

Saint-
Étienne

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A Space Odyssey

By Côme Bastin and Fleur Weinberg

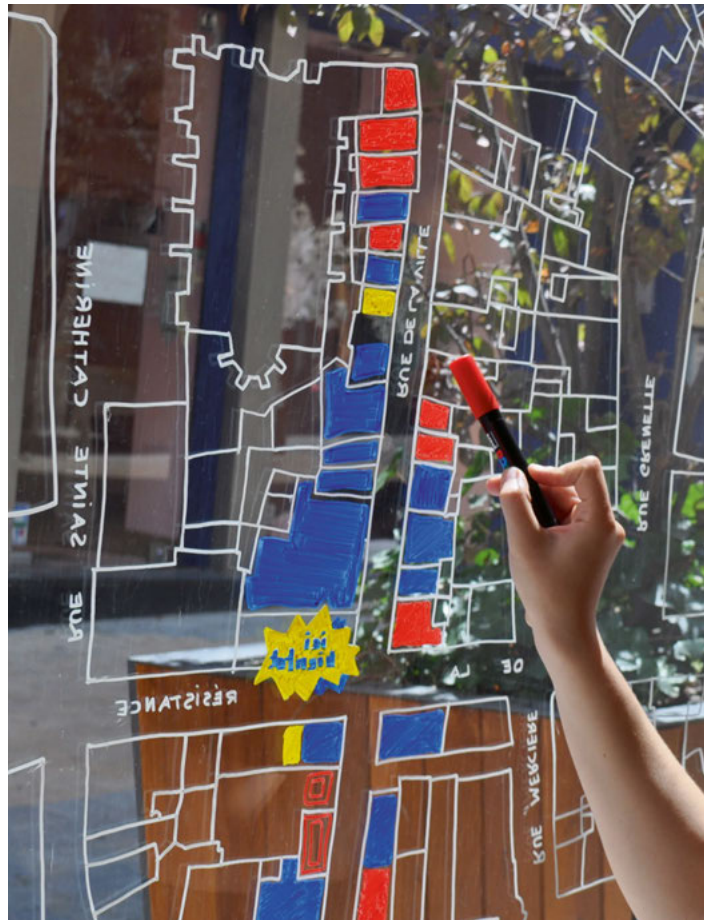
The Cité du design has been working with citizens' initiatives in Saint-Étienne to bring empty spaces to life. Together they have transformed a vacant lot

into a public square, incubated businesses and projects in empty shops, and engaged residents in the regeneration of their neighbourhood.



An installation designed by CREFAD was used to collect suggestions from passers-by on how to revive the Beaubrun neighbourhood. © EtienneB-photography

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A slide and a mini-golf course on the central stairs were among the many interventions in the Crêt de Roch neighbourhood. © Hypermatière



Vacant and occupied shops in rue de la Ville were mapped on the window of the Ici Bientôt office. © Ici Bientôt / CREFAD

“When there is large-scale renewal work going on, we tend to forget there are still people living in the area.”

Raymond Vasselon, Amicale Laïque du Crêt de Roch.

The growth of supermarkets in the suburbs and the shift to online shopping pose an existential threat to shops in our cities, not just in France but throughout Europe. *“There are a lot of empty shops in the centre of Saint-Étienne and they affect the atmosphere,”* says Josyane Franc, who is a member of the Saint-Étienne Human Cities Team and the Head of International Affairs at the Cité du design. *“It’s a serious problem, because small shops are important for neighbourhoods. In their windows, you can see the different elements that make up the city’s identity.”* In Saint-Étienne, which is still suffering from the after-effects of industrial decline, the issue is particularly acute. *“As a result, people who live in the city centre try to develop new networks and services, and come up with new ideas to revitalise public spaces,”* Josyane Franc explains.

