

# The French Banlieue: Renovating the Suburbs

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## **Introduction.**

In a volume about the suburbs, inevitably many different interpretations of the word “suburbs” are brought to the fore, depending on the specific context and culture of the cases in question. But perhaps no greater difference can be found within the Global North, than between the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the word “suburbs” and its French equivalent: “les banlieues.” Typically, the word “suburbs” in the United States and UK conjures up images of wealthier neighborhoods, detached houses set in well-kept gardens and occupied by middle- and upper-income families (although as this volume illustrates, there are also many other varieties of suburbs in the Anglo-Saxon context). Contrast this portrait of a “respectable” neighborhood with the traditional “received image” of the French suburbs or “banlieues,” with their high-rise tower blocks, bleak open spaces, boarded-up shops, and groups of young people of color congregating in stairwells. Again, there are clearly peripheral areas around Paris and other French cities that don’t match this description, but typically the word “banlieue” is associated with images of large-scale post-war concrete housing estates, characterized by a concentration of poverty and inequality, as well as anti-social behavior, crime, and social disintegration (Kokoreff and Lapeyronnie, 2013).

This chapter aims to provide insights into the French banlieue, in particular to trace how and why these characteristic banlieues grew up, mapping their history from initial construction in the post-war period, to their decline towards the end of the twentieth century. Recently, efforts have been made to regenerate some of the most deprived peripheral housing estates on the edge of French cities. This chapter will explore how this redevelopment has been characterized, and what it means in particular for local residents who live there and have been affected by the regeneration of their neighborhoods.

## **History of the banlieue.**

Starting in the mid-1950s, as a response to the post-war housing crisis, large-scale social housing estates were constructed on the edge of many French cities, through a house-building program of HLM (Habitat à Loyer Modéré, or Low-Cost Housing)

under the Plan Courant of 1953. Often built in a highly functionalist style initially inspired by Le Corbusier, these “cités” (housing estates) were built rapidly, often with poor quality materials, on a scale that had never been witnessed before, with sometimes thousands of households living in one block. Figure 21.1 shows one such housing block, the “Balzac” Tower in La Courneuve on the outskirts of Paris, part of the “4000” housing estate.



*Figure 21.1* Balzac, France  
*Source:* Petit Louis. 2010. Creative Commons 2.0.

Initially, the residents of these public housing estates were relatively diverse (Tissot, 2007). Following World War II, there were significant housing shortages, particularly in major cities, first as a result of the extensive damage from the war, and second because of the significant rural-to-urban migration prompted by employment opportunities in growing industrial sectors. Many middle-income families saw these new housing projects as attractive places to live. They represented modernity, offering light, space, and comforts such as a bathroom and

central heating, often in stark contrast to some of the inner-city and rural housing to which newcomers had become accustomed. Furthermore, they symbolized the importance of the welfare state within society, both in facilitating access to housing, as well as in promoting economic growth through a government-subsidized mass housing construction program. During this period from 1953 to 1973, an average of 300,000 housing units were constructed per year (Bertagnini, 2013, p. 10).

However, during the 1970s the situation in these social housing estates began to shift, primarily due to three factors (Tissot, 2007). First, up until the 1970s foreign nationals had almost no access to public housing. There was significant discrimination against immigrants, particularly against those from the former French colonies in North and West Africa; until the 1970s, many non-French nationals lived in substandard slum housing and bidonvilles (informal shantytowns) in and around the city. However, in the early 1970s the government launched a major slum clearance program, and as a consequence, social housing landlords were subsequently obliged to house immigrants in their cités.

Second, there was a shift in France's house-building policy in the early 1970s, with a halt on large-scale public house construction, coupled with incentive programs encouraging homeownership of individual houses through low-interest loans. So as middle-class households moved out of public housing estates into home ownership, migrant families were being rehoused from slum dwellings into the cités.

