forrest *et al.*, 2017; Minton, 2017; Stein, 2019).

While geographies of the super-rich have focused primarily on housing (Atkinson, 2020; Laueremann, 2022), the study of airport projects contributes to a better understanding of other spheres of VIP urban capture, related to mobilities and infrastructures. Questioning airport-led development as a field of VIP urbanism is a way to expand thinking about the inequalities produced by networked infrastructures highlighted in the thesis of splintering urbanism (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Wiig *et al.*, 2022), which the social ambiguities of the

urban model of transit-oriented development illustrate (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019). By changing the scale of analysis, we can focus attention on property development on land owned by transportation operators, which profits from proximity to transit hubs and services and yet is designated for – socially and financially exclusive – non-transit uses.

Groupe ADP, hereafter referred to as ADP, which manages all airports in the Paris city region (Île-de-France), is a highly relevant case for discussing the social and urban implications of airport-led development. ADP oversees Roissy Charles de Gaulle (CDG), Orly and Le Bourget airports, as well as 10 aerodromes and one heliport in the city region. Although rarely portrayed as such, it is the largest private landowner in the region, owning the equivalent of two-thirds of downtown Paris, of which 69% is dedicated to aeronautical activities, 20% to real-estate activities, 5% to land reserves and 6% is considered unexploitable. While ADP is not allowed to sell the land, state-granted until 2089, few constraints on its uses are exerted by the French government, compared to other large landowners – for example, rail company SNCF, which has signed a charter with the government to plan the conversion of various sites for other uses (MTECT, 2021), in a context of growing pressure due to urbanization, bringing into play the social and environmental responsibility of these institutions. Originally a public authority, ADP was transformed into a limited company in 2005, with a significant portion of its capital sold to private investors the following year – totalizing 49.4% to date. Since its corporatization, ADP, like other major airport authorities (Schiphol Group or Heathrow Airport Holdings), has expanded considerably into five business areas: aeronautical activities; shops and services in terminals; real-estate development outside terminals; international investments and operational activities worldwide; and telecommunications and security services (ADP, 2020).

To generate additional resources and improve its financial situation, ADP has greatly expanded real-estate projects on its extensive assets to generate and capture land-value uplift (Halpern, 2011). In common with many airport authorities, ADP divides these activities into two segments. “Aeronautical” assets comprise logistics warehouses, maintenance hangars and cargo stations with direct access to runways. “Diversification” or “non-aeronautical” assets comprise the various hotels, business parks, shopping centers, and conference facilities developed on ADP land. This portfolio includes 300,000 m<sup>2</sup> of offices, 1,000 businesses, 200 shops and 4,000 hotel rooms. It is valued at €3.37 billion in 2020 (32% of ADP’s market capitalization) (ADP, 2020). While non-aeronautical real-estate activities were originally focused on hotels and business parks, ADP now also develops large-scale mixed-use urban

projects. In 2019, the PACTE law<sup>1</sup> allowed the French government to sell its shares, enabling the full privatization of ADP. This process, interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, could further intensify the assetization and market-oriented development of ADP's properties. Thus, questioning their land-use repercussions has never been more relevant.

In this paper, we discuss the contribution of ADP's non-aeronautical real-estate activities to the production of VIP urbanism. Our main hypothesis is twofold. First, as the group is engaged in a privatization process, its land management is progressively guided by financial rationales aimed at maximizing revenue and land value, making self-evident its emphasis on high-end real-estate projects and naturalizing their social and urban reach. Second, this selective urbanism is deployed in addition to more ordinary forms of urban production – facilities for employees, less-affluent passengers or freight – and leads to tensions, with alternative uses of airport land ultimately giving rise to a two-sided airport space.

To test this hypothesis, our research draws on three main sources of data. First, it relies on documents produced by ADP: 42 annual reports published from 1980 to 2022, 42 press releases on real estate published between 2012 and 2023, and 14 promotional brochures featuring ADP's real-estate projects on its website. The content analysis of ADP's brochures focuses on the textual and iconographic discourse surrounding real-estate programs, including photographs, maps, and virtual images, in line with works questioning developers' marketing strategies and the normative representation of potential audiences in their images (Budds, 2015; Schafran *et al.*, 2017). These documents are used to assess the capture orchestrated at the airport by assessing changes in ADP's strategy and examining the social and urban consequences of ADP's recent real-estate programs.

Second, we conducted five semi-structured interviews with executives of ADP's real-estate division and journalists specializing in airports, before and after the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our third data source is a press corpus that spans from January 1990 to November 2023. It consists of 209 news items from national (*Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le Figaro*, *Les Echos*) and regional (*Le Parisien*) French dailies, newspapers of record with the largest readerships. We used the Europresse database to identify all articles containing the expression "Aéroports de Paris" in their title or introduction. We scrutinized each of the resulting 9,162 articles and selected 209 of these articles, concerning ADP's non-aeronautical property activities. In addition to collecting factual information, our analysis focused on how

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<sup>1</sup> French law promoting business growth and transformation.

ADP and its real-estate activities are portrayed in the articles, following both an “instrumental” and a “critical interpretation” of the press reports (Drozd, 2016).

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 shows that the prism of VIP urbanism is of great importance in understanding the changes at stake at financialized airports, which can be termed airport VIP urbanism. Section 3 addresses the long-term processes through which ADP’s airport land has been the object of forms of capture and commodification that lie at the very heart of this urbanism. In section 4, we focus on the projects undertaken by the airport authority to show the extension of the geography of social distinction from air terminals to non-aeronautical sites of airports, and their relationship with more ordinary forms of urban production. Section 5 then probes the major implications and tensions that this urban model generates.

