

TERTIARIZATION, GENTRIFICATION AND MARGINALIZATION – THE VOLTAIRE DISTRICT IN LYON

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1 Introduction – a village in the shadow of Part-Dieu

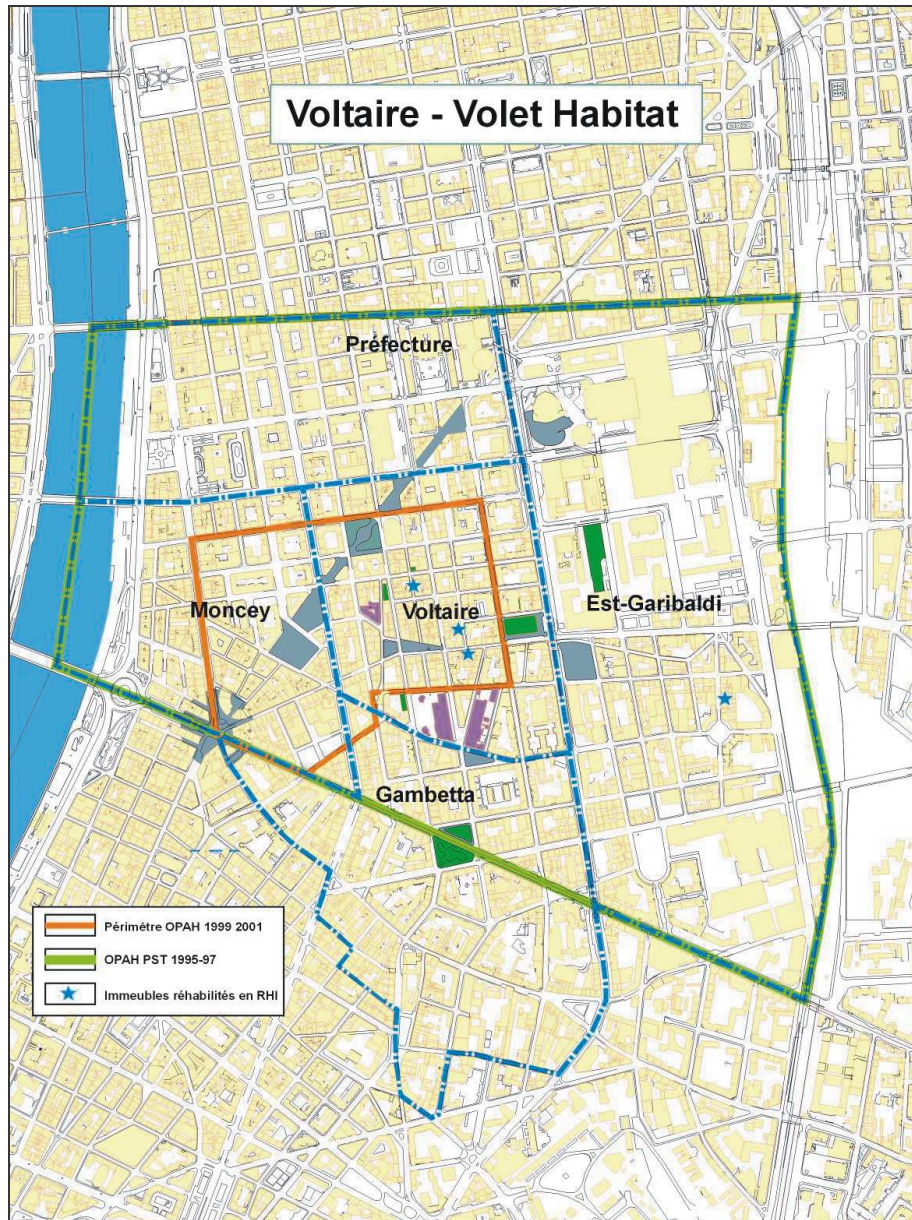
The Voltaire District is a working-class area on the left bank of the Rhône that now forms part of the hyper-centre of Lyon and its suburbs. For a long time the district remained a village-type neighbourhood with small companies and modest apartment buildings, both in terms of their simple construction and the low incomes of their inhabitants.

