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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article is based on a research project co-financed by Irstea and DATAR Alpes (Commissariat de Massif). It also received support from the European Union within the framework of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

- 1 With around 60 000 hectares of land consumed by building projects every year in France¹, the spread of urbanised areas is a major phenomenon, raising a number of issues. From the Solidarity and Urban Renewal Act of 2000² to the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernisation Act of 2010³, not forgetting the measures stemming from the government's Grenelle Environment Forum, legislation has been unyielding in getting to grips with these issues by placing "the struggle against urban sprawl" at the heart of planning strategies⁴. Despite the special legal status that they enjoy, mountain areas and particularly winter sports resorts have been profoundly affected by this phenomenon (Saddier, 2005).
- 2 The tourism real estate market is particularly sensitive to speculation and is only too ready to seize the opportunities presented by a favourable economic climate, a climate helped in large part by numerous tax exemption measures. Combined with tourism, the increasing attraction of these areas for residential purposes (Moss, 2006) has undoubtedly exacerbated pressures from urbanisation. In Switzerland, the popular vote of 11 March 2012, often referred to as the "Weber initiative", bears witness to the omnipresent question of the control of tourism urbanisation in mountain areas (Schuler and Dessemontet, 2013). In France, many winter resorts, faced with the repeated failure of rehabilitation measures and the chronic incapacity of the public authorities to push through their implementation, must now deal with the dilemma

between maintaining a tourism economy that is vital to the survival of mountain areas and allowing unbridled real estate growth with its irreversible impacts on the landscape. Although real estate development often constitutes the direct corollary of a tourist destination becoming increasingly attractive, the dynamics of growth are not always governed by the need to meet soaring demand. In mountain tourism communities, the institutional context and the ways in which local power is exercised (Duboeuf, 2006) may also favour the emergence of coalitions of actors around real estate development (Gill, 2000, Clivaz and Nahrath, 2010).

- 3 Analysing the development processes of tourist resorts has long been a subject of tourism research (King, 1994). The determinism of the seminal works of Plog (1974) and Butler (1980) gave rise to abundant complementary studies that opened the way to a vast field of research seeking to identify the general principles at work in the transformation of tourist sites (Equipe MIT, 2005). Whether it be through an analysis in terms of links with the local area (Marcelpoil, 2007) or recourse to the concept of touristic capital (Darbellay et al., 2011), it is accepted today that the territorial factor is capable of changing the development paths of resorts. Nevertheless, the question of the impact of the development model on the form and intensity of real estate growth has attracted little attention.
- 4 Thus, not every resort has been the result of spontaneous development. Many have resulted from planned and rational development based on the models in place when they were built. But from both an economic and urbanistic point of view, calling into question the mass production model (Cuvelier, 1997) is today upsetting its very foundations. Beyond the diversity of the successive urban forms deployed within the framework of the Snow Plan (Plan Neige), our research is focused more specifically on gaining insights into the consequences of an economic organisation inspired by the Fordist doctrine. Our main thesis is based on the fact that outside the cyclical factors that sometimes contribute to variations in the rates of construction, the real estate growth of these resorts is also stimulated by more structural factors, linked to the specific characteristics of their economic model. Based on the case study of the Tarentaise valley, this article will firstly try to present the methodological issues relating to real estate observations in resorts. The second part of the study will focus on identifying the influence of the economy in the growth cycles, while the final section will seek to analyse the more structural mechanisms that encourage real estate development.

Characterising real estate phenomena in resorts: a methodological challenge

Tourism urbanisation: an illustrious unknown

- 5 In mountain resorts and coastal resorts alike, the recurrent problem of vacant beds and the insoluble question of the rehabilitation of leisure real estate constitute the current paradox of tourism-driven urbanisation. On the one hand, there is a new sense of collective awareness regarding the need to limit the expansion of resorts. On the other hand, the construction and marketing of new tourist accommodation is seen as the only effective tool for maintaining visitor numbers stations and ensuring facility use. Although these questions continue to be raised in official reports and ministerial

agendas, the prevalence of this subject in public debate contrasts sharply with the general lack of knowledge about the phenomenon on the part of resort operators. The difficulty in obtaining reliable and robust data to characterise this phenomenon results in part from methodological obstacles.