Third, the socioeconomic status of the banlieue residents was also shifting. Many cité residents were employed as low-skilled manual workers in factories, particularly around Paris. From the 1970s, with the global downturn following the 1973 oil crisis and subsequent industrial restructuring, many employees were made redundant, with foreign workers often among the first to lose their jobs. Thus, from the auspicious beginnings of the cités as places of modernity and optimism, the banlieue housing estates were increasingly characterized by deprivation, a high ethnic minority population, and economic and social exclusion, or what Wacquant (1996) has termed "advanced marginality," associated with the rise of a neoliberal economy.

However, it was not until the 1980s that the government recognized that a number of problems were concentrating in the banlieue as a result of the isolation, both physical and metaphorical, experienced by local residents. Growing resentment, particularly among young people who felt excluded from mainstream French

society, was manifest in outbreaks of civil disturbances in the early 1980s, initially in Les Minguettes, a social housing estate in the suburbs of Lyon in 1981 and 1982, as well as in other housing estates in Paris and elsewhere. Institutionally, the government response was to restructure national agencies to have a more urban focus, with the creation in 1988 of three new governance bodies responsible for cities, the Comité Interministériel des Villes (CIV – Interministerial Committee for Cities), the Délégation Interministérielle à la Ville (DIV – Interministerial Delegation for Urban Affairs), and the Conseil National des Villes (CNV – National Council for Cities). These bodies were charged with the delivery of an urban policy specifically aimed at disadvantaged neighborhoods, the Politique de la Ville.

### **La Politique de la Ville.**

Historically, questions of poverty in France, including urban policy related to poverty in the city, have been addressed by programs aimed to reduce inequalities, taking a “color-blind” approach without reference to the role of ethnicity in reinforcing inequalities. This approach dates back to the French Republican ideals of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” which focus on the universal citizen, rather than on citizens defined by their ethnicity or religion. This in theory guarantees equality for all and facilitates the integration of immigrants into French society.

However, in the context of debates related to the banlieue during the 1980s, for the first time ethnicity was introduced into discourses around tackling the “social problems” of the banlieue. As Tissot (2007) argues, narratives at the time from both politicians and the press drew a direct link between the emerging challenges of the banlieue and the issue of immigration, which in turn influenced the development of France’s urban policy for disadvantaged neighborhoods, the Politique de la Ville of the late 1980s and 1990s.

Initially, the emphasis of the Politique de la Ville was on local social development, strengthening social ties, promoting community links, and enhancing civic participation. There was minimal physical intervention limited to minor refurbishment and occasional demolition. Rather than being coordinated by national agents, urban policy was to be administered in partnership with local stakeholders, including public, private, and civil society actors, in order to promote civic participation and social diversity as a means of addressing poverty and unemployment in the banlieue (Tissot, 2008).

Up until the 1990s, the Politique de la Ville was characterized by a diversity of approaches, addressing social, economic, environmental, and physical dimensions

of disadvantaged neighborhoods through an integrated approach to tackling urban deprivation (Busquet et al., 2016). However, in the late 1990s there was a marked change in direction. It was felt that the previous approaches, particularly those related to social development measures designed to promote neighborhood cohesion, had failed to solve the “problems” of the banlieues (Lelévrier, 2004).

These problems were deemed to stem from the concentration of specific groups in certain areas, which could be addressed through the objective of so-called “social mixing” (“mixité sociale”). Rather than community development to support deprived neighborhoods, the Politique de la Ville shifted its focus towards a program of demolition and rebuilding, so-called “urban renewal” involving comprehensive housing diversification, which was seen as the appropriate response to achieve a “social mix” and thus to address the “problems” of the banlieue (Gilbert, 2009).

