

Case Study

From Industry to Community: The Process of Transforming an Industrial Area in France into an Ecoquartier

(A Case Study of the Saint-Ouen Ecoquartier)*

Hamideh Abarghouei Fard**

Laboratoire Espaces Transformations (LET), Laboratoire Architecture Ville Urbanisme (LAVU), École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-La Villette (ENSAPLV), Paris, France

Michael Fenker

Department of Landscape Architecture, ENSA Paris-La-Villette, Paris, France

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Abstract | Participatory approaches in urban design and management, particularly at the neighborhood scale, have attracted global attention since the mid-1970s. In France, resident participation in urban development projects has received particular emphasis through the national Ecoquartier program. Since 2009, numerous neighborhood development projects across France have been implemented under this designation. Achieving sustainable development goals has been closely linked to the provision of social housing, the development of public spaces, and the optimization of energy consumption. Four stages have been defined for the development of Ecoquartier projects: planning, delivery, lived experience, and evaluation. Despite a general consensus regarding the relative success of these projects, the nature and level of participatory design and management approaches remain unclear. In particular, the relationships among different stakeholders over time, and the ways in which they shape and reshape the production of space, require further clarification. More specifically, the role of public spaces, as one of the common instruments of participatory development in these projects, has remained to some extent unexplored. By examining the case study of Saint-Ouen, this research aims to clarify the relationship between participatory approaches throughout the process of designing and managing public spaces and the ways in which space is inhabited, allocated, used, and reproduced by the population for whom it is planned. Using a case study approach, data were collected and analyzed through interviews, field observations, and urban planning documents. In total, eight key stakeholders, along with a number of residents, were selected based on their roles and levels of involvement. The extracted themes were coded and categorized within the theoretical framework of participatory governance. Ecoquartier projects in France are initiatives that stem from the pursuit of realizing a national policy and ideal at the local scale. This creates logistical complexities that are a natural outcome of the multiplicity of stakeholders and the frameworks defining and controlling development. The realization of participation in these projects depends on transparent, continuous, and inclusive processes that incorporate residents' voices from the earliest stages and remain adaptable to the inevitable contextual changes inherent in urban projects. Accordingly, participation in Ecoquartier projects is understood as an ongoing and multilayered process that requires continuous adaptation, genuine inclusion, and effective coordination among all stakeholders within a holistic framework. In the Saint-Ouen Ecoquartier, challenges such as socio-economic inequalities, logistical constraints, political orientations, and intrinsic project limitations have reduced the process to staged and episodic consultation rather than full participation. Consequently, partial participation has been achieved through development instruments such as social housing initiatives and neighborhood council meetings.

Keywords | *Participatory governance; Ecoquartier; Public space.*

Introduction | The concept of participatory approaches has increasingly gained attention in the field of urban project management, particularly in the context of sustainable development. Since the mid-1970s, this approach has been widely

embraced at the global level, and France has emerged as a notable example through the Ecoquartier¹ initiative. The Ecoquartier program represents one of the key initiatives for the development and promotion of national policies in favor of the sustainable city² in France. Within this framework, the French government

**Corresponding author: +989126998223, hamidehabarghouei@ut.ac.ir

has encouraged local authorities to implement a new “technical and social system” for developing, evaluating, and transforming urban planning practices (Fenker & Zetlaoui-Léger, 2017, 83).

Launched in 2009, the Ecoquartier program aims to strengthen sustainable urban environments by integrating social, environmental, and economic dimensions into neighborhood planning and development. Central to this initiative is an emphasis on public spaces, including community gardens³, which function as vital components for community participation and social cohesion. Despite the widespread recognition of the Ecoquartier Label⁴ and the extensive body of research on the planning and design of these neighborhoods (see Zetlaoui-Léger et al., 2015), a research gap remains in analyzing the impacts and outcomes of participatory planning of public spaces after project delivery and during their use by residents.

While many initiatives associated with the Ecoquartier program have been evaluated as successful in promoting sustainable development, the processes of transformation, allocation, and evolution of public spaces within these neighborhoods over time remain insufficiently understood. Analyzing the production of space in the Saint-Ouen Ecoquartier, with a particular focus on public spaces, provides a means of understanding what occurs between the project design phase and the subsequent management and everyday use of these spaces by residents over time. Accordingly, the primary objective of the present study is to examine the continuity of participatory approaches throughout the stages of design and management of public space projects, as well as the ways in which these spaces are inhabited, allocated, and used by residents.

Research Background

To date, numerous studies have been conducted with the aim of identifying and evaluating Ecoquartier projects in France, addressing various dimensions of this manifestation of participatory urban governance. These studies include, among others:

Analyses of the nature of Ecoquartier projects as interactive products reflecting urban sustainability (Tozzi, 2017); examinations of what constitutes an Ecoquartier with a focus on its level of operationalization (Yepez-Salmon, 2011; Ndiaye et al., 2015); clarifications of the practical dimensions of the Ecoquartier concept and its distinction from related terms (Souami, 2011); assessments of the continuity of participatory approaches in the design, management, and use of public spaces in Ecoquartiers (Bosc, 2012); and the development of indicators for evaluating Ecoquartier projects based on the perception of the city as a closed system (Yepez-Salmon, 2011).

Other studies have focused on the role and position of agencies and development instruments in Ecoquartier projects, including the role of community gardens as guarantors of overall project success (Tozzi & D’Andrea, 2014) and the role of designers in the development process (Leonet, 2018).

Further research has addressed challenges surrounding Ecoquartier projects, such as the integration of innovative ecological techniques into development processes (Renauld, 2012), the incorporation of global discourses such as sustainable development into local specificities (Leger-Smith, 2021), the adverse effects of Ecoquartier projects, including the intensification of social inequalities (Roudil, 2023), and the challenges of balancing stakeholder interests and managing historical heritage within Ecoquartiers (Rémy et al., 2018).

