



# The Green Divide

## City Profiles

Nantes

*Isabelle Anguelovski*  
*Melissa Garcia Lamarca*  
*Emilia Lewartowska*  
*Emilia Oscilowicz*  
*Aina Planas Carbonell*  
*Carla Rivera Blanco*

*Edited by: Ana Cañizares*

**BCNUEJ** Barcelona  
Laboratory for Urban  
Environmental Justice  
and Sustainability

**IMIM** Parc de Salut **MAR** Barcelona  
Institut Hospital del Mar  
d'Investigacions Mèdiques

**icta** Instituto de Ciencia  
y Tecnología Ambientales • UAB

  
**NATURATION**  
cities - nature - innovation

**Green LULUs**

 **urbanA**



Bas-Chantenay  
**Nantes, France**

Source: Alberto Bougleux, 2020

# Bas-Chantenay Nantes, France

## Synopsis

*Bas-Chantenay is a historically industrial and working-class district of Nantes that today represents a key redevelopment site in the city. The City of Nantes is known for its socially equitable sustainability strategy and anti-displacement and housing-centered policies, but the ongoing intensification of metropolitan dynamics, progressive greening, and massive construction has led to growing community mobilization against gentrification and displacement of long-term residents, in efforts to reclaim common space and demand public consultation in development projects. How is the increased metropolization of the city jeopardizing its social achievements?*

## I. Historical context

Nantes has become one of the greenest, yet still relatively affordable cities in Western Europe thanks to an ambitious political strategy of urban re-naturing and social housing implemented during the last three decades (Nantes Metropole 2013). Even if it exhibits a green image that it brands nationally and internationally, Nantes has managed to remain relatively affordable and provide ample social housing schemes and units for residents – at least until recently. However, as the city further accelerates its ambitious green agenda through emblematic large-scale green projects, real estate prices and gentrification have drawn increasing concern and civic mobilization, raising the question of what type of re-naturing and social policies are needed to keep Nantes a green, equitable and inclusive city for all.

### Urban development history

During most of the 20th century, Nantes was an industrial city largely dedicated to shipbuilding. However, the 1970s global recession brought a large wave of deindustrialization to France, and Nantes suffered the closure of many factories and the city's shipyards (Lemmin-Woolfrey 2017). After a period of economic stagnation in the 1980s, Nantes reoriented its development strategy in the 1990s by converting former industrial lands into cultural centers and began promoting high-tech industries, research and creative and business districts, together with a strategy for

sustainable development, social cohesion, solidarity and liveability.

Starting in 1994, Nantes initiated one of the largest urban brownfield site redevelopment projects in Europe, transforming the former industrial shipyard district in the center of the city, the Île de Nantes, into a multi-purpose, culturally diversified and environmentally centered neighborhood. With the impulse of new high-tech and creative industry centers, social housing, universities, and green spaces, all following urban ecology guidelines, this project marked the beginning of Nantes' transformation from an industrial center to a livable, healthy, and socially-grounded eco-city ("Île de Nantes - Fabriquer La Ville Autrement" 1994).

Historic Nantes canal  
Source: Commons, 2020



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## Contemporary development

Nantes' greening and redevelopment strategy culminated with the European Green Capital Award in 2013, having doubled its number of green areas from 1984 to 2015 (Nantes Metropole 2013). Today, green areas cover over 1,000 hectares in Nantes, offering 57m<sup>2</sup> of green space per capita and a total of 100 municipal urban parks (2013). Beyond the creation of different landmark projects and several eco-districts, the City of Nantes has articulated a city-wide sustainability strategy around a healthy, welcoming and socially equitable enclave (Nantes n.d.). All these innovations have made Nantes an especially attractive location for college-educated residents and entrepreneurs, making the entire city overall more prone to higher property prices. This is why, according to the municipality's mission to densify, all green interventions have been accompanied by diverse types of social housing projects and regulations to ensure that a variety of working- and middle-class residents can reside in areas of Nantes with a high environmental quality.

