

# FRENCH DOUBLE BIND: RECONCILING PLANNING AND PROJECT

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## Abstract

French planning is characterized by a persistent duality, wherein a centralized regulatory framework coexists with flexible, design-driven, project-based practices. The analysis in this paper situates these developments within the broader evolution of French planning, tracing the transition from postwar centralization to decentralization and ecological transition. It addresses the separation which exists between statutory planning and project delivery via Zones d'Aménagement Concerté (ZACs), the emergence of the projet urbain as a negotiated design practice, and the rise of tactical urbanism since the 2000s. By engaging with five contemporary trajectories in architecture and planning—from post-urbanism to political contextualism—the paper contends that effective planning must integrate spatial rationality, local specificity, and political agency, while acknowledging power and resource asymmetries. The conclusion advocates for strategic incrementalism, suggesting that the future of French planning relies on transforming the plan-project duality from a structural constraint into a productive tension that supports adaptive, equitable, and democratic urban development.

## Keywords:

*French urban planning, projet urbain, tactical urbanism, PLUb Paris, Paris 2024 Olympics, urban governance, contextualism, ecological transition.*

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French planning follows a hybrid trajectory, blending distinctive national characteristics with practices common to other advanced economies. Understanding the origins of current dualities requires acknowledging that, despite substantial postwar transformations, this approach has yielded relatively stable policy outcomes. It also acknowledges that the state of French theoretical debate is inadequate to map and represent the actual practices or to compare and defend them within the international debate. The aims of this paper are to set the field of this tension, to show what is vital in French debates and what needs to be positioned, as well as illustrate, how the international debate can learn from France.

Surprisingly, while international scholars have enormously exploited French theories to understand postwar urbanization process, and even more, French theories do not weigh in the world of planning (Allmendinger 2002) and international 'planning theories' do not feature much in France (Maulat, 2020; Bognon *et al.*, 2020). When it comes to the divide between plan and design, French planning literature is either conservative, claiming continuity with the glorious past (Merlin 2007) or defending the ruins (Desjardins 2020) against rampant invaders; or self-critical, celebrating the innovative turn (Novarina 2003; Ingallina 2013). In between, a rich field of interdisciplinary empirical research deploys critical, sociological and ethnographic analyses that illuminate both practices and theories. This corpus fails, however, to invigorate the academic international debate.

This paper analyses this cleavage by first setting the scene: planning practice in France is highly innovative, although encounters some institutional freins. The new urban plan and the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris provides a dual lens to revisit French planning traditions and theoretical frameworks.

The *Plan Local d'Urbanisme bioclimatique* (PLUb) in Paris confronts statutory planning with the limits of dominant international planning theories and reopens long-standing debates within French scholarship on the political nature of regulation, negotiation, and incremental change. The PLUb exemplifies an intermediate and deeply political form of urbanism (Cremaschi, *forthcoming*), in which regulatory tools are explicitly recalibrated to address highly specific local conditions, including climate vulnerability, uneven heat-island effects, high office vacancy rates, tourism pressure, and pronounced territorial inequalities. Rather than pursuing comprehensive transformation, the plan relies on negotiated, incremental adjustments within existing institutional and regulatory constraints, and seeks to maintain spatial coherence over time. In doing so, the PLUb foregrounds planning as a structured field of negotiation shaped by unequal distributions of resources, authority, and legitimacy. These features challenge long-standing assumptions underlying French planning and point towards a context-aware rationality that selectively integrates elements of the *projet urbain* into statutory planning processes.

The planning and implementation of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games magnify both the system's capacity for centralized coordination and controlled experimentation, and its limits in terms of democratic accountability and social equity (Delaplace, 2026; Jreij, 2026, this issue). Importantly, Paris 2024 was framed not as a standalone event but as a catalyst for sustainability, territorial rebalancing, and long-term metropolitan transformation. Simultaneously, Paris 2024 deployed a strongly place-oriented, design-led approach in the historic core. The Olympic Village in Saint-Denis further illustrates the interplay between top-down strategy and place-based objectives: conceived as a flagship regeneration project, the 51-hectare development is intended to be converted into a mixed-use neighbourhood with substantial social and affordable housing and climate-resilient design features (Lopes dos Santos, Delaplace, 2024). However, critics argue that narratives of sustainability and legacy risk are obscuring displacement, social disruption, and gentrification pressures in already vulnerable territories (Faure, 2021; Wolfe, 2023).

