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A process for developing micro-territorial resources

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Reorganization of urban spaces in a mountain resort

A process for developing micro-territorial resources

Émeline Hatt

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 Today's ski resorts, now more than 50 years old, face various difficulties. Having been built at a time when an increasing share of the population was starting to go on holiday, with use of motor vehicles on the rise and skiing an all-day occupation, they are at pains to adapt to changing practices. The 1970-80s were a turning point in public development policies. Various factors – some external (shifting demand, sustainable development requirements and climate change), others internal (outdated planning model) or territorial (quest for the 'authentic', decentralization and the increasingly important part played by local authorities in urban development) – are straining the functional and symbolic rationale which underpinned Fordian mountain resorts. New issues are emerging, coalescing around concerns for urban, architectural or environmental quality, or indeed a resort's market position and image. In line with the Law on Urban Solidarity and Renewal (SRU)¹, the managers of ski resorts must plan urban development and renewal with a mind to preventing or halting the decline in the number of visitors.
- 2 Upgrading public spaces, seen here as urban places (Paquot, 2009), is a key issue². This approach, when applied to mountain resorts, raises questions for town planning researchers. Our attention is drawn to the 'infra-ordinary', which we tend to forget, to the 'intangible', 'almost immaterial' quality of the ambient environment, which we have opted to address using a *micro-territorial*³ approach. We focus on all the components which characterize the urbanistic form of the resort. Taken as the scale of socio-spatial perception corresponding to common sense, this approach enables us to

refer, as a form of subtext, to the concept of territory, widely explored by geographers and economists working on mountain resorts (Debarbieux, 1988; Gumuchian, 1988; Marcelpoil, 2007, etc.). Following on from such research, we seek to show that as a medium for ‘living together’, public spaces may be seen as micro-territorial resources. We therefore treat the design and management of these urban spaces as vectors for the production and broadcasting of images⁴ which give ‘meaning’ to the resort, and play a part in the leisure experience, in the atmosphere and overall attraction of the venue. In keeping with these ideas, projects to upgrade and ‘scenograph’ these public spaces are treated as processes for capitalizing on micro-territorial resources.

- 3 In particular the present article draws on analysis of a ‘second-generation’ resort⁵, subjected to uncoordinated development. Its subsequent, concerted refurbishment involved drawing up an overall, long-term project: Gourette⁶ (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map situating the study areas

PRODUCTION: M. MORALÈS, E. HATT – UPPA, 2011

Urban projects in mountain resorts and capitalizing on micro-territorial resources

- 4 We propose to examine the micro-territorial scale of mountain resorts by looking at how they use urban spaces as a prime vector for sustainable development and attracting visitors. By taking up and adapting the concept of a territorial resource, we may consider public spaces and their component objects as micro-territorial resources.

The urban places of resorts as micro-territorial resources

- 5 We shall therefore treat urban places as micro-territorial resources, which may be revealed using an intentional process by a group of players that recognizes them and interprets them as such (Corrado, 2004; François, 2007).
- 6 Public spaces have established themselves as essential levers in urban policy. In just 50 years they have evolved from the status of residual spaces, or hollows, between built structures, to the status of central spaces, endowed with meaning and specific characteristics. Over and above the exclusively functional and functionalist aims of towns and resorts, the aim is to conceptualize such spaces as landscapes and territory, as a part of the social and symbolic register. Urban places are not only addressed as functional, utilitarian spaces, but also as inhabited spaces. In so far as they structure urban territory by conveying values and meaning (i.e. a direction for future change) public spaces represent tactical and strategic stakes (Berdoulay, Da Costa Gomez, Lolive, 2004).
- 7 Attention focuses on the *legibility* of urban places, on what Kevin Lynch ([1960] 1998) also called 'imageability'. City-dwellers change their place of residence much more often now than in the past. When they adopt the guise of tourists or travellers, their appetite for discovery is just as great, indulging in new experiences during their stay. They move from one space to the next, from one town or resort to another, observing and comparing. As they become familiar with the new space in which they live or holiday, they may be subtly guided or, rather, urged to explore their surroundings. A legible urbanscape eases integration and helps those who use places to appropriate them, whether they are permanent residents or – and this is undoubtedly even more necessary – just visitors. For some time such considerations were overshadowed in France by the (often misconstrued) ideas of the Modernist movement. But since the 1980-90s they have rejoined the mainstream of theory and practice. Following on from Lynch's work, town planners now make full use of urban design, with renewed concern for urban composition, understood as the practice of giving shape to the city (Pinson, 2012).
- 8 Surfing on this dynamic, the managers of contemporary ski resorts are now being encouraged to make better use of the elements contributing to the legibility of their charge. Starting from this observation, we submit that upgrading public spaces may contribute to the legibility of a territory and the quality of experience for residents and visitors. The scenography of public spaces may hence be seen as a means of capitalizing on micro-territorial resources.