The principal problems of the district are the insalubrity of its old and poorly maintained buildings with their low-quality apartments, the gradual disappearance of shops and services, the poor quality of public spaces, the desperate economic situation of some of the households renting apartments in the older buildings, the difficult co-habitation between the different social strata present in the area and a certain level of insecurity.

A stone's throw from the historic centre of Lyon, the Presqu'île, and located on the left bank of the Rhône, the Voltaire District forms an irregular quadrilateral between Avenue de Saxe in the west, Rue Servient in the north, Rue Garibaldi in the east and d'Arménie and Rue Villeroy in the south (*Figure 1*). The southern border of the sector is largely parallel to Cours Gambetta. Rue Garibaldi, an urban expressway in the east, forms a daunting frontier between the district and the urban renewal action area of Part-Dieu. This regeneration programme dates back to the 1960–70s, and Part-Dieu now constitutes one of the two main districts of the Lyon hyper-centre, the other being the Presqu'île.

Voltaire is a traditional district, contrasted by the large service sector of Part-Dieu, designed in the 1960s and completed in the 1970s, where the region's administrative, commercial and cultural amenities are concentrated and which constitutes one of the major public transport hubs of the Lyon metropolitan area with a TGV station, underground line, tramway and many bus terminuses.

FIGURE 1
A district close to the Rhône and forming part of the hyper-centre of Lyon



Source: Own elaboration.

2 Plans for the transformation of the Voltaire District

The district remained hived off from the city for a long time and escaped the large-scale urban development operations of the 1960–1970s that planned its destruction. In fact, it had been chosen for an extension of Part-Dieu, and the original project for the Part-Dieu-Garibaldi area¹, with its modern residential apartment blocks linked by elevated footbridges and a pedestrian concourse six metres high, was to replace the district's old houses, small workshops and local shops (*Photo 1*).

The growing disappointment of the Lyon population with regard to the intensive concreting of their city and the destruction of the original urban environment led to the abandonment of the policy of intensive urban renovation. Later a more progressive policy of urban development was adopted for the area to the west of Rue Garibaldi, which was more in tune with its economic and socio-cultural situation and aimed at upgrading the existing urban heritage.



PHOTO 1. *The Voltaire district, Part-Dieu in the background*

¹ Area earmarked for a local government planning project launched by the city authorities in 1967–68.

On the other side of Rue Garibaldi, the Part-Dieu project continued in line with its original design, but with the progressive integration of more urban elements in the programme, such as the municipal library, the auditorium, the administration centre and the offices of the Lyon Urban Community responsible for its infrastructures.

Starting in 1980, demolition-reconstruction operations were carried out in scattered areas of the district. Numerous residential buildings of all categories rose on its fringes, mostly local authority apartment blocks and blocks of individual apartments. To meet the social demand, the city of Lyon built a cultural centre that mainly caters to middle-class interests, though officially called the "*Maison pour tous*" ("House for all").

The image of the district is rather blurred today, with certain signs of the pauperisation of its inhabitants and the increasing social marginalisation of the most captive population: refugees, illegal immigrants, unemployed people and retired immigrants. Others regret the "gentrification" underway, with the arrival of new upmarket apartment buildings and the location of offices and service activities on its immediate periphery.

In spite of the constantly rising demand for real estate, the district has managed to keep some features of the old suburb dominated by traditional apartment buildings from the period of 1860–1900, with traditional shops on their ground floor. This type of urban landscape is especially characteristic for its centre, along Rue Paul Bert and around Place Voltaire.

In 2003, demolition and reconstruction projects were still in the planning phase, and the city authorities debated what scope to give them. They were also uncertain about the intervention strategy that should be implemented and the resources needed for dealing with the phenomenon of pauperisation and the underlying social tensions between the different social groups. There was also disagreement about the future of certain areas destined for demolition: whether to rebuild them, create public spaces to reduce congestion, or build sports facilities for teenagers.