The two Parisian cases—one exemplifying a context-sensitive response to the climate crisis, the other involving the time-bound management of a mega-event—underscore ongoing tensions within the Planning system in France: plan versus project, centralisation versus local adaptation, and regulatory stability versus design-led experimentation. Starting from these examples, the paper re-examines France's planning tradition, its ongoing transformation and dilemmas, and potential exit routes.

Section One follows the French shift from a centralised, redistributive system to a fragmented, multi-level governance structure shaped by decentralisation, globalisation, and ecological imperatives. This evolution has been marked by a persistent tension between regulatory planning and project-based practices, which continues to influence debates regarding the planning system's capacity and the planning agency's role in addressing contemporary social and environmental challenges.

Section Two delves into the tool *Zones d'Aménagement Concerté* (a mixed development tool: ZACs), which institutionalize a functional separation between statutory planning and project delivery via negotiated, publicly led development processes. While this model allows for coordination among public authorities, developers, and civil society, it also constrains ecological ambition and long-term coherence. Financial pressures, extended implementation timelines, and the challenge of reconciling multiple, often competing objectives limit the transformative potential of ZAC-based development.

Section Three analyses the emergence of the *projet urbain* as a negotiated, design-led response to the limitations of centralized and regulatory planning. This approach offers flexibility, contextual sensitivity, and opportunities for political negotiation. However, its partial and uneven integration into statutory planning frameworks contributes to institutional fragmentation and perpetuates enduring tensions within French urbanism.

Section Four discusses the expansion of tactical urbanism in France since the 2000s, focusing on temporary uses, co-production, and experimental interventions. While these practices foster participation and innovation, they also raise unresolved questions regarding value creation, power asymmetries, and the extent to which such interventions generate substantive and lasting urban change.

Finally, contemporary debates in architecture and planning are discussed, identifying five principal trajectories as potential exit strategies from the current theoretical impasse. Three of these either reinforce dominant paradigms or remain marginal, while two—contextual material rationality and politically informed planning—are best positioned to address structural urban challenges. Collectively, these approaches emphasise the integration of spatial logic, local specificity, and political agency as foundations for more equitable, adaptable, and democratic urban development.

The conclusion proposes strategic incrementalism as a pathway forward: regulatory frameworks establishing binding ecological and social objectives that also enable context-sensitive implementation through projects and experimental practices. French planning's future depends on institutionalising the political literacy and contextual sensitivity exemplified by the PLU*b* and Paris 2024: transforming the plan-project duality from a structural constraint into a productive tension that sustains adaptive, equitable, and democratic urban development.

## 1. A rigid planning legacy

A comprehensive assessment of contemporary French planning necessitates analysis of its long-term institutional transformation and the underlying tensions that influence its current operational modes.

Since the mid-twentieth century, French planning has undergone a significant transformation. Initially conceived as a centralised, technocratic mechanism for redistributing national growth, it has gradually evolved into a decentralised, multi-level governance system. Currently, it confronts the challenge of reconciling ecological imperatives with entrenched local autonomy. This evolution demonstrates both the adaptability of a traditionally hierarchical planning structure and the inherent limitations of decentralisation within a system originally designed for centralised control. Consequently, French planning now faces the challenge of achieving greater flexibility while maintaining effectiveness.

The historical development of French regional planning illustrates a distinctive trajectory of institutional change and political culture. This trajectory reflects both structural discontinuities in the rationale for regional planning and the persistence of a strong localist political culture. French regional planning has evolved through three principal “ages” (Desjardins and Estèbe, 2021):

- The first age (1947–1980) defined by postwar modernization and a Fordist-Keynesian approach to redistribution and state-led territorial cohesion. Within an urban hierarchy dominated by Paris, planners sought to mitigate excessive centralization by promoting industrial decentralization and establishing *métropoles d'équilibre*;

- The second in the 1980s emerged from the interplay between decentralisation and globalisation. Cities received significant authority and became increasingly involved in global competition for investment and skilled labour. Planning adopted a more entrepreneurial orientation; marking a shift from redistributive territorial policies to urban branding and competitiveness.
- after 2010, a third age is increasingly being defined by the ecological imperative influenced by laws in 2014 and 2015 that strengthened metropolitan bodies and regions. This approach emphasises coordination rather than hierarchical control, and signals a broader transition from government to governance.

