

Recommendations on addressing territorial stigmatisation in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.

Bio

Before studying Sustainable Development in Scotland, I grew up in the North of France, near Boulogne-sur-Mer. Over my three years of high school in Boulogne-sur-Mer, I discovered the Passage Siblequin, its unique environment, difficult reputation, and emerging community initiatives. When I prepared this research on community-led solutions to urban sustainability challenges, I immediately decided to focus on the Passage Siblequin.

Abstract

Boulogne-sur-Mer is a French city of 40,000 people situated by the English Channel. The once prosperous city now faces several urban sustainability challenges. Its unemployment rate is almost three times higher than the national average. The Passage Siblequin, situated in the heart of the city, is suffering from a negative reputation in Boulogne-sur-Mer and beyond, which impacts the inhabitants' life quality. As the municipality has failed to solve this issue, this report is addressed directly to the inhabitants of the Passage Siblequin. It offers practical, nuanced, and achievable recommendations to address this territorial stigmatisation effectively and sustainably. Two visions for the neighbourhood are developed – a peaceful green oasis and an attractive and artistic space. To achieve either or both these visions, the report gives step-by-step guidance on forming a lasting community initiative. Overall, this report aims to empower the inhabitants of the Passage Siblequin to act to address the negative perception of their neighbourhood, to implement their own vision of an enjoyable and sustainable place to live in the city.

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Dear inhabitants of the Passage Siblequin,

This community report aims to equip you with the tools to implement your own vision of urban development in the Passage Siblequin. In this report, practical, nuanced, and achievable recommendations are developed using academic theories and case studies across the world to offer you ways to make the passage lively, enjoyable, and included in the city.

Foreword

Before studying sustainable urban development in Scotland, I grew up in Boulogne-sur-Mer myself. I attended the Lycée Mariette and discovered how special the Passage Siblequin is. This report is the result of months of research on the best ways to improve the passage. It is based on my personal knowledge of the place and reinforced by discussions with friends from Boulogne-sur-Mer, interviews of inhabitants in newspaper articles, and academic research.

If you wish to contact me for comments or more information, please email me at mathilderoze16@gmail.com

Introduction to the Passage Siblequin

The Passage Siblequin in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, is a special place in the middle of the city. Understanding the history of the city and the specificities of the passage can help to understand the best ways to generate change.

Boulogne-sur-Mer

Boulogne-sur-Mer is a French city of 40,000 people situated by the English Channel. It used to be a centre of academic excellence, a prosperous fishing port, and a fashionable touristic destination (Béthouart, 2009). However, the city faced a decline that started in the early 20th century. Overfishing ultimately caused a reduction in the quantity of fish available, on which most of the economy relied (Béthouart, 2009). Then, the city was partly destroyed during WWII and became much less attractive for tourism (Béthouart, 2009). Over the past decades, the economy has slowed down, and the unemployment rates have risen. Unemployment rates in Boulogne-sur-Mer are now almost three times higher than the national average, with 28% of the population between 15 and 64 years old actively seeking employment (Insee, 2021). Multiple funding from the national and regional scales have been used by the municipality to redevelop the touristic attractiveness of the city, in particular with the development of the largest aquarium in Europe on the waterfront.

An ideal location in the heart of the city

Among these evolutions and renegotiations, the Passage Siblequin seems to have been forgotten from the municipality's urban development policies. The passage is ideally situated in the centre of the city, offering a shortcut between two of the main streets: Boulevard Clocheville and Faidherbe street. This location offers a large open space in the heart of the city, in the middle of a few dozens of flats. The space is especially remarkable considering the lack of open spaces and parks in most cities in France, including in Boulogne-sur-Mer. In addition, it is surrounded by shops, close to the local high school, and between the two campuses of the university. Despite this favourable location in an active part of the city, the passage remains largely deserted.



Figure 1 and Figure 2: Photographs of the two parts of the Passage Siblequin in March 2021. Courtesy of François T.

Territorial stigmatisation

A reputation of being unsafe

At first sight, it may appear surprising that such an ideal space remains disused and deserted. However, a closer look into the reputation of the passage helps to understand the situation. Unfortunately, the Passage Siblequin has acquired a lasting reputation across the city and beyond as being a dangerous place to be avoided. Local newspapers have published numerous articles about regular police interventions and feelings of insecurity (Voix du Nord, 2020; Voix du Nord, 2021). The neighbourhood is being referred to extremely negatively in the media, mentioning a “no-go zone” (Voix du Nord, 2020). This negative perception is also observable in interviews of the inhabitants themselves, who explain that they do not feel safe in this neighbourhood (Rabé, 2018). In addition, parents in Boulogne-sur-Mer often warn

their children against walking through the passage, advising them always to avoid this shortcut.