2 Population characteristics of the district

Today most of the households in the district are recent arrivals. Three quarters of the 7,600 people took up residence between 1990 and 2000. Over a quarter of the latter (1,500 people) arrived in the last couple of years. Only less than a quarter of the present residents (1,800) moved to the district before 1990 and retain the memory of its atmosphere.

The district has 5,200 apartments, 780 of which are vacant, which makes a vacancy rate of 15 percent. The vacancies are concentrated in the oldest and most dilapidated buildings. In addition, there are 220 hostel-type accommodation units for single people or particularly precarious households. The residential density is less than two people per dwelling on average, with 7,600 residents in 4,200 housing units.

The population includes many single people, often retired, living in the old apartments, whether insalubrious or not. Among the households², the proportion of families³ remains low: 40 percent or 1,700. Most of them are middle-class or upper-middle-class families with very few children. 1,468 households are made up of couples⁴ and half of them have no children. Therefore ‘classic’ families consisting of two parents and one or more children form only a slight majority: a little over a thousand for over seven hundred single parents raising their children. The district is also inhabited by large and poor families living in overcrowded conditions in low-quality apartments.

In the last decade the proportion of foreign residents has remained stable, around 12–13 percent. However, the presence of these communities, especially those of Turkish and North African origin, has been reinforced. The shops have taken on an ethnic character, and the most decrepit buildings are squatted by illegal immigrants. The poor conditions of the housing stock leads to greater visibility for the most disadvantaged groups of residents in the public areas of the district: retired poor people living alone, illegal immigrant families, groups of young people from ethnic minorities, unemployed adults, etc.

In the district 90 percent of the active-aged population is employed, while tradesmen and professionals represent only less than 10 percent. Close to the Part-Dieu and Prefecture Districts, the Voltaire District, after having been a district of tradesmen and workers, has naturally become one that houses service employees. The lowest wage earners moved to the municipal housing estates developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Professionals with the highest qualifications moved into the numerous upmarket blocks of individual apartments built in the 1970s or in the 1990s.

The unemployment rate in the district is 14 percent, which is higher than the Lyon average. But unlike the situation in other sectors, unemployment is higher among men than women. Most of the unemployed are young adults aged 25 to 30. This age group makes up 40 percent of all the unemployed (*Table 1*).

² The term “household” refers to the occupant(s) of a housing unit, and is neutral with regard to their number or marital status.

³ Families are households with children and parents whatever their number or marital status (single parent or parents living together, married or not).

⁴ Households consisting of two adults.

TABLE 1
The structure of employment and unemployment in the Voltaire district

| Categories | Total | % of working population | % by category |
|-----------------------|-------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Working population | 3659 | 100 | |
| Working | 3140 | 86 | 100 |
| Employees | 2824 | 77 | 90 |
| Jobless | 511 | 14 | 100 |
| Jobless men | 268 | 7 | 52 |
| Jobless women | 243 | 7 | 48 |
| Jobless aged 20 to 24 | 57 | 2 | 11 |
| Jobless aged 25 to 35 | 200 | 5 | 39 |
| Jobless aged 35 to 45 | 135 | 4 | 26 |
| Jobless aged 45 to 55 | 80 | 2 | 16 |
| Jobless aged 55 to 65 | 50 | 1 | 10 |

3 Housing stock and tenure in the district

Numerous demolitions have led to the construction of over a thousand modern apartments in the district in the last ten years, with a high proportion of them located in subsidized council blocks. The city has also built a number of social and cultural facilities required by the district: the “*Maison pour tous*” cultural centre, a grammar school, a library, etc. More recently, in the last five years, the construction of upmarket and medium-range blocks of individual apartments have been completed, as well as administrative buildings, private offices and luxury shops on the fringes of the district. Many regional and departmental administrative bodies and cultural institutions are now settled at the boundary of the district, e.g. the Prefecture, the Departmental Council Headquarters, the Courts, the Departmental Infrastructure administration, the *Mutualité* convention centre, the head office of the regional newspaper *Le Progrès*, etc. The contrast is striking between the periphery and the centre of the district, the latter being mostly occupied by obsolete apartment buildings on narrow streets, forming a rather depressing and dilapidated environment.

