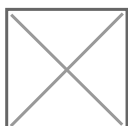1.

The allocation of vacant dwellings: an ecological policy to rebalance the territory and promote more local travel

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SUMMARY NOTE

CONTEXT

A legacy of the grands ensembles program of large-scale high-rise housing projects built between 1953 and 1973, the process of mass construction, whether subject to a

supply or demand shock, is no longer well adapted to the challenges of contemporary France. In the absence of any control over where such mass construction occurs, it risks worsening territorial imbalances by encouraging the densification of additional housing in metropolitan centres and certain coastal and tourist areas, and ultimately the expansion of their peri-urban areas. It can contribute to the relative desertification of marginal areas and the centres of small and medium-sized towns located far from these cities. Metropolisation refers to the spatial concentration, whether urban or regional, of economic activities and population flows, causing the territory to become increasingly polarised. This phenomenon is at odds with the goal of decarbonising travel, which relies on partially replacing high carbon-emitting means of transport (such as cars) with collective and low-carbon modes (buses and trains). Since the 1980s, metropolisation has been a contributing factor to both the saturation of centres and the increased urban sprawl around these major cities[^1] , in areas where low housing density is ill-adapted to the transition towards a low-carbon public transport system. In contrast, village centres and the hearts of small and medium-sized towns, where there are often many vacant dwellings, have a high density and a built morphology that favour low-carbon public transport services that are accessible on foot from one's home. Old centres and some rural areas generally have a higher housing vacancy rate than the national average; therefore, a policy for allocating these homes would imply a prior rebalancing of the territory through a process of "de-metropolisation," which appears to be one of the ways to respond to excessive urban sprawl and to the environmental crisis.

Figure 1 logements vacants France.png Quantitative surveys, citizen forums and studies led by the Mobile Lives Forum show, however, that French people remain committed to the single-family home model, despite the regular travel this entails (they travel nearly 400 km per week, which equates to about 10 hours spent in transport). This is at odds with the goal of decarbonising travel, which, beyond the modal shift from cars to buses or trains, cannot be achieved without discussing how to decrease the distances travelled between home and the various activities of daily life. Finding the right housing density requires being able to access services through local trips. Transport planning is one of the prerequisites for achieving the ecological demetropolisation of the territory, through the allocation of vacant dwellings. Indeed, their architectural typologies often correspond to town houses that are destined to become the compromise to reconcile the French ideal of single-family homes with the challenges of the ecological transition.

VACANT DWELLINGS, AN OVERSIGHT IN DISCUSSIONS ON THE ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION OF BUILDINGS AND THE TERRITORY

A vacant dwelling is a built unit meant for human habitation that remains unoccupied, without being allocated to any household. It is different from a second home in that it may be available for rent or be for sale, or pending succession settlements. In 2021, according to the LOVAC database of the Centre for Studies on Risks, the Environment, Mobility and Urban Planning (CEREMA), an estimated 1.1 million homes throughout the country were subject to a long-term and so-called structural vacancy (over 2 consecutive years), which represents 3.15% of all existing housing, while the overall vacancy rate among this total existing stock was estimated at around 3 million (or 8% of the total stock, also including short-term vacancies, known as frictional vacancies). When speaking of allocating vacant dwellings, we are only referring to structural vacancies. The present study focuses on the geographical and cultural issues involved in this allocation. Its legal modalities (acquisition, expropriation, rental, sale, etc.) are not detailed in this study, but will be examined in a second study, in partnership with the Mobile Lives Forum. Similarly, economic modalities are addressed only from the perspective of urban planning, since the note defends the allocation of these dwellings at low cost, or even free of charge, to increase the attractiveness of peripheral regions. While this vacant real estate exists, recent housing policies (the SRU law on Urban Solidarity and Renewal, for example) still do not radically call into question construction in and around major metropolitan centres. While the State has the epistemological tools to quantitatively assess vacancies, none of its agencies have yet launched any strategic planning to modulate real construction needs based on the prior allocation of existing vacant properties, on the basis of forecasting future human settlements as well as the economic and cultural prospects of each region. Allocating vacant dwellings is not only of socio-economic interest, it also contributes to the ecological transition of urban and regional planning. By reducing real construction needs, it helps to reduce the carbon footprint of the construction sector. Vacant dwellings are generally located in run-down, energy-intensive buildings that are unsuited to market needs and that require urgent insulation improvements and renovation, but their architectural characteristics often mean that any work must comply with their heritage status. By reallocating them first, we follow a straightforward principle of sobriety: the most ecological building remains the one that is not built unless necessary. This model rejects the demolition-reconstruction strategy, which still continues to feed certain imaginaries of political ecology, in favour of updating a cultural approach based on restoring the