## **2. VIP urbanism and the financialization of airports**

The contemporary urban economy favors the concentration of the super-rich and their capital in cities at the top of the global hierarchy, the so-called “alpha cities” (Atkinson, 2020), with profound effects on their social and physical fabric. This move is facilitated by a political economy where the alignment of multiple stakeholders encourages property- and finance-driven urban capture by the super-wealthy (Forrest *et al.*, 2017). Real estate is a staple in this process, with pro-developer and pro-homeowner policies creating a “real-estate state” and “planning-by-not-planning” (Stein, 2019). These structural conditions allow a small fraction of society to benefit from a neoliberal exceptionalism (Ong, 2006) that shapes a tailor-made and opportunistic urbanism, whether through the irregular sale of public land below market value or through the neutralization of planning rules in the name of a mega-event such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup (Müller 2015). The resulting spaces are conceived as “an effective ‘spatial fix’ to capture highly mobile super-rich capital” (Pow, 2017: 224). Multiple intermediaries limit the exposure of the super-rich to public scrutiny (Davies, 2017). The related projects are often framed – in a post-political way – as a “self-evident good” (Atkinson, 2020), glossing over their unglamorous consequences of growing inequalities and evicted inhabitants. A key factor in the acceptability and exacerbation of this VIP urbanism is the widespread pursuit of such elitism, “in relation to which all consumer-citizens, regardless of their wealth or power, are constantly persuaded and taught to position themselves” (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2014: 177), inviting us to attend to a broader set of urban processes and forms at play. Most attention has focused on residential real-estate

investment. Studies cogently investigate the spectacular rise of empty apartments as “safety deposit boxes” for the super-rich (Minton, 2017: 14), the volumetric inflation of buildings for luxury housing precipitating a vertical (super-)gentrification (Lauermann, 2022), and, in addition to “luxified skies”, the emerging plutocratic subterranean geography of elites “bunkering down,” forming a “basement belt” in London (Burrows *et al.*, 2022). VIP urbanism in the making in mobilities and transportation has been a rather under-researched topic in the field, despite vectors of mobility associated with elite tourism and the consumption of extreme luxury having received some attention, such as yachts or expensive cars, and, to some extent, “private airports” (i.e. those specialized in private jets, a booming market since the Covid-19 pandemic) and first-class lounges (Atkinson, 2020; Birtchnell and Caletrío, 2014; Spence, 2017). Understanding how VIP urbanism plays out at metropolitan airports means foregrounding the major shift in the role of airport authorities.

In line with the model of the airport city, airport authorities have initiated extensive developments of offices, hotels, retail, logistics areas, etc., significantly transforming airport hubs and, conversely, transforming them into major real-estate players. The scale of these real-estate activities has indeed grown considerably over the last 20 years, both in terms of the spaces involved and the revenues generated. Non-aeronautical revenues from retail, catering and other commercial facilities account for about 40% of airport revenues (Graham, 2019). Accordingly, many airport authorities, such as Schiphol Group (Morrison, 2009) and Aéroports de Paris (Halpern, 2011), have now expanded their real-estate divisions. Of course, the intensity of airport land development varies widely, depending on the type of airport, its management, location, traffic volume, the extent of its properties, and local real-estate markets (Graham, 2009; Morrison, 2009). Nevertheless, this mushrooming is a clear indicator of a shift in airport management from a public utility approach to a commercial paradigm.

The rise of non-aeronautical real estate is linked to profound changes in a more globalized airport industry, with political decisions to deregulate air traffic on the one hand, and to financialize – and, in various cases (Europe, Australia, Mexico, Brazil, Japan or India), to privatize – airports or introduce private-sector participation on the other. Indeed, this form of airport-driven development began with the deregulation of the aviation market in the Global North – from 1987 to 1997 in the EU – enticing airport authorities to attract airlines, businesses, and passengers by offering new services (hotels, offices, conference centers, etc.) and therefore sustained real-estate development (Button, 2017). While many airports in the world are still public, in 2017, 39% of the 500 busiest airports involved private-sector participation, and even 51% of the 100 busiest airports. Airports with some private-sector



involvement accounted for 43% of global passenger traffic, an increase of 2% compared to 2016 (ACI, 2018).

In this new playbook, real-estate development is seen as a cash machine for greater investment in aeronautical infrastructure, thus enabling a reduction in the fees charged to airlines, providing a comparative advantage over other airports, as shown in Hamburg (Morrison, 2009), London (McNeill, 2010), and Paris (Kasioumi, 2021). Unsurprisingly, however, fully or partially privatized airports have now developed their properties to generate more profits for their shareholders, including Global Infrastructure Partners (GIP), the world's second-largest manager of private infrastructure assets (e.g. the Port of Melbourne and the Suez water group) and a key investor in major British and Australian airports, whetting the appetite of the world's largest asset manager, Blackrock, on the verge of acquiring GIP (Deruytter and Derudder, 2019; Lorrain, 2010; Masters and Gara, 2024; Solomon, 2009). Airport assets present important specificities – well-rehearsed in airport city discourses – that meet investors' risk and return criteria: growing air traffic, prime locations at key nodes in the global transportation system, and rising property values near major urban centers.

The privatization and financialization of airports, largely supported by neoliberal agendas and urban austerity policies, have paved the way for a profound alteration in the relationship to land. Scholarship has shown how reforms and organizational changes at airports have enabled and driven their transformation into a financial asset (Deruytter and Derudder, 2019). These processes have been bolstered by national, as well as local, governments embracing entrepreneurial agendas (Harvey, 1989). Examples in Australia, London, and Amsterdam highlight the major role of local governments in supporting hotel, retail, and business park development projects on airport properties as an “engine of growth” (Bocquet, 2018). Airport real-estate developments involve the cooperation and alignment of manifold actors, including airport authorities, the real-estate and finance industries, and governments, suggesting that proper growth coalitions are at stake (Logan and Molotch, 1987) and that their specific regulation (Morrison, 2009) enable tailor-made regimes of urban planning. Indeed, local governments can support these projects not only by granting building permits or facilitating the marketing of projects but also by lifting regulatory restrictions and amending planning rules. Yet various configurations of airport-led developments have fostered protest: where they competed with municipal economic development projects, or did not generate additional revenue for local governments, or produced negative externalities – such as induced car traffic – that were considered unacceptable. In Australia, significant

controversies arose as local governments had no regulatory authority to control airport development (Freestone, William, and Bowden, 2006; May and Hill, 2006). However, because of the many tensions generated by air traffic and, more broadly, by the environmental impacts of airports, conflicts over commercial activities have been often overlooked.