The housing stock of the district is divided equally between old buildings with obsolete amenities and large modern buildings of different levels: subsidized housing for marginal and low-income groups, and mid-range and upmarket blocks of individual apartments.

Out of the 4,226 dwelling units, 1,500 were built before 1914, mostly after 1856, the date of the last major flood of the Rhône on the left bank. Altogether 2,100 apartments were constructed before 1948 and their rents are permanently fixed in the framework of a law passed after the war. Among these old apartments, 625 are low-quality ones with minimum comfort and 200 have neither bathroom nor indoor toilet.

The housing stock was recently renovated and upgraded on a large scale, 860 apartments were built between 1968 and 1990, and another 820 between 1990 and 1998. Over a thousand units were completed in the last ten years.

With regard to housing tenure, out of the 4,226 dwelling units of the district 2,180 apartments are privately rented and depend on private landlords, 570 are in subsidized local authority apartment blocks, and about 300 are in hostel-type buildings for people with low income. Overall, subsidized public housing represents almost 18% of the housing stock in the district.

If we take into account the presence of 625 old and substandard private apartments, which play the same role as the housing for marginal incomes, 32 percent of the total housing stock can be regarded as officially or unofficially meeting the needs of marginal and low-income tenants in the Voltaire District. Hence, in terms of public policy, particularly the PLH (Local Housing Programme), the Voltaire district is regarded as a non-priority area for the construction of new housing units subsidized by the state or the city of Lyon. Other less disadvantaged areas in the city that have an insufficient supply of subsidized accommodation will be picked for new housing projects.

The heart of the district, around Rue Paul Bert and Place Voltaire, has a higher proportion of apartment buildings dating before 1948 than in its peripheral areas, which have been upgraded through recent renovation projects and now contain a large share of the new buildings (*Photo 2*). The centre of the district accounts for 60 percent of the old and often very poor-quality housing. On the other hand, the fringes of the district account for the vast majority of the new buildings dating from 1949 to 1975. The spatial imbalance was somewhat reversed in the 1980s, but in the recent period it was reinforced again and the fringes now have 75 percent of the new buildings. These recently raised apartment buildings house mainly middle-class households taking advantage of the service jobs available locally (*Table 2*).

TABLE 2
*Comparison of the age of housing in the centre and on the periphery
of the district*

| Housing categories / Situation: | Total | Centre | | Periphery | |
|------------------------------------|-------|--------|-----|-----------|-----|
| Total housing | 5,129 | 2,371 | 46% | 2,758 | 54% |
| Principal residences | 4,149 | 1,877 | 45% | 2,272 | 55% |
| Total before 1948 | 2 739 | 1,620 | 59% | 1,119 | 41% |
| 1949-1974 | 347 | 125 | 36% | 222 | 64% |
| Total 1949-89 | 1,463 | 533 | 36% | 930 | 64% |
| After 1990 | 927 | 218 | 24% | 709 | 76% |
| Population of principal residences | 7,280 | 3,424 | 47% | 3,856 | 53% |



PHOTO 2. *Place Voltaire in the district's centre*

4 Marginalization in the centre of the district, gentrification on its fringes

The presence of population groups with very modest income (with a notable fraction of very poor families and ageing immigrants) in the old centre of the district and in some nearby subsidized housing estates gives the area a marked working-class character, particularly around Place Voltaire.

In spite of several actions designed to improve or embellish it, the environment of the district is deteriorating; shops are closing down, the streets and squares, and their ambiance differ sharply from those of the more prosperous districts located in the north or the west (the Prefecture and Lafayette Districts); the narrow streets get little sunshine and are cluttered with parking cars, the pavements are often in disrepair or obstructed by construction site barriers.

To the east, the large-scale modernisation of Part-Dieu into a business district from 1960 to 1980, incorporating concourses, shopping malls, large service amenities, a multimodal transport hub and expressways, offers an even more radical contrast.

