Public Space as a Resource for Urban Transformation in Marseille

A Discourse Analysis of Underlying Rationalities

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Public Space as a Resource for Urban Transformation in Marseille - A Discourse Analysis of Underlying Rationalities

Öffentlicher Raum als Ressource urbaner Transformation in Marseille - Eine Diskursanalyse zugrundeliegender Rationalitäten

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Abstract

Transformations of urban public space are driven and shaped by competing problem definitions, interests, objectives, and rationalities. As a multidimensional resource, public space is increasingly understood as an economic asset for urban competitiveness, a tool for social integration, and an ecological infrastructure for climate resilience. These diverse conceptions generate a complex field of negotiation, as public space is limited and thus under growing pressure to serve multiple purposes.

In Marseille – France's second-largest city – urban renewal efforts have intensified in recent years, aiming to regain competitiveness after the decline of its port-centred economy through attracting investment and tourism. Yet, unlike in other major French metropolises, and despite ongoing transformations, the city's core remains home to a largely socio-economically disadvantaged population. Within this socially sensitive and symbolically charged context of the city centre, several important public space transformations have significantly reshaped the city, prompting an examination of their underlying rationalities.

This thesis draws on the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) to investigate how rationalities, problem definitions and legitimations of public space transformations are constructed within Marseille's institutional political discourse. By analysing how public space is understood as a resource for urban transformation, it offers a critical perspective on the underlying discursive logics of spatial transformation in Marseille.

Kurzfassung

Transformationen des städtischen öffentlichen Raums werden durch konkurrierende Problemdefinitionen, Interessen, Zielsetzungen und Rationalitäten geprägt. Als multidimensionale Ressource wird öffentlicher Raum zunehmend als wirtschaftliches Mittel für städtische Wettbewerbsfähigkeit, als Instrument sozialer Integration und als ökologische Infrastruktur für Klimaresilienz verstanden. Diese unterschiedlichen Konzeptionen erzeugen ein komplexes Verhandlungsfeld, da öffentlicher Raum begrenzt ist und damit unter wachsendem Druck steht, seine vielfältigen Rollen zu erfüllen.

In Marseille – der zweitgrößten Stadt Frankreichs – haben sich in den letzten Jahren Stadterneuerungsprozesse intensiviert, mit dem Ziel, nach dem Zusammenbruch der auf den Hafen ausgerichteten Wirtschaft die städtische Wettbewerbsfähigkeit durch Investitionen und Tourismus zurückzugewinnen. Doch anders als in anderen großen französischen Metropolen bleibt das Stadtzentrum trotz fortschreitender Transformationen zu weiten Teilen von einer sozioökonomisch benachteiligten Bevölkerung bewohnt. In diesem sozial sensiblen und symbolisch aufgeladenen Kontext des Stadtzentrums haben mehrere bedeutende Umgestaltungen öffentlicher Räume die Stadt wesentlich verändert und werfen Fragen nach den ihnen zugrunde liegenden Rationalitäten auf.

Diese Arbeit verfolgt den Ansatz einer wissenssoziologischen Diskursanalyse, um zu untersuchen, wie Rationalitäten, Problemdefinitionen und Legitimationsmuster von Transformationen des öffentlichen Raums im institutionalisierten politischen Diskurs Marseilles konstruiert werden. Durch die Analyse, wie öffentlicher Raum als Ressource für städtische Transformationen verstanden wird, bietet sie eine kritische Perspektive auf die zugrunde liegenden diskursiven Logiken räumlicher Transformation in Marseille.

Résumé

Les transformations de l'espace public urbain sont motivées et façonnées par des problématisations, intérêts, objectifs et rationalités concurrentes. En tant que ressource multidimensionnelle, l'espace public est de plus en plus conçu comme un atout économique pour la compétitivité urbaine, un outil d'intégration sociale et une infrastructure écologique pour la résilience climatique. Ces conceptions diverses constituent un champ de négociation complexe, car l'espace public est limité et donc soumis à une pression croissante pour remplir ses fonctions multiples.

À Marseille – la deuxième ville de France – les efforts de renouvellement urbain se sont multipliés ces dernières années, avec pour objectif de retrouver une certaine compétitivité après le déclin de son économie urbaine principalement axée sur son port, en attirant investissements et tourisme. Pourtant, contrairement à d'autres grandes métropoles françaises, et malgré les transformations en cours, le centre-ville reste majoritairement habité par une population socio-économiquement défavorisée. Dans ce contexte socialement sensible et symboliquement chargé du centre-ville, plusieurs transformations importantes de l'espace public ont profondément remodelé la ville, incitant à une analyse des rationalités qui les sous-tendent.

Ce mémoire s'appuie sur l'approche sociologique de la connaissance du discours pour étudier comment les rationalités, les définitions de problèmes et les légitimations des transformations de l'espace public sont construites au sein du discours politique institutionnel à Marseille. En analysant comment l'espace public est perçu comme une ressource pour les transformations urbaines, il propose une perspective critique sur les logiques discursives sous-jacents de la transformation spatiale à Marseille.

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Figure 1: *Vieux-Port*, Marseille (author's own photo)

Figure 2: *La Plaine*, Marseille (author's own photo)

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Interest

Over recent decades, urban public space re-emerged as a key arena for European cities to cope with global challenges imposing major restructurings upon cities (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014). Public space does not only have to fulfill its role as a site for everyday urban life but becomes a multi-faceted policy tool connected to urban political agendas that materialize within its organisation and design.

Due to globalisation and deindustrialisation since the 1980s but with still enduring consequences, economic production in cities shifted towards service-based and symbolic economies (e.g. Harvey, 1989; Zukin 1991; Madanipour, 2014). Cities entered an era of international competition; and public space became an important element of distinction, a symbolic locational factor and resource to develop attractiveness (e.g. Madanipour, 2010; Carmona et al., 2019). Cities across Europe started to invest in the redesign of central squares, boulevards and waterfronts to improve their image and attract economic capital.

Economic restructuring on a global scale, together with increasing urbanization and international migration flows resulted in drastic social consequences in Europe (Le Galès and Harding, 1998; Madanipour, 2004). These consequences had strong local repercussions in cities, such as polarization, segregation and urban poverty (ibid.). In return, public space was recognized by scholars and urban policy as a tool to address social challenges in an urban context due to its integrative dimension (e.g. Amin, 2008; Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014; Cruz, Roskamm and Charalambous, 2018; European Commission, 2020; United Nations, 2017).

In addition, as local consequences of the global climate crisis, such as extreme weather events, become more frequent, climate resilience has gained increasing importance over the past decades (Tyler and Moench, 2012). Since the COP21 in 2015, climate adaptation is considered an equally pressing challenge as mitigation (Gonzales-Iwanciw, Dewulf and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, 2020, p. 797). With urban areas being especially vulnerable to the consequences of climate change, cities are urged to push forward in terms of adaptation efforts to build climate resilience (Bulkeley, 2010; Measham et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2015). Public space plays an important part in adapting to climate change as part of the adaptive capacity of cities (Wilson et al., 2008), being a provider of green, blue and grey infrastructure (Gago et al., 2013; Demuzere et al., 2014) and playing an important role for social resilience (Peinhardt, 2021). But cities also need to adapt public space to maintain its other existing (social) functions (Peinhardt, 2021; Greiner, 2023).

Public space is thus understood as a resource to cope with global challenges of economic, social and ecological dimensions on a local level. Dealing with these often-contradictory dimensions results in overlapping, conflicting and competing claims on public space and its transformation (Madanipour, 2010,

p. 237; Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 3). Conceptions of public space can thus never be considered as neutral, since they always mirror societal and political priorities as well as relations of power (Zukin, 1995; Carmona, 2010; Madanipour, 2010). This requires critical planners and researchers to interrogate normative conceptions of public space. Furthermore, it demands to look beyond "*seemingly neutral technical regulations*" (Huxley, 2018, p. 209) in urban design and examine the underlying rationalities driving projects in urban public space.

Marseille, France's second-largest city and long shaped by its port-centered industrial economy, has experienced major urban transformations since the early 2000s, following a period of socio-economic and demographic decline (Donzel, 2014; Grondeau and Vignau, 2019). The city has undergone metropolisation processes (Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021) and implemented large-scale urban renewal projects next to its waterfront (Bertoncello and Dubois, 2010). It further multiplied efforts to promote its cultural and symbolic economy as well as tourism to regenerate and revitalize its city centre (Andres, 2011; 2013; Giovangeli, 2015), that nevertheless remains characterized by a diverse and partly pauperized population (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015). Since the transformation of its most emblematic public space, the *Vieux-Port* (Old Port) the role of public space in Marseille's urban development has become increasingly prominent (Bertoncello, 2012). Several public space projects have followed, amplifying the significance of public space as both a symbolic and strategic component in the city's transformation.

These transformations of public space take place within the complex context of a city marked by persistent social and spatial inequalities, with a history of fragmented governance and urbanization, but promoting a strong agenda to reposition itself in international competition. In regard to the multi-faceted dimensions of public space, this raises questions about the rationalities guiding change in urban public space and how public space is understood as a resource in ongoing processes of urban transformation in Marseille. While critical research has extensively examined urban renewal initiatives in Marseille such as Euroméditerrannée or the city's turn towards cultural and creative industries, little research has been carried out on the role of public space in this period of broad urban restructuring. While certain aspects of projects have been subject to previous research (e.g. Kerste, 2018; Romeyer and Hernandez, 2022), there has been no research investigating the politics of transformation in public space across major projects of the past two decades, that considerably reshaped the inner city.

1.2 Research Questions and Approach

Thus, this thesis aims to provide a critical perspective on change in public space for the case study of Marseille, amid a context of urban transformation. Considering space as a product of social practices, this thesis applies discourse analysis to examine the ways public spaces are conceived, perceived and designed through the interrogation of mobilized problematisations, meanings, and rationalities in their transformation processes (Huxley, 2018; Belina and Dzudzek, 2021; Bauriedl, 2021). It engages in an in-depth analysis on motives and discourses of actors engaging in urban change (Wolfram, Frantzeskaki and Maschmeyer, 2016, p. 22), embedding its research on urban transformation in a place-specific context (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021). Using a Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (Keller, 2011), it examines political protocols and planning documents from the institutionalised political discourse in Marseille. The analysis is guided by the overarching research question:

- **How is public space conceptualized as a resource within the institutionalised political discourse on its transformation in Marseille?**

Following sub-questions further structure the inquiry:

- What problem definitions are articulated to legitimize the transformation of public space?
- What underlying rationalities guide these transformations, and what meanings of public space are constructed within them?
- How are these rationalities critically negotiated?
- How are discourses materialized through spatial interventions?

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 outlines the role of public space as a resource in urban transformation through a literature review (2.1–2.3). This leads to a reflection on how to approach the analysis of public space as a resource (2.4–2.5). Chapter 3 presents the approach to the case study (3.1), the methodology of discourse analysis (3.2–3.3) and reflects the empirical research design as well as its limitations (3.4). Chapter 4 introduces the case study of Marseille and its specific context (4.1) and ongoing urban transformations within the city (4.2), before linking these developments to public space (4.3). Chapter 5 presents the results from the empirical analysis for the chosen four cases of transformation. This is followed by an interpretative discussion of the results, comparing and interpreting across cases (6.1–6.5). Last, the thesis concludes in chapter 7 with a short summary (7.1), a reflection on limitations (7.2.1), an outlook on further research directions (7.2.2) and finally underlines its relevance for urban planners (7.2.3).

2 Public Space as a Resource in Urban Transformation

This chapter first outlines approaches on public space (2.1) and urban transformations (2.2), before elaborating on the role of public space as a multi-faceted resource in urban transformations in 21st century Europe (2.3). It then shortly reflects on recent developments and normative implications about developed transformation challenges and (2.4) and provides an outlook on how and why to question transformations in public space (2.5).

2.1 Perspectives on Public Space

Urban public spaces have always been essential for social life in cities (Madanipour, 1999; 2003). While their uses and meanings are constantly changing, they are characterized by important economic, social, ecological, cultural and political functions, serving as places of appropriation, cooperation, interaction, encounter, residence and diversity (Berding and Selle, 2018, p. 1639; Cruz, Roskamm and Charalambous, 2018, p. 797). Public space can be understood as the place where public life unfolds (Madanipour, 2010; Knierbein and Tornaghi, 2015).

Public space is a concept that can be approached from various theoretical perspectives, ranging from urban planning, geography, economics and law to philosophy, political theory and social sciences (Neugebauer and Rekhviashvili, 2015), each providing distinct definitions (Cruz, Roskamm and Charalambous, 2018; Low and Smith, 2005; Hou and Knierbein, 2017). In an urban context, public space can be considered as all urban spaces commonly accessible to and usable by the public (Berding and Selle, 2018, p. 1639), and thus as the spaces between the private realms of dwellings, taking different forms and functions (Madanipour, 1999, p. 882). Akkar Ercan (2010, p. 23) describes public space as a space "*concerning the people as a whole, open to all, accessible to or shared by all members of the community, provided by the public authorities for the use of people in general*". Public space can further be described by a range of aspects, such as "*ownership, maintenance, accessibility, and inclusiveness*" (Lee, 2022, p. 32). Madanipour (2004) sees accessibility as the main quality of public space, "*the more unconditional the access, the more public it becomes*" (ibid., p. 282) – accessibility is meant as both physical, and social (Madanipour, 2010, p. 9). However, it must be noted that rather than being a uniform group, "the public" consists of different socio-economic, gender, ethnic and marginalized groups (Boyer, 1993, p. 118). The distinction between private and public spaces has marked the social, political and spatial organisation in almost every city at any given time in history around the world (Madanipour, 1999, p. 880; Madanipour, 2003, p. 1). They are differentiated in terms of their rules of access, use and behaviour as well as control and sanctions (Low and Smith, 2005, p. 5). The differentiation and relationship between public and private can, however, vary (Madanipour, 2003, p. 1).

In urban planning, public space is still often commonly understood as an "*accessible, contained spatial situation*" (Cruz, Roskamm and Charalambous, 2018, p. 797), understanding public space as a container, and thereby ignoring its contested uses and meanings (Knierbein and Tornaghi, 2015). Relational perspectives, however, see space as undergoing constant change, growing over time and being a product of their contexts and the relations between people and places (Knierbein and Tornaghi, 2015, p. 4). Through practices and experiences taking place in space, public space thus has the power to produce new meanings (Cruz, Roskamm and Charalambous, 2018). Henri Lefebvre (1974 [1991]) argued that space is neither an absolute, fixed entity nor a purely abstract concept, but is socially produced through the relations

and practices of each society and its mode of production (Davoudi, 2018, p. 16). Massey (2005) contends that spaces are shaped by societal power structures and are continuously produced through social interactions. Davoudi (2018, p. 17), also referring to Massey (1993; 2005), promotes a relational understanding of space and place, seeing places as *"both real and imagined assemblages of material, events, discourses and practices"* (Davoudi, 2018, p. 18) and both space and place as *"socially and culturally produced and their production is infused with power and politics"* (ibid.). This thesis adopts a spatial perspective that is interested in "*the ways in which social and political, and economic and cultural processes and relations make specific public spaces*" (Low and Smith, 2005, p. 5), seeing public space as relational and as a process of continuous negotiation.

2.2 Perspectives on Urban Transformations

Cities play an essential role in ongoing technological, economic, social, and political developments, that also impose spatial, societal, social and governance issues upon them (Nijkamp and Kourtit, 2013). Thus, they must currently deal with several complex challenges of both global and local nature (Frantzeskaki, Bach and Mguni, 2018, p. 43). They are at the forefront to act in response to the pressing climate crisis (Frantzeskaki, Bach and Mguni, 2018; Hölscher *et al.*, 2019), since urban areas account for most of global Greenhouse gas emissions while being especially vulnerable to the consequences of climate change (UN-General Assembly, 2016; WBGU, 2016; IPCC, 2023). In this context, urban transformations can be understood as an answer to global challenges affecting cities today (Kabisch *et al.*, 2018, p. xix). These can be of economic (globalization), social (demographic change, polarization, migration), or ecological (climate change, scarcity of resources) nature (ibid.). Concerning European cities in particular, one can add challenges due to deindustrialization as well as European integration (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 1). Change in European cities can be seen as trying to cope with these broad processes of restructuring (Knierbein, 2016).

These mentioned pressing global challenges resulted in an increasing research and policy interest for objects and dynamics of systemic societal change with a strong normative focus on sustainability (Wittmayer and Hölscher, 2017, p. 45 ff.; Hölscher, Wittmayer and Loorbach, 2018, p. 1). Within this field, the term "transformation" is often used to call for structural, radical and non-linear change (Feola, 2015; Hölscher, Wittmayer and Loorbach, 2018). While it remains a contested and widely used term, both research and policy seem to agree on its general description of "*fundamental change, as opposed to minor, marginal, or incremental change*" (Feola, 2015, p. 377). It is also used as a term to describe broad societal change, the "*fundamental social changes [...] that occur during the change from one social order to another*" (Bedtke and Gawel, 2018, p. 24), for instance as during the industrial revolution (WBGU, 2011). Wittmayer and Hölscher (2017) define "transformations" as „*radical, struc-*

tural and paradigmatic changes of societies and their subsystems, through which the functional orientation of a (sub)system or the way in which this is fulfilled is fundamentally changed" (p. 45, author's translation). This thesis employs the term of „transformation" to describe fundamental, radical and systemic change in relation to societal change (Feola, 2015, p. 379, 387). It aims for a critical perspective, that is often marginalized in debates on sustainable transformations and transitions (Feola, 2020).

Since cities are expected to play a pivotal role in the transformation towards a more sustainable society (WBGU, 2016; Moglia *et al.*, 2018; Hölscher, 2019), "urban transformation" has become a frequently used concept in policy and research debates on transformation (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021, p. 2). Research on urban transformations engages with the multi-faceted challenges cities face and seeks to deepen the understanding of complex processes of urban change that unfold in a radical, systemic way across political, institutional, cultural, economic, social, technological and ecological dimensions (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021, p. 3). Cities are considered as dynamic, *"complex, adaptive and open systems"* (Hölscher, 2019, p. 29), undergoing constant (non-)linear change due to global and endogenous influences (Hölscher, 2019, p. 28), being *"local nodes within multiple overlapping social, economic, ecological, political and physical networks, continuously shaping and shaped by flows of people, matter and information across scales"* (Wolfram and Frantzeskaki, 2016, p. 7). Within this context, "transformation" can be considered an "*analytical lens*" (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021, p. 3) to develop an understanding of ongoing complex and contested urban dynamics and processes (ibid.), their endogenous and exogenous driving forces (Hölscher, 2019, p. 28), as well as their outcome in terms of the alteration of the *"systemic configuration of urban areas"* (Wolfram, Frantzeskaki and Maschmeyer, 2016, p. 20), such as change in urban functions, needs and relations between cities and their environments (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021, p. 3). This research adopts a perspective on *"transformation **in** cities"* (Hölscher, 2019; Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021, original emphasis) that focuses on cities as specific spaces and places of transformations and tries to untangle the diverse and place-specific factors, driving forces, dynamics and influences that occur at multiple scales (local, regional, national and global) (Hölscher, 2019, p. 30; Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021, p. 4 ff.).

2.3 Public Space as a Resource for Urban Transformations in 21st Century Europe

As introduced under 2.2, cities are facing unprecedented challenges (Frantzeskaki, Bach and Mguni, 2018; Hölscher, 2019) and are linked to ecological, socio-economic and spatial problems (McCormick *et al.*, 2013, p. 5). They are facing *"pressures [...] 'from above' as well as expectations 'from below' [...] urban areas need to be attractive and inclusive, sustainable and resilient, and prosperous and innovative from local, national and international viewpoints"* (McCormick *et al.*, 2013, p. 4). These complex issues and pressures are reflected in urban transformations and societal shifts, and *"as society changes, so does public space"* (Lee, 2022, p. 24).

Urban public space enjoys a growing interest by politicians, decision-makers, planners and scholars as a key leverl to address such urban challenges, increasing in relevance for both planning practice and academia (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014; Madanipour, 2019; Mehta and Palazzo, 2020). Public spaces are an undeniable necessity for functioning cities (Madanipour, 2010). The social as well as physical dynamics of public space have been considered as being central for urban life and public culture, as sites of *"collective well-being and possibility"* (Amin, 2008, p. 6). While public space is spatially limited because of urbanisation, its functions, users and purposes are multiple (Duivenvoorden et al., 2021). Furthermore, urbanization is still an ongoing process, and distinct demands, functions and uses of public space have even multiplied over the past decades. In short, pressures at multiple scales are multi-faceted, leading to public space constantly *"adapting to a range of global and local pressures, many of which it has not had to cope with before, and often this has placed extreme pressures on the local experience of that space"* (Carmona, 2010, p. 165). Public space both shaping and being shaped by society and its economic, and power relations as well as societal priorities (Zukin, 1995; Carmona, 2010) is by far no stranger to the societal changes of the past decades and can even be considered a mirror of the intricacies of contemporary urban societies (Madanipour, 2010).

In this context, the relevance of public space is even more emphasized, since it must evolve in response to the growing pressure of multiple demands. Therefore, its transformation can take multiple trajectories within a larger context of urban transformations, in response to (political) understandings, priorities, visions and expectations. This chapter aims to categorize the defining tendencies in the transformation of public spaces in 21st century Europe by identifying three defining streams, that understand public space as *a resource for urban competitiveness* (2.3.1), *a resource for social integration* (2.3.2), and as *a resource for climate change resilience* (2.3.3). It shows how these overlapping claims increasingly put pressure on public space, and what normative implications should be made when dealing with them.

2.3.1 Public Space as a Resource for Urban Competitiveness

With cities shifting from industrial production to the production of services and developing their urban environments as places of consumption (e.g. Harvey, 1989; Zukin, 1991; Madanipour, 2014), public space became an important asset for urban competitiveness (e.g. Zukin 1998; Madanipour 2010; Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014; Carmona et al., 2019), resulting in its increasing commodification and aestheticization (Madanipour, 2003).

Public Space as a Factor of Competition in the Post-Fordist City

European cities were once transformed drastically through the industrial revolution, and at the end of the 20th century, they have once again entered a period of transformation: With globalisation and deindustrialisation, there was a shift in attention to new forms of economic production, driven by services and knowledge intensive economies (Madanipour, 2014, p. 145). Cities gained in importance as sites of command functions, of the production of specialized services, and transnational marketplaces (Sassen, 2000, p. 256 ff.). In Europe, Le Galès and Harding (1998, p. 142) consider cities on the rise due to their economic and demographic dynamism and political strategies. As their economic focus shifts from production to services, cultural capital replaces industrial capital as their competitive advantage (Zukin, 1991).

Critical scholars considered cities entering an era of capitalist globalization, that promoted neoliberalism as a dominant, hegemonic ideology (Swyngedouw, 2004, p. 28; Theodore, Peck and Brenner, 2011, p. 15). Throughout several phases of neoliberalization, urban space has held a crucial role, as cities emerged as key sites of major economic disruptions and sociopolitical contestation, becoming arenas of conflict over the trajectories of economic restructurings during the crisis of the Fordist–Keynesian growth model (Theodore, Peck and Brenner, 2011, p. 21). Urban processes imperatively followed logics of capital and wealth accumulation and circulation in capitalist societies (Harvey, 1989, p. 3). Neoliberalism put public goods under pressure (Madanipour, 2010, p. 5), with a large impact on public space, disrupting the socio–spatial configuration of cities, exposing them to the pressure of a market–centric system (Madanipour, 2003, p. 191; 2010, p. 3). The relevance of public space went far beyond their role as functional spaces for urban life, becoming a target of urban policy of a much wider significance in the context of urban renewal or revitalization projects, driven by inter–city competition (Carmona, 2015, p. 373).

Public Spaces as Locational Factors

As cities shifted from being *"landscapes of production"* to *"landscapes of consumption"* (Zukin, 1998, p. 825) and became objects of *"cultural consumption"* (Lefebvre, 2013 [1996], p. 148), the development of consumer society has emphasized the role of public space as a driver for the urban economy, often characterized by leisure and retail activities (Madanipour, 2019, p. 42). Ultimately, the quality of public space has become a field of global competition between cities (Carmona *et al.*, 2019, p. 246). Place-quality became an asset for attracting capital and giving value to new forms of production and consumption (Swyngedouw, 2004; Davoudi, 2018, p. 16). International competition did not only turn around direct attraction of companies, but urban policy has increasingly focussed on also improving quality of life and upgrading (physical) urban environments to provide spaces for consumption and entertainment, to appear as an "*innovative, exciting, creative and safe place to live or visit, to play and consume in*" (Harvey, 1989, p. 9). City governments paid attention to new urban lifestyles, leading to strategies focused on the aesthetics of public space (Zukin, 1998, p. 825).

The commodification of urban spaces leads to a conception of city design as providing an aesthetic experience, that is intertwined with efforts in city marketing to gain attention at international capital markets (Zukin, 1998; Madanipour, 2003, p. 200). Therefore, it creates tension between their economic and use value, that can influence the structure of cities as well es everyday life of citizens (Lefebvre, 1991 in: Madanipour, 2003, p. 131). In the process of commodifying public space, policies of zero-tolerance and securization have developed, targeting behaviour that is opposed to the desired image of a certain space (Low and Iveson, 2016, p. 13). Especially for North American scholars, privatization represented a major threat to the future of public space: They have thoroughly described its effect on urban space through new access restriction, policing and surveillance practices (Low, 2006, p. 45). Examples demonstrated that urban change could influence the conditions of accessibility of public spaces, changing their essence (Madanipour, 2010, p. 8). These developments are considered as problematic by scholars due to their exclusionary potential, since public space holds key social functions and should thus be considered more than a support for attractiveness and consumer lifestyles (Madanipour, 2010, p. 241). Furthermore, restricting access to public space is also considered a democratic issue, since they are places of contestation and political struggle (e.g. Sorkin, 1992; Kohn, 2004; Harvey, 2012). Conflicts over public space are often seen as a mirror for the transformations of everyday life brought by the neoliberalization of urban policy and governance as a response to capitalist globalization (Low and Iveson, 2016, p. 13).

While these effects differ in their manifestation between North-American and European cities for instance, the processes of deindustrialization, European integration and economic globalization also led to rapid change in European cities (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 1). Cities were

looking for new economic opportunities and recognizing public spaces as a potential in promoting, mediating and facilitating economic transformations, creating attractive conditions for investment, consumption and innovation (Madanipour, 2019, p. 41). For example, EU policy stresses the imperative for economic growth, with the European Leipzig Charter 2007 on Sustainable European Cities considering their role as "*soft locational factors*" (European Commission, 2007, p. 3) for economic development. Redistributive European territorial policies turned to a more competitive orientation (Brenner, 2004). Expectations on the positive effect of public space on economic outcomes resulted in an increasing interest among city administrations, planners and developers for public space, expressed through the development of policies, projects and marketing documents referring to public space (Madanipour, 2019, p. 38 ff.; Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 3).

Examples throughout Europe are manifold: After the fall of the Berlin wall, the development of public spaces was key in a strategy to construct a new image of the city for marketing purposes (Colomb, 2013). Cities like Lyon developed large-scale urban development projects with an emphasis on attractive public spaces in order to stay competitive (Stouten and Rosenboom, 2013; Matthieu, 2020). Liverpool, a city with a strong industrial legacy developed flagship public spaces through public-private partnerships (Daramola-Martin, 2009; Schachner, 2025). Especially central public spaces and their transformation take an important role, due to their symbolism and capacity to attract tourists and new economic actors (Madanipour, 2004, p. 267 f.).

Thinking Beyond Economic Value

The conception of public space as a commodity and turning it into an asset in global competition was criticized early on (e.g. Zukin, 1991; 1995; Sorkin, 1992). Many critiques of public space design as a part of capitalist, neoliberal urbanism are formulated from the normative position as public spaces having to be inclusive and open for political matters, social encounters and cultural exchange (Kohn, 2004; Carmona, 2015, p. 376).

Henri Lefebvre with his concept of the "*right to the city*" (1996 [1968]) advocated for a right of participation and appropriation, *"the right to live in, play in, work in, represent, characterize and occupy urban space"* (Purcell, 2003, p. 577 f.). Lefebvre (1996, p. 148) envisions place as a realm of meaningful and diverse encounters – what he calls "qualified places" – where urban life unfolds through social interaction and human encounter rather than commercial exchange and financial profit. Susan Fainstein (2005; 2010; 2014) conceptualises the idea of a *"just city"*, that values justice more than economic value or efficiency and hopes to "*change the rhetoric around urban policy from a single-minded focus on competitiveness to a discourse about justice*" (Fainstein, 2014, p. 14). In her conception, a *"just"* city is based on the principles of democracy, equity and diversity (Fainstein, 2010). Transferring these general principles to public space, one could argue the need for accessible, shared, open, inclusive

and participative public spaces. These perspectives are united in their aim to stress the need for public space, that allows for difference and contestation in public space (Mitchell, 2003; Kohn, 2004; Harvey 2012), puts collective use over individual consumption (Harvey, 2012), and enables social rather than commercial exchange in public space (Lefebvre, 1996).

Carmona (2010; 2015) identifies several critical main streams concerning public space that are (partly) tied to using public space as an economic resource: In his work, he identifies critique on *neglected space* (in its physical form and vis-à-vis of driving market forces), *invaded space* (dedicating spaces to cars instead of social needs), *exclusionary space* (letting physical as well as psychological barriers dominate the design of public spaces and its management), *consumption space* (allowing the commodification of public space), *privatised space* (privatisation of public space with socially exclusionary effects), *segregated space* (the desire of certain groups to have exclusive spaces), *invented space* (the development and spread of pre-formulated entertainment spaces), *scary space* (letting the fear of crime allow to dominate the conception of spaces), and *homogenised space* (over-regulation, globalisation and homogenisation of public space). This analysis further results in a positive narrative for future public spaces, that should be evolving, balanced between cars and people, diverse, delineated, social, free, engaging, meaningful, comfortable and robust (Carmona, 2015, p. 399f.).

In summary, globalization and the shift to a service-based economy fundamentally changed the role of cities, which increasingly recognized public space as a resource in the growing international economic competition between urban areas. In consequence, this led to an often-narrow conception of public space as a commodity and a reduction of its value to symbolic urban aesthetics, threatening its unconditioned accessibility and excluding potential users.

2.3.2 Public Space as a Resource for Social Inclusion and Diversity

Over the past decades, social inclusion has become a central concept in transnational (urban) policy and has been increasingly integrated into municipal policies and strategies, emerging as a response to global transformations with heavy local repercussions (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014; Silver, 2015).

