Removing Paris’ périphérique ring road: towards more sustainable and desirable lifestyles?

Ongoing research

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In the run-up to the 2020 Paris municipal elections, many proposals and claims are being made on the future of the périphérique, the 35 km ring road around Paris: removing it, redesigning it as a main road with traffic lights, turning it into green spaces, creating several dedicated lanes to promote different modes of transport, etc. The Mobile Lives Forum wanted to explore the option of totally removing it. What problems would its removal pose at the Parisian, metropolitan and regional level? Under what conditions could this removal be part of a transition towards more desirable and sustainable lifestyles? And therefore, what should we make of the proposals made in the municipal elections campaign?

Research participants

PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOP URBAN PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Removing the périphérique is a topical issue for a number of reasons (environmental problems, noise, visual pollution; urban divide; questioning the place of such a big highway that symbolizes an all-car ideology that is now obsolete, etc.). Yet, our Post-Car study revealed how people in the Ile-de-France region are heavily dependent on cars, and unevenly so depending on whether they live in Paris, the suburbs, or periurban and rural areas, etc. This is the case even though there is a greater fragmentation of public policies, that strongly call into question the place of cars in Paris, while neglecting the other spaces of Ile-de-France.

The research, conducted by a group of students from the University of Paris 1, will strive to break away from this center-periphery duality and question the effects of removing the périphérique ring road on the various territorial levels at play (Paris, suburbs, Ile-de-France, and even national and international), through two questions:

**What are the current uses of the périphérique and what problems would its removal pose on the realization of these uses?**

What are the uses of the périphérique (distribution of traffic in space and time, patterns...)?
What spatial scales are involved in transit trips through the périphérique? What lifestyles do these journeys allow? What travel problems would the removal of the périphérique pose for its current users, whether they live in Paris, in its suburbs, or in the periurban spaces of Ile-de-France?

**Under what conditions can the removal of the périphérique be part of the transition to desired and sustainable lifestyles?**

The project will consider two levers to enable a more sustainable and desirable mobility: modal shift and avoidance.

Regarding modal shift, the project will investigate to what extent and under what conditions the removal of the périphérique could lead to a decrease in the number of cars throughout Ile-de-France and cause people to use their car less in favor of public transport, walking, cycling, etc.

Avoidance: the research hypothesizes that the removal of the périphérique could be accompanied by a reconfiguration of people’s mobility practices (daily, weekly, etc.) allowing for a decrease in the number of trips and a more localized lifestyle. What land planning issues does this imply in the various territories at play (Paris, neighboring suburban towns, greater suburbs and periurban areas)? For example, could we reorganize how people commute by reconfiguring employment zones?
The research also aims to imagine solutions for car trips that currently use the périphérique and can’t be avoided or shifted onto other modes of transport. The goal will be to identify and correct potential adverse effects, such as the transfer of vehicles that use the périphérique onto surrounding streets and the consequences of this on the lives of local inhabitants (nuisances, reconfiguration of their own habits...).

Based on these investigations, students will imagine different scenarios in which the removal of the périphérique could be part of the transition to desired and sustainable lifestyles. These scenarios will be pitted against the lifestyles and desires of people who currently use the périphérique and of people who live nearby, through semi-structured interviews.

Finally, the various proposals for the future of the périphérique that have been debated during the Paris municipal elections will be critically analyzed in light of this work. This will include questioning the different visions of the city, of the Parisian metropolis (centre/periphery relationship...), of the place of mobility in people’s lifestyles, of cars in the trips that underlie these different proposals and the reactions they elicit. In the end, are these proposals part of a transition to more sustainable and desirable lifestyles, moving towards less travel, more proximity, less pollution, etc.?

**Preliminary results**

The first stage of this work was to establish an overview of the proposals for the future of the périphérique ring road and to assess its current uses and the spaces and people that are most dependent on it.

**Proposals for the future of the périphérique**

In recent years, several works have been published on the question of the périphérique’s future. In a 2016 report, the Paris Workshop on Urban Planning (Atelier Parisien d’Urbanisme, or APUR) proposed measures aimed at reducing the divide caused by the périphérique ring road, by developing crossings and green spaces to create a form of landscape continuity. In 2018, the Metropolitan Forum of Greater Paris (Forum Métropolitain du Grand Paris, or FMGP) worked on the future of mobility in the Ile-de-France region and called for the périphérique to be turned into an urban boulevard. The proposed measures aim to reduce the prominence afforded to cars and promote public transport and soft mobilities, as part of a broader thought-process that isn’t limited to Paris and includes the périphérique inside of the metropolitan area. Finally, the Paris Region Institute (Institut Paris Région, or IPR, formerly IAU) claims that a transformation of the périphérique into an urban boulevard is too complex in the short term, for economic and logistical reasons (cost of work, managing the rerouted traffic). Instead, the Institute
proposes measures to lower speed limits on the périphérique, reduce the amount of single-person car occupancy and promote public transport.