One would expect that, in spite of the large number of vacant or insalubrious apartments, the introduction of new housing has led to a new social and economic situation in the district and created a certain social diversity. To the contrary, social tensions in the district have increased. The middle-class households that have bought their apartment here do not feel safe when they pass through the district. The local secondary school is facing difficulties of integrating pupils drawn from different social groups with highly contrasting levels of economic and cultural resources.

There are few shops along the streets running north to south. The historic suburban-type shopping area around Rue Paul Bert and Place Voltaire is hampered by three serious problems: 1) the general decline of local shops in the city and the progressive disappearance of non-food shops; 2) its isolation; and 3) the competition from the regional centre of the nearby Part-Dieu, particularly with regard to everyday purchases, owing to the presence of hypermarkets.

But we should not exaggerate. If the centre of the district is largely devoid of shops, Rue Paul Bert has kept a large number of traditional shops that have been taken over by people from ethnic minorities. The street has a busy and animated atmosphere, thanks to much longer opening hours than in traditional French shops.

The fringes of the district have also profited from the attractiveness of Part-Dieu. As the region's large-scale service hub, the nearby Part-Dieu centre has led to new tertiary developments in the Garibaldi and Servient areas. The presence of several thousand white-collar workers maintains a dense and diversified

network of restaurants that liven up the centre of the district at lunchtime, though most of them are closed at night.

This commercial rhythm creates two contrasting atmospheres in the district. In the morning the district, especially Rue Paul Bert, is busy with pedestrians on the way to Part-Dieu and parents taking their children to kindergarten or school. At lunchtime the restaurants and cafés draw considerable numbers of employees. But then, in the evening, the centre of the district is taken over by its inhabitants. Most of the restaurants are closed and the inhabitants with the least resources take over the squares and open spaces. They form groups according to age and sex, young adults making up the biggest groups.

The middle-class demand for law and order, relayed forcefully by their elected representatives at municipal council meetings, results in more frequent police patrols and the installation of a video surveillance system. These solutions, of little relevance to reducing criminality and petty crime, may be seen as control systems aimed at the practices of poor working-class communities in the district: street groups, noisy talking or quarrelling, begging.

5 Actions undertaken by the city authorities – a district at a crossroads

The Voltaire District was earmarked in 1994 as one of the priority districts of the 'Policy for the City'⁵ and designated as a Sensitive Urban Area (ZUS), like the Monecy District, and a Category 1 district in the city's urban development plan for 1994–1999. This classification was repeated in the current urban development plan for 2000–2006. But this has not yet led to any large-scale action in the district and there has been no serious attempt to relocate its inhabitants. The district's secondary school, however, benefits from a Local Education Programme intended to reinforce the education resources provided for the most disadvantaged pupils and to favour projects aimed at collective empowerment and cultural discovery.

Faced with the arrival of populations with highly contrasting profiles in terms of their social status, economic level, cultural aspirations, housing background and household composition, the city authorities are relatively at a loss. The district's inhabitants, shopkeepers and associations await a plan of action. This situation leads to conflicts and feeds antagonisms between the different social groups living in the district. Social diversity, which could be a positive force,

⁵ Public policy bringing together the state, the region and local authorities for the improvement of derelict working-class districts.

does not work well, due to the lack of mediating structures to mobilise the actors around projects to improve the district.

The Voltaire District appears dense and cramped, with few green spaces. The centre of the district is becoming increasingly pauperized and dilapidated, while its fringes are marked by tertiarization and a certain degree of gentrification. The present trend points towards the residential densification of middle-class households on the periphery, while uncoordinated property development operations contribute to the dilution of the district's character. The risk of a loss of identity and the further decline of the streets in the centre of the district – Rue Paul Bert and Place Voltaire – should be tackled by a comprehensive intervention policy, as well as by social mobilisation programmes that could enable the different population groups to coexist in a positive way.

The risk is high that the process of gentrification and tertiarization will eventually prevail and the district will lose part of its identity and the social imbalances will be aggravated. Nevertheless, the Voltaire District undoubtedly possesses certain potentials and assets. Firm public action should take the form of programmes targeted at improving the quality of the urban environment, strengthening its identity and helping its communities to live together.