Defining Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is often defined through its opposite: Social exclusion, which commonly describes the process in which individuals are denied participation in social functions due to their economic, social, or demographic characteristics, despite their desire to engage in these functions and the general societal expectation that they should have access to them (Schütte, 2012). Silver (2015, p. 2 f.) defines social inclusion as:

> *"a multi-dimensional, relational process of increasing opportunities for social participation, enhancing capabilities to fulfil normatively prescribed social roles, broadening social ties of respect and recognition, and at the collective level, enhancing social bonds, cohesion, integration, or solidarity."*

Global Restructurings and Urban Consequences

At the international level, the concept of social inclusion has gained significance due to democratization, demands for equal rights, globalization, liberalization, migration, displacement and rising inequalities, leading to a strong emphasis on inclusion in the UN-Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Silver, 2015). Processes of global economic restructuring and the erosion of supporting welfare state structures have led to the marginalisation of vulnerable groups and augmented their threat of social exclusion, especially in the global south (Bayat, 2010). But also in Western Europe, new forms of poverty, segregation and exclusion appeared, particularly in old industrial centres (Le Gales and Harding, 1998). Throughout Europe, uneven patterns of urban growth and decline can be observed, with large metropolitan regions growing rapidly, as well as capital regions accumulating wealth (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 3). Globalization and European (economic) integration through the development of a flexible, unified capital market have had significant social consequences, such as the peril of higher inequalities. While the shift toward a service economy, technological advancements, and deindustrialization have created new opportunities, they have also brought social issues to those unable to compete within a global economy (Madanipour, 2004, p. 269). The exacerbated social tensions and polarization in European urban areas have threatened vulnerable groups by social exclusion, such as socio-economically disadvantaged people, elderly as well as children, women, minorities and migrant poor, often clustering them in stigmatized

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neighbourhoods (Madanipour, 2004, p. 269 f.). Overall, this engendered the fight against social inclusion and the subsequent integration of social inclusion into the agenda of the European Union, as an effort to uphold and protect its social model and referring to the objective of social as well as economic cohesion (Percy-Smith, 2000; Madanipour, 2004, p. 269). While the term of social exclusion originated from French policy in the 1980s referring to marginalized people, it gradually replaced poverty in EU social policy since the 1990s (Percy-Smith, 2000; Dikeç, 2007b).

Public Space as a Local Solution to Structural Problems

Processes leading to social exclusion are rooted in broad, global phenomena of economic restructuring, but have severe local consequences, especially in cities and urban areas. While problems related to social exclusion are mostly structural, city authorities lack power and resources to address them (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 4). However, there is an urgency to deal with such issues on an urban level, as tensions in urban space are related to the ways of dealing with consequences of global economic phenomena (Kazepov, 2005).

This is where public space, understood as a resource for social inclusion, becomes relevant: Policy and programmes in European cities emphasize the potential of public space in addressing social challenges (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 183). Scholars stress the possibility for interaction between people from different backgrounds (neighbourhoods, generations, ethnic, social) in public space, who thus plays a central role for the integration in society, fostering tolerance and a sense of belonging (Cruz, Roskamm and Charalambous 2018, p. 798). Public space can be considered a social infrastructure, fundamental for our society and cities (Krisch and Hiltgartner, 2019). Holm (2016, p. 3, author's translation) underlines the (social) role of public space as being a *"collective infrastructure of social interaction and encounter, [...] place of unconditional, non-discriminatory and unrestricted accessibility as well as [...] manifestation of a social public sphere".* Ash Amin (2008, p.6) sees the potential in public space for *"social communion by allowing us to lift our gaze from the daily grind, and as a result, increase our disposition towards the other"* and in ensuring that humans can participate in urban life as a complete as complete social participants (ibid., p. 22). Thus, public spaces can be considered places of encounter, diversity and appropriation (Berding and Selle, 2018) as well as platform for interaction, acquaintance, understanding and cooperation between different social and ethnic groups (Cruz, Roskamm and Charalambous, 2018, p. 798). They can nurture citizenship and enable people to participate in public life, spending life outdoors (Sim, 2019). Therefore, the provision of public spaces should be a part of a multi-faceted response to the threat of social exclusion (Madanipour, 2004, p. 284).

The potential of public space for social inclusion is also acknowledged in transnational policy. The New Leipzig Charter (European Commission, 2020,

p. 2) sees public space as part of the transformative power of European cities and an element of integration and social encounter: "*High-quality, open and safe public spaces function as vibrant urban places, allowing people to interact, exchange and integrate into society.*". The Charter further stresses the importance of the quality of public space as part of urban policy for the common good and recognizes the "*design and management of safe and accessible public spaces providing healthy living environments for all citizens*" (European Commission, 2020, p. 8) as key for "*resilient and long-term development*" (ibid.). Transnational urban policy such as the New Urban Agenda (United Nations, 2017) also emphasizes the importance of inclusion, interaction, diversity, participation, accessibility and safety concerning the design and management of public spaces.

Dealing with Diversity for Inclusive Spaces

However, public spaces, which are by essence shared between users, can not only be places of collective well-being, but also places of struggle, competition and conflict (Beguinot, 2009 cited in: Esposito De Vita, 2014, p. 169). Sociocultural dynamics increased the plurality of urban lifestyles, and thereby diversified different competing uses and interests (Lee, 2022).

Certain vulnerable groups can put public spaces under high pressure as their claims can compete with each other, since some groups spend long periods of time in public space. For many users, it can be considered even an extension of the house, especially for those having nowhere to go: homeless people, the unemployed, teenagers, migrants, drug users, causing conflict with their alone their presence in public space (Madanipour, 2004, p. 271; Ye, 2019). And while inclusive public spaces for *everyone* as a reaction to broad phenomena of social exclusion become more necessary than ever, they are additionally under threat by trends such as privatization, policing, neglection of public space or over-surveillance (Low, 2006; Amin, 2008). For Setha Low (2006), this represents a threat for promoting diversity in public space, since these developments have created an

> "*increasingly inhospitable environment for immigrants, local ethnic groups, and culturally diverse behaviors. If this trend continues, it will eradicate the last remaining spaces for democratic practices, places where a wide variety of people of different gender, class, culture, nationality and ethnicity intermingle peacefully*" (Low, 2006, p. 47).

In public space, social in and exclusions become visible (Zukin, 1995). They can be shaped by the claims of different groups, but also by their absence and abandonment (Madanipour, 2010, p. 238). Dealing with a sheer diversity of user groups thus becomes a relevant matter when speaking of inclusion in public space and arises questions on how to design or transform spaces and for whose needs. Cultural and social diversity appears to be a major challenge and at the same time one of the main features of the European city today: „*The ideal type image of well-ordered and beautiful historic cities is faced with highly*

unstable economic conditions and a highly diverse social reality" (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 183). While public authorities show awareness for a multitude of challenges regarding public space, social inclusion and cultural diversity are usually not on the top of their agenda (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 183).

Even though 'inclusive' transformations of public spaces are always contested, and can for sure never be considered as inclusive for everyone, one could cite certain approaches with an aim for more inclusivity. In Vienna, girls were specifically integrated in the transformation process of the *Reumann-platz* and its redesign, a highly frequented public space in a working class neighbourhood (*wien.orf.at*, 10.09.2020), with Vienna setting implementing a general focus on gender mainstreaming in urban planning, including public space design (Reinwald, Roberts and Kail, 2019) and has early on developed a guide that aims for more inclusive participation processes (Magistrat der Stadt Wien, 2012). Alongside their effect on adapting the urban fabric to climate change, Barcelonas *Superilles* (*Superblock*) strategy can be considered an example of people-centred planning of public space (Mueller *et al.*, 2020; Brizotti Pasquotto and Fernandéz Baca Salcedo, 2024), although concerns of equity are very well present (Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés and Marquet, 2023). In Palermo, intercultural place-making was promoted as a means to create more inclusion in public space while coping with migration flows (Wulff Barreiro and Brito Gonzalez, 2020).

Just and Inclusive Public Spaces

The recognition of the importance of public space for social inclusion in an urban context calls for more socially just urban public spaces that foster diversity and aim to fulfil their inclusive potential. Pratt (2023, p. 59) describes several dimensions of social justice in the production of space: The reduction of uneven power relations, of disparities in the well-being of citizens and communities and of distributive disparities both spatially and in terms of resources. In addition, social justice should recognize group rights, preserve culture and include all those who are affected in decision-making processes.

Low and Iveson (2016, p. 11) underline that one cannot choose a unique formular for *"'just public space'"* that can be applied to different contexts around the world. But they see "*processes that seek to redistribute resources, recognize difference, foster encounter/interaction, establish an ethic of care and ensure procedural fairness."* (ibid., 2016, p. 12) as fundamental. The authors (ibid.) thus stress the importance of access to public spaces for all citizens in response to the unequal distribution of public space across neighbourhoods as well as address the stigmatization of certain ways of behaviour and use in the regulation and design of public spaces and the role of recognition. They further argue that urban policy should promote interaction, encounter, a climate of trust and respect and emphasize the role of care and repair in the form of maintenance, urban services like trash collection, etc. and pro-social behaviour. Lastly,

they point out the importance of procedural justice, referring to the fairness of processes that lead to decisions on public spaces.

Ali Madanipour (2010, p. 239) sees the goal in the process of urban design and development as *"to ensure that the place is as public as possible, serving as many people as possible, rather than being at the service of a privileged few"*. Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros (2014, p. 4) argue that the maintenance and provision of public spaces is essential in adressing social structural problems. They contend that the provision of all neighbourhoods with high quality public spaces is a keystone of more democratic and fair cities, where investments in public space do not necessarily lead to the displacement of marginalized groups and gentrification (ibid.).

Global economic restructurings, in conjunction with the phenomena of migration and urbanization have imposed a series of structural (social) chal-lenges upon European cities, which ought to face their consequences: Public space is under pressure to serve as an inclusive, social infrastructure for all, and cater to the needs of an increasingly diverse urban population. Scholars as well as policy frameworks thus urge city authorities to pay attention to social concerns when transforming public spaces and designing processes as just and inclusive as possible, in order to plan more inclusive public spaces.

2.3.3 Public Space as a Resource for Climate Resilience

Climate change is urgently threatening human societies (UN – United Nations, 2015, p. 1), with many of its potentially irreversible impacts being already underway (IPCC, 2014; Hölscher, Frantzeskaki and Loorbach, 2019). Especially in an urban setting, due to the density of human and economic activity (EEA, 2012), climate change amplifies risks such as heat stress, flooding and other natural hazards, thus imposing a need to adapt to changing conditions (Runhaar *et al.*, 2012, p. 777). On the one hand, urban areas are at the source of problems, since they produce the majority of Greenhouse gases and are especially vulnerable (UN-General Assembly 2016; IPCC 2023), on the other hand they are the ideal setting to develop new solutions (Frantzeskaki, Bach and Mguni, 2018, p. 51), presenting key opportunities to act for global and national objectives concerning sustainability and climate action (Castán Broto *et al.*, 2019, p. 449). While there is frustration of the pace of action on national and international levels, local authorities in cities often hold the competencies on relevant climate-related domains to act (McCormick *et al.*, 2013, p. 4; Frantzeskaki, Bach and Mguni, 2018, p. 51).

Scholars thus underline the role of city governments to design *"low-carbon, sustainable and resilient urban systems"* (Hölscher, 2019, p. 38) to contribute to a broad, global sustainable transformation (Hölscher, 2019; Castán Broto *et al.*, 2019). Both international policy such as the UN-SDGs and science underline the need for a transformation to make cities resilient (Elmqvist *et al.*, 2019; Talubo, Morse and Saroj, 2022). While "resilience" is per se not a normative concept and depending on the definition (Elmqvist *et al.*, 2019, p. 269), the IPCC (2007, p. 86) defines resilience as *"the ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organisation, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change"*.

A Turn Towards Climate Change Adaptation

To build climate resilience, adaptation to climate change to counter the effects of a changing climate and reduce associated vulnerabilities becomes inevitable (Tyler and Moench, 2012, p. 312; Peinhardt, 2021, p. 7). Adaptation can be understood as *"an adjustment in ecological, social or economic systems in response to observed or expected changes in climatic stimuli and their effects and impacts in order to alleviate adverse impacts of change or take advantage of new opportunities."* (Adger, Arnell and Tompkins, 2005, p. 78). This can be pursued through building adaptive capacity or implementing decisions (ibid.). Since the Paris Agreement concluded in 2015, adaptation to the climate crisis is thus considered an equal challenge on a global level to climate mitigation (Gonzales-Iwanciw, Dewulf and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, 2020, p. 797). While mitigation strategies are developed on a national or supranational level in most policy areas, local and city governments often push forward in terms of climate adaptation (Carter *et al.*, 2015), since adaptation concerns often

require timely attention at the local level (Bulkeley, 2010; Measham *et al.*, 2011). A truly sustainable development requires both climate mitigation as well as climate adaptation efforts, while in urban planning, concepts are commonly merged despite their different goals (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2020, p. 124; Cuevas, 2016, p. 662 cited in: Greiner, 2023, p. 27). In Europe, it is popular to choose measures that combine adaptation and mitigation, which can be described as *climate planning*: High-income nations previously put their focus on climate change mitigation before taking a recent *"adaptation turn"* (Davoudi, Crawford and Mehmood, 2009 cited in: Wamsler, Brink and Rivera, 2013, p. 78).

Cities are characterized by a multitude of features that are interrelated and can increase their vulnerability to the effects of climate change, such as the structure of the built urban fabric (such as the amount of green and built-up spaces, heat islands, land coverage, and fresh air corridors), environmental features that define the urban climate, and socio-cultural features (like population densities, social inequality and cohesion) (Wamsler, Brink and Rivera, 2013; Sharifi, Sivam and Boland, 2016). Already facing the irreversible consequences of the climate crisis and being particularly exposed to certain threats such as heat extremes, cities are under pressure to adapt their urban environment to changing conditions (Carter *et al.*, 2015). In that context, public spaces have been identified as crucial in building resilience in cities (Peinhardt, 2021, p. 12).

The Adaptive Capacity of Public Space

Public open spaces play a key role in the adaptive capacity of urban environments (Wilson *et al.*, 2008), as their design and management have an impact on the above mentioned physical, environmental and socio-cultural factors. Currently, they are thus in the process of undergoing a significant transformation (Maring and Blauw, 2018). On the one hand, climate change specifically threatens the quality of life and the urban functions of public spaces, making adaptation necessary to maintain elementary functions of public spaces in the future (Greiner, 2023, p. 39, 51). On the other hand, aiming for climate resilience puts pressure on public spaces through the spatial needs of adaptation measures such as green, blue and grey infrastructure. Public spaces are already limited and need to provide for multiple groups, functions and serve different interests (Duivenvoorden *et al.*, 2021). This means that they will increasingly have to respond to the technical demands of climate adaptation, while still having to fulfil its social functions.

Public space can be a resource for climate change adaptation through providing green, blue and grey infrastructure and by playing a key role in a sustainable mobility transition. Green and blue infrastructure can be considered *"a hybrid infrastructure of green spaces and built systems, e.g. forests, wetlands, parks, green roofs and walls that together can contribute to ecosystem resilience and human benefits through ecosystem services"* (Demuzere *et al.*, 2014, p. 107). Regarding

climate resilience, green and blue infrastructure is seen as a remedy against increasing heat and flooding, commonly cited as the most pressing issues cities are facing because of the climate crisis (Derkzen, Van Teeffelen and Verburg, 2017, p. 107). Green and blue infrastructure can tackle both issues due to their capacity to provide shade, enhance evaporation, intercept rainfall, and facilitate infiltration and thus promote resilience against climate change (Demuzere *et al.*, 2014, p. 109 f.). It can play a vital role in attenuating the Urban Heat Island effect (Kimic and Ostrysz, 2021), through parks and green spaces, trees and vegetation (Gago *et al.*, 2013). Cities widely acknowledge the potential and benefits of green and blue infrastructure, launching ambitious programmes of greening (C40, 2023). The city of Rotterdam for instance set itself goals until 2026 in its Green Agenda Action Plan to transform fifteen city squares and add an additional 20 hectares of green space among fifty climate adaptation projects in total (Interreg Europe, 2024). Paris has planted more than 113,000 trees since 2020, amongst which more than 10,000 in streets and urban forests (Ville de Paris, 2025). Other physical (built) measures such as arcades, galleries, or tarpaulins can provide shade and a cooler atmosphere (Kuttler, 2011). The choice of materials can positively use the Albedo-effect to prevent heat (Gago *et al.*, 2013).

Changing urban mobility patterns are often regarded as a climate mitigation effort, but its effect on public space can also be considered a climate change adaptation measure: On the one hand, the reduction of space dedicated to car traffic is often a practical premise to the redistribution of public space to climate adaptation measures (such as green and blue infrastructure), on the other hand, cars are contributing to heat up the micro-climate in urban public spaces (Grajeda-Rosado *et al.*, 2022). Cities with a strong dependence on individual motorized traffic are to a certain extent exposed to a "*spatial lock-in*" (Bridge *et al.*, 2013, p. 339), where the consumption of fossil fuels is already "*built into the urban landscape*" (ibid.), through allocating large amounts of space to cars and not provisioning alternatives (ibid.). This leads to the necessity of reorganizing urban mobility solutions with a considerable effect on public space, which plays an essential role in building better cities for pedestrians and cyclists (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 6), leading to large public space transformation programmes in European cities such as Paris, which created 60 kilometres of bike-paths in 2024 on a territory of only 105.4 square kilometres (Ville de Paris, no date a). This was only made possible by transforming public space and redistributing space that was formerly dedicated to motorized traffic.

From Adaptation to Transformation

Concerning adaptation to climate change, there is a strong advocacy among scholars to go further than to adapt in an incremental way, stressing the need for radical change and fundamental transformation to build resilient and sustainable societies and cities (e.g. Feola, 2015, 2020; Fedele *et al.*, 2019; Hölscher, 2019). City governments often tackle climate change based on

short-term decisions, as "add-ons", by developing adaptation measures in *"incremental, reactive and technocratic ways, which perpetuate mal-adaptation"* (Hölscher *et al.*, 2019, p. 845). While framing climate adaptation as an opportunity to promote quality of life and wellbeing, they fail to incorporate social, economic, cultural, as well as political and institutional concerns in adaptation planning (Hölscher *et al.*, 2019, p. 844 f.)*.*

Fedele *et al.* (2019, p. 116 f.) argue for *"transformative adaptation"* that aims for the fundamental change of entire systems and the reduction of vulnerabilities related to climate change at their various (social, cultural, etc.) roots by *"transforming them into more just, sustainable or resilient states"* (Fedele *et al.* 2019, p. 117). While there is an acknowledgment that "business as usual" is insufficient in light of the looming climate changes, policy makers still largely overlook the transformative potential of adaptation (Feola, 2015, p. 376; Fedele *et al.* 2019, p. 117 ff.). Partly, since *"transformative adaptation"* would require higher investments and longer time frames (Fedele *et al.* 2019, p. 117). In terms of building climate resilience, cities should go beyond discrete measures and go further than approaches that think in a "predict and prevent" manner, since many impacts might not be predictable in the future and strengthen whole systems to build the capacity for adaptive responses (Tyler and Moench, 2012, p. 312, 319 f.).

Regarding climate change adaptation in public space, strategies mostly only consider its physical components and ecosystem services, leaving out social aspects of resilience (Peinhardt, 2021, p. 10 f.). The WBGU flagship report on the *"transformative power of cities"* (WBGU, 2016) strongly underlines social considerations regarding public space in the process transforming cities in a sustainable way.

Climate Justice in Adaptation Processes

Climate adaptation can, despite its benefits, (re-)produce inequalities in an urban context (Mohtat and Khirfan, 2021, p. 1f.). Research on phenomena like green gentrification (e.g. Anguelovski *et al.*, 2019) has pointed out a risk that adaptation measures such as greening can paradoxically foster social exclusion and social inequality (Haase *et al.*, 2017). As the relevance of public space grows under the need to adapt, *"underlying social and economic drivers might constrain their ability to offer adaptive opportunities for all members of society equally."* (Wilson *et al.*, 2008, p. 32). This challenges decision-makers to tackle these issues ethically (Pratt, 2023, p. 56), taking the debate on climate justice, that was formerly mostly limited to the national level, to an urban scale (Bulkeley, Edwards and Fuller, 2014, p. 31). Scholars thus argue for the recognition of urban climate justice in adaptation processes (Mohtat and Khirfan, 2021).

Planners should avoid climate adaptation measures characterized by an unequal treatment of populations, that favour green gentrification, engage

in a neoliberal turn or exclude populations from decision-making (Pratt, 2023, p. 81). To ensure just adaptation processes, decision-makers should recognize three closely interrelated climate justice pillars: First, distributive justice, that refers to a fair distribution, both spatial and temporal, of adaptation processes and their positive effect. Second, procedural justice, relating to just, fair and inclusive adaptation procedures. Third, recognitional justice, referring to the *"legitimization of all racial, ethnic, gender, cultural, and social identities in adaptation processes and its outcomes"* (Mohtat and Khirfan, 2021, p. 2). This third pillar complements the other two dimensions of justice, directly tackling the socio-economic and political differences that create unjust decisions and outcomes, being the foundation for the fulfilment of procedural and distributive justice (Bulkeley, Edwards and Fuller, 2014, p. 39; Mohtat and Khirfan, 2021, p. 2).

2.4 Interim Conclusion –
Reflecting Developments in Public Space

After developing defining tendencies in the transformation of public space, this chapter provides a short reflection and summary while highlighting the normative expectations that planners and researchers should keep in mind when studying or planning transformations in public space.

Increasing Pressure on a Limited Resource

When Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros (2014, p. 1) speak of a "*moment of transformation*" concerning public space in Europe, it can be noted that in 2024, in times of multiple crises (Brand, 2016a; 2016b) this 'moment' still endures and has even intensified. In recent years, crises such as the Covid-19-Pandemic and war in Ukraine added to still ongoing crises and global changes (Haselbacher *et al.*, 2024). The need for a fundamental transformation in cities is stressed by a broad range of scholars (e.g. WBGU, 2011, 2016; Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021). Public space is increasingly seen as a policy tool to address challenges that European cities are facing today: As it is a limited resource, especially in dense urban areas, this means that several – often contradictory – understandings of and claims on public space overlap.

Cities and urban areas are both exposed to and drivers of global restructurings and phenomena, such as the development of a post-Fordist economy, capitalist globalization and a neoliberal policy turn, as well as climate change (e.g. Theodore, Peck and Brenner, 2011; Kabisch *et al.*, 2018). They ought to find proper answers with limited means on city-level to these global, structural challenges that all have drastic local repercussions. Public space is seen as a policy tool to address these challenges (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014). Cities transform public spaces to create an attractive urban environment to stimulate consumption, attract investment and achieve a transition towards a service-based economy to compete with other metropolitan areas and cities (Carmona, 2015). In response to the social and cultural consequences of global phenomena such as globalization and urbanization, public spaces are seen as an important social infrastructure to create more inclusive cities, highlighting its social capacities (Madanipour, 2003; Low, 2006; Amin, 2008). Climate change and its already felt consequences oblige cities to act for adaptation and mitigation measures, many of which have a major spatial impact in the public realm (Peinhardt, 2021). Since consequences of the climate crisis will only multiply over the next decades, the pressure to adapt public space to build more climate resilient cities will only be further amplified.

Developing a Normative View on Public Space

In response to global tendencies of capitalist and neoliberal urbanization and the commodification of urban infrastructures and goods, prominent scholars note the importance of public spaces that are – and stay – open for *everyone*, as places for political–, social and cultural exchange (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Kohn, 2004, Madanipour, 2010; Harvey, 2012; Carmona, 2015). A *"just city"* focuses on democracy, equity and diversity instead of urban competitiveness (Fainstein, 2005; 2010; 2014). This can be considered a call for more *inclusive* public spaces, which are under threat by uneven power relations and urban disparities (Pratt, 2023). Through inclusive processes of transformation that pay attention to procedural fairness, by recognizing difference and aiming to redistribute resources and foster interaction, more *"just"* public spaces could be created (Low and Iveson, 2016). There is a need for maintained, high quality public spaces in *all* neighbourhoods, the provision with public space being key for citizens (Madanipour, Knierbien and Degros, 2014).

The climate crisis puts a new imperative of climate resilience upon cities to adapt their urban environment and cope with rising temperatures, floodings and extreme weather events (Tyler and Moench, 2012; Derkzen, Van Teeffelen and Verburg, 2017). Public space becomes a key spatial resource to provide blue, green and grey adaptation infrastructure and create social resilience (Gago *et al.*, 2013; Kimic and Ostrysz, 2021; Peinhardt, 2021; Greiner, 2023). Transformations of public space are also a necessity to shift urban mobility systems towards a more sustainable future, make room for adaptive measures and reduce urban heat. To maintain its other (social) functions, public space thus needs to be adapted to the local effects of climate change (Greiner, 2023). But this should not undergo without recognizing urban inequalities and aiming for just adaptation processes that aim for a spatial and temporal fair distribution of climate adaptation (Mohtat and Khirfan, 2021). Furthermore, scholars argue that cities should move from isolated, incremental steps in adaptation to tackling the roots of vulnerabilities and acknowledge the transformational potential of adaption (Feola, 2015; Fedele *et al.*, 2019).

2.5 Questioning Rationalities of Transformation

As elaborated within this chapter (2.), public space is considered a common good and infrastructure, characterized by different meanings, undergoing constant change and a means to meet sometimes contradictory goals. Projects transforming public space can thus never be considered as neutral, requiring untangling different meanings, motives, power relations and rationalities involved. The complexities of urban societies, where processes of public space design, development and management are situated, result in complex answers (Madanipour, 2010, p. 237).

Unravelling Competing Claims and Interests

(Urban-) Planning is traditionally justified by the public interest as a main criterion (Moroni, 2018, p. 69). But the public interest as such is difficult to identify when it comes to public space, which is considered a means to meet multiple policy goals of the European social model that can be sometimes contradictory, such as social inclusion and economic development. Public space can be considered a *"vehicle of change"* (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 3), that possibly can carry *"various roles and symbolize different meanings at the same time"* (ibid.).

When it comes to controversies and conflicts over the use and design of public spaces, competing actors make claims on the – in their view – legitimate use of certain places, making it interesting for scholars to study the mobilized meanings in such conflicts (Low and Iveson, 2016, p. 11). Through the process of making claims over space, the claims of others are contested, *"instigating a process of inclusion and exclusion, creating spaces with overlapping meanings"* (Madanipour, 2010, p. 237). Urban development can be understood as an ongoing process of negotiation, in which various actors promote their own visions, ideologies, identities and values, for shaping the urban environment (Suitner, 2013, p. 27). Therefore, questioning how authorities are addressing challenges in the provision of public space, seen both as a collective good and a driver of change (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014, p. 1) becomes crucial.

Dark Sides of Planning?

Questioning projects call for approaches that *"look beyond and examine the disciplinary and normalizing effects at work in seemingly neutral technical regulations or well-meaning projects of urban design"* (Huxley, 2018, p. 209). Bent Flyvbjerg (1996) adopts a Foucauldian perspective to look at the *"dark side of planning"*, focusing on what *is* done – and not what *should* be done – recognizing that planning is always shaped by power relations which cannot be made inexistent (Huxley, 2018, p. 208). Following his reasoning, what he calls *"Realrationalität"* of power is superior to socially desirable outcomes

that are negotiated in a communicative way (ibid.). Michel Foucault, with this concept of *"Governmentality"*, aimed to reveal power effects in a whole range of expressions of social coexistence, such as institutional arrangements and architectural designs (Füller and Marquardt, 2021, p. 88). The process of governing includes a multitude of power mechanisms and elements of control that have an effect together (ibid, p. 91). Foucault himself early on developed this concept with historic examples from urban design, the creation of spatial milieus and orders, as well as historic considerations on the capitalization of urban space (Foucault, 2020 [2004]). Thus, this approach acknowledges strategies, problematizations and the spatialization of problems and interventions as well as approaches to spatial challenges as a means of control and a technique of governance (Marquart and Schreiber, 2021, p. 201; Füller and Marquardt, 2021, p. 94). Foucauldian approaches are thus well suited to provide a nuanced analysis of rationalities involved in transformation projects of public space and looking for complexity beyond a dichotomy between light and dark sides of planning (Huxley, 2018, p. 210).

These perspectives acknowledge problematizations and rationalities as well as their spatial implications as an expression of power, encouraging to examine projects from a perspective that questions *what is actually done* in the production of public space, and *why*. This thesis aims to explore the problem definitions, rationalities, produced meanings, and the legitimations and negotiations driving and shaping the transformation of public spaces in Marseille. Unravelling underlying rationalities in the transformation of public space can reveal what understandings of public space as a resource are prioritized and what dimensions of public space as a crucial public, social and collective infrastructure are acknowledged.

3 Methodological Framework

This chapter introduces the methodological framework for the empirical analysis of this thesis: First, the approach to the case study is briefly outlined (3.1). Second, discourse analysis as a methodology and the concept of discourse is briefly outlined (3.2). Third, the chosen methodological approach of the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) conceptualised by Reiner Keller (2004; 2011) is introduced (3.3). Last, the research approach of the analysis is made more concrete: The choice of transformation cases and textual material as well as the structure of the present analysis is reflected (3.4).

3.1 Case Study

Marseille presents a single case study within this thesis. Case studies are a recommended method when aiming for an in-depth understanding of a contemporary social phenomenon that the researcher has no control over (Yin, 2014, p. 25.). To develop an understanding of the phenomenon, contextual circumstances and conditions are highly relevant (ibid., p. 16). The selection of Marseille as a site of this research study has been information-guided, based on the expectation of revelatory information content, to maximize the utility of information when only using a single case (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). Marseille can be considered an unusual and therefore extreme case (ibid.).

This thesis develops a deep understanding of the context of Marseille and ongoing urban transformations under chapter 4, adopting a research perspective of *"transformation in cities"* (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021, p. 4) that embeds transformation processes in local place-specific contexts. The aim is to then interpret the case of Marseille in connection to the developed global trends of urban transformations and understandings of public space as a resource under 2. and set urban developments in Marseille into a broader context.

3.2 Discourse Analysis

Discourse can be understood as the *"production of social meaning"* (Traue, Pfahl and Schürmann 2014, p. 493, authors' translation) through the *"symbolic [...] representation, mediation, and constitution of objects in social processes"* (ibid.). Keller (2004, p. 7) describes discourses as the attempt to establish and stabilize attributions and orders of meaning to institutionalize them in a binding order of knowledge in a social ensemble. Discourse is not something abstract, it is "***concrete and material*** [emphasis in original]" (Keller, 2011, p. 48) and can appear as *"speech, text, visual image, use of symbols, which have to be performed by actors following social instructions and therefore discourses are a real social practice."* (Keller, 2011, p. 48).

Discourse analysis as a method is used to analyse the emergence, content, and circulation of discourses and to explore the communicative negotiation and the practices of knowledge and meaning production on a suprasituational or supra-individual level (Traue, Pfahl and Schürmann, 2014). Its subject are *"patterns of thinking, speaking, self-perception and action as well as the processes in which certain ideas and logics of action are created and repeatedly changed"* (Glasze and Mattissek, 2021, p. 13, authors' translation). Discourse analysis can conceptualize the social production of specific meanings, truths and social as well as spatial realities (Glasze and Mattissek, 2021, p. 13). Being a power-critical project, discourse analysis considers what is written and said as an expression and means of social power relations (Belina and Dzudzek, 2021, p. 110). The connection between knowledge and power is central for

discourse analysis: Through hegemonizing and marginalizing discourses, certain truths, meanings and socially constructed realities are created (Glasze and Mattissek, 2021, p. 14).

The perspective of discourse analysis is useful to analyse social phenomena such as spatial representations and urban development strategies using the fundamental category of power (Füller and Marquardt, 2021, p. 87). Considering space as a product of social practice and an expression of social relations following the reasonings of David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre, it can contribute to the investigation of concrete space productions, the ways spaces are conceived, perceived and designed (Belina and Dzudzek, 2021, p. 123; Bauriedl, 2021, p. 169), providing *"insights into the symbolic structuring of social and spatial relations and their enabling and disciplining effects"* (Bauriedl, 2021, p. 169, authors' translation). Language can reflect projected urban fantasies, social inequalities and promotions of territories (Chauvier and Devisme, 2021, p. 31).

