
French belt boulevards

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Abstract. *As the evolution of French belt boulevards clearly shows, it is the interaction between urban planning and 'spontaneous' urban dynamics which creates urban forms, in this case prestigious ones. A comparison of twenty such boulevards in a number of cities provides insights into the formation and transformation of these major urban forms, their morphological features and their role in contemporary urban planning.*

Key Words: boulevards, promenades, planning, fringe belts, France

Marcel Poëte defines three types of street according to their shape: straight, sinuous and curved.¹ The first is created by the 'will' of man: it is part of a planned development. The second reflects a slow adaptation to the natural ground. The third results from the replacement of a fortification. This last type sometimes takes a grandiose form: a series of large streets, planted with trees, that create together a belt around the historical nucleus of the city. Curiously, this archetypal French urban form – named a *boulevard*, *cours* or *mail* – has never been studied as such. Pierre Lavedan mentions some such grand streets in his masterpiece on the history of urbanism,² but in chapters devoted primarily to other aspects, namely one on the limits of Paris, and others dealing with aspects of provincial cities (the demolition of fortifications, city gates, city extension, and promenades). The belt boulevard as a specific urban form is missing even from this masterly book.

Recently the opportunity arose to look more closely into this matter with a grant from the French Ministry of Culture.³ The

idea was to synthesize existing information on a large number of cities rather than initiate a new individual case study. Twenty belt boulevards were selected and ten people were invited to write a short article on one or more of the examples chosen.⁴ The belt boulevards were in the following cities: Aix-en-Provence, Angers, Arles, Avignon, Bordeaux (2 belts), Clermont-Ferrand, Cusset, Istres, Moulins, Nantes (2 belts), Nîmes, Orléans, le Puy-en-Velay, Riom, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Sens, Toulouse and Tours.⁵

These twenty belt boulevards are very different. Their length, for instance, varies from 800m in Istres to 6500m in Toulouse. Their width also varies, ranging from 12m in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence to 78m in Orléans. They comprise either a central planted ground strip (*terre-plein*) lined with two roads and their sidewalks (as in Toulouse and Tours), or a single road with two sidewalks, normally lined with trees (Istres is an exception as its single road has no trees). The shape of belt boulevards also varies: the circle is sometimes reduced to an arc by a

natural element (for example, a river in the famous case of Bordeaux, and a mountain in the case of le Puy-en-Velay) or because the original project remains unfinished (for example at Moulins). Comparison of the twenty belts brings into focus some historical and morphological issues.

The formation of promenades

The belt boulevard became a typical French urban form as the result of the evolution of promenades created around certain cities. This complex process started when city walls began to attract promenades. On the one hand, there were modern fortifications in the form of enormous earth platforms planted with trees and surrounded with open land. On the other hand, there were new types of leisure for privileged social groups: walking, carriage driving and games such as pall-mall. In these circumstances promenades were improvised, for instance on the fortifications, and pall-malls were created near the walls.

In terms of planning, the history of belt boulevards probably begins in 1471, when King Louis XI decided to create in Tours a planted promenade outside the city wall to serve as a ground for the game of pall-mall. There were two parts to it, Grand Mail and Petit Mail. Later (between 1592 and 1685) the wall was moved and the two *mails* were incorporated within the city. In Orléans, a century later, a promenade was created along the wall, but on the city side (a rare case). In a few other cities, at the end of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth century, public authorities filled up moats and planted them with trees as a way to prevent private uses of the land (such as gardening or the erection of small constructions). Avignon, where the wall still remains, is a case in point: during the sixteenth century, an alley between the fortifications and the river Rhône became the favourite promenade of the Avignonnais; then, between 1687 and 1756, a double row of trees was planted all around the fortifications to form a continuous line of *cours*.

The existing wall in Avignon is the exception. In most cases, fortifications were demolished but promenades survived, albeit in a very modified form. In Orléans, an exceptional case, external promenades were added to the internal ones at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Then both sets of promenades were levelled. Finally, around the middle of the nineteenth century, the wall which separated the two was pulled down.

The creation of promenades parallel to fortifications was only one way to associate the two. Another was to lay out promenades on the site of demolished walls. This is probably better known because it is the manner in which the Grands Boulevards started in Paris: in 1670, Louis XIV ordered the transformation of the city wall on the Right Bank into a great promenade. In Nîmes, during the 1680s, the engineers of the king demolished the fortifications on the north side of the city, and filled up the moat to create a *cours* with two double rows of trees. At Riom, near Clermont-Ferrand, a similar process, started in 1739, took several decades to complete.