From a comparative standpoint, the French system operates under a ‘decentralised imperative.’ While the central state keeps strategic authority, operational power is widely distributed. Municipalities and inter-municipal bodies are responsible for legally binding plans. This fragmentation leads to competition for tax bases and development projects. It often undermines territorial coherence (Demazière, 2019).

The centralised planning system supported mass housing, new towns, and major infrastructure networks, playing a decisive role in national modernisation and, more recently, in reducing Paris’s dominance in favour of secondary metropolitan centres (Veltz, 2017). However, rational–comprehensive planning has faced substantial criticism for its technocratic orientation, disregard for local contexts, and reinforcement of structural power imbalances (Desjardins, 2020). In response, critical urban sociology and grassroots movements advocated for participatory, conflictual, and deliberative approaches, though these initiatives primarily addressed distributive conflicts rather than fundamentally altering planning instruments. French practices and debates frequently addressed issues such as participation, negotiation, and contextualism prior to their international prominence, yet these contributions often struggled for recognition within comparative planning theory. While international discourse shifted toward abstraction, French scholarship remained grounded in operational practice and institutional arrangements, reflecting its unique intellectual history (Cremaschi, 2023).

The planning of the Games illustrates the distance travelled from this age-old model, and reflects compromises within the municipal coalition, conflicts with economic stakeholders, and (limited) forms of citizen participation. This political rationality is somehow suspended between renovated technocratic approaches that depoliticise planning decisions and proclaimed consensus-based models that assume deliberation alone can resolve structural conflicts. The ambiguity is structural, and it follows that analytical attention should shift to the processes through which coalitions and oppositions are formed, the relative weight of formal participation versus informal political and economic influence, and the ways in which planning instruments redistribute regulatory burdens and benefits among social groups, property owners, and developers. Somehow these processes are governed (Borraz, Le Galès, 2010; Le Galès, Vitale 2015), though the shape and perimeter keep changing (Artioli, Le Galès 2025).

Despite multiple reforms, the French system still faces persistent structural challenges. First, the decentralisation process created a disconnect: local plans frequently promote land development, whereas national objectives seek to limit it. Second, the proliferation of planning tools increases procedural complexity and obscures accountability, resulting in what some term strategic inflation. Third, the transition to ecological policies raises issues of distributive justice. Measures such as fuel taxes, land-use restrictions, and densification have uneven social impacts, as evidenced by protests such as the *Gilets Jaunes* movement<sup>2</sup>.

However, focusing exclusively on regulatory frameworks and institutional constraints risks overlooking the most dynamic aspect of French planning: its project-based practices and experimental approaches, which are examined in the following section.

2 The *Gilets jaunes* (“Yellow Vests”) movement emerged in France in late 2018 as a decentralised protest against rising fuel taxes. Initially rooted in rural and peri-urban discontent over mobility costs, it quickly expanded into a broader movement demanding greater social justice, purchasing power, and fiscal fairness.

## 2. Public-led Mixed Developments

Urban projects in France are mainly organised through ZACs (*Zones d'Aménagement Concerté*) and public development agencies, with some participation from private operators. These initiatives are collective efforts, typically started by public authorities such as local governments, inter-municipal entities, or, in some cases, the national government, and are frequently carried out through inter-administrative cooperation. Although private initiatives are becoming more common, they are most common in the United Kingdom and are only slowly expanding across continental Europe.

