

# RETHINKING THE CITY THROUGH THE COMMONS

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**ERIC PIOLLE**  
BY **ROSALIE SALAÜN**

The city of Grenoble, led by Green Mayor Eric Piolle, is pursuing an ambitious ecological policy of transition in the context of severe budgetary constraints. Yet this approach to the public management of space that serves the collective good requires citizens to think beyond their own immediate interests and make sacrifices, which can be a tough sell from a political perspective.

**ROSALIE SALAÜN:** What links do you see between the commons and the participative politics that you are conducting in public spaces which embrace several areas, such as culture, traffic, and so on?

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This article is available in its original language (French) on the Green European Journal website.

## CHANGER DE POINT DE VUE SUR LES COMMUNS PAR LA PARTICIPATION CITOYENNE

La Ville de Grenoble mène une politique de transition écologique ambitieuse dont un des aspects forts réside dans sa politique de démocratie participative : la réappropriation de l'espace public dans toutes ses dimensions.

**ERIC PIOLLE:** The link is strong: we have removed billboards from public spaces; we are working on street furniture especially designed for children, on the frontiers, both physical and temporal, within the city; on reclaiming public space with, for example, the potential tensions between night-time and day-time use of space. At each stage we have to explore and preserve what we have in common. Citizens have to rediscover their capacity for action, individual and collective, and what we hold in common must be managed, shared, and supported politically to have any meaning: we don't simply 'consume' the commons; we find meaning there.

In all public services, users are the ultimate owners of the commons. Rather than reinforcing the logic of a consumer society, we adopt an Aristotelian approach, which is that each citizen must be able to govern and be governed. That is our perspective, on both public spaces and participatory democracy.

**This vision of the public space is quite unusual in France...**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** The ecological vision which flows from this is an actor-network vision (which is doubtless more developed in other European countries). First and foremost, there is a logic of subsidiarity: each level has its relevance and meaning. What we do together, we can do more easily.

Last week I was with the Norwegian ambassador, who was speaking about his experience in France; he mentioned this capacity to think both in terms of history and the long-term, with leaps of progress, and to do things which go in the right direction, without fitting perfectly into an ideology.

Our aim in Grenoble is to stay our collective course with this society of actor-networks which find meaning in social and economic exchanges; a society with debate and conflict, but also the ability to get things done. We want to stimulate conflict that is organised and goes beyond intellectual debate to action: ideas must generate action.

**Is it not a little risky, for the achievement of some of your ecological policies, for example for billboards or parking, to have this participatory approach?**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** The real risk is that nothing changes; that we continue as before. Transition is an innovative societal project, for it responds in concrete new ways to the emergencies and extreme constraints that we are dealing with nowadays. Yes, we must change, but we must actively choose, not just passively put up with change. That's what my engagement in public life is about: clearly recognising constraints, without submitting to them. The urgency of the current situation pushes us to shake off old habits; some say that austerity management is enough. For my part, I maintain that it's through more democracy that we will succeed.

**How are local people reacting to this change in how things are done?**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** Firstly, people are contacting me a lot. Secondly, residents have a two-fold reaction: satisfaction that there is no more queue-jumping; but also frustration, because you can't pull strings anymore!

The old system was a bit of a lottery: the losers tell themselves they can win next time if they bump into the mayor at a good time – everyone plays the game. This was also true for cul-

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tural politics, in Grenoble as elsewhere, where cultural life often revolved around arbitrary decisions from above. Certain stakeholders got used to this. We are staying the course of transparency and the same rules for all; what matters is to respond to the needs of the people of Grenoble.

The approach we have adopted is ambitious, but it also recognises each person's capacity to take charge of their own lives, both individually and collectively. I was recently at a citizen's forum in a disadvantaged part of town. They have worked on defining indicators of well-being (peace and quiet, housing, education, living together, etc.), and on identifying their resources.

We are moving on from the old mentality of raising all issues with the mayor's office, which creates a really interesting dynamic which values the actions of local people. They are organising their own support for school children, initiating campaigns for people to greet each other in the street and get to know their neighbours, working on managing waste, developing mentoring networks for local people, creating activities to build links between parents and young people in a sometimes problematic public square, and even creating 'true/false' activities on the allocation of housing. All that, simply on a neighbourhood scale, is support in action in our city.

#### Does the mayor's office provide a framework for this?

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** Yes, for the participatory budgeting, we impose limits. The project that I just mentioned was supported by the public landlord: for example, we wanted to bury the waste disposal points because they were causing problems, so we incorporated that into redesigning the square. Even such an apparently trivial matter raises fundamental questions. We did the planning with local residents, and there was a debate about a children's play area in the middle of the square. In the end, it was decided collectively to put it in the middle; the local senior women say that when there is no noise that's when the dealers appear, and so on.

All this also involved discussions about what public spaces mean to us, our relationships with our neighbourhoods, and the tensions between different uses of space. For me, managing conflict is eminently democratic – it's where the visions of all of us meet that the city comes to life.

**So you see yourself in a role of mediator, rather than coming down on the side of one plan or another?**

**ERIC PIOLLE:** Yes; there is even self-regulation of conflict. The work of the city's stakeholders enables us to reframe the terms of discussions.

With participatory budgeting, the rules were a little stricter. Projects varied in size, and we mustn't allow operating costs to outstrip start-up costs; we can't support a project which would entail ever-increasing expenditure. So it is a matter of investment, which, naturally, needs to be maintained.