The formation of street-promenades

Around 1780 in Nîmes, an engineer of the king pleaded for the demolition of the remaining part of the fortifications in order to create a *rue-promenade*. The belt boulevard, initially mainly a pedestrian promenade, was seen at the end of the nineteenth century as an urban road, made for vehicles and lined with buildings. The walls were henceforth replaced by street-promenades. From the end of the eighteenth century, belt boulevards were actually meant to be main thoroughfares: in the river cities, for instance, bridges were constructed as part of these arteries, as at Angers (1811) and Toulouse (1815).

This change matched the transformation of existing boulevards. In Paris, for instance, the promenades became an attractive place to live from the 1740s onward. Public authorities nevertheless tried to keep buildings away from the promenade, which

was originally meant to be free from any type of construction. On the city side, owners had to erect a garden wall on the boulevard front but were not allowed to have a gate in it for carriages. On the country side, the moat side, the roofs of constructions had to be limited to 4 feet (1.2m) above the ground of the promenade, the idea being to maintain an open view of the countryside. The Parisian boulevard was clearly meant to be a promenade without buildings on its sides. Slowly, however, it attracted all sorts of constructions (for example, different types of buildings, craftsmen's workshops, theatres, and coffee shops). The public authorities were drawn into this movement against their will. They did not admit that the promenade had become an urban road of a special kind until it was nearly totally lined with buildings in about the 1780s.⁶ But once they did, they very successfully remodelled this road and thus contributed to creating the most prestigious urban form of nineteenth-century Paris: in the 1830s and 1840s, the Grands Boulevards became the most attractive part of the capital, the 'heart' of Paris according to Balzac, the 'centre' according to others.

It is customary for Paris to be considered the model for other towns in France. In this particular case, many assume that the Grands Boulevards were the inspiration for many other French belt boulevards, but this is never supported by evidence. It is often taken for granted that Paris leads the way and the provinces follow. But in the case of belt boulevards, there is the risk of projecting the prestige of the Grands Boulevards of the 1840s on promenades created much earlier. Are we sure that, in the middle of the eighteenth century, local municipal officers, engineers or architects had Paris in mind when they came to establish *cours* around their cities? It should not be forgotten that, while the Parisian promenade was still meant to be free from buildings, in some provincial towns the *cours* were intentionally created as a prestigious urban form: in Nantes the *cours* Saint-André was lined with uniform façades and, in other towns, belt boulevards were associated with public buildings (in Paris this

was not the case until 1875 when the building of the Opera was completed).⁷

Moreover, what do we mean by 'model' in this case? Is it the idea to have a belt around the city? Or to create a pedestrian promenade? With what width? What section? What kind of building regulations? This series of questions goes beyond our present subject, but it underlines the difficulty of applying a term such as 'model', in the sense in which it is used in the history of art, to the morphological history of cities.

From street-promenade to traffic artery and back?

Belt boulevards remained street-promenades as long as the traffic that used them was generated by the promenades themselves and activities in their immediate vicinity. Once a belt boulevard became a link between different parts of the city and served as a means of bypassing the city, the sheer number of vehicles destroyed the promenade: sidewalks were made narrower to widen the road, central green areas became parking lots, trees were cut down and underpasses were dug. However, there have been further changes since the 1970s, with conservation policies progressively gaining ground. Although the belt boulevard is often the boundary between the protected historic town and the rest of the town, in the last decade the fashion for conservation has started to spread farther out and a new role for the belt boulevard is emerging.

Orléans is a good example of this full cycle. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the construction of a new bridge on one end of the old *malls*, and the construction of a tramway, strengthened the transport role of the belt boulevard. From the 1950s onwards, more and more traffic passed along the boulevard. In 1962 the west part of the *malls* became a major thoroughfare with underpasses and overpasses. Modern buildings and new services were built on the side of this fast road. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1990s a new policy was launched. The municipality initiated

numerous architectural projects to give a more 'urbane' character to this urban form. At present, it is considering the reintroduction of the tramway along the *malls*, and thus promoting pedestrian use of this wide road. Will it be long before the *malls* of Orléans have reverted to a promenade?

Dissymmetrical urban form

According to Poëte, the distinctive feature of belt boulevards lies in their curved shape. More fundamental, however, are the differences between the two sides of the street, as is clearly shown in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. There, on the old intramural side, the width of the plots varies between 5 and 8 metres, and the houses have three stories and are built with party walls and front directly on the street. On the old extramural side, the plots are wider, larger and of varying forms; the houses are only two stories high and have front gardens or yards. Even the style changes: the elevations on the old city side are rather modest, while those on the country side are more elaborate, having classical references (pilasters and pediments). In this town, cafés and restaurants are located on the city side, whereas banks, offices and public services are on the opposite side.