This model of airport urbanism raises far-reaching questions about its outcomes on urban places and sociospatial inequalities, by concentrating capital, employment, and urban resources in limited areas of large urban regions. Real-estate activities are more conspicuous around the airports of world cities, with high potential for land development and value uplift due to the concentration of air traffic, accessibility, and high-value property markets (Graham, 2009; Morrison, 2009). The financialization of airports and expected profitability could well incentivize airport authorities to pay more attention to the most profitable segments of activity, regarding revenue-generating commercial land uses, passenger services, and aeronautical support infrastructure. While studies of commercial activities in terminals have highlighted how retail, advertising, and the design of their spaces target a high-end clientele and convey an exclusionary conception of aeromobility as an attribute of elites (Frétigny 2015), commercial development outside terminals has rarely been examined through this critical lens. Yet the development of upmarket hotels at airports has been seen as indicative of “a trend to plug in ‘premium networked spaces’ that prioritize time-poor, cash-rich travellers (Graham and Marvin 2001: 262, 249)” (McNeill, 2009: 227). As the privatization and financialization of airports is not limited to the terminals themselves, our hypothesis is that VIP urbanism is fully at play at the larger scale of airport real-estate activities.

### **3. The capture and commodification of airport land**

A diachronic analysis of ADP’s real-estate activities reveals not only a shift in the business model but also a change in the relationship to airport land that accompanies its privatization and financialization. This multilayered bifurcation, still in progress at the time of writing, extends over at least six sequences. While not easily assignable to one stakeholder in particular, over the long term these steps and their technical nature have allowed this incremental and distilled process to appear as a self-evident change and to be little discussed in public debate, favoring its political and social acceptability.

The first sequence, from 1945 to the 1980s, involved the public entity ADP acquiring land, with real-estate activities directly linked to its aeronautical missions. Inside terminals, ADP developed shops and aeronautical-related business premises. Outside, it provided maintenance and cargo-storage hangars. Paris's airport capacity increased with the opening, in 1974, of CDG airport, enabling ADP to expand its land resources by 18,533 acres. This involved a reinforcement of property developments but, again, for aeronautical purposes.

The diversification of real-estate activities and their orientation toward socially selective tertiarization began in a second sequence, in the 1980s–1990s. As in the United States some years earlier, the deregulation of air traffic in the European Community, from 1987 to 1997, and increasing competition among airports were key drivers (Forsyth *et al.*, 2016). ADP's new real-estate strategy was guided by two goals: the rationalization of land use to create land surpluses for development, and diversification through the creation of offices and hotels. From the outset, developments were differentiated according to the social status of the target clientele (Menanteau, 1990). Two ranges were classified as “ordinary”: the “operation” range for freight and the “village” range for single-function office and warehouse buildings for export companies. Two others were conceived as more “prestigious” offerings. One was aimed at producing “intelligent” offices for high-tech activities, and the other at producing office buildings, notably the Roissy-pôle project, designed as an international business center (Menanteau, 1990). These developments benefited from ADP's exceptional regime of urban planning for airport land, for which building permits were granted by a high-ranking official representing the state – a prefect<sup>2</sup> – instead of municipalities. This diversification also capitalized on major investments made by ADP, the state (e.g. via the rail company SNCF), and local governments, especially at CDG. Both accompanying and fostering the rise of air traffic, these investments sought to reinforce its accessibility, with high-speed train and rapid-transit stations opened in 1994, expand the terminals, and develop shops and services within them. The growth of aviation fueled ADP's diversification.

The beginning of the 2000s marked an important political turning point with the corporatization of ADP, transformed into a limited company in 2005, and listed on the stock exchange in 2006. This led not only to a profound transformation of the group but also to a decisive act regarding the commodification of airport land. The French finance ministry retained some control over ADP through “economic regulation contracts” setting out the

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1800, the state's representatives in a department or region, and thus to local governments.

terms for the provision of public services. But the state, through its shareholding agency, went from owner to majority stockholder: 33% of ADP's capital was sold at that time.<sup>3</sup> The transformation of ADP into a limited company removed the previous regulatory barriers to the diversification of its investment portfolio. To ensure the success of ADP's IPO in 2006, and subsequent potential share sales, the 2005 Airports Act organized the transfer of almost all land and real estate from the state to the company for 70 years, until 2089. The only regulatory restriction on ADP was that building permits on the fringes of airport perimeters, in the so-called "white zone", henceforth had to be obtained from municipalities, which thus had to be involved in defining projects in advance to ensure their acceptance. A press article in a right-wing newspaper summed up the dominant mindset at the time, in a highly gendered way, regarding ADP's assets: "The bride will be beautiful" (Ducros, 2006). This organized dispossession of land by lawmakers, resulting from an offensive lobby (Coulon, 2003), was barely contested, despite the extent of these properties and their strategic location.