- 6 Tourist accommodation is usually considered in terms of its market and non-market components. Based on a simple counting method, market or commercial capacity is normally expressed in “visitor beds”, figures obtained from the files of local tourism operators (tourism offices). By definition, non-market accommodation is not covered by the commercial networks and cannot therefore be evaluated using the same methods. By default, assessment is based on data concerning second homes collected by the INSEE. However, when a global approach to the stock of visitor accommodation is required, the statistician comes up against several constraints. One difficulty stems from having to add together visitor beds, for the market sector, and accommodation units for the non-market sector. It is true that this obstacle can be partially overcome by applying an arbitrary ratio of beds per secondary home⁵. Nevertheless some inaccuracies remain and these are exacerbated by the potential presence of double counting⁶. A second problem arises from the lack of correspondence between the geographical area of the resort and the scale at which public statistics are collected (the commune). This makes it impossible to describe specific configurations such as two resorts present in the same commune or a mountain resort situated within the same municipal area as a town at the bottom of the valley⁷.
- 7 From a more general point of view, recourse to the concept of visitor beds to quantify tourism urbanisation has been questioned. This measurement unit is in fact the result of statistical tinkering whose methods of adjustment are regularly called into question in discussions. This situation of methodological fuzziness, which can be considered as an instrument at the service of public action (Lascombes and Le Galès, 2005), has helped maintain zones of uncertainty, providing actors with considerable room for manoeuvre (Crozier et Friedberg, 1992). The absence of stability in the quantitative references cited could thus be seen as a convenient means of legitimising local public planning policy, making it possible to reduce or increase accommodation capacity figures depending on the orientation desired (Perret and Mauz, 1997). In those municipalities containing resorts, there was sometimes a real imbalance between the engineering of public services and that of resort operators pushing for real estate projects. In response to this worrying situation and because critically assessing a statistic with a view to getting rid of it is as costly as setting it up (Desrosières, 1992), the methodological foundations of “local” statistics are very rarely discussed.

Towards a renewed approach to real estate dynamics in resorts

- 8 An in-depth approach to real estate phenomena in resorts requires access to reliable and precise information in order to characterise the changes taking place. The disadvantages mentioned above plead for the implementation of an alternative method using a unique measurement unit (the area) at a reduced spatial scale (the plot). The mobilisation of documentary land data from the cadastral survey⁸ collected within the framework of land taxes thus appears to be an interesting approach with a view to retroactively retracing the growth cycles of these extremely localised spaces.

Figure 1. Winter sports resorts in the Tarentaise

SOURCE: IRSTEA GRENOBLE / UR DTM, BASED ON IGN (BD TOPO, BD CARTO, BD CARTHAGE) AND IRSTEA (BD STATIONS)

- 9 The history of these tourist resorts has been marked by a series of endogenous and exogenous shocks whose impact on the growth cycles can only be distinguished from that of structural factors through a detailed survey based on case studies. With a view to specifically studying the “urbanisation” consequences of the rational and highly capitalistic model of post-war tourism development policies, our approach selects a sample of resorts corresponding to these criteria. Apart from a minority of sites of more modest size, whose development followed an alternative path⁹, the Tarentaise valley was the main area of experimentation for implementation of the Plan Neige programme (François and Marcelpoil, 2012). Taking its inspiration mainly from the Fordist industrial doctrine, it enabled the development of resorts of international renown. With some fifteen resorts (cf. figure 1) accounting for almost 40% of the national turnover from ski lift operations¹⁰, this valley is now ideally suited for experimenting with such an approach¹¹.
- 10 From the date of construction, as shown in the files of the cadastral plan, analysis of the evolution of the built area in the resorts since their beginnings throws light on the particularly cyclical character of their development. The differences in fluctuations between the resort market and the market outside the resorts underline the sensitivity of tourist real estate to cyclical factors. (cf. figure 2).

Figure 3. Cumulative built areas in the main Tarentaise resorts

SOURCE: IRSTEA GRENOBLE / UR DTM, BASED ON DGFI (MAJIC II, 2009) AND IGN (BD PARCELLAIRE)

- 12 The catastrophic events of winter 1970, however, contributed to a slowing down of this movement. Media coverage of the negative impacts of unbridled urbanisation and the avalanches of Tignes and Val d'Isère, combined with increasing environmental controversies, culminated in the first attempts to question this development model (Arnaud, 1975, Cognat, 1973). The economic crisis linked to the first oil price shock of 1973 also weighed heavily on the winter occupancy rates following these events. In the season immediately following the crisis, the sudden drop in visitor numbers in ski areas and the difficulties in real estate marketing led to most property developers temporarily revising forecast development rates downwards.