Voltaire is a district that still contains large areas of old and insalubrious apartment buildings. A number of actions have been undertaken to renovate the oldest and most dilapidated buildings. The Société d'Équipement de la Région Lyonnaise (SERL, Infrastructure Company for the Lyon Region) is the prime contractor for upgrading the buildings in the framework of a Programmed Housing Improvement Operation (OPAH), as well as for improving the shopping areas with the support of FISAC (Fonds d'Intervention pour the Sauvegarde de l'Artisanat et du Commerce, Fund for Saving Crafts and Shops). The results of this upgrading policy have surpassed the initial objectives: from 1998 to 2002 a total of 1,200 housing units were renovated and subsidised as against the initial goal of 350.

A more radical programme of demolition-reconstruction has been undertaken in some highly derelict areas of the district in the framework of the Reduction of Insalubrious Housing (RHI) policy and the use of "Immediate Unfitness for Human Occupation" orders. In this framework, after the purchase and demolition of the old buildings and the re-housing of their inhabitants, new buildings containing 35 subsidized apartments for tenants on the lowest incomes is planned. In the context of considerable social fragility, the new subsidized housing units are added to the already sizeable council housing sector. Hence this programme leads to the concentration of subsidized housing in a district already in difficulty and without any master plan for the housing needs of its inhabitants.

The situation is further complicated by the presence of real estate owner-speculators who count on the degradation of their buildings. They have a *laissez-faire* strategy: they buy the property, let it deteriorate, then obtain from the Prefecture a notice of unfitness with a ban on inhabiting the buildings that allows them to empty the buildings and sell them to a developer who then demolishes them to make way for a speculative operation.

The property market on the fringes of the OPAH operation is booming. Developers build medium quality apartment buildings that meet the demand of middle-class households, while the centre of the district is further downgraded and populated by disadvantaged groups. Little by little, with the building of over 1,000 new apartments in ten years, which appear everywhere where the opportunity arises and without an overall plan, the architectural heritage and milieu of the district is disappearing. The district is losing its unique urban personality (*Figure 2*).

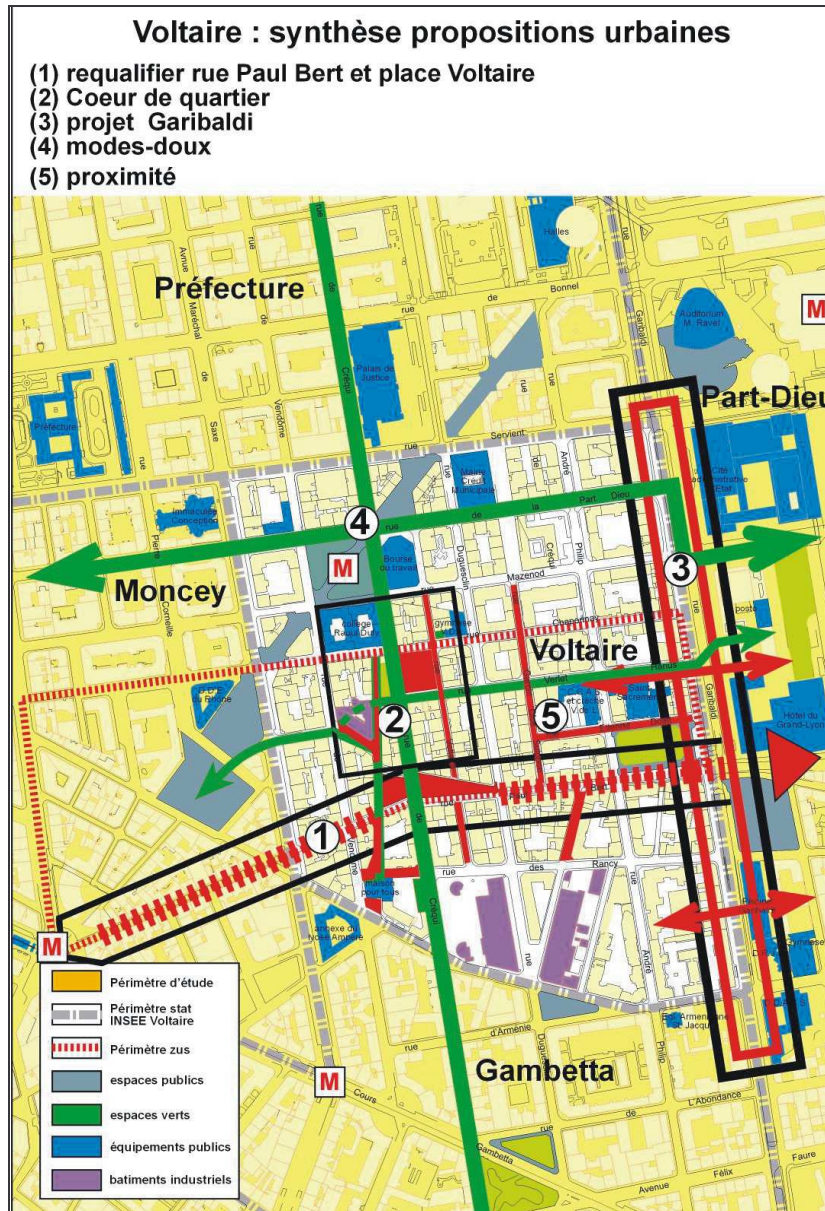
6 Towards sustainable social development