In other towns, other differences distinguish the two street sides. In Arles, there are 335 buildings on the city side and only 80 on the country side. The date of construction is another consideration. In Aix-en-Provence, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings are found on the intramural side, while those opposite date from *circa* 1900. Often public buildings are built on the 'external' side of the belt boulevard because more land was available there than on the 'internal' side.

However, the differences between the two sides of belt boulevards are not always as clear-cut. First, sometimes on the intramural side the urban fabric is not as dense as has been described. In Sens, for instance, the buildings on this side are separated from the road by *back* gardens. These buildings were originally built against the fortifications, their

frontage being on to a parallel street. Demolition of the fortifications left space for what are now private gardens.⁸ Second, the urban fabric on the extramural side can be denser than has been described. In Nantes, the elevations of buildings on both sides of the *cours* Saint-André were built according to identical drawings, and from the beginning these buildings were occupied by socially quite similar people. On the extramural side of the *cours*, the typical *faubourg* urban fabric is thus 'hidden' behind the buildings facing the *cours*. In Toulouse, the extramural area near the belt boulevards was heavily built up during the last two centuries. In Clermont-Ferrand, this kind of 'densification' is even more pronounced, the urban core having spread over the belt to such an extent that in some areas the belt itself is not recognizable as a distinct morphological unit.

In this respect, among others, it is appropriate to draw parallels with, and employ the terminology of, the fringe-belt concept. The form taken by the intramural side of a belt boulevard is influenced by the extent to which the old town has undergone 'repletion', to use Conzen's term:⁹ in Sens, for instance, the present-day gardens whose tails originally terminated at the town wall have not been truncated following the replacement of the wall by a boulevard, nor has secondary building development occurred on them.¹⁰ The extramural side of a belt boulevard, generally being part of an inner fringe belt,¹¹ has developed 'with greater freedom of space in the wider frame of an earlier field pattern'.¹² Moreover, the urban landscape on this side tends to have been influenced by a long period of very slow city growth when it was at or just beyond the edge of the built-up area.¹³ It is not mere chance that the buildings of the twentieth century tend to be on the extramural side.

The degree of dissymmetry of a belt boulevard thus reflects the evolution of the city as a whole. The wall that a belt boulevard replaced was an archetypal urban edge, a clear separation between the inside and outside parts of the town. Belt boulevards still carry this dichotomy but not

to the same degree and not in the same way, each one of them being a variation on the morphological theme of scissure/seam used by Philippe Panerai to define this urban form.¹⁴ In our sample, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence would be the best example of a scissure and the Grands Boulevards of Paris the best example of a seam: already in the 1840s some authors refer to the latter as the uniting artery of the Right Bank,¹⁵ having by then forgotten their original role as a limit.

Fragmented urban form

The physiognomies of belt boulevards also vary along their lengths, according to the character of the different neighbourhoods they separate or connect. Urban fabric was always dense near the old gates, but much looser along the rest of the wall. This is still the case today, with important squares (*places*), and intense activities, near some old junctions, in contrast to long stretches made up of dwellings and public buildings on large plots. Moreover, belt boulevards have fronting on to them many old *faubourgs* and new neighbourhoods with very different social features. This contrast is obviously reflected in the urban landscape. In Paris, the part of the Grands Boulevards near the Opera became the most fashionable area of Paris. In many other cities a particular section of the belt boulevard attracted prestigious activities and became a kind of heart of the city. These sections remain very active even today, for example in Toulouse and Bordeaux.

Urban planning

Belt boulevards are often used as boundaries between two different zones of land use. A boundary is sometimes established in the middle of the road, sometimes along the fronts of buildings located on the country side, and sometimes along the rear boundary of the plots on the country side. Only in two cases, Bordeaux and Moulins, are the boulevard and the plots on both sides

combined to make up a zone.

Belt boulevards have rarely been subject to a coherent planning policy. They host all sorts of projects that have arisen in disparate ways. In Angers, for instance, on one bank of the Maine river, the belt boulevard hosts the new *Préfecture* as well as a recently-completed housing project, while, on the other bank, the *place* Saint-Serge was redesigned in front of a new building for the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (a major public financial institution).