Discourse analysis as a perspective in spatial research allows a focus on the societal construction and regulation of the assignment of meanings and underlying power relations, highlighting the interplay between society, power and space in the power–laden construction of space (Strüver, 2021, p. 66). The aim is to *"examine the different rationalities at work in different regimes of discourses, rules and procedures and the 'truths' that are invoked as reasons and principles for these"* (Huxley, 2018, p. 210).

3.3 The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse

The research approach of this thesis is oriented on the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) conceptualized by Reiner Keller (2004; 2011). The SKAD-approach focuses on how sign use as a social practice correlates with the production, maintenance or transformation of shared social knowledge. (Keller, 2011, p. 51).

SKAD integrates a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis into the interpretative paradigm and the sociology of knowledge developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, conceptualizing knowledge as a socially constructed and contested entity (Traue, Pfahl and Schürmann 2014, p. 497; Keller, 2011). Keller (2011, p. 46) builds upon the work of Berger and Luckmann, who argue that knowledge is both an "objective reality," sedimented in institutions and social structures, and a "subjective reality," internalised through socialisation processes. He further contends that language plays a crucial role in this construction, shaping and stabilising collective understandings of reality through everyday communication. Drawing on Foucault, Keller argues that discourses are not merely reflections of reality but active social practices

determining the legitimacy of knowledge (Keller, 2011, p. 47). SKAD adopts Foucault's concept of "discursive formations" (Foucault, 1972), which organize knowledge through specific rules governing enunciations, concepts, and subject positions. SKAD emphasizes *"problematisations"*, a concept derived from Foucault (1980), which refers to the social construction of specific issues as problems requiring intervention (Keller, 2011, p. 48). Through discourse, knowledge is institutionalised into policies, norms and material infrastructures, what Foucault termed "dispositifs". Yet, in contrast to Foucault's more structuralist approach, SKAD acknowledges that these dispositifs emerge from struggles between competing knowledge claims within discourse arenas.

Thus, the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse combines the interpretive traditions of sociology of knowledge with discourse theory. It considers knowledge not only as a structured entity but also as a dynamic and contested social process, shaped by both institutionalized discourse formations and the agency of social actors engaging in symbolic struggles (Keller, 2011, p. 51).

3.4 Reflecting the Research Approach

This sub-chapter reflects the choice of transformation cases, text material as well as the concepts used from the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis to examine and discuss four specific cases.

3.4.1 Transformation Cases

To be able to answer the defined research questions for the case of Marseille, four transformations of public spaces were chosen: The *Semi-Pedestrianization of the Vieux-Port* (chapter 5.1), the *Requalification of the Hyper-Centre* (5.2), the *Requalification of the Place Jean-Jaurès (La Plaine)* (5.3) and the *Transformation of the Place de la Providence* (5.4). While all projects are located within the city centre of Marseille, they were chosen due to their different spatial configurations, roles within the urban system of the city and user structures.

Chapter 5.1 treats the transformation of the most central and symbolic space of the city, frequented by numerous tourists and locals alike. Chapter 5.2 analyses the transformation of a large network of squares and streets in the immediate city centre, including the symbolic *Canebière*, that are bustling with commercial activity. The project of *La Plaine* (5.3) concerns the redesign of a large square amid a more residential but lively and alternative neighbourhood at the edge of the city centre. The final chapter 5.4 analyses the transformation of a small square that was mostly used as a parking lot in the central but impoverished and densely populated neighbourhood of *Belsunce*.

All four public spaces are highly frequented spaces but differ greatly in size and fulfil different functions in the urban and metropolitan context of

Marseille. The choice of these four cases was made after a thorough study of their project and transformation context through literature review, as well as reviewing of existing political and planning documents and media coverage and additional observations on site in Marseille (Traue, Pfahl and Schürmann 2014, p. 500). The author spent several weeks in Marseille in autumn 2024 to further deepen his understanding and knowledge of the research field on site and the local context. Impressions of public spaces on site influenced the final choice of the following cases.

1 *Vieux-Port*
2 *Hyper-Centre*
3 *La Plaine*
4 *Place de la Providence*

Source: OpenStreetMap Data (2025)   1: 50 000
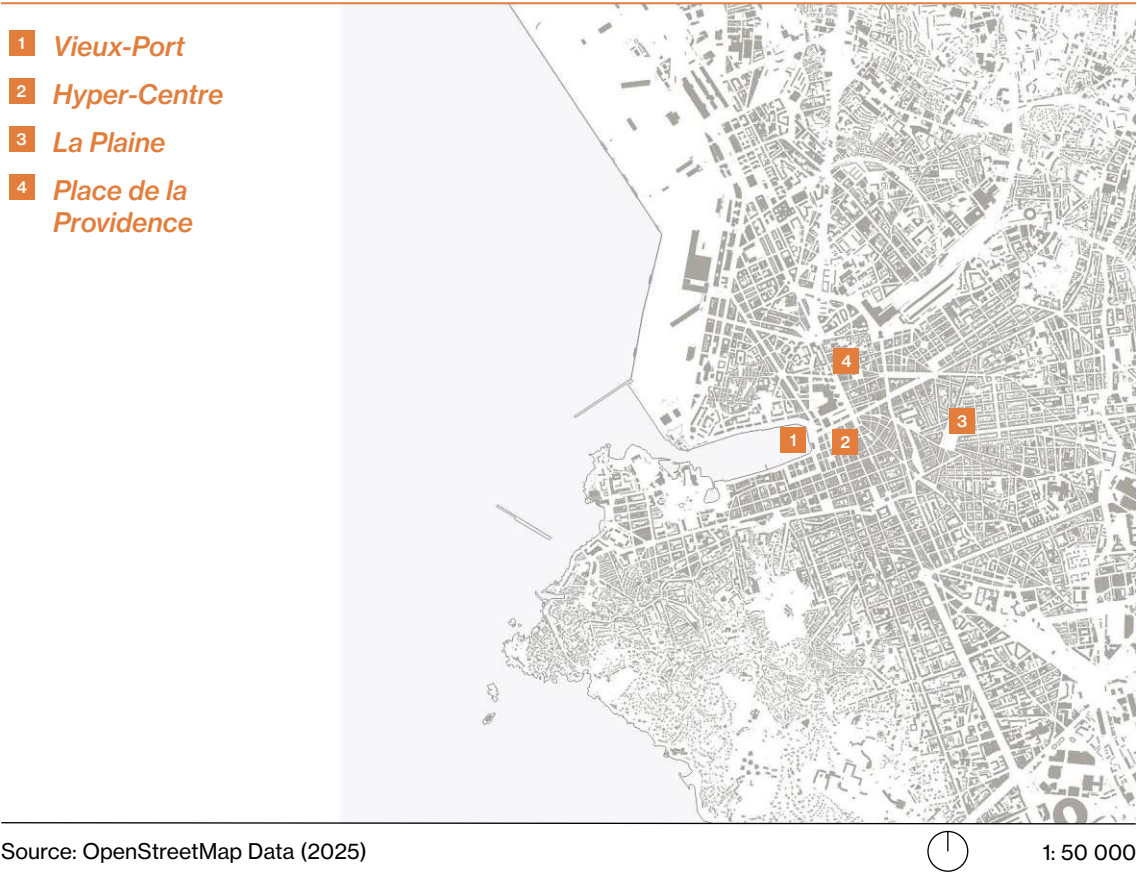
Figure 3: Location of Transformation Cases

Case	Timeframe	Size	Location
Vieux-Port (5.1)	2008-2016 not yet completed as initially planned	55 ha incl. water surface	1st, 2nd and 7th district (*arrondissement*)
Hyper-Centre (5.2)	2017-2022	72 ha (total area) 22 ha (pedestrian)	1st, 2nd and 7th district (*arrondissement*)
La Plaine (5.3)	2015-2021	2.5 ha	1st, 5th and 6th district (*arrondissement*)
Place de la Providence (5.4)	2017 - ongoing	0.25 ha	1st district (*arrondissement*)

Table 1: Specifics of Transformation Cases

3.4.2 Textual Materials and Corpus

Discourse analysis dissects discursive practices, which can be linguistic statements of all kinds, such as policies, newspaper articles, or deliberations (Belina and Dzudzek, 2021, p. 115). Data treated in discourse analysis is usually found in the research field, analogous to in an archive, and are not generated by the researchers themselves (Traue, Pfahl and Schürmann 2014, p. 500).

This research is based on several sources that constitutes what is called the *institutionalized political discourse* within this thesis. First, it focuses on the minutes of sessions of the metropolitan council of *Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence* (*MAMP*) and its predecessor *Marseille-Provence-Métropole* (*MPM*), and transcribed recordings of the municipal council of the City of Marseille. Second, on legal decision (deliberation) texts by these entities. Third, on programmes, planning and press documents published by the municipal and metropolitan authorities, most of them with formal legal status. It is acknowledged that this in total can only represent a fraction of the general urban discourse in Marseille on these transformations. All materials are originally in French and they were downloaded from the official websites of governing bodies or project managing entities, apart from some exceptions sourced from media websites that provided the documents for the public. The character of the available material slightly changes across cases: While for some the political debate within council structures is extensive (*Vieux-Port*), others provide more detailed planning documents (*La Plaine*). Whereas this has an impact on the results, it is also a sign of how projects are negotiated within the discourse (e.g. increasing technical discourse, little debate in political institutions).

Concerning citations, all quotes are translated from French by the author. To ensure clarity and avoid disrupting the readers' flow all in-text references to documents are cited in abbreviated form. The table below provides an overview of used abbreviations, while a complete list of the cited documents is provided in the appendix.

Abbreviation	Meaning
MPM	*Marseille-Provence-Métropole* (Metropolitan authority until 2016)
-CM	Council Minutes (ex. MPM-CM: Council Minuts of MPM)
VdM	*Ville de Marseille* (City of Marseille)
MAMP	*Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence* (Metropolitan Authority)
SOLEAM	*Société Locale d'Equipement et d'Aménagement de l'aire Métropolitaine* (Local public development company)
UMP	*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (Conservative party)
PS	*Parti Socialiste* (Socialist party)
PCF	*Parti Communiste Français* (Communist party)

Abbreviation	Meaning
LR	*Les Républicains* (Conservative party, new structure of UMP)
FN	*Front National* (National Front, far-right)
EELV	*Europe Écologie les Verts* (Green party)

Table 2: Abbreviations used in the analysis of the textual material

3.4.3 Analysis Structure and Interpretative Discussion

While discourse analysis does not provide a fixed scheme for analysis and description of research phenomena, one can use several concepts to analyse the production of social meaning (Traue, Pfahl and Schürmann 2014, p. 502). This analysis uses the concept of *interpretative schemes* as defined by Keller (2004; 2011) to describe constituting elements of the discourse. They can be described as *"fundamental meaning and action-generating schemata, which are circulated through discourses and make it possible to understand what a phenomenon is all about"* (Keller, 2011, p. 57). Through *interpretative schemes*, overarching problem definitions, legitimations, action logics and strategies of transformations were distilled out of the textual material. Together, legitimating elements, subject positions and discourse-generated model practices generate *interpretative repertoires* of a discourse (Keller, 2011, p. 57), that were used to describe the overall rationalities of transformation legitimized in the political discourse.

In accordance with the chosen SKAD-approach, sequential analysis of textual data was carried out *„to give an account of discursive claims and statements beyond the single utterance or discursive event: line by line, step by step development, debate and choice of interpretations, in order to build up a socially accountable analysis of frames"* (Keller, 2011, p. 61). The coding and analysis process was conducted following the principles of Grounded Theory, which emphasizes developing insights and theory directly from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 2017 [1967]; Eckardt 2014, p. 105 ff.). Instead of a strictly linear process, data collection, coding, and analysis occurred simultaneously in line with the principle of *theoretical sampling* (Eckardt 2014, p. 105 ff). The data was coded several times using the software MAXQDA, with the resulting codes being continuously refined and consolidated into broader categories, whose relationships were systematically examined throughout the coding process, allowing to identify overarching statements in the discourse and draw connections between statements. This iterative approach involved constant comparisons until no new insights emerged, indicating *theoretical saturation* in the research process. This allowed to highlight explicit and implicit regularities in the discourse, draw complex connections, recognize narrative patterns and develop an understanding of rules in the discursive construction of meaning (Glasze, Husseini de Araujo and Mose, 2021, p. 400).

3.4.4 Limitations of the Research Approach

The present analysis is limited to the institutionalized political discourse (for choice of exact material see 3.3.2), thus excluding a range of voices from media, civil society or everyday users of public space. It is primarily analysing the official production of knowledge and not presenting the whole discursive field in Marseille on these matters.

While media coverage by four local media (*La Provence*, *La Marseillaise*, *MarsActu* and *MadeinMarseille*) on all four projects was studied and partly coded, its analysis and discussion were not included in the final research design, since substantial new findings in addition to those from the in-depth analysis of the institutionalized political discourse were not expected. Additionally, research capacities within this thesis project were limited. In the case of certain projects (especially the case of *La Plaine*) a large debate emerged, where it was not possible to include all elements of emerging discourses (e.g. self-published newspapers on the project by protest collectives) in the analysis, although these elements were studied by the author to fully grasp the research context.

This thesis analyses discourse about the production of space and its effects – however, it does not investigate how specific spaces are used in everyday life after their transformation, since it does not include systemic empirical observations in urban space. However, the author acquainted himself with the research field during several stays on site in Marseille, amongst which a long stay of several weeks in autumn 2024. During these stays, observations in public space to reflect the choice of cases and gather a sense of their use were repeatedly made.

While findings are guided by a solid methodological approach detailed within this chapter, analytical choices in detail are made by the researcher himself and thereby form interpretative results with his positionality (Rubin, 2021, p. 169f.). Since this case study concerns Marseille, a French city, it must be stated that the author of this thesis lives, studies and works in Austria. Yet, he has completed part of his studies in France, is fluent in French and able to grasp linguistic nuances, as well as well informed on the local political and urban development and planning context in Marseille.

The focus was to carry out an in-depth analysis of coherent material that can unravel emerging problem definitions, rationalities and negotiations within the constrained research frame of a master thesis that imposes limitations in terms of scope and time capacities.

Figure 4: Evening on the *Vieux-Port* (author's own photo)

4 Introducing the Case Study – Marseille

First, this chapter aims to contextualise Marseille as a city and its metropolitan region, providing a short overview of the historical, economic and social developments that shaped the structure of the city. Second, it develops on the defining urban transformations in 21st century Marseille and puts them into a more global context. Third, it draws an interim conclusion on urban developments in Marseille and situates public space within this given context of urban change.
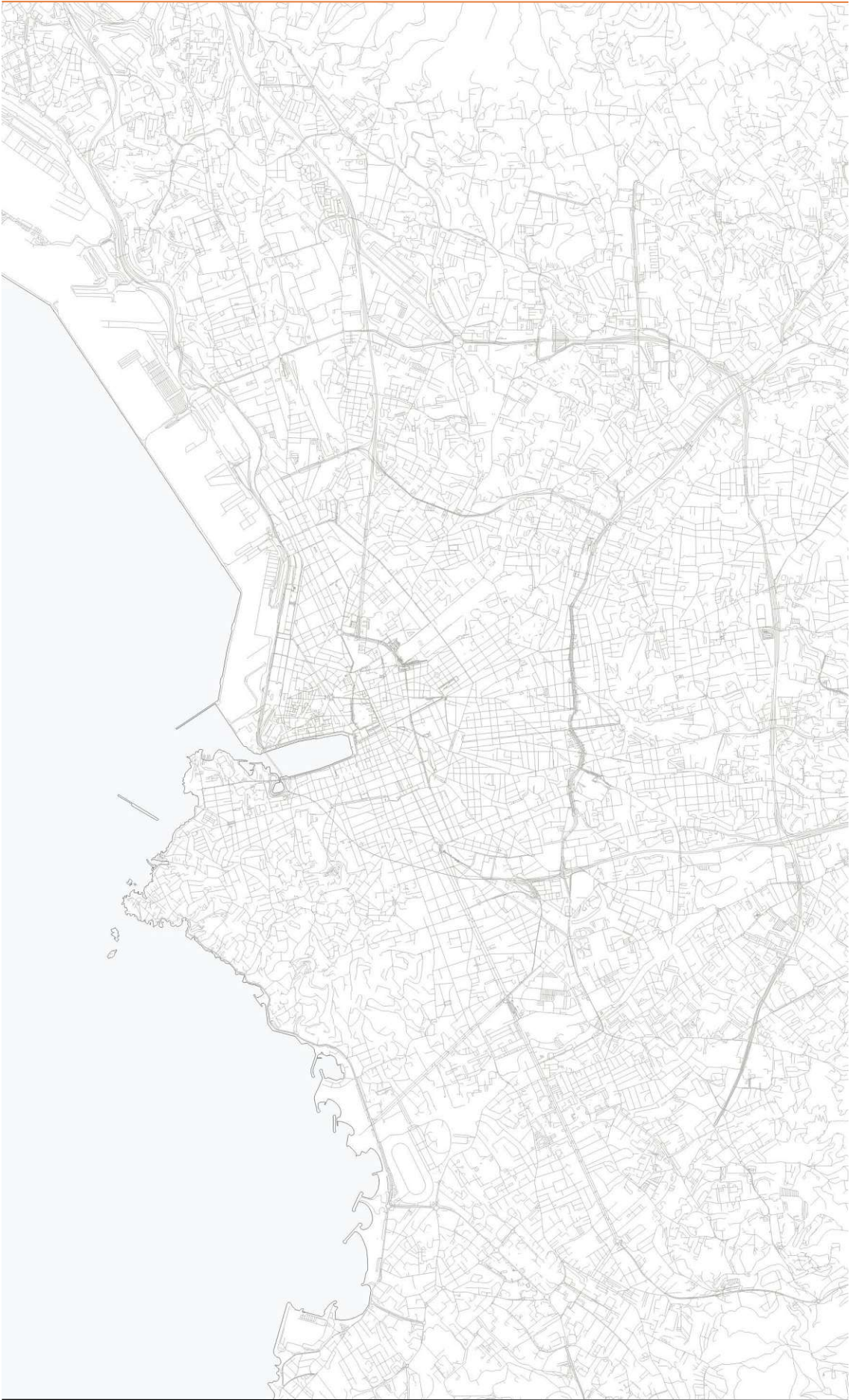
Source: OpenStreetMap Data (2025)

1: 50 000

Figure 5: Marseille - Street Network. *Map by the author.*

Source: OpenStreetMap Data (2025)   1: 50 000

Figure 6: Marseille - Building Structures. *Map by the author.*
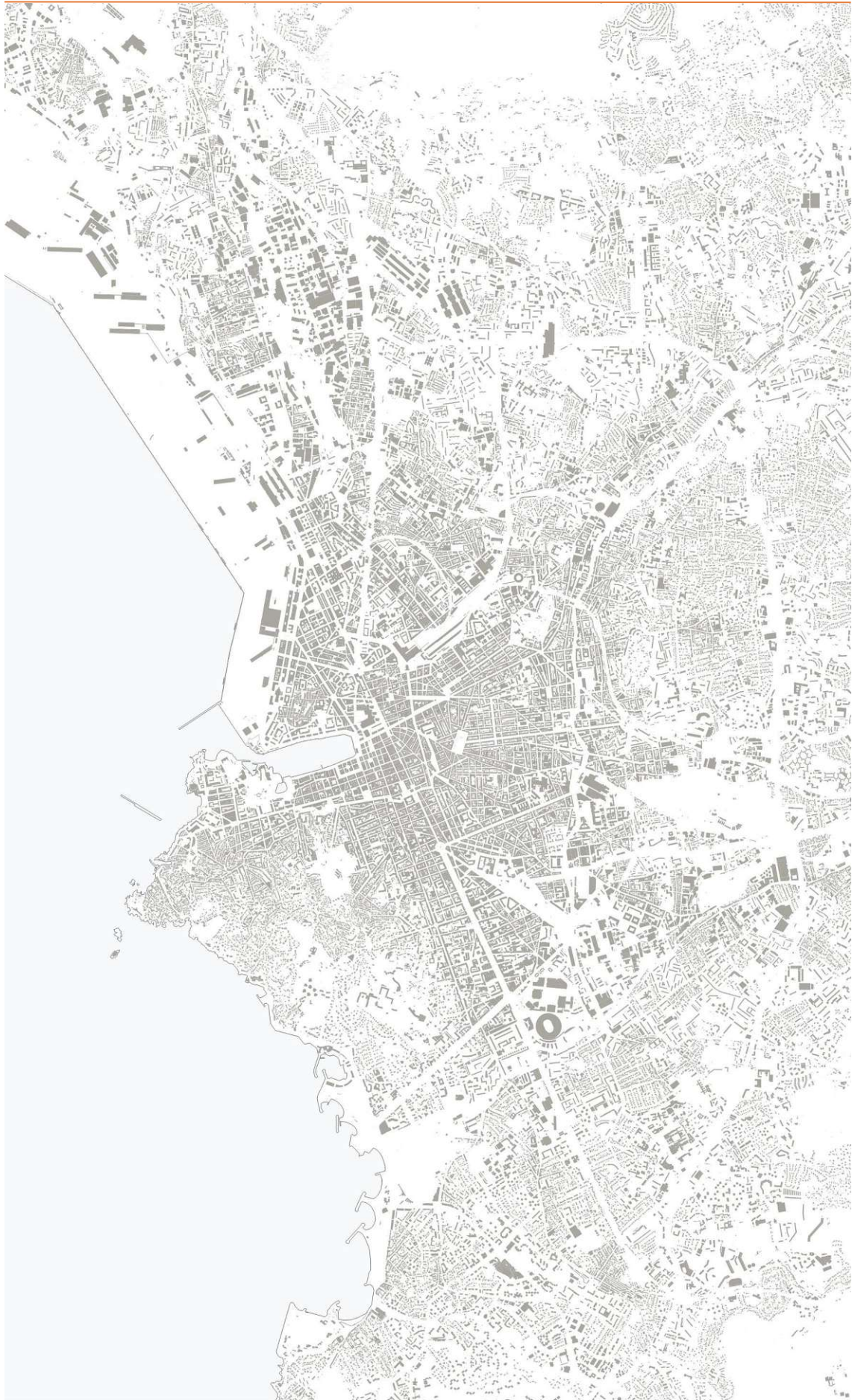
4.1 Contextualising Marseille

Marseille is the second largest city in France, with a population of 873,076 inhabitants (2021) on a municipal territory of 240.6 sq. km (INSEE, 2025a). Thus, the city is spread on an area more than twice the size of the municipality of the French capital Paris (105.4 sq. km) while having less than half of the population (Paris: 2.15 million inhabitants). In terms of population, it is more comparable to France's third city Lyon (528,550 inhabitants on a territory of only 47.9 sq. km).

Marseille is the capital of the *Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur* region in the south of France, which counted 5.13 million inhabitants in 2021 (INSEE, 2024) and spreads from the Provence to the region of Nice and the Italian border, along the mediterranean coast. It is also the capital of the French *Département des Bouches-du-Rhône* (Department No. 13). Marseille is the largest centre within the Aix-Marseille-Provence Metropolis (*Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence*), the institutionalized metropolitan public authority, the second largest of its kind in France, counting 1.91 million inhabitants (2021) on a large territory of 3,150 sq. km that includes other important cities in proximity such as Aix-en-Provence, Aubagne or Arles (INSEE, 2025b). However, its population density of 606.9 inhabitants per sq. km is quite low compared to the Greater Lyon Metropolis (*Métropole de Lyon*: 2,668.4 inh./sq. km), not to mention the Greater Paris Metropolis (*Métropole du Grand Paris*: 8,724.5 inh./sq. km) (INSEE, 2025b).
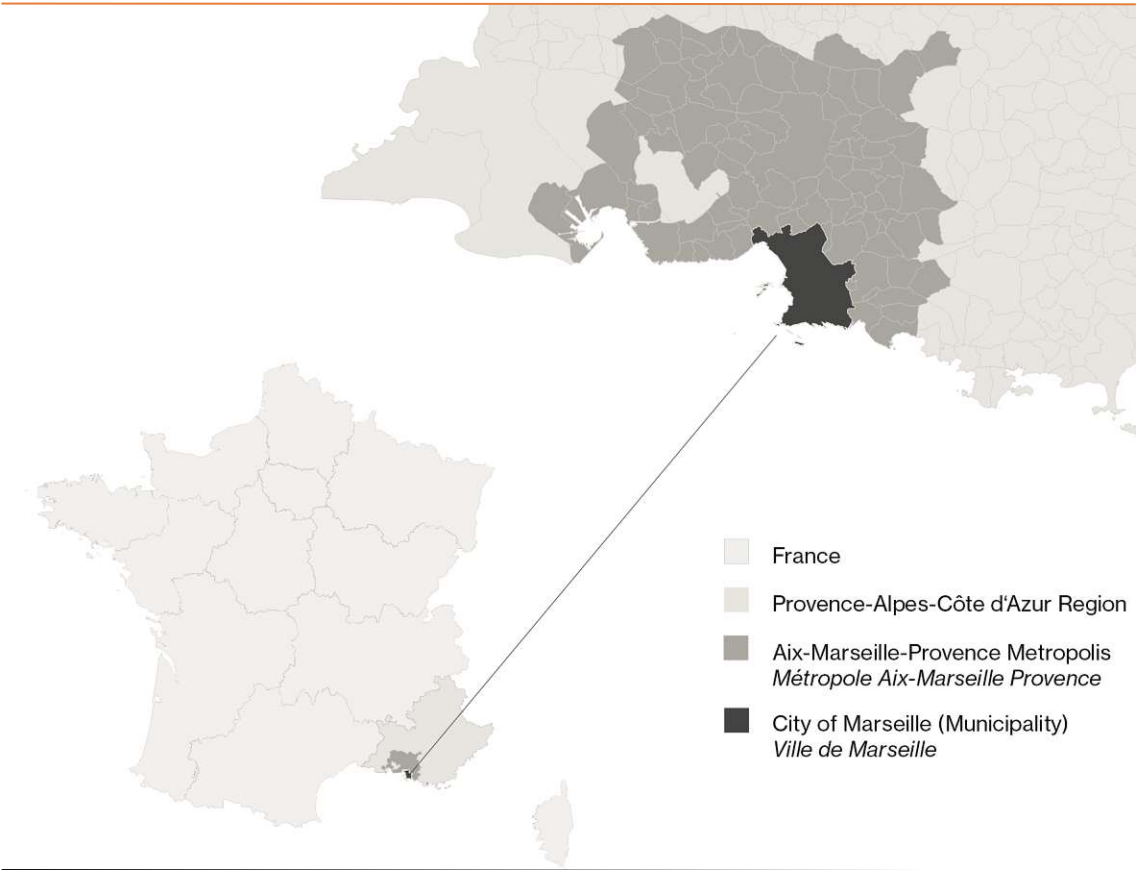
Source: data.gouv.fr, OpenStreetMap Data (2025)   1: 1 500 000 | 1: 30 000 000

Figure 7: Situating Marseille. *Map by the author.*

4.1.1   A Historic, Cosmopolitan Port City?

Marseille is the oldest city of France, founded by Greek settlers as *Massalia* at around 600 B.C. as a port city around the north shore of the old port, which still today marks the heart of the city. (Morhange et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2011, p. 414). It can be considered a mediterranean port city, marked by several waves of immigration among others from Italy, Greece, Spain, Italy, Corsica, Armenia, Turkey, Comoros, Senegal as well as Marocco, Tunesia and Algeria (Roncayolo, 2002, p. 113; Mah, 2014, p. 19). Immigration was intrinsically linked to French colonization and decolonization (Mah, 2014, p. 19) and shaping the narrative of Marseille as a city of 'passage' (Duruz *et al.*, 2023, p. 582). Marseille was long considered a gate between Europe and Africa (Grondeau and Vignau, 2019, p. 24), more connected to the Mediterranean than to mainland France. Therefore, Marseille is often regarded as a cosmopolitan city, due to its role in connecting the French mainland with its (former) colonies, much alike Liverpool and its role as a trader in the British Empire (Van De Laar, 2020, p. 1170). The co-existence of several opposed groups such as Sephardic Jews and Muslim North Africans, or Armenians and Kurds play a part in the city's cosmopolitanism (Temime, 2005, p. 11 cited in: Ingram, 2009, p. 273).

Like other port cities, one could describe it as a city on the edge, referring to being *"on the fringe of nations, oceans and cultures"* (Mah, 2014, p. 31 quoted in Duruz *et al.*, 2023, p. 573). Alice Mah (2014, p. 1) refers to port cities sharing *"narratives of cosmopolitanism and even exceptionalism"*, *"global legacies of [...] colonialism, inequality and political unrest"* as well as *"long histories of casual labour, large migrant communities, and international trade networks"*, offering an *"important urban context for examining new and old aspects of the 'global'"*.   But despite parallels, one needs to be careful in not standardizing and stereotyping port cities (Duruz *et al.*, 2023, p. 574).

Marseille had always been at pulse with transformations of the global economy, as a big industrial centre, and the principal colonial port of France (Peraldi and Samson, 2006; Donzel, 2014, p. 12). After the second world war, Marseille is confronted with severe transformations. French decolonization wars, especially in Algeria, bring a dramatic increase in population, the city gaining around 18,000 inhabitants every year between 1962 and 1967. Its number of inhabitants went up from 650,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the 1950s to 900,000 (even more than today) in 1975 (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 9).

4.1.2 Entering a Post-Industrial Era of Decline

The city had a prosperous image due to its port up until the 1970s, but subsequent oil crises and technological evolutions affected its image (Grondeau and Vignau, 2019, p. 24). In the following years, Marseille was continuously relegated to the role of a residential, regional administrative capital (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 5; Donzel, 2014, p. 12). This narrative of the decline of Marseille was essentially based on the decline of port activities (Donzel, 2014, p. 18): The whole economy depending on the industrial-portual system was in deep crisis (Grondeau and Vignau, 2019, p. 24). In the 1980s, port activity was mainly relocated to Fos-sur-Mer, a neighbouring town of Marseille (Mah, 2014, p. 20). After 1975, Marseille becomes a shrinking city, counting only 798,000 inhabitants in 1999 and thus loosing over 100,000 inhabitants over a period of 25 years (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 9).

The breakdown of its industrial-portual system (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015) brought economic, social and urban consequences (Peraldi and Samson, 2015; Dubois and Olive, 2004), such as exacerbated social exclusion and pauperization of central neighbourhoods (Bertoncello and Rodrigues Malta, 2003). This shaped the perception of Marseille as a degraded, dangerous, dirty city marked by urban voids, unemployment and decline (Andres, 2011, p. 799). Challenges in Marseille were similar to those observed in other European port cities (Bertoncello and Rodrigues-Malta, 2003, p. 424 f.), such as Liverpool, Bilbao or Genoa (Andres, 2011, p. 799). Mah (2014, p. 12) sees Marseille as a city that is no longer competitive as a global port city, but still "*harbouring global aspirations*".