Growth and emergence of new methods of marketing

- 13 Despite a brief period of slower growth, the mid 1970s marked the beginning of a new intensive development phase that continued unabated until the start of the 1990s. Although most major sites were already equipped, they benefited from further expansion through new programmes that grafted development onto existing facilities. But from the end of the 1970s, slumps in real estate sales put developers such as Godino in Les Arcs and Schnebelen in Tignes in a delicate situation as they found it increasingly difficult to attract buyers. Faced with financial difficulties, they handed operations over to more powerful institutions such as the banks and the State, with the Caisse des Dépôts acting as intermediary. Given the slump in demand for second homes, it was necessary to invent new methods of marketing to conquer new markets. New formulas such as *timesharing* and the first types of sales with a commercial management lease appeared.
- 14 The selection of the candidature of Albertville for the XVth Winter Olympic Games of 1992 was made official in 1986 and this helped to sustain real estate development. With

the exception of the satellite of Tania in Courchevel, which was created specially for this occasion, all the Tarentaise resorts were then built and reached a peak in their growth phase. Even though the winter sports economy was showing its first signs of weakness¹³, construction continued unabated.

- 15 Although they were supposed to limit and contain urban expansion relating to tourism, the provisions of the 1977 directive and then the Mountain Act of 1985 proved to be relatively ineffective. During the next five years (1985-1990), the rate of construction reached one of the highest levels in the history of tourism in the Tarentaise. The climate of uncertainty, relating to the new socialist government, in fact destabilised the market more than the new constraints on urbanisation recommended by the legislature. Stimulated by the birth of the status of tourism residence and in part maintained by implementation of the Multiannual Tourism Development Plans (Plans Pluriannuels de Développement Touristique)¹⁴, this development was also encouraged by a euphoric real estate market. The hosting of the Winter Olympics did no more than partially prolong a generally favourable economic situation.

From crisis to recovery: the change towards a consolidation phase

- 16 From the beginning of the 1990s, the crisis following the bursting of the real estate bubble, combined with winters with very little snow at the end of the 1980s, contributed to a sudden slump in the market. The excessive construction resulting from the numerous programmes completed for the Winter Olympic Games accentuated the slowing down of the market. Despite this unfavourable context, the growth of the Tarentaise resorts continued inexorably, with a minimum area of some 30 000 m² being added annually¹⁵. With economic recovery and the development of a second bubble, a period of renewed growth was confirmed at the end of the 1990s. Real estate construction was further boosted by successive government tax deduction measures in favour of tourist accommodation (Périssol then Censi-Bouvard programmes). Real estate speculation became the main driving force behind construction in the resorts of the Tarentaise.
- 17 Since 1990, an average of 90 000 m² has been built each year. On the assumption that growth continues at a similar rate, the capacity of the real estate stock will have almost doubled by 2040. Beyond the simple “physical” capacity of the Tarentaise mountains to absorb such an expansion of urban fabric, these projections raise the question of environmental and landscape impacts. Already, issues relating to the routing and adjustment of water treatment infrastructures are providing fuel for the main critics of mountain tourism development, who continue to draw attention to them in the media. Without even addressing the problem of climate change and its possible implications on the winter sports economy, this situation therefore questions the medium-term viability of this development model.

A model structurally dependent on construction?

A vicious circle of tourism real estate development

- 18 Apart from fluctuations linked to cyclical factors, the resorts of the Tarentaise have become increasingly urbanised at a steady rate. Although the propensity of the resorts

to continually expand may be one of the consequences of a rational and standardised urbanisation, the mechanisms that drive it have nevertheless been subject to a few variations. From their first appearance, the resorts of this generation have been founded on a healthy balance between real estate promotion and ski area development. The real estate programmes, which guarantee the financing of ski facilities from the outset, also ensure an occupancy rate. During the installation phase, construction thus constitutes an indispensable base for the financial viability of the economic model. Despite numerous unforeseen developments, as recounted in the major reports on this period of tourism development, this model proved itself and enabled the installation and growth of most of today's resorts.

- 19 From the start of the 1970s, however, the shortcomings of market studies and the first problems of visitor numbers began to increase financial pressures. Resort managers thus had to find new sources of revenue that only real estate is capable of providing rapidly. The decision to increase accommodation capacity automatically put pressure on ski lift facilities, pressure that could only be relieved by building more facilities, financed once again by real estate development programmes. This vicious circle led to a headlong rush into real estate construction, which in very large part contributed to resort growth until the mid-1980s. From that time, the single developer was gradually replaced by the arrival of large financial groups that progressively helped kill off this infernal mechanism.
- 20 At the same time, increasing demands relating to landscape impact led to a change in the purpose-built model that slowly abandoned the construction of large complexes in favour of a more environment-friendly architecture, inspired by the neo-regional style (Vlès, 2010). Although the resort of Valmorel is an emblematic example of this change, the growth of satellite-type extensions is also part of this general movement. Stricter regulations to protect natural areas, however, curbed efforts to extend ski areas. The emphasis was no longer on increasing the scale of the productive equipment but more on ensuring optimum economic profitability. This was achieved namely by the implementation of a double strategy consisting of ensuring a minimum period of operation, through investment in artificial snow machines, and maximising visitor rates through the new real estate programmes favouring high occupancy rates. In the final analysis, the advent of this consolidation phase was characterised by real estate development driven in part by the needs of the financial markets for audacious growth, given that it is these markets in which resort operators function. As with the metropolitan areas (Harvey, 1978), the mechanisms of urban production in these mountain resorts, 'taken over by financial considerations' (Renard, 2008), are now subject to the stimulations of a global economic market.