Following the partial privatization of ADP, CEO Pierre Graff, in office until 2012, placed the financialization of the company and the diversification of its investment portfolio in commercial real estate at the heart of its strategy, claiming that a strong development of non-aeronautical real-estate activities would secure its financial path. In fact, since the 2011–2015 economic regulation contract, enshrined in the 2019 PACTE law, a rule has been applied, known as the "adjusted till," under which many non-aeronautical activities, including real estate, cannot be used to finance the public services provided by ADP, and the lucrative revenues accrue directly to the company and its shareholders. ADP at this time undertook numerous property investments and continued to develop hotel assets and business parks. But for the first time, the company initiated large mixed-use urban development projects that combined offices, hotels and retail. In a retrospective analysis of this market-driven, shareholder-earnings-oriented development, the CEO commented: "We started from the observation that it is not possible to make a good return on investment with aeronautical activities alone. ... We had to develop what we call 'secondary' activities which are actually not secondary" (Trévidic, 2012). Airport land is thus explicitly conceived as a key object of commodification, with a half-hearted acknowledgment that the lexicon used to describe this bifurcation – "secondary activities" or "diversification" – was euphemistic and potentially counterproductive to the pursuit of the strategy at this stage, in a privatized company.

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<sup>3</sup> As of December 2022, the French state owns 50.6% of ADP's capital; Vinci, a concessions (airports, highways, energy) and construction company, 8%; Crédit Agricole Assurances (an insurance company), 7.7%; employees, 1.8%; the remainder is free float.

From 2013 to 2019, ADP focused on consolidating this strategy. Emblematic gestures included the opening of the shopping and leisure center Aéroville<sup>4</sup> in 2013 and the launch of Cœur d'Orly, set to become nothing other than “the second-largest business center in the Paris region” (Prolongeau, 2016). ADP incrementally played the role of both investor and developer, alone or in partnership with major French real-estate developers, to maximize land-value capture, while retaining ownership of the buildings, leased to their users. It continued to expand its investments in hotels, office buildings, and business parks, at both Orly (Palierse, 2014) and CDG (Fagnard, 2015). It also expanded its activities in Le Bourget, with high-end business parks, restaurants, and hotel projects (*Le Moniteur*, 2013). The social selectivity of these developments is also illustrated by ADP’s urban renewal projects, which typically consisted in the redevelopment of cargo areas into tertiary zones (Moutarde, 2016).

In 2019, the PACTE<sup>5</sup> law, in the wake of the 2005 Airports Act, authorized the full privatization of ADP, suspended by the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on air travel. It opens yet another sequence – as yet unfinished – for the commodification and financialization of airport land. ADP’s land assets accounted for €265 million in turnover in 2018, i.e. 5.9% of total revenues. In the same year, they were valued at €3.048 billion euros, an increase of 30% compared to 2013 (ADP, 2019). The development potential identified is particularly high and is used as a key argument for future stockholders. ADP estimates that a quarter of its land devoted to real-estate purposes is still undeveloped, including 49 acres for aeronautical activities (cargo storage, etc.) and 828 acres – twice the size of La Défense CBD! – for other purposes. The value of its assets is driven by the rise in land prices in the Paris city region, the scarcity of land, and the growth of air traffic. It is further enhanced by another iteration of large-scale transportation infrastructure projects in the region: the extension of metro line 14, Grand Paris Express – consisting of four new automated rapid transit lines – and CDG Express. In 2019, opponents of the (full) privatization of ADP obtained a “joint initiative referendum”, i.e. a procedure that initiates discussion and voting on the associated bill in parliament if enough citizens support the initiative. Although it was the only referendum of this kind held since the procedure was introduced, it failed to meet the required threshold of 4.7 million votes in 2020. While ADP’s full privatization and its contestation sparked limited but passionate public debate, the commodification of airport land and its social dimension were rarely covered by the media, despite one piece, for instance, foreseeing the possibility

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<sup>4</sup> Literally “Aerocity” in French.

<sup>5</sup> Tellingly, PACTE stands for “Action Plan for Business Growth and Transformation.”

that “public authorities [would] lose any ability to guide the development of these strategically located sites” (Allix, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic opened a new chapter by obliging ADP to revise its plans. The major drop in air traffic, with an expected return to pre-crisis traffic levels by 2024–2026, has led ADP to review its Connect 2020 strategic plan focused on responding to the strong growth in traffic observed in the late 2010s. Consequently, ADP has canceled its Terminal 4 project. While non-aeronautical development projects were slowed down, they could appear – symbolically at least – as a precious source of income for a group faced with a temporary but spectacular fall in its aeronautical business. Additionally, in a context of growing environmental concerns, they could be presented as an opportunity for the group to engage in less carbon-intensive activities than aviation, and even provide some material and financial impetus for decarbonization. And ADP’s strategy has indeed been inflected by its 2025 Pioneers roadmap for 2022–2025, which aims to make its three Parisian airports “carbon neutral” by 2030, echoing the decarbonization objectives of France’s 2021 Climate and Resilience law. ADP’s ecological commitments regarding land and real estate comprise a target for all new buildings to meet High-Quality Environmental (HQE) standards, a broader reduction of their environmental footprint (low-carbon construction, circular economy, reduction of soil sealing, etc.), the development of geothermal and biomass plants at CDG; and the construction of solar farms in France to supply the Paris region’s airports. This move involves a relative adjustment of ADP’s strategy, with more industrial buildings and fewer offices than previously planned. ADP (2022a) is also pursuing a reduction of land degradation, by designating 25% of CDG’s land and 30% of Le Bourget and Orly’s land as biodiversity areas by 2025, again showcasing non-aeronautical land uses and their related (ecosystem) services. Even during this tumultuous period, the process of diversification appears to have been consolidated in a timely manner.

This historic analysis highlights how ADP and public authorities have orchestrated a commodification and elite capture of airport land through the corporatization of ADP, its partial (and planned full) privatization, and its acquisition of land ownership until 2089. The capture in question can be better understood by focusing on the developments themselves.

