

## «The Franco-Spanish Mediterranean Strip. An Opportunity to Turn Applied Research into Trans-Border Planning»

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**Paper** submitted to:

«Game Changer: Planning for Just and Sustainable Urban Regions»

Congress of the Association for European Schools of Planning (AESOP)  
Sciences Po, Paris, July 2024

on its [track n°4](#): «Borders. Transboundary planning for sustainability and cohesion»

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with an ongoing procedure to establish a transboundary partnership between two institutions at both sides of the Mediterranean Franco-Spanish border, between Région Occitanie (in France) and Catalonia (in Spain). It presents, on one hand, a range of methodological issues that try to link teaching, practice, and research, in order to produce applied architecture and planning according to research standards. On the other, it proposes a series of specific actions to be made, both at an institution level (such as the creation of double degrees) and from a thematic approach (such as the exploration of mid-density urban patterns). These could, by responding to the specific problems of this bi-national territory, serve as design and methodological guidelines for wider actions, such as transboundary planning.

word count: 125 words

### **Keywords**

Trans-boundary, Pyrénées-Méditerranée, Applied Research, Architecture, Planning

## 1. Introduction

Is it feasible to establish common planning strategies, with the aim of preserving the identity and evolution of a common territory, between two different countries in a trans-border situation? In this text, we will try to respond to this issue through the particular example of the region assembling the Mediterranean shores of South-East France (in the Région Occitanie), and those of North-East Spain (in Catalonia).

After describing the geographical particularities of this bi-national region, summarizing its main problems and potentialities, we will propose a particular methodology of work that assembles research, teaching, and practice, and that will lead to the completion of pilot-projects; these will allow, further on, a planning initiative at a larger scale. We will, as well, illustrate the whole picture with the partial results of our ongoing scientific and pedagogic activity, developed in this context.

## 2. Geographical definition

If it were a geographical tentative of definition, the territory we aim to treat can be described through four different types of limits. Two of them would be physically equivalent, and correspond to the deltas of the two main rivers that drain the Alps, in France (the Rhône) and the Pyrenees, on its Spanish southern slope (the Ebro).

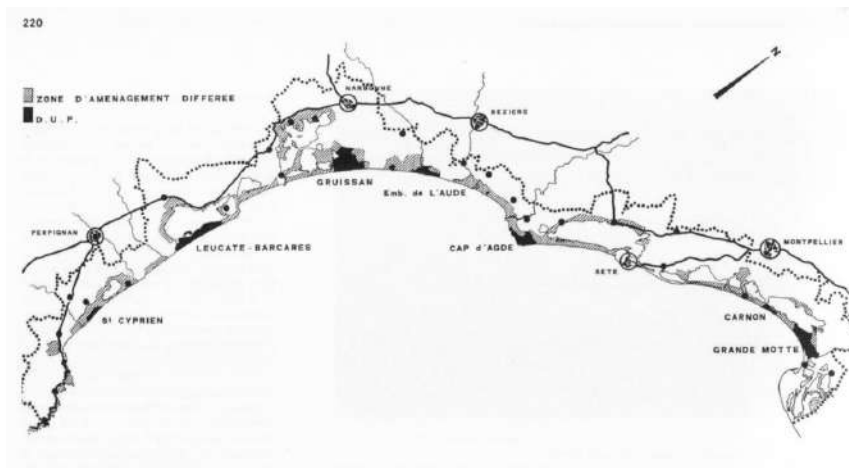


**Figure 1:** definition of the Eurorégion Pyrénées-Méditerranée (Midi-Pyrénées and Languedoc-Roussillon formed together later on, in 2015, the Région Occitanie) (source: Eurorégion Pyrénées-Méditerranée)

Dividing this 600 km. long coast line, the Pyrennees (that would be our third internal boundary) come to meet the sea in Port Bou, as an imposing perpendicular barrier with the last spurs of the Sierra de Les Alberes; they establish as well, and at its watershed, the administrative border between both countries. The fourth limit of this coastal strip becomes more diffuse, but could be assimilated, inland, to a shore plain of irregular size, always backed up by a secondary mountain range running parallel to the sea; at some points raising very close to the water (like the double Cordillera Pre-Litoral and Litoral in Catalonia), and, at some other moments a bit further away (like La Montagne Noire, or Les Cévennes, in Occitanie).

Most of the coastline in the French sector is occupied by large lagoons (around Sète, Narbonne, or Perpignan) which are less frequent in the Spanish side (deltas of Ebro and Llobregat, and at the Empordà, close to the border), that in all appears to be more abrupt and rocky. Concerning urban areas, we will find two different sizes of cities. On the one hand, and at the Northern and Southern limits, the metropolitan areas of Montpellier and Barcelona, that, although very far from being equal in size and character, contain similar problems and situations... They will thus be considered as equivalent fields of experimentation for us, since, as well, they are the cities that host both our research institutions.

On the other hand, there exist a series of small size province cities, such as (listed from North to South) Béziers, Narbonne, Perpignan, Girona, and Tarragona, which, as the biggest cities, have an