4.1.3 The Emergence of Socio-Economic and Spatial Inequalities

Still today, regarding its socio-spatial context, Marseille stands out among other French metropolises due to a pauperised city centre (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015), which can again be considered a similarity with other mediterranean cities such as Genoa or Naples (Bertoncello and Dubois 2010, 41 f.). Even when comparing the socio-economic structure of the whole municipality of Marseille to those of Lyon and Paris, the former stands out in terms of income, wealth or employment: The median income in the city of Marseille is 23% lower than in Lyon and 44% lower than in Paris (INSEE, 2025b, own calculations). The poverty rate is at 26%, while in the other two cities it amounts to 16% of the local population (ibid.). Whereas 15.9% are unemployed, youth unemployment is at nearly 30% (ibid.).

Partly, this can be explained through the polycentric structure of the metropolitan area of the city: According to the geographer Marcel Roncayolo (1996), the metropolitan area of Marseille does not follow the logic of Christaller's

theory of centres (Christaller, 1933), but rather counts different centres with proper functions (Donzel, 2014, p. 108). Marseille was observed as a declining city with a deficit of centrality, while other parts of the metropolitan area were subject to a dynamic development (Girard, 2001, p. 212 f.). The economic hierarchy between the by far most populated centre of the metropolis and its periphery is inversed, an atypical model in France (Cusin, 2016, p. 109).

This is even reflected in the official name of the metropolitan authority – *Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence* – which places the name of the more prosperous city, Aix-en-Provence, which only counts 147,478 inhabitants (INSEE, 2025c), ahead of Marseille (Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021, p. 209). Aix-en-Provence, around 30 km away from Marseille's city centre, has always been the centre of the regional *bourgeoisie*, economy and academic life, rivalries are as old as the 12th century, when Aix-en-Provence was the capital of the counts of Provence (Geppert, 2017, p. 238). While Marseille looked towards the Mediterranean and built international and colonial trade networks, Aix-en-Provence remained an academic centre that did not flourish during the industrial revolution. In the post-industrial age however, Aix-en-Provence prospered while Marseille was in decline (Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021, p. 209). Cities near Marseille economically thrived (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 5), concentrating economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s (Douay, 2010, p. 58). Aix-en-Provence specialized in high-tech, while the towns of Marignane and Istres specialized in aeronautics, the Etang de Berre in petrochemicals, and Cadarache in nuclear energy (Paché, 2017, p. 59).

These socio-economic restructurings had repercussions that persist today: In 2012, the GDP per capita of Aix-en-Provence was estimated 60% higher than Marseille's (AMGVF, 2012 cited in: Lefilliâtre, 12.01.2012). In 2021, 40.5% of those elder than 15 and not in school education in Aix-en-Provence held the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree or higher – compared to 24.8% in Marseille (INSEE, 2025d). While in Marseille, 23.8% did not even have any school diploma except from primary school, in Aix-en-Provence, this group accounted for only 14% (ibid.). The median disposable income of households per adult is around 25% higher in Aix-en-Provence than in Marseille, and the poverty rate in Aix amounts to 15% while it reaches 26% in Marseille (ibid.). In 2013, unemployment in the most deprived neighbourhood of the urban area was 40 percentage points higher than the average of the urban area (Alivon and Guillain, 2018, p. 143). Aix-en-Provence established itself as a centre for high-tech and tertiary activities, to the point that it is one of the cities in France with the most expensive housing prices (Alivon and Guillain, 2018, p. 145). Strong regional disparities are therefore evident, and the two cities share little common interests (Geppert, 2017, p. 238).

4.1.4 Spatial Structures

Under 4.1.3, the construction of geographic inequalities in Marseille's city region were outlined, but Marseille itself is a historically and symbolically deeply divided city between the affluent south of the city and the pauperized north: The symbolic border runs through the heart of the city along its most famous boulevard, *la Canebière* (Roncayolo, 1996).

While in Paris, media and observers commonly speak of the *banlieue* referring to the stigmatized outskirts of the capital, in Marseille, there are no *banlieues*, the stigmatized and pauperized neighbourhoods ("*quartiers*") are commonly referred to as "*quartiers nords*" ("*northern neighbourhoods*") (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015; Buslacchi, 2013). In Paris, the core city is isolated from the *banlieue* by the *Boulevard Péripherique*, a ring motorway on ancient fortifications, which serves also as a symbolic and administrative border. Whereas in Marseille, the "*quartiers nords*" are mostly within the municipal boundaries of Marseille, but not always necessarily located in the north of the city (Buslacchi, 2013, p. 55 f.; Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 13 ff.). The northern *arrondissements* of the city are a patchwork of individual homes, commercial zones, fragmented by large-scale infrastructure, and home to the notorious "*cites*", large-scale social housing complexes, associated with a negative image of degraded housing, danger and criminality (Buslacchi, 2013, p. 59). Most of them were constructed in response to the demographic developments after 1945 and subsequent decolonization (see 4.1.1) (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2005; Angélil, Malterre-Barthes, and Something Fantastic, 2022). In opposition to the pauperized north, the south of the city stretches out along the hilly coast from the city centre, characterized by *bourgeois* apartment blocks and generous individual homes, as well as gated communities (Roncayolo, 1996; Dorier and Dario, 2018).

In between north and south lies the city centre, with its important symbolic spaces and functions, but in a tense socio-economic context. In Marseille, the wealthier residents always preferred neighbourhoods south of the centre, along the coast and deserting the city centre (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 93). In 1982 already, when French urban policy programmes first developed to tackle urban inequalities, the centre of Marseille was a priority neighbourhood (Dikeç, 2007a). With the decline of the port economy, despite minor gentrification tendencies, central historic neighbourhoods still offered housing possibilities for immigrants and working-class people (Mitchell, 2011, p. 414).

In 2021, the central first district (*arrondissement*) had a poverty rate of 38%, its median income was 40% below the national average of France (INSEE, 2025e). This data is comparable with other French cities like St. Denis and Aubervilliers, two notorious *banlieues* north of Paris (ibid.). Some of the most central neighbourhoods of Marseille, especially *Noailles* and *Belsunce*, located between the *Vieux-Port* (Old Port) and the main train station *St. Charles* have historically been arrival neighbourhoods, serving as a new home for several

waves of immigration throughout the past decades (Angélil, Malterre-Barthes, and Something Fantastic, 2022; Peraldi, Duport, and Samson, 2015; Berton-cello, 2012). These neighbourhoods are today also marked by poor housing conditions: In 2018, two buildings in the neighbourhood of Noailles collapsed, killing eight people and triggering a wave of protest against housing politics and illegal practices by landlords (Peraldi and Samson, 2020a). In the centre, there are still opportunities for social and economic interaction, despite class division in the city (Mitchell, 2011, p. 414). Central neighbourhoods are still densely inhabited, diverse places, however now subjects to larger urban transformations (Angélil, Malterre-Barthes, and Something Fantastic, 2022). Current restructurings concerning the centre are further detailed under 4.2.

Marseille can be considered a Mediterranean city in its development, which distinguishes itself from other french cities: Urban production was mainly private, the city lacked strong urban planning and informal arrangements often prevailed (Roncayolo, 1996 in Dorier and Dario, 2018, p. 2,9). Mediterranean cities have developed both spontaneously and speculatively, often resulting in a fragmented, patchwork city landscape with mixed use (Leontidou, 1993, p. 951). They are marked by characteristics that do not correspond to an ideal of modernity, however, they can certainly not be defined as preindustrial (ibid., p. 949). Some aspects can even be considered as nearly postmodern, such as *"spontaneity, anti-planning attitudes, piecemeal urban development, informality in the economy and in the housing sector, lack of discipline in the work ethic, land use"* (Leontidou, 1993, p. 949).

While some Mediterranean cities were successful in establishing themselves as role models throughout Europe (Gospodini, 2009), Marseille is normally not considered one of them. However, Katharyne Mitchell (2011, p. 405) argues that Marseille's particular form of ethnicity-based and transnational capitalism, as well as its social organisation, geography and public infrastructure created a more inclusive city. Despite existing segregation, there are more opportunities for spatial interaction between different ethnic groups in Marseille, in comparison to other major cities in France (Mitchell, 2011, p. 414). The *Marseillais*, regardless of their neighbourhood, seem to have developed a sense of ownership over many spaces of the city, like the *Canebière*, or the beaches alongside the southern coast (ibid., p. 418).

4.1.5 Politics and Governance

After the second world war, Marseille was characterized by an exceptional political stability, counting only three different mayors from 1953 to 2020 (Peraldi and Samson, 2006, p. 30 ff.; Peraldi and Samson, 2020a). Albeit they were socialist and conservative, they were all a similar political culture (Peraldi and Samson, 2006). Over decades, the political system in Marseille was characterized by a powerful local actors and clientelism (Peraldi and Samson, 2006; Mattina, 2017; Peraldi and Samson, 2020a). Jean-Claude Gaudin, a conservative politician deceased in 2024, was the last mayor of the bespoke

era, serving from 1995 to 2020, but being first elected as municipal counsellor already in 1965 (Élysée, 21.05.2024). During his succeeding mandates, several renewal initiatives were initiated (see 4.2) and the city government and administration lost in power, due to new governance structures: From 2000 on, the new inter-municipal structure *Communauté Urbaine Marseille-Provence Métropole* was created as a first attempt to create a metropolitan structure in the region (Paché, 2017). In 2016, the larger metropolitan authority of the *Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence* replaced the previous *communauté urbaine*. On the dynamics of this process of metropolizing, see chapter 4.2.1. However, in 2020, Marseille entered a new political era, with a new mayor (Michèle Rubirola then replaced by Benoît Payan), supported by a left-green-alliance, being elected (Peraldi and Samson, 2020a; 2020b). Nevertheless, the government of the powerful metropolitan authority remained in the hands of Martine Vassal, conservative protégée of Gaudin (ibid.). Since then, Payan and Vassal, political rivals, often play out their disputes in public (e.g. Gilles, 01.03.2024).

Governance Structure	Legal Type	Total Area	Inhabitants	Number of Municipalities	Key Competencies
Ville de Marseille	Municipality *Municipalité*	240.62 km²	873,076 (INSEE, 2021)	1 (16 districts)	Local urban planning (building permits), social housing, primary education, local roads, management of public space, social services, cultural and sports facilities
Communauté Urbaine Marseille-Provence-Métropole (MPM)	Urban Community *Communauté Urbaine* From 2000-2015	604.75 km²	1,069,909 (INSEE, 2021)	18	Urban planning, strategic planning, public transportation, waste management, environmental protection
Aix-Marseille-Provence Métropole (MAMP)	Metropolis *Métropole* Since 2016	3,149.2 km²	1,911,311 (INSEE, 2021)	92	Urban planning, strategic planning, public transportation, waste management, environmental protection, social cohesion

Sources: INSEE (2025b), MAMP (no date b), Ville de Marseille (no date), République française/Légifrance (2025)

Table 3: Governance Structures in Marseille

The municipality of Marseille is divided into 16 *arrondissements* ("districts") which are regrouped in eight sectors with proper mayors ("*maires de secteurs*") and a sectors council, that elects its members of the overall municipal council (Ville de Marseille, no date). The municipal council then elects members of the metropolitan council: Today, the *Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence* counts 240 counsellors in total and 102 are elected from Marseille (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, no date a). The table on the left presents a short overview of past and present governing structures. Concerning urban planning, *MAMP* holds essential competences, such as for the elaboration of strategic development plans ("*SCOT – Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale*") as well as intercommunal local zoning plans ("*PLUi – Plan Local d'Urbanisme intercommunal*") (République française/Légifrance, 2025).

4.1.6 Local Culture and Image

Marseille distinguishes itself in France through a strong local culture (political, linguistic among others) and through its unusual socio-economic structure (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015) and working-class image (Bertoncello, 2012). There is a distinct socio-linguistic culture, that does not only refer to a specific accent, but also in lexical terms, in terms of volume and connected to a mediterranean habitus (Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille, 2017, p. 92). Marseille takes pride in its diversity and larger degree of integration than in other French metropolises (Juan and Langevin, 2007; Aziz, 2024, p. 6). When famous riots broke out in France in 2005, Marseille curiously stayed calm, which was traced back both to its multiculturalism and geography (Ingram, 2009, p. 273).

However, the city still suffers from a negative image, essentially due to corruption, poverty and crime (Mah, 2014, p. 18; Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 3). Numerous political affairs have constructed a reputation of a city suffering from corrupt and clientelist politics (Mattina, 2017). In relation to crime, Marseille is notorious as being a major hub for drug trafficking and gang violence associated to it. In 2023, 47 people were murdered in relation to drug trafficking (Leroux, 22.12.2023), leading to a mediatized – and not scientific – ranking as the city with the highest crime index in Europe in 2024 (Numbeo, 2024). Media regularly points out the city's troubled reputation (Giovangeli, 2015, p. 304). This image, which has developed over time, is somehow not something unusual for a port city, that in Kokot's (2015, p. 10) words "*have triggered a wide range of imaginations and projections, blending fantasies of freedom and faraway places with images of danger and moral decay*".

4.2 Urban Transformations in Marseille

Port cities were essential nodes in a global network of cultural and knowledge transfer, characterized by a steady flow of diverse, temporary residents (Van De Laar, 2020, p. 1165). In past decades, they have been severely affected by global transformation and restructuring processes, affecting the relationship between their port and city (Kokot, 2015, p. 7). The transition to an entrepreneurial city model affected the urban landscapes and economies of Mediterranean cities particularly (Gospodini, 2009, p. 1181): *"In urban history, transitions from one socio-economic paradigm to another have almost always entailed shifts in the city's spatial organisation, structure and landscape [...]. In our era, the development of post-industrial urban economies has undoubtedly been affecting our cities as spatial entities."* (Gospodini, 2009, p. 1158).

Marseille, at the beginning of the 1990s, had difficulties in coping with socio-economical and urban challenges (Andres, 2013, p. 768). It became urgent to finally overcome its post-fordist transition and find new ways for economic growth, to compete with other mediterranean cities such as Barcelona or Genoa (Andres, 2011, p. 799). Since the end of the 1990s, Marseille started to regain attractiveness, through new cultural institutions, high-speed rail infrastructure and slowly began constructing a new image (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 6). This dynamic has amplified over the past decades, accompanied by large-scale urban renewal and development projects. One could witness several initiatives both on institutional level concerning local governance, as well as the emergence of *urban projects* as a steering approach, such as *Euroméditerrannée* or large scale events, especially *Marseille European Capital of Culture 2013,* and more recently, being a co-host city of the Paris Olympic Games 2024. Marseille has undergone a transformation closely intertwined with its urban renewal and regeneration initiatives and is now becoming increasingly attractive for a certain population for its mediterranean climate and lifestyle, nature and cultural life (Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille, 2017, p. 84).

4.2.1 Metropolizing Marseille

Following decolonisation and the post-fordist transition, the rise of neoliberalism and globalized capitalism transformed the role of metropolises, with metropolitan regions becoming players in a networked, global economy based on competitiveness (Harvey 1989; Sassen, 1991; Brenner 2013). A global trend towards bigger cities emerged, large urban agglomerations with *"global power and a high degree of local/regional autonomy"* (Nijkamp and Kourtit, 2013, p. 293).

Fragmented governance can be considered a serious problem for urban agglomerations and a factor in global competition (Swyngedouw, 2004; Nijkamp and Kourtit, 2013, p. 292), and the metropolitan area of Marseille was generally regarded as an under-organized and fragmented territory (Paché, 2017,

p. 63, Grondeau and Vignau, 2019, p. 26). Metropolisation processes *"transcend and reinvent the geographic, functional, institutional and imaginative spatiality of the city"* (Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021, p. 202) through the *"constitution of integrated urban structures"* (ibid.). Since the 1990s, Marseille sought to develop a status as Euro-Mediterranean metropolis (Bertoncello, 2012, p. 139), and for this purpose needed to overcome its traditional territorial boundaries in a long-term view of establishing itself as a globalised space (Paché, 2017, p. 54).

The project of a strong metropolitan authority was a long existing demand by the city of Marseille and its economic actors, in order to position the city amongst Europe's leading metropolises (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 18). In addition, it promised a reduction of heavy inequalities between the prospering surrounding towns of Marseille and the core city in economic decline (Paché, 2017, p. 54), as developed under chapter 4.1.3. The French central government under former president Sarkozy saw a strong Marseille metropolis as essential in cementing French influence in the Mediterranean (Buslacchi, 2018).

But politicians in the city region were opposed to a stronger metropolitan integration: While in French planning policy, since the 1960s, there was a turn towards creating powerful regions in a technocratic manner, politicians in the Marseille region were unwilling to build alliances to promote a common dynamic: Marseille was the only large French city to refuse to be part of a law creating urban communities and facilitating cooperation between municipalities, due to political tactics of the former mayor of Marseille, Gaston Defferre (Douay, 2010; Paché, 2017, p. 55 f.).

In 1999, a new law, the *"Chevènement Act"*, provided the base for putting in place new forms of local authorities that regrouped several communes: Urban Communities, Agglomeration Communities and Communes Communities (Douay, 2010, p. 58). This led to the creation of the Urban Community of Marseille-Provence *("Communauté Urbaine Marseille-Provence-Métropole"*), while other cities such as Aix-en-Provence or Aubagne created their proper agglomeration community, leading to eight inter-municipal structures in the Bouches-du-Rhône-Département. However, strong rivalries between political actors and their interests existed (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 25). For several years, the urban community and city of Marseille were governed by different majorities (conservative and socialist), complexifying the situation. This stalemate between political actors cost the construction of a metropolis many years and saw other regions, such as Lyon, taking the lead in France (Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021, p. 211).

Ultimately, the prosperous city of Aix-en-Provence and its region had to be forced by the French central state to become part of the new Aix-Marseille-Provence Metropolis, *"Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence"* (*MAMP*). Most other medium-sized cities and communes did not want to adhere to the *MAMP*-metropolis, fearing Marseilles structural problems such as debt, waste

management, migration, poverty, to name a few (Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021, p. 209). In the meantime, before the creation of the metropolis, Marseille was penalized since a lot of wealth was created in its region, but outside of its administrative boundaries, depriving the city of important financial resources.

Both succeeding inter-municipal structures took on competences among others for economic development, mobility, urban planning, and environmental protection, thus being also responsible for projects in public space in Marseille (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, no date b). But the new metropolitan structure covers a much larger territory including other important centres of the urban area and has increased its powers. An overview on the current governance in Marseille is proposed under chapter 4.1.5.

4.2.2 Euroméditerrannée

In several South-European cities, a trend towards large restructuring projects to change the image of declining portal cities persisted (Bertoncello and Rodrigues Malta, 2003, p. 424). Historically, the waterfront, or as to say the *"edge"* (Van De Laar, 2020, p. 1168) of port cities were associated with immoral behaviour, a *"'place of otherness'"* (ibid.). Transforming the waterfront thus means transforming the image of a typical port city and favouring the venue of new residents and leaving behind the problems and narratives of the old waterfronts (Van De Laar, 2020, p. 1168). Alongside Marseille, cities like Glasgow, Liverpool or Rotterdam have pursued these strategies (Van De Laar, 2020, p. 1168). Here, the Mediterranean Sea presents the *"primary backdrop to urban renewal and intensification of tourism"* (Duruz *et al.*, 2023, p. 574).

Local and national policy aimed to strengthen the urban centre rather than the periphery of the city by trying to internationalize and globalize functions as well as orientate the city towards the mediterranean (Donzel, 2014, p. 13 f.; Guinand, 2015, p. 199). Given that Marseille as a port city has always been turned towards global exchange, this approach seems evident (Guinand, 2015, p. 199). This led to several large-scale initiatives for urban regeneration, starting in 1995 with the launch of *Euroméditerrannée*, an "operation of national interest" piloted by the French nation state, with a development of 310 ha in the north of the city centre, next to the former docks and the waterfront (Dubois and Olive, 2004; Becciu, 2016). Its heterogenous perimeter was heavily degraded, but mostly still in use (Dubois and Olive, 2004, p. 103). *Euroméditerrannée* was presented as a driving force for the metropolisation and internationalization of Marseille, with the goal to attract investment, companies, and create new job opportunities and reduce social problems (Bertoncello and Dubois, 2010; Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021). The project can be seen as a response to similar projects in other Mediterranean competitor cities Genoa and Barcelona (Celik Rappas, 2016, p. 368).

Through the revitalization of the waterfront, decision-makers hope to create a new dynamic for the city centre (Guinand, 2015, p. 57), following a similar scheme than projects in other metropolises (ibid., p. 227). After even extending its perimeter, *Euroméditerrannée* presents itself today as the third business district of the country, regrouping 43,000 jobs as well as offering 18,000 new and 7,000 rehabilitated flats (Euroméditerrannée, no date). In the frame of *Euroméditerrannée,* a large-scale private renovation of the *Rue de la République*, the axis connecting the old port and historical centre with the new business district around the *Joliette* square, took place. This was considered the largest private urban renewal initiative in Europe at the time (Dubois and Olive, 2004, p. 107). It led to the displacement of numerous (often vulnerable) inhabitants (Becciu, 2016), meeting heavy resistance (Ingram, 2016, p. 128). In general, the market-driven approach of *Euroméditerrannée* has met a lot of critique from scholars as well as citizen initiatives (Ingram, 2016; Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021).

Euroméditerrannée also included the renovation and expansion of the main station *Gare Marseille Saint* Charles, accompanying the south extension of the high speed rail network in 2001, which created a high speed connection by TGV train between Marseille and Paris in three hours, reinforcing the importance of the Saint-Charles train station (Geiling, 2011, p. 87). This also augmented the attractiveness of Marseille for former residents of the Parisian region. In France, processes of *second hand gentrification* were observed for several cities that are well connected to the capital region (Loumeau and Russo, 2023).

For the city of Marseille, *Euroméditerrannée* marked a major step in modernizing its larger city centre and comforting its role as the core city in the metropolitan region (Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021, p. 207).

4.2.3 Cultural Renaissance and Marseille-Provence 2013

Alike other European port cities, Marseille also opted for strategies promoting culture and creative industries (Duruz *et al.*, 2023, p. 574). Many scholars have retraced the role of culture in the urban transformation processes of Marseille and its turn towards a creative city (Ingram, 2009; Andres, 2011 & 2013; Giovangeli, 2015; Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022). In the 1970s, Marseille was considered a *"'cultural desert'"* (Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille, 2017, p. 89, authors translation), slowly recovering through the emergence of Marseille as one of the centres of hip-hop culture in France and the representation of the city in film and television series.

However, the year 1992 marked a first turn in the city's cultural politics with the creation of the cultural centre of *La Friche – Belle de Mai* in an ancient tobacco factory in the *Belle de Mai* – neighbourhood, which is amongst the most pauperized in Marseille and even France; central but fragmented due to presence of large-scale infrastructure (Bertoncello and Hagel, 2020, p. 6). It can be considered an industrial brownfield development following a post-

fordist logic (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 1). The *Friche* developed continuously, also due to the support of the municipality, and eventually became part of the *Euroméditerrannée*-perimeter in 1999 (Andres, 2013, p. 769; Andres, 2011, p. 807). Cultural actors were also attracted by the particular image of Marseille, marked by proletarian-, multicultural and cosmopolitan culture (Lorente, 2002 cited in: Andres and Chapain, 2013, p.172). While it remained somehow an isolated cultural magnet in the everyday life of the neighbourhood (Bertoncello and Hagel, 2020, p. 7), *La Friche* has undoubtedly contributed to Marseilles renaissance on a city-wide scale (Andres, 2011, p. 808) and played an essential part in regeneration initiatives such as *Euroméditerrannée* and *Marseille-Provence 2013 European Capital of Culture.*

It further contributied making Marseille attractive for potential new residents and investors (Ingram, 2009, p. 285).

In 2008, Marseille was designated European Capital of Culture 2013 (*Marseille-Provence 2013*), offering a major opportunity to rebrand a city until then haunted by its negative image and stimulate economic growth and tourism (Giovangeli, 2015). The label *European Capital of Culture*, awarded for one year by the European Commission, grants international exposure and seeks to position cities as a cultural and creative city on a long-term basis (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 2). As previous successful examples for *ECOC*, former industrial cities such as Glasgow, Lille and Liverpool can be named (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 2). Especially since the discourse on the campaign of Lille 2004, the economic argument prevailed and convinced both politicians as well as local economic actors (Grondeau and Vignau, 2019, p. 23). Local actors saw the opportunity for large transformations of Marseille, concerning its image, attractiveness and physical urban space (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 15). The city's image now became a public concern (Buslacchi, 2018). In its bid, the *MP2013* campaign was successful in positioning itself as the city needing this impulse the most, transforming their negative image into an advantage (Giovangeli, 2015, p. 304; Grésillon and De Saussure, 2021, p. 207). The bid developed positive narratives around interconnections between the Mediterranean and Europe and underlined the multicultural and diverse image of the city (Mah, 2014, p. 19).

Most events of *MP2013* took place in the historical centre of the city, comforting Marseille as a touristic destination (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 24). Critical scholars argue that *MP2013* resulted in an increase in social fragmentation in the city, due to concentrating its economic programme on a very limited perimeter (Grondeau and Vignau, 2019, p. 30). To accommodate events, *MP2013* brought change in (physical) urban space: The emblematic old port was requalified as a "semi-pedestrianized" space (see chapter 5.2) and new representative public spaces (*Esplanade du J4*) and cultural institutions were inaugurated along the waterfront (Romeyer and Hernandez, 2022; Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022, p. 15). These transformations of public space represented the starting points for subsequent transformations taking place in Marseilles city centre that are then further analysed in chapter 5.

4.2.4 Regenerating the City Centre

In addition to the other initiatives summarized under 4.2, several urban renewal programmes were launched over the years ("*Opération Grand Centre Ville*", "*Ambition Centre-Ville*") that targeted the city centre. On the one hand, the goal was to improve living conditions, on the other hand, to transform the city and its image (Bertoncello, 2012, p. 141). This duality showcases the different interests and goals for a city centre that is both home to a population in need of improved living conditions, and the recognized potential by local authorities (the municipality, metropolitan authority and the *Département*) to develop the centre as a factor of urban competitiveness.

While in most Western cities, historical centres have been increasingly commodified and are subject to museumification, Marseille has seen its centre pauperizing continuously, concentrating a fragile and precarious population (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015, p. 13). In 2003, Claude Vallette, deputy mayor for urbanism matters, declared in response: *"We need people that create wealth. We need to get rid of half of the city's inhabitants. The core of the city merits something different"* (Dell'Umbria, 2006, p. 13 quoted in: Becciu, 2016, p. 9, author's translation). The situation of Marseille's city centre has been problematized since the 1980s, when issues of quality of life became apparent (Bertoncello, Hernandez and Bertoni, 2013). A first broad attempt by the municipality to regenerate the city centre in decline was the *"Projet Centre-Ville"* between 1995 and 2001 (Bertoncello, Hernandez and Bertoni, 2013, p. 287). The centre with its diverse and working class population, poor housing state and ethnic shops selling cheap produce did not meet the expectations of the local government and its aspirations of becoming an international metropolis (Bertoncello, Hernandez and Bertoni, 2013, p. 284).

But programmes like the *Opération Grand Centre Ville* were not really successful in improving housing conditions for instance, and focused on more symbolic renovations in public space, as later on developed in chapter 5.4.1. However, the *OGCV* led to the *"Projet-Partenarial d'Aménagement du Centre-Ville de Marseille"* (*PPA*) ("Joint Development Initiative") that further pursues its objectives through a new publicly owned development company created by the central state, the city and the metropolitan authority (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, no date c).

4.2.5 Marseille en Grand

More recently, in response to structural problems and a critical financial situation of the city, the "*Marseille en Grand*" ("Marseille in big") – plan, announced as a priority by the president Emmanuel Macron himself in 2021, wants to deeply transform Marseille, following years of under-investment (Gibellini, 21.11.2023). The plan sees Marseille as a *"laboratory for new public policies focusing on seven priorities: safety, social affairs, health, education, employment, culture and transport"* (Elysée, 2023) that unlocks a total of 5 billion euros

from the national budget dedicated to the structural projects in Marseille, such as new tram lines or school buildings. Measures are supposed to be located in more peripheral, structurally weak neighbourhoods. It can be expected that the plan will have a major impact on the urban structure of Marseille in the future, due to the construction of new schools and tram lines for instance (Martot-Bacry, 11.12.2024).

4.2.6 Marseille – a City in Transformation?

The present sub-chapter (4.2) emphasized the impact of large projects and programmes for urban transformation in Marseille – a city that was profoundly changed through increasing metropolitan integration and the creation of the Aix-Marseille-Provence Metropolis, the development of its central waterfront through *Euroméditerrannée*, a long-lasting focus on culture and creativity driven by *La Friche* and *Marseille-Provence 2013*, and urban regeneration initiatives like the *Opération Grand Centre Ville*. In the future, it is expected that *Marseille en Grand* will further bring change.

Transformation is taking place within an urban context that still faces severe structural problems and yet did not overcome the deeply rooted challenges concerning its socio-economic and socio-spatial structure but is also experiencing a period of change in the past years. While Marseille lost 110,000 inhabitants – nearly the size in population today of the city's first three districts in (INSEE, 2025a) – between 1975 and 1999, the city regained 63,000 inhabitants between 1999 and 2015 (INSEE, 2025a).

A whole discourse on the term *néo-Marseillais* emerged, fabricating a stereotypical category of new inhabitants (Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille, 2017, p. 81). Indicators show a change in the societal and demographic composition of the city: In 2020, 55.5% of households lived in the city for a maximum of nine years (INSEE, 2025a). Between 2009 and 2020, the share of the population having a degree in secondary education grew by over 30%, while the share of population without any school diploma decreased by 27.82% (INSEE, 2025a). Especially young people aged between 20 and 34 years move to the city, often leaving the Ile-de-France-region around Paris, attracted by "*sun, moderate rents and liberty*" (Cassely, 30.06.2021, author's translation). Research found that *néo-Marseillais*, despite not being a homogenous group, were often attracted by the city's mediterranean way of life, diversity and cultural development (Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille, 2017, p. 84). Since the end of the 1990s, Marseille is frequently portrayed by the media as a dynamic and creative city, that is both modern and authentic (Bertoncello and Rodrigues Malta, 2003, p. 425). Part of Marseilles' appeal is also due to its exceptional natural landscape between the sea and its backcountry, a sunny climate and mediterranean lifestyle that goes with it (Bertoncello and Rodrigues Malta, 2003, p. 425). However, while rents and real estate prices are still below levels of other French Cities, they are increasing since 2020, especially in the central arrondissements (French Ministry of Economy, 2023 in: Baldy, 2023).

Concerning economic development, the city was also able to create jobs in the private sector and attract important players, such as the headquarters of the shipping and logistics company CMA-CGM, first private employer in the city (Donzel, 2014, p. 18 ff.).

The venue of an educated and more affluent population is seen sceptical, as the *Marseillais* are being quite protective of the city's particular identity and authenticity (Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille, 2017). Wandering the streets of Marseille today, it is impossible not to stumble upon graffiti or street-art expressing a hostility towards new (temporary) residents from Paris, being characterized as "*bobos*" (bourgeois bohemians).
Tourism is on the rise, and tourist rentals like *Airbnb* are flourishing (Martot-Bacry, 09.05.2023), protest against them intensifies (Baldy, 24.03.2023).

But despite recent dynamics, Marseille can still be considered a working-class city, cumulating socio-economic, security, educational and financial challenges and important inequalities (Gibellini, 2023, p. 3). Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille (2017) note that certain *néo-marseillais* interviewed during their research did even affirm to have felt like in a "*foreign country*" (p. 92, author's translation) when arriving in Marseille. Assisting to a public reunion on public space projects in the central neighbourhood of *Noailles* in November 2024, the author was immediately struck by the divide between long-term residents and what immediately appeared to be new residents, the latter appearing often shocked by local practices and customs on how to deal with issues.
Buslacchi (2018) sees the number of urban regeneration projects as a means to change the values of urban space, introducing new values such as ecology, legality and order, replacing former values such as proximity, solidarity and informality, changing the image of the city in a top-down logic.