Social mixing is an ambiguous term. Officially, it refers to a mix of housing tenures, income groups, and classes that are found in any one area. The definition of social mixing from the “Critical Dictionary of Housing Conditions and Home” states:

Social mixing (mixité sociale) is the objective of a social policy that aims to bring together different social classes to coexist within a given urban unit [e.g., a neighborhood] mainly through implementing housing programs.  
(Bacqué, 2002, p. 297, author’s translation)

As noted, the French Republic does not permit distinctions to be made between social groups along lines of ethnicity or religion; this is the reason why there are no census data collected on ethnicity in France. However, the term “social mixing” in the context of urban redevelopment can also imply “ethnic mixing” and the implicit aim of encouraging a more diverse ethnic mix in areas characterized by a high proportion of non-French nationals (Kipfer, 2016). The rise in socioeconomic inequalities and a growing feeling of discontent in France has been exploited in political terms by the Far Right, led by the National Front but also echoed by other right-wing parties. The National Front’s discourse, focusing on immigration as one of the key sources of French society’s troubles, has concentrated its attention on immigrants and their spatial concentration (Gilbert, 2009). The French Republican tradition considers every citizen to be a member of the “national community” rather than any other religious or ethnic minority community, and a narrative has developed around the concentration of immigrants in the banlieue that represents a “tribalism” (‘communautarisme’) that cultivates difference and serves as a “threat” to national unity (Dikeç, 2007). Thus, within mainstream policy discourses

related to the Politique de la Ville, the term “ghetto” was increasingly used to characterize the concentration of ethnic minority groups in the banlieue, although as Wacquant (1992) has shown, the comparison between the French situation in the banlieue, and the extreme social exclusion and racial tensions of the black American ghettos is far from justified. It was these so-called “ghettos” that the remodeled Politique de la Ville sought to break up by encouraging middle-income households to move into targeted neighborhoods through “social mixing.” The next section outlines these more recent developments, including the impacts of the “social mixing” policy.

### **Recent policy approaches to the banlieue.**

Shortly after Chirac’s right-wing government took power in 2002, a new approach to urban policy was introduced through the Borloo Act of 2003, named after Minister Jean-Louis Borloo, who at the time was responsible for City and Urban Renewal. This marked a shift in France’s urban renewal policy, from a more holistic vision to one dominated by demolition and reconstruction, particularly in the industrial working-class housing estates of the banlieue (Dikeç, 2006). The first National Urban Renewal Program (PNRU – Program National de Rénovation Urbaine) launched in 2005 had a double remit, focusing both on creating mixed-income neighborhoods (“mixité sociale”), as well as on promoting sustainable development by targeting neighborhoods classified as “Zones Urbaines Sensibles” (ZUS – Deprived Urban Neighborhoods). These were often areas with concentrations of non-French nationals and their French-born descendants, where the government used a strategy that involved significant elements of housing demolition and rebuilding. Figure 21.2 shows the demolition of the Balzac Tower in 2011, as part of the urban renewal strategy for La Courneuve. In 2014, the PNRU was extended by the Socialist Government up until 2024 to include a wider remit, but also with fewer resources and far more focused territorial interventions (Gouvernement de France, 2014).

The “Agence Nationale de Rénovation Urbaine” (ANRU – the National Agency for Urban Renewal) coordinates the Program, which oversees the rehabilitation of social housing units. The PNRU initially targeted a population of over six million people, with other goals including the demolition of some 250,000 housing units over eight years, the renovation of around 400,000 housing units, the provision of community infrastructure, as well as a focus on cultural facilities and in particular, employment opportunities.

Through the PNRU, demolition was no longer seen as “taboo” for addressing the

challenges of peripheral social housing estates (Baudin and Genestier, 2006; Driant, 2012, Kipfer, 2016). It was a legitimate method to follow through the “social mixing” policy, by redesigning the urban environment to diversify the housing supply, including the construction of different architectural designs (more low-rise buildings and individual housing), different sized properties, and different forms of tenure, including intermediate and market rent housing as well as homeownership.