In a few cities the boulevards are considered as entities, as the next step in the 're-conquest' of the historical centre. Hitherto, they have tended to be used as a divide between the old centre and the rest of the town: a boundary between conservation and non-conservation. However, in the last 5 years or so, there have, in some cases, been changes. Moderate conservation policies have been extended into the old *faubourgs* (in Toulouse, for instance). But more interestingly, the use of the boulevards seems to have become an issue, particularly when municipalities consider reintroducing tramways into them. For the time being, however, efforts in this direction are hampered because no one is ready to restrict drastically the use of cars on these major thoroughfares. Nevertheless, the ideas are there, and it seems to be only a matter of time before they become reality.

International comparative research?

The presentation of a shorter version of this paper at the ISUF conference in Florence gave rise to discussion of belt boulevards in countries other than France.¹⁶ There is much to learn about this type of urban form and the way it has developed, and is developing, not only in different cultures but also in different sub-cultures. In central Europe, for instance, the 'rings' created in the nineteenth century (the Viennese one being an obvious case) were part of the layout of much larger areas than the eighteenth-century French belt boulevards. If it were decided to consider belt boulevards within the wider context of

fringe-belt development,¹⁷ a much larger area of investigation could be opened up that would seem to provide scope for interdisciplinary co-operation, for instance between architects and geographers. The author therefore invites correspondence not only on the issues raised here but on broader ones, particularly regarding the belt boulevard elsewhere in Europe and in other culture areas. If there were sufficient international and interdisciplinary interest, an appropriate way of developing this would be to propose to the Council of ISUF that a working party be set up.

Notes

1. Poëte, M. (1929) *Introduction à l'urbanisme* (Boivin, Paris).
2. Lavedan, P. (1982) *Histoire de l'urbanisme. La Renaissance et les Temps modernes*, (Arts et Métiers graphiques, Paris) rev. edn.
3. The grant was specifically provided by the Mission de l'Architecture de l'Aménagement et du Patrimoine Urbain.
4. The following people took part in this study: François Bodet, Anne Calvet, Marilyn Doutré, Valérie Fouque, Pascale Francisco, Agnès Fuzibet, Paulette Girard, Marie-Paule Halgand, Jean-Louis Kerouanton, Michèle Lambert, Olivier Micaud and Isabel Roux.
5. Darin M. (ed.) (1998) *Les boulevards circulaires* (Ecole d'Architecture de Versailles/Ville Recherche Diffusion, Versailles).
6. The basis for this is provided in Châtelet, A.-M., Darin, M. and Monod, C. 'Formation et transformations des Grands Boulevards', which will appear in the catalogue of an exhibition on the Grands Boulevards which will take place in Paris in May 2000.
7. Some public buildings were originally related to the wall (a well known case is the remains in Nîmes of the Roman *Maison Carrée* and amphitheatre. Others were built in association with the boulevard: for instance, theatres (e.g. at Moulins, Nîmes and Orléans) and railway stations (e.g. at Tours and Avignon).
8. Brive-la-Gaillarde, which was not part of this study, illustrates the same phenomenon.
9. Conzen, M.R.G. (1960) *Alnwick, Northumberland: a study in town-plan analysis*, Institute of British Geographers Publication 27 (George Philip, London), 64.
10. *Ibid.*, 58.
11. 'The fringe-belt concept is arguably the most important single contribution to urban morphology to arise out of the German morphogenetic tradition': Whitehand, J.W.R. (1987) *The changing face of cities: a study of development cycles and urban form*, Institute of British Geographers Special Publication 21 (Blackwell, Oxford), 76.
12. Conzen, op. cit. (note 9), 59.
13. Whitehand, op. cit. (note 11), 77.
14. Panerai actually refers to a notion used by Henri Lefebvre: cf. Panerai, Ph., Depaule, J.-Ch., Demorgon, M. and Veyrenche, M. (1980) *Eléments d'analyse urbaine* (Archives de l'Architecture Moderne, Bruxelles).
15. Darin, M. (1989) *L'idée du Boulevard Saint-Germain* (Ecole d'Architecture de Nantes/Bureau de la Recherche Architecturale/Ville Recherche Diffusion, Versailles).
16. I am particularly grateful to Jeremy Whitehand who suggested that I look again at Conzen's notion of the fringe belt, an idea which helped me to use the paper that I presented at the ISUF conference in July 1999 as the basis for this article.
17. Whitehand, J.W.R. (1988) 'Urban fringe belts: development of an idea', *Planning Perspectives* 3, 47-58.