### Île de Nantes

Île-de-Nantes is a 460-hectare fluvial island located on the Loire River, in front of the city's Old Town. Since the late 1990s, this former industrial shipyard district and brownfield site has undergone major transformations into a multi-purpose, high-tech, creative, cultural and environmentally-centered neighborhood. It currently hosts the famous tourist attraction Les Machines de l'Île.

Among other eco-districts, the project boasts the Prairie-au-Duc inaugurated in 2009, 7 km of longitudinal green spaces built in 2015 along the Berges du Faubourg, and two new large parks – the Parc des Chantiers redevelopment of the former shipyards and the Jardin des Fonderies public garden ("Liste Jardins Familiaux" n.d.). Overall, the project aims to enhance the



Île de Nantes

Source: Alberto Bougleux, 2020

environmental quality of the area while still offering an affordable way of living (2018).

### ZAC public instruments

Many of the municipal land use conversion and rezoning schemes implemented by the city of Nantes rest on a special planning instrument called ZAC (Zones d'Aménagement Concertée – Integrated Development Zones) (Gallez 2020). In ZACs, municipal planners control all project developments and locations rather than leaving private developers to act as "free agents". In this way, when requesting construction permission, developers must follow comprehensive city-driven planning guidelines and decisions. However, in those large ZAC redevelopment schemes, contestation has emerged from local organizations who demand "real" and less formal participatory processes to express their demands.

### Bas-Chantenay redevelopment

As of 2020, Bas-Chantenay is a key redevelopment site in Nantes. Throughout Nantes, redevelopment is creating a strong pressure on real estate markets, with prices skyrocketing in several neighborhoods, including Chantenay (Nantes Metropole n.d.). Residents report that they are suffering gentrification and being displaced not just to other neighborhoods in Nantes but further away to the periphery.

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## II. Recent green interventions (10-15 years)

The creation of the ZAC of Bas-Chantenay was approved in 2019 as an urban redevelopment operation that is part of a process to reappropriate the banks of the Loire and renew industrial districts. Developed in response to and in connection with surrounding developments (Euronantes-Malakoff to the East) including the revitalization of the historical center (Nantes Center-Ville project), Ile de Nantes (Plan of intentions) and Pirmil-les-Isles (in Nantes and Rezé in the South), the Bas Chantenay project aims to both assert and renew the site through a new mix of usages and inhabitants over the mid-term and several key interventions in the short-term. Specific objectives have been defined for four concrete intervention areas called *cales* (Roche Maurice, Bois Hardy, Usine Électrique, Dubigeon/Gare and Carrière Miséry), where several projects will be developed according to the challenges and the heritage of each *cale*. The aim is to create a global balance between housing, business activities, infrastructure and public space.

### Municipal

#### Industrial cales

##### Usine Électrique

As an emblematic place facing the Loire, the power station will be a future site of innovation and experimentation, a symbol of the economic and industrial renewal of Bas-Chantenay next to the city center. It plans to offer its users workspaces, industry and leisure by allowing companies to be part of the Nantes new industry growth dynamic.

##### Doubligeon/Gare

As an economic hub of economic creation, this enclave is meant to highlight the abundant activities of Bas-Chantenay. It is intended to become a development site both on the city side and on the Loire side, through a passenger ferry that will connect it to the Chantenay station transport hub and will benefit from shops and services in the nearby Place Jean-Macé.

#### Green cales

##### Roche Maurice

The industrial surroundings of this small “urban island” located on the west side of Bas-Chantenay will be opened up and connected to the Loire River by repurposing green spaces. Roche Maurice is one of the essential stages of “La Loire à vélo” (The Loire on bike), a 900 km cycling route linking Cuffy (near Nevers) to Saint-Brevin-

les-Pins (Loire-Atlantique) inaugurated in 2019 (Les services de l'État en Loire-Atlantique 2019).

##### Bois Hardy

Several residents of Bois Hardy, a working-class residential zone of Bas Chantenay, organized in defense of a 1.5 hectare open community garden area threatened by the development of 400 new housing units. The civic group argues that the preservation of the gardens would be possible with a more reduced-scope housing project.

