In dialogue with Paul Citron
Edited by Francesco Campagnari

The interview has been conducted at Césure, the new two-year project of Plateau Urbain and Yes We Camp. This 25.000 sqm former University building will host more than 180 initiatives and more than 1.000 students.

Francesco Campagnari: Hello Paul. I'm going to start by asking you how you fit into the theme of bottom-up urban regeneration and how you got there.

Paul Citron: First of all, I am a professional urban planner: I studied geography and then urban planning at the Sorbonne. My doctoral research dealt with the role of property developers in urban planning. Not really bottom-up urban regeneration.
Afterwards, I initiated the Plateau Urbain association with Simon Laisney, a friend from the urban planning school. It is an association – and now a cooperative – which originally brought together only urban planners from our school and which sought to occupy empty buildings to make them available to artists, craftsmen, associations, and people who needed offices or workshops to carry out their activity. So here again, we are somewhat peripheral to this notion of citizen empowerment, given that we, even if we were an association and even if we were very young, were in some way professionals, 'experts'.
When we founded Plateau Urbain we considered that there was on the one hand 'the below', i.e. the associations, the artists, and the craftsmen, even if that was also in some cases the dominant or creative classes, and on the other hand the supposed 'top', i.e. the real estate owners and the local authorities, the developers, i.e. the public and private owners.
With Plateau Urbain we wanted to situate ourselves in the middle, linking this supposed bottom and this supposed top. It's perhaps a position of translator between two separate worlds of the city, those who animate it and make it more united, more beautiful, more interesting, more creative and more creative, and those who own it, who transform it and who manage it.

With architect Patrick Bouchain, we then created an association called 'La preuve par sept'. The association sought to ensure that the projects carried out by Plateau Urbain or by Bouchain could be disseminated more widely, on another scale or in other contexts and thus become public policy.

Today I am an independent urban planner and I still work with Plateau Urbain as an expert.

FC: How has the idea of 'bottom-up' been used in France by projects, associations, and cooperatives, but also in the planning discipline?

PC: For the last twenty years, the main axis of public policies on urban planning in France has been the urban renovation of social housing areas, with a lot of demolition and reconstruction. Calls to take inhabitants more into account and, above all, to empower them, first emerged in debates about these urban programmes. In particular, Marie-Hélène Bacqué's and Mohamed Mechmache's 2013 report *For a radical reform of urban policy* for the Ministry for Urban Planning advocated for the intensification of the involvement of civic initiatives in these urban programmes and policies.

The concept of empowerment of the 'below' in urban planning emerged from a field of urban policies which is very different from that of third places because of its size – it involves hundreds of neighbourhoods in France – because of its financial volume – billions or tens of billions of euros of renovation – because of its economic stakes – with hundreds of demolition and reconstruction sites, as well as professionals involved.

Even if this urban policy remained very technocratic, Bacqué's and Mechmache's call legitimised a participatory approach to urban programming initiatives in target neighbourhoods. Considering the prevalence of poorer than average or very poor inhabitants in these neighbourhoods, the bottom-up urbanism developed in these programmes therefore necessarily involved people who were indeed in conditions of economic and social disadvantage.

Meanwhile, in the last decade or so, there has been a rise in prevalence as well as increased institutional recognition for new kinds of spaces: firstly cultural spaces, then the social economy, then *friches*, a lot of temporary urbanism initiatives, amongst others. These projects did not concern the same people: they

concerned educated people, the so-called creative classes. Even if they had no economic capital, they had social and cultural capital, especially interpersonal skills and networks. Through these, they were able to occupy places, have legitimacy, show a face acceptable to authorities or owners, and therefore impose themselves or at least legitimise themselves in the occupation and management of these small pieces of town.

These people wanted to animate, manage and occupy *friches* to make them places of creation (cultural, artisan, etc.) or even neighbourhood hubs. Even if they were often not commercial places, they had a shiny appearance.

Largely thanks to the Aurore association and the Les Grands Voisins project, these groups met with social workers and emergency shelter operators. Organisations like Aurore are solidarity associations working for people in extreme social and economic difficulty. You could say that these associations represent the bottom, but on the other hand, all the people who work in these associations are not especially the bottom.

This meeting between the *friche* movement and the social work/solidarity movement led to what was then called "temporary urbanism with a social vocation", with a somewhat solidarity-based accent to the *friches*.

I would like to stress something. Even if one could have the impression from the outside that these *friches* had a completely social, supportive and generous character, we must not forget that – at least in the most mediatised projects – the narrative was nevertheless always in the hands of those who organised these projects: educated people with undeniable social, relational and cultural capital. I think that in other contexts there are projects which really come from below.