The Borloo Act was partly introduced in response to the Socialist government’s Law on Solidarity and Urban Renewal (Loi Relative à la Solidarité et au Renouveau Urbain – SRU) dating from 2000, which made it compulsory for all municipalities in large metropolitan areas to provide at least 20 percent of their housing stock as social housing by 2020, for communes with at least 3,500 inhabitants (1,500 in the Greater Paris area) included in a metropolitan area of more than 50,000 residents (Desponds, 2010). The Borloo Act, coming from the right-wing government, took a different approach, prioritizing the demolition of social housing, particularly in communes where there was a concentration of public sector housing, in favor of a more varied housing offer, in order to diversify the residential population.

However, a number of critiques have been leveled at the approach the Borloo Act has taken. The National Urban Renewal Program (PNRU) could be seen as introducing a series of elements that work against the principles of social sustainability in a neighborhood context. By focusing on demolition rather than rehabilitation, communities have been broken up and social ties severed, weakening residents’ social capital, connections, trust, and networks. Lelévrier (2008) has shown that the process of rehousing through the PNRU has been particularly unsettling for the most vulnerable households, for whom severing ties with social networks and familiar places has the most detrimental effects. In the reconstruction phase, there has also been a bias towards market and intermediate housing, which many original residents are unable to afford, thus eroding the stock of affordable housing (Kipfer, 2016). Furthermore, in redesigning the urban environment, emphasis has been placed on issues of security, separating public and private space, and “privatizing” previously “open access” space (Epstein, 2013).

Gilbert (2009) identifies two key objectives of the PNRU; first, destigmatizing neighborhoods by reshaping their urban form, and second, modifying residents’ behavior by transforming the urban environment and its social mix. The first objective aims to rid neighborhoods of their negative image and dispel the stigma

associated with the area as a result of the “dysfunctionalities” of post-war physical planning. As Wacquant et al. (2014) identify, territorial stigmatization can have a significant impact on residents’ everyday lives, such as on finding a job or looking for alternative accommodations, and it can also act as a deterrent to middle-income households moving into the area. Measures to address this stigmatization through the PNRU have included demolishing high-rise housing blocks and replacing them with smaller scale housing units; redesigning public spaces with streets, squares, and more “welcoming” public areas; and opening up neighborhoods through clearer and more accessible links to neighboring districts and the city center.

*Figure 21.2* Demolition of the Balzac Tower, France  
*Source:* Diego BIS. 2011. Creative Commons 2.0.



However, as Wacquant (2008) suggests, place-based policies often build on and reinforce territorial stigmatization, as they highlight the negative labels public authorities have assigned to an area, such as “problematic” and “worthy of destruction.” Urban policies aimed at “changing the image” of an area often serve to underline the very issues that the demolition policy aims to address. A number of seminal sociological studies have demonstrated the negative effects of demolition programs on local communities, including the erosion of social ties based on neighborhood proximity (Coing, 1966; Young and Willmott, 1957). These have also been backed up by studies related to the PNRU (Lelévrier, 2008). Veschambre (2008) highlights the symbolic importance of recent neighborhood demolition policies, and the detrimental effect that this can have on residents’ sense of home, community, and belonging.

The second objective of the PNRU identified by Gilbert (2009) relates first to modifying residents’ behavior through the transformation of the urban environment, and second to diversifying an area’s social mix. Policies aimed at transforming the urban environment have involved reconfiguring public spaces, in particular to address crime and anti-social behavior. However, critics have suggested that this involved the privatization of public space, where previously open spaces are now subject to restricted access, with increasing use of keypad codes, CCTV, and other tools to restrict and control residents’ behavior.

The second aspect of this objective relates to social mixing, which has been implemented through a range of different measures. First, the PNRU aimed to reconfigure the urban form away from high-rise apartment blocks to a more “humane” scale of housing that aims to attract more middle-class households. Second, following demolition, the policy aims to reconstruct a more mixed tenure offer, including owner occupation, intermediate ownership, and private renting, in order to attract households with a wider range of incomes. Third, alongside the diversification of housing tenure, the PNRU aims to provide infrastructure, such as cultural and sporting facilities, to attract people from outside the area during the daytime. Figure 21.3 illustrates the type of housing that has replaced tower block estates, here showing new social housing in the Balzac neighborhood of La Courneuve, in 2014.