Figure 9: View of the *MUCEM* and the *Esplanade du J4* (*Robert-Laffont*)(author's own photo)

4.3 Interim Conclusion – Transforming Public Space in Marseille

As developed under 4.1, Marseille represents a quite specific urban context, characterised by diversity, difference, strong local imaginaries and identities as well as profound urban inequalities and socio-spatial particularities, not only on an urban but even metropolitan level. Marseille, like other industrial port cities throughout Europe, as the core city of a large urban area, needed to find a new role in the era of service-based economies after suffering from decades of decline. There was especially a need to 'reinvent' its city centre, abandoned to degradation and socio-economic difficulties.

All major developments outlined in chapter 4.2 have had repercussions on urban public space in central Marseille: First, the development of a stronger metropolitan authority led to making the transformation of public space a *metropolitan* matter and competence (Bertoncello, Hernandez and Bertoni, 2013, p. 287). It is primarily the metropolitan council who decides on where-, how and for what reasons public space is being transformed. Second, *Euroméditerrannée* created new representational, symbolic public spaces alongside the waterfront, that also shape the image of public space in Marseille today (Martin-Colonna and Kadri, 2022). And third, *Marseille-Provence 2013* paved the way for a fast transformation of the *Vieux-Port* (detailed further under 5.2) and thereby started off a wave of transformations of central public spaces (Romeyer and Hernandez, 2022). Subsequently, recent renovations in the city centre particularly focused on the role of public space and the place of pedestrians (Bertoncello, Hernandez and Bertoni, 2013, p. 283).

Therefore, it becomes clear that public spaces play a central role in the larger urban transformation of Marseille since the turn of the century – scholars see recent transformations of public space strongly tied with a more global ambition to develop attractiveness, even arguing that transformations are rather made for an expected population than for the existing (Bertoncello, Hernandez and Bertoni, 2013, p. 284; Buslacchi, 2018).

In recent years since the transformation of the Vieux-Port (2009-2016), large-scale transformations of public spaces in central areas have multiplied. Considering the specifically tense urban context of Marseille's (partly) pauperized city centre that has undergone major spatial changes, and adopting a normative view of public space (developed in chapter 3), there is a need to critically discuss those transformation processes regarding their purposes, motivations, problematizations and underlying rationalities. Public Space is clearly understood as a resource for urban transformation in contemporary Marseille – but there is a need to untangle the exact understandings and expectations of public space within these processes and how they refer to global tendencies in the transformation of public space.

Figure 10: View of the *Promenade Robert-Laffont*
from the *MUCEM* museum (author's own photo)

5 Results - Transformations of Public Space in Marseille

This chapter will present the results from the discourse analysis on the four chosen transformation cases in central Marseille. In chapters 5.2 to 5.5, the identified *interpretative schemes* and *repertoires* within the four chosen cases are presented and discussed in response to the three subordinated research questions. First, problem definitions that legitimize transformations of public spaces are examined. Second, underlying rationalities for transformation are identified, and their specific legitimated meanings, logics and strategies examined. Lastly, an insight in the critical negotiation of rationalities is provided.

5.1 Semi-Pedestrianization of the *Vieux-Port*

The *Vieux-Port* (Old Port) is the historic harbour of Marseille, presenting a central and symbolic reference point in the city. It is the place where Greek settlers are believed to have founded *Massalia* (Marseille) over 2,600 years ago, on the shores of the natural creek *Calanque du Lacydon* (Morhange et al., 2003), that is still the current harbour basin. It can be considered the heart of the city, where its central districts converge, serving as a reference point for inhabitants and tourists alike. It is a famous site in Marseille, being represented frequently in (touristic) representations of the city. One can enjoy a view of the sea and harbour activity as well as of the *Notre Dame de la Garde* cathedral on the hill in the background, sit in numerous cafes and restaurants, go for a walk along the quays or visit cultural events, festivities and animations that take place throughout the year. The city hall is located on the northern shore of the harbour.

5.1.1 Project Context

Through car-centred development, the *Vieux-Port* became an essential road infrastructure and transit node during the 20th century, counting up to nine driving lanes and leaving little space for pedestrians, tourists, cyclists and public events. The question of redesigning the *Vieux-Port* emerged in 2008, when the two main political opponents for the mayor's seat of Marseille both committed to a pedestrianization in their election programmes, paving the way for a transformation (Romeyer and Hernandez, 2022). In September 2008, Marseille was designated European Capital of Culture 2013 and put the focus on the *Vieux-Port* as an event location, creating the imperative to have completed an operational transformation by 2013 (Romeyer and Hernandez, 2022). The transformation of the *Vieux-Port* can be seen as an essential part of the transformation of the city centre (Bertoncello, 2012).

In a preparatory study of December 2008, the urban planning agency of the Marseille agglomeration (*AGAM*) defined several objectives for its redevelopment, situating the transformation of the *Vieux-Port* within a larger transformation of the city centre (AGAM, 2008). This study emphasized the need to diminish car circulation and develop public space as a signature of the city centre. For the *Vieux-Port*, the document projects to reduce car-dedicated space, create a continuous pedestrian space, reconfigurate the *Quai des Belges* – the central area of the port – entirely, and redesign the harbour basin (AGAM, 2008). From early on, official documents as well as political actors speak of a '*semi-pedestrianization*', meaning that a large area should be pedestrianised while others can be temporarily banned for cars.

The municipal council of Marseille and the council of the current metropolitan structure at the time, the *Communauté Urbaine Marseille Provence Metropole* (MPM), both shared relevant competences concerning elements of public space and provided resources for a transformation. At the time, the municipal

council was governed by a conservative majority led by long-term mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin, while the metropolitan council was governed by a left-leaning majority led by the socialist Eugène Caselli. Both supported the project and worked together for its implementation, a rare consensus. Among others, the imperative of efficiency regarding MP2013 led to a joint decision instituting *MPM* as a unique project contracting authority. *MPM* then organized an international competition for the project, officially entitled "Urban Development of the City Centre including the semi-pedestrianization of the *Vieux-Port*" (MPM, 2009; author's translation). It came with financial resources of 23 million Euros to transform the first section of 12 hectares (the parts of the *Vieux-Port* that needed to be ready for 2013) and then develop an urbanism guide plan for public space of the whole city centre. The competition further foresaw another 9 million Euros for the planning of a reorganisation of the necessary road infrastructure as well as 40 million Euros for the remaining 43 hectares (of which a large part is water surface) of the *Vieux-Port* that were to be transformed after 2013 (MPM, 2009).

Based on the rules of procedure of the competition, the jury chose the project of Corinne Vezzoni, an architect from Marseille, as the winning project, although only by a slight majority of a single voice. But Eugène Caselli (president of *MPM*) and Jean-Claude Gaudin (mayor of Marseille) decided otherwise and overruled the jury's judgment to choose the project of the famous British architect Norman Foster and French landscape planner Michel Desvigne – it seemed that the opinion of economic actors, such as the chamber of commerce also influenced the decision (Vinzent, 9.11.2010). While the project of Vezzoni proposed to pedestrianize the central area of the port completely by 2013 in the spirit of a proper square, as well as plantations of trees on the edges of the *Vieux-Port*, the project of Foster and Desvigne still included space for private cars on the central quay and opted for a more mineral design. Shade is only provided by a pavillon with a mirrored surface ("*Ombrière*") (Vinzent, 19.11.2010; Boucaud, 21.11.2010). Instead of greening the *Vieux-Port*, they proposed to develop a "chain of parks" on the southern side of the port, an idea that was never further pursued by city politics (Martot-Bacry, 18.02.2023). Whereas Vezzonis approach could be considered as more culturalist, Desvigne and Foster convinced with expertise in transport systems engineering (Romeyer and Hernandez, 2022, p. XIII).

After finalizing legally required technical studies, as well as information and participation procedures during the year of 2011, the transformation of the first section was completed in only nine months in 2012, ready for the opening of Marseille-Provence 2013, and fully inaugurated including the prominently placed pavillon on March 2nd, 2013 (Gilles, 02.03.2013; Griffe, 23.04.2015). It profited of international exposure and received the European Price for Urban Public Space 2014 (Architecturefoundation.org, 2013).

In June 2014, preparations began for the second phase of construction works, who were set to begin a year later (Griffe, 23.04.2015). In June 2016, the renovated southern quay, *Quai de la Rive Neuve*, was inaugurated, right before the

UEFA – European Male Football Championship took place in the city (Manelli, 04.06.2016). The final section on the northern side, the *Quai du Port*, between the city hall and the Saint-Jean Fort was postponed until further notice due to other priorities and is still not completed today (Gallini, 28.05.2016). However, this section is temporarily pedestrianized from July to September since 2020, proposing animations, temporary installments to refresh oneself, and free cultural events (Leras, 12.07.2024).

Spatial Transformation

The deadline of MP2013 imposed a strict calendar for a first section of 12 hectares around the central *Quai des Belges* (MPM, 2009). This is also the part where the transformation was most significant, reducing space for motorized vehicles from nine driving lanes to four, amongst which two are reserved for public buses. A large traffic island greened with lawn was removed and the former narrow quays enlarged to the size of a proper square. Space for pedestrians was supposed to be up by 50% over the total area of the *Vieux-Port* and by 75% on the central area (Boucaud, 09.05.2011). A minimal, flexible pavilion was constructed to provide shade and host events (Foster and Partners, no date). Its mirrored surface makes it a new attraction of the site (*La Marseillaise*, 22.01.2013). The overall design was kept minimal, with a uniform paving with pale granite. Barriers to the waterfront were removed, nautical club houses and technical installations removed to platforms on the water, further freeing the quays for pedestrians and liberating perspectives on the water (Foster and Partners, no date).

Construction Phases

1 First Phase (until 2013)
2 Second Phase (until 2016)
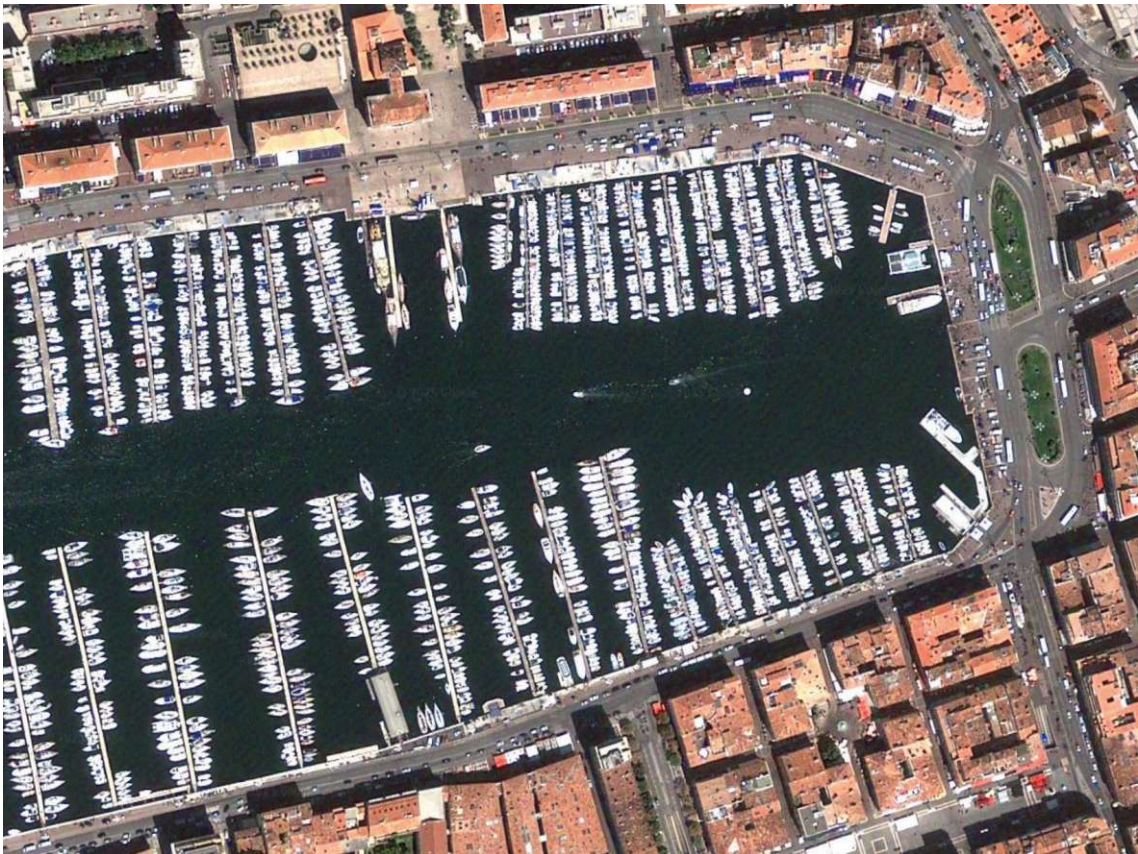3 Initially planned, not completed

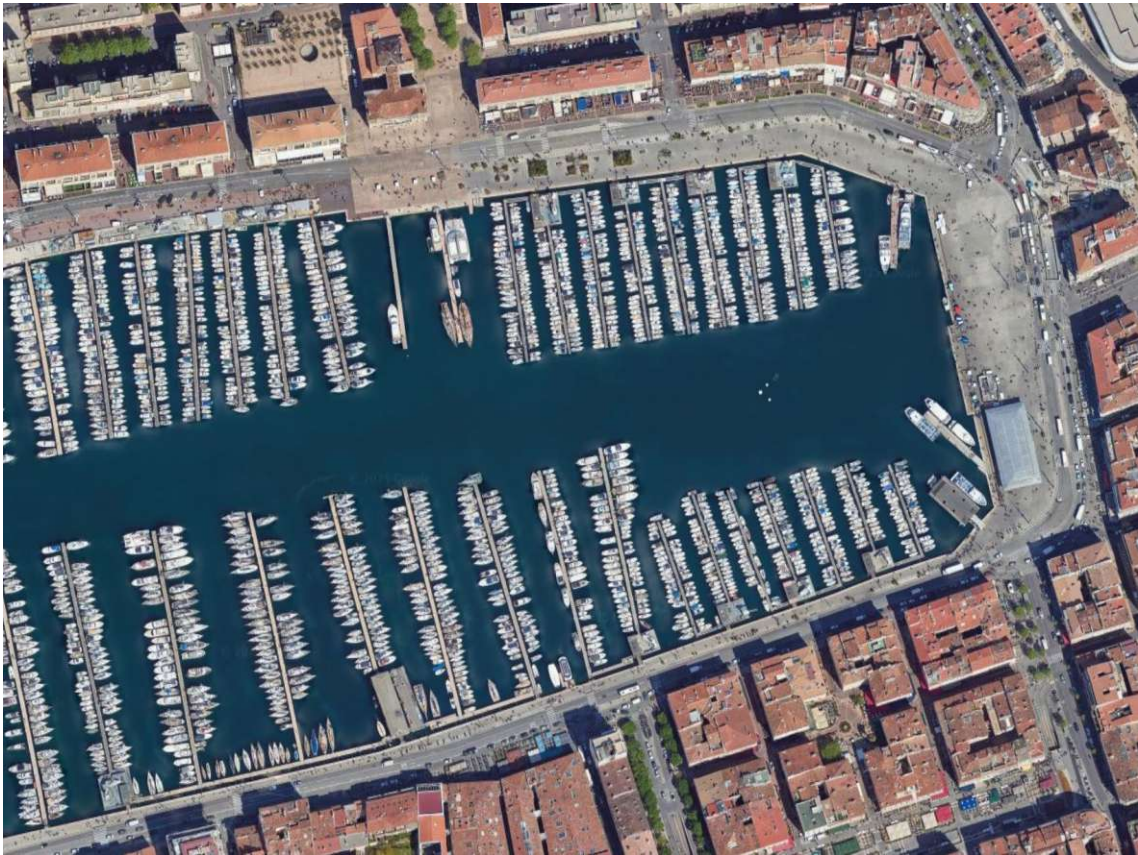Source: Google Earth (2025). *Emphasis by the author.*

150 m

Figure 11: Aerial view of the *Vieux-Port* with an emphasis on the different sections

2010

2023

Source: Google Earth, Maxdar Technologies (2025)   50 m

Figure 12: Aerial view of *Vieux-Port* before and after its redesign

Figure 13: Morning on the *Vieux-Port* (author's own photo)

5.1.2 Results

Problem Definitions and Structure

Definition	Dimensions
Car-centric public space	- Little space for pedestrians and other uses - Lack of safety for active mobility - Sharing of public space is not living up to contemporary standards
Lack of attractiveness of public space	- Low quality of public space design - Degraded state of public space - Unattractive for tourists and visitors - Disturbing use of space - Marseille reluctant to change
Socio-economic paradox of the city centre	- City centre as an important symbolic space is still partly pauperized

Table 4: *Vieux-Port* - Problem Definitions and Structure

The *Vieux-Port* is considered as a site that is mainly dominated by car traffic, heritage of urban development logics of the 1970s. Representatives refer to it as a space that was rather treated like a "*motorway node*" (Viard (PS), *MPM-CM* 2.10.2009, p. 41*)* while at the same time being an important representative and emblematic space for the city. Its spatial organisation leaves little space to the numerous pedestrians, the central quay at the heart of the port counts nine car lanes. Planning documents invoke a lack of safety and comfort for pedestrians. This problematization is shared across political borders and not up for debate, no actors are interested in preserving the status quo of the site.

Furthermore, the omnipresence of the car contributes to an overall lack of attractiveness of the *Vieux-Port*, that is seen as a problem given the importance of this public space for the city in general, and tourism in particular:

> "*First of all, as with any project, the first question to ask is whether or not the current situation is satisfactory? Is this site, the most emblematic of Marseille throughout the world, acceptable today? Are we using this treasure rationally and intelligently? Are the people of Marseille enjoying it as much as they might expect? Can the 4 million tourists we manage to bring to Marseille every year enjoy this site as much as they might expect? The answer is no.*"

> Yves Moraine, UMP (Conservative) Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Marseille-Provence Métropole, p. 40

In general, the state of the *Vieux-Port* is seen as poor, insufficiently designed, with materials of low quality and in an incoherent way, thus the space is lacking legibility. The design produces several conflicts of use and makes it impossible to appreciate certain qualities of the site: Access to the waterfront is impossible for pedestrians due to the barriers of nautical clubs, blocking access to the sea even visually. The little space left for pedestrians has to be shared with restaurant terraces.

It is even the question of an *"anarchic"* use of space that can no longer be tolerated:

> *"This site is being eaten up by the reign of the car, parasitised by houseboats and disappearing through anarchic uses that are modestly renamed 'traditions', as is all too often the case in Marseille. The current situation is unsatisfactory."*

Yves Moraine, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Marseille–Provence Métropole, 40

In addition, Marseille is characterized as a city that is opposed to changing the status quo, complicating the task to transform public space and making it attractive:

> *"We live in a capricious city, a rebellious city, a city that often wants everything and its opposite. And when it comes to carrying out work of this nature that will considerably change the face of an area as symbolic as the Old Port, I must admit that it's complicated."*

Jean Viard, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Marseille–Provence Métropole, p. 34

However, the problematization of a lack of attractiveness also takes another dimension concerning the socio-economic paradox of the city centre, which describes the phenomenon that in Marseille, the city centre is still home to a population that is largely characterized by a weak socio-economic status and precarity, although the centre takes or aspires to take even more important functions within a large metropolitan area. Despite past action by the municipality, the situation endures and is also reflected in the bad state of housing conditions in the centre, which is a hindering factor for the attractiveness of Marseille and its centre. The programme on public space explicitly refers to the paradox:

> *"[...] the paradox of the city centre persists: the heart of the major regional capital is confronted with the functions of a metropolitan centre and some of the most precarious social situations and unemployment [...]"*

Communauté Urbaine Marseille–Provence Métropole, 2009, p.4

Rationalities of Transformation

Rationality	Creating attractiveness through transforming symbolic spaces	Inducing a shift towards sustainable mobility by reducing the car-dedicated space	Transforming public space for Marseille-Provence 2013
Problem Definitions	- Lack of attractiveness - Socio-economic paradox	- Car domination	- Lack of attractiveness - Socio-economic paradox
Conceptions of Public Space as a Resource	- Symbolic space for the identity and image - Touristic attraction - Space for animation	- Public space as a means to change mobility habits	- Public space as a stage for events and festivities in the frame of *MP2013* - Public space as a marketing tool
Logics and Strategies	- Create a flexible pedestrian space that can be used for events - Use design by international architects - Implement modern techniques of control and management	- Pedestrianize large areas that were formerly used for car traffic - Prioritize sustainable mobility within the design	- Realize a fast transformation that is operational by 2013 - Create an open, flexible space
Legitimation	- International comparison with other cities - Need for a different image of Marseille - Attractiveness of the centre is for the common good	- Contributing to attractiveness - Modern mobility solutions - Environmental benefits	- Need for a different image of Marseille - *MP2013* is for the common good
Summary	- Stimulating the attractiveness of the city centre through transforming a major public space that is visible in representations of the city, to potentially create a new image of the city.	- Shifting towards through pedestrianization, positively affecting the attractiveness of public space and producing environmental benefits	- Transforming public space to create a positive image of the city during the large-scale event of *MP2013*

Table 5: *Vieux-Port* - Rationalities of Transformation

Creating Attractiveness through Transformating Symbolic Spaces

In response to the lack of attractiveness of the city centre in general but the state of the *Vieux-Port* in particular, action in public space is seen as a means to create attractiveness. Even more because of the symbolic and historic role that the Old Port takes for the identity and image of Marseille, both on city and metropolitan level, as well as for the international reputation of the city:

> *"The Old Port, a protected natural site, and the urban elements that surround it, form a remarkable and 'powerful' landscape of international significance."*

Communauté Urbaine Marseille Provence Métropole/Ville de Marseille, *Aménagement Urbain du Centre Ville incluant la Semi-Pietonisation du Vieux-Port à Marseille*, 2010, p. 19.

Its symbolic value and central location make it one of Marseille's main tourist attractions:Expectations of the growing number of tourists are broadly taken into consideration. The *Vieux-Port* is envisioned as a space of consumption, representation, public events, and festivities, that is an attraction for different kinds of visitors:

> *"The aim is to make it a place that people from all over the city will visit and come to consume, but also people from the metropolitan area, tourists, people who come by boat, etc."*

Jean Viard, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Marseille-Provence Métropole, p. 34.

Several strategic approaches are developed as a strategy to make the *Vieux-Port* more attractive: First, the reduction of car traffic and the pedestrianization of the quays is presented as a central element in creating a new image of Marseille's historical centre, referring to international practice:

> *"It is necessary to look at the issue of car transit in the city centre and to give pedestrians back their rightful place, as in many national and international cities."*

Conseil de Communauté Marseille-Provence-Métropole, Extrait des Registres des Déliberations: VOI 020-1536/09/CC, 02.10.2009, p. 2

The 'semi-pedestrianization' and transformation of the overall traffic organisation on this central node is discussed more in terms of its symbolic meaning, than its contribution to sustainable mobility. New economic realities require different public spaces in city centres to stay competitive, and Marseille as a car-centred city still lacks welcoming, flexible public spaces, designed to accommodate pedestrians and host large events.

The need to take action to stay competitive with other Mediterranean rival cities is underlined:

> *"But the bottom line is that we're not doing this to solve the car problem, we're doing this because all cities are transforming their city centres, whether it's Genoa, Barcelona or smaller cities like Aix or Montpellier. [...]*
>
> *The aim is to accelerate a process of economic development. [...] The rest is important, but above all, this city needs at least 80,000 private-sector jobs if it is to have the employment rate of other major cities. That's the key issue, and I think that the Vieux-Port is an asset."*

Jean Viard, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Marseille-Provence Métropole, p. 39

In redesigning the space to make it attractive, decision makers are drawn to international design, while wanting to respect the local identity. They are flattered by the interest of international architects for the project during the

competition phase:

> *"Who would have thought 15 years ago that the likes of Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid and other great architects would come to Marseille to use the magnificent material that is our city?"*

Yves Moraine, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 41

While Marseille is constantly compared to other metropolises, and the choice is made for an international team of architects, the designs, however, ought to take local traditions and uses like the fish-market on site into consideration, especially as they contribute to the site's attractiveness:

> *"Our aim is to revolutionize the Vieux-Port, without standardising it. Obviously, let me reassure those who are worried, we have no intention of turning it into the port of Cannes or the port of Nice, and we will have to leave [...] their place to traditional activities, [...] not for the sake of clientelism to one side or another, but because these activities are in themselves strong elements of attractiveness. People who come to see the Vieux-Port of Marseille don't want to see the port of Monaco."*

Yves Moraine, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 41

But reflections on attractiveness are not limited to the new design, but go further regarding the management of the newly transformed public space: new modes of control, management and maintenance, such as reinforced video surveillance and more police presence should be put in place, since the Vieux-Port

> *"can only be and remain a place to live in accordance with the initial objectives, if its uses are regulated and if the control of the respect of good use practices is organized".*

Ville de Marseille and Communauté Urbaine Marseille-Provence-Métropole, *Convention des Usages du Vieux-Port,* 11.02.2013, p. 1

These logics are above anything else legitimised under an economic imperative, with public spaces being assigned a considerable role in the aspired global transformation of the city centre:

> *"public spaces are at the heart of the new orientations for the city centre"*

Communauté Urbaine Marseille Provence Métropole/Ville de Marseille, Aménagement Urbain du Centre Ville incluant la Semi-Pietonisation du Vieux-Port à Marseille, 2010, p. 6.

Therefore, it is necessary to transform symbolic spaces to change the image of the city itself, and Marseille needs a change of image to be able to compete with other (Mediterranean) cities. Jean-Claude Gaudin, mayor of Marseille, reasons:

> *"Projects that embellish the city boost its reputation and attractiveness, and consequently its commercial activity and the creation of jobs."*

Jean-Claude Gaudin, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Marseille-Provence Métropole, p. 44

Thus, there is a *"need to be contemporary"* (Viard (PS), MPM-CM 13.02.2012, p. 38) and achieve progress in modernizing public spaces for a service-based economy, something that is coined as serving the common good. Politicians constantly emphasize that they work united across political borders for this project, since despite ideological differences, the transformation of the *Vieux-Port* is a sign of progress in the interest of all *Marseillais*:

> *"I think it is to the credit and intelligence of Marseille's elected representatives that they have understood that we can overcome a number of divisions to move forward and enable things to move forward."*

> Patrick Menucci, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 09 October 2009 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 42-43

In summary, the *semi-pedestrianization* is seen as a chance to transform a major symbolic space that has enough significance to initiate an image change of the whole city centre for locals, visitors and tourists alike. The transformation is supposed to stimulate the local economy and is seen as a crucial step in modernizing Marseille.

Induce a Shift towards Sustainable Mobility through the Reduction of Car-Dedicated Space

The car-centrism of the *Vieux-Port* is portrayed as an expression of the traffic problems of the inner city, thus seeing the transformation of such a major hub as a chance to start off a sustainable change in mobility habits of citizens. The semi-pedestrianization of the Old Port is ought to be:

> *"an opportunity to implement a sustainable urban project, with a significant reduction in the use of cars, [...] and a focus on soft modes of transport."*

> Ville de Marseille, Extrait des Registres des Délibérations: 09/1302/FEAM, 14.12.2009, p. 2

The project aims to do so through reducing the amount of space dedicated to cars in the public realm and pedestrianizing areas, assuming that in return motorized traffic will decrease. Vast new areas will be made accessible for pedestrians, making walking more comfortable and attractive, inciting people to walk more. Cycling is made more attractive through mixed spaces for cyclists and pedestrians as well as the possibility to use bikes on the new bus lanes, however there are no specific bike lanes. In addition, better public transport offers are promised. On a more strategic level however, the redesign of the Vieux-Port is accompanied by other measures to make motorized traffic more fluid on boulevards surrounding the centre that is ought to be plagued by traffic jams after the transformation of the Vieux-Port, thus not necessarily hindering car traffic on city level. This is legitimized as an important step towards a sustainable transformation of the centre, bringing multiple environmental benefits:

> *"I believe that this project will reduce the number of cars, improve air quality, reduce noise and make the water in the Old Port cleaner. [...]*
> *Of course, we can't remake Marseille as a whole, but it's still an integrated vision of the centre that has tried to be coherent."*

> Jean Viard, *PS* (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 38

Apart from making the *Vieux-Port* more attractive, the semi-pedestrianization is supposed to initiate a transition towards sustainable mobility practices in Marseille and bring positive environmental benefits.

Transforming Public Space for Marseille – Provence 2013

A main objective of the transformation is to make the Old Port ready for the festivities for the *European Capital of Culture* event in the year 2013 (*Marseille-Provence 2013*), seen as a positive driver in propagating a renewed image of the city. Since the beginning of the planning process, it is a main objective – or even an imperative – to complete an essential part of the transformation of this vast space by 2013, so that events can take place on the *Vieux-Port*, the symbolic heart of the city.

Public space is thus both a location for events and a vehicle for the city's image that is granted broad international mediatic exposure during a whole year, making the *Vieux-Port* an essential project for *MP2013*:

> *"This project is emblematic and necessary for Marseille 2013 and beyond for the city's reputation"*
>
> Jean-Claude Gaudin, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 09 October 2009 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 45

This guides the project in the sense that public space should be adapted in its design to host large-scale events and festivities and concerning the timeframe of the transformation, with its central part around the *Quai des Belges* needing to be ready by 2013 and the other quays only being transformed after 2013. Besides needing to be able to host events, public space needs to be transformed in a certain way (pedestrianized or freed of cars) to appear modern and attractive during Marseille-*Provence 2013*, that presents a rare window of opportunity for international exposure, propagating the image of newly transformed public spaces:

> *"It is important for 2013 that part of the Old Port is transformed and pedestrianised, as this will be an important part of the city's image."*
>
> Jean Viard, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 09 October 2009 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 44

Marseille-Provence 2013 is supposed to bring an impulse of renewal to Marseille, therefore a successful event is seen as necessary for the long-term positive development of the city and its whole metropolitan area, while the transformation of the *Vieux-Port* is seen as an essential part in achieving this desired success. As the mayor of Marseille, Jean-Claude Gaudin, puts it:

> *"Tomorrow, in 2013, as we all know, Marseille will be the European Capital of Culture, a major event for its influence and future development. [...] And the city centre, through the Vieux-Port project, must play a key role! [...] it is on their improvement, and on the urban, tourist, commercial, cultural and nautical offer that they will develop, that the development of the city as a whole will depend."*
>
> Jean-Claude Gaudin, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 43

Critical Negotiations

Critique	Negotiations
Lack of ambition concerning mobility solutions	- Political opposition argues that measures taken will not reduce car traffic on the level of the city centre - Political majority argues that semi-pedestrianized project is balanced and approved by the population
Lack of climate adapted design	- Political opposition criticizes the absence of greening in the plans for the redesign - Political majority legitimizes the project with reasons of respect towards historical urban design

Table 6: *Vieux-Port* - Critical Negotiations

A Lack of Ambition concerning Mobility Solutions

Communist and green members of the opposition criticize a lack of effective traffic solutions proposed in the project: In their opinion, there will be no reduction of car traffic in the city centre. They see a need for more elaborate solutions regarding public transport, cycling and broader solutions on city-level for car traffic. Currently, the solution would only cause a transfer of motorized traffic to other important routes. But conservative members of the council equally criticize proposed solutions:

> *"Will semi-pedestrianization reduce traffic problems in the city centre? No, we know very well that it won't, because we're pushing the problem of traffic onto the so-called urban boulevards [...] "*

> Lionel Royer-Perreaut, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 35

Additionally, it is also argued that the project could go further and pedestrianize even more space, instead of only *semi-pedestrianizing* the *Vieux-Port*. Furthermore, there is also the constat of a lack of proper bike infrastructure. In response, members of the governing majority refer to the large public approval for the project, citing numbers as high as 80% of approval within the population (Moraine (UMP), MPM-CM 13.02.2012, p. 41). Since there is also critique of banning cars to a larger extent coming from the far right, the metropolitan government uses the different critiques as a means to present its proposed solution as the properly balanced way:

> *"So today, the best proof that this project is a success is that the criticisms levelled at it are contradictory. Some say there should be more pedestrianization, others say there should be less. This is the proof that our project today is a balanced one."*

> Jean-Claude Gaudin, UMP (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 13 February 2012 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority *Marseille-Provence Métropole*, p. 41

Lack of Climate Adapted Design

The mineral design that was chosen for the *Vieux-Port* is considered as unsuited for the future, since it does not – apart from one metal pavilion – provide shade or refreshment and is not adapted for the rise of the sea level,

floodings or rainwater. This is surprisingly not only brought up by green or left council members, but also by the far-right *Front National*:

> "*But be that as it may, this large stony square, without a single tree, will, in the heat of the summer, moderate, I think, the ardour of walkers.*"

Bernard Marandat, FN (far-right), Session held on 11 February 2013 by the Municipal Council of Marseille, (2:55:00)

Communist elected members of the municipal council would have preferred the other project by local architect Corinne Vezzoni, that was initially chosen by the jury members, since it included the greening of the quays.