Capitalizing on micro-territorial resources, a challenge for resort planning

- 9 Building mountain resorts from scratch is a thing of the past in France, but local authorities in these purpose-built resorts are now asking how best to adapt their 50-year-old amenities (Wozniak, 2006; Vlès, 2007).
- 10 There is no longer any question of creating new urban spaces to cope with rising demand, but rather of rethinking the composition of existing places, of remaking a resort on top of the existing one. This trend also reflects the new demands of

sustainable development, with its more cost-effective use of space. Mountain resorts must focus more attention on the quality of urban developments, in line with prevailing conditions and the demands of both residents and visitors. Rejecting conformism and banality, and repairing the lack of identity and originality, public spaces are now the focus of scenography⁷ inspired by work on urban composition, landscape, and light and sound atmospherics. Recreating a resort on top of the existing one involves rehabilitating the built environment and refurbishing public spaces as part of a concerted project. The notion of 'requalification' is used here as an echo to its use by the economists Véronique Peyrache-Gadeau and Bernard Pecqueur (2004). These authors refer to the notion of 'requalification' as it applies to specific resources. This involves various processes by which a local community carries out a reappraisal of the collective value invested in this resource. In this sense, the public space may be understood as a specific resource of a particular territory and – all the more so – holiday resorts. We shall focus on the requalification of this (micro-)territorial resource by addressing the way public spaces in resorts are used as instruments to produce and broadcast images which give meaning to a town – or resort – and form the basis of its attractiveness as a leisure destination (Vlès, Berdoulay, Clarimont, 2005).

- 11 Seizing on this change, the French Agency for Tourist Engineering (AFIT) published in 1999 a work on public spaces in mountain resorts⁸. This study document, intended for an audience of resort managers, highlights the design of public spaces, seen as essential components of a leisure territory and, as such, decisive for the image of the destination. The publication marks a clear step forward in this field, if only because it draws the attention of travel-trade professionals to a topic rarely discussed previously⁹. The following year the scheme for operations to rehabilitate recreational property (Oril) was enshrined in the SRU legislation. One of the two parts of this scheme is devoted to rehabilitation of public spaces in resorts, because they contribute to the operation of the venue itself (hosting visitors with varying expectations both at peak periods and all year round) and to the landscape of the holiday destination (fixing the identity, image and visual attraction of emblematic sites).
- 12 As part of this process, the aim of development strategies is primarily to pinpoint what may constitute the identifiable potential of a territory. The generic resources on which mountain resorts based their drawing power (unsullied environment, landscape and snow-clad slopes) are no longer sufficient to make a tourist facility a success (François, 2007). Above all it is necessary to highlight its territorial and micro-territorial resources.