Other contributions highlight the advantages of Ecoquartier projects as strategic opportunities for aligning neighborhoods with sustainability goals (Tozzi, 2014), enhancing “norms of living” based on the concept of “living together” (Valegeas, 2018), and exploring the potential for extending participatory neighborhood management experiences to the citywide scale (Toura, 2020).

Additionally, studies have sought to define criteria for the success of Ecoquartier projects, including the influence of spatial location on project outcomes (Joss et al., 2022), as well as efforts to redefine the Ecoquartier development model by proposing conceptual, methodological, and operational instruments for the design and implementation of more successful projects (Charlot-Valdieu & Outrequin, 2011).

A review of the existing literature indicates that previous research has predominantly focused on institutional and policy dimensions, as well as indicators for evaluating project success. Fundamental questions regarding the formation and continuity of public spaces from the perspective of residents’ lived experiences have received comparatively less attention. In particular, everyday interactions, the agency of local associations, and the social reproduction of space over time remain underexplored in the existing literature. This research gap suggests that a more practical understanding of the Ecoquartier concept requires attention not only to macro-level policies but also to the micro-level of actual use and residents’ concrete participation. The present study is designed to address this gap by demonstrating how social processes and lived experiences can play a decisive role in shaping the quality and functioning of public spaces.

Research Methodology

This study employs a case study methodology, in which data were collected through structured and semi-structured interviews, field observations, and urban planning documents. In total, eight representatives of the main project stakeholders, including members of neighborhood associations, neighborhood councils, and municipal experts, participated in the interviews, along with a number of residents as complementary participants. Participants were selected based on their roles and levels of involvement in the Ecoquartier development process.

For data analysis, key themes were initially identified through open coding and subsequently categorized within a theoretical

framework related to participatory governance and Ecoquartier projects. These themes were organized around axes such as development instruments and agencies involved in sustainable development, and evaluation criteria, including equity, transparency, and intervention.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

• Participatory urban governance: Power distribution, inclusion, and challenges

According to the theory of participatory power introduced in the 1960s, citizen participation in decision-making institutions can enhance their political, social, and economic power (Filmer, 2006). Since the 1970s, public participation has played an increasingly significant role in urban development, particularly in France, and by the 1980s it was regarded as a means of mobilizing local knowledge and rebalancing power relations. The 1990s were marked by a renewed emphasis on deliberative democracy and the role of civil society in urban governance (Sorensen & Sagaris, 2010, 297–300). Overall, participatory governance provides a platform for “collective reasoning” (Gustafson & Hertting, 2017) and “collective action within society” (van de Wetering & Groenleer, 2023).

Today, public participation methods constitute a key component of planning practices in many countries and have given rise to diverse approaches. Global frameworks such as Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992), the New Urban Agenda (ibid., 2017), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (ibid., 2015), particularly Goals 11 and 16, emphasize local participation in decision-making processes. The Aarhus Convention (United Nations Economic ..., 1998) guarantees public access to environmental decision-making, while the OECD’s Principles on Urban Policy (2019) promote participatory urban planning. Despite the numerous advantages attributed to participatory governance (Portney et al., 2002; Bovaird, 2007; Fontan et al., 2009), this approach has also been subject to criticism. Issues such as the privileging of elites over marginalized groups (Taylor, 2007; Hertting, 2024), the concealment of ineffective or problematic policies (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2015; Boussaguet, 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2017), and challenges related to power imbalances, state control, selective participation, and institutional ambiguity have been widely discussed (Ostrom, 1990; Fagotto & Fung, 2009; Mathers et al., 2008; Jun & Musso, 2013; Fung, 2015;).

The processes and outcomes of participatory neighborhood governance are neither fixed nor singular but rather dynamic and open to multiple interpretations (van de Wetering & Groenleer, 2023, 559). Consequently, a deeper understanding of participatory governance processes in French Ecoquartier projects is required.

• Ecoquartier as a process for resident participation in project management

Participatory governance shapes the relationship between

the state and citizens and empowers local organizations to claim citizenship rights through participatory democracy (Sorensen & Sagaris, 2010). The objective of this process is to redistribute power in neighborhood transformation processes (Vrebos, 2024). The Ecoquartier program, through its global and comprehensive approach, revisits issues of sustainable urban development and the organization of urban projects (Zetlaoui-Léger et al., 2015). This program addresses the intersections and synergies between individuals, residents, and the evaluative capacities of urban governance systems in France (Tribout, 2018).

Emerging perspectives emphasize joint action among citizens, professionals, and democratic institutions in managing urban and natural spaces as “commons” (Paquot, 2002). The Ecoquartier initiative, launched in response to the Grenelle laws of 2009 and 2010, encourages local authorities to develop sustainable neighborhoods. In 2012, the Ecoquartier Label was introduced and was further developed in 2023 with a focus on the labels “delivered” (livré) and “lived” (vécu). The labeling process consists of two stages: certification after project completion and evaluation after three years of lived social experience. This framework is adaptable to diverse urban, suburban, and rural contexts, ensuring broad applicability.

The updated framework emphasizes four key principles: governance, quality of life, territorial development, and environmental impact. To date, more than 500 development projects at various stages have participated in the Ecoquartier approach (Écoquartiers, n.d.) (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, research on French Ecoquartier projects highlights a gap between stated objectives and actual implementation, influenced by the challenges of urban governance (Zetlaoui-Léger et al., 2014, 1). Evaluation and sustainable development, as core objectives of Ecoquartier projects, are inherently interconnected. In France, evaluation is primarily conceived as a matter of “compliance control,” and post-completion project evaluation is considered essential (Fenker & Zetlaoui-Léger, 2017, 98 & 99). Understanding the mechanisms of participatory governance within Ecoquartier projects therefore constitutes one of the main axes of the present research.

