

Town planning and health in Grenoble: “Improving living conditions for city residents”

Interview with Françoise Berthet,
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La Santé en action: Which healthy urban planning and environment project can Grenoble be proud of?

Françoise Berthet: In recognition of its long-term policies, Grenoble was awarded the title of European Green Capital in 2022, partly for the development of Bonne, the first eco-neighbourhood to obtain a level IV sustainability label from the government, which began in 2007 and was completed in 2012. It was a fairly radical project, which represented a real leap forward in terms of quality of living conditions for residents. Low-energy and even passive buildings were constructed, alongside the redevelopment of military buildings, which all gave significant weight to public areas (green spaces and paths) over buildings. A landscape designer was drafted in to create a large park; the shopping centre, which is connected to the urban heating network and equipped with natural ventilation, only has a small car park because it is accessible by public transport.

S. A.: How is it looking today?

F. B.: It's important to be pragmatic. Initiatives are tested in development plans and included in the specifications for developers. The aim may be to improve air quality or noise control (which is important for mental health), to promote physical activity, social cohesion, high-quality healthy food, a medical project, or so on. For example, in the Flaubert eco-neighbourhood there was a call for projects to develop fruit and vegetable patches across 2,000 m² of rooftops; in this case, the combined activities of urban agriculture specialists, a restaurateur and a brewer have made it a place where residents can go to learn and socialise. Actions that are deemed a success and show potential for expansion are included in the local development plan (PLUi), the latest edition of which was drafted in 2020 and sets ambitious objectives for new projects. These include a 20% improvement in energy performance compared to the 2012

heating regulations for new builds. Also, in certain sectors such as commercial areas, the PLUi determines that 60% of surfaces are to be greened (roofs, walls, car parks, terraces, etc.), of which 30% must be open ground where trees can be planted. Already active in the French network of the WHO Healthy Cities initiative, the city has also sought to upskill in methods and tools for healthy urban planning so that the link between all actions related to this concept, even if they are not presented from this angle, becomes clear. We are demonstrating a solid political will, since we have deputy delegate for both town planning and health.

S. A.: How did this move to a focus on healthy urban planning materialize?

F. B.: The first step in this process took place in 2021. It was a health survey identifying the determinants of health at city level and by sector. This involved an initial technical step, mapping the offer of healthcare professionals in the area and producing an inventory of health and social well-being. Another component was based on a public consultation carried out in the spring of 2021. This took several forms: public opinion was sought through an online survey publicized on the city's website and social networks, as well as three days of door-to-door visits; a workshop seeking the opinion of older residents that was attended by a dozen participants; and a day of outreach during which parking spaces were reclaimed for alternative uses such as a relaxation area, a vegetable garden, or a dozen parking spaces for bicycles¹.

S. A.: What are the top concerns for residents?

F. B.: When asked about the links between the city, urban planning and health, the issues that were spontaneously raised most often by the 600 respondents to the survey were pollution and greening. Next came cleanliness, noise, walking, cycling, safety, access to health care, public transport and, finally, urban density. When asked to choose two priorities for the improvements they wanted to see in their neighbourhood, the issues of

KEY POINTS

■ **In 2007, the city of Grenoble began to make inroads in healthy urban planning with the development of Bonne, its first eco-neighbourhood. Fifteen years later, following a health survey and consultation with the residents, the city's local development plan (PLUi) now includes health as a factor that property developers, builders and urban planners must take into account. This is particularly important for neighbourhoods designated by the local authorities as priority areas for regeneration and investment (QPV).**

safety, cleanliness, natural spaces and noise came out on top. All the results obtained, both from the technical investigations and opinion surveys, were analysed in detail by health determinant, e.g. grouping all issues related to air quality. These determinants are integrated into the action plans for two priority areas currently undergoing regeneration: the site of a former teaching college, which is part of the Flaubert eco-neighbourhood, and Cambridge South in Presqu'île.

S. A.: How do you work with the different stakeholders?

F. B.: The city is also in the process of drawing up a housing, construction and health charter in order to promote the use of biobased materials in particular. This approach is being developed through participatory workshops that bring together funders, the federation of property developers, residents' associations, professionals from the timber industry, etc. We want to support living spaces built from wood or earth, as not only are they efficient from a climate perspective, but they also offer comfortable living conditions and represent a source of well-being for occupants. This charter – to be finalized by the end of 2022 – will be signed by the willing parties then



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attached to the local development plan to serve as a handbook, both for private projects and town planning operations. Applications for building permits provide an opportunity to intervene early on and influence the shape of future buildings: dual-aspect residences, common areas likely to foster social cohesion, spacious stairwells with natural light that encourage people to take the stairs rather than the elevator, materials used, etc. In general, we co-build with the residents, as is the case with the redevelopment of a 1930s apartment block complex into social and private housing in the priority neighbourhood of L'Abbaye, for example. While waiting for the renovation work to be carried out, a temporary urban planning scheme was created, named Les Volets Verts after the green shutters of the buildings. It is run by an association called La Boussole, which brings together city officials, other associations and local residents as partners. The objective is to support the transformation of the complex, which is currently empty because the inhabitants have been temporarily rehoused. This entails defining the future functions of public spaces, kicking off cultural and social life, hosting certain municipal services related to community action, emergency accommodation, and so on. It's a

way to start restoring a positive image to this site, which suffered from a poor reputation due to its previous state.

S. A.: *What obstacles are inherent to this approach?*

F. B.: We can encounter certain difficulties during the course of the works. We must ensure that all the objectives of the specifications are met, which is not always the case. This means we maintain a high level of vigilance, supporting the project through all phases of construction and strengthening controls to avoid poor workmanship. Conscious development operations that prioritize health and the environment are perceived as more expensive. However, these new approaches to construction do not always generate additional overall costs. Admittedly, incorporating dual-flow ventilation or biobased materials increases the cost of investment. However, by selling the land at an appropriate price, the city gives developers leeway to work with these constraints.

S. A.: *Do you evaluate the different programmes that you deliver?*

F. B.: Part of the process of obtaining the sustainability label for the Bonne eco-neighbourhood in 2019 involved gathering

feedback, which started with quantitative interviews and finished with an urban sociologist two years later. This process highlighted positive aspects such as the social mix, the provision and utilization of green spaces and cinemas, but also identified areas for improvement, particularly in terms of shops. Looking beyond the technical assessment of a completed development project, we felt it was valuable to carry out this type of sociological survey in order to find out how the residents feel about their new environment and to highlight the ways in which the amenities have improved (*Editor's note: the services and natural elements of the space were appealing for the residents*). Finally, the healthy urban planning approach will establish indicators that relate to determinants and successful initiatives. ■

Interview by Nathalie Quéruel, journalist.

1. <https://www.placegrenet.fr/2013/09/21/parking-day-international/524444>