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Ludovic Bonduel

► **To cite this version:**

| Ludovic Bonduel. Gentrification policies and urban protests in Marseille. 2019. hal-04731050

HAL Id: hal-04731050

<https://hal.science/hal-04731050v1>

Submitted on 10 Oct 2024

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Gentrification policies and urban protests in Marseille

by [Ludovic Bonduel](#) | Feb 11, 2019 | [The Urban Media Lab](#)

A year before his retirement, Jean-Claude Gaudin, the right-wing Mayor of Marseille since 1995, is confronted to unprecedented protests and generalized criticisms against his politics: the city might be witnessing the end of an era. In comparison to other French cities, a particularity of Marseille is that lower classes and immigrant populations still occupy the centre of town and have not yet been expelled to the margins by the increase of real estate prices. This is exactly what Gaudin and his associates have always found intolerable and did their best to change. For more than two decades they strived to replace the precarious and often immigrant populations of the centre, with wealthier populations that would supposedly work, consume and pay taxes without any agitation. Their long-term strategy of economic development and urban planning which focused on tourism, culture, luxury and the attraction of international investors, has been perceived by many critical voices to be more consistent with this objective of gentrification, than with the needs of the inhabitants of the centre. This objective is not always explicitly expressed by the town council today, but in 2003 Claude Valette, an associate of Gaudin could declare: “We need people who produce wealth. We must get rid of half of the inhabitants of the city. The heart of the city deserves something different”^[1].

Two recent events have fed the protests. On the one hand, the project of renovation of the main square of the city – *Place Jean Jaurès*, also known as “La Plaine” – located in the centre, is accused of gentrifying the neighbourhood and to be imposed to its inhabitants without serious concertation. On the other hand, two among the many insalubrious buildings of the city centre, the 63 and 65 rue d’Aubagne, have collapsed on the 5th of November, provoking the death of 8 people.

The issue of insalubrious housing in Marseille and the City’s response to it

An official report written by Christian Nicol in 2015 estimated that Marseille counts 42 400 insalubrious apartments out of a total of 377 000 apartments. This means that 13% of the city’s apartments are insalubrious and that there is a potential risk for the safety and health of about 100 000 people. In many areas of the centre, this rate exceeds 35%. Most insalubrious buildings are private and owned by slumlords who refuse to make the necessary renovations. Amina Baggour, 31-year-old, who has recently been evacuated of her flat in Rodolphe-Pollak street after that the stairs collapsed, tells her story: “There were cracks, the stairs were holding with iron bars, it was raining in our apartment, but the landlord did not answer. We even had a rat invasion, and he told me ‘They don’t kill’”^[2]. Many other buildings – including one among the two that collapsed on the 5th of November – belong to the city, which simply did not invest in their renovation.

The city also has tools to act for the safety of inhabitants of privately-owned buildings. It can put pressure on landlords by diverse means, have the right of undertaking the works by itself, and can sign peril decrees (*arrêtés de péril*) to evacuate buildings when necessary. In 2014, two million euros were unlocked by the city council to identify which buildings it should urgently renovate. Four years later, only 15% of this money has actually been used^[3]. Despite the well-

known seriousness of insalubrious buildings in Marseille, peril decrees are extremely rare. Since the 5th of November though, the city hall multiplies these decrees as it is under the fire of criticisms coming from all sides. In the last 3 months it has signed 147 peril decrees, the same amount of decrees it had signed in the previous four years. Christian Nicol argues that the scarcity of peril decrees is related to the problems of rehousing. The city should find a new accommodation to those that it evacuates, and this requires the mobilisation of social housing. However, as some city officers confessed to him, this cannot be done as local representatives monopolise the attribution of social housing for cronyism[4].



Noureddine Abouakil, co-founder of *Un centre-ville pour tous*, an association which has been struggling against gentrification policies since 2000, claims that peril decrees and other legal tools to tackle the issue of insalubrity are only used for political purposes: “When there is a renovation project that may change the populations as it was the case for the buildings of Belsunce, peril decrees rain from everywhere. But if you live in a district that does not interest the city, like the Barbini street in the 3rd district, where there are many slumlords, you may die. There won’t be any decree”[5]. In 2007 he even saw a landlord making a written demand to the Mayor’s cabinet asking for a peril decree on his building. The peril decree enabled him to expel the tenants, in order to demolish the building and construct an office block. According to Abouakil, the city council always find ways to expel tenants when it wants to do so. Their problem is that, once this is done, they have difficulty to attract wealthier people, as there is a lack of demand which keeps prices down. Consequently, when they put back such apartments on the market, they see precarious and immigrant populations come back. This also explains why many buildings owned by the city are left vacant and without renovation. Since the city does not find richer people interested in their acquisition, it prefers not to invest, it refuses to create an offer destined to underprivileged populations. In this process, the city often wastes

great sums of money. For instance, the city bought the 29 rue du Baignoir and expelled their tenants in 2007, then it left the whole building empty until 2018. After abandoning these 1500m² for 11 years, without getting any rent out of it, it sold it to a private owner for a price of 88 000 euros, while some experts estimated its real price to be about 260 000.