Numerous studies emphasize the central role of public space in participatory practices within Ecoquartier projects (Tozzi & D’Andrea, 2014; Zetlaoui-Léger et al., 2015). Public spaces are often perceived as the most durable and tangible domains for participation (Hamman, 2008). Their symbolic and functional characteristics make them particularly suitable for co-production efforts (Faburel & Roché, 2012; Renaud, 2012; Fleury & Guérin-Pace, 2022). Moreover, public and green spaces are less constrained by regulatory standards and profitability requirements than buildings. These spaces offer short-term outcomes and foster residents’ sense of participation and ownership. This dynamic reflects participatory models such as neighborhood management in France since the 1990s, where public spaces have been mobilized as instruments of participatory

urban governance (Rumpala, 2009; Tozzi & D'Andrea, 2014) (Fig. 1).

• Social production of public space: An instrument for understanding participatory development processes in the ecoquartier label

Urban planning projects constitute a specific form of public action (Pinson, 2004). Although they result from negotiations between public and private actors, in France they are designed according to a political will aligned with the “public interest” (Vanier, 2011). Therefore, planning objectives are integrated with regional strategies, defined at different scales in urban planning documents (Bourdin, 2005).

In ecoquartier projects, both individual and institutional actors operate within a regulatory framework to achieve sustainable development goals, using instruments such as participatory public spaces, optimized energy systems, and evaluation mechanisms. Two categories of variables influence the progress of these projects (Fig. 2):

- Driving variables: organizations, actors, and instruments

- Steering variables: policies, strategies, and regulatory frameworks

Evaluating ecoquartier projects, with an emphasis on the role of public space, is essential to understanding the long-term processes and evolution of the projects. Henri Lefebvre argued that space is a social product, and each society has its specific way of producing space (Madanipour, 1996, 341 & 342). Accordingly, space is not merely a backdrop for social actions; it is inherently linked to power relations, social interactions, and cultural practices that shape urban life. Public space serves as an accessible arena for social interaction (Abarghouei Fard et al., 2023a, 44). Public spaces are shaped by various social, economic, and political forces and are overseen by urban managers, designers, and citizens (Abarghouei Fard et al., 2023b, 93). The process of producing public space acts as a vital platform for citizen participation and is therefore valuable for studying and evaluating the democratic nature of urban projects.

In ecoquartier initiatives, public spaces are considered essential instruments for enhancing inclusion. Public space, by definition,

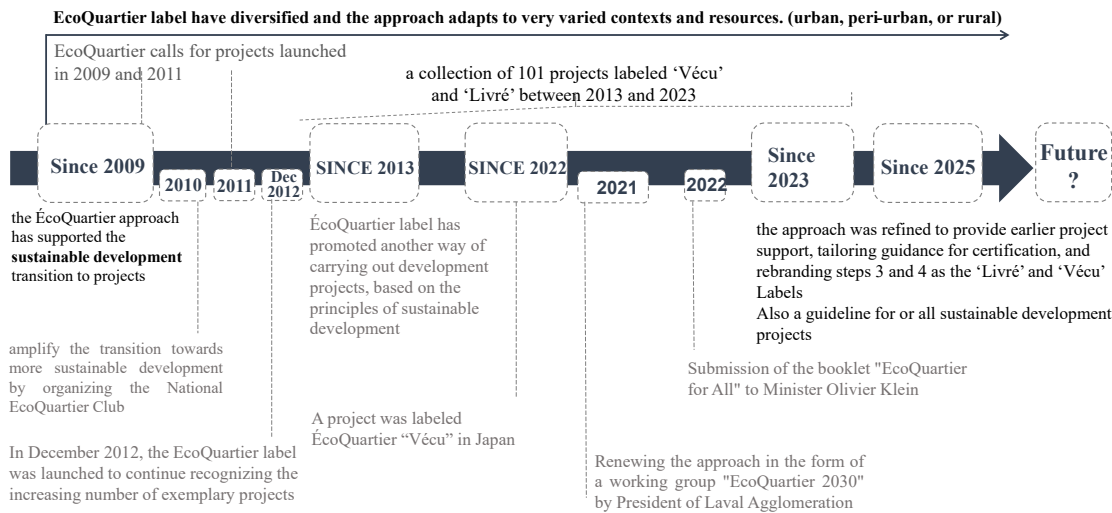


Fig. 1. The ecoquartier label: From an instrument for sustainable development to a guide for sustainable development. Source: Authors.

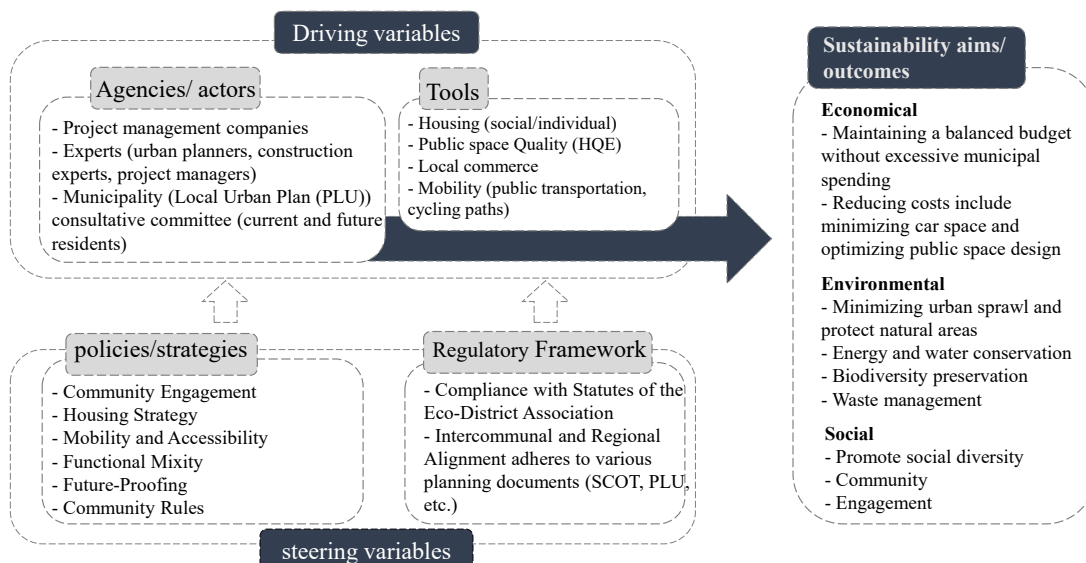


Fig. 2. Participatory development process in the ecoquartier label. Source: Authors.