Unjustified concerns

This situation may lead to believe that the passage is indeed an especially dangerous place to avoid and that the only way forward would be to increase surveillance. While no official data is available on police interventions, arrests, and crime rates on such a small scale, research seems to show that these concerns are unfounded.

Indeed, analysis of all the media articles on the passage seems to indicate that it is not any more dangerous than the rest of Boulogne-sur-Mer. Multiple media articles on the Passage Siblequin have dramatic titles on the weekly police interventions (Voix du Nord, 2020; Voix du Nord, 2021). However, none of them report a single arrest or issue in the passage over the past years.

Even more surprisingly, the passage and its immediate surroundings seem to face less violence than the opposite end of the Boulevard Clocheville, which is nearby. Indeed, the Boulevard faced arrests, including armed robberies and a shooting from a window, over the past years (Rabé, 2018). Despite this, the Boulevard enjoys a much more positive reputation from both its inhabitants, who do not report feeling unsafe, and from the larger population which does not hold any collective negative opinion on it (Rabé, 2018).

As a result, it appears that the negative perception of the passage is disproportionate and unjustly constructed.

Understanding territorial stigmatisation

The disproportionately negative reputation of the Passage Siblequin is not an isolated case. This phenomenon has been perceived in numerous cities across the world and theorised by

academics as territorial stigmatisation. While academic theories may often appear far removed from reality and unable to have a significant impact, territorial stigmatisation has the potential to inform practical recommendations that can truly help you make your neighbourhood a livelier and more comfortable place.

This notion of territorial stigmatisation has been developed by the academic researcher Loïc Wacquant. The term has been defined and used in multiples ways (Larsen and Delica, 2019; Sisson, 2020). The central common element between these definitions is the link between social, political, and symbolical construction of stigma of a place and its impact on the inhabitants (Larsen and Delica, 2019; Wacquant et al., 2014). A place facing territorial stigmatisation is disproportionately represented and perceived as dangerous. These representations and perceptions negatively affect its inhabitants and exclude the neighbourhood from the rest of the city.

One of the key aspects of territorial stigmatisation is what Wacquant refers to as its “nationalized and democratized” nature (Wacquant et al., 2014, p1275). This is what was described earlier, when the media, politicians, and inhabitants alike have a generalised negative perception of the neighbourhood – despite the lack of evidence to support such a claim.

Current responses

Insufficient investment in urban development

The Passage Siblequin was classified as a priority neighbourhood in 2016 due to its unemployment rate being much higher than the rest of the city (Préfecture du Pas-de-Calais, 2016). The classification of the neighbourhood should have generated a specific focus on development from the municipality. In 2011 and 2016, when national funding was secured

for urban development in Boulogne-sur-Mer, the Mayor Cuvillier claimed that the focus would be put on the Passage Siblequin (Rudz, 2017). However, it appears that years later, no change has been made (Rudz, 2017; Rabé, 2018).

Punitive measures

The municipality has however been extremely proactive on the implementation of punitive measures in the passage. Indeed, it has reacted to the perceived dangerousness of the passage in two main ways: by supporting weekly police interventions and by closing the passage overnight. As mentioned earlier, the municipality has required weekly police interventions in the passage despite the fact that no arrests have been reported over the past few years. Additionally, in 2012, the municipality decided to close the passage every night from 8 pm to 7:30 am, arguing that it would help address the issue of insecurity in the neighbourhood. However, this has further stigmatised the passage. It legitimised the perception of the passage as dangerous, despite the lack of data supporting this claim. Years later, there are still no arrests, the passage remains close every night, media articles still mention insecurity, and the population still reports feeling unsafe (Rabé, 2018; Voix du Nord, 2020; Voix du Nord, 2021).

Overall, these policies appear to have failed to address the perceived insecurity of the passage and to foster its inclusion in the city. On the contrary, the policies seem to reinforce the territorial stigmatisation of the passage and the feeling of insecurity among its population.



Figure 3. Gate at the entrance of the Passage Siblequin. Courtesy of François T.