The institutional framework of French urban planning is characterised by a distinct separation between regulatory planning and project implementation, primarily facilitated through ZACs, which are managed by public development agencies often structured as public firms. The implementation of ZACs and urban projects involves negotiations among public authorities, private developers, and, occasionally, civil society actors. This separation is a defining characteristic of French planning practice. Urban projects are governed by negotiated contracts and specific agreements while integrating regulatory and project-based approaches. Such reforms might include amendments to existing laws to harmonise planning and development processes, thereby enabling more cohesive project execution. Legislative changes could involve establishing unified frameworks to streamline negotiation requirements, thereby enabling more flexible regulatory planning while maintaining oversight and accountability. Municipal officials aim to maintain both regulatory authority through local urban plans and the capacity to pursue flagship projects via ZACs, yet they express concerns that greater integration could diminish political flexibility during project negotiations. Ensuring financial viability is critical for ZACs; they must balance revenues from land sales and developer fees with expenditures for infrastructure and social housing.

Stringent bioclimatic requirements can threaten the financial viability of urban projects, reinforcing the rationale for maintaining the separation between regulatory planning and project implementation. Paris currently contains several active ZACs, including Chapelle-Charbon, Gare des Mines-Fillettes, and Bercy-Charenton. These projects involve comprehensive redevelopment encompassing infrastructure, public spaces, housing, economic activities, and social facilities; coordinated by the municipality, public development agencies such as SEMAPA (*Société d'étude, de maîtrise d'ouvrage et d'aménagement parisienne*) or *Paris and Métropole Aménagement*, and private-sector partners. Many of these initiatives integrate ecological features, such as parks, green roofs, and renewable energy systems. They often exceed minimum social housing requirements.

However, several challenges persist. First, ZAC timelines generally span 10 to 15 years and are often set before the adoption of local urban plans (PLUs). Second, although ecological features are included, few projects surpass minimum regulatory standards. This struggle to exceed minimum standards stems from several barriers. Financial constraints often play a significant role, as more extensive ecological measures can be costly and may exceed budget limitations. Regulatory hurdles may also limit innovation in design and implementation. Additionally, stakeholder resistance arises when interests conflict, leading to compromises that prioritise more immediately impactful objectives over ecological goals. Third, ZACs frequently seek to balance multiple, and sometimes conflicting, objectives, including housing, office space, retail, cultural facilities, transportation, and environmental improvements. These competing priorities result in complex trade-offs, with bioclimatic objectives often competing against other goals (Arab, 2018).

The sociology of urban projects highlights the complexity of these processes, their intermittent nature, and the roles of diverse stakeholders. The shift from intentions to realisations creates a tension between desirable outcomes and practical feasibility, and may lead to ongoing negotiation and adaptation that vary by context and project phase. Civil society plays a critical role during consultation phases by advocating for community needs and ensuring that public interests are reflected in project outcomes. Private developers are pivotal during the design and construction phases, bringing both technical expertise and financial resources to the table. Public agencies coordinate these efforts and align them with regulatory requirements, ensuring compliance with broader planning goals. Numerous studies have analysed the trajectories of urban projects (Arab, 2018; Arab, Dang Vu, 2019) and emphasised the interplay between 'hard' instruments, such as land management, and 'soft' instruments, such as coordination among economic actors during implementation.

Project activities encompass a wide range of operations, from conceptual development and strategic objective setting to functional programming and spatial design. These processes also require stakeholder consultation, technical and administrative management, and operational coordination. The objectives are ambitious and include remediating contaminated soils, revitalising marginal or polluted areas, creating high-quality public spaces, ensuring access to housing to promote social diversity, and providing planned public facilities. The ecological transition introduces additional challenges, such as creating open and permeable spaces; establishing efficient heating and cooling networks; generating energy; implementing nature-based solutions (NBS) for water filtration, collection, and recycling; and achieving sustainable waste management.

### 3. The Urban Project turn

Since the 1980s, decentralisation, neoliberal reforms, and strategic urbanism have further reshaped the planning landscape. Urban projects have proliferated as instruments of competitiveness and place branding, frequently prioritising efficiency and market rationales over social justice (Pinson and Morel-Journel, 2016). This tension demonstrates that the urban project emerged not merely as a stylistic trend, but also as a response to the persistent dominance and critique of the state-led system which followed World War II.