involves the sharing of “common goods”, a central concept in the “sustainability discourse” (Rumpala, 2009). Public spaces appear as the minimal common denominator in participatory experiences facilitated by local authorities. Green spaces, in particular, are intended for “co-design,” “co-production,” and potentially future collective management (Laboratoire Espaces ..., 2013, 115). Specifically, community gardens within ecoquartier projects are given special attention to promote sustainable development principles concerning urban nature, intergenerational relations, urban agriculture, autonomy, and food security (ibid., 2013, 116). The evaluation of ecoquartier projects is based on the social production of space, which serves as:

1. A showcase of social sustainability and citizen participation
2. An instrument for assessing participatory governance processes

Case Study Introduction

The redeveloped area of Les Docks de Saint-Ouen, supported by the French government, is part of the New Urban Neighborhoods (Nouveaux Quartiers Urbains) initiative and aligns with sustainable development standards. This area features energy-efficient buildings and innovative environmental solutions, such as pneumatic waste collection, district heating, and rainwater management (Introduction à l'écoquartier ..., n.d.). The evolution of the Saint-Ouen district illustrates the gradual transformation of an industrial suburban area into a residential neighborhood with distinct demographic, economic, and social characteristics (Figs. 3 & 4).

The Saint-Ouen Zone d'Aménagement Concerté (coordinated

development zone (ZAC))⁵ covers 100 hectares, approximately one-fourth of the total area of the city of Saint-Ouen-sur-Seine. In 2007, this new neighborhood replaced a derelict industrial zone along the Seine River. The city has been successively governed by different municipal parties, and its planning has included the development of facilities, social housing, and architectural styles over time, with full development scheduled for completion in 2028. This area was first recognized in 2013 for its commitment to the ecoquartier label and is now officially acknowledged in both the “delivered” and “lived” phases (Service Planification ..., 2024).

The Plan Local d'Urbanisme intercommunal (Inter-communal Urban Master Plan (PLUi))⁶ of Saint-Ouen was approved in February 2020. The main goals of this plan were functional diversity, social integration, alignment with the city, and consistency with sustainable development objectives. It was designed in alignment with other strategic plans, such as the Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale (Territorial Coherence Scheme (SCOT))⁷ and the Urban Mobility Plan. The ecoquartier Les Docks de Saint-Ouen embodies a major effort to redevelop an industrial area. The project includes over 2,000 residential units, commercial areas, and extensive public facilities, including a park and community gardens. The park serves as a multifunctional space, providing recreational opportunities while supporting environmental management in the area. The overarching aim of this coordinated development, supported by the city of Saint-Ouen-sur-Seine, is to reconnect with the Seine River and transform former industrial wastelands into mixed-use residential areas (Lettre d'information ..., 2022) (Fig. 5).

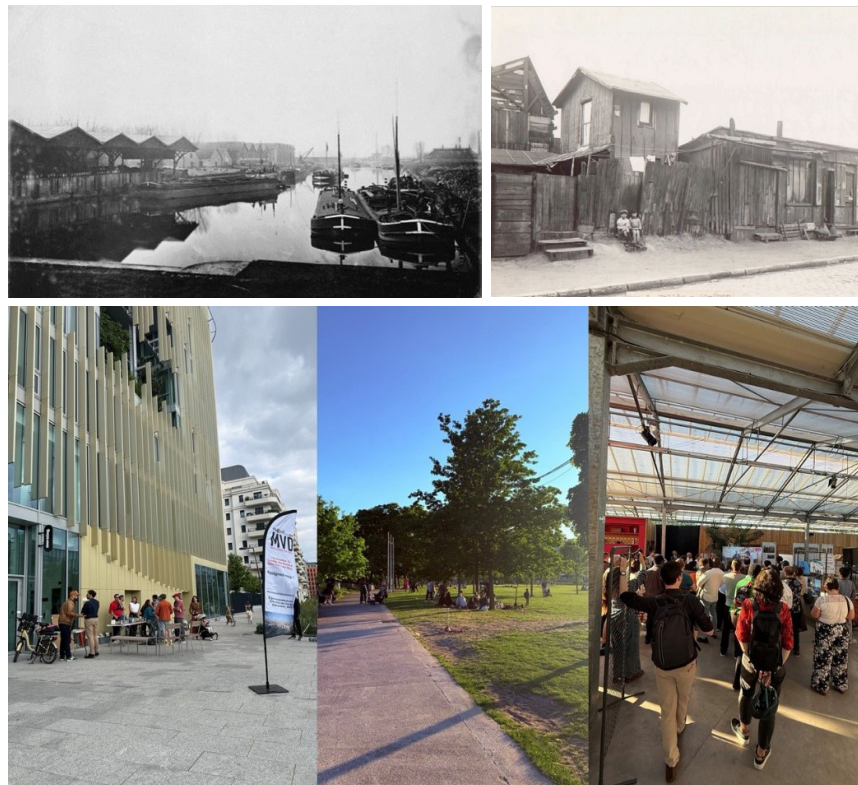


Fig. 3. Gradual transformation of Saint-Ouen from an industrial suburb of Paris to a sustainable neighborhood. Top: Les Docks de Saint-Ouen in the late 19th century. Source: Teller & Ruelle, 2016/ Bottom: Present-day ecoquartier Saint-Ouen. Photo: Hamideh Abarghouei Fard, 2025.