Existing community initiatives

Inhabitants have also been acting independently to improve life in the Passage. In particular, the local charity C-napse has installed one of its offices in the Passage. The C-napse aims to generate connections between inhabitants and to increase employment through computer science teaching. The C-napse only has a small team of two people, who also work in other parts of the city. Over the years, they have organised family-friendly events during the summers, including board game afternoons and large shared meals. For each event, between 5 and 10 inhabitants joined, which demonstrates a willingness of some inhabitants to get involved in new projects and enjoy the passage they live in (HappyDice, 2018).

However, these community events remain few and far between, with only a couple getting organised each summer and very little actions during the rest of the year. In addition, the fear of the passage remains within the inhabitants, the media, and the wider population (Voix du Nord, 2021; Rabé, 2018). Considering the extent of the territorial stigmatisation of the passage, one-off events do not offer a sufficient shift to address the tinted image of the passage.

In the next part, I am introducing practical recommendations to help you develop the passage further.

Recommendations

These recommendations aim to give you ideas of possible ways to transform the passage into a welcoming and enjoyable space included in the city.

Learning from the friches

These recommendations are inspired by friches across France and adapted to the specific context and space available in the Passage. The term friche, which translates into wasteland, has found a new meaning in the collective understanding of most French people. It is often used to describe a forgotten space in a city that gets taken over by a collective to become a space of freedom and community-led activities. They are usually open to anyone and include spaces to rest and meet, as well as cultural activities.

The most famous one near Boulogne-sur-Mer is the Gare Saint Sauveur in Lille. The large abandoned train station in the middle of the city of Lille was disused for many years and perceived as a dangerous deserted area. After months of growing initiatives, it has now become a central place where people from all over the city meet in this outdoor space to enjoy a drink or attend an exhibition (Gare Saint Sauveur, 2021). It completely transformed the perception of the neighbourhood into an attractive and dynamic place. The friche of the Grands Voisins in Paris has a similar story. Numerous charities took over the deserted hospital in the heart of the city. While it could have been perceived as a new no-go zone, this transformation attracted very diverse audiences and the space is now recognised by local politicians as an exemplar case of urban transition (Livet, 2017). These projects do not appear

to have caused an exclusion of the local population and gentrification but rather have allowed the population to become less stigmatised (Livet, 2017). These two cases offer hope and practical ideas for the transformation of the Passage Siblequin.

From the various components of the friches – including open spaces, cafes, exhibitions, concerts, gardens – this report develops two visions for the Passage Siblequin. These visions can be implemented independently or together, depending on what you want to see in the passage. This flexible approach recognises your agency and ensures the development of a sense of ownership of the project, which is essential to guarantee its sustainability (Mullenbach et al., 2019; Haggett and Aitken, 2015).

A peaceful green oasis

The first proposition for the passage is a calm and enjoyable space. This includes places to come together and socialise the possibility to share knowledge and passions, as well as gardens to develop food autonomy, teach children about nature, and enjoy some green space in the middle of the city. Considering the lack of open outdoor spaces in Boulogne-sur-Mer, the passage could offer a restful and enjoyable green place in the heart of the city.

The aim of this approach is to turn the passage into a liveable space where people would have a reason to go and stay for a few hours. In addition, it could generate more interactions between the inhabitants. This could turn the entire space into an enjoyable garden and social space.

Benches could be installed to offer a place to stop and rest, changing the perception of the passage as always empty which reinforces the “no-go zone” perception. Further, a Little Free Library could be built to offer local inhabitants an additional reason to spend time in the passage. It is also an opportunity to learn and exchange about diverse topics. Similar libraries have been installed around the city by the municipality, but the passage has remained

excluded from such initiatives. In addition, shared raised gardens could be developed in the passage. This would allow children to learn about nature and food production. It would offer a source of free local organic food, which could be extremely beneficial to this community with a low average income. It could also support local university students and be used in community meals. Moreover, recent studies have shown that exposure to nature in urban spaces can have significant health benefits, including improvements in mental and physical health (Shanahan et al., 2015; Kondo et al., 2018), so these gardens could be highly beneficial. These simple changes requiring limited investment could significantly impact the use and perception of the passage by transforming it into a lively and welcoming space.

An artistic and attractive passage

The second proposition for the passage is an artistic and attractive space. This could include family-friendly live music and theatre shows in partnership with local artists, professional street art on the facades, and using a part of the space as a cafe terrace.