In 2014, the Cité du design became the leader of the Human Cities project. It was a valuable opportunity to experiment with new ways to co-create the city with citizens. *“Several neighbourhoods in Saint-Étienne were undergoing renewal,”* says Nathalie Arnould, who is Design Manager at the Cité du design and in charge of incorporating design into municipal and regional policies. *“Many residents and groups weren’t happy about this and started to reclaim public spaces, vacant lots and empty shops.”* This raised a number of important questions. Can design tools be used to find common ground between citizens, landlords and the authorities? And how can empty spaces be reinvented in a way that supports the regeneration process? The Cité du design launched its experiments in a bid to find answers.

Second life for spaces

Thomas Fremaux is a Project Coordinator at the CREFAD Loire Association. Since 2015, he has been working with local actors to improve the bad reputation of rue de la Ville. The street dates from the 14th century and is filled with picturesque buildings; Saint-Étienne’s first town hall used to be located here, too. But over the years, many shops have closed and many buildings have become vacant. We meet at his office called Ici-Bientôt, which translates to Coming Soon. *“Ici-Bientôt transforms streets, focuses attention on windows, and imagines how empty shops can be used differently,”* is posted by the entrance. Within just a few years, the organisation has managed to breathe new life into the historic street in the Beaubrun neighbourhood. *“Over here we have opened a new craft workshop,”* he says as we walk down the street. *“Over here is a community café. And here is a space we gave to a seamstress who was desperately looking for cheap work space.”*

After a 30-minute walk to another part of the city, we meet another activist. Raymond Vasselon is a retired architect who is trying to tackle some of the problems in the Crêt de Roch area. Located on a hill next to the city centre, this popular neighbourhood faces some of the same challenges as Beaubrun. *“The city has gone through major industrial decline and the public response has been to implement large-scale urban renewal plans,”* he says. *“But while this work is going on, we tend to forget there are still people living in this part of the city.”* Many buildings and shops have



Designers from Captain Ludd, students, members of community associations and children from the Crêt de Roch neighbourhood all participated in constructing the welcome desk for Place du Coq. © Hypermatière

From an industrial to a creative city

Textile mills, mines, iron foundries, arms factories... From the 16th to the 20th century, Saint-Étienne was home to France's most important industries. In the 1950s, many large housing estates were built for workers from various European countries and the French colonies in North Africa. During the 1970s,

Saint-Étienne was badly affected by the decline of the coal industry and increased competition from Asia. Many factories had to shut down and the industrial city had to reinvent itself. New institutions (such as a university, theatre and conference hall) were established, while the mines became a historical muse-

um. Only the most advanced industries like optics or high-tech textiles were able to survive, but Saint-Étienne retained a "maker" spirit. This was one of the reasons why the city turned to design as a new source of growth and a potential remedy for some of its ills.



ESADSE design students and children from the Crêt de Roch neighbourhood during the construction phase of Place du Coq. © Axel Mariotte



Top: Urban gardeners and designers from Detroit (USA) met designers from Captain Ludd in Place du Coq during Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Étienne 2017. © Fernando Mascaro

Bottom: The entrance of Place du Coq on Neyron Street.
© Captain Ludd/Martin Guillaumie

“Together with design students and local residents, we constructed a stage, a terrace, a bar, and some play equipment for children.”

Juliana Gotilla, member of Captain Ludd

become vacant in Crêt de Roch, which has acquired a reputation for being dangerous. Raymond Vasselon has tried to turn things around with his associations “Amicale Laïque du Crêt de Roch” and “Rues du Développement Durable”. During several editions of Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Étienne, they helped create a new design workshop, several community gardens, and a space for public events.

Hypermatière and Ici-Bientôt

The two activists were both involved in Saint-Étienne’s Human Cities experiment. In July 2015, a creative meeting was held which brought together 40 people and organisations involved in the transformation of the city. Participants included designers, education associations, and urban planning institutions. After the meeting, the Cité du Design launched a call for proposals to tackle some of the main issues in the city. “*The idea was that the people who were chosen would be like an agency of experts,*” says Camille Vilain, International Project Manager at the Cité du design. “*What we wanted to do was create an office of urban experimentation.*” Two collectives were selected: Hypermatière in the Crêt de Roch neighbourhood and Ici-Bientôt in the Beaubrun area.