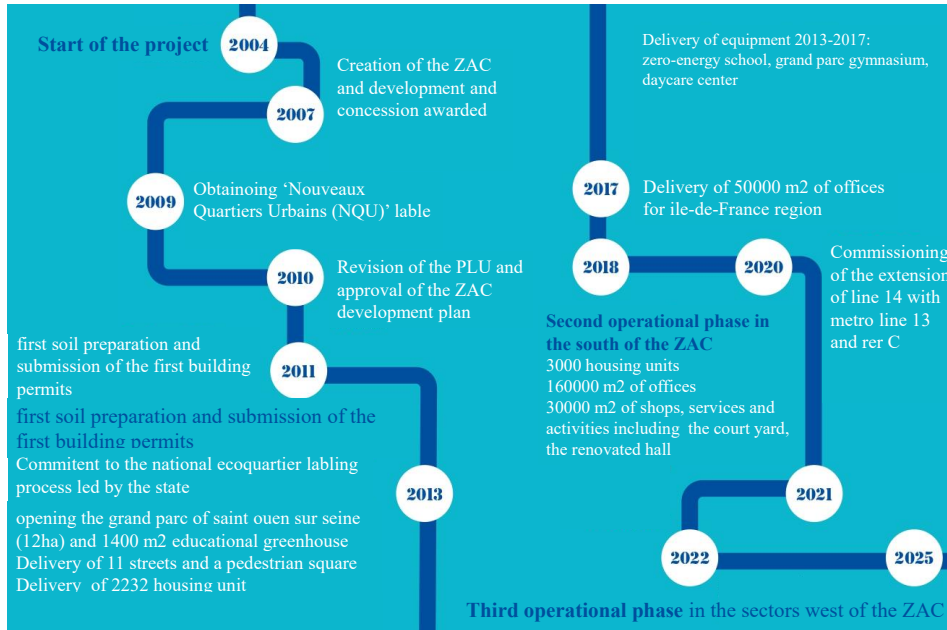


Fig. 4. Timeline of Saint-Ouen neighborhood formation and evolution: from industrial zone to residential community. Source : www.docks-saintouen.fr.

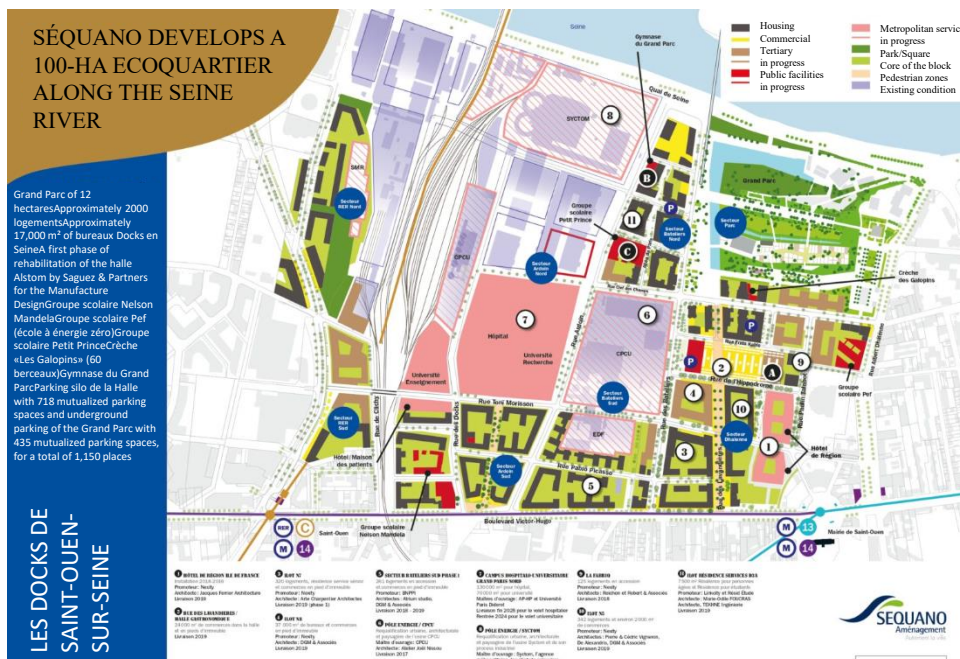


Fig. 5. Location of the ecoquartier Saint-Ouen. Source: www.espacedeco.com.

Discussion

The participatory management process of ecoquartier projects is, according to an active member of the Saint-Ouen neighborhood association, “ongoing and constantly changing.” This reflects the logic that urban projects are often described as a “black box.” The reality likely lies somewhere in between, explainable, yet not fully describable. Based on field findings, the social production and spatial transformations in ecoquartier projects depend on the following factors and their interrelations:

- Actors and agencies involved in the social production of space
- Components of social space production
- Characteristics of the participatory process (Fig. 6)

• Actors and agencies involved in social space production

Field findings indicate that the influence of individual residents, social associations, local institutions, municipal staff, and professionals such as architects and urban planners guides both the physical and social development of the neighborhood. These actors collectively create a complex, multi-layered process of spatial production that reflects the evolving characteristics of the neighborhood.