Revealing micro-territorial resources, analysing representations among end-users

- 13 The process of revealing or identifying specific resources is a key issue, particularly as a resource is always relative, its usage value depending on its socialization and appropriation by the relevant players (François, Hirczak et Senil, 2006). Among these players, the end-users¹⁰ of urban places are seen as essential interlocutors. Over and above the permanent residents, the end-user concept opens the way for reference to the diversity of players frequenting these resorts. Particular emphasis is placed on the views of tourists, long overlooked in the design and renewal of public spaces in such resorts, despite the fact that they were built from scratch and disconnected from

existing traditional dwellings. So the visitors are now the focus of analyses, to which in turn they contribute.

- 14 To reveal the micro-territorial resources as identified by end-users, an experimental methodology was used with a view to sketching out possible options for requalification. Starting from the assumption that public spaces are free and open to all-comers (and hence not prefigured by any specific category of end-user), it was decided to focus analysis on the collective representations of resorts. Over and above the diversity and specific features of representations, the aim was to pinpoint their common basis, what Lynch calls the 'collective image' of the city. It was also decided to adapt methodologies already applied in an urban environment (Grosjean, Thibaud, 2001) for use with the specific interlocutor whose representations were of interest, namely the target audience formed by potential visitors. The selected methodology hinged on various components: direct observation of places; semi-directive interviews with urban designers and end-users; exploratory use of commented visits and photographic surveys (Hatt, 2011). Ultimately it was decided to carry out photographic surveys based on a two-phase, reference-free classification of more than 130 photographs. These surveys were carried out on-site on a sample of 110 visitors to the two resorts under study (Hatt, 2010).
- 15 This approach to revealing micro-territorial resources was implemented at Gourette, a mountain resort in the French Pyrenees, and subsequently fuelled projects to refurbish its urban spaces and upgrade its landscape.

Application in the Pyrenees: the scenography of urban places at Gourette

- 16 In the following, we present the case of Gourette, a ski resort that opted for a project to reorganise (or "requalify") its public spaces. This entailed research on identifying micro-territorial markers in the resort as part of a larger programme of groundwork for the requalification project.¹¹ This research also enabled certain priorities to be confirmed by confronting them with the views of end-users.

Identifying micro-territorial markers at Gourette

- 17 The photographic surveys, carried out in 2009, demonstrated that public spaces are seen as powerful vectors for a resort's image. The quality of their design is acknowledged and appreciated¹². But at Gourette it turned out that what might at first sight be seen as the resort's emblematic spaces, are often considered repulsive, or at best prompt divergent views. Strange as it may seem, none of the pictures of the resort's strategic, central spaces (entrance to the resort, Place Sarrière in its centre, and the 'snow front') featured among the mass of attractive representations.

Figure 2. Rather repulsive pictures of the entrance to the resort

B47 – Gourette <i>Identifiée comme répulsive par 60% des enquêtés</i>	B21 – Gourette <i>Identifiée comme « répulsive » par 52% des enquêtés</i>	B55 – Gourette <i>Identifiée comme « répulsive » par 50% des enquêtés</i>

« il faut raser ce rond-point et ce lampadaire, c'est vilain, ça fait autoroute » « ça fait voie d'accès »	« là, on est dans le paysage urbain avec un affichage illisible pour les pauvres automobilistes, il y a beaucoup trop d'indications »	« ce rond-point, ce n'est pas heureux »

PICTURES: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 18 The main entrance to the resort, at the central roundabout in the Marcassins district, was the target of much criticism during the survey (Figure 2). Regardless of the angle from which photographs were taken, visitors did not like the views of this central space, an urban node in the resort (Lynch, [1960] 1998). It was perceived as too urban, too much like a main road. Reactions were particularly severe with regard to the roundabout itself, perceived as a brutal reminder of urban traffic woes. However, as a 'place of announcement' (Atout France, 2010) it should play an essential part in promoting the image of the resort.
- 19 Place Sarrière, in the middle of the resort, is another example of a strategic space that is not identified as such. Visitors answering the survey did not see this space as a square, but once again, as a stretch of road, marked by the predominant role of motor vehicles which impacts on its image and limits any scope for doing something else with this space (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Place Sarrière, a little-liked urban node