The mirage of tourist apartment complexes

- 21 Faced with the colossal challenge of the rehabilitation of tourist apartment complexes (or tourism residences as they are referred to in France) and the inefficiency of successive measures¹⁶ to stimulate this rehabilitation (Miquel et al., 2010), the question of empty beds and their obsolescence is a real thorny issue. In the context of a mature winter sports market, the (mechanical/systematic erosion of the stock of market accommodation in favour of non-market accommodation represents an old argument that is frequently put forward to justify the ever-increasing number of real estate

programmes. The need for the regular and constant marketing of new tourist accommodation today appears to resort operators as an overriding necessity in order to maintain *at least* a stable use threshold and thereby guarantee their economic activity. “Every year, we lose 2 % of visitor beds in the market sector! The only way today of compensating for these losses is to build hotels and tourist residences” (SNTF, 2010).

- 22 Given this observation, the construction of tourist residences/accommodation is seen as an interesting alternative to enable a quantitative and qualitative renewal of the stock of accommodation facilities while at the same time guaranteeing the operation of the ski lifts. With attractive ancillary/associated services and a strong marketing network, these accommodation formulas enjoy high occupancy rates. Stimulated by a favourable market and helped by tax incentives (cf. figure 4), operations of this type have multiplied and none of the Tarentaise resorts have escaped this phenomenon.

Figure 4. Tourist accommodation starts and visitor figures for the ski areas of the Tarentaise

SOURCE: IRSTEA GRENOBLE / UR DTM, BASED ON MEDDM/CGDD/SOES (SIT@DEL2) AND DOMAINES SKIABLES DE FRANCE

- 23 This construction mechanism appears all the more efficient in that it satisfies a wide network of actors whose economic model is closely related to this growth dynamic. Not only does the regular marketing of new visitor accommodation enable operators to maintain their objectives, it also constitutes a windfall for a few specialised property developers who have found, in this measure, a tax niche enabling them to enhance their profit margins. For the communes, the marketing of a few hectares of communal land can also represent a significant financial resource. In the best-case scenario, it can finance new facilities such as aquatic centres¹⁷. In the most critical situations, the sale of land can temporarily help balance the municipal budget.
- 24 Today, this combination of factors conducive to the development of tourist accommodation has led to an over-production of new accommodation, which calls into question the medium-term viability of this form of development. When the regulatory expiry date of leases is reached in 9 or 12 years time, much of the accommodation could

suddenly be removed from the rental market or even transformed into a tourism wasteland. As buildings begin to age, analyses clearly show that the proportion of managed accommodation units¹⁸ decreases (cf. figure 5). The observation of an average period of 9.8 to 11.8 years elapsing between the purchase of a property and its transfer to another owner appears to support the hypothesis that resale is motivated by expiry of the lease. In any event, the continuing real estate development of resorts thanks to this measure is mechanically helping to regularly boost the needs for new accommodation. With the legislature granting an extension of the Censi-Bouvard programme until 2016, it would seem that only an unfavourable property market will be able to contain the spectacular boom in the development of tourist accommodation.

Figure 5. Occupation and transfers of accommodation units in tourism residences in the Tarentaise resorts

SOURCE: IRSTEA GRENOBLE / UR DTM, BASED ON SNRT (2009), DGFIP (MAJIC II, 2009) AND IGN (BD PARCELLAIRE)

Conclusion

- 25 Based on an original methodology, our approach proposes a fresh analysis of the real estate dynamics at work in resorts. Although the impact of cyclical factors on the nature of real estate growth is an important component, it is mainly the unrelenting and sustained marketing of new accommodation since the resorts first appeared that emerges as the most striking phenomenon from this analysis. Undoubtedly, the mechanisms helping to nourish this real estate growth have been subject to fluctuations during the different phases, but it remains true that their development model appears to be structurally dependent on construction to ensure its viability. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the need to compensate for the erosion of accommodation in the market sector has been one of the most regularly cited factors to justify the construction of new accommodation. This served as a base for numerous studies aimed at preparing quantified projections for this erosion from phenomena observed in the past with a view to identifying precise targets regarding future land use. Without wishing to contest the phenomenon relating to the expiry of the lease in

tourism residences, it would seem that this erosion is also fed by a dynamic of renewal continually stimulated by new construction.

