

## EuropaCity: a “hyper-place” for a globalised Europe?

Article by Clémence Pèlegrin

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EuropaCity was once Greater Paris’s flagship development project. Planned for the town of Gonesse in the department of Val d’Oise, part of the French capital’s northern hinterland, it was due to be completed in 2027. But this cultural and commercial mega complex was finally abandoned in November 2019. A microcosm of the issues faced in urban planning today, this project ran into the challenges posed by consumerism and the environment, transit spaces and inhabited places. Clémence Pèlegrin from *Grand Continent* examines this gargantuan project that aroused public enthusiasm and anger in equal measure, and which continues to hold lessons for understanding people’s relationships with cities.

The EuropaCity project was led by development vehicle Alliages et Territoires, a joint venture between Immochan (the real estate subsidiary of the Auchan Group, which was renamed Ceetrus in 2018 and is owned by the Mulliez family) and its Chinese partner, Wanda Group. It was supposed to occupy around 80 of the 280 hectares that make up the Triangle de Gonesse *zone d’aménagement concerté* (ZAC) or joint development zone. This vast expanse of mainly farmland – one of the last remaining agricultural areas in the north-east of the Île-de-France region – had been earmarked by government for its potential for economic development, plans which have been fiercely opposed by those who want to preserve its ecological potential.

Like other major infrastructure projects in France, EuropaCity has seen years of relentless fighting between implacably opposed camps, often uniting otherwise strange bedfellows in alliances of convenience. On one side were local campaign groups, like the *Collectif pour le Triangle de Gonesse*, environmental activists, conservatives of all stripes and anti-capitalists; on the other were campaigners for local economic development and the “opening up” of the region, investors, architects, developers, as well as Val-d’Oise’s local government and politicians, for whom EuropaCity represented the only real vision for the region in years, and an ambitious one at that.

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In the three years since its creation by prefectural order, the ZAC had already undergone considerable upheaval: it had been disbanded by the Cergy-Pontoise administrative court in March 2018 – following legal action brought by groups opposed to development of the area – on the grounds that the impact assessments conducted hitherto were insufficient, as recommended by the public rapporteur. In March 2019, the urban development plan for the town of Gonesse was declared null and void by the same court, thereby removing the local authority’s ability to grant planning permission for the area. In one final legal twist before the project was abandoned, in July 2019 the Versailles administrative court of appeal overturned the original decision to disband the ZAC.

EuropaCity was a Gordian knot that pitted two ideas of progress and development against each other. This ambitious architectural project was truly gigantic: 230 000 m<sup>2</sup> of shops occupying the ground floor of the development’s various buildings; 50 000 m<sup>2</sup> of space dedicated to “culture”, including an exhibition space, cinema complex, contemporary circus, creators’ residence and concert hall; a 7-hectare urban farm with its own system for composting waste from the site and whose fruit and vegetables would be served in its restaurants; several hotels, from three to five star, offering a total of 2000 rooms. Before the master plan was revised in 2017, there were even plans for an indoor ski slope with artificial snow, but these were abandoned following the outrage sparked by their announcement. All of these amenities were to be accessible from Gonesse station on line 17 of the Grand Paris Express, due for completion in 2027, and which would have linked EuropaCity to central Paris in 24 minutes and Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport in 7 minutes. The government’s abandonment of EuropaCity raises questions about whether Gonesse, the only Grand Paris Express station serving the Val-d’Oise department, should be kept on the line 17 route. By any measure, EuropaCity was a gargantuan project. But leaving aside formal aspects, it had been conceived and held up as an example of a new type of urbanism that reinvented people’s relationships with the cities.

## **Pushing the boundaries of the modern retail complex**

EuropaCity was simply the latest in a long line of retail space refinements which began with the first European shopping arcades in the 19th century. In France, the shopping centres that cover the country today all follow the same model, whose origins lie in 1920s America: a hypermarket around which other shops, restaurants and services are clustered, and whose business complements the hypermarket and benefits from its draw to customers. Through this model, which provides ample parking and a huge variety of products, developers are able to present an offering unrivalled by city centres in terms of comfort and convenience. These businesses are part of a virtuous circle of convenience and geographic concentration in satisfying the needs of consumers. The first French example is the Englos shopping centre, near Lille, which was opened in 1969 by the Mulliez family. Fifty years after the opening of France's first shopping centre, the same Mulliez family planned to use EuropaCity to anticipate and shape the aspirations of consumers over the next 30 years.



Forum des Halles underground shopping centre, 1985.