The aim is to increase the area’s social mix, with the expectation of a “role-model” effect (Gilbert, 2009); that is, the idea that spatial proximity will promote the diffusion of “middle-class norms” within these areas. There are also expectations

that school attainment levels will increase, given the higher proportion of children from middle-class households. However, such policies have generated considerable debate regarding evidence to support the “role-model” effect and the benefits for lower-income groups. As Kleinhans’s review shows, merely living in close proximity in urban renewal areas does not necessarily result in social interaction between residents in different tenure types (Kleinhans, 2004).



*Figure 21.3 Social housing at Balzac in La Courneuve, the 4000 Housing Estate, France*  
*Source: Dark Sabine. 2014. Creative Commons 2.0.*

### **Impact of urban renewal on banlieue residents.**

In relation to social effects, Gilbert (2009) also identifies three impacts of the urban renewal process on housing and community. First is the impact on affordable housing availability. The demolition of low-cost social housing in urban renewal areas and its replacement with housing of different tenure types, often aimed at those with greater financial resources (intermediate housing and homeownership), has reduced the stock of affordable housing in targeted areas. This has inevitably led to the displacement of more precarious and low-income households outside the renewal area, hindering the right to decent housing for the very poor (Blanc, 2010).

Second, the urban renewal process has impacted social capital, in particular kinship and support networks for precarious households (Bonvalet, 2003). Social networks have been weakened in renewal areas for households moving out of the area, and for those remaining whose family and neighbors have moved away. The third impact relates to the integration of new residents with the original community. Gilbert (2009) argues that, based on research in Les Minguettes housing estate in Lyon, newcomers adopt a distanced attitude toward their neighbors, as their stable income and employment situation often distinguish them from the majority of the local population. However, he points out that local residents rehoused in the new buildings hold the key to bridging connections between newcomers and “established” residents. This group is crucial in achieving the supposed positive effects of social mixing policy promoted through PNRU’s urban renewal demolition program (Lelévrier, 2013).

Despite the significant funding and extensive renewal programs implemented under the PNRU, the Cour des Comptes (2012) found, in its review of 10 years of the Politique de la Ville (2003–2012), that there had been little impact on reducing urban inequalities. It found that in the targeted neighborhoods, where over eight million people live, unemployment is still twice the rate it is elsewhere, the proportion of people living below the poverty threshold has increased, and the average quality of life for households is less than half the national average. In relation to social sustainability, the report also found that the PNRU policy has not led to social integration as intended, but rather social fragmentation due to the increased supply of intermediate social and market housing in the target areas, the out-mobility of residents with higher incomes, and the difficulty of attracting new residents to some sites (Kipfer, 2016). This supports well-established studies based on research in the grands ensembles that show that “spatial proximity does not reduce social distance” (Chamboredon and Lemaire, 1970; see also Bernard, 2009), with no guarantee of the anticipated positive cooperation between local people and newcomers. Social mobility and the “social distinction” between groups depends more on broader processes of structural inequality, rather than on narrower contextual processes (Bourdieu, 1979). Indeed, the President of the Evaluation and Monitoring Committee of the ANRU in 2012 claimed that the objective of social mixing (that is, neighborhood diversity) hadn’t been met by the PNRU: “We’ve remade ghettos, but only cleaner this time” (Le Monde, 2012).

One of ANRU’s underlying principles for its urban renewal programs is public engagement; the objective is to involve residents in projects at the earliest possible opportunity in their development, as a key factor for success in both the short and

long-term. However, certain commentators have raised questions about how far “involvement” actually goes. As Arnstein (1969) pointed out almost half a century ago, there are different levels on the “ladder of participation,” with “involvement” often being little more than consultative, rather than true empowerment through engagement and participation in decision-making.