PICTURE: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 20 The question of the place that should be given to pedestrian strolling seems essential here. Visitors, who have witnessed the transformation and pedestrianisation of many town centres, often think that resorts should do more to upgrade their pedestrian spaces. For example, one interviewee said: 'There aren't enough streets in resorts; on the assumption people are just here to ski, they do nothing for pedestrians.'
- 21 Lastly, one of Gourette's key urban challenges is the design of the snow front¹³, or in other terms the transition area between the resort and the mountains. The pictures of the snow front (seen from the Valentin esplanade and Place Sarrière) do raise questions, particularly during the low season when the lack of snow lays bare this rather Spartan, largely illegible transition area. Those answering the survey found the pictures of the snow front 'repulsive' (see below) and had difficulty identifying with any 'attractive' dimension, tending at best to identify with the mass of 'divergent' representations (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The snow front, an emblematic but poorly used space

PICTURES: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 22 Yet the central space formed by the snow front and home slope is a driving force in local life, thanks to the activities it supports and the two-directional view it affords (to see and be seen). Another real urban node in the resort, it is above all a strategic transition space between the urban environment (accommodation and car parks) and the space in which visitors indulge in their leisure activities (the ski area and mountains). There would consequently be much to be gained from giving priority to requalification of this emblematic space, a prime spot for meeting and chatting, essential to the resort's atmosphere. One option for its design would be to enhance, in both form and function, the vertical (between natural and man-made ground) and horizontal links (between urban space and ski area).
- 23 These observations, centring on identification and analysis of the venue's micro-territorial markers, fuelled debate on requalification plans for this 50-year-old resort. To complete this paper, we now propose briefly to outline the project implemented at Gourette in summer 2010 to make better use of these micro-territorial resources.

Capitalizing on micro-territorial resources: the scenography of urban places at Gourette

- 24 As mentioned above, several places were identified as key locations in the course of the photographic polls carried out on tourists, in particular: the entrance to the resort; Place Sarrière; and the snow front. The design priority, central to the scenography of public spaces at Gourette, was to make the resort more legible by highlighting emblematic public spaces.
- 25 The question of the entrance to the resort is essential. This is the space through which visitors pass on their way to discovering where they will be staying, a node at which those arriving by car become holidaymakers or just visitors. Whereas this spot had previously had a powerful road-transport connotation, what was at stake was to conjure up a form of urbanity, in the sense of an urban feel clearly distinguished from a world hinging exclusively on road transport. At Gourette the architects decided that removing the roundabout was an essential first step in such a project. At the same time, the Maison de Gourette (a reception centre offering a range of services and activities) was set up on the reconstituted square. To manage the new interface, which is likely to attract a large amount of traffic, the old wooden concourse, erected in 2001, was connected to the square by demolishing the pergolas running along its edge (Figure 5). The aim of making the concourse more accessible and legible, by opening it onto the

square, is to encourage direct communication between holiday amenities (tourist board and ski area, in particular). It should also facilitate meetings between visitors. Previously marked by the presence of motor vehicles (roundabout, car traffic and parking), the entrance to the resort played a key role in the requalification project. The determination to make more space for pedestrians in the resort also led to the car park on Place Sarrière being closed.

Figure 5. A square, not a roundabout, as the entrance to the resort

PICTURES: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 26 As a central node of the resort, particular attention was paid to Place Sarrière. The architects were keen to offer a solution which could be adapted according to the season and the number of visitors¹⁴. The choice of urban furniture, which contributes to organizing the square, was also the focus of careful consideration by the team in charge of requalification. The aim was to make it consistent with the fairly imposing built environment (Figure 6). The density of the flower boxes and the many lamps, particularly when seen from higher up in the resort, helps soften the imposing effect of the built environment by playing on proportions and scales.

Figure 6. Urban furniture on the scale of the built environment

PICTURES: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 27 The position of urban furniture was also rethought so as to organize the urban place by marking limits between areas given over to pedestrian and motor traffic (Figure 7). This form of design by subtraction avoids the needs for bollards and posts, often in large numbers, which impair the legibility of public spaces, ultimately obstructing them.