#### **4. Developing an airport VIP urbanism**

ADP’s financially driven real-estate development strategy has led to the production of a veritable form of airport VIP urbanism, extending the geography of social distinction at play

in air terminals to the larger scale of its diversification projects. This continuity is visible in the prioritization of kinetic elites as major commercial targets for the projects. In its communications on office property projects, ADP alights on socially dominant discourses on airport cities and aerotropolises. Cœur d'Orly is portrayed by emphasizing its place in a “booming business hub”, “open to the world”, in what is supposed to be “the third largest economic center” in the Paris region: Orly airport. More specifically, its Belaïa building is presented as a place for kinetic elites, showcasing it as “a veritable epicenter where traveling and welcoming clients, business prospects, partners or coworkers based in other cities in France, Europe or the world has never been easier” (Groupe ADP, 2018). Pictures in the brochures show white middle-aged executives in suits and ties, with optional suitcases, representing the upper fractions of the flying public. This targeting is also explicit in ADP’s rationale for the development of an “automobile village” at CDG (Chaffotte, 2018), dedicated to high-end car retailers such as Audi: “The car dealerships coming in are more upmarket. ... There is a link between these types of vehicles and frequent flyers” (ADP’s real-estate executive).

The configuration of property products developed by ADP reflects this pursuit of a distinctive urbanism. The architectural forms of the office buildings are based on the standards of CBDs (transparent bay windows, metal, etc.). Their environmental performance, certified by (inter)national labels and standards (BREEAM or HQE) is systematically touted by ADP as a guarantee of the highest quality. On the façade of Aéroville, Unibail, owner of the construction lease and ADP’s partner, also makes use of this rhetoric of excellence by displaying a (self-awarded) four-star rating, intended to reflect a multi-criteria assessment of the services provided. Various architects have been commissioned, such as Wilmotte & Associés, PCA-Stream and Art & Build, and feature prominently in ADP’s communications. Retail and hotel complexes have also been designed to recall socially distinctive traits of the airport. At Aéroville, PCA-Stream’s architecture is said to result from a concept that “hybridizes the codes of the airport with those of ... an urban center.” Saguez & Partners’ interior design proceeds from a collage of “atmospheres” of five “continents”, drawing on the distinctive imaginations of exoticism, alpha cities, class-based cosmopolitanism and tourist destinations: “Tropical Design”, “Nordic Chic”, “Tokyo Mix”, “Africa Lodge”, and “Bali Market.” In this way, Aéroville is intended to be “a commercial and leisure center inspired by the imaginary of travel [that] becomes the ‘town center’ ... [of] this vast area ... an open space in which the airport has inoculated its cosmopolitan dimension” (PCA-Stream, 2023). Interestingly, the marketing of these buildings capitalizes on the singularities of the airport to

brand it as a safe city, as shown by the surveillance camera displayed in the Belaïa building brochure and the accompanying text: “Belaïa has security and protection systems linked to airport activity that will guarantee a safe environment for businesses” (ADP, 2018). ADP’s products are thus expected to benefit from the publicly funded security activities deployed at the airport (border police, customs, and air transport gendarmerie) in what is almost profiled as a gated or fortress VIP airport city. Due to the prevalent perimetric approach to airport security, the airport premises, from aircraft, runways and terminals to the fringes of the airport, are heavily monitored, with a prefect<sup>6</sup> specifically responsible for its strict enforcement.

Not all non-aeronautical real-estate activities can be reduced to the most conspicuous features of VIP urbanism, however. More nuanced accounts are needed to grasp how this model attempts to endogenize less extraordinary forms of urban production, targeting local residents and a – relatively – less-privileged clientele of air travelers. Part of the real-estate offer is predictably devoted to ADP employees (offices and training centers), classified by ADP as diversification development. To secure the necessary workforce, who mostly work staggered hours, and ensure the social acceptance of its activities for surrounding inhabitants, ADP has built a number of facilities: nurseries, a health center, two residences for young workers, and two “environment centers” (one each at CDG and Orly). Built in the 1990s, and recently renovated, these centers provide communication and mediation facilities for residents (including schoolchildren) and local stakeholders, an activity typically undertaken by major airport authorities in Europe. Unsurprisingly, ADP uses this type of real-estate development as a vehicle to weigh favorably in its relationships with local communities: *“ADP group has endeavored to rebuild its image with very small local authorities, by welcoming schools[’ students] from small municipalities in the northern Seine-et-Marne area. ... These are just a few examples to show that we’re not that bad. ... Our emergency medical center provides services to nearby residents, operating around the clock [and easily accessible] in contrast to [overcrowded] emergency departments. Actually, we act as if we were a local government”* (Territorial Relations and Environment (North) division, ADP).

In terms of commercial property, more ordinary forms of urban production can be perceived with the development of various mid-range, two-star hotels in Orly and CDG

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<sup>6</sup> The symbolic, as well as functional, role of prefects is significant. A small number of prefects are entrusted with specific law-enforcement missions, as in the case of ADP’s airports.



(Table 1). However, in contrast to the surrounding areas, only a few are on ADP land, mostly located some distance from the terminals, as in the case of CDG's easyHotel.

Table 1. Hotels on ADP’s land at CDG, Orly and Le Bourget

Platform	Hotels	Number of stars	Number of rooms	Date of opening
<b>CDG</b>	easyHotel	2	208	2022
	Holiday Inn Express	3	305	2018
	Ibis	3	700	ND
	Ibis Styles	3	305	2016
	Moxy by Marriott	3	246	2019
	Citizen M	4	230	2014
	Courtyard (The Jangle Hotel)	4	240	2022
	Hilton	4	392	1994
	Innside by Melia	4	278	2019
	Mercure	4	246	1974
	Novotel	4	201	NC
	Pullman	4	305	2016
	Residence Inn	4	121	2022
	Sheraton	4	252	1996
<b>Orly</b>	Ibis Style	3	393	ND
	Novotel	4	163	2014
	Ibis Budget	2	154	2014
	Mercure	4	189	1971
<b>Le Bourget</b>	Campanile	4	46	ND
	AC Hotel by Marriott	4	122	ND

*Source: authors based on press releases, newspapers and hotels and ADP’ websites*

This “ordinary” urban production also includes logistics warehouses, offices for local businesses, and retail outlets targeted at airport employees or residents of the surrounding areas (among France’s poorest municipalities), such as Aéroville, which offers a wide range of low-end or mid-range stores. While in the past, local economic activities that had no connection with the airport were located in municipalities’ business parks beyond the airport perimeter, ADP’s bifurcation involves endeavors to selectively blur this separation.