This critique is heavily dismissed by the metropolitan government, arguing that historically, the *Vieux-Port* was always a mineral space, and should be in the future:

> "*[...] this urban space, one of the largest pedestrian squares in southern Europe, where for 2,000 years, I would remind you, we have never seen a tree. Ever. So I find it a little strange that we're having this debate about the greening of the Vieux-Port, even though there's a shade pavilion. A port is a mineral space, it's a listed space where you can't add trees that have never existed historically*"

Eugène Caselli, PS (Socialist), Session held on 11 February 2013 by the Municipal Council of Marseille, (3:05:00)

Figure 14: Pedestrianized Area on the *Vieux-Port (author's own photo)*

5.2 Requalification of the *Hyper-Centre*

The "*Hyper-Centre*" designates an area that encompasses several streets and squares next to the *Vieux-Port*, the city's opera and the *Canebière*, certainly the most emblematic boulevard of Marseille. A total area of 72 hectares of public space were to be *requalified*, amongst which 22 hectares were fully pedestrianized (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 2019). The central area is rich of architectural heritage, historical monuments and bustling with commercial activity. The public spaces to be transformed are diverse in their nature, there is a pattern of several connected small streets (*Rue Beauveau*, *Pytheas*, *Saint-Saens*, etc.) adjacent to the *Vieux-Port*, as well as several squares with recreational functions (*Place du Général de Gaulle*, *Cours Honoré Estienne d'Orves*) as well as spaces with important functions for public transport (*Cours Jean Ballard*, *Rue Bir Hakeim/Rue des Fabres*) and emblematic spaces of the city (*La Canebière*). Before its transformation, just like on the *Vieux-Port*, public space design was mainly oriented on car use.

5.2.1 Project Context

In December 2017, the metropolitan council of the metropolitan authority *Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence* (*MAMP)* made the decision to allocate funds of 50 million Euros to a programme to re-dynamize the city centre by transforming public space mainly for pedestrians, baptizing the project "*Ambition Centre-Ville*" ("*Ambition City Centre*"). The project is co-financed by the Bouches-du-Rhône Department (64%), *MAMP* (29%) and to a small extent, the city of Marseille (7%) (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 2019). Since 2016, *MAMP* had replaced the former metropolitan authority, *MPM*, that was leading the transformation of the *Vieux-Port*. In addition to operating on a considerably larger perimeter, *MAMP* was now governed by a conservative majority, aligned with the municipal majority in Marseille and the departmental council. Martine Vassal, president of *MAMP*, is also president of the departmental council and was at the time of the project the chosen candidate for the mayor's office in Marseille, as a successor to her mentor Jean-Claude Gaudin, for the elections that took place in 2020 (Peraldi and Samson, 2020a; 2020b).

The political decision texts refer to successful public space projects in the previous years, notably the *Vieux-Port*, and place the requalification of the *Hyper-Centre* in the continuity of this action. The completion of a motorway bypass between the north and the south of the city meant a considerable reduction of car traffic in the centre by 20-30% according to the metropolitan authority, justifying the pedestrianization and requalification of large areas in the centre (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 2019). Like for the *Vieux-Port*, the office of landscape architect Michel Desvigne was trusted with the design, together with architects of *Tangram* and engineers of *Ingerop*, underlining the continuity with the adjacent project of the *Vieux-Port* (Vinzent, 26.02.2018). In June 2018, *MAMP* decided the modalities of the legally required public parti-

cipation process that took place between December 2018 and the beginning of February 2019 (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 28.02.2019), a rather tight timeframe, especially considering the traditional Christmas holidays.

In the meantime, the tragic event of the collapse of two buildings on the central *Rue d'Aubagne* street on November 5th, 2018 put the terrible state of many buildings in the city centre in focus of public attention and amplified the housing crisis: The collapse tragically killed 8 people and led to evacuations of over 2,500 people in numerous buildings (Mildonian, 05.05.2019). This event marked a turning point for politics in Marseille, also defining the end of the era of the reign of long-term mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin and its conservative majority (Peraldi and Samson, 2020b). It also led to politicians including references to degraded housing in the programme for the city centre, but without concretizing planned actions.

The perspective of upcoming municipal elections in March 2020 had a considerable influence on the project calendar: Before even approving the results of the participation process, preparatory construction works already took place, upsetting the political opposition (Thomas, 28.02.2019; Vinzent, 26.02.2019). Critics argued that the project was mainly an opportunity for the president of *MAMP*, Martine Vassal, who presented herself for Marseilles mayor's office, to get positive media exposure (Branca, 24.07.2019). The project was promoted under the slogan "#*MarseilleChange*" ("#*MarseilleIsChanging*", authors translation), which media commentators suspected to be more of a campaign slogan (De Corbier, 11.03.2019). While the project itself in its global essence was not really a source of controversies, it took place in a tense political context and was most probably driven to a certain extent by electoral motives.

Spatial Transformation

Essentially, the project comprises the pedestrianization of 22 hectares of public space (mostly the streets surrounding the opera house and the *Canebière*), the creation of bike lanes, greening of several streets and squares with more than 450 planted trees and a requalification through new soil coverings with materials such as limestone, porphyry or granite (Métropole Aix Marseille Provence, 2019, p. 4). Access to many streets is still possible for cars, but only with a lower speed limit, in order to better share public space (Thomas, 28.02.2019). Pedestrian areas are equipped with safety bollards due to terrorist menaces (Beaufils, 07.01.2019). Public space was designed and transformed in a uniform way, using the same materials, with the aim of creating a harmonic space.

The *Canebière* as a strong symbol is pedestrianized in its lower part, between the *Vieux-Port* and the intersection *Cours Belsunce/Saint-Louis*. While this is the most central part of this artery, the section is only about 270 metres long, while the boulevard stretches out further for about one kilometre (Google Maps, no date). Several important public transport bus lines had to change itinerary due to the full pedestrianization of the *Canebière*, requiring a reor-

ganisation of the bus system with two new terminals, located on the north and south of the *Canebière*, on the *Rue Bir-Hakeim/Fabres* and the *Cours Jean Ballard* (Beaufils, 07.01.2019). The decision that no buses can cross or drive along the Canebière was seen critically by some observers, who argue that they were a connecting element between the separated north and south of the city (Branca, 24.07.2019). Priority in the transformation was given to the pedestrianization, requalification and greening of public space.
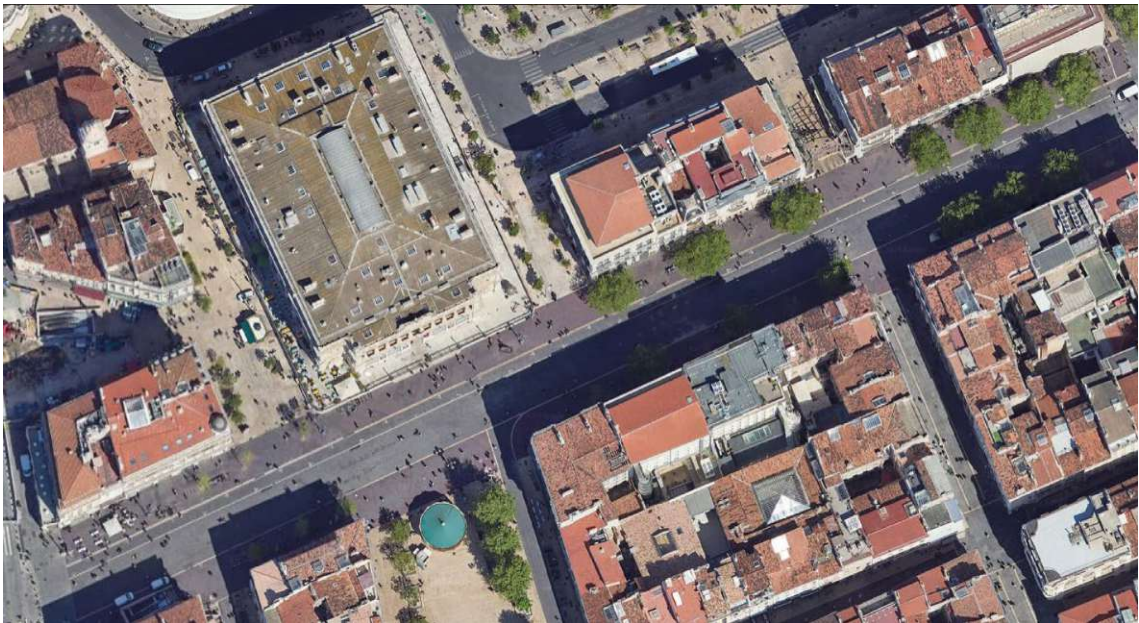

Source: Google Earth (2025), Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence (no date)   200 m

Figure 15: Aerial overview of public spaces redesigned. *Graphical Emphasis by the author.*

2018

2023

Source: Google Earth (2025)

50 m

Figure 16: Aerial view of *La Canebière* and adjacent public spaces before and after their redesign

Figure 17: *Place du Général-de-Gaulle* (author's own photo)

Figure 18: *La Canebière* (author's own photo)

5.2.2 Results

Problem Structure

Critique	Negotiations
The absence of real mobility solutions	- Citizen initiatives deploy an absence of clear strategy and missing bike infrastructure - Metropolitan government underlines overall approval
Electoral motivations	- Political opposition criticizes suspected electoral motives - Metropolitan government justifies itself through political argumentation
Lack of participation	- Political opposition criticizes absence of 'real' participation process - Metropolitan government justifies proper action and cites large approval within participation process
The absence of a social vision	- Absence of investments in complementary social infrastructures in the city centre - Imbalance between investments in housing and public space

Table 7: *Hyper Centre* - Problem Definitions and Structure

A general decay of the city centre is observed and problematized in several dimensions: First, the lack of commercial attractiveness is seen as critical, and the degradation of public space as a sign of overall decay, even in a symbolic dimension concerning the *Canebière.*

The commercial pole of the centre is seen weakened by the development of shopping centres outside of the core city, that have *"quadrupled"* (Patrick Menucci (PS), AMP–CM 20.06.2019, p. 69) since 1995, and seen as a factor of closing shops and businesses. This is problematized by the socialist opposition, blaming politics by the city government in place since 1995. According to this argumentation, the current problem of decay of the city centre is directly linked to the lack of *commercial attractiveness*. While the conservative government shares the acknowledgment of the problem, they describe it rather as a phenomenon that most inner cities in metropolises are facing today.

Concerning car traffic and the socio-economic situation of the city centre, this is not explicitly problematized in documents concerning the transformation of the *Hyper-Centre.* However, the project is seen as directly linked to the project of the *Vieux-Port*, implicitly sharing its problem dimensions.

Politics of the past years in public space are seen as insufficient by the left opposition, public space being degraded, and the *Canebière* as a symbolic space is cited as an example:

> *"This Canebière is the emblem of your failed policy. It has been abandoned for over 20 years and is a scar on the face of Marseille."*

Muriel Prisco, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 28 February 2019 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix–Marseille–Provence, p. 40

Rationalities of Transformation

Rationality	Creating an attractive city centre through the homogenization of public space	Rebalancing public space in a sustainable way
Problem Definitions	- The decay of the city centre: Degraded public space and lack of commercial attractiveness	- The decay of the city centre: car traffic
Conceptions of Public Space as a Resource	- Public space as a defining factor of attractiveness for the city centre - *La Canebière* as an important symbol of transformation	- Transformation of public space to make sustainable changes
Logics and Strategies	- Homogenize design to harmonize public space - Requalify and embellish public space - Valorize architectural heritage - Pedestrianize to increase commercial attractiveness - Achieve symbolic transformations	- Redistribute space occupied by cars to pedestrians, cyclists and greening measures - Bring „nature to the city" to create a sustainable, comfortable environment - Comfortable environment creates attractiveness
Legitimation	- Continuity of politics - Public approval - Necessary for economic development of the metropolis	- Environmental benefits and better quality of life - Positive economic effect - Public approval
Summary	- Create a network of uniformly designed public spaces to renew the image and overall attractiveness of the city centre	- Renew the attractiveness of the city centre by making it more sustainable

Table 8: *Hyper-Centre* - Rationalities of Transformation

Creating an Attractive City Centre through the Homogenization of Public Space
In response to a perceived decay of the cities' central symbolic public spaces, and a subsequent lack of attractiveness of the entire city centre, the principal aim is to create an attractive city centre through the homogenization of public space. Public space is thus understood as a major factor of the attractiveness that is supposed to bring:

> "*spatial, environmental and identity quality to the city centre*"

> Ville de Marseille, Extrait des Registres des Délibérations: 19/0368/UAGP, 19.06.2017, p. 2

Specific spaces such as the *Canebière* are singled out in that aspect due to their symbolic role on city level:

> "*Our metropolitan authority must carry out an emblematic project for la Canebière, Marseille's showcase, that will give our city back its most beautiful face and restore its pride*"

> Muriel Prisco, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 28 February 2019 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 41

Several logics and strategies are then pursued to make public space, and consequently the city centre, attractive (again). First, a homogenous design is considered key, a coherent choice of simple, effective and qualitative materials as well as the provision with homogenous urban furniture and lighting is intended. The new homogenous design is supposed to create a harmonic environment in public space and create a continuous coherent, legible and secure space, especially for pedestrians. Thus, the goal is to homogenize and 'harmonize' public space to make it an attractive space.

Implementing the new design means requalifying degraded public space: The operation aims to requalify *"52,000 square metres of public space"* (MAMP, *Bilan de la Concertation Prealable*, 2019, p. 241) in total. The notion of requalification is frequently used, understanding *partial requalification* as upgrading the quality of existing (degraded) public spaces, while *total requalification* is rather understood as the *"creation"* of public spaces, referring to broader changes, for instance their pedestrianization. Requalification and harmonization of public space, together with greening, is expected to create streets and places that are *"embellished, aerated and greened"* (MAMP, *Dossier de Presse.*, 2021, p. 4). While measures are principally set in public space, the aim is that the *requalified* and newly *harmonized* public space also functions together with the architectural heritage of the numerous historic buildings and monuments on site, to lead to a more general *"valorization of architectural heritage"* (MAMP, *Bilan de la Concertation Prealable*, 2019, S. 3).

Requalified, *harmonized*, *homogenized* and *embellished* public space is thought essentially for the use of pedestrians, that should ultimately be provided a space that is *"ideal to stroll around"* (VdM, 19/0368/UAGP, 19.06.2017, p. 1). It is promised that *"22 hectares will be entirely pedestrianised"* (MAMP, *Dossier de Presse.*, 2019, p. 4). This further creates a harmonic setting where pedestrians can walk around freely, indicating that the project thinks of pedestrian mobility rather from a perspective of comfort for leisure activities, such as shopping. Through homogenizing and requalifying interventions, public space is made attractive for pedestrians, which makes the whole centre overall more attractive for businesses and commercial activity.

While discourse on the project rarely focuses on specific spaces and puts the aspect of *requalifying* a whole area of distinct streets and places and turning it into a homogenized, pedestrianized area, the transformation of the *Canebière*-boulevard is repeatedly specifically emphasized. The *Canebière* is seen as a *"mythic arterial street"* and a *"strong symbol for Marseille"* (MAMP, *Dossier de Presse.*, 2019, p. 7). Its pedestrianization is listed as a proper objective among the overall defining ones, calling it a *"symbolic and prestigious act"* (MAMP, *Bilan de la Concertation Prealable*, 2019, p. 241). Transforming the *Canebière* is a symbol that embodies the general effort to make public space attractive for pedestrians.

Several arguments are constructed to justify this type of action in public space: First of all, revitalizing the city centre in general through *requalifying*

public space is presented as being directly linked to the previous project of the *Vieux-Port,* seen as the successful starting point for a global re-dynamization of the city centre and putting public space at the heart of a re-dynamization strategy. The requalification of further major public spaces in vicinity to the *Vieux-Port* and pursuing identical objectives is therefore seen as the next logical step:

> *"Today, the project being launched to pedestrianise the city centre under the authority of the President of the Metropole, Martine Vassal, and the mayor of the 1st and 7th arrondissements, Sabine Bernasconi, is a continuation of this, and we wouldn't be able to achieve this ambitious objective if we hadn't done this excellent work previously."*

> Yves Moraine, LR (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 28 February 2019 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 44

Second, the positive feedback that was received during the participation process regarding the pedestrianization is regularly emphasized, conveying that the local population largely approves the project in its essence:

> *"The project to redevelop public spaces in the city centre received very favourable opinions overall, expressing the desire for a calmer city centre, thanks to the pedestrianization of several sectors"*

> Conseil de la Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, Extrait des Registres des Déliberations: VOI 001-5522/19/CM, 28.02.2019, p. 4

Furthermore, the necessity to make the centre *attractive* is underlined from an economic and metropolitan perspective: An *attractive* city centre in the future is seen as a premise for an overall attractive metropolitan region, since it is still *"the metropolitan area's leading economic hub"* (Caradec, LR, MAMP-CM 20.06.2019, p. 68). The project is ought to be "*a success both for Marseille and for the Metropolis"* (Caselli, PS, MAMP-CM 28.02.2019, p. 39).

Rebalancing Public Space in a Sustainable Way

In response to the dominance of motorized traffic in public space, the transformation of streets and squares is seen as an opportunity to make sustainable changes in the city. In a similar manner to the *Vieux-Port*, reducing space occupied by car traffic should induce a change in mobility habits, alongside with new active mobility infrastructure such as bike paths. Through rebalancing space, new capacities for greening in urban space are made available. Overall, these sustainable changes are meant to provide comfort in public space and favour a better quality of life. The aspect of creating infrastructure for pedestrians and active mobility is emphasized as especially crucial, even in promoting sustainability on a metropolitan level:

> *"Revitalising the heart of the city of the central city of the metropolis is one of the keys to the sustainable development strategy promoted by Aix-Marseille-Provence. The aim is to improve the sharing of public space in favour of pedestrians [...]"*

> Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, La métropole et le département poursuivent la transformation de Marseille. Dossier de Presse., 2021, p. 4

Public space is *"largely freed from cars"* (MAMP, Dossier de Presse., 2021, p. 4), and while new cycling infrastructure is also planned in the frame of the project, the focus lies clearly on providing pedestrian infrastructure with high quality and favouring walking as a sustainable mode of transport. Therefore, pedestrian zones are implemented that make it impossible for cars to transit through the centre. Parking lots on the street are heavily reduced and general parking rules become stricter, banning the "*stationnement à cheval*", meaning the allowance to park on the pavement with only two wheels. Public space will be shared in a new way that favours sustainable mobility and aims to break the dominance of cars in urban space.

Furthermore, public space is made more 'sustainable' by "*bringing back nature to the city*": A large focus is set on greening public space, often arguing with a quantitative number of "*450 planted trees*" (MAMP, *Dossier de Presse*, 2019, p. 4) in the centre, speaking even of an "'*archipelago of trees*'" (MAMP, *Bilan de la Concertation Prealable*, 2019, p. 217), in opposition to former car-dominated space. New vegetation is seen as necessary in a space that is described as very mineral, lacking greenery. The landscape design is supposed to vary depending on the specific space and its atmosphere, chosen plants are selected for their adaptive capacities to a mediterranean environment. Thus, public space is transformed to create a more equitable balance between motorized traffic, active modes of mobility (walking in particular), and urban greenery.

However, these measures are legitimized in different ways. They are supposed to have a positive impact on quality of life due to their beneficial environmental effects, notably the reduction of noise and air pollution through the reduction of car traffic and the positive effect on biodiversity of greening measures. In combination, this is supposed to create comfort in a calm city centre. But this legitimation remains marginal. Quite openly, the expected positive effect on the local economy by the transformation of the city centre is put forward:

> "*These projects aim to improve the sharing of public space in favour of pedestrians and soft mobility. 'Marseille is changing' and evolving towards a harmonious and fulfilling quality of life, with one major objective: to put an end to the car-only lifestyle in the city centre and develop new spaces to live and share, giving pride of place to the return of nature and greenery. A breath of fresh air, both literally and figuratively, that will also be the basis for revitalising the commercial heart of Marseille.*"
>
> Métropole Aix–Marseille–Provence, La métropole et le département poursuivent la transformation de Marseille. Dossier de Presse., 2021, p. 3

Rather than arguing with environmental benefits of the reduction of car traffic and subsequent emissions, the positive effect on comfort, quality of life and commercial revitalization is central in the legitimation. Furthermore, as a supporting argument, public approval of greening measures and pedestrianization is underlined. In summary, public space is *rebalanced* for *sustainable* purposes – that are however not legitimized by their supposed concrete *sustainable* effect, but by their expected positive economic effect.

Critical Negotiations

Critique	Negotiations
The absence of real mobility solutions	- Citizen initiatives deploy an absence of clear strategy and missing bike infrastructure - Metropolitan government underlines overall approval
Electoral motivations	- Political opposition criticizes suspected electoral motives - Metropolitan government justifies itself through political argumentation
Lack of participation	- Political opposition criticizes absence of 'real' participation process - Metropolitan government justifies proper action and cites large approval within participation process
The absence of a social vision	- Absence of investments in complementary social infrastructures in the city centre - Imbalance between investments in housing and public space

Table 9: *Hyper-Centre* - Critical Negotiations

The Absence of Real Mobility Solutions

Within the official assessment of the participation process, two initiatives (*Un Centre Ville pour Tous* and *Piéton à* Marseille) approve the project in its outlines, but deploy the lack of a clear strategy behind the proposed solutions for sustainable mobililty, and especially that necessary bike infrastructure is missing in the project. It is further remarked that the project only focuses on important axes and spaces, leaving out small adjacent streets and lacks a proper environmental focus. However, these concerns are not taken up by the metropolitan government, who underlines that in summary, there was a large approval of the proposed plans during the participation process.

Electoral Motivations

The project is debated in 2019, a year before the municipal elections in Marseille. Concerning the project itself, there is a critique of short-sighted-ness and going too fast, arguing that this is caused by the upcoming elections in 2020 and serving electoral purposes. In the Metropolitan Council, members from other municipalities complain about the amount of time dedicated to debate the project, and the political motivation of interventions, which legitimizes the governing majority to dismiss further discussions on critical aspects of the project. The debate becomes increasingly political than fact-based, as demonstrated by how critique on the speed of the transformation and participation process is politically dismissed by the majority in power:

> *"With you, it is always too early or too late! It is always too fast or too slow! In short, you find a reason to criticize because your criticism is purely political."*

Yves Moraine, LR (Conservative), Minutes of the session held on 28 February 2019 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix–Marseille–Provence, p. 43

Lack of Participation

Communist opposition members in the metropolitan council criticize the lack of participation possibilities for the population in the process, and states that construction works even started between the result of the concertation process was officially approved, speaking of a *"pseudo-concertation"* (Pellicani, PCF, MAMP-CM 28.02.2019, p. 42). The chosen methods for participation such as a public event were only the "*legal minimum*" that was required (ibid.). This perspective is dismissed by governing politicians, who argue that nobody could have done it better, that a broad range of participative measures were taken and that the process put in place showed a broad approval of the project by the population.

The Absence of a Social Vision

The way the requalification project tackles the decay of the centre does not convince opponents from the political left: In their view, the project that is too focused on aesthetic qualities, in opposition to a lack of investment in social infrastructure for residents and social aspects that are relevant for quality of life. This targets both the rationalities to *homogenize* public space to renew attractiveness, as well as the argumentary based on *quality of life*, that is criticized in its too narrow conception:

> *"There is a desire for fewer cars, more pedestrians and more trees. We agree with this. But there is also a virtual absence of anything to do with the quality of social life in this large public space."*

> Christian Pellicani, PCF (Communist), Minutes of the session held on 28 February 2019 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 41

In addition, there is strong critique that programmes for the city centre do not include any proper concepts concerning housing issues: Especially after the drama in the *Rue d'Aubagne* on November 5th, 2018, the political left states the need to invest in housing, and not only in public space:

> *"Today, I would especially like to re-emphasise a point that I feel is [...] fundamental to the success of the project, namely that the renovation of the hypercentre requires us to carry out, at the same time, both the redevelopment of public spaces and the rehabilitation of substandard and run-down housing in the streets of this city centre, which cannot be left behind in the current project"*

> Eugène Caselli, PS (Socialist), Minutes of the session held on 28 February 2019 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 39

And in consequence criticizes the investment priorities of programmes in place:

> *"[...] the reality is that there is a complete imbalance between the budgeted programmes for development and the redevelopment of public spaces visible in the centre of Marseille [...] and the programmes allocated to housing regeneration and the construction of social housing in all the arrondissements of Marseille, to make the city a better place to live for everyone, starting with the people who live in the city centre today."*

> Marc Poggiale, PCF (Communist), Minutes of the session held on 13 December 2018 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 133

Figure 19: *La Canebière* and *Cours Saint-Louis* (author's own photo)

5.3 Requalification of *La Plaine*

The *Place Jean-Jaurès*, a square of 2.5 hectares more commonly known as *La Plaine*, is the largest public square in Marseille, located at the edge of the city centre and the 1st, 5th and 6th district of Marseille. It is named *la Plaine* derived from the Provençal word for plateau ("*plan*"), since it is geographically located on a plane surface on a small hill, offering views on the city and the mountains in the background (Bocquet, 01.12.2016). Today, the vibrant square is well known for its large open-air market and as a gathering place for locals throughout the day, as many bars on the square and the neighbouring streets between the *Place Jean Jaurès* and the *Cours Julien* are open until late. The lively neighbourhood is characterized by a diverse and alternative public, street art, small hip, alternative shops and gastronomy. The *Notre-Dame-du-Mont* neighbourhood south of the square was recently awarded the "*Worlds Coolest Neighbourhood*" by magazine "*Time Out*" (*Time Out*, 25.09.2024). Before its transformation, *La Plaine* was characterized by large surfaces that were not dedicated to a specific use, being a marketplace, parking lot or place for spontaneous, self-organized activities, but public space was undermaintained and left in a desolate state (Kerste, 2018).

5.3.1 Project Context

In 2010, the city of Marseille started the *"Opération Grand Centre-Ville"* (*OGCV*, "*Operation Grand City Centre*") for urban renewal in the city centre with the goal to renovate 35 clusters of building blocks in the city centre and produce new housing, renovate buildings and facades, create new commercial premises and concering public space to "*embellish existing public spaces to stimulate investment by renewing the residential, commercial and tourist attractiveness of central neighbourhoods*" (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 19.10.2017, authors translation).

The city trusted the publicly owned local development company *SOLEAM* (*"Société Locale d'Équipement et d'Aménagement de l'Aire Marseillaise"*) with the operation. *SOLEAM* was then owned by the City of Marseille by 94%, with three other neighbouring cities sharing the remaining 6% of its capital (Ville de Marseille and SOLEAM, 2011). Originally planned for a period of ten years (2011-2021), it was supposed to renew 15,000 square meters of public space (Ville de Marseille, 06.12.2010). With the creation of the Aix-Marseille-Provence Metropolis in 2016, the *OGCV*-operation was transferred to the competence of the metropolitan authority (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 19.10.2017). The project was then extended until 2025 and was now supposed to transform 50,000 square meters of public space (SOLEAM, no date a).

Today, 67% of *SOLEAM* is owned by the *MAMP*-Metropolis and only 15% by the City of Marseille, but the company remains 100% publicly owned (SOLEAM, no date b). The Regional Court of Audit of the *Provence-Alpes-Côte*

d'Azur Region heavily criticized the management of the *OGCV* because *SOLEAM* was incapable of meeting the goals of the operation in terms of housing: Between 2010 and 2018, only 31 of the promised 1400 new apartments were constructed, and only 14 out of promised 2000 renovated (Gilles, 04.03.2021; Chambre régionale des comptes Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, 2021, p. 89ff.). The Court of Audit criticizes that instead of focussing on housing issues, SOLEAM's management of the *OGCV* increasingly sets its focus on public space, and the project of *La Plaine* in particular. Originally, only the facades on the Place Jean-Jaurès were to be renovated in the frame of the *OGCV*. The transformation of the square was not initially planned but ended up being the most significant operation of *OGCV* in terms of costs (Chambre régionale des comptes Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, 2021, p. 89ff.).

Preparations and the development of scenarios for the square as well as a participation process started in 2015. After the leak of a pre-programme for the transformation, protest against a project of requalification emerged rapidly – especially driven by an autonomous, open group called "*Assemblée de la Plaine*" ("*Assembly of la Plaine*"), that was already active in the neighbourhood before during contestations against new video surveillance (Kerste, 2018). For its leftist and alternative activists, *La Plaine* was a space freed of commercial use unlike other squares in Marseille. They rejected the project because they feared that with the square, the requalification will lead to a large-scale gentrification of the whole neighbourhood (ibid.). The *Assemblée de la Plaine* even self-published a newspaper "*Sous le Soleil la Plaine*" that accompanied the development of the project. In several editions, among others, the supposed commercial orientation of the requalification, the abandonment of public space on purpose, as well as the expected touristification and gentrification is subject to violent critique (Assemblée de la Plaine, 2016). Activist groups as well as market vendors heavily criticized public visions for the market, that planned a reduction in size and a new orientation towards high-end products, as well as a temporary relocation during construction works. While many did not adhere to the protest of the *Assemblée de la Plaine* and its absolute refusal of any kind of transformation, many locals were heavily concerned about the outcome of the project of *La Plaine* (Kerste, 2018; Biehler, 2021, 28ff.). Protest intensified throughout the concretization of the project: In 2018, between 2,500 and 3,000 people demonstrated against it after 46 trees were cut during construction (Manelli, 21.10.2018). To protect the construction works from protestors, SOLEAM erected a concrete protection wall for a cost of over 420,000 Euros (Chambre régionale des comptes Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, 2021, p. 93).