The city authorities have begun to examine urban scenarios for the development of the district over the short, medium and long term. They have set as their goal a more balanced residential district with sufficient shopping facilities, a district that allows for a more harmonious coexistence of different population groups, is capable of receiving new households in a renovated setting, and is opened to the rest of the city.

According to the plans, the local authorities wish to work towards:

- achieving a better balance in programming the housing needs of the different areas;
- restructuring the district's public spaces, and notably upgrading Place Voltaire and Rue Paul Bert, which form its backbone and largely define its identity;
- injecting new dynamism into its shopping facilities and particularly the concentration of shops along Rue Paul Bert;
- improving its environment via the renovation of its inner streets and small public areas now rather neglected;
- limiting the parking areas, especially in the old and narrow residential streets of the centre;
- redesigning Rue Garibaldi to allow more contact between Part-Dieu and the Voltaire District, based on the idea that the dynamism of Part-Dieu can carry Voltaire along with it;
- providing additional community amenities: school sports facilities, meeting-places for civic groups, etc.

FIGURE 2
A series of actions for the medium term



Source: Development plan for Voltaire.

These actions should be accompanied by tools in favour of the everyday functioning of the district: support for its social life via financial assistance to the local associations and socio-educational facilities, reinforcement of the daily management of public spaces and subsidized housing areas, with social and socio-educational support and assistance to encourage the participation of inhabitants.

In such a context, the reinforcement of the daily management of the outdoor areas and the setting up of street-cleaning services and specific mediation structures is as important as making new investments.

These actions affecting urban planning and the urban environment do not exclude the reinforcement of localised thematic programmes that are vital for halting certain negative trends in the district or managing its evolution in the medium term. Their targets:

- A reinforced management and support mechanism for the most disadvantaged strata in subsidized housing, the hostels, and the old low-rent buildings as well as an inter-service training programme for the personnel of the different services concerned.
- Pursuit of the efforts to reduce insalubrity and upgrade the housing on Rue Paul Bert and in the areas concentrating housing units built before 1948.
- Injection of a new dynamism into the district's commercial activity, by exploiting the complementarities between the traditional shopping hub of Rue Paul Bert, the modern facilities of Part-Dieu and those of the Moncey-Récamier pedestrian area.
- A policy of social coordination, reinforced educational support and mediation linked to the Policy for the City (DSU).
- A policy to reinforce law and order and reduce the public feeling of insecurity: preventive measures (pathways and lighting, design of public spaces, entrances and communal areas of buildings, concourses, etc.).
- Action in support of community clubs and associations, tenants' associations, a feasibility study of a building put at the disposal of local associations and clubs (the former Caisse d'Épargne building).