I think that what was important for us was to get out of a purely neoliberal logic, in which all actions around the city are market-oriented. There was clearly a desire not to orient our actions towards the market. We were also in the form of an association. Then we did some things in the form of a cooperative. We were careful to avoid the commodification that we feared and which may have occurred in other places. But even considering this non-market orientation, I couldn't say that this was urbanism from below either.

FC: You mentioned the narratives in these projects. The content of these narratives and their grammar of deployment are quite important to gain legitimacy and validation in the public debate. In Italy, the narratives of bottom-up urban regeneration often touch on the themes of impact and effectiveness. These projects are often seen as more effective than government-led urban plans or policies in developing effective responses to citizen needs or new ways to transform the city. These arguments are linked to the idea of these initiatives as participatory, flexible and experimental.
How is this narrative characterised here in France? What are the arguments these projects craft to get legitimacy in the public debate?

PC: I think that Plateau Urbain tried to gain political legitimacy quite early on. We used Marx 101. We said that there are buildings that no longer have any exchange value, and we're going to give them a use value. That's it. So, the fact that we managed to give a use value to things which no longer had an exchange value, even if we gave the owner back his building as soon as it had somehow regained an exchange value, made us friends with a bit of everyone. It allowed us to legitimise ourselves with those who were rather progressive or left-wing and who understood the reference, and it allowed us to legitimise ourselves with those who didn't have the reference and saw the positive economic side. So there was, I think, a fairly political narrative from that point of view.
Then there was a technical narrative, about the maintenance of the building. The owners thought of us as a way to secure the buildings, and deter squatting. We never claimed that because, firstly, we were not actually against squatting, even if we couldn't say that. And secondly, in the end, we knew that the buildings we were lent could not be squatted because they were not the most convenient typology to squat. So we didn't feel that we were competing with the squatters, but on the other hand, the owners thought that we were securing the buildings, and they liked that.
The third argument is about city-making. Without it being our intention, what we did for a few years then affected the long-term project of the owner – first at Les Grands Voisins, with a very enlightened public owner, and then several other times. Thanks also to the legitimacy of being urban planners and not

architects, we developed a whole discourse on urban evolution and experimentation. We said that you don't need to touch the buildings to think about their transformation. You just need to adapt them a little bit, without changing their form and by modifying their uses, to do an urban planning action. Instead of doing a theoretical study, we did full-scale technical studies. This is what we called open programming and the urban lab. We said that in the end, it was by occupying, by acting, that we could think. And that was also very appealing. Because who would have thought that going for a drink somewhere or walking around a *friche* was urban planning?

If we put it in order, we had on the one hand a technical narrative. We had to master the technical terms. Simon and I had a background in real estate. We knew how the owners thought, how they spoke, we even knew how they dressed. We had taken on their habitus to be accepted and we spoke the same technical jargon to them. On a second level, there was an urbanistic discourse that we drew from our studies and which allowed us to give a bit of a push to the people who entrusted us with land and to hold a discourse on this. And thirdly, a more political discourse focused on the right to the city, the value of use which takes precedence over the value of exchange, and the refusal of the commodification of urban spaces.

We mostly used these three levels of discourse. There was very little talk of empowerment or of giving power to people 'from below'. The only thing we said about this was that the programme of each project would be determined through open processes involving the tenants. We launched open calls for applications, where we offered spaces in such and such a building, saying people could do anything that was allowed by the regulations. And then the programme resulted from the sum of the people who applied to use the building and that we selected – we always had too many requests compared to the offer.

FC: In connection with that, have you had any criticism that you didn't aim to include the local communities in the spaces where you are setting up?

PC: We've had lots and lots of criticism, but not much on this topic. There is an interesting project in Marseille led by Yes We Camp, a close partner of ours. It's in a working-class district in the centre of Marseille called Belsunce. The State lent Yes We

Camp a building for three years, which is a medium-term lease from our perspective.

Yes We Camp are more collaborative than Plateau Urbain: their DNA is to open up to the public. The first thing they do when they arrive is to go and see local associations to develop collaborations. What is interesting, even if it was disappointing, is that the associations told them ¨You've arrived today and you're here for three years. We've been here for ten years and in ten years we'll still be here. We don't know if we want to waste our time doing things with you, because you will be gone soon¨.