Nevertheless, even when ADP’s real estate targets a more intermediate clientele, the rhetoric of luxury abounds in the marketing of projects. The press release for Citizen M, a hotel at CDG opened in 2014, is a case in point, portraying the hotel as the epitome of “accessible luxury” for aspirant elitism (Groupe ADP, 2012). In addition, the recent renovation of old hotels (e.g. Orly and CDG’s Mercure hotels) is often an opportunity to upgrade quality (associated with an additional star) and emphasize the codes of luxury by developing new services (gyms, swimming pools, spa-type services, etc.). This extension of airport VIP urbanism can be seen as both a manifestation of its aspirational dimension and a

limit to and a tension weighing on this urban model, aimed at a very limited fraction of the population. Indeed, this urbanism has multiple implications that we will now examine.

### **5. The flipside of the VIP airport city**

Airport VIP urbanism fosters tensions of various kinds. First, it faces economic difficulties – in striking contrast to its ambitions and proclaimed boosterism – related to the challenge of embedding this model in the broader context of the Paris region. Its various projects do not easily materialize in a region already replete with facilities, despite their unique location. The optimistic conference-center projects, for instance, contemplated at both Orly and CDG – the soon-forgotten “Airapolis World Trade Center” (Pestel, 2005) – never found the necessary funding for their development. Despite plans envisaging that “as of 2023, [ADP’s flagship project] Cœur d’Orly [would] be the second-largest business center in the Paris region” (Prolongeau, 2016), this goal has been clearly missed. This urbanism also exposes ADP to the risks associated with the economic cycles of office buildings. The 2008 real-estate crisis led to overcapacity, which played a key role in the sharp slowdown of the Cœur d’Orly project, just as the 1992 crisis resulted in the unsuccessful opening of the CDG Roissypôle project. Some projects, when marketed, face difficulties in attracting occupants that correspond to their specifications, and must be revised, at least temporarily. Tellingly, in 2018, the Grand Orly Seine Bièvre local authority<sup>7</sup> moved its headquarters and 300 of its employees to the Askia building in Cœur d’Orly, a move that went against the conception of the airport city as a magnet dedicated to private companies. This building was described one year earlier as “the pride of ADP”, allowing them “to envision the airport as an airport city” in the words of its CEO (Batiactu, 2017). Cœur d’Orly’s failure to attract tenants from large private companies has led ADP to envisage a new balance between public and private tenants, in order to safeguard the marketing of its projects, and consequently its revenues. The phasing of projects such as Cœur d’Orly has also been revised, with ADP’s strategy adjusted to match market dynamics. As a result of these marketing difficulties, ADP has also decided to give up its ambitious practice of developing office space without pre-marketing it to a user, as mentioned by interviewees from ADP’s real-estate division.

Capitalizing on the growing yet still relatively limited accessibility of airports at the regional scale, compared to major urban centers, also has its limitations. Uncertainties and

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<sup>7</sup> An intermunicipal authority whose area includes Orly airport.

delays have plagued infrastructure projects such as the creation of a high-speed rail station at Orly, which was planned in 2006 and has yet to be built (Duffé, 2006). Because of the – sometimes yawning – gap between high expectations or justifications related to VIP urbanism and the more prosaic measures necessary to realize them, projects run the risk of becoming disconnected from the airport. Aéroville, for instance, which at its inauguration was presented as primarily focused on air passengers (Batiactu, 2013), “actually, in practice, very much concerns residents,” according to one ADP real-estate executive we interviewed. The VIP model is also in tension with the airport authority’s lucrative – and generally working-class – activities such as logistics, which, admittedly, are often frowned upon by local authorities because of the truck traffic involved (A, 2005).

This VIP urbanism also creates tensions with local stakeholders, despite the economic spin-offs generated by airports. Surrounding municipalities, with low- to medium-income communities, have a large supply of social housing that accommodates many airport employees. As they are responsible for local town-planning schemes and granting building permits outside the core airport zone, they are associated, to a certain extent, with ADP’s property projects. They also benefit directly and indirectly from airport-related jobs and local taxation. In 2022, ADP (2022b) paid €66 million in property taxes and €38 million in territorial economic contribution, a levy earmarked for local governments, but recent studies have offered limited insights into the specifics of how these inflows are – unevenly – distributed across and used by municipalities. However, these fiscal compensations are at odds with the low-tax environment to which ADP aspires for its non-aeronautical activities: “Airport activities are generally highly profitable, leading local authorities to impose substantial tax rates. ... This is also a way of maintaining social peace. [But] in competitive business environments, especially in property development, competing with other locations, we must look [at these tax rates]. But we are in an impossible situation, as it’s very difficult to tell elected representatives that tax rates are too high and have a major impact on the development of tertiary buildings” (Real-Estate Division, ADP). Yet ADP still signs partnership agreements with local authorities, which sometimes involve ADP co-financing infrastructure projects that make the airport more accessible to employees, and enhance its assets (e.g. *Le Parisien*, 2023).