Abouakil multiplies the examples of buildings that have been left vacant for 15 to 20 years and sold under their prices, often without publicity nor competition. He considers the actions of the city authorities to be criminal, as they wasted money and have let people die. His diagnosis seems to be shared by many, as the demonstrations against insalubrious housing and for the right to the city, have assembled a few thousands of people at repeated occurrences in the last months, who often shouted: “Gaudin Assassin!”.

The renovation of La Plaine: a highly contested project

The collapse of the two buildings on the 5th of November occurred in a context of increased tensions between the city authorities and diverse collectives of inhabitants. These tensions aroused from the project of renovation of the largest square of Marseille, commonly called *La Plaine*, which is located about 500 meters away from the fallen buildings. This square and the neighbouring streets are well-known for sheltering a great amount of self-organized social and cultural activities favouring the mixture of populations, an enhanced local solidarity, and alternative dynamics that have always been regarded as suspicious by the city authorities.

It is a famous area of Marseille's nightlife hosting many musical bars in which some of the city's main artists made their debuts (e.g. Keny Arkana, Massilia Sound System). Popular festivals, carnivals and open-air theatre performances are common, while international brands are rare. There is also a traditional and very cheap market taking place three times a week, which usually leaves a lot of trash on the square, but significantly contributes to the livelihood of the area. All these elements constitute a rather fragile ecosystem to which many – probably most – inhabitants are deeply attached.

The communication over the project of renovation has been quite disastrous, and even the supporters of the project usually admit its default. Opacity dominated the process. The locals first heard about a renovation project through rumours in spring 2015, then some of the plans leaked to the public during the summer. According to these plans, the traditional market should get replaced by new commercial activities with top-of-the-range products. The whole square should be restructured, and commercial terraces should be installed in places where free activities used to take place. An elected representative of the municipality, Yves Moraine, even declared about the project: "No one can take care of public space as well as the private sector". The budget of the project is of a little more than 13 million euros. After the leaks, the municipality hired Parisian consultants to organize public discussions about the project. The consultants and the city representatives were surprised by the depth of the opposition of the public to the project, which was not calmed down by the ambiguous language of the professionals of communication. After the discussions, Jean-Claude Gaudin declared at the city council of the 8th October of 2015: "If someone has some remarks to make, and ...I will take into account... as I said, the ones of those who are elected, but again, the lessons coming from those who aren't elected... these people should first get elected at the universal suffrage then we might talk again"[\[6\]](#).



In early October 2018, the works were launched in a tense context. On the 16th, more than fifty trees were chopped down under the surveillance of 150 anti-riot policemen. Four days later, 3000 people demonstrated to demand the cessation of the works. On the next Monday, they started again with the help of the anti-riot police. As the wooden fence protecting the construction site was destroyed by inhabitants, the city invested in a 2.5-meter-tall wall of concrete, extending along the 2.5 acres of the site. Not only the wall symbolizes the city council's lack of openness to dialogue, but it also costed 390 000 euros.

The opponents of the project do believe some renovations would be beneficial to the area. They demand for instance, bins, toilets, and better lighting on the square. They simply refuse the imposition of a vast and undiscussed project, which threatens the local dynamics and current uses of the square. An inhabitant of the area sums up their views: “La Plaine, it's a neighbourhood which hosts, people who come to party as well as poor people who come to the popular market. The city's project, it's to transform it into a residential district with a high-revenue population”[7]. Some inhabitants are also exceeded by the conflict and feel trapped between both sides. They united into a collective – les Riverains de la Plaine – demanding for the works to be continued and ask both sides to calm down. Their online petition received about 640 signatures so far. The struggle will probably remain a significant stake in local politics, as the representatives of LREM (the party of Emmanuel Macron) support the project, while the France Insoumise (the party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon) and the Socialist Party contest it. The protests against the renovation has also been stimulated and, to some extent, merged with the ones against insalubrious housing and the national scale ‘Gilets Jaunes’ movement. Hendrik Davi, from the France Insoumise, explained this convergence: “They are managing Marseille as Macron is managing the country. In an authoritarian style, without dialogue. We want more local democracy and social justice”[8].

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