Figure 7. Urban furniture arranged to delimit territory

PICTURES: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 28 As can be seen from these pictures, in addition to the flower boxes, public benches have also returned to this resort, playing a part in the organization of the space. These amenities for resting and waiting seem to appeal to not only to those visitors watching skiers but also to tired athletes at the end of the day (Figure 8). There is now room for those in search of a quiet, contemplative stroll in a resort originally designed for all-out skiing and winter sports. The street furniture thus lends itself to leisure and encounters and makes it easier for people on the home slope (skiers, sledders, etc.) and 'spectators' on the terraces or public benches to see one another.

Figure 8. Public benches invite relaxation and mountain gazing

PICTURES: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 29 Place Sarrière now seems to have found its true role as a square, a place for exchanges, meetings and easy conviviality. In its new form, it facilitates the transition between resort and mountains with a legible, accessible concourse opening onto the mountain landscape to which it, indirectly, lends structure and value (Figures 9 et 10).

Figure 9. Place Sarrière, once a car park...

PICTURE: E. HATT, JANUARY 2008

Figure 10. ... now a square opening onto the mountains.

PICTURE: E. HATT, JANUARY 2011

- 30 Carrying on from Place Sarrière, the requalification project has also focused on the edge of the snow front, near the square (Figure 11). However the local council was split over the design recommendations for this emblematic space. In the absence of a firm

decision the architects opted for an adaptable solution. A series of low steps means that the ruling council can decide whether or not to clear the snow from this interface area.

Figure 11. Work on the snow front at Place Sarrière

PICTURES: E. HATT, JANUARY AND NOVEMBER 2011

Conclusion

- 31 At the crossroads between research into town planning and tourism, public spaces are addressed here as the micro-territorial resources for resorts. Urban requalification is treated as an instrument for (re)defining the ‘overall style’ of a holiday destination, on

the basis of the existing urban organization. The aim is not to reproduce indefinitely a single model, but rather to unify the resort by adjusting its differences to make them complementary, by uncovering and preserving the most powerful images of urban places, revealing their underlying structure and latent 'identity' previously concealed by a confused, somewhat illegible, urban landscape.

- 32 At Gourette, the requalification project launched in 2010 by the local council refreshed the scenography of urban places and made better use of micro-territorial resources. Attention focused in particular on three emblematic, strategic public spaces in the resort: the main entrance, Place Sarrière and the snow front. Finally the urban design project involved a re-appraisal of the space set aside for pedestrians, with more extensive restrictions on motor traffic.
- 33 The resulting changes represent a genuine step forward in planning and landscaping terms, even if there is still scope for additional measures that might, if appropriate, form the basis of a further requalification phase. In this respect, work on the snow front seems relatively incomplete, only the Place Sarrière sector having been refurbished, but not the Valentin esplanade. The lack of vertical connection between these two central spaces, which make up the snow front, as pointed out by end-users in the surveys, still poses a problem. The Valentin esplanade is another strategic space, which was neglected in the recent urban requalification procedure. Though open to public use, this space is private property¹⁵, which complicates the task of the local authority in this central area, raising the issue of urban governance.
- 34 Though not a complete success, the project to capitalize on Gourette's micro-territorial resources does have the merit of having been carried through at a time when urban requalification projects are still fairly rare in mountain resorts, despite being increasingly necessary.