In terms of governance, projects under the PNRU are drawn up through a Contrat (Agreement) between the key institutional actors to set out the proposed program of work: between the State represented by the regional Prefect (Préfet), ANRU, the City represented by the Mayor, and the social housing landlords (*bailleurs sociaux*). From 2014, all priority neighborhoods under the Politique de la Ville have also been given the opportunity to set up Citizens’ Councils (Conseils Citoyens) through which residents can engage with the urban renewal process. However, it is still too early to assess their impact, and how involved residents’ associations, tenants’ groups, and neighborhood committees are in decision-making. First analyses suggest that municipalities have a strong influence on Citizens’ Councils (Talpin, 2014). Some have also suggested that in the lead up to urban renewal operations, site analysis is carried out by experts and technicians without reference to the daily experiences of local residents (Bertagnini, 2013). Thus, the discourse is mediated through the views of institutional actors and experts, who justify demolition through a narrative related to “opening up the neighborhood” (*désenclavement*), introducing more “mixité sociale” and addressing the area’s “ghetto”-like aspects. It is only at this late stage that residents are invited to be involved, when a demolition program is already in place and a process of rehousing is already planned (Bertagnini, 2013, p. 13).

Examples of resistance to demolition are limited. Kipfer (2016) highlights cases of anti-demolition protests, where local resistance to redevelopment projects has had a direct impact, either stopping full demolition or reducing the number of demolished units, improving the rehousing process as well as bettering the quality of reconstructed housing units. However, examples of such resistance are limited.

More generally, however, it has been suggested that in some places urban renewal projects have had a positive effect in building capacity locally, in particularly strengthening the attachment that some residents feel towards their neighborhood, contributing to what Deboulet (2010) refers to as a new form of urban citizenship (“*citoyenneté urbaine*”), involving an individual and collective commitment to the city. This re-appropriation of place can be interpreted as a response to their threatened expropriation by residents, who express a new willingness to participate in the construction of their everyday worlds (Bertagnini, 2013).

## **Conclusion.**

In many French cities, post-war urban economic growth was met with rapid expansion on the periphery of towns and cities. Low-cost solutions to house the growing population, coming both from rural hinterlands as well as from outside France, resulted in large-scale public housing projects on the edge of cities, characterized by generally poor quality high-rise housing developments, with few public services and often little access to public transportation.

Over time, these factors have been coupled with a concentration of low-income households, often of ethnic minority origin, and increasing socioeconomic exclusion, isolated by both visible and invisible borders. A feeling of disillusionment with and abandonment by the French political class, as well as alienation from mainstream society, led to civil disturbances in the early 1980s, early 1990s, and during the autumn of 2005 for around a month across 40 towns and cities (Tshimanga et al., 2009).

Various urban renewal programs have been instigated in these areas, in an attempt to address the escalating challenges associated with the banlieue. However, as this chapter has illustrated, a number of these programs' objectives have not been met. One of the key challenges is territorial stigmatization in the banlieue, but studies have shown that area-specific policies tend to reinforce the "outsiders" perception that the neighborhoods concerned are "problematic." Evidence shows that there is a need to improve housing conditions, but this objective appears to be secondary to the policy imperative of "social mixing." Research also highlights the problem of potentially increasing the precarity of the banlieue's most disadvantaged through a reduction in affordable housing stock, which can cause displacement and undermine social capital and local kinship ties through rehousing.

The impact of the first 10 years of PNRU's urban renewal program is beginning to be felt. Learning from the past decade, a number of recommendations have been put forward for the second program, 2014–2024 (Kipfer, 2016). Rather than emphasizing demolition, experience from the first program suggests that more reconstruction would produce better outcomes for residents. It is also important to focus on small-scale interventions, including social development actions, rather than purely physical mechanisms of demolition and rebuilding higher income housing. In order to build banlieues that are socially sustainable, there needs to be investment in community-led actions to promote social cohesion, connecting different social groups and building trust through engagement with residents.

These bottom-up initiatives will construct more socially cohesive neighborhoods that will create the banlieues of the future, by and for residents.

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