The long-held ambition to imitate and rebuild towns in the suburbs and outside cities set certain projects apart from other iconic shopping centres of the second half of the 20th century. One such project was Paris's Forum des Halles, built on the site of the eponymous former



market, which then Prime Minister Michel Debré moved to the southern suburb of Rungis in 1960. Following the demolition of Baltard's old market and a ten-year hiatus, the first part of the new Forum des Halles was opened in 1979, above the Paris region's main public transport hub. A subterranean city was built on three levels between the RER train station and the surface. It contained retail, leisure and cultural spaces covering some 70 000 m<sup>2</sup> and connected with each other and the city above by a network of new passageways and doors. The "belly" of Les Halles swallows and spits out 48 million visitors a year, and over 750 000 passengers a day: these are as much Forum customers as they are transport users, since the only way to reach the RER station is through the shopping centre – and confusion between customer and passenger remains. In 2010, the City of Paris sold the shopping centre between the RER station and the surface to Unibail, which had operated it since 1976, thus sewing further confusion between the Forum mall and the Châtelet-Les Halles station<sup>1</sup>.



Architect Jean Willerval's "umbrellas" at Les Halles, opened in 1983.

According to urban planner Françoise Fromonot, "the fact that a private space must be crossed to reach a public station on public land" raises questions about people's relationship with the cities<sup>2</sup>. Questions that apply equally to EuropaCity. Indeed, Gonesse station, which was to be built right at the entrance to the retail park, over 1.5 km from Gonesse town centre, would have allowed passengers to get off the Grand Paris Express and almost immediately enter EuropaCity, or to be exact, the "creative park", freely accessible and open 20 hours a day. This strategic choice raises questions about the commercialisation of transit spaces, in the manner of airports. Current and recent renovation projects at Parisian stations, including Montparnasse, Saint-Lazare and possibly Gare du Nord, confirm this underlying trend. Through these projects, as well as offering intermodality, the station is (again) becoming a space for retail, entertainment and services that are often far removed from traditional station activities. As well as the trend towards the commercialisation of space per se, there are also questions to be asked about how this is being achieved. Don't current financial and contractual structures, like Unibail running Les Halles station, favour a commercial homogenisation of these spaces, which is even more harmful than just any old commercial offering?

The EuropaCity project tried to avoid this confusion by creating what was meant to look more like a neighbourhood than a shopping centre, a definition that it was at pains to avoid by using lots of jargon. In this future "urban ecosystem", structures have clearly defined uses (concert hall, exhibition space), even though their descriptions imply that they have been designed with "participatory" and "scalable" intent. So, the commercial nature of EuropaCity not only informs the promenade from one side of the park to the other, but

opportunities for leisure and escape too.




Overview of the [EuropaCity](#) project.

EuropaCity therefore fundamentally differed from the Forum des Halles model primarily for spatial reasons: Les Halles, the historic hub of Paris's mercantile economy, became Europe's largest underground station and one of France's busiest shopping centres, all in a highly constrained space. Because it involved developing the Gonesse triangle, a no man's land that today cannot be built upon and is hemmed in by an international airport and a European capital, because it involved realising the economic potential of a region long neglected by the government, because it involved both meeting supposed demand and anticipating societal changes which themselves would lead to new patterns of consumption, EuropaCity was clearly quite different from any previous development project.

## Neither shopping centre nor town: a *hyper-place* for a globalised Europe

EuropaCity was proof of the growing influence that private developers exert on urban planning. The only reason for building a Grand Paris Express station in the Val d'Oise department, through its huge footprint and unprecedented concentration of shops and services, the project helped to profoundly shape its environment by taking the place of government. Investors and the developer were not content with simply building; they wanted to express and promote values too – inclusiveness, sociability, and so on – by giving them tangible form (as architects are always wont) and creating the illusion of an urban public space, yet with a resolutely commercial purpose. But while EuropaCity wasn't exactly a shopping centre, it wasn't exactly a city either: there would have been nobody living there. A city open 20 out of 24 hours, with no inhabitants other than retailers by day and hotel guests and security guards by night, could not exactly have been called a city – let alone European.