After years of tension between activists and *SOLEAM* and additional delays due to the Covid-19 pandemic, construction was finally completed and the square officially reopened in May 2021: The date collided with the end of a Covid-19-lockdown, with the place being immediately frequented by a large number of people. Especially the new large terraces of bars were very popular, directly resulting in new conflicts of use due to noise (Rapaud, 26.05.2021; Hagoug, 16.11.2021).

Spatial Transformation

Several structural changes had a considerable impact on the square: First, the organisation of motorized traffic was restructured. The ring road, that formerly made it possible to contour the square, was abandoned in favour of a new spatial organisation of the square that promised fewer transiting cars. Parking lots were reduced and parking in the middle of the square, until then tolerated by night, was now prohibited. In total, 85% of the surface of the *Place Jean-Jaurès* is now pedestrian. A small new green open space and playground was created in the middle of the square, replacing the former one that was encircled by a fence. Trees were cut and new ones planted, with now a total of 150 trees on the square (SOLEAM, no date c). A large wooden structure in the middle of the square incorporates four historic magnolia trees while serving as a 'sun deck' for recreational purposes. New kiosks for different uses (newspaper agent, gastronomy, toilets, etc.) were built. The market was reorganized to fit the new structure of the square, but nearly all former vendors could finally stay (Elziere, 15.03.2022). Bar terraces were considerably enlarged, especially when there is no market taking place. The equipment of public space was entirely redone, with new floor coatings, lighting and urban furniture. Vast spaces were still open and flexible for multiple uses, with large areas needing to be able to accommodate the market: For instance, they still accommodate spontaneous gatherings, demonstrations, playing children, skaters.

2017

2023

Source: Google Earth (2025)   50 m

Figure 20: Aerial view of *La Plaine* before and after its redesign

Figure 21: Market on *La Plaine* (author's own photo)

Figure 22: Greening and skater on *La Plaine* (author's own photo)

5.3.2 Results

Problem Structure

Definition	Dimensions
Invaded by car traffic	- Through traffic diminishes the quality of the square - Large parking areas are an obstacle to a diverse use of space
Quality of the market	- Size of the market is an obstacle for a diverse use - Nature of products is not desired by local government
Degradation of the neighbourhood	- Poor state of equipments in public space - Chronic littering and incivilities, poor hygiene
Inappropriate use of public space	- 'Anarchic' use of space needs order - Incivil use of space produces insecurity

Table 10: *La Plaine* - Problem Structure

The *Place Jean-Jaurès* is depicted as congested by through traffic, with a negative impact on the quality of public space. Compared to a *"huge roundabout"* (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 52), its spatial structure with car lanes forming a ring road throughout the square is seen as a problem for the appropriation of the square by pedestrians as well as gastronomic uses. The space is dominated by the presence of cars:

> *"a ''flood'' of cars that inundates the square and prevents it from being appropriated by the public"*
>
> SOLEAM, Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, Ville de Marseille, *Dossier du Projet*, 2017, p. 7

Traffic causes dysfunctions such as congestion, noise and pollution. Large areas of *La Plaine* serve as a parking lot, especially at night. The result is bad pedestrian infrastructure and little space for alternative uses, causing conflicts of use. This constat is shared and comforted by oppositional voices, as well as citizens in the records of the public participation process.

Another use that temporarily takes up most of the space on the square, the Market of *La Plaine* takes place three times a week on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays with over 300 market stalls. Of its total length of 1800 metres, only a fraction of around 100 metres is reserved for food produce. Both the city and metropolitan government consider this as a negative factor for the quality of the market. The large surface occupied by the market is also seen as an obstacle to putting in place large permanent terraces for the gastronomy on the *Place Jean-Jaurès*, especially during market days, the bars and restaurants dispose of rather small surfaces outside in public space to accom-

modate their guests. The cars of the market merchants create traffic and are parked all over the surface. Altogether, the market is leaving too little space to other activities during long hours each week. The pre-study on *La Plaine* lists several points concerning the market for a political negotiation, showing that it is not desired to keep the market in its actual form:

> *"Determination of the number and size of market stalls.*
> *Choice of the market traders.*
> *Management of waste collection/cleaning of the market."*

> SOLEAM, *Etude de programmation pour l'aménagement de la place Jean Jaurès (la Plaine – Marseille)*, 19.05.2015, p. 10

Furthermore, *La Plaine* is described as a neighbourhood that is chronically dirty due to littering, generating hygienic problems such as rat infestations and bad odours, affecting its quality negatively. The far-right opposition describes the situation very drastically:

> *"I've never understood it – between chronic dirtiness, poverty, anarchic traffic, incivilities and impoverishment, the residents, for the most part, suffer this area more than they live it."*

> Jacques Besnainou, FN (far-right), Minutes of the session held on 19 October 2017 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 88

More generally, the state of the neighbourhood is seen as degraded, aside from a lack of cleanliness, the quality of design and equipment of public space is judged as poor and insufficient. Floor materials are seen as degraded, the metal grids in the middle of the square regarded as a disturbing element, lighting is considered inefficient, and the trees on the square are *"insufficiently developed"* (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 88). The quality of pedestrian spaces is presented as bad due to the narrow sidewalks, hindering the commercial attractiveness of the neighbourhood:

> *"As for the other shops, the narrow pavements limit their potential appeal and prevent customers from taking the time to stop in front of the shop windows"*

> SOLEAM, Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, Ville de Marseille, *Dossier du Projet*, 2017, p. 14

The bad state of the neighbourhood seems to justify the requalification project, also for politicians of the political opposition, from the far-right to the far-left:

> *"With regard to the project to redevelop the Place Jean Jaurès, no one can doubt the absolute need to look into this central area of the City of Marseille, which has been left in a deplorable state for many years [...]"*

> Jacques Besnainou, FN (far-right), *Minutes of the session held on 19 October 2017 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence*, p. 87

> *"[...] my contribution is not intended to call into question any plans to redevelop or reorganise the square of La Plaine. [...] Anyone disputes the need to update the facilities, equipment, operations and services of a highly frequented public space."*

> Marc Poggiale, PCF (Communist), *Minutes of the session held on 19 October 2017 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence*, p. 88

Even though during the participation process, critical voices emerged and are subsequently officially registered, many citizens shared the concern of degraded space:

> *"The need for action is recognised and emphasised by a very large majority of contributors. Moreover, not a single contributor supported a position that would leave the Place Jean Jaurès in its current state, without any renovation."*

> SOLEAM, Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, Ville de Marseille, *Projet de Requalification de la Place Jean-Jaurès. Compte rendu de la concertation publique (synthèse globale)*, 03.11.2017, p. 4

Last, the problem of inappropriate use refers indirectly to all other three problem definitions: Public incivilities in several domains are depicted as having a major detrimental effect on public space. This is emphasized by the conservative majority in power, as well as the far-right opposition and voices from the participation process.

This includes "*anarchic*" parking practices, littering from the market traders and clients or illegal trafficking, leading to a climate of insecurity. For the mayor of Marseille, Jean-Claude Gaudin, this is one of the main reasons for an urban intervention on the *Place Jean Jaurès*:

> *"[...] It can't go on like this on Place Jean Jaurès. It's just not possible! We need order. We can't allow everything to be done by people who don't respect public spaces, by people who want to take over everything without any law or title. At some point you have to make a certain number of decisions."*

> Jean-Claude Gaudin, LR (conservative), *Minutes of the session held on 19 October 2017 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence*, p. 89

Rationalities of Transformation

Rationality	Reconquering car dominated space	Accentuating use in multifunctional space	Fostering commercial attractiveness	Creating a metropolitan Mediterranean square
Problem Definitions	- Invaded by car traffic	- Inappropriate use - Invaded by car traffic - Degradation of the neighbourhood - Quality of the market	- Inappropriate use - Invaded by car traffic - Degradation of the neighbourhood - Quality of the market	- Degradation of the neighbourhood
Conceptions of Public Space as a Resource	- Public space should primarily be for pedestrians	- *La Plaine* as a multifunctional, urban free space and 'green lung'	- Public space as a space of consumption	- La Plaine as a symbolic space of metropolitan relevance
Logics and Strategies	- Reducing car traffic through reducing space dedicated to cars - Reorganisation of road structure to cut off through traffic - Change mobility habits through reducing car space	- Only emphasize the use of certain desired uses through public space design - Preserve strong symbols of local identity - Greening public space	- Pedestrianize areas to increase their commercial appeal - Provide better regulation and control of uses to increase attractiveness of the neighbourhood	- Transform a large symbolic space to develop the attractiveness of the city centre - Valorize architectural heritage - Use 'Mediterranean' design elements to emphasize identity
Legitimation	- Car culture is not contemporary - Change in mobility habits is necessary - Giving pedestrians their rightful place	- The identity of *La Plaine* is characterized by multifunctional use - Conflicts of use make design interventions necessary	- Degradation of commercial attractiveness of the centre needs intervention - Situation of the market needs new rules	- Relevance of the square for attractiveness on city-/metropolitan level - Mediterranean identity of the space
Summary	- Reducing the space for cars on a car-dominated square to pedestrianize large areas	- 'Accentuating' desired uses through a restructuring of the spatial organisation of the square that respects the local identity	- Pedestrianize and regulate space to increase its attractiveness for commercial purposes	- Branding a space as 'Mediterranean' to develop its attractiveness

Table 11: *La Plaine* - Rationalities of Transformation

Reconquering Car Dominated Space

A reorganisation of current uses and especially the reduction of areas occupied by cars is seen as necessary in achieving a *"radical transformation of the square"* (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 5) in response to the 'invasion' of the square by cars. The aim is to reconquer space that was previously occupied by cars and thus favouring sustainable forms of mobility, pedestrianizing large areas and increasing the quality of public space. This means a reorganisation of traffic flows and car lanes, that no longer form a ringroad circling the whole square – an *"urban choice"* (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 5). Together with a reduction of car lanes and a new speed limit, it is supposed to cut off traffic passing through the square, allowing to reduce car traffic by up to 50%. Beside the restructuring of road infrastructure, parking spaces that made up a large proportion of the square are drastically reduced. The subsequent pedestrianization of space that was formerly occupied by cars creates *"A square reconquered by pedestrians"* (SOLEAM, *Dossier du Projet*, 2017, p. 3), that offers a large continuous, pedestrianized space that is a symbol of a new culture of sharing public space:

> *"With the aim of breaking away from the outdated culture of 'all for the car', the project of La Plaine presents a new traffic pattern, combining efficiency of local services and optimisation of space. The project reverses the current situation, with 85% of the space dedicated to pedestrians, compared to 21% today."*
>
> SOLEAM, Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, Ville de Marseille, *Dossier du Projet*, 2017, p. 7

Aside from providing better pedestrian spaces, the transformation favours other sustainable mobility choices by planning new bike lanes and new bus shelters. The reduction of the space for cars is said to influence people's mobility habits and shift them towards sustainable choices. However, the mobility focus lies undeniably on pedestrian space.

Accentuating uses in a multifunctional space

La Plaine is a square that is marked by conflicts of use, between cars and pedestrians, or the market and gastronomy for instance, as well as between a lot of different users on the areas that are left open for multiple use. Some uses are seen as inappropriate and contribute to the degraded state of the neighbourhood. By accentuating desired uses and creating new green spaces, the transformation aims to create a multifunctional space for the everyday life of citizens.

The local identity of the square and its neighbourhood, as well as the attachment of the local population to the space is acknowledged. Conceptors of the project want to capture the specific sense of place of *La Plaine* that is consisting among others in its cosmopolitan, cultural, multigenerational spirit, choosing a *"'contextual' approach, attentive and mindful of the neighbourhood's human and cultural environment"* (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 52). People from all over the 1st, 4th, 5th and 6th *arrondissement* of the city gather on the highly frequented *Plaine*, located at the crossroads and the natural centre of multiple neighbourhoods, a multigenerational social

meeting-point with a 'working-class' identity. The project wants to "*respect the local identity*" (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 56) and the history of the place: Considered a multifunctional square in its essence, the *Place Jean-Jaurès* offers space for multiple purposes throughout the day and during the week – for instance the three market days a week require a different use of space than the remaining four days.

With regard to its identity, the transformation does not chase away current uses of space, but only "*accentuates certain uses, and minimizes others*" (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 109) while aiming to better ensure a harmonic coexistence between concurring uses of space. This strategy is implemented through the principles of efficiency, harmony, organisation and optimisation in the planning of space. However, all existing uses are preserved, there will only be less space for car parking and through traffic, all other uses will be "*accentuated*". This implies more space to relax and play, but also larger terraces for restaurants and bars accompanied by a reorganisation of the market stalls. The pre-study of the project defined the uses that need to be accommodated as:

> "*Going to the market, doing your shopping, Relaxing on a terrace, Going for a walk, Having fun, Playing with your children, Parking to do your shopping or to go home, Transit*"

> SOLEAM, *Etude de programmation pour l'aménagement de la place Jean Jaurès (la Plaine – Marseille)*, 19.05.2015, p. 15

Several elements on the square are strongly tied to the identity of the space and are thus said to be carefully incorporated in the redesign of the square such as the market of *La Plaine* or the four magnolia trees at its centre, that are older than a hundred years. Around these defining elements, the design proposes to "*accentuate*" uses such as "*relaxing and encounter*" (SOLEAM, *Requalification de la Place Jean-Jaurès*, no date) through design elements such as "*urban salons*" (SOLEAM, MAMP and VdM, *Dossier du projet*, 2017, p. 11). For these purposes, a larger restructuring of the space is seen as needed, since the current (degraded) structures in place and the organisation of space do not fulfil these functions sufficiently.

Characterized by a proper dynamic that shapes its identity as a deeply urban space, the square is a singular vast free space within a densely built city that offers refreshment, a "*lung of the city*" (SOLEAM, MAMP, VdM, *Compte rendu de la concertation publique*, 03.11.2017, p. 11):

> "*Known as "La Plaine", it is the only large, planar area in Marseille, with a dimension of more than 2 hectares in a single continuous piece, located right in the heart of the dense urban fabric. It offers residents a real space to breathe.*"

> SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen au cas par cas préalable à la réalisation d'une étude d'impact. Annexe*, 2017, p. 80

Additional greening is supposed to create "*nature in the city*" (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 92), a proper green space in the heart of the city for recreation, while also increasing biodiversity in comparison to

the existing tree structure. The planting of 150 new trees is thus seen as a central measure.

Fostering Commercial Attractiveness

The commercial attractiveness of Marseille's centre is seen as key in comforting its role as the centre of the metropolitan area, and a large-scale renovation of the central neighbourhoods is thus seen as vital in stopping the closure of shops and the flight of the shopping clientele.

Pedestrianizing large areas of the square is not only seen as contributing to a shift towards sustainable mobility, but also as a step towards making the neighbourhood commercially attractive, enhancing the potential of existing and future businesses:

> *"One of the major challenges in requalifying La Plaine is to enhance the commercial appeal of existing and future entities. Studies show that shops located in pedestrian areas are more frequented. As a result, the increase in pedestrianised areas at the foot of facades, as presented in the development plan for La Plaine, will make it possible to develop the commercial appeal of Place Jean Jaurès and the surrounding area."*
>
> SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen au cas par cas préalable à la réalisation d'une étude d'impact. Annexe*, 2017, p. 74

The redesign prioritizes the idea to *"encourage a dynamic city on foot or by bike."* (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 99). For decision-makers, this idea of a dynamic city includes making public space attractive for shops and gastronomy terraces to animate public space:

> *"The heart of the square, designed as a place to relax and meet people, features wide avenues lined with shops and terraces. A space that was once dedicated to cars has been transformed into an area optimised for everyone."*
>
> SOLEAM, *Requalification de la Place Jean-Jaurès (Marseille)*, no date

A central element of the economic life of the neighbourhood, the market is seen as an element that needs more organisation, regulation and rules, since it is at the origin of issues that are detrimental to the overall commercial attractiveness, such as the lack of cleanliness. The political government wants to introduce a new way of organisation and control to enforce the respect of rules:

> *"At la Plaine in particular, we have to do what we do at other markets, where there is an organisation that is respected, and where our municipal employees are there to facilitate and ensure respect. We're not chasing anyone away, but we want things to be respected."*
>
> Jean-Claude Gaudin, LR (conservative), *Minutes of the session held on 19 October 2017 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence*, p. 90

Restructuring the market opens the possibility to offer larger spaces for bars and restaurants on the square, a key element of the spatial restructuring. Before the transformation, establishments only disposed of small terraces

on the narrow sidewalks, or larger terraces on the opposite side of a driving lane and only to be opened when there was no market taking place. Thus, a main objective to increase the attractiveness of the bars and restaurants on *La Plaine* was to *"give space to generous terraces"* (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 50) that animate public space. The city of Marseille created a proper chart for terraces on the square to:

> *"promote these emblematic areas of the city of Marseille for their residents and increase their attractiveness to tourists and the economy."*
>
> Ville de Marseille, Extrait des Registres des Délibérations: 20/0057/EFAG, 27.01.2020, p. 1

In response to the problem the 'inappropriate' use of public space, setting further measures for surveillance and order on the square is supposed to contribute to its attractiveness. The need for order goes together with a need for better management of the space, that already needs to be planned in advance, alongside with the design of the future square. Driving lanes are planned in a manner that illegal double-parking becomes impossible, and the spatial reorganisation is supposed to facilitate police interventions. Questions of cleanliness, waste and hygiene are seen as vital: More equipment like public toilets and bins will be provided. New and better lighting as well as surveillance cameras are supposed to enhance a sense of security.

Creating a Metropolitan Mediterranean Square

Located *"in the heart of Marseille"* (SOLEAM, *Requalification de la Place Jean-Jaurès*, no date), the significance of the *Place Jean-Jaurès* and its requalification is considered far beyond the neighbourhood scale:

> *"Marseille's Place Jean-Jaurès is emblematic of this Mediterranean city. A historical, geographical, urban and sociological landmark [...]"*
>
> SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen au cas par cas préalable à la réalisation d'une étude d'impact. Annexe*, 2017, p. 80

Emphasis is placed on the fact that the square is even larger than the central area of the *Vieux-Port* and can thus be considered as the second most important public space in central Marseille, making it an elemental part of the *"Opération Grand Centre-Ville"* urban renewal initiative. People come here from all over the town to shop at the market, have a drink or relax. The relevance of the square for a large proportion of inhabitants of the city is repeatedly stressed. *La Plaine* embodies a particular urban identity that can be made part of the city's attractiveness. Therefore, its renewal is not only one of a central neighbourhood space – even if the role as such of *La Plaine* is recognized – but also the renewal of a public space with metropolitan relevance:

> *"The City of Marseille decided at the end of 2018 to redevelop the square into a major metropolitan and multi-purpose square."*
>
> Ville de Marseille, 27.01.2020, Extrait des Registres des Délibérations: 20/0057/EFAG, p. 1

From this perspective, the architectural heritage of the square is also highlighted, mentioning to *"upgrade the square by building on its intrinsic architectural and landscape qualities"* (SOLEAM, *Étude de Programmation*, 2015, p. 12) and liberating the facades to create a more direct link between the architecture

of the surrounding buildings and public space, valorising its architectural potential.

However, the square takes another symbolic dimension that puts its *"Mediterranean"* character forward, as many design elements are described with allusions to the "*Mediterranean*" as a concept. Greening of public space leads to a *"new urban ecosystem with a Mediterranean atmosphere"* (SOLEAM, *Requalification de la Place Jean-Jaurès*, no date) that consists of mediterranean plantations. Water elements are a reference to the *"mediterranean identity"* that is being reinterpreted (SOLEAM, *Demande d'examen préalable*, 2017, p. 52). Two newly planned tree alleys are being referred to as "*Ramblas*", in reference to the famous boulevard in Barcelona, a metropolis that many consider the example to follow in Mediterranean Europe. *La Plaine* should be turned into a modernized symbol for Marseille, with the transformation creating a square that lives up to modern standards, *"a large Mediterranean square, multi-purpose, pedestrianised and accessible"* (MAMP, *VOIMOB 020-252/20/CT*, 15.12.2020, p. 2).

Critical Negotiations of Transformation

Critique	Negotiations
The absence of real mobility solutions	- Citizen initiatives deploy an absence of clear strategy and missing bike infrastructure - Metropolitan government underlines overall approval
Electoral motivations	- Political opposition criticizes suspected electoral motives - Metropolitan government justifies itself through political argumentation
Lack of participation	- Political opposition criticizes absence of 'real' participation process - Metropolitan government justifies proper action and cites large approval within participation process
The absence of a social vision	- Absence of investments in complementary social infrastructures in the city centre - Imbalance between investments in housing and public space

Table 12: *La Plaine* - Critical Negotiations

Lack of Room for Expression

A considerable stream of critique emerged, both within the discourse in political institutions as well as in the registers from the participation process: It tackles the lack of expression and discussion of the project of *La Plaine* and its principles. Politically, the project is debated in the metropolitan council of the *Aix-Marseille-Provence Metropolis*, since the requalification of public space falls into the competence of the metropolitan authority. Many counsellors within the institution are not familiar with the neighbourhood, nor the project, publicly admit so and criticize the amount of time spent debating on the project.

The President of the Metropolitan Council, Jean-Claude Gaudin, also mayor of Marseille at the time, takes advantage of the situation to keep the debate low. Politicians from the opposition make part of their disenchantment that no 'real' debate took place in the metropolitan council:

> *„There has been very little debate at local level on the files on the Place Jean Jaurès because they are metropolitan issues. We need to have the debate here, even if it may offend some sensitive souls, and I think that you must ensure that the organisation of debates is respected"*

Christian Pellicani, PCF (Communist), Minutes of the session held on 18 October 2018 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 85

On the other hand, the registers from the participation process showcase considerable critique from citizens on the form and extent of the process, desiring to be included more in the planning process:

> *"[...] some participants expressed their impression of a project that was already set in stone, 'a fait accompli' before which they would be placed"*

SOLEAM, Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence and Ville de Marseille (03.11.2017), Projet de Requalification de la Place Jean-Jaurès. Compte rendu de la concertation publique.

In addition, project management by *SOLEAM*, the publicly owned company is criticized as inefficient and non-transparent.

Costs and Imbalance of Investments

Opponents of the project see it as far too costly, with the projected amount of costs rising continuously throughout the project. In addition, an imbalance between investments in public space and housing and other social infrastructure is pointed out by the left-wing opposition as well as during the participation process:

> *"We're investing 12 million to renovate the Place Jean Jaurès, while our schools..."*
>
> Nouriati Djambae, EELV (Green Party), Minutes of the session held on 18 October 2018 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, p. 75

Openness and Flexibility of Design

A main preoccupation by citizens in the concertation process is that the square remains open for a multitude of uses that are not defined in detail by the design in advance, like spontaneous actions, festivities or demonstrations – there is a fear that the new spatial structure will not allow for the same flexibility anymore as the previous one.

Fear of Urban Exclusion

Within the participation process, fears of *"standardisation, gentrification, homogenisation, sanitisation, dispossession"* (SOLEAM, MAMP, VdM, *Compte rendu de la concertation publique*, 03.11.2017, p. 4) were constantly present. Politicians from the left-wing opposition echo these concerns:

> *"What is being prepared is a complete reorientation of the road system, public space and uses. Hence the great concern expressed during the consultation on the subject of 'gentrification' for tourism..."*
>
> Marc Poggiale, PCF (Communist), *Minutes of the session held on 19 October 2017 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence*, p. 88

Within the registered remarks, participating citizens make part of a fear of commercial gentrification, *folklorization* and *touristification* of the market, followed by rising rents and local taxes. When dismissing these fears and critiques, the far-right allies with the conservative majority to defend the politics of transformation put in place:

> *"Many criticisms were expressed during the consultation process. Where some see nothing but standardisation, homogenisation and asepticisation, I see only the restoration, modernisation, restructuring, cleaning up and maintenance of these neighbourhoods that have been left to their own devices for too long."*
>
> Jacques Besnainou, FN (Far-right), *Minutes of the session held on 19 October 2017 by the Council of the Metropolitan Authority Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence*, p. 88

Regarding the future of the market, mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin defends the intended change under the developed motive of order and respect: *"We're not chasing anyone away, but we want things to be respected."* (Gaudin, MAMP-CM 19.10.2017, p. 90).

Figure 23: Market and Playground on *La Plaine* (author's own photo)

5.4 Transformation of the *Place de la Providence*

The *Place de la Providence* is a small square of about 2,500 square meters, located in the dense, central neighbourhood of *Belsunce* (Elziere, 20.02.2023). The neighbourhood with its small, narrow streets and old buildings has historically been an arrival neighbourhood for several waves of immigration, also characterized by its location between port and the main train station *Marseille Saint-Charles* (Peraldi, Duport and Samson, 2015; Angélil, Malterre-Barthes, and Something Fantastic, 2022). Still today, it is characterized by bad housing conditions, small, cheap hotels, wholesale shops, as well as ethnic shops, snacks and bars.

The square is only around 500 metres away from the *Vieux-Port* and around 200 metres from *La Canebière*, being located right next to the municipal library of Marseille *Bibliothèque de l'Alcazar* on the *Cours Belsunce*. A private car park for around 80 cars on public grounds with a licence conceded by the metropolitan authority, protected by fences, took up nearly the whole space (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 2022). Space for pedestrians was limited to narrow sidewalks on the side and adjacent, unequipped, small spaces such as the *Place René-Sarvil Chansonnier* and on the *Rue de la Providence*. The initiated transformation essentially removed the parking space in the middle of the square, pedestrianising the space and plans to develop it as a small green space that is flexible for multiple uses. Currently, it is open to the public with temporary arrangements and urban furniture to test out future uses (Carmona, 19.11.2024). While media coverage is widely positive, there is protest by wholesale shopkeepers, who fear that their businesses will collapse due to the removal of the cheap, comfortable car park.

5.4.1 Project Context

Like the transformation of *La Plaine*, the *Place de la Providence* project is part of the *Opération Grand Centre Ville (OGCV)* led by the public local development company *SOLEAM*. In 2017, the *MAMP* metropolitan authority decided to approve participation modalities for projects concerning several clusters included in the *OGCV*, among which the cluster around the streets of *Rue Nationale* and *Rue de la Providence* – which includes the development of the *Place de la Providence* (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 30.03.2017). Several times, the planned-out timeframe for the transformation of the space was postponed, and eventually the participation process took place in May and June 2022, with public reunions, information on site, and workshops with local businesses as well as in a primary school nearby (Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 25.10.2022). During the participation process, the majority of participants seemed to appreciate the plans to transform the former parking into a greened square, according to the official registers. However, wholesale business owners were also very vocal about their opposition against the project, since they argue that their businesses rely on accessible parking spaces and delivery zones.

In springtime 2024, archaeological excavations took place on the square. In November 2024, the square opened to the public with temporary urban furniture such as benches and pergolas, making the former parking area accessible to the public. Final construction works are set to begin at the end of 2025 and be completed in 2026, for a total cost of 2.7 million Euros (Métropole Aix–Marseille–Provence, 20.11.2024).

Spatial Transformation

Essentially being a parking lot until its transformation, the *Place de la Providence* has and will completely change its essence due to the transformation, therefore presenting a slightly different example than the other three cases, albeit all of them reduce space for motorized vehicles. In the middle of the square, the car park left its space for a multifunctional use and greenery. Minimal temporary instalments were made in 2024, with a few benches, pergolas and embankments. However, shortly after the opening in November 2024, one could already observe the new furniture being already used by many people to rest, chat or have lunch. The final design of the square is not known yet, but it is envisioned to set a focus on greening and multifunctional use.

2023

2025

50 m
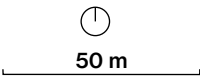
Source: Google Earth (2025)

Figure 24: Aerial view of the *Place de la Providence* before and after temporary redesign

5.4.2 Results

Problem Structure

Definition	Dimensions
Neighbourhood with socio-economic difficulties	- Through traffic diminishes the quality of the square - Large parking areas are an obstacle to a diverse use of space
Lack of (green) public space	- Dense urban fabric - Public spaces are highly frequented

Table 13: *Place de la Providence* - Problem Structure

The problem definitions for transformation rather describe the state of the neighbourhood than of the *Providence* square itself, and unlike the other cases, outcomes from the participation process are reflected stronger within the problem definitions. The neighbourhood of *Belsunce* is characterized as a neighbourhood marked by insecurity in public space, such as aggressions, drug abuse and other incivilities.

> *"[...] the participants felt strongly that the public spaces in the area are perceived as 'difficult' and that there is a need for more visible intervention that is adapted to the life of the neighbourhood."*
>
> Conseil de la Métropole Aix–Marseille–Provence, Extrait des Registres des Déliberations: CHL–002–12690/22/CM, 28.02.2019, p. 4

On the other hand, the neighbourhood is seen as drastically lacking public (green) space, because of its dense urban fabric and streets and squares being mainly occupied by cars, while the neighbourhood and its public spaces are still being used and frequented heavily by a diverse public.

Rationalities of Transformation

Rationality	Creating a new public space for local inhabitants	Changing the image of the neighbourhood through transforming public space
Problem Definitions	- Lack of (green) public space	- Neighbourhood with socio-economic difficulties
Conceptions of Public Space as a Resource	- Public space as a social infrastructure - Public space as a resource for climate adaptation - The Place de la Providence as a central space of the neighbourhood	- Transformation of public space as a means to change the image of the neighbourhood
Logics and Strategies	- Turning a car park into an area for multifunctional use	- Radically transform a public space to make change within a neighbourhood visible and change its image
Legitimation	- Need for public space in a dense urban area - Public support to create a new public space	- Neighbourhood in need of new image - Public support
Summary	- Transform a space entirely dedicated to cars into a space dedicated to people	- Transform public space to transform the overall image of a neighbourhood

Table 14: *Place de la Providence* - Rationalities of Transformation

Creating a New Public Space for Local Inhabitants

Since *Belsunce* is described as a dense, highly frequented neighbourhood that lacks public space, the creation of a proper square in place of a car park is presented as a unique opportunity to offer a new public space to inhabitants. Public space is acknowledged as important social infrastructure, and the *Place de la Providence* referenced as a central public space in the neighbourhood, being *"in the heart of the Belsunce neighbourhood"* (MAMP, *Belsunce: une nouvelle place pour des nouveaux usages*, 13.12.2022).

It is the opportunity to create a multifunctional green square amidst the dense building blocks, something that is desired by the local population. Repeatedly, it is argued that the local population expressed the wish for a green, multifunctional square.

> *"Another point of consensus was the need for a green lung [...]"*
>
> Métropole Aix–Marseille–Provence, Réaménagement de la Place de la Providence. Bilan de la Concertation, 25.10.2022, p. 37

Through a radical transformation, the *Place de la Providence* changes from a space that was formerly nearly exclusively used for car parking into a new green space. Car traffic is drastically reduced. The new space is supposed to accustom multiple uses on a central location in a densely populated neig-

hbourhood, public space is developed under the motive of being a social, climate adaptive and resilient infrastructure. Temporary change through tactical urbanism enables to immediate improvement of conditions for residents.