Recent developments in architecture, planning, and urban theory have increasingly positioned the *projet urbain* as a strategic response to the limitations of postwar regulatory planning, particularly in the French context. This renewed focus on the urban project must be understood within the distinct trajectory of French planning, which diverges from Anglo-American developments (Idt, 2020). In both architecture (Devilleers, 1994) and critical urbanism, the urban project is conceptualised as a flexible, negotiated, and context-sensitive intervention that emphasises co-production, adaptability, and the rehabilitation of public space (Ingallina, 2008). Drawing on typomorphological traditions (Mangin and Panerai 1994), the concept integrates spatial form and social process, and promotes reversible urban configurations that address economic uncertainty and changing lifestyles. Notable projects such as Portzamparc's Paris Rive Gauche, Chemetoff's work in Nantes (Didelon, 2024), and Michelin's interventions in Bordeaux (Pauchon, 2018) illustrate this doctrinal shift through their having combined design experimentation with innovative forms of urban governance. However, the influence of this debate warrants caution, as its theoretical momentum has diminished while its practical outcomes remain inconsistent.

In this context, the project gained significance from the mid-1980s as both an alternative and a corrective to regulatory planning. This shift represented a partial return to design, though it did not fully resolve the relationship with statutory planning. From the 1990s onward, social science research reconceptualized urban projects as forms of collective action and negotiations of public policy, rather than being merely technical instruments (Arab, 2001; Pinson, 2009). Projects increasingly came to be seen as processes that reshape power relations, mobilize symbolic resources, and yield outcomes that may be unpredictable and only partially consistent with formal plans. The convergence of project-based approaches and urban governance introduced greater flexibility and horizontal coordination but also resulted in new forms of fragmentation.

Empirical research indicates that urban projects and ZACs are most effective when public authorities maintain control over land access, while their influence declines in contexts marked by market dominance, fiscal austerity, and diminished public coordination (Arab and Dang Vu, 2019). In these circumstances, projects often operate outside the PLU framework, and result in 'punctual and disjointed' urban landscapes. Additionally, ZACs face internal challenges, including programmatic inflation, rising transaction costs, and greater organizational complexity.

As consultation mechanisms diverge from the original project doctrine, the risk of fragmentation is heightened. These dynamics reveal enduring tensions at the heart of French urbanism: regulation and design, efficiency and justice, market rationalities, and collective rights. It follows, that the *projet urbain* cannot therefore be reduced to a simple alternative to planning; rather, it functions as a complementary mode of action, the integration of which into statutory frameworks remains unresolved. This unresolved relationship between project-based urbanism and regulatory planning provides the conceptual foundation for the analysis presented in the following sections.

## 4. Performative urbanism

The emergence of tactical urbanism as both a set of practical interventions and a conceptual framework helps in understanding broader shifts in planning theory and practice. Tactical urbanism is situated within ongoing debates on co-production, governance, and everyday urban life.

Since the early 2000s, tactical or transitional urbanism has emerged as a prominent paradigm in contemporary planning practice. Unlike approaches that rely exclusively on permanent interventions, tactical urbanism emphasises temporary actions to activate underutilised land and buildings and engage local communities before comprehensive redevelopment. These initiatives are distinct from spontaneous or informal occupations, as they are frequently supported by temporary contracts negotiated with public authorities. Such arrangements grant access for cultural, entrepreneurial, or socio-economic activities designed to stimulate revitalisation. In their more institutionalised forms (Cremaschi 2021; Cremaschi and Lucciarini 2022), tactical urbanism practices are integrated into co-production processes, in which public, private, and civil society actors collaboratively provide services and construct common goods. These arrangements intentionally foster direct citizen engagement and frame tactical projects as experimental settings for developing new forms of collective action.

The implementation of tactical projects generally follows an incremental approach. An initial actor—whether public, private, or non-profit—initiates the first intervention, after which additional participants are incorporated through formal invitations or informal networks, coordinated by a site manager. Each stakeholder contributes specific interests, such as economic return, social advancement, training, property enhancement, or community cohesion, which collectively influence the spatial and symbolic dimensions of the intervention. The primary policy challenge is to ensure that these interactions produce enduring public value rather than leading to the privatisation of space or new forms of social exclusion. In this context, tactical urbanism serves as a laboratory for examining agency in urban co-production and enables scholars to investigate how objectives and practices develop through interaction, as well as how local dynamics can shape broader development strategies.