**In the spring you are welcoming an Assembly of the Commons, as part of the first Transition Towns Biennial gathering. Is your ambition to be a model, or innovator for this movement?**

**ERIC PIOLLE:** I don't know if we are as innovative as all that. It seems to me that innovation is generally the fruit of a blend of various inputs, which shift, hybridise, and cross-pollinate. So many things are springing up all over

the place that being a model doesn't mean very much. Simply to demonstrate consistency, rather than to be a blueprint, would be pretty good.

When considering all areas of our work, we have to think in intersectional terms. For example, measures to combat air pollution are social policies: l'INSERM (the National Institute for Health and Medical Research) has shown that in Grenoble, not only are there two deaths per week from polluted air, but that this mainly affects the poorest people. I like to use the image of sailing with a compass: I tack into the wind, so that even if things are not exactly how I would like, we are all going in the right direction. The important thing is not to do anything which takes us backwards or in the wrong direction.

For example, the government's environmental policies are mind-boggling: on the one hand they host COP21 and create a law on energy transition, and on the other, we have plans for more motorways, a new airport at Notre-Dame des Landes, a high-speed railway between Lyon and Turin, a nuclear programme, and so on. They set a course, yet all the while sending out strong signals that are not only out of line with it, but taking us in completely the wrong direction. Consistency is essential for us to unite the forces which will carry society forward.

**Conversely, does giving more power to citizens give local politics more consistency?**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** Well, it raises the question, anyway. The debate about advertising is interesting. When we decided to ban billboards, the vast majority of people were in favour. 99% of the feedback went from ‘we didn’t even think that was possible’, through ‘we didn’t think that politicians had the power to make that sort of decision’ (which also gives people more confidence in political decision-making), to ‘that’s great – we are deluged with adverts, and I don’t want to see naked women, cars, and alcohol when I’m taking my children to school’. It was amazing; these reactions came from everyone: young, old, all political persuasions, from here and even around the world.

Over time, with the difficulties of transition, cuts to funding from central government, and Grenoble’s financial situation, we have no choice but to impose pretty savage savings measures. Several times a month I find myself with key people in culture or education who tell me to put the adverts back so we can have a bit more money for them. I understand them, but there is a contradiction here: to have more money for education do you want me to stick up a massive billboard for Landrover because they would give us more money for exercise books?

**This means local stakeholders have to think in a very broad way...**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** Beyond their own immediate interest, yes, certainly.

**Does this consultative, or co-constructive approach, in a very complicated budgetary context, also mean the processes are more accessible to people?**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** What appeals to me about the commons approach is that it brings together individual and public interest. There is a third way. The general interest can sometimes be paralysing – there is a risk of being unfocused, saying we can’t do anything about anything because there is too much at stake everywhere, so we don’t know what to do about climate change, we become demoralised and end up doing nothing. It’s by working through the commons, this space where we come together in all our differences, that we get a sense of how our personal interests are part of a whole, and are not in opposition to the public interest.

**Coming back to the commons, do your traffic policies chime with this thinking?**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** In the 1950s and 60s, we really designed our towns around cars, and since the 70s we have, little by little, tried to reclaim some of what we handed over to cars during

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that period, in a similar way to how we have tried to reclaim some of what we handed over to shopping malls in the 80s and 90s. It's a matter of seeing the car as a 10m<sup>2</sup> of private space, 'squatting' in public thoroughfares.

**In real terms, what sort of feedback have you had for these policies? Do local citizens understand that it's best for everyone to travel by bicycle?**

**ERIC PIOLLE:** Yes and no – there's a bit of everything! Some, for example, say that if parking were free, they would leave their car parked and take public transport. And this is also an opportunity for us all to learn from each other. Here in Grenoble in 2012 there were already 35% of households which didn't have a car, and it has progressed since then.

As for what we spend on cars in public spaces, we are realising that ultimately the local community is paying for something which only benefits a few people. Is that really what we want? The social pricing which we put in place for parking created howls of rage at the thought of price rises, but the first figures show that in fact, for 40% of people, it's cheaper. To those for whom the price has gone up, I reply that local taxes are those that are the least linked to income.

We can also combine that with the particular situation in Grenoble, which is that the town spread in the 1950s and 1960s and the tax income from the more disadvantaged parts of town are greater than those of the wealthier areas.

There is also the element of gender, which is extremely interesting. If we are not careful, a town can become a town for men: fit, able-bodied, for whom the system works well. We must also consider the elderly, children, women, and so on.

**In relation to the vote on social pricing for parking, how will you react if the majority of voters turns out to be against your proposal?**

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**ERIC PIOLLE:** What interests me is bringing the debate to life. In theory, that could be difficult; we are raising overall parking costs, so we could expect 90% of people will vote to scrap this consultation. However, we can also have an interesting debate with, for example, people who have private parking for their car and therefore don't use public space; those whose cars are in public spaces but not in the city centre (where you have to pay), with the 40% who will pay less, and so on. Will all those people join the debate and vote, or will it only be those who feel hard done by who will be mobilised? The debate continues, and in any case, I will accept the result.

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**ERIC PIOLLE**

is an engineer by training, and has previously worked as director in a large company. He was elected as Green Mayor of Grenoble in March 2014, leading a coalition of Greens, citizen groups, and the Left Party.



**ROSALIE SALAÜN**

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