- 26 Given the performance levels of tourist apartment complexes (empty bed level), and even though their underlying financial structure means that they are destined to eventually contribute to non-market accommodation, systematic recourse to the construction of new tourism residences nevertheless seems to be resisting as a means of maintaining the stock of tourist accommodation available in the market sector. While the viability of such strategic choices is open to question, they are not without consequences for tourist destinations. Faced with the difficulty of improving the profitability of available accommodation through the traditional marketing circuits, the power of the distribution network of the major accommodation players often argues in favour of the tourist residence. Nevertheless, the rapid increase in this type of product raises fears of a gradual slide from destination-based tourism towards a form of catalogue tourism. The choice of a resort because of its image and the specific characteristics of the local area could thus give way to a form of generic consumption prioritising the characteristics of the accommodation product as part of a homogenous offer distributed over a multitude of sites. The economic performance of a resort thus becomes closely dependent on its appearance in a prime position in a catalogue, which requires continually having exclusive rights for a recent product. This situation of regular renewal adapted to the market life cycle of tourist apartment complexes and to the economic interests of property developers, however, has difficulty in meeting sustainability requirements.

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NOTES

1. On average for the 1992-2004 period according to Terruti (CGDD/SoeS).
 2. Act n°2000-1208 of 13 December 2000.
 3. Act n°2010-874 of 27 July 2010.
 4. Standardised formula in articles L. 122-1-3, L. 122-1-5 and L. 123-1-3 of Planning Code.
 5. The decree of 2 April 2008, standardised in article R133-33 of the Tourism Code recommends applying a ratio of 5 beds per secondary residence.
 6. Furnished accommodation and accommodation in tourist residences are counted in the stock of both market and non-market accommodation.
 7. The case of the resorts of Val-Thorens and Les Ménuires (commune of Saint-Martin de Belleville) or the resort of Les Arcs (commune of Bourg-Saint-Maurice).
 8. Obtained from MAJIC II 2009 (internal application of DGFIP to calculate land tax).
 9. Namely Pralognan-la-Vanoise (pioneer resorts), la Rosière and Sainte-Foy (developed later).
 10. According to MDP 73 (Mission Développement Prospective).
 11. The area selected is that of the Tarentaise-Vanoise Territorial Coherence Programme (SCOT) in preparation.
 12. 8% per year on average between 1965 and 1970 with a peak of close to 15% in 1968 (MAJIC II, 2009).
 13. After a decade of strong growth, in 1985, for the first time, there was a drop in both the number of people taking winter sports holidays and the average length of stay.
 14. Introduced by the circular of 29 August 1979, the Multiannual Tourism Development Plans (PPDT) were a prerequisite for the drawing up of UTN (New Tourist Units) procedures aimed at creating a coherent group of constructions planned over a certain period of time. They disappeared in 1985 with the Mountain Act, but their application continued until their expiry date.
 15. The built-up areas correspond to the sum of the areas used for professional purposes, accommodation and outbuildings, as obtained from the file MAJIC II (2009).
 16. Assessments of measures initiated to facilitate renovation (such as ORIL, concerning renovation in leisure properties, and VRT (tourist residential villages)) have produced mixed results.
 17. In La Plagne and Courchevel, two vast real estate projects recently submitted to the UTN commission are aimed precisely at the financing of aquatic centres.
 18. The owners of which are subject to a professional tax since they are renting furnished property for non-professional purposes (LMNP).
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ABSTRACTS

In the context of a mature winter sports market and ageing accommodation facilities, most contemporary French ski resorts are having to deal with a gradual decline in visitor numbers. Faced with the failure of numerous attempts to introduce rehabilitation measures, new property developments appear the only way to maintain a viable tourism economy in these mountain areas. The purpose of this paper is to gain insights into the real estate development process in ski resorts. Based on the example of the Tarentaise Valley, the paper focuses on the seemingly headlong rush of many resorts into real estate construction. More generally, it analyzes the

characteristics of an economic model that is structurally dependent on permanent urban development to ensure its viability.

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Keywords: ski resorts, Real Estate development, tax exemptions, tourism planning, land pressure

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