##### Carrière Miséry

This is the closest site to the city center, stretching from the banks of the Loire River to the neighborhood's

Urban greening Ile de Nantes  
Source: BCNUJEJ 2019



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natural cliff. Since 2019, it hosts the well-known Jardin Extraordinaire (Extraordinary Garden), which will be home to L'Arbre aux Hérons (the Hérons Tree) in 2022, a new machine sculpture designed by François Delarozière and Pierre Oréface, the designers of the cultural site Machines de l'Île. (Radaction 20minutes 2019).

## Le Jardin Extraordinaire

Le Jardin Extraordinaire is a public park located in the western part of the old Quarry of Miséry, located on the right bank of the Loire, in the Bellevue-Chantenay-Sainte-Anne district (Radaction 20minutes 2019). Inaugurated in 2019, it hosts a 25-meter high waterfall and is adorned with giant aquatic plants, ivy, banana trees and tree ferns. A metal staircase designed by François Delarozière, the creator of Machines de l'Île, connecting the garden to the Maurice-Schwob square located at the top of the cliff will be installed in 2020, and in 2022 the park will welcome the Arbre aux Hérons, a new attraction of the Machines de l'Île also imagined by Delarozière. As a tourist asset and showcase of Nantes' know-how, the park also illustrates the Nantes Métropole's long-term desire and commitment to place nature at the heart of urban projects. However, several neighbors criticize the project because they see it as an erasure of the past in order to build a new elitist and tourism-driven city. In their view, the garden destroys existing informal nature and replaces it with intensive irrigation and imported exotic plants.



## Arbre Aux Hérons

Arbre Aux Hérons is a piece of (green) art located at the heart of the former Misery quarry in Chantenay to be inaugurated in 2022. Situated in front of the Loire and 800 meters from the Île de Nantes, this moving architecture piece will support the rezoning and redevelopment of the Bas Chantenay district ("L'Arbre Aux Hérons | Projet Urbain" n.d.). With a height of 35 meters, a crown of 50 meters in diameter and a trunk of 15 meters in diameter, the Heron Trees is a colossal steel sculpture of around 1,700 tonnes designed by François Delarozière. Plants will be added to the metallic structure, taking the form of hanging gardens with a capacity to accommodate around 450 people (5,000 per day and 50,000 per year). The project aims to give Nantes worldwide visibility and reinforce the image of an inventive city framed within the "nature en ville" (nature in the city) discourse, although it is a mostly artificial combination of art and nature. Many residents blame the project for creating the recent tourist boom and increased car traffic in an area where public transit is scarce. Some residents also regret that other social priorities, such as addressing the precariousness of many immigrants housed in a nearby gym, are overlooked.

## Oblates Park

Oblates Park, inaugurated in 2013, is located on a hill overlooking the Loire and was previously owned by a religious congregation that still occupies the top of the park. Before the rehabilitation, it was a quiet, underused area, but the City Council decided to encourage new uses as it was expanded and remodeled. Today, it is a small 3-hectare park next to a small open square that attempts to increase local biodiversity including birds, sheep, goats and apple and pear trees ("Oblates Park" n.d.).

Nantes, Le coteaux du Bois Hardy  
Source: Alberto Bougleux, 2020

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## Community Led

For over 30 years, the municipality of Nantes has supported the development of collective and community gardens. The city currently hosts 40 community gardens totalling over 24 hectares managed by 35 civic associations on a day-to-day basis with the support of the municipal Green Space and Environment Service (SEVE). The gardens have all signed the Nantes Charter for the practice of organic agriculture, following the SEVE green space Department action plan for creating and strengthening social bonds, helping the family economy, and promoting health and well-being. Some examples are the 26 plots located within Oblates Park, the 70 plots situated in the Bois de la Musse Street and the 36 plots of the Bois des Anses Street, both managed by the Association des Jardins Familiaux Nantais ("Liste Jardins Familiaux" n.d.).