I think that this very short time frame, from three to five years, for temporary urbanism projects has hindered the collaboration with civic movements rooted in the neighbourhoods. On the other hand, these short periods can be immense for a young company or a young association. Three years for an artist who is just starting is infinite, three years for a fifty-year-old association activist who has been working in a neighbourhood for twenty years is nothing.

Things are also more complex than this. With the lockdown, Yes We Camp started working much more than before with the neighbourhood associations and this finally created links. It turns out that today the project is going to be extended, perhaps indefinitely. Here again, little by little, links can be created. But I think that in France, this type of project, at least for the biggest projects, is not very much oriented towards citizens' associations and is more likely to be directed towards larger associations, young professionals, or solidarity associations.

There is also a difference in political culture, which is why these associations are suspicious of organisations like ours. Because there is a culture of volunteering versus one of the organisations trying to professionalise. We don't have the same political history or the same militant history. The people who work in the *friches* in France end up becoming activists, but at the base they don't often come from an activist background. So, the biggest and most visible projects, often in the city centres of big cities, are not led by citizen collectives; but there are of course other projects led by militants and associations.

FC: I see a paradigmatic difference between what you are doing as Plateau Urbain and the model of civic urban action we observe in Italy: in terms of local rooting, not only you adopt

a different approach to the relation with local communities, but you especially operate in multiple sites and cities. You're based in Paris, but you also have projects in Lyon, Marseille, and Bordeaux. In Italy, initiatives often stick to a single locally-rooted project.

How did this approach emerge? Was the idea of working on a national level and in different cities problematised in Plateau Urbain? How do you relate to the specificities of each context?

PC: The idea of establishing an organisation able to work on different territories was there since the beginning. We initially saw ourselves as a technical actor who would connect two actors who didn't know each other – the artist and the owner, or the association and the owner. What was missing, in our opinion, was trust, a legal framework, a technical framework that was clear to everyone and that allowed for the multiplication of experiences that were until then rather singular.

Plateau Urbain didn't invent anything. We simply tried to disseminate practices which already existed – like for example, 6B, which is a great inspiration for us – and to improve them as much as we could. Our contribution was scalable and reproducible anywhere: laws, safety regulations, and the logic of owners and artists are the same whatever the territory.

That didn't mean that we did the same thing wherever we went: we had the same mode of action, but, given that there was this idea of open programming, in the end the project would have the flavour of those who apply to the call for applications to rent the spaces. Given that the people who applied came from the area, this allowed us to create projects that had an extremely local flavour each time, whereas we didn't come from there to begin with.

We also didn't call the projects Plateau Urbain II, Plateau Urbain III, Plateau Urbain IV. Each time, the names were given by the occupants, and the logos or the signage was done by the people on the spot. And so there was an appropriation of the place that was possible through this.

The magical thing that made this possible was that we were given medium or large buildings and we put in small actors. Our activity was therefore to match many, many small local players with a large building owned by a national or international owner. When we arrived in a territory, we met the heads of the network,

the associations, the elected representatives, and everyone. We are urban planners and geographers, so we knew how to make this kind of territorial analysis that a traditional real estate developer would not think of doing. We went to see all these local networks and asked them to spread our call for applications in their networks. We did this in Lyon, Marseille, and the Greater Paris area.

So in the end, even if it seemed very standardised – and it was – given that the aim was to give space to the people who worked and lived there, in the end, we were not criticized too much on this point.

FC: Was your approach also helped by the presence of large real estate owners in France? Have you ever worked with an owner in different cities?

PC: I think that's very true. We've worked with the same owner in Paris several times, but not in different cities. There is a club effect among the few big property owners: when Société Générale sees that we work with BNP, they want to collaborate as like their friends or like their competitors do.

FC: How is your approach – the Plateau Urbain approach, Yes We Camp and others – changing the real estate market, professional practices and urban policies?

PC: Let's be very clear from the beginning: we haven't changed the real estate market at all.

About professional practices: we were lucky to arrive at a moment when, by doing the same thing as projects initiated ten years earlier, we could show a way to do the city differently. That is to say, first of all, the idea of an open construction site: to not close a building or a site undergoing a transformation, but rather to open it up. Showing that we are going to do something here and opening it up as widely as possible.

Secondly, an idea of evolving programming: as I was saying, to show that, through the uses that we are proposing temporarily, we can think about more long-term uses.

This is linked to several contextual issues: in a pressured real estate context where there is not much space, it is interesting to be able to use the available spaces, even for a few years. In a context of market uncertainty, it is interesting to be able to change programmes. In a context of increasing scarcity of

ecological resources and ecological sobriety, it is interesting to reuse buildings and develop them little by little rather than carry out major works. And to have a slightly lighter impact on the city in terms of carbon footprint.