  
[Franklin Azzi](#) Architecture

EuropaCity expected to eventually welcome 31 million visitors a year, including 6 million French and foreign tourists. Its economic success was to be built not only on its advantageous location, but on the creation of “customer experiences” that would be constantly refreshed in anticipation of their changing needs: customised services, targeted promotions, marketing initiatives, active customer participation in [events](#)<sup>3</sup> and more. At a time when retailers are looking to reinvent themselves to maintain growth and profits, attracting and retaining customers requires new approaches, approaches that can be augmented by the digital revolution. If EuropaCity showed inventiveness, it's because its designers were guided by a vision shared by many town centres for some time: the strengthening of social connection. By talking about an “inclusive” and “desirable” space, EuropaCity hoped to convince those living in the Paris region over the coming decades to leave their homes and “experience things with other people<sup>4</sup>,” even though, thanks to smartphones and the Internet, they can already access a vast cultural, social and leisure offering, something that no local festival committee could ever hope to match.

Furthermore, in its ambition, its size and its concentration of an unprecedented variety of goods and services, the aborted EuropaCity site was more like a hyper-place than a traditional shopping centre based on the 1960s model. The concept of *hyper-place* was developed by geographer Michel Lussault in his 2017 book<sup>5</sup>. It's a response to the concept of *non-place*<sup>6</sup>, a standardised and uniform space created by globalisation that contributes to the lack of identity in many functional places, like airports and shopping centres. Lussault defines a hyper-place through five essential characteristics. First, the intensity of interactions that happen there, like Times Square and its vertiginous cacophony of noise and images; second, “hyperspatiality”, in other words, myriad physical and digital connections possible in a single place, a phenomenon stemming directly from telecommunications and their potential for distributing content to an infinite number of people; third, “hyperscalarity”, i.e. the convergence in a single place of local, national and international scales – in this respect, EuropaCity's ambition was to be an international destination, as well as a regional and national tourist attraction; the “experiential



dimension”, as outlined above, by generating excitement through entertainment, culture and consumption; and fifth, “affinity”, or a place’s ability to let people collectively have the same experience, a sort of spontaneous generation of social connection.



The BW Galerija development in Belgrade.

## Urban planning against social division

The narrative spun by EuropaCity’s developers, in media appearances and brochures for the project, told of a desire to consciously create a hyper-place, and to do so collectively, thus ensuring local acceptance of the project. While many infrastructure projects face strong and multifaceted social opposition, recent memory of the scrapped Notre-Dame des Landes airport is pushing developers to establish the legitimacy of their projects as far as they can, often going beyond existing regulatory requirements, such as examination of major development and infrastructure projects by the *Commission nationale du débat public* (CNDP [National Commission for Public Debate])<sup>7</sup>. Once a decision or project is proposed, the views of citizens, users, locals and the general public are crucial for enlightening the decision-maker: a shared decision is a more legitimate decision. French law requires that the CNDP examine the biggest development and infrastructure projects, as well as public policies. These are projects that shape the country, like the multi-year energy plan, the national plan for radioactive waste management, the gold mine project in Guyana or the proposed extension of Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport.

Its chief virtue would have been to recreate social connection, the erosion of which is often lamented in surveys of public opinion<sup>8</sup>. The EuropaCity project, the subject of endless controversy over the past decade, offered a definitive solution to the problem of social division, which has lain at the heart of political debate for almost 30 years. As well as legitimate questions about the project’s environmental credentials, its promise of economic development and its local rootedness, EuropaCity raised a more general question about the longevity of major urban planning projects. Fifty years after France’s first *grands ensembles*, large high-rise housing estates

which promised to return “the city to nature”, would EuropaCity have represented the future of reconciled social space? Or would it have been urban gigantism’s swan song?

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## Footnotes

This article was first published in French on *Le Grand Continent*.

1. BAVEREL P., “Paris : un livre dénonce la vente du Forum des Halles à Unibail.”, *Le Parisien*, 06/03/2019
  2. « L’urbanisme est-il un sport de combat ? » La Grande Table, diffusée le 5 mars 2019, France Culture ; La Comédie des Halles. Intrigue, mise en scène, La fabrique, 2019
  3. “Une offre culturelle ouverte vivante et participative.” Let’s build EuropaCity
  4. “David Lebon : « EuropaCity est un concept unique au monde »”, Francetvinfo, 21/02/2019
  5. LUSSAULT M., Hyper-lieux – Les nouvelles géographies de la mondialisation, Le Seuil, 2017
  6. “Non lieux et hyper lieux”, Géoconfluences, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon, novembre 2017
  7. “The Commission nationale du débat public (CNDP) is an independent administrative authority whose mission is to inform citizens and ensure their point of view is taken into account: ‘Giving you a voice and making it heard.’”
  8. « Enquête sur le lien social et la proximité », CSA Research for FDJ, novembre 2014
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