In order to promote the emergence of citizen initiatives on natural gardening, in 2012 the City

Council launched a campaign under the name "My street is a garden", which consists of inviting inhabitants and associations to adopt spaces around their homes as shared gardens. This is how, in Bas-Chantenay, citizen initiatives such as the Garden Avenue Sainte-Anne and the Shared Garden on Le Huédé Street emerged in 2019 following the initiative of residents and the school of Garennes.

Jardin des Ronces is 1.5-hectare swathe of land occupied by a collective of 20 people who have built several community gardens. The area is affected by the ZAC Doulon-Gohards project which includes the development of 180 hectares of formerly agricultural land into 2,700 housing units, several public facilities, commercial areas, and four urban farms by 2034, a move likely to boost gentrification in the area.

## III. Anti-displacement and Right-to-the-City Activism

In Nantes, numerous resident initiatives have mobilized for the right to decent living conditions under a system that values cooperation and care for humans and animals. Initiatives tend to claim a new way of engaging with nature in the city and remain mostly informal, decentralized organizations without a designated leader. They protest against things like metropolization (the regional economic projection and growth of the city following a logic of competitive urbanism), gentrification, and advocate for reclaiming public space. Rather than being "against progress", they claim to be organizing under a "logic of re-appropriation of the places that we have in common".

In the Bas-Chantenay district since September 2016, citizen meetings and co-construction meetings have come together under the name of Les coteaux du Bois Hardy (@lcboishardy on Twitter), a collective of around 40 residents concerned with the potential densification of the neighborhood due to its future redevelopment plans that include new housing construction and new green spaces ("Les Coteaux Du Bois Hardy" n.d.). The collective was formed in support of the existing life and urban fabric of the neighborhood, especially in relation to the local gardens. In parallel, in September 2017, about a dozen inhabitants founded the Commune of Chantenay in response to the Arbre aux Hérons and Jardin Extraordinaire projects, which they perceive as a consumerist theme park where strict rules and designated paths have replaced more informal and spontaneous urban life and green spaces.

These two collectives are part of the social activist platform Métropole en Luttés, a network of approximately 30 mobilizations in defense of local territories and their identities and sustainable (re)development. The platform is part of the broader initiative Luttés du Grand Ouest founded on December 11, 2019 at the Maison du Peuple de Nantes, following a meeting between several organizations including ZAD de la Dune, Terres Communes, Nantes Contre le Surf Park, Métropole en Lutte, Extinction Rebellion, ZAD Mobile and XR Nantes. Its purpose is to create ties of solidarity between different isolated struggles against what they consider to be imposed, top-down, unnecessary and environmentally or socially noxious projects ("Présentation – Confluence Des Luttés de l'Ouest" n.d.).

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## IV. Campaigns and demands

Les coteaux du Bois Hardy would like to see a reduction in the number of new housing units in the Bas-Chantenay ZAC. They view the remodeling of the ZAC through the addition of 400 new housing units and roughly 1,200 new people as a top-down imposition that erodes the spirit of collaboration and partnership ostensibly at the heart of the municipality's governance practice. Les coteaux would like to manage the green space in partnership with the city. Activists fear that the industrial shipyard district will become a site for residential towers and neglect the needs of its residents. They want to preserve gardens at risk of being greatly reduced by new housing units as spaces of support and social cohesion where working-class residents can mix with wealthier newcomers.

The Commune of Chantenay, a civic group against the gentrification of the district and revitalization planned by the city, has rallied through actions including the deployment of a banner in the Chantenay quarry in September 2019, writing and reading workshops, and a bike ride in March 2020 in defense of threatened spaces. This has led to larger collective initiatives against the progressive commodification of the Carrière Miséry and the associated costs of recent large-scale projects (Commune de Chantenay n.d.). Activists protest the lack of consultation by the City Council concerning the Jardin Extraordinaire and the Arbre aux Hérons and, ultimately, what they see as the dispossession of public spaces that are being reconverted, fenced off, and/or restricted (no picnics allowed on sidewalks for instance). Overall, they feel that the increasing number of parks in Nantes lack things like seating and rest areas, prioritizing aesthetic features over public use.