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NOTES

1. French law n°2000-1208, dated 13 December 2000.

2. In this article we have adopted a town-planning approach to urban places, treating them as public spaces, territories devoid of buildings, open to enable people to meet freely and governed by public law. As such they should not be confused with the sense used by Mathis Stock (2003, p. 50) who considers the resort, as a whole, as a single urban place.
3. Markus Zepf (2004) distinguishes three territorial levels for the organization of urban space: macro, meso and micro-territory. We focus particular attention on the lowest level in the present research into public spaces. In this sense it represents an application of the theories of perception developed in the 1960s by Kevin Lynch.
4. The image of the resort is defined by Bernard Lamizet (2002, p. 202) as follows: 'image consecrates the unity between what the town means and what signifies it; what it symbolizes, a particular conception of existence, a way of life, acquires meaning in what symbolizes it : buildings, a site, itineraries'.
5. We refer here to the generational typology promoted and institutionalized by the Service d'Équipement et d'Aménagement Touristique de la Montagne (SEATM). Its typology is still the target of justifiable criticism, which will not be discussed here (François, 2007).
6. This analysis has also been applied to seaside resorts, with the study of Seignosse-Océan, in the Landes, another resort built from scratch and developed along fairly similar lines. The present article nevertheless centres on mountain areas.
7. The scenography of public spaces inevitably raises questions, in particular regarding the risk of reducing 'narrative' (Vlès, Berdoulay and Clarimont, 2005). The aim is to 'stage' collective lives, making possible narratives and itineraries, and not to produce a more or less fixed theatrical decor.
8. A second book was produced on this topic 10 years later, in December 2010, by the same body, now a part of Atout France.
9. However, for a researcher specializing in the planning of tourist facilities, it is hard not to entertain some doubts about this somewhat functionalist approach based on standardized demands. The solutions proposed deserve to have a local connection, to be rooted in the territory in which they are to be integrated, while also making allowance for the end-users of such resorts, namely residents and visitors.
10. The term 'end-user' ("destinataire" in French [Zepf 2004]) is used to qualify the flexible, changing group formed by all the individuals who use a space in one way or another, be they permanent residents, or more or less temporary visitors.
11. Many studies have been carried out at Gourette since 2001, with work by firms of architects and planners (Agence Adour-Pyrénées, Cabinet Grésy, Agence 'D'une ville à l'autre', Cabinet Thal'archi and Cabinet GCAU), analysis by a consultant on an unsuccessful three-year mission to implement a leisure property rehabilitation scheme (Oril), and PhD research work (as part of a research programme involving Laboratoire SET-UMR 5603 CNRS/UPPA and the Pyrénées-Atlantiques Departmental Council).
12. In a general way, three main themes emerge from this survey of end-users' feelings about public space in mountain and coastal resorts: the importance attached to places to stroll and relax; the fundamental role of landmarks (sculpture, fountains, etc.); and the care taken with the upkeep and everyday management of the residential or holiday environment.
13. We opted to use the term 'snow front' (front de neige in French) although it is usually restricted to the buildings fronting the bottom of the slopes. Here the concept is used more broadly to include the Gourette equivalent of the home slope in purpose-built ski resorts. The term snow front thus enables us to discuss the transition space, the front between the (built) resort and the mountains.
14. Rethinking the share-out between spaces given over to pedestrian and motor traffic, respectively, is a key issue for resorts subject to significant seasonal variations. At stake is the modular nature of car-parking space. At Gourette the space on Place Sarrière is open in summer

to all cars to park on the sides. In winter, on the contrary, the square is largely restricted to pedestrians.

15. The Valentin property complex is a form of condominium that includes the raised esplanade in which the buildings are rooted.

ABSTRACTS

Fordist ski resorts must cope with internal and external pressures. These restrictions strain relations between the functional and symbolic rationale of the purpose-built resorts of the 1960-70s. In the larger context of a 'return to local values', increasing attention is being paid to the quality of the inhabited environment, even if only used for only short stays. To address the escalation of issues related to land coverage and landscape features, we need to 'make do' with the ski resort's urban legacy, perceived as a (micro) territorial datum and a potential resource. The scenography of such mountain resorts is seen as a way of promoting micro-territorial resources. This research into the planning of tourist facilities focuses in particular on analysis of Gourette, a resort in the Pyrenees that chose to reorganise its urban spaces as part of a "requalification" project.

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