

# STRENGTHENING SOCIAL TIES IN VULNERABLE CITIES

By **Jean-Christophe Levassor**,  
Director of La Condition Publique



La Condition Publique - ©Julien Pitinome

Jean-Christophe Levassor is director of La Condition Publique, a cultural center in the Le Pile neighborhood of Roubaix, a large town in northern France located on the border with Belgium. He started his career at the Chaillot-Théâtre National in Paris before being appointed administrator of the Centre Dramatique National in Nancy. In 2008, he joined the French Ministry of Culture as head of the public service broadcasting bureau. Two years later he returned to a more locally based focus with his appointment as head of culture for the Lille metropolitan authority. In 2016 he was appointed to head La Condition Publique.

## KEYWORDS

- INDUSTRIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS
- SOCIAL TIES
- CULTURE

Le Pile in east Roubaix has been particularly hard-hit by the industrial and financial crisis. Over 40% of the neighborhood's residents live under the poverty line (€642 a month for a person living alone). Social divisions are clear to see and recreating spaces where people can interact and make contact with each other is a key challenge in building resilience for the future. These social divisions will become worse without a proactive policy to combat them, and may be further exacerbated by the digital revolution. If nothing is done to restore harmonious co-existence in the community, positive initiatives such as urban farming and zero waste will never have an effect beyond a limited circle of insiders.

Located in this deprived neighborhood, La Condition Publique is a creative laboratory at the crossroad between art, culture and the imperatives of urban renewal and sustainability. Its aim is to recreate ties and spaces between different actors across the territory – residents, nonprofits, businesses, etc. – to support urban renovation and foster resilience.

## INTRODUCTION

*For many years Roubaix has been forced to deal with the devastating fallout of rapid deindustrialization across the region combined with the effects of the economic crisis. Rates of unemployment and poverty spiked sharply and, despite considerable efforts, the town has been unable to fully shake off the effects of the violent economic upheaval.*

*Some neighborhoods were particularly hard-hit, and Le Pile in particular remains very badly affected. In 2011, median taxable household income in Roubaix was €9,641, compared to €17,985 for the metropolitan authority area as a whole. The crisis caused by deindustrialization undermined social ties and harmonious co-existence in the community.*

*One of the key challenges is to find new ways to renovate and improve resilience in places like this. This is what La Condition Publique hopes to achieve in Le Pile, taking a fresh and innovative approach that brings economic, social and cultural projects together under one roof. La Condition Publique exists above all to revive ties between local people by providing a space that combines exhibitions, workspaces, community spaces and social experiments.*

## 1. LA CONDITION PUBLIQUE: A SOCIAL INNOVATION LABORATORY FOR REBUILDING SOCIAL TIES

### LE PILE: A NEIGHBORHOOD RAVAGED BY DEINDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Le Pile is a neighborhood in the east of Roubaix whose blue-collar architectural heritage is a legacy of the region's textile industry. Le Pile felt the full impact of the crisis, symbolized by the closure of the dye works and the former La Condition Publique, originally a textile storage and packing facility. The industrial crisis plunged the town and Le Pile into a critical economic and social situation. Housing in the district deteriorated while many of its inhabitants live in poverty and even extreme poverty.

In this context, urban renovation policies are particularly difficult to implement. For example, the moribund housing market means that renovations to the area's degraded housing stock, initiated by the publicly owned local development corporation, cost significantly more than the market value of the houses in question.

However, Le Pile can rely on its young population (50% of Le Pile's inhabitants are less than 30 years old) and its large ecosystem of non-profit organizations. Against this background, La Condition Publique aims to revitalize the neighborhood and recreate social ties by providing a space for the community, exhibitions and work, and playing a part in re-imagining public policies for urban renovation and resilience.

### GENESIS OF A UNIQUE SPACE IN ROUBAIX

Located in a building that symbolizes the legacy of the textile industry, La Condition Publique is a cultural center that opened as part of the lille2004 program, celebrating Lille's role as the 2004 European Capital of Culture.

First impressions are that the site has a number of drawbacks: it is huge and therefore difficult to redevelop, its budget is far smaller than the norm for an organization of its type, and it is geographically distant from the town center where most arts activities are clustered.

Danser Danser ! by Bon Esprit- ©La Condition Publique



**“THE AIM IS TO REVITALIZE THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND RECREATE SOCIAL TIES, PLAYING A PART IN RE-IMAGINING PUBLIC POLICIES FOR URBAN RENOVATION AND RESILIENCE.”**

The venue received a new lease on life in 2016, backed by a clear and powerful ambition: turn La Condition Publique into an interface between economic development policies and cultural policies. One of the biggest hurdles was getting people from the arts and business sectors to work together on common projects, given that they generally have very different outlooks, timescales and ways of working. We felt it was important to have a space where possibilities of working together, and the desire to do so, could coalesce around issues of urban renewal and social and environmental innovation. These issues have formed the subject of joint projects.

### A SPACE FOR WORKING, EXHIBITING AND THE COMMUNITY

La Condition Publique has therefore become a creative laboratory at the intersection between art, culture and issues of urban renewal and sustainability. The center actively seeks to promote hybridization of models and to consolidate a cross-disciplinary approach by fostering cooperation between stakeholders.

Our work at La Condition Publique centers on three main fields:

- **a space for exhibitions and performance** divided into two seasons each with a showpiece exhibition (see Habitarium, below) and an entertainment event every weekend;
- **a space for social innovation and creation** focused on the cultural economy. Aiming to create the conditions for shared projects to emerge, La Condition Publique provides artists' studios, co-working spaces and a fablab with shared tools. Thus, it acts as an incubator for people with projects in arts, design and social innovation. This helps to create an ecosystem of actors engaged with social innovation in fields such as food, housing and social citizenship;
- **a heritage community space open to all.** La Condition Publique also hosts a farmers' market, cookery workshops and guided tours of historical sites. We encourage people to visit the site as this in turn promotes encounters.