The members of Hypermatière included Raymond Vasselon, designer Magalie Rastello, and design collective Captain Ludd, which was already working with residents of Crêt de Roch and the association Amicale Laïque. “*We did a project called Atelier*

Toboggan at the 2015 Design Biennale,” remembers Juliana Gotilla, a Brazilian architect and member of Captain Ludd. “*We organised a participatory workshop and built a street slide on the steps that lead down from Crêt de Roch.*” Captain Ludd managed to obtain cheap office space with Raymond Vasselon’s help. His association Rues du Développement Durable negotiated the rent with the landlord. “*There are a lot of run-down but overpriced properties in Crêt de Roch,*” Raymond Vasselon says. “*We convinced the landlord that it’s better to get a bit of rent than nothing at all. We also promised to renovate the place.*” Using the same arguments, Rues du Développement Durable helped several other shops and organisations find space in Salengro Street.

Cité du Design helped Hypermatière carry out more interventions in the area. In 2016, Magalie Rastello got together with gardener Matthieu Benoit-Gonin and mosaicist Yai Acosta-Valois to develop the “Epidermal City” project. It consisted of a ceramic herbarium, which was produced in public workshops and then ‘planted’ along a route through the neighbourhood. The Epidermal City was an invitation for residents and visitors to discover not only the ceramic plants that had been made, but also the real plant diversity in the numerous empty spaces of Crêt de Roch. For the 2017 Biennale, Hypermatière thought of another ambitious project and transformed a 600 m² vacant lot in Neyron Street—considered one of the most run-down in the area—into a giant event space. “*Together with design students and local residents, we built outdoor furniture using recycled materials,*” says Juliana Gotilla. “*We constructed a stage,*

“We showed that it doesn’t take much time, money or personal investment to change things.”

Thomas Fremaux, CREFAD Loire.

a terrace, a bar, and some play equipment for children.” The space was named “Place du Coq” and a programme of activities including concerts and workshops was developed. It proved so popular that the space stayed open for several weeks after the Biennale.