In certain contexts, tactical projects have functioned as platforms for experimenting with the concept of 'open programming'. Traditional urban planning typically relies on interventions that are guided by predetermined objectives and programs. In contrast, participatory practices reveal how small-scale, provisional actions can activate dense networks and facilitate collective learning. Bouchain (in Manelli, 2019) emphasises both a methodological strategy, contending that democracy must question authority, and a 'republican' imperative, stating that public space is a shared space. His notion of 'open programming', as demonstrated in the Marseille *Belle de Mai* project, exemplifies how tactical urbanism can support gradual, incremental, and participatory change (Cremaschi *et al.*, 2021). Unlike fixed plans with set timelines and budgets, such as those found in ZACs, open programming initiates site activation through temporary uses, involves residents and users in identifying needs, allows programs to evolve through ongoing learning, and integrates physical infrastructure with social processes. These initiatives frequently leverage regulatory gaps or exemptions, maintain activity during extended development periods, engage communities in neighbourhood renewal, and promote innovation related to urban commons.

Paris provides numerous examples of tactical urbanism that the new PLUb puts at the forefront, including temporary uses of vacant sites, community gardens, pop-up cultural venues, and experimental public-space interventions. Within these activities, new professional actors have emerged, such as NGOs, consultants, and planning firms specializing in the management of temporary occupation contracts and the activation of vacant buildings for artistic, social, or entrepreneurial purposes prior to redevelopment. These practices exemplify flexibility, experimentation, and community engagement; qualities that are frequently absent from regulatory planning.

Scholarly perspectives diverge regarding the transformative potential of tactical urbanism. Some emphasize its capacity for social innovation, while others argue that it remains superficial and primarily serves market interests (Adisson 2017). Critical approaches (Bragaglia and Rossignolo, 2021) concur that everyday practices should not be viewed as alternatives to top-down policies. This perspective is symbolically affirmed by the Austrian pavilion at the 2025 Venice Biennale (Obirst *et al.*, 2025).

From this vantage point, challenges identified by the sociology of urban projects (Arab, 2018) are also evident in tactical urbanism. Both domains emphasize co-production and the public value of space, albeit at different scales and temporalities. The associated risks differ: tactical urbanism may legitimise market-driven transformations, whereas urban projects are constrained by institutional and financial limitations. In both cases, the principal challenge is to balance participation with structural constraints, experimentation with project duration, and immediate action with long-term programming. Rather than being oppositional, tactical urbanism and urban projects are complementary. Tactical urbanism introduces adaptability and innovation, while urban projects offer strategic and institutional coherence. When transition is understood as a process of gradual change and reuse, the intersection of these approaches becomes both relevant and essential.

## 5. Five Exit Routes

Within the overall context of architecture and planning, five principal pathways currently shape debates and practices. The first three largely reinforce dominant macro-trends, and either advocate impractical forms of withdrawal, or remain peripheral to planning institutions. In contrast, the final two pathways offer greater promise by integrating spatial rationality with political agency and institutional accountability. This paper contends that only a politically literate contextualism can guide cities toward equitable futures. This frames the subsequent analysis of these pathways.

The first way accepts postmodern fragmentation and the emergent hierarchies of post-industrial values without addressing their consequences. Often termed Post-Urbanism and exemplified by the work of Koolhaas, this approach embraces contingency within neoliberal frameworks and treats context as largely inconsequential. Planning practices in regions such as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Russia frequently align with this paradigm, which currently dominates globally. Notable projects, such as Boeri's *Vertical Forest*, Gehry's formal innovations, and the proliferation of waterfront developments which often neglect the threat of rising sea levels, illustrate a significant abdication of responsibility for long-term urban change. According to a UN-Habitat report, urban areas in Asia and Africa face heightened flood risks due to unchecked development and climate change; highlighting the consequences of neglecting sustainable planning (UN-HABITAT 2024). In this framework, urbanism is reduced to spectacle and private consumption, thereby abandoning the goal of shaping collective futures.