These benefits for local authorities create coalitions of interest with ADP and limit the debate on its land and real-estate strategy. Nevertheless, ADP’s real-estate activities can be

controversial for local authorities. A major problem is the competition with activities nearby induced by ADP's diversification projects. Despite its presentation specifically as a high-end airport-related facility, Aéroville has been highly contentious. Its lack of congruence with local planning processes has been criticized by elected officials, especially politicians from municipalities that could not benefit from local taxes generated by Aéroville, such as the mayor of Gonesse: "All studies show that there are enough large retail facilities. We are currently drawing up a commercial plan [in the Val-d'Oise department], and it's incredible to discover this now" (Sterlé, 2004). Along with environmental and consumer organizations, he denounces an "airport gigantism" involving the urbanization of 25 acres of highly fertile silt plain, "without real consultation or consideration of noise and air pollution" in the planning of this car-centric facility (P, 2008). The legitimacy of an airport authority to intervene in this form of planning is thus questioned, as summed up by a vice-president of Val-d'Oise departmental council: "I don't think a shopping mall is meant to be built by ADP" (Pestel, 2005). The shift of ADP's relationship with its urban environment and local stakeholders is proving complex for an airport authority that, until its privatization, was unfamiliar with local regulations governing building permits; as one executive from the real-estate division puts it: "[diversifying our real-estate activities] means we are competing with surrounding areas, with programs that have always been developed on the edge of airport land."

Several local stakeholders are increasingly vocal about the unequal territorial effects of the airport authority's VIP urbanism, even regarding non-real-estate projects. CDG Express, a planned rapid rail service linking CDG directly to downtown Paris, is a case in point, reminiscent of splintering urbanism. These stakeholders have heavily criticized the project as a transportation service for affluent air travelers developed at the expense of the heavily underfunded, slower, and already existing (RER B) connection (Subra, 2008). The RER B line, serving various intermediate stations, meets the travel needs of many working-class communities surrounding CDG, especially in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, known for its poverty rate – the highest in mainland France. These forms of contestation are project-specific, and there is no evidence that these numerous local stakeholders might coalesce and challenge ADP's overall strategy. But, as the expression of "airport gigantism" shows, they hold remarkably different conceptions of the elite capture at play.

The unfolding capture of airport land can be better understood by considering the way it obscures oft-overlooked yet well-attested and long-standing alternative uses and users of

airport land, especially for the accommodation of urban subalterns. These make sense in the wider context of the housing crisis in the Paris region (Desjardins, 2011). Four main forms of (non-)habitation of airport land can be identified. First, at the behest of national authorities facing the homelessness crisis, facilities near Orly and at Chelles airfield were used temporarily as emergency shelters during the winter (Calant, 2002; *Le Parisien*, 2016), a usage that would be jeopardized by the anticipated full privatization of ADP. Second, travelers such as Roma regularly attempt to set up their caravans on airport land. Our study of *Le Parisien*'s articles shows their presence at various airfields, especially in the eastern part of the Paris region: Coulommiers-Mouroux, Meaux-Esbly, and Lognes. ADP land near Le Bourget, the third Parisian airport, was also occupied by travelers in 2001 (M, 2001). Some 400 caravans arrived at CDG airport in 2002, near the "environment center," which, ironically, was created by ADP to welcome visitors from surrounding areas (Soulié, 2002). Similar numbers of caravans appeared in Orly's parking lots in 2016 (Courtine and Vives, 2016). The travelers were evicted, but returned a month later, only to be once again ousted by border police. France's planning failures regarding travelers, and the underlying exclusionary tactics (Acker, 2021), thus spill over into the urban fringes, of which airport land is a part, and can only be exacerbated by airport VIP urbanism. To be sure, building new forms of housing on airport land is almost impossible, in accordance with planning regulations that prevent it to limit noise exposure. But the attrition of these uses of airport land raises an issue of social and spatial justice and the question of how airport authorities and elected representatives might strive to improve – rather than worsen – the situation of urban subalterns and the housing crisis – for instance, through compensatory measures.

Third, other forms of squatting are tangible, especially in the old village of Goussainville. Located directly under CDG's flight path, the village is highly exposed to aircraft noise. Its buildings were largely abandoned, but not destroyed, when the airport was built. Moreover, a planning regulation protects the buildings within a 500-meter radius of the village's church, listed as a historic monument. A noise-exposure plan, designed to prevent more people from being affected by airport noise, has prohibited the building of new houses. As many residents left the village when the airport was built, ADP bought their houses they left empty. In what is often described in the press as a ghost town, the remaining residents live alongside squatters. ADP's neglect of this decaying and precarious urban setting has been regularly criticized locally (Foulon, 2003). ADP's partial sale of the properties for a token euro to the municipality in 2009, in the hope of regenerating the village through the

development of craft activities, as well as ADP's €2.3 million grant toward their rehabilitation (*Le Parisien*, 2009), shows the difficulty, for the airport authority, of addressing the less glamorous aspects of airport-led urban development. A fourth form of (non-)habitation of airport land concerns the segregative effects of airport VIP urbanism. Specifically, potential dwellers are being pushed away from ADP's land, such as at CDG, where budget hotels are planned for construction "workers who struggle to find accommodation within the airport perimeter" (Léo, 2012: 137) in the noisy neighboring municipality of Compans. This village is notoriously exposed to aircraft noise, and indeed it holds the sad record of the municipality in the Paris region with the greatest average loss of healthy life expectancy due to transportation-induced noise for residents, amounting to 38 months (Bruitparif, 2019). The unfolding VIP urbanism of airports thus undermines a myriad of other uses of airport land for accommodation purposes deployed by the most vulnerable.