In 2017, La Condition Publique welcomed 140,000 visitors, up from 80,000 in 2015. Its growth is therefore fast.



## BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER AROUND A SHARED THEME: THE HABITARIUM EXHIBITION



Habitarium -29 March 2018 - ©Maxime Dufour

For its spring 2018 Habitarium exhibition, La Condition Publique worked with a number of partners active in urban planning and housing, including Réseau Alliances, Fondation Abbé Pierre, Fabrique des Quartiers (publicly owned local development corporation), architects and designers, to form a multi-disciplinary committee in charge of creating an exhibition that established a dialog between their different projects and visions. The exhibition featured largescale works alongside designers' projects, large pieces for kids to play with and even rooftop camping courtesy of a nonprofit called Yes We Camp.

As part of its outreach work for the exhibition, La Condition Publique initiated a project that saw journalism students and local young people work together to produce photo and video content on the theme of housing. The results were also exhibited. This exhibition perfectly encapsulates La Condition Publique's aims and working method. It is all about bringing together, within the same physical space, the results of theoretical and practical work undertaken by the full set of urban stakeholders, working together on topics that involve them all and giving them an opportunity to talk to each other, which is often lacking.

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La Condition Publique also runs a series of broad-based food projects, focused on three topics:

- **putting consumers in touch with local producers** thanks to the farmers' market, something that was missing in the neighborhood because local shops have closed;
- **educating people about food quality** through workshops for parents and children and a participatory festival where children cook and are taught about choosing ingredients;
- **encouraging locals to get involved** so that they take ownership of the issues, thanks to an educational garden on the rooftop and interventions by artists.

### CONTRIBUTING TO LOCAL POLICIES

La Condition Publique collaborates with other public bodies to participate in the wider economic and social development of the region. For example, as part of a major redevelopment project, Fabrique du Quartier was obliged to demolish some dilapidated houses. Programs like this usually take time to complete and houses are often boarded up, which is detrimental to the general atmosphere in a neighborhood. So the decision was taken to turn the site into a temporary city vegetable garden as a way of encouraging local people to become involved in the redevelopment process. La Condition Publique collaborated with Fabrique du Quartier to involve designers, who helped create the Jardin du Bonheur (Happiness Garden). Later, when we held an exhibition of street art, we staged it to run through the garden as a way of honoring the work that locals had put in.

In a similar vein, we asked Fabrique du Quartier to make a house available to an artist prior to demolition so that it could be used to create a largescale artwork. This allowed local residents to view their neighborhood in a new way, with a sense of pride replacing the unsettled anxiety more usually encountered.

Although our actions are very locally focused, we know that that alone is not enough to reach our target audience. We have to develop a national reputation if we are to encourage local people to take more of an interest in what we do, because at the local level La Condition Publique remains relatively unknown. The street art exhibition attracted big names and national media coverage, with 50,000 visitors coming to see it. It was a springboard that made many locals aware of La Condition Publique for the first time.



La rue couverte - ©La Condition Publique



Visit by President Emmanuel Macron - 13 November 2017 - ©La Condition Publique

## 2. OUTLOOK AND CHALLENGES FOR RAMPING UP THE IMPACT OF LA CONDITION PUBLIQUE

### FINANCIAL CHALLENGE

Finance is the biggest hurdle. La Condition Publique currently operates with a budget of €3 million. This comes from three main sources: public funding for running costs, subsidies for specific projects and, to a lesser extent, income from our activities (co-productions, ticket sales, bar, etc.) The current change in public subsidy policy, from subsidizing running costs to a project-by-project model, poses a real difficulty for La Condition Publique because we have very significant running costs that are generally not covered by project subsidies.

However, one of the strengths of La Condition Publique is its ability to find funding from unconventional sources, not just the usual arts funders, thanks to the wider social and environmental contributions it makes. For example, the “(Se)cultiver program” won a national food award from the Ministry of Agriculture.

### EMBEDDING OUR CENTER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND LOCAL MOBILIZATION

Raising awareness among local people remains a real challenge because they are all too often convinced that this is not a venue for them. Social media is undeniably an effective tool, but it always talks to the same people. If we are to convince local people that La Condition Publique is also a community space for them, we need to develop a highly proactive approach to reaching out to them, making sure that we know how to build projects with local nonprofit organizations. This is why the staff at La Condition Publique all understand the importance of local outreach to convince people to visit the place and make it their own.

### UNDERSTANDING HOW TO CONSTRUCT INITIATIVES WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

It is necessary to increase the number of partnerships with businesses. This process starts by making the work we do at

La Condition Publique more accessible to economic players across the region. It is vital that we gain a better insight into their situations and become involved in co-developing experiments. Our community fablab, for example, is supported by Orange and Leroy Merlin which is involved in DIY project. Aside from traditional sponsorship, we have for example been working with Sergic, a housing manager, on a program of artists in residence in large housing blocks as a way to reinvent social ties in these spaces.

## CONCLUSION

*Le Pile, a neighborhood particularly hard-hit by the crisis in the textile industry, was for years caught in a downward spiral of economic decline and rising social difficulties. In order to halt this decline and create the conditions for greater future resilience, La Condition Publique creates connections between economic development policies and cultural policies. The organization seeks to rebuild social ties around a space for the community, for work and exhibitions by bringing together businesses, nonprofit organizations, artists and residents to work on issues of concern to all. La Condition Publique proactively engages with local people to change the way they look on their surroundings and make them stakeholders in revitalizing their neighborhood.*