The second, New Urbanism, is advanced by proponents such as Andrés Duany, King Charles, and Léon Krier. This approach is defined by formal idealism and a reformist, integrative political orientation. Space is conceptualised as an ordered, normative framework that shapes behaviour through predetermined schemas. The resulting environments are coherent and legible, often manifesting in neighbourhood- and community-oriented designs. Exemplary cases such as Poundbury in the United Kingdom and Seaside in Florida illustrate principles of pedestrian centrality, architectural harmony, and human scale. Nevertheless, this pathway represents a conservative and regressive response which is rooted in a nostalgic invocation of purportedly universal and timeless values.

The third way, Everyday Urbanism, is associated with scholars such as Kalinsky and Crawford, as well as various artistic and activist practices. This approach is driven by a utopian belief in bottom-up activation, which emphasises improvisation, informality, and the presumed equality of spatial uses. The resulting urbanism is dialogic and non-authorial, and prioritises contextual interaction over explicit causal reasoning. It is manifested through temporary, informal, and transitional practices, and often favours unregulated or residual spaces. Consequently, Everyday Urbanism represents a lateral strategy: rather than confronting the constraints and responsibilities inherent in planning, it tends to circumvent them, thereby avoiding the compromises required by institutionalised action. This raises the question of when informal interventions succeed or fail in specific urban contexts, encouraging critical reflection on the practical implications of Everyday Urbanism.

These three pathways are prevalent amongst architects and are often mixed within individual practices. However, they offer limited potential for addressing the structural challenges facing contemporary cities. Two alternative pathways, which may be combined, are better positioned to revitalise planning's relevance.

The first seeks to identify an internal rationality in the spatial arrangement of urban elements over time and across territories. While acknowledging the influence of socio-economic structures, the first pathway investigates whether material constraints, spatial rules, and typological continuities possess a degree of autonomy from purely economic logics. This orientation is closely linked to the work of Bernardo Secchi, who inserted morphology into a political economic understanding of urban change (Secchi 2002). Its outcomes are incremental and context-sensitive, attentive to languages, materials, and existing forms, whilst not resorting to imitation or historicism. Beyond certain formalist tendencies and an emphasis on self-organisation, the central contribution of this approach is its conception of context as the localised articulation of global networks and structural relations that shape, while not fully determining, urban configurations (Kudva and Forrester 2023).

The second conceptualises planning as fundamentally political. Here, politics is not defined by sovereign will or class teleology, but by the interplay of diverse forms of knowledge and power among actors with varying levels of influence and position. This approach explicitly rejects reducing politics to consensus-building, which is increasingly unstable and often arbitrary. Any intervention that engages systems of interaction and power within public space is inherently political. According to the Sciences Po Urban School, planning is 'profoundly' political because it operates through dynamic interactions among actors and produces outcomes that are not predetermined. These outcomes depend on which actors participate and how they act; necessitating empirical examination of their diversity, contingency, and non-linearity (Le Galès and Vitale, 2015).

As Palermo (2022) suggests, these two routes can be effectively combined. Integrating contextual materiality with explicit recognition of actor constellations allows planners to acknowledge both the limited autonomy of local configurations and the inherently political nature of spatial intervention. This middle ground, though modest, offers a concrete space for reform-oriented planning that can produce incremental, context-specific results without reverting to modernist abstraction or postmodern fragmentation.

## 6. Conclusion: Navigating the Double Bind

The contrast between the *Plan Local d'Urbanisme bioclimatique* and the Paris 2024 Olympic Games highlights the ongoing duality at the core of French planning: a centralised, regulatory system confronting the need for flexibility, context awareness, and design-oriented experimentation. Rather than representing incompatible approaches, these two cases illuminate complementary aspects of a planning system in transition; each responds to different timelines, scale challenges, and political rationalities.

Both cases resist fitting into the first three pathways. Neither condones postmodern fragmentation (the first route) nor retreats into nostalgic formalism (the second), nor avoids institutional responsibility by resorting to informal or temporary measures (the third). Instead, they show that effective planning operates at the intersection of spatial logic, local specificity, and political agency—understanding material constraints and typological patterns while actively engaging with power dynamics and contested futures.