architectural and urban heritage. However, the ELAN law (2018) removed the need to get approval from the French architectural review board (l'Architecture des Bâtiments de France) to demolish substandard housing near historic monuments, which does not help. Similarly, most energy-intensive dwellings are removed from the rental market in accordance with the criteria of the Energy Performance Diagnosis (DPE), which shrinks the rental market and risks increasing, at least temporarily, the vacancy rate. The allocation of housing can only be virtuous through the urban conservation and revitalisation of city centres and rural areas, which implies using, as much as possible, artisanal renovation methods for historical buildings up to the post-war period. Conversely, industrial renovation methods, which are currently favoured by political, administrative and economic actors, are in conflict with the need to promote marginal areas where vacant dwellings are located, and where access to green spaces and the heritage and landscape value are two essential benefits. However, since industrial insulation solutions intersect, without being completely identical, with the concept of "global renovation," they often degrade the architectural characteristics of buildings. They also present uncertainties about their carbon impact and their sustainability.

DEMETROPOLISATION: A NEW MODEL OF LAND PLANNING

The geographical distribution of the structural vacancy rate reveals a social and economic geography that goes against the grain of the spatial dynamics of metropolisation. Consequently, the allocation of vacant dwellings necessarily involves a counter-model based on rebalancing the spatial location of the population. The transition area between Lorraine and Champagne, Orne and former Maine, central France and the inland of the South-West have the highest vacancy rates; these areas have not been metropolised and are neglected by spatial planning policies, which in recent years have concentrated their efforts on major urban centres (through the NOTre law of 2015 for example). The distribution of vacancies reveals a spatial dynamic on two levels. At the regional level, the vacancy rate is higher than the national average in rural areas far from major cities; but at the local and infra-urban levels, the vacancy rate is higher in the centres of rural towns and in small and medium-sized towns than in peri-urban areas, which instead often experience low numbers of vacancies, even though they are located outside major cities. From the point of view of spatial planning, while we need to demetropolise, we need to adopt a pro-urban doctrine of moderate "re-concentration" in city centres and towns, beyond the simplified opposition between French peripheries and main cities. This voluntary geography of housing that we propose is opposed both to the metropolitan

conception of the territory, defended by Jacques Lévy in Oser le Désert, and to the anti-urban concepts embodied by libertarian geography and North American models. The territorial loosening that we are calling for is not an urban loosening that would involve cities sprawling into the countryside: the allocation of vacant dwellings in all city centres defines the contours of a "multipolar organisation" that hinges on an urban hierarchy of small and medium-sized towns that channel a transfer of activities from large cities. In other words, it is no longer a matter of organising an urban hierarchy solely polarised by large regional urban areas, but of rebuilding a network of small and medium-sized towns in which there is a shared supply of services and activities, creating an urban hierarchy on a smaller scale: for example, the development of Lorraine should not be focused solely around the hub formed by Metz and Nancy, but should also combine cities such as Toul, Remiremont, Bar-le-Duc, Neufchâteau; similarly, Normandy's development should not hinge exclusively around the axis formed by Caen-Le Havre-Rouen, but should include towns like Vimoutiers, Falaise, Lisieux, Le Neubourg, etc. This voluntary geography takes advantage of existing housing settlements to rebalance the territory, but it cannot be implemented without a "systemic" or global metropolisation of the territory by deconcentrating several facilities and infrastructures throughout the country, which is a goal that goes beyond the scope of this note. The aim is to provide small regions with long-term economic autonomy so that they are no longer dependent on large cities. However, it is impossible to encourage people to live in marginal areas without the presence of essential services, industrial economic activity with employment opportunities and some minimal cultural offerings. This economic geography would encourage the establishment of socio-professional profiles according to the employment needs of each territory.