- Individual agency; Community members

The influence of individual agency on participatory management in ecoquartier projects is inherently relative. Among the 2,000 residents of Saint-Ouen, participation levels vary significantly. According to one neighborhood association member:

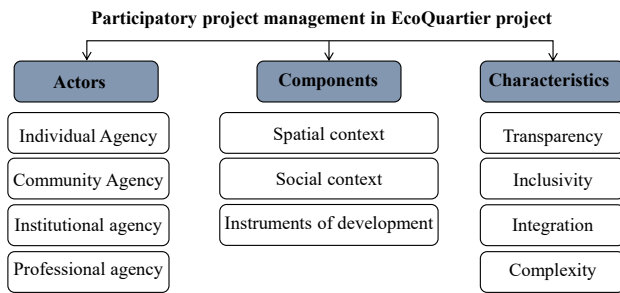


Fig. 6. Components of participatory project management based on findings from ecoquartier Saint-Ouen. Source: Authors.

“Among residents, those who are more sensitive engage with neighborhood development, participation, and community.” While “many newcomers are environmentally conscious,” even the term ecoquartier holds significance for some individuals. This highlights the role of individual agency in participation, influenced by factors such as age, social background, personal interests, and cultural context. The neighborhood association primarily comprises individuals aged 35–45 from similar social classes who voluntarily organize constructive discussions about the future of the neighborhood. One member explains that monthly meetings are motivated by “interest in connecting with other residents,” whereas other groups, such as some newcomers and adolescents, may lack interest or detailed knowledge about the ecoquartier, limiting their participation. Accordingly, “the municipality can act, but not do everything. Residents can make significant changes through the use of space and even their consumption habits.” Thus, proper demographic planning, continuous information, and resident education are essential for enhancing participatory neighborhood management.

- Collective agency; Associations

Associations such as Mon Voisin des Docks play a key role in neighborhood dynamics by supporting grassroots initiatives⁸. These associations carry out self-organized actions, such as murals near the main park or compost projects, without direct coordination with the municipality. One member stated that their efforts aim to “strengthen social bonds and empower residents to take ownership of their living environment.” Associations provide opportunities for social interaction and mutual support, enhancing community cohesion and collective identity. However, their influence is limited by membership size, typically about 50 active participants, representing specific social groups within the Saint-Ouen ecoquartier. A municipal expert notes: “The Mon Voisin des Docks association manages public spaces around the park, including gardens and environmental initiatives. Yet, they only have around 200 members, relatively small for a neighborhood of thousands. Collective spirit has decreased over time, especially among younger residents, creating challenges for inclusive neighborhood management.” These findings raise questions about representation and legitimacy, as associations often reflect only segments of the community.

- Institutional agency; Municipality and local authorities

Urban governance policies have directly shaped the socio-

spatial structure of Saint-Ouen, evident in housing architecture and social fabric transformation. Social housing distribution, for example, has shifted with municipal policies, higher percentages under leftist administrations and lower under rightist administrations, altering the neighborhood’s social composition. Informed residents remarked: “During the first term, the municipality was communist; they built a lot of social housing. In the second term, almost none was built. Thus, the social characteristics of the population differ significantly between periods. This is what we call gentrification⁹, they are changing the social fabric.” The limited municipal action during the second term increased the agency of associations, leading to higher resident participation in local affairs. Members of Mon Voisin des Docks acknowledge: “In 2014, local power shifted from leftist communists to right-wing liberals. They did not want to make changes and did absolutely nothing. So, we had to organize ourselves to participate in projects and balance power.”

- Professional agency; Experts

Professionals such as architects, landscape architects, and urban planners play transformative and facilitative roles in ecoquartier projects. Through strategic interventions and support mechanisms, they shape physical and social neighborhood dynamics. As one interviewee noted: “In dense areas like ours, it’s less about construction and more about creating smarter spatial organization,” highlighting how design can foster social cohesion. Professionals also facilitate citizen initiatives: “People do small things; it is important not to block their success and to support them with engineering and operator assistance.” Overall, professionals act as catalysts for positive change, modifying physical spaces while facilitating community participation to create socially vibrant neighborhoods.

• Components of social space production

The social production of space refers to the ways in which space is created, organized, and experienced through human activities over time. These practices can act as either barriers or drivers in advancing ecoquartier projects. The social production of space in Saint-Ouen is influenced by spatial context, social context, and developmental instruments:

- Spatial context

The physical and environmental context of Saint-Ouen shapes both opportunities and constraints within spatial practices. Its industrial history, often viewed as a limiting factor, does not necessarily deter residents from choosing the area as a place to live. Proximity to Paris, only 13 minutes away, and affordability are significant advantages. However, physical barriers such as the railway line and central urban facilities limit connectivity and access across the neighborhood. Residents note: “We have strong industrial activities that shape our community... these features limit our social life and interactions.” A multi-role resident-professional involved in neighborhood management added that the large scale of the ecoquartier complicates active citizen participation, as the size and population increase the complexity of participatory processes. The constraints of location, bounded

by the Seine and neighboring cities Clichy and Saint-Denis, act as barriers to more sustainable urban development. Additional environmental limitations, such as uneven vegetation coverage and a lack of green spaces, reinforce the industrial character and affect residents' quality of life. Recent strategic development plans to incorporate more green space and improve accessibility (Service Planification ..., 2024) indicate efforts to enhance livability. These physical and environmental factors illustrate the complex dynamics of spatial practices in Saint-Ouen, where inherent constraints coexist with opportunities for urban regeneration and social cohesion.

- Social context

The social context plays a critical role in shaping social interactions, cohesion, and overall neighborhood development. It is influenced by project timelines, community history, residents' perceptions, and participatory urban governance practices. For example, a new resident explained: "One reason I moved here was the very rich social life in Saint-Ouen," indicating that social identity can facilitate attachment and support for ecoquartier initiatives. For long-term residents, however, the absence of historical continuity initially limited social participation: "Previously, there was only an industrial environment, so no history to create social ties... the community had to foster dialogue and interaction."