The PLUb exemplifies what could be called politically informed contextualism—the fifth pathway identified in this analysis. It functions through negotiated, incremental adjustments of regulatory tools to address highly localised conditions: climate risks, spatial inequality, vacancy issues, and heritage conservation. Its strength lies not in sweeping change but in the selective integration of *projet urbain* principles into official planning; showing that regulation need not be rigid or detached from context. By explicitly emphasising the political nature of planning—acknowledging disparities of power, resources, and legitimacy—the PLUb challenges both technocratic depoliticisation and consensus-based models that conceal structural conflicts. It reflects an intermediate urbanism that maintains spatial coherence while allowing for adaptation over time.

In contrast, Paris 2024 leverages elements of the fourth pathway, contextual material rationality, within an accelerated, centralised governance framework. The Games demonstrate the system's ability for strategic coordination and controlled experimentation, which integrates Olympic infrastructure into long-term metropolitan goals through the Grand Paris Express and territorial renewal strategies. The targeted use of design-led interventions in the historic centre as well as the legacy-focused vision of the Olympic Village in Saint-Denis show attention to place-specific conditions and typological continuities. However, the exceptional regulatory framework, tight timelines, and hierarchical coordination also expose the limits of democratic accountability and the risks of displacement in vulnerable areas.

Together, these cases suggest that French planning is moving toward a hybrid model that combines regulatory stability with project-based flexibility, although this integration remains incomplete and uneven. The PLU<sub>b</sub> hints at institutionalising negotiated, context-aware regulation that can address ecological transitions without sacrificing statutory coherence. The Games illustrate that exceptional circumstances can accelerate delivery and innovation, but also reveal the dangers of governance arrangements that bypass sustained negotiations and community participation.

The evolution of French planning will depend on its ability to address three interconnected challenges. First, it must achieve greater integration of regulatory planning and project delivery without sacrificing the political flexibility necessary for complex negotiations among diverse stakeholders. This requires not just technical harmonisation but also constitutional and legislative reforms that recognise the complementarity of plans and projects. Second, it must ensure that ecological goals do not reinforce territorial inequalities. The ZAC model's difficulty in exceeding minimal bioclimatic standards and the uncertain distribution of Olympic legacy benefits show that sustainability goals remain vulnerable to financial pressures and competing priorities. Third, it must embed participation that goes beyond mere consultation, thereby creating mechanisms that redistribute not only symbolic but also material resources and decision-making power. Tactical urbanism and open programming, discussed in Section 4, offer valuable insights for this evolution—not as alternatives to formal planning but as experimental labs for co-production, adaptive programming, and community engagement. Their transformative potential depends on integrating them into strategic frameworks that ensure long-term coherence and prevent the privatisation of public value. The challenge is to scale their lessons without losing responsiveness and innovation.

Ultimately, the future of French planning lies in embracing what could be called 'strategic incrementalism': regulatory structures set binding ecological and social goals while allowing for negotiated, context-sensitive implementation through projects, ZACs, and transitional practices. It would require recognising planning as an inherently democratic activity that mediates between expertise and participation, between vision and uncertainty, and between collective ambition and localised knowledge.

The PLU<sub>b</sub> and Paris 2024, despite their differences, share a key insight: planning's legitimacy depends not on the completeness of its vision or the efficiency of its delivery, but on its ability to foster justice, inclusion, and shared urban agency. Whether French planning can realise this potential depends on its willingness to embed the political literacy and contextual sensitivity exemplified by these cases and thereby transform isolated experiments into systemic practice. Only then can the persistent duality between regulation and project cease to be a barrier and instead become a productive tension that fosters adaptive, equitable, and democratic urban development.

Looking ahead, the purpose of planning remains ambiguous, positioned between two seemingly conflicting objectives. On the one hand, planning seeks to preserve environmental resources, landscapes, and heritage; on the other, it must address rapid, unpredictable social, economic, and ecological changes.

To reconcile these aims, one potential solution is to assign plans a primarily conservative function focused on safeguarding resources and preventing irreversible harm, while making multi-level spatial projects responsible for shaping future development; a division of responsibilities that has not yet been fully articulated within European planning systems.

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