Both Les coteaux du Bois Hardy and the Commune of Chantenay claim that the ZAC impact reporting focuses solely on environmental dimensions. Neighborhood collectives say that there has not yet been a genuine public investigation

of the projects' impact from the perspective of residents, and that profound debates about the ZAC's utility and the broader need for economic stability are still needed. The long-term

economic amortization of social housing in ZACs is achieved by the construction of new homes, to the detriment of public and green spaces. As the Commune de Chantenay and the Bois Hardy collectives point out—both very critical about the city's "participatory" workshops, where they say only neutral and depoliticized citizens are welcomed—the institutional response only considers the possibility of construction, despite the fact that building more does not necessarily lower real estate prices throughout the city. In sum, the collectives criticise that recent green interventions are merely there to attract new investors and homeowners, which is an added vector for citizen depoliticization and spatial segregation.



Nantes, Parc du Grand Blottereau  
Source: Alberto Bougleux, 2020

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## V. Success Stories

The global intensification of metropolitan dynamics is exemplified in Nantes, where greening processes and massive construction projects are leading to the precarious living standards and exclusion of many neighbors. In response, long-term residents have organized to avoid displacement brought on by the pressures of new investment funds. Most recently, on February 29th, 2020, residents protested new developments that represent a culture of selfishness and elitism, rallying more forces around the Luttés du Grand Ouest.



Jardin des Ronces community garden  
Source: BCNUEJ, 2019

## Progressive anti-displacement or green equity policies and plans

So far, Nantes has presented itself as an exception to the western global trend of increasing property values resulting from urban greening agendas associated with the physical, cultural and social displacement of vulnerable residents. Despite its increased metropolization, Nantes demonstrates how combined policies, strategies and practices can make urban greening centered on principles of equity as well as residents' needs, where the revitalisation of underprivileged neighbourhoods and post-industrial sites actively aims to benefit current inhabitants. The key factors determining this exceptional relation between urban greening and affordability include the extent of active municipal intervention, redistribution considerations, and the historic importance of inclusion and equity in urban development.

### (Green) Equity Policies

Nantes is an active city in the "transition town" movement through diverse grassroots community initiatives that seek to build community resilience from a city-perspective, directly addressing challenges like peak oil, climate change and the economic crisis. To this end, recent municipal policies have been oriented towards the development of functioning gardens and the

promotion of territorial food projects ("CartoQuartiers - Cartographie Participative - Nantes Métropole" n.d.). The latter includes the Agronaute recreational urban farm and the Maison de l'Agriculture Urbaine, a joint project between the associations ECOS, Nantes Ville Comestible, Permaculture 44, Bio-T-Full and Riche Terre, all of which form part of the Lab'AU 44 collective that develops urban agriculture for greater Nantes and serves as a resource and experimentation center (Bruno 2017).

The support for citizen initiatives from district to city level occurs through open calls for projects. A recent example is the "My street is a garden" municipal project initiated by the Nantes Parks, Gardens and Environmental (SEVE) director Jacques Soignon, which invited inhabitants and associations to adopt and transform spaces around their homes, such as driveways, front yards and unused lots into gardens (Liste Jardins Familiaux" n.d.).

Another new municipal project known as "Green Star/Etoile Verte" aims to achieve the "A city in a garden" vision by offering 57m<sup>2</sup> of green space per capita and connecting Nantes' 101 parks through a network that can offer residents access to a garden within 300m of their residence (Nantes n.d.). Today, 60% of the metropolitan land area is demarcated as agricultural, natural or

urban green space, which includes four natural sites and 33 areas of floral, faunal or ecological interest.

Beyond these greening oriented projects and campaigns, the municipality of Nantes has articulated its sustainability and greening strategy around the creation of a healthy, welcoming, socially equitable, and protective eco-city. Much of this strategy is inscribed in the 2007 SCOT urban planning framework (Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale), which presents development objectives alongside aims to protect agricultural spaces and nature from urban sprawl. This has led to the creation of "éco-quartiers" (eco-districts), such as the notable regeneration of the Malakof-Pré Gauchet working-class neighbourhood and the Botière-Chénaie project ("Eco-Quartiers.Fr: Le 1er Espace de Débat En Ligne Sur Les Éco-Quartiers et La Ville Durable" 2018). Likewise, although not under the eco-district label, other urban projects such as Bas-Chantenay and the Grand Bellevue have incorporated green space development into their plans.