Street art, in particular, could help to include the passage in larger initiatives in the city. Indeed, Boulogne-sur-Mer has been growing as a key place for street art in France. The municipality has supported street art across the city, even creating a street art trail to foster tourism. While the Passage Siblequin has been excluded from this initiative until now, it could become included. The shape of the passage makes it perfectly adapted for immersive experiences, if some walls were to be painted over by professional artists. Using inspiration from small spaces such as in Berlin, the passage could become an artistic hub for the young people living in the city and artists across the country, and a popular place to visit in Boulogne-sur-Mer. Funding for this project could be raised through local grants for community initiatives and partnerships with local businesses.



Figure 4. Street art piece “La vague de chaleur” in Boulogne-sur-Mer, by the artist Fintan Magee. It received international awards.

Advice on starting a community project

Implementing these visions may appear daunting, but it does not have to be. The following advice could help you to become more confident in your ability to lead positive changes in the Passage Siblequin.

No change is too small

Firstly, it is possible to start small. There is no need to completely change the passage overnight. It can be tempting to aim to have a large impact from the start and try to develop everything at once. However, aiming to change all aspects of the passage - painting the walls, building furniture, and contacting artists all at once - may be overwhelming. It could lead to exhaustion once the initial energy runs out and ultimately compromise the sustainability of the project (Chen and Gorski, 2015). It is therefore essential to remember that no change is too small. It may be much more effective to focus on starting small and slowly building up.

For example, starting by creating a Little Free Library is as easy as putting an old bookshelf in the passage and a small sign explaining the concept. Over the coming weeks, it will attract more and more people and bring life to the passage. It could even be added to the interactive map of Free Library across the north of France to attract more people. Such projects could be started right now by a person like you.

Make it known

Secondly, the project will be able to grow as it aggregates support along the way. These initial small changes in the passage will generate discussions and aggregate support.

Making perceivable changes in the passage will help generate conversations and learn what other inhabitants want to see. Indeed, it will be a good way to start a community consultation on the development of the passage. Consultations are a common practice in urban development, and often have a negative reputation of being a token gesture to make people feel involved without truly listening to them (Mahjabeen et al., 2009). However, it can be a powerful tool to create genuine collaborations. Here, making visible changes – such as starting a free library – can help bring people together and start a conversation about the future of the passage. These visible changes have been successfully used in many other contexts, including in Riga, where young urbanists painted a part of the pavement in blue to successfully generate discussions on the space given to cars in the city (FineYoungUrbanists, 2015). Similarly, visible changes in the passage can help gain other inhabitants' opinions on what they would like to see. This sense of ownership is essential to ensure support of the project and help the project to last. In addition, it will help bring people together who can help develop the passage further, including other inhabitants with special skills and experience.

Develop partnerships

Thirdly, do not hesitate to reach out to other independent local stakeholders who could help in this project. For example, students from the University and high school that are only a few steps away could help build furniture for the passage and maintain the gardens. In addition, local shops could be interested in developing a terrace in a part of the passage. This could bring them some clients, ensure that the passage is full of life, and generate some income to fund further projects in the passage. In particular, the Kawa coffeehouse nearby often works with community initiatives and has been expanding over the past years, but lacks outdoor space for its customers. These partnerships could be extremely valuable in the development of an inclusive and attractive passage.

Learn from others

Finally, it is always possible to learn from other similar projects. Most friches and large urban community initiatives have contact details available online and would very likely be happy to show solidarity and discuss their own experiences. This could include advice on running a Little Free Library, working with local businesses, and even contacting national media to change the perception of the passage. They may also offer valuable knowledge on the legal aspects of some parts of this project and legal authorisations that might be needed to ensure the project can last. Indeed, considering the current perception of the passage, it may be valuable to ensure that every initiative is developed in a legal way that would further the inclusion of the passage, rather than reinforce its perception as a zone where the law does not apply.

Conclusion

This community report has analysed the reasons why current policies and community initiatives have remained scattered and did not change the overall negative perception of the neighbourhood as an unsafe space. This report has demonstrated that using the academic and urban development concept of territorial stigmatisation could help address this issue adequately. Two achievable visions for the passage have been proposed based on relevant academic theories and cases studies of other cities, adapted to the specific context of the Passage Siblequin. These practical, nuanced, and achievable recommendations will hopefully allow you to implement the changes you want to see in your community.

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