Changing the Image of the Neighbourhood through Transforming Public Space

On the other hand, decision-makers also argue that upgrading the *Providence* square will be an asset in upgrading the entire neighbourhood, until now characterized by insecurity in the public realm and a lack of green public space. Here, public space is again understood as a premise and resource for attractiveness:

> *"[…] the requalification of the La Providence parking lot is a major challenge for the attractiveness of the district."*

> Conseil de la Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, 28.02.2019, Extrait des Registres des Déliberations: URB 017-1822/17/CM, p. 3

Due to its central position within *Belsunce* and as a transition space on a pedestrian route between important public spaces and sights, the square presents an interesting opportunity for such matters. This is legitimized again as a desire that is shared by the local population:

> *"The project to develop the square is seen as a real opportunity to improve living conditions for residents and transform the image of the neighbourhood."*

> Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, Réaménagement de la Place de la Providence. Bilan de la Concertation, 25.10.2022, p. 37

Improving the qualities of public space by transforming it is supposed to improve the image of the neighbourhood itself: Changing its image is thus associated as a positive aspect of a transformation.

Critical Negotiations

Critique	Negotiations
Parking lot required for business activity	- Wholesale businessmen and women claim the need for parking infrastructure to maintain their business - Transformation is legitimized by the need of the rest of the population for public space

Table 15: *Place de la Providence* - Critical Negotiations

Parking Required for Business Activity

The shopkeepers of the many wholesale businesses in the area deploy the closing of the parking area, arguing that they need cheap, specifically dedicated parking lots nearby for their clients, as well as delivery zones. However, the closing of the car park was declared as non-negotiable even before the participation process. The official documentation of the participation process points out that a special workshop with businessmen and women has been organized as a response, and remarks the:

> *"[...] fairly strong divide between, on the one hand, some of the wholesalers and, on the other, the area's residents and users."*

> Métropole Aix-Marseille-Provence, Réaménagement de la Place de la Providence. Bilan de la Concertation, 25.10.2022, p. 29

The city argues that other users and participants are largely in favour to create a new green public space, while only the wholesalers reject the project: Therefore, the project is legitimated through the voice of other participating residents.

Figure 25: Temporary Installments on the *Place de la Providence*
(author's own photo)

Figure 26: Dense urban fabric in
the centre of Marseille (author's own photo)

6 Discussion – Public Space as a Resource for Urban Transformation in Marseille

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the findings from the empirical analysis of the four distinct cases by identifying continuities, variations, specificities, and overarching patterns within the discourse on public space transformation in Marseille. Through a synthesis of the interpretative schemes and repertoires that legitimize certain problem definitions, underlying rationalities and critical negotiations of public space transformations, it offers a critical understanding of how public space is conceptualized as a resource for urban transformation in the centre of Marseille.

A comparison of the different cases allows the identification of overarching patterns in their interpretative schemes that are consistent elements within the discourse on public space (chapter 6.1). While the cases are sharing many parallels in their rationalities and legitimation strategies, they also present variations in the discourse. This particularly concerns the significance of certain rationalities as well as the nature of these rationalities themselves. These variations merit further investigation (6.2). Moreover, the discussion seeks to unveil how discourses have materialized in space, thereby physically shaping change through spatial arrangements (6.3). This is followed by a reflection on the subject positions constructed and mobilized within the discourse (6.4) and a final discussion on how public space functions as a resource to transform Marseille (6.5).

Figure 27: *Vieux-Port* (author's own photo)

Summary Results

Case	Problem Definition	Rationalities	Critical Negotiations
Vieux-Port	- Car centric public space - Lack of attractiveness of public space - Socio-economic paradox of the city centre	- Creating attractiveness through transforming symbolic spaces - Inducing a shift towards sustainable mobility by reducing the space for cars - Transforming public space for Marseille-Provence 2013	- A lack of ambition concerning mobility solutions - Lack of climate adapted design
Hyper-Centre	- Decay of the city centre	- Creating an attractive city centre through the homogenization of public space - Rebalancing public space in a sustainable way	- Absence of real mobility solutions - Electoral motivations - Lack of participation - Absence of a social vision
La Plaine	- Invaded by car traffic - Quality of the market - Degradation of the neighbourhood - Inappropriate use of public space	- Reconquering car dominated space - Accentuating use in a multifunctional space - Fostering commercial attractiveness - Creating a metropolitan mediterranean square	- Lack of room for expression - Costs and imbalance of investments - Openness and flexibility of design - Fear of urban exclusion
Place de la Providence	- Neighbourhood with socio-economic difficulties - Lack of (green) public space	- Creating a new public space for local inhabitants - Changing the image of the neighbourhood through transforming public space	- Parking lot required for business activity

Table 16: Summary of Problem Definitions, Rationalities and Critical Negotiations

6.1 Discursive Continuities

Several stable patterns recur across the projects, showing how public space is conceived as a means for broader objectives in urban transformations. Despite differences in timing, as well as in political context and spatial scales, the cases reveal consistent interpretative repertoires: Within the analyzed discourse, public space is emphasized as a lever for attractiveness, a symbolic resource for a modern and competitive metropolis, a means to improve quality of life in the city centre and a driver of more sustainable mobility futures in the city.

Overarching Problem Definitions

Overall, a lack of attractiveness of the entire centre of Marseille is identified, and public space is considered a reflection of this phenomenon. Its streets are crammed with car traffic, the built environment is left in a degraded state, and the socio-economic situation still needs improvement. Disorder is attributed to 'anarchic' use of space. These factors contribute to an overall state of public space in the city centre that is seen as neither desirable, nor tolerable by the city and metropolitan government and require change and action, in form of requalification and better management of the public realm. This problematisation constructs a consensus around these issues and does not mention specific groups that are affected by the current state of public space – it creates an uncontested frame for action that legitimizes intervention. This is specifically apparent concerning the cases of the *Vieux-Port* (5.1) and *La Plaine* (5.2) where the need to change an intolerable status quo is strongly put forward.

The dominance of car traffic in public space is a major issue for bespoke lack of attractiveness, due to several dimensions. The presence of cars in the streetscape is an obstacle for attractive public spaces, hindering quality of stay for pedestrians and thus other (commercial) uses. A reduction of motorized traffic is also seen as inevitable in developing a more sustainable city that fosters sustainable mobility and provides better quality of life. However, concerning sustainable mobility, only the need to improve spaces for pedestrians is primarily emphasized. The car-centred orientation of public space design is seen as not living up to contemporary standards anymore.

Recurring Rationalities

A dominant rationality in all transformation cases is that of urban attractiveness and competitiveness. Central, symbolic public spaces become a matter of metropolitan importance, their aesthetic dimension and representational role is emphasized, whereas their role as social infrastructure in a socially tense urban context is only recognized to a minor extent. Transforming public space and implementing a new culture of sharing public space is presented

as an efficient means to bring about change in mobility habits, however the restructuring is limited to certain spaces and not necessarily part of a larger city-wide scheme.

The Imperative of an Attractive and Competitive City Centre

There is a persistent focus on attractiveness and competitiveness: When legitimizing projects, the economic argument always prevails. Given Marseille's economic context, developing economic attractiveness becomes an imperative that is not thoroughly questioned by neither sides of the political spectrum thus becoming a commonly accepted guiding principle. Diverging voices are marginalized with political arguments.

Comparisons with other international cities are instrumentalized to underline the necessity for competitiveness. The analysed transformation examples can contribute to a more competitive city through their symbolic role within Marseille's urban context, they are seen as capable of transforming the city's image (5.1–5.3), or, at a smaller scale of a neighbourhood (*Place de la Providence*, see 5.4, but also *La Plaine*, 5.3). Therefore, emphasis is placed on aesthetics in transforming these spaces, while the usability by different groups is not so much in focus. An overarching goal is to make spaces attractive for inhabitants, visitors and tourists alike. While these central public spaces are seen as an asset to boost the city's overall image and attractiveness, they are also more specifically relevant to redevelop the role of its centre, that had lost importance within the polycentric structure of the large urban area that counts other economic poles (see 4.1.3, 4.1.4 and 4.2.1). In that context, public spaces are a chance to develop the symbolic capital of the historic centre.

Therefore, this dominant stream within the discourse can be considered as following global tendencies described by a broad range of scholars and detailed under 2.2.1 (*Public Space as a Resource for Urban Competitiveness*): Public spaces are developed as an asset for competitiveness (e.g. Zukin, 1998; Madanipour, 2010; Carmona *et al.*, 2019), following logics of neoliberal and capitalist urbanisation (e.g. Harvey, 1989; Madanipour, 2003; Theodore, Peck and Brenner, 2011).

Public Space as a Resource for a Modern, Mediterranean Metropolis

Transforming the city's major public spaces is not only a metropolitan competence by law, but it also becomes a metropolitan matter: Their symbolic transformation promotes the image of the whole metropolis. They are testimonies of the ability of the metropolitan authority for action. Again, attractiveness and competitiveness are in focus but promoted with specific symbolic meanings.

Repeatedly, 'Mediterranean' aspects of spaces or their future design are emphasized: Through 'Mediterranean' vegetation, design or atmosphere or a 'Mediterranean' and 'metropolitan' space. The Vieux-Port itself is the opening gate of the city towards the Mediterranean Sea. Reiterating references to the Mediterranean is a steady tendency in Marseille's metropolisation processes,

most prominently incorporated by the *Euroméditerrannée* project (see 4.2.2). Additionally, even French presidents regularly underline the importance of the Mediterranean for Marseille's future, as last did Emmanuel Macron in his discourse on his plan *Marseille en Grand* (see chapter 4.2.5).

The metropolitan and city government constantly compare their city with its mediterranean neighbours, such as Barcelona or Genoa. Given its contested reputation, Marseille had to act and make efforts to bring about an image change and keep up with their rival cities. While the *Mediterranean* aspect of the city was one that often set it apart from other French cities in a negative way, it is now used as a marketing asset.

But the used conception of the "*Mediterranean*" is one that combines a *Mediterranean* lifestyle (that can be well promoted due to its appeal) with a discourse based on modernity, order and technical progress, the image of a 'modern' city by contemporary standards: With regulated traffic, a good management of uses, surveillance of public space, proper maintenance, spaces with defined functions and little room for spontaneous use. One can see this is contrast to the previous image of Marseille, characterized by informal or even *'anarchic'* use, piecemeal urban development, chronic traffic jams, illegal parking, littering and degraded, neglected public spaces. However, referring to Leontidou (1993), exactly part of such characteristics can be considered typical of Mediterranean cities.

The contrast between these two different conceptions becomes most apparent in the project of *La Plaine*, a large open space which was used in a very unregulated and spontaneous way, with a large bustling market. Within the process the aim was to establish *order*, regulate different uses and make them *better compatible with each other*, as well as reduce the size of the market and shift its focus towards selling local produce. The vision of the square resembled more a picturesque kind of *Mediterranean*, with trees lining café terraces and market stalls selling local high-quality produce, in contrary to the *chaotic* or '*anarchic*' kind of *mediterranean*, marked by grassroots counterculture, that informally made most out of a public space that was left in a desolate state since many years. There is a coherence with what Buslacchi (2018, p. 7) observes concerning *Euroméditerrannée*:

> "*Legality, ecology and order were the new values, while the old ones were defined by solidarity, proximity and a sense of informality. [...] They disqualified the old values that were embedded in the customs of the people who lived in the areas under transformation.*"

Politics in public space want to change the image of the city in a top-down manner, aiming to exclude certain forms of behaviour from the public realm, while wanting to keep the *picturesque* Mediterranean character that remains attractive for tourists (Buslacchi, 2018, p. 11). A quest for a specific '*authenticity*', a phenomenon observed in other cities by Sharon Zukin (e.g. 2008; 2010).

As a result, *Mediterranean* images are combined with *metropolitan* aspirations: Modernizing public space is seen as a central element of a *modern metropolis* and a sign of progress. This includes homogenizing or *harmonizing* their design, greening spaces, as well as increasing control and management and rebalancing public space in favour of sustainable forms of mobility. In 21st century Marseille, the vision of a '*modern*' metropolis took multiple turns, resulting in different large-scale transformations: Transforming obsolete docks into a modern business district, that also includes cultural institutions and housing (*Euroméditerrannée*, see 4.2.2*)*, modernizing rail and transport infrastructure (new high speed rail line and tramway constructions), promoting cultural industries (see 4.2.3) renovating housing (see 4.2.4), developing university campuses and modernizing metropolitan governance (see 4.2.1 and 4.1.5). But alongside these transformations, this vision was also translated into the design of public space, that was until now seen as too car-dominated and crammed, an obstacle to a modern, metropolitan way of life. Transformations of symbolic spaces are thus seen as a strategy to create a new kind of *Mediterranean* authenticity, that is however also favourable to international, Western modern conceptions of cities, and foster competitiveness, becoming a crucial element of metropolitan politics.

Symbolic Transformations for Sustainable Change

All four projects put the idea forward to make changes in public space to influence more sustainable mobility choices and make the city more attractive for active mobility. By redistributing space that was formerly occupied by cars, it is reasoned by local governments that motorized traffic will substantially decrease. However, this principle is only applied to the important symbolic spaces to be transformed, strongly focussing on few emblematic spaces rather than developing strategic solutions for implementing sustainability measures. This can be demonstrated with several examples.

While the *Vieux-Port* project aimed to largely ban cars from public space, in the meantime, a chain of boulevards in the centre was optimized for cars to fluidify traffic and accommodate the surplus of cars that cannot pass by the *Vieux-Port* anymore. Thus, the project's effectiveness in fostering sustainable change can be questioned – as it was done by oppositional politicians at the time. Whereas the project of the *Hyper-Centre* was based on an elaborated guide plan that treated a network of public spaces, especially the symbolic *Canebière* was placed in the centre of attention: The complete pedestrianization of a section of this boulevard meant the reorganisation of crucial bus connections between the north and south of the city, reinforcing this historical divide (see 4.1.4). Regarding the project of *La Plaine*, the pedestrianization of a few adjacent streets to the large square is only planned for 2025 (Elziere, 07.11.2024). Until then, cars still drive through the small streets around the large, redesigned space, leaving little space for pedestrians and cyclists. There seems to be no apparent strategy of reducing car traffic on a city level and public spaces are mainly being adapted for pedestrians, that are often rather depicted as *flaneurs* with time to shop, eat and drink.

While transformations might have a positive influence on sustainability issues such as air pollution, modal split, or urban heat, they are not necessarily carried out for these reasons. The underlying legitimations put a stronger emphasis on the positive effect of such measures on the city's image, its attractiveness and competitiveness, than on concrete (technical) goals regarding sustainable outcomes, such as urban mobility or climate resilience. Also greening is primarily seen as an asset for a comfortable, qualitative and attractive urban environment, and not as a tool to positively influence the microclimate. Altogether, this shows a ponderous symbolic understanding of transforming public space, in opposition to technical-, or social issues in the centre. However, expected sustainable outcomes are used as a minor justification for projects.

6.2 Variations in the Discourse

While several consistent discursive elements were identified, there are also variations and shifts between the several cases, reflecting their changing and specific project contexts.

Differences in Rationalities

As developed under 6.1, strategies to develop attractiveness are dominant repertoires across cases, but notable differences emerge between cases. The *Vieux-Port* project has a clear focus on developing international visibility and setting a strong symbol of transformation and uses *Marseille-Provence 2013* (see 4.2.3) as a legitimation for fast transformation. While the case of the *Hyper-Centre* also reveals a strong symbolic dimension, specifically concerning the *Canebière*, its focus lies more on *harmonizing* public space to foster commercial revitalization, than on a strong transformation symbol. Today, a largely pedestrianized city-centre might even not be considered a strong symbol anymore, but a necessity for any 'modern' city. In the case of *la Plaine*, competing rationalities emerge, since the city government had to face violent protest and had to increasingly incorporate social concerns. The most recent example of the *Providence* square shows the use of social and climate adaptation concerns as a strong legitimation to transform the square previously exclusively occupied by cars, marking a stronger distinction to the other cases. Nevertheless, this different legitimation serves a transformation that does also aim to contribute to an image change, albeit on a neighbourhood level. In summary, these different rationalities in their majority promote a similar vision of public space.

Discursive Conflicts

In the case of the *Vieux-Port*, there is a strong support across political parties for the project, as it is implemented by two normally rivalling political forces, that join together for the occasion, in the name of the *common good*. This

further serves them as legitimation of the project to isolate the rare critique that the project is facing. The following project of the *Hyper-Centre* sees the emergence of critique from the left opposition, that deploys a lack of social focus of investments and a short-sightedness that focuses on aesthetics and visible results. This critique is pursued concerning *La Plaine*, where a strong countermovement emerged that could only be reflected here under 5.3.1 due to the institutionalized nature of the textual material – however, to a certain extent, critique by citizens is also present in reviewed documents. Major concerns regarding possible social exclusion and the openness of the proposed design were put forward. In the case of the *Providence* square, a specific group (wholesale shopkeepers) were strongly opposed, but their claims were delegitimized as a sectoral, individual interest in contrary to the wish of other inhabitants to transform the square.

Contextual Differences

The four chosen cases represent spaces that are relevant on different scales: The Old Port as the city's most symbolic public space is relevant for the image of the whole city and treated as a priority on metropolitan level. The subsequent requalification of its adjacent streets and squares in the *Hyper-Centre* project can be seen as a support of its transformation. *La Plaine* is characterized by a very different context, being the largest proper square in the city, but located amid lively neighbourhoods. While the city aspires to develop it as a metropolitan symbol, it also remains a neighbourhood square. This duality is reflected in the contrasting guiding rationalities and emerging conflicts. The *Place de la Providence* is a much smaller project, but one that quickly gained visibility through its more experimental approach and central location.

Visions for these spaces change due to their scales – as do envisioned user groups. While the *Vieux-Port* and the *Hyper-Centre* directly want to attract visitors, pedestrian-consumers and tourists, the plans for the *Place Jean-Jaurès* envision new users, such as a more affluent clientele for the new market and new visitors to stimulate commercial attractiveness but must also deal with existing uses. Thus, they propose to only *accentuate* desired uses. The *Providence* case however shows a stronger acknowledgement of different user groups and their needs.

6.3 Materialization of Discourses

Analysing discourse on the production of space can reveal how elements of the discourse materialize in space, through spatial restructurings and design (Belina and Dzudzek, 2021; Bauriedl, 2021). This section retraces for each example how interpretative schemes and repertoires are translated into physical transformations and provides an understanding how material urban space is shaped by the analysed discourse.

Transformation of the *Vieux-Port*

The *Vieux-Port* case clearly illustrates how the priorities for transformation, condensed in the interpretational repertoires (rationalities), have guided the final design and physical change. Since concerns on climate adaptation for instance are absent from the driving rationalities, they did not become manifest later in the physical transformation. The result is a large, clean space designed by a famous architect that ensures international visibility. However, it does not propose urban furniture to rest or invite to spend time there.

Rationalities	Materialization
Creating attractiveness through transforming symbolic spaces	- Design by internationally renowned architect - Iconic design of the mirrored pavilion as a landmark - Clean, modern, open design
Inducing a shift towards sustainable mobility by reducing the car-dedicated space	- Reduce space for motorized traffic and pedestrianization of large areas
Transforming public space for *Marseille-Provence 2013*	- Openness of design with few elements creates a flexible space that can easily accommodate large-scale events

Table 17: Vieux-Port - Materialization of Rationalities

Requalification of the *Hyper-Centre*

Here, rationalities create a *harmonized* space that support a revitalization of the city centre through providing a clean, readable design of public space that creates a *harmonic* environment for leisure and shopping purposes. A minor focus on sustainable development manifests through greening, a strong counterpoint to the *Vieux-Port*. The centre becomes a space where one can easily stroll around by foot and spend time essentially for consumption purposes. Its new streetscape is not designed for cars anymore, but for pedestrian *flaneurs*.

Rationalities	Materialization
Creating an attractive city centre through the homogenization of public space	- Homogenous design elements throughout a large area (lighting, pavements, urban furniture) - Upgrading of used materials
Rebalancing public space in a sustainable way	- Pedestrianization of a large coherent area - Greening through the planting of new trees

Table 18: Hyper-Centre - Materialization of Rationalities

Requalification of *La Plaine*

On the *Place Jean Jaurès*, the contested rationalities have become manifest in its spatial form in several dimensions: To *reconquer* space from cars, the whole layout of the square was completely transformed, leading to the cutting of several trees. The approach to *accentuate* use led to a space that is still open and flexible for different purposes, however, concrete political intentions have materialized into spatial dispositifs: The aim for an increase in commercial attractiveness has resulted in larger terraces for consumption. Due to the redesign of the whole structure of the square, it presents itself as a new, readable attractive space with *Mediterranean* design elements. Its contested meanings are reflected in a design that proposes a spatial compromise between contrasting rationalities pursuing different goals (i.e. commercial attractiveness and keeping the space multifunctional and open).

Rationalities	Materialization
Reconquering car dominated space	- New spatial layout that changes traffic circulation to eliminate through traffic - Suppression of nearly all parking spaces, no possibility to park in the middle of the square anymore
Accentuating use in a multifunctional space	- Restructuring of the market - Enlargement of terraces for consumption - New wooden structure in the middle of the square with new playground - Preserving Magnolia trees - Leaving large spaces open for use
Fostering commercial attractiveness	- Larger sidewalks to make facades more attractive - Enlargement of terraces for consumption - New kiosks
Creating a metropolitan mediterranean square	- Complete redesign to make it a large, readable and uniform square using high-quality materials - Using mediterranean vegetation and planting typical alleys of trees

Table 19: La Plaine - Materialization of Rationalities

Transformation of the *Place de la Providence*

Considering the last transformation case, the current materialisation reflects the aim to break with car-dominant logics and the stronger social orientation of the project. Through its radical transformation and provision of a new qualitative space, it presents an opportunity to upgrade the neighbourhood.

Rationalities	Materialization
Creating a new public space for local inhabitants	- Removal of the entire car park - Instalment of temporary benches, pergolas and embankments - Emphasis on greening, shade and multifunctionality of elements
Change the image of the neighbourhood through transforming public space	- Upgrade space that was used only as a car park - Create a new comfortable space

Table 20: Place de la Providence - Materialization of Rationalities

These examples demonstrate how concrete materializations in physical space anchor the discursive rationalities in urban space, influencing how people move, behave, gather and consume in public space. Differences between materializations also show that despite continuities, nuances in the conception of public space as a resource exist across cases and how material transformations are discursively negotiated.

6.4 Subject Positions

Since the empirical analysis was limited to the institutionalized political discourse, speakers within the material are predominantly politicians or planning institutions and local government bodies. However, discourse also defines legitimate users and speakers with authority, and delegitimates and excludes other voices.

Within the institutionalized political discourse, governing actors present their position as rational and evident: They delegitimize political opponents with political arguments, rarely defending their position with a fact-based or technical argumentation. Voices from the participation processes are either marginalized or used as to legitimize transformation processes.

In all three large-scale projects, a lack of transparency and participation were observed by critical voices in political debates and the recordings from participative processes: In their opinion, projects followed specific political goals and failed to include other perspectives into planning. Additionally, over time, there is less debate on projects within political assemblies, since projects are principally led by *SOLEAM* within the frame of the *Opération Grand Centre Ville*, and the metropolitan government tries to keep the debate low.

In accordance with the guiding rationalities and their (manifested) spatial imaginaries, certain users are imagined and legitimised. Across cases, *pedestrians* are presented as the main target group. Ideally, the *pedestrian* has an economic effect (e.g. tourist, shopper, client of a restaurant terrace). For the cases of *la Plaine* and the *Place de la* Providence, children and families as users are recognized. In all cases, the social and cultural diversity that yet characterizes the lively centre of Marseille is not reflected enough in the imagination of future users, although the *Providence* project marks a first step.

Dissident voices were consequently marginalized. Politicians from both political ends of the spectrum that aimed for greener public space were disempowered through arguing from a historical-urbanistic perspective. Especially in the case of *La Plaine*, local actors were delegitimized: Market vendors criticizing the reorganisation of the market were portrayed as spreading chaos in public space and not committing to rules in place. Local actors from the neighbourhood that were involved in protest were presented as only following proper interests and being opposed to progress. The legitimisation of the

speaker position of inhabitants from the *Belsunce* neighbourhood and their social concerns enabled institutional actors to marginalize the struggles of local businessmen and women.

These struggles over legitimate speaking positions only reveal an insight in the existing tensions in the broader local discourse on these projects. For deeper research on subject positions, further research should thus include material that reflects a broader range of actors in its corpus.

6.5 Public Space as a Strategic Resource for Urban Transformation

Within the analysed discourse, public space emerges as a strategic governance device, instrumentalized to promote agendas of urban attractiveness, competitiveness, revitalization and sustainable mobility, as well as symbolic images of a modern Mediterranean metropolis. The underlying rationalities and meanings are constructed and stabilized in the discourse and have been made perennial in space through spatial dispositifs in the form of physical transformations in urban space. Specific actors are systematically delegitimized within the discourse to maintain the dominance of constructed rationalities and their associated meanings of public space.

Regarding chapter 2.2 that conceptualizes public space as a resource in contemporary Europe, it can be stated that for the case of Marseille, the conception of public space as a resource for urban competitiveness is largely dominant. In light of ongoing urban transformations taking place in Marseille (see chapter 4.2), public space appears as a strategic support for broad restructurings. While the centre of Marseille presents a socio–economic sensitive context, social concerns are widely absent from the discourse on public space, whose inclusive capacities are only rarely put forward, most prominent in the recent case of the *Place de la Providence*. Despite narratives of sustainability and modernity, public space was not properly recognized as a resource for climate resilience. The analysed transformations, however, implemented certain measures that can also contribute to climate adaptation, such as the planting of trees, or banning cars from public space. In the case of the *Place de la Providence*, the need for adaptive spaces within a dense urban environment is acknowledged and materialized in space.

In summary, despite taking place within a tense social and cultural context amid a dense spatial setting in a city in southern Europe that will further experience a rise in temperatures, major transformations in public space over the last fifteen years in Marseille were mainly oriented on the understanding of public space as a means to develop economic attractiveness through the materialization of the image of a modern ('*Mediterranean*') metropolis.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Key Findings

Through an extensive review of literature, this work first conceptualised public space as a resource for cities in dealing with global challenges that have strong local repercussions, emphasizing its economic, social, and ecological dimensions (see chapter 2.3). This study further argues that due to competing and contrasting claims, planning public space can never be understood as a neutral or purely technical intervention (see chapters 2.3–2.5, 3.1). Investigating public space projects within a tense and sensitive urban environment such as Marseille (see chapter 4.) thus requires approaches that are focused on the production of social meaning that shapes conceptions of public space. Therefore, as a following step, this thesis used the lens of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (see chapter 3.2) to develop an understanding of how public space is conceptualized as a resource in major public space transformations in the centre of Marseille. To that end, it examined the institutionalised political discourse on four distinct transformation cases, studying political protocols and documents as well as planning documents with a focus on their underpinning rationalities, constructed meanings, problem definitions and symbolic negotiations (see chapter 5). This has shown that over time, political debate around projects has diminished within institutions and the discourse on public space has become increasingly technical.

Thereby, this study shows that public space transformations in Marseille are only seemingly neutral, being influenced by powerful discourses that are connected to political agendas which thus materialize in space. In Marseille, rationalities based on economic attractiveness and competitiveness can be considered dominant. They are complemented by imperatives of modernity that are connected to an image of sustainability and constructed imaginaries of a 'Mediterranean' city, while ecological and social concerns are marginal within the discourse (see chapter 6).

By embedding public space transformations in a larger context of urban change in Marseille (see chapter 4.), this study further contends the relevance of public space in the urban transformation of Marseille, stressing their role as an instrument of governance through which discourses on desired urban futures are materialised.

7.2 Reflection

7.2.1 Limitations

As reflected under chapter 3.3.4, this thesis has focused exclusively on the analysis of the institutionalised political discourse. As a result, alternative discourses – from activists, media, informal actors, local inhabitants and everyday life users remain underrepresented. This thesis therefore cannot provide an examination on how discourses are contested and resisted in the urban context of Marseille due to the nature of the textual material.

While the four analyzed projects have not all been completed yet, meanwhile, several major large public spaces are also in the process of redesign (e.g. the *Place Castellane*, or the *Place Notre Dame du Mont* and streets adjacent to *La Plaine*) – this discourse analysis can only capture the discourse on public space over a certain period of time: It is certain that urban discourses on the subject have already evolved and will continue to evolve.

Regarding the scope and time constraints of a master thesis, there was no triangulation with other methods, such as participatory observation or interviews. Nevertheless, there was a strong focus on gathering in-depth knowledge of the local context through extensive literature review and on-site observations.

Finally, it must be stated that discourse analysis is *per se* interpretative, the reconstruction of discourse is always subject to an analytical perspective, it can thus never claim to represent a fully objective or singular truth.

7.2.2 Propositions for Further Research

Future studies based on the results of this thesis could take several directions: In terms of methods, scope and used material. Further research could investigate how users experience and interact with transformed public space in Marseille and the spatial materialization of the analysed discourse, using ethnographic methods of urban research for instance. A focus on specific user groups could also be an interesting direction in this context. Another possible direction would be to include new material in the analysis to further inquire into contestation processes and counter-narratives. A different option would be to include a range of interviews with key actors and experts to test whether rationalities from the institutionalised discourse are reproduced in their discourses.

Last, the findings from the case of Marseille could be compared to other cases. Several pathways for comparative analyses could be of interest. On the one hand, one could compare Marseille to other French cities, to test if Marseille stands out as a singular case or presents similarities to other urban areas. Often presented as an exception within France, this could be empiri-

cally analysed concerning public space transformations. On the other hand, a comparison to other Mediterranean metropolises, which have been framed as 'rivals' within the discourse, such as Genoa, Barcelona, Valencia or Naples, could be specifically interesting. With Mediterranean port cities often sharing similar socio-economic and urban development challenges, comparing their cultures of transforming public space could bring fruitful insights and identify overarching similarities and variations in their approaches to developing public space as a resource. This would also enable a further interrogation of conceptions of the 'Mediterranean'.

7.2.3 Relevance for Urban Planners

Planning public space is inherently political – this thesis clearly demonstrates that public space is clearly never a neutral field of intervention within the urban realm (see chapter 2) but is strongly shaped by society, power and politics. While planning decisions might be presented as technical, neutral or aesthetic, they are guided by rationalities that often remain implicit but shape spatial outcomes. The case study of Marseille further reveals how planning interventions in urban public space often align with economic objectives, marginalizing social concerns or measures to build climate resilience. Problem definitions that legitimize such interventions are likewise never neutral but discursively constructed and serve different interests.

As a planner, it thus becomes important to continually critically reflect your own positioning, inherent values and to interrogate dominant narratives, assumptions and rationalities embedded in and imposed through strategies and planning documents, often without explicit acknowledgment. In chapter 2, this work argues that pressure on public space has increased and will do so in the future, especially because cities need to adapt to the consequences of the climate crisis, often requiring technical solutions that may seem neutral at first sight. Therefore, urban planners who will increasingly be required to deal with public space in the future should always reflect that they are not acting in a neutral field but rather one that is *"infused with power and politics."* (Davoudi, 2018, p. 17).

Figure 28: View of Marseille (author's own photo)

Figure 29: Centre of Marseille, *Escaliers du Cours Julien* and *Rue Jean-Baptiste Estelle* (author's own photo)

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8.4 List of Figures

All photographs were taken by the author.

8.5 List of Tables

All tables are created by the author.

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