Actions along these lines are essential for improving the well-being of the different communities at district level. Only effective urban and social actions whose continuity is guaranteed can pacify the relationship between different population groups that spontaneously tend to reject or exclude one another. The goal of these measures is to make this 'problem area' into a district with a distinct identity based on both social diversity (different socio-residential groups sharing the space) and functional multiplicity (various economic activities and services).

Looking beyond everyday difficulties in the maintenance of the district's deteriorated social and urban environment, the measures adopted should allow the city to affirm that this district has a future and that the diversity of its population with a strong multicultural dimension forms a rich resource for the city of Lyon.

7 Conclusions

The Lyon model of public action mobilises a high level of technical expertise and considerable financial and human resources. However, it is still dominated by a top-down approach to public action whereby the urban regeneration project overrides the social action.

The inhabitants of the district are better informed today about the projects that will transform their environment, they are consulted on the design of projects, but they have no real input in the overall strategy adopted. There is no project for training the inhabitants so that they can sufficiently participate in drawing up the policies and their practical application in projects.

The city of Lyon and the Greater Lyon Area has carried out a policy of developing public transport, encouraging alternative means of transport⁶, and restoring urban spaces to pedestrians in the last four years. This included the pedestrianization of the banks of the Rhône, which have become a new civic amenity for walks, leisure activities and contemplation in the heart of the city. These elements obviously fit into a policy of sustainable social development. However, the city's approach to the internal development of the Voltaire District tends to be dominated by short-term goals. The predominance of projects linked to vehicular traffic in the centre of the district needs to be called into question.

In fact, pressure is being brought to make the district more accessible to traffic. Likewise, the particularly sensitive problem of parking in the district's traditionally narrow streets has not been tackled. The construction of large underground car parks for amenities catering to public and office buildings may cause ecological damage due to the fact that groundwater is close to the surface throughout the district. The same applies to the normal parking rate adopted in the Local Urban Development Plan (PLU⁷).

The Voltaire District has already evolved considerably in practical terms. It is no longer a predominantly working-class and immigrant district. It has become a neighbourhood with considerable social diversity, though this has not been rec-

⁶ Namely an original and highly efficient bicycle rental system ("Vélo'V").

⁷ The Local Urban Development Plan replaced the Land-Use Plan (POS) since the law on Urban Solidarity and Renewal (SRU).

ognised yet. Hence the district's two parallel grievances: the complaint of the new middle-class households who regard the presence of disadvantaged people in public areas as a sign that the district is going downhill; and the complaint of the lower-income groups who feel that their presence in and mode of using communal areas are threatened by the increasing influx of middle-class people.

In many respects the Voltaire District is in a transitional phase. The series of urban and social actions that are being implemented today accompany this transition, without attempting to eliminate either the antagonisms caused by the occupation of public spaces, or the competition for urban housing extremely well-located in the centre of the city of Lyon. Hence the programmes that are implemented need a constant compromise between two approaches, one adopted by a fraction of the traditionally conservative lower-middle class concerned about law and order issues, and a second adopted by a more modern fraction in favour of the district's multicultural identity and tolerating a certain cohabitation with the more disadvantaged sections of the population.

In short, unlike the nearby Moncey District, where there is a greater crystallization of fears arising from strongly asserted ethnic identities in its sub-sectors (North-African, Asian and Caribbean), it is very likely that Voltaire will move towards a smoother blending of its communities with a steady dilution of its social and ethnic diversity. The demarcations here are less stark and hence more ephemeral than in Moncey, and the district's gentrification is already well underway.

It may be a pity that the city authorities have not grasped the need for actions to integrate this district successfully into the city without diluting its social character and multicultural personality. Nevertheless, the recent events in the French outer suburbs show that the problems of integration can be tackled more effectively in well-integrated districts in the traditional city centre rather than in those peripheral and segregated areas well outside the city boundaries.