As part of the municipal elections campaign, political actors have also taken up these issues. Following the presentation by the Paris Council of their report on the Information and Evaluation Mission for the future of the périphérique, the City of Paris proposes several avenues for action. Citizens, cyclists and pedestrians want to reduce noise and air pollution and bridge urban divides, while the users of the périphérique are more concerned with issues of congestion. The City of Paris thus proposes to change the périphérique into an urban boulevard by 2050, with calm traffic, reserved lanes for carpooling, public transport and clean vehicles.

In government, the consensus seems to be settling around the proposal of regulating traffic speeds. As for right-wing politicians, they overwhelmingly support the project to cover the périphérique in order to mitigate the urban disruption created by the infrastructure and allow for the construction of housing. The green party’s proposals also favor transforming the périphérique into an urban boulevard with traffic lights, a 50km/h speed limit, dedicated lanes for soft mobilities, the development of public transport, bike paths and pedestrian spaces. Some MODEM officials propose closing some of the périphérique’s gates (called Portes). Gaspard Gantzer, a candidate in the Paris municipal elections, is the only one to call for the total removal of the périphérique, in addition to the development of bike lanes throughout Greater Paris.

These proposals will be the subject of a critical analysis at the end of the research in light of the forecasting exercise conducted in axis 2.

Assessment of the périphérique

The 35-kilometre-long périphérique ring road is the busiest urban road in Europe, with 1.2 million vehicles a day, representing 40% of all traffic in Paris. By analyzing the data from the 2010 Global Transport Survey (Enquête Globale Transport, or EGT), we can identify three main types of trips using the périphérique. First, there are short trips that allow people to reach neighboring or nearby towns, especially in the north-eastern suburbs, between Montreuil, Pantin, Le Pré-Saint-Gervais and the 20th arrondissement. These are the least numerous overall due to the presence of alternate roads or modal alternatives (tramway, RER). The second type of trip is the most common: the “bypass trip” which people make to reach a place on the other side of Paris. And finally, the périphérique can be used as part of a longer route connecting urban poles located on the outskirts (Roissy-en-France, Versailles, Chessy, Nanterre, etc.).

The areas that border the périphérique are the most dependent
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In 2010, only 20% of people using the périphérique lived in Paris. Nearly 80% resided in other departments of the Ile-de-France region. Half of all users of the périphérique lived in the inner suburbs (called petite couronne, i.e. the first ring of suburbs around Paris); indeed, they constituted the main starting point (47%) and main destination (48%) of all trips using it. Furthermore, a quarter of all trips using the périphérique started and ended within these inner suburbs.

The areas most dependent on the périphérique are those that border it, both inside or outside Paris’ city limits; this is particularly the case for the the north-east of Paris (19th arrondissement, Montreuil, Bagnolet, Romainville): most journeys using the périphérique originate from one of these areas. The périphérique is however far less important for trips originating in the outer suburbs (less than 1% of trips that originate in the outer suburbs use it).

In addition to analyzing the Global Transport Survey data, the students developed a tool for modeling journeys in Ile-de-France using Google Maps. This analysis confirms the first results: it shows that Paris and its inner suburbs are the most dependent on the périphérique. Indeed, when requesting from Google Maps an itinerary originating or ending in Paris or neighboring towns, the app overwhelmingly suggests taking the périphérique. However, the people who live or work in these areas can more readily benefit from public transport alternatives than the residents of more distant municipalities.

The users of the périphérique

Three-quarters of all drivers on the périphérique are men. Furthermore, the most advantaged socio-professional categories and intermediate occupations (executives and higher intellectual professions, artisans/traders/business leaders) are over-represented among users. This is also the case for manual workers; they make longer journeys (67 minutes on average) than executives (51 minutes on average), with the latter tending to make short trips (sometimes bypass trips) between arrondissements in Paris and/or the neighboring suburbs; indeed, analyzing their trips reveals a clear triangle linking the 15th and 16th arrondissements in the south, La Défense in the west and the 17th arrondissement in the north. Meanwhile, manual workers make trips that are more spatially spread out, originating mainly in northern and eastern suburbs and going to more distant poles (Créteil, the 16th arrondissement, Clichy, etc.). These results confirm the overall dynamics of Paris’ metropolitan area, with workers residing in the north and east and executives living in the west closer to their workplace.
The périphérique, a divisive infrastructure

While the périphérique helps motorized residents of Ile-de-France to get around, it severely hinders pedestrians and cyclists who want to cross it. Indeed, it constitutes a fracture between the spaces that border it on both sides, a divide that is more or less permeable depending on how the gates are built. An index measuring how divisive each gate is was developed based on three indicators: the presence of a multimodal transport service, pedestrian and cycling permeability, and the coherence of the gate’s landscape, architecture and functioning.

In the north of Paris, the area between two neighboring gates - Porte de la Chapelle and Porte de Clignancourt - constitutes a strong barrier between Paris and the suburbs, where low-rent housing projects have been developed since the 1930s and, more recently since the 2010s, informal camps have emerged. Conversely, another gate called Porte Dorée, with the Bois de Vincennes park, showcases great continuity between the areas either side of the périphérique, thanks to the ring road being underground and a gradual transition from city to green spaces. Some roads, such as Daumesnil Avenue and the Planted Promenade, are Parisian gateways to the park.

Results are expected in April 2020.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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