VACANT DWELLINGS, AN OVERSIGHT IN TRANSPORT PLANNING

As explained by the work of the Mobile Lives Forum, metropolisation lengthens the distances between home and work because it generates the knock-on sprawl of vast peri-urban areas around major cities[^2] . Consequently, the long-term viability of this model necessarily depends on increasing the speed of traffic to connect centres and peripheries, a dynamic that current transport decarbonisation policies rarely ever question. Demetropolisation means reversing this trend of accelerating interurban or interregional travel by reducing the distances to be travelled throughout the territory. By allocating vacant dwellings within the urban mesh of existing secondary centralities (small and medium-sized towns outside of large cities), multipolar demetropolisation induces a new transport planning based on the proximity of urban

centres and the development of rapid links between them. In many cases, this policy requires revising territorial plans (SRADDET in particular) by developing a circular and reticular design of rail routes and bus lines to relieve congestion in city centres and create transversal connections between small and medium-sized towns. Multipolar demetropolisation is inspired by Ebenezer Howard's garden city theory, and more particularly the Social Cities model,[^3] which imagines a balance between a central city and a circular network of satellite cities linked together by an inter-city railway. While Howard designed his model in response to the socio-spatial disorders of industrial society, our aim is to adapt it to meet the contemporary goal of decarbonisation. Rather than traveling far and by car to reach city centres, we call for a rethinking of the accessibility of work opportunities and of goods and services by repopulating vacant dwellings in the centres of small and medium-sized towns. At the territorial level, this means being able to travel quickly and regularly, ideally by carbon-free means. We recommend developing a network of rapid buses connecting the main cities of the territory in question. This network would be part of a train-bus-bike/walk hierarchy. The trains would connect the cities, the regional capitals and the medium-sized cities that already have a train station, then frequent buses, with diametral and transversal routes, would take over at the train station to serve the smaller towns that are not connected to the rail network. Finally, the last mile could be achieved by bicycle or on foot. Such a system would allow for most cities to be connected in a demetropolised and small-scale system that does not encourage urban sprawl since it is multipolar.

A CASE STUDY: THE COMMUNITY OF MUNICIPALITIES OF THE VALLEYS OF AUGE AND MERLERAULT

We conducted a case study in Normandy, in the Community of Municipalities of the Valleys of Auge et Merlerault (CDCVAM), which has no medium-sized towns, and only one small town, Vimoutiers, as well as rural towns (or "villages" [bourgs]) that INSEE does not consider to be towns[^4] . Starting with a regional scale that links the south of Auge to the neighbouring pays corresponding to the west of the departments of Orne and Calvados, we imagined an urban hierarchy of cities and a few major towns linked by a transversal and diagonal network of public transport (buses, trains) so as to decarbonise work-related and leisure travel.

Figure 2 agglomerations Normandie.png Creation: SIG Normandy -01/2022; Sources: Banatic - Ministry of the Interior; Fund: ADMIN EXPRESS 2021- IGN©