Residents were not involved in early stages of participatory development, which, as a municipal representative noted, rendered the process "consultative rather than participatory." Another expert observed: "Neighborhood management is not fully participatory and requires realistic foresight. The real challenge is that in some areas, residents arrived after residential and public spaces were designed and built." Lack of early involvement often confines participation to consultation or feedback on planned changes, limiting true social cohesion. Historical factors, such as the revival of community gardens, reconnect current residents with the local past. One interviewee noted: "Reviving the community gardens, originally belonging to Alstom factory workers in 1931, provides social potential and attraction today." This heritage creates a shared identity that can strengthen contemporary social interactions.

- Development instruments

Development has been guided through various instruments, including social housing, the main public park, public transport, and the local economy. Each instrument modifies the neighborhood differently, and effectiveness depends on how actors use them within participatory management processes:

- Social Housing: Social mixing through dispersed social housing has created certain inefficiencies. One association member remarked: "The municipality tried to insert social apartments within luxury buildings, and coexistence is not ideal because we can see gaps in living standards... perhaps a cultural difference."

- Public Space: During weekends and holidays, individuals from other parts of the city and neighboring areas use the main park.

User diversity in terms of gender, age, and social class is evident from field observations. However, logistical issues in managing public space, due to multiple municipal actors living and working in the neighborhood, are considered disruptive factors.

- Public Transport: Fast, convenient access to Paris via two metro stations within the neighborhood is commonly cited as a key advantage by participants.

- Local Commerce: Lack of successful local commerce is a concern noted by residents and association members, from "few shops and stores" to "insufficient agricultural products in communal gardens compared to the number of residents." Inactive local commerce is seen as a consequence of unsuccessful developments granted to external investors.

• Features of the participatory process

Participatory management in ecoquartier projects is defined by characteristics such as transparency, inclusivity, complexity, and institutional integration. These features arise from the inherently multi-layered, multi-variable development process, influenced by the large number of stakeholders, phased development, temporal dynamics, limited resources, and ongoing changes in urban fabric, which challenge truly participatory collaboration.

- Transparency and effective communication

Transparency and effective communication are essential for inclusive participatory management, ensuring urban development aligns with community needs. In Saint-Ouen, political actors actively interact with residents through platforms like the Neighborhood Council. As one interviewee explained: "They explain their plans, what they want to do, and listen to residents' questions and concerns," exemplifying direct, transparent dialogue. Another resident noted: "We have the neighborhood map and can see what will be built in five or ten years," reflecting a commitment to transparency. Continuous, clear communication allows residents to respond and influence the allocation of public spaces over time. However, information is not always equally accessible; "not everyone seeks information," limiting participation to a subset of the community.

- Social inclusivity

Inclusivity refers to the active involvement of residents and local actors in decision-making. One association member commented: "This is not exactly a bottom-up system where we are considered in every decision they make. So, when we want to be heard, we are heard. If we say nothing, the municipality proceeds with its plans." While residents' voices are recognized, their influence is often limited. Identifying the role of citizen inclusivity in participatory management timelines can be challenging. A municipal representative noted: "When a large vacant space emerges, like an abandoned industrial site, it's easier to consult residents. But in large projects, especially in early stages with no residents yet, the focus is on quality of life, housing conditions, and amenities, not detailed spatial planning participation." Collective engagement of residents in shaping projects is critical, requiring consensus before technical or financial feasibility is addressed. Often, participation is limited

to consultation on temporary activities rather than structural changes.

- Institutional integration

Integration concerns how different organizations and institutions collaborate in sustainable neighborhood management. For example, the Public Spaces Administration (PTA) maintains public areas and manages solutions, while the municipality only receives reported issues: “We just report issues but don’t manage solutions... this isn’t conflict; it’s a logistical planning and budget matter.” Clearly defined roles require meaningful coordination among municipal departments, associations, and residents to ensure coherent and effective actions. Effective institutional integration relies on coordinated roles and is essential for creating a truly sustainable, livable neighborhood.

- Complexity

Participatory management in ecoquartier projects is inherently complex, shaped by interrelated variables and evolving contexts. A professional explained: “Neighborhood project management in Saint-Ouen is an ongoing, consultative process but not fully participatory. It’s a massive project implemented in phases with a specific operational method.” The scale and phased nature of these projects complicate interaction. Particularly in large urban renewal areas (ZACs), “instead of solving the issues, the main goal of creating a ZAC, more challenges arise.” Municipal experts also emphasized that residents were absent during decision-making, highlighting timing issues and limited scope for real dialogue, often beyond planners’ control due to financial, legal, and administrative constraints (e.g., delayed commercial activation or failed investments). Additionally, gentrification pressures, due to proximity to Paris and limited municipal authority, influence decision-making.

Overall, the complexity of ecoquartier projects arises from dynamic relationships among stakeholders, evolving variables, and the unpredictable nature of urban development, requiring adaptive management to achieve sustainable and inclusive public spaces (Table 1).

Findings

The findings of this study indicate that public spaces in an ecoquartier are not merely the product of initial design or institutional decisions but are continuously shaped through ongoing participation and social reproduction. The case analysis of Saint-Ouen revealed that the agency of residents, local associations, and even everyday practices can gradually alter the quality and functionality of space and influence the social identity of the neighborhood. This outcome goes beyond conventional political patterns and evaluation indicators, emphasizing that true sustainability is achieved only when meaningful, multi-layered resident participation persists over time.

These findings gain particular significance in light of Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the social production of space. Lefebvre emphasized that space is not a neutral container for human activities but a product of power relations, cultural

representations, and everyday practices. Field data from Saint-Ouen showed that neighborhood public spaces are continuously redefined through the interactions among residents, local institutions, and professionals. This process fosters collective initiatives and social cohesion on one hand, while economic forces and processes such as gentrification can lead to unequal resource distribution and reduced genuine participation on the other.