All these initiatives are aligned with urgent ecological concerns addressed in the Plan Climat Air Energie Territorial (PCAET) approved in 2018 which is meant to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, enact climate adaptation, achieve energy sobriety, improve air quality, and develop renewable energies (Les services de l'État en Loire-Atlantique 2019). In the same way, in order to strengthen and guarantee the sustainability of residential commutes and transport in an increasingly densified city, in 2018 the Metropolitan Council approved the Plan de Déplacements Urbains (PDU, 2018-2027), which is oriented towards facilitating public transport, a soft mobility dynamic and bike lanes (Nantes Métropole 2018).

### **Anti-displacement and housing-centered policies**

NMH is the oldest and largest social housing agency in Nantes with a total of about 30,000 social housing units. As owner of 64 hectares of publicly accessible green space in the Nantes metropolis, it is also a relevant actor in greening policies. In NMH's view, green spaces play a key role in the quality of life and health of their

tenants, promoting physical activity, social cohesion and adaptation to climate change.

Most recently, in order to achieve housing objectives, Nantes has put in place an ambitious legal requirement of 33% social housing and 24% affordable housing for new real estate projects. These commitments are underpinned by social and affordable housing laws at the French level, such as the 2000 Loi SRU and the 2014 Loi Dufflot, and reinforced by several municipal commitments to housing rights, principally the new Programme Local de l'Habitat (PLH, 2019-2025). This strategic planning document defines the development of Nantes Métropolis, which plans to build 6,000 new homes of diverse typologies per year (of which 2,000 are meant to be social housing) in response to a growing population and affordable housing needs (less than 2,500 € / m<sup>2</sup>). Affordable housing schemes include Social Rental Mortgage (PLS in French, a mortgage for the construction or rehabilitation of a unit to be rented as social housing) and social housing purchase (Accession Sociale).

In addition, in order to define and organize the development of Nantes' territory and living environment by 2030, the Plan Local d'Urbanisme métropolitain (PLUm) was approved in April 2019, replacing the former municipal PLUs and unifying the urban planning rules for the 24 municipalities in the Nantes conurbation. It is both a political and regulatory tool which sets out the Nantes Métropole's spatial planning and development objectives for the next 15 years (including a balance between rural and urban life; urban, architectural and landscape quality; social diversity in housing; public safety and health; prevention of foreseeable natural risks; and fighting against climate change) and sets implementation methods by defining rules for land use.

The territorial diagnosis and consistency of the PLUm is achieved through three main methods. The first is the Project d'Aménagement et de Développement Durables (PADD, 2016-2030), one of Nantes Métropolis' tools for which the general orientations, efficiency and coherence of the metropolitan project are defined. Second, the Orientations d'Aménagement et de Programmation (OAP) defines specific urban planning guidelines

to be applied to agricultural zones, areas to be urbanized and urban areas. Finally, ZAC measures were applied after the approval of the PLU in 2001, extending its scope towards the creation of green areas with the entry into force of the PADD. The ZAC defines the number of social, affordable and free housing based on the housing policy's (PLH) targets. However, several neighborhood collectives dispute the reality of the

city's participatory discourse and practice when the city decides how to implement development projects.

## Implications and future steps

In sum, Nantes has developed an ambitious green agenda since the 1990s and has articulated it with dedicated housing strategies and funding to allow working class residents and moderate income residents to benefit from a more livable and green city. However, the increased metropolization of Nantes and its vision to become a green capital attractive to French residents, investors and developers jeopardizes social achievements and translates into the continuous urbanization of peripheral areas of the city. Nantes thus risks moving away from being a green city that is socially equitable to a green city that is privileged and unsustainable.

Nantes, Jardin Extraordinaire  
Source: Alberto Bougleux, 2020



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