Figure 3 modele organisation territoire_0.jpg Theoretical model of the reticular and circular (or satellite) organisation of the urban hierarchy and carbon-free public

transport links, as well as their coordination at several scales, taking the local example of the Pays d'Auge around Vimoutiers and the regional example of Normandy around Caen. © Dorian Bianco, 2022. This network aims to take advantage of existing and functional infrastructures in order to provide travel quickly at the local level. More specifically, our case study of the CDCVAM revealed that the region has good urban, road and rail networks, which could be used to loosen the urban density. By strengthening and rehabilitating the rail services connecting central towns such as Argentan, L'Aigle or Vimoutiers, their periurban areas and the small and medium-sized towns located in their urban areas, we could encourage a modal shift from carbon-based transport (mainly individual cars) to low-carbon public transport (trains, or even buses from the train stations of town centres). The Community of Municipalities has a significant vacant dwellings problem (9.5% for the whole territory, but up to 14.6% in the town of Merlerault). Other nearby inter-municipalities face similar vacancy issues in city centres, such as the Community of Municipalities of the Pays de L'Aigle, where in the main city, L'Aigle, 8% of long-term dwellings are vacant, while in peripheral municipalities such as Rai or Saint-Sulpice-sur-Risle the figures are 3% and 4.5% respectively. To the west of the CDCVAM, in the Community of Municipalities of the Pays de Falaise long-term vacant dwellings average 4.2%, and 6.4% in the central town of Falaise, while satellite towns such as Potigny (3%) or Vendeuvre (4.3%) have relatively lower structural vacancy rates. These various examples show that the vacancy problem mainly concerns the central towns of inter-municipal cooperations (EPCIs) in the south of the Pays d'Auge in the department of Orne, which is at once far from the metropolitan polarisation of Caen, Le Havre and Rouen to the north, and from the Loire region (Blois, Tours, Angers, Nantes) to the south. The analysis of the SRADDET of the Normandy Region (2020) shows the extent to which public authorities still defend the metropolisation model, while our counter-model involves completely rewriting it. Our case study, focused on the south of the Pays d'Auge, is a small-scale experiment of a much larger project of spatial redevelopment, which we want to consider at the departmental level of Orne. Its peripheral position in the north-west of France makes it a laboratory for demetropolisation, similar to what has been observed in the departments of Meuse or Nièvre in the north-east. This planning will include a new hierarchy of towns that balances urban polarities, a redevelopment of the transport system and a territorial zoning process to consider the locations of future urban extensions - when they are desirable or necessary - and of economic and industrial activities. This experiment will be developed as part of a second study.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS (details in the propositional conclusion of the note)

- **The allocation of vacant dwellings and a national strategy for evaluating the vacancy rates of non-residential buildings to assess real construction needs.**
- **The systematic demetropolisation of the territory by revitalising the economic and industrial fabric of the most depressed territories.**
- **The renovation of vacant dwellings and of the living environment by controlling periurbanisation through the creation of regional natural parks (on the model of the British green belt) and the artisanal thermal renovation of existing heritage buildings.**
- **The launch of an architectural, ecological and cultural reflection on new housing models.**
- **Transport planning for a new system linked to the demetropolised hierarchisation of the urban system.**

Download the report (in French only)

Couv Rapport logements vacants.PNG [^1]: Urban sprawl can also be explained by other causes: building subsidies and home ownership policies; the widespread model of detached suburban homes, even in small metropolitan areas; low land density; environmental protection; the agricultural model; etc. [^2]: Mobile Lives Forum, National Survey on mobility and lifestyles, 2020, 48 p. URL: https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/project/12796/national-survey-mobility-and-lifestyles [^3]: Diagram 7 "Social cities", in Ebenezer Howard, To-morrow, a peaceful path to real reform, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1898. [^4]: INSEE considers that a town must have at least 2,000 inhabitants, while the French National Agency for the Cohesion of Territories (ANCT) classifies towns between 2,000 and 20,000 inhabitants as "small towns," and towns between 20,000 and 100,000 as "medium-sized towns." Chapô
The geographical distribution of France's population and the travel it entails are overlooked in housing policies. This discrepancy between construction and land use planning is based on the belief - widely held throughout the real estate and construction sectors - that we need to build more in order to provide better housing for more people. These policies do not first consider allocating vacant dwellings to people without adequate housing, and they also fail to plan a new transport system

to link these relocated homes to economic and social activities (work, leisure).

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