A street is reborn

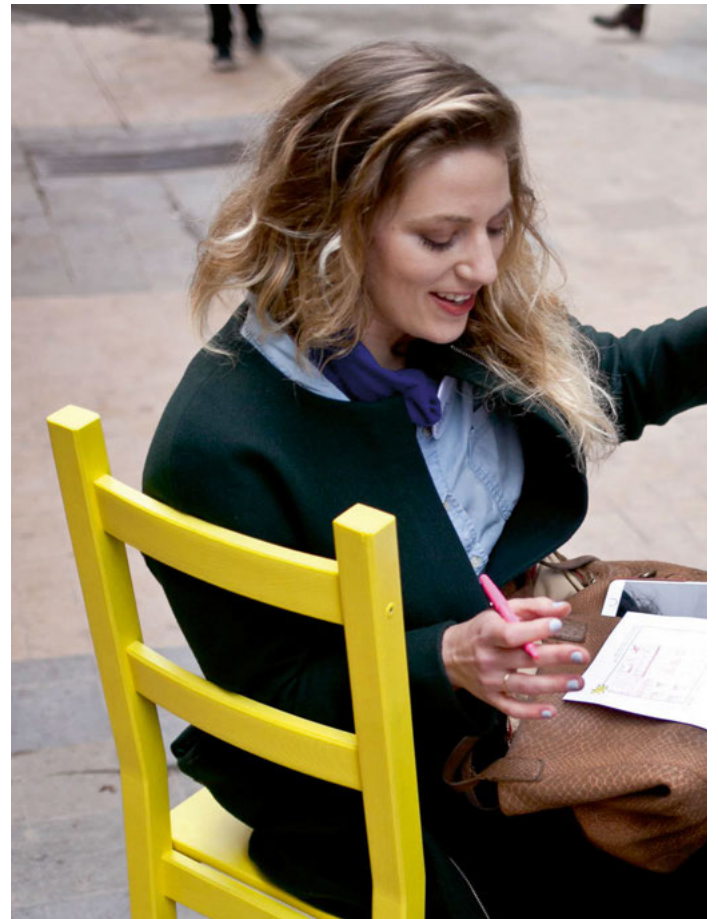
At the same time, Ici-Bientôt brought new life to the Beaubrun neighbourhood. The project was led by education association CREFAD Loire, graphic design collective Typotopy, and activist association Carton Plein which works on temporary projects in public spaces and empty buildings. *“We tried to talk to the owners of empty shops,”* Thomas Fremaux says. *“A lot of the time they just wanted to sell their property. So we said to them: ‘why don’t you let us use it temporarily? And if you sell it, we’ll leave’.* In the meantime, Ici-Bientôt also opened a resource centre in rue de la Ville to help people set up projects in vacant spaces. The goal was to open a network of temporary spaces and shops by the time of the next biennale. *“We helped them turn their idea into a real project, find a space, and renovate it,”* Thomas Fremaux explains. *“And if their project wasn’t right for us, we signposted them to other organisations.”* During the 2017 biennale, Ici-Bientôt opened 5 temporary spaces: a bar, a cooperative craft shop, a cooperative tea room run by mothers from the neighbourhood, an atelier for activities related to reading and writing, and an exhibition space. A group of 30 volunteers worked with the designers to renovate the spaces and create new shopfronts. 150 people came to the

artistic interventions, performances and parties on the opening day. To maintain the momentum after the biennale, *“we considered all spaces individually,”* Thomas Fremaux says. *“And we also managed to open a few new ones: a coffee shop, a cooperative bar, a sewing workshop, and a community workshop in partnership with Saint-Étienne’s Fab Lab.”* The collective also organised temporary events, like a creative week at nearby Boivin Square. A group of 40 students from around Europe will soon renovate the whole street and a Syrian grocery might open as well.

“We showed that it doesn’t take much time, money or personal investment to change things,” Thomas Fremaux says. Raymond Vasselon believes that the reputation of Crêt de Roch has also improved. *“The area used to be viewed as the Bronx of Saint-Étienne, but it’s now considered creative. It’s much more valuable to have a lot of people getting involved in a neighbourhood than to have a large regeneration plan.”* An important lesson can be learnt from both projects: the volunteer work done by residents and activists is enormously valuable. *“We managed to open public gardens for a tenth of the price it would have cost the city to employ professionals,”* Raymond Vasselon says. He hopes that there will be more support for participatory approaches in the future and that they will play a larger role in urban development, both in Saint-Étienne and elsewhere. Are there some initial signs of this already? *“Captain Ludd and Rues du Développement Durable have been contracted by EPASE to design temporary spaces during the regeneration of another part of Saint-Étienne,”* Camille Vilain says with a smile.



Partners from Human Cities and UNESCO City of Design Detroit suggested new uses for vacant shops during a workshop in rue de la Ville. Left photo: © Ici Bientôt / CREFAD Right photo: © EtienneB-photography



A city of design

Together with the Saint-Étienne Higher School of Art and Design (ESADSE), the Cité du design was established on the former site of an arms factory in 2009. The Cité du design, which has led the Human Cities project since 2014, is a platform for research,

higher education, economic development, design and art promotion. It is supported by the city of Saint-Étienne, the metropolitan government, the Rhône-Alpes region, and the ministry of culture. The Cité du Design and ESADSE came together in 2005 around the common

goal of developing research through creative action. The Cité du design focuses on human-centred design: design that enhances our everyday lives and enables tangible improvements in a range of fields, from housing and mobility to energy and health.