This urbanism also overshadows vernacular heritage and popular culture, which do not fit into the normative model of the airport city. In addition to the example of Goussainville's village and church, the small Delta Museum in Athis-Mons, near Orly, run by a local nonprofit organization, illustrates the disconnection of ADP's strategy from heritage concerns. Devoted to the history of aviation and exhibiting vintage aircraft such as Concorde, it has been located on airport land since 1988. In 2006, however, its location was threatened by the arrival of a new light-rail line. Athis-Mons's mayor and the museum's management succeeded in modifying the route (Binet, 2007). Yet in 2012, when the 25-year contract between ADP and Athis-Mons expired, and new transportation infrastructure projects were planned, ADP significantly reduced the space dedicated to the museum, from 33,000 to 3,600 m<sup>2</sup> (Musée Delta, n.d.). The real-estate priorities of the airport authority are clearly reflected in these repeated decisions.

The multiple alternatives to market-led developments, largely invisible in public discourse and in the literature, are at odds with the urbanistic model of the airport city. They point to a wide range of uses of airport land, whether related to neighboring communities, minorities, the working classes or popular culture.

## **6. Conclusion**

By examining three main sources of data, we show that the urban development undertaken by an airport authority such as ADP, in the pursuit of airport-city policies, is the

vivid expression of VIP urbanism. ADP's property developments opt for an urbanization organized around the upper fractions of the flying public, the so-called kinetic elites, considered the most profitable targets for the non-aeronautical real-estate activities of a financialized and privatized airport. The pursuit of a distinctive and exclusionary urbanism is framed as a "self-evident good" (Atkinson, 2020), making it harder to challenge its legitimacy. The dominant discourses of the airport city and the aerotropolis must therefore be seen as yet another means of normalizing the influence of the few on urban land (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2017) and deconstructed accordingly.

This urban model in the making shares many of the identified traits of VIP urbanism. It proceeds from intermediaries rather than from the wealthy themselves: the airport authority, developers, starchitects, etc., with the support of local governments, forming a growth coalition. Up until 2005, in the case studied here, the airport authority benefited from a tailor-made planning regime that allowed building permits to be issued bureaucratically, by local representatives of the state – of which ADP was a part – rather than politically, by the relevant municipalities, even for its growing non-aeronautical activities. Anticipated economic growth is based on a trickle-down approach, with VIP activities seen as the key driver of airport-led urbanization, alongside aviation, a gradually questioned source of activity.

This model comes up against its own contradictions, however, as it does not fully meet the needs of its – cherry-picked and thus narrow – audience. Moreover, more ordinary activities and populations must also, to a limited extent, form part of the airport authority's urban production. While this production can partly be presented as endogenized, as an expansion of the strategy of distinctiveness aimed at aspirational audiences, it also attests to the performativity of airport VIP urbanism grappling with its limitations. It leads to a two-sided airport, where an exclusionary principle of airport development prevails, but has to concede dissonant actions, either to increase the social acceptability of the model among local residents or to secure its workforce.

Of course, airport VIP urbanism has its own specificities. By foregrounding and – to some extent – overplaying the unique characteristics of airport spaces, it enables one major entity, the airport authority, to prevail in its planning, relatively to surrounding municipalities (typically small in terms of population and area, with limited clout) and its real-estate partners, as it asserts itself as investor, (co-)developer, and landlord. This paper shows how the distinctive geography at play in airports changes as it is projected from air terminals to real-estate "diversification" projects on the scale of the whole airport complex. The financial



logic of diversification encourages a progressive blurring between the key functions of an airport as a public utility and other activities, conveniently overshadowing the debate on the legitimacy of an airport authority as urban planner. The massive land grabs observed, in the name of infrastructural needs, and the associated transfer of land over 70 years to a semi-privatized company, even for other purposes, decided by the national executive and legislative branches of government, has paved the way for a dispossession of land.

However, this specific “planning-by-not-planning” (Stein, 2019: 227) can be seen as part of a broader trend affecting urban spaces, consisting in a succession of political gestures that reduce a vast amount of space to a specialized, expert-dominated and extraordinary money-making infrastructure. This contributes to a portrayal of large-scale, urban, politically orchestrated planning as irrelevant, while enabling the landowner to deploy a tailored form of urbanization that would call for wide-ranging, participatory planning processes. Probing these mechanisms is helpful in elucidating how VIP urbanism could be implemented in other entrepreneurial urban models such as the smart city, the safe city or transit-oriented development. Beyond their post-political problem–solution rhetoric and the role played by large service companies, these tropes all have in common the promise of speed and “ubiquitous connectivity”, whether in the form of a digital fix, for the smart city and the safe city alike (Datta, 2020: 1318), via surveillance technologies, or a physical fix for the TOD and aerotropolis models. Their promise of public acceptance comes with the marginalization of others, through social biases of algorithms in facial recognition, with TOD-related displacements of people (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019) or by disregarding uses of airport land, encroaching on people’s right to the city. These models face major pitfalls, or at least disconnections with their proclaimed benefits, and these tensions – operational, social, and, potentially, political – merit closer scrutiny. Another avenue of research concerns the role of the media in underestimating the setbacks of these urbanization models. Explanatory factors may be related to structural transformations in the news industry (e.g. the lack of investigative journalism on certain topics) or to financial and relational proximity to these forms of urbanism, through the media’s involvement in growth coalitions or its dependence on related companies for advertising.

In an era of climate and ecological emergencies, when many countries, including France, contemplate “no net land take” strategies – a perspective that airport authorities acknowledge themselves to a certain extent – and against the backdrop of an acute housing crisis in major city regions, it is essential to reorient the debate towards the potential uses and users of airport land, and spatial justice regarding its informal occupation. It entails often-

neglected manifestations of everyday resistance, of infrapolitics (Scott, 1990), as well as more explicit – yet project-specific – political stances taken by local stakeholders. They are an integral part of much-needed alternative narratives on airport VIP urbanism. While airport governance varies from airport to airport (Bloch *et al.*, 2021), “people-focused” approaches (Hirsh, 2019) to airport urbanism still need very much to be constructed.

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