

Modern Heritage at the heart of a territorial
innovation project:
The case study of Le Corbusier University Campus in
Firminy (France)
ISMAHAN HAMZAOUJ⁸⁷

Among the seventeen properties of the Architectural Work of Le Corbusier registered as UNESCO World Heritage sites since 2016, the Corbusian site in Firminy (Loire department, France) reveals a strong mobilization dynamic of local actors around the UNESCO labelling, thus marking the start of a structured approach to territorial resource stimulation. Local actors (political and associative) have taken advantage of the project's momentum, generated by the UNESCO application process, to work in partnership with the University of Saint-Etienne on an innovation and territorial development project. This innovation project was materialized by the creation of 'Le Corbusier University Campus' at the top of the modern heritage building of the 'Unité d'Habitation' in Firminy. The new university campus was inaugurated in 2012.

The resulting creation of 'Le Corbusier University Campus' reflected local desire to address the inequalities that affected the Le Corbusier heritage site, on the one hand – particularly the 'Unité d'Habitation' which has accumulated a threefold

⁸⁷ Université Clermont Auvergne (France).

vulnerability (both technical, social and symbolic) – and the small city of Firminy and its inter-municipal territory, which have endured, and are still enduring, the consequences of the deindustrialization crisis, on the other. Today, Firminy concentrates precarious situations and both economic and social weaknesses: poverty, unemployment, concentration of families in difficulty, under-qualification of young people, etc. The city is still losing its inhabitants.

In this context, local stakeholders are trying to provide a new approach to solving several social and economic challenges and territorial attractiveness stakes through a social innovation project. Their initiative is based on a particular system of local governance, which is characterized by the cooperation between several stakeholders, including: the municipality (which owns the top of the 'Unité d'Habitation'), the inter-municipality, the University of Saint-Etienne and the 'Residents Association of the Unité d'Habitation of Firminy'.

The objective of this project is to improve the reputation of the 'Unité d'habitation' and the city of Firminy. The University Campus project aims to reconcile the local society with Le Corbusier's heritage through the students, seen as possible ambassadors, able to make the inhabitants more conscious of that modern heritage value and to involve them in its artistic and cultural dynamic.

Moreover, the establishment of this University Campus in Firminy is also considered as an undeniable opportunity for the territory in relation to the attractiveness and the economic momentum that it may engender. This territorial innovation project is then perceived as an initiative which can lead to a territorial development process, mainly in consideration of the multidimensional stakes (both economic, social and cultural) that the University Campus project embodies.

However, our field survey conducted between 2017 and 2019 showed the changing position of the municipality in this

territorial innovation project. The main reason that can explain the decrease in the municipality involvement is related to the removal of the 'Unité d'Habitation' of Firminy from the World Heritage nomination process. In fact, the involvement degree of some stakeholders, such as the municipality, is proportional to the intensity of the stakes and the challenges related to the heritage site. In this case study, since the 'Unité d'Habitation' of Firminy has not been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, the municipality has preferred to focus its efforts on the enhancement of 'La Maison de la Culture' in Firminy which, unlike the 'Unité d'Habitation', has been inscribed on the World Heritage List since 2016.

Despite the decrease of the municipality engagement for the development of this territorial innovation project, Le Corbusier University Campus has actually resulted in positive impact on the social perception of the 'Unité d'Habitation' by local residents. The cultural and artistic activities organized by the 'Residents Association of the Unité d'Habitation of Firminy' in direct cooperation with the students have brought the local population closer to the 'Unité d'Habitation' and have increased their awareness of this heritage. The question that arises in this case is about the possibility of this territorial innovation project to lead to a territorial development process based only on the active role of the students and the Residents Association in developing this innovation project.

This communication aims to interrogate the heritage-territory-innovation triptych through the exploration of the territorial conditions and mechanisms that guide the construction of innovation, in addition to questioning modalities of governance and associated territorial interactions. Also, it proposes to highlight the constraints that may influence their bonds. Finally, this contribution aims to show how the phenomenon of stakes' temporality and the conditions of creation of Le Corbusier University Campus in Firminy related to the UNESCO labelling,

would be able to trigger change in the logics of local stakeholders and to weaken the mechanism of an innovation approach that may lead to territorial development.