Thus, the innovation of this study lies in highlighting that an ecoquartier is not only an urban policy instrument but also a site of contestation and dialogue regarding the meaning and function of space. The findings contribute theoretically to extending Lefebvre’s understanding of space at the neighborhood scale and carry practical implications for urban planners and municipal managers: the success of ecoquartier projects is ensured only when inclusive and transparent participatory mechanisms activate the social and cultural capacities of residents alongside technical and spatial dimensions.

Conclusion

Successful resident participation in the design and use of public spaces is the result of a dynamic, multi-level process in which interactions among urban institutions, civil associations, and local groups play a decisive role. An ecoquartier is not merely a physical project; it is a socially constructed entity that is continually reproduced. Achieving its sustainability objectives is impossible without genuine participatory mechanisms and the empowerment of local communities.

Consequently, an approach that treats participation as symbolic or purely instrumental cannot guarantee social-spatial sustainability. As a municipal representative noted regarding Saint-Ouen: “The process is more consultative and reactive to existing conditions than participatory from the initial design stage.” This is rooted in the neighborhood’s development on an industrial site without initial inhabitants and is further reinforced by other challenges, including:

- The large scale of the neighborhood and physical limitations of internal and external development due to central urban facilities and limited adjacency;
- Lack of social cohesion caused by phased demographic structure development and pronounced differences in social, cultural, and economic characteristics of residents;
- Transformation of social fabric and gentrification resulting from conflicting municipal policies over time and the influence of proximity to Paris.

The effectiveness of participatory strategies in creating sustainable neighborhoods heavily depends on contextual, institutional, and social factors that evolve over time. The participatory management mechanism is characterized by dynamic interaction among diverse actors, residents, associations, municipal authorities, and experts, whose roles and influence vary according to the project development stage. This process is inherently complex, shaped by spatial and social

Table 1. Field findings of the study based on components of participatory management. Source: Authors.

Actors, components, and characteristics of participatory management		Roles and impacts in participatory management of a sustainable neighborhood
Actors involved in the social production of space	Individual agency; community members	Inherently relative effects related to personal characteristics such as age, social background, and cultural context
	Social agency; associations	Limited effect due to membership basis and representation of social classes and specific groups of residents
	Institutional agency; municipality and local authorities	Transformative effect through direct or indirect approaches, policies, and urban management decisions
	Professional agency; experts	Both transformative and facilitative depending on expertise and technical assistance
Components of social production of space	Spatial context	weakening or strengthening effect depending on the potentials and limitations of a specific urban environment and design/management policies
	Social context	weakening or strengthening effect depending on project timeline, community history, residents' perceptions, and participatory management practices
	Development instruments	Direct or indirect effect depending on how actors utilize social housing, public spaces, public transport, and local commerce
	Transparency and communication	Relative effect depending on individual willingness to seek information and the activity of communication platforms such as the Conseil de Quartier and websites
	Social inclusiveness	Direct or indirect effect depending on individual and institutional willingness to participate, as well as project context and timeline
	Institutional integration	Direct or indirect effect depending on roles and coordinated relations among different agencies
	Complexity	Indirect effect depending on dynamic relations among stakeholders, project timeline, and financial, legal, and administrative dimensions of projects

contexts, community history, and institutional arrangements that impact the social production of space.

A key insight from the Saint-Ouen case study is that the success of participatory management depends on transparent, continuous, and inclusive processes that genuinely integrate residents' voices from the earliest stages and adapt to inevitable contextual transformations, such as gentrification. Even seemingly minor developments, such as changes in the proportion of social housing, can fundamentally alter the demographic structure and reduce residents' agency in participatory processes.

Implementing a national ideal or policy at the local scale introduces logistical complexities, a natural outcome of the multiplicity of actors and development control schemes. In Saint-Ouen, the municipality functions as a coordinator among residents (both individual and collective), specialized organizations such as the PTA and Sequano, and private actors including developers. Accordingly, participatory management in ecoquartier projects is understood as a continuous, multi-layered process, and ensuring the long-term success of these neighborhoods requires a holistic approach integrating social, spatial, and institutional dimensions.

Nevertheless, the findings challenge a key assumption: "The

success of public spaces such as parks and community gardens represents tangible and symbolic indicators of successful participatory approaches." In Saint-Ouen, challenges such as socio-economic inequalities, logistical constraints, political orientations, and inherent project limitations have often reduced participation to stage-wise consultation rather than genuine engagement. Through development instruments such as social housing and Neighborhood Council meetings, partial and relative participation is achieved. However, the success of public spaces like the park is undeniable based on observations and interviews. This suggests that public spaces, as components of a large-scale urban project, can reflect the flourishing of social life enabled by municipal and professional support, yet this does not necessarily confirm the realization of full citizen participation in an ecoquartier project.

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Endnotes

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1. In French, Quartier means neighborhood; Ecoquartier can thus be translated as "sustainable neighborhood."
2. Ville durable

3. Jardin commune
4. Label ÉcoQuartier: a technical and social mechanism launched in 2012 to encourage, support, and promote urban development projects aiming to comply with national policy, from standard creation to implementation (Fenker, 2022: 231).
5. ZAC (Zone d'Aménagement Concerté), translated as "coordinated development zone," a designated area where urban planning and development are collectively coordinated by public authorities and developers to promote organized growth, infrastructure, and land use.
6. PLUi (Plan Local d'Urbanisme intercommunal), a strategic urban planning document prepared jointly by multiple municipalities providing

- a framework for spatial development, land use, and infrastructure policy at the intercommunal level.
7. SCOT (Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale), a regional coherence plan serving as a reference framework for inter-municipal policy design and implementation.
8. Associations play a multifaceted and essential role in achieving environmental, social, and economic sustainability in neighborhoods, often including residents, local stakeholders, environmental groups, and professionals.
9. Gentrification: the transformation of a neighborhood from lower to higher value, often resulting from urban renewal programs that rapidly elevate a district's status.

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