I think that it showed the elected representatives and the inhabitants that we could do urban planning without being forced to think in ten-year time frames. Usually, urban planning, typically the urban renewal projects I was talking about at the beginning, are based on five, ten, fifteen, twenty years timeframes. We do projects over two years, and in a few months the project is set up. Here in the studio where we are, even if it's very rudimentary, it's not decorated, some wires are unplugged but which are visible, there are filthy suspended ceilings, there's no paint, and the carpet is from the 80s. Yet we're in a recording studio: it was a recording studio before, we've put a little thing together and it works. Even if in terms of image it's not very good, in terms of use we're in a perfect recording studio.

Finally, about the effect on urban policies. I think we need to be more critical about this. These movements are emerging in a time, in a period that has been undermining public services for thirty years. The budget of local authorities and public services has decreased. Public actors are asked to do perhaps a little less or just as much with much less money, and it's the same for public services. At the same time, in these projects cultural events can be organised without or with very low subsidies. Or we manage to set up places of solidarity that don't cost much. In the end, we could see, unfortunately, that in a way we are being used: the efficiency of these objects can be used as a justification to continue to break down public services.

These projects are extremely visible to citizens, to city dwellers, and they don't cost much. For public administrations, it is convenient to support hundreds of them with grants in the order of tens of thousands of euros, because they are cheap and visible. But the resources invested – in the order of millions – are a tiny fraction of the billions being cut from the budget of public services.

When you consider public policies for *friches* and temporary urbanism projects, you have to be careful about the value of the budgets and the total expenditure.

Here is an example. We are in a former university. It's 25.000

square metres, a big building from the 80s in the heart of Paris. It contains asbestos, which is dangerous for health when in contact with the population. Even if it is not dangerous now, the building will have to undergo heavy work to remove the asbestos. They moved the university to another building and they gave us the building so that we could occupy it before starting the works. The day after the university moved to another site, the public owner, who manages the real estate of the universities, told us that there was another university that needed classrooms and would have to use the building. So we rented them a whole building plus other rooms. Today we find ourselves managing a university building that receives students.

This is very interesting, it allows us to think about how to mix university and academic functions with activists, artists, companies and associations that also provide training. In terms of the hybridisation of urban mixing functions, I think it's very interesting.

But it still raises the question: is it up to a private player – even if we are a cooperative and not a commercial player – to manage a university and to manage the real estate aspect of a university? There is a risk that at some point someone, recognizing the economic advantage of this configuration, will propose to have these buildings managed by the private sector rather than by the universityìs technical services.

So without wanting to, because I think that nobody had calculated that, there is a risk of rampant privatisation of the public service for the benefit not of market players, but of private players from the social and solidarity economy. Even if I think that we do our job very well, is not always the same thing as the public service either. There should be a real reflection and debate on this.

FC: What are the main topics of debate now in France about the future of these projects and these spaces?

PC: Today in France we have a kind of opposition between what would be temporary and long-term or 'perennial' projects. I think that more projects should have a longer lifespan, but that we should not oppose so-called temporary projects and so-called permanent projects as we do today. For me, the real opposition is between market and non-market projects.

In any case, we need to make sure that there is better legitimacy for these projects to last over time, beyond temporality. So,

one of the issues is how can these places better control the buildings. Many of the organisations active in this field have started to create their land trusts: there's La Main 93.0, led by Mains d'oeuvres, and Base Commune, founded by Plateau Urbain. There's a joint property company that has been created to support this kind of place, called Belleville. I think that the next challenge is: will we succeed in carrying enough weight to win some market share from the classic real estate players?

Today they look at us rather kindly. But to actually compete with them we have to go beyond comparing ourselves with marginal players, as we have done in the past. We often reflected on how we positioned ourselves in relation to squatters. It was an interesting topic of debate because it questioned our political positions and our radicalism. But it made us lose sight of the fact that to change things at some point you have to scale up. To do that, we may become less pure, but we could reach more people. It's always about finding that balance between quantity and quality.

In the end, and I'll end on this point, no matter how much we grow, on our own we won't be able to have enough influence on policies. At some point we have to ask ourselves how we influence things at the political level: for example, how do we take over town halls? How can we influence the members of parliament or Europe to ensure that these urban practices are recognised, encouraged, and perhaps subsidised? Or in any case excluded from certain market rules that don't see the difference between projects like this, which does not bring in any money but offers an important service, and a real estate project which brings in a lot of money, but if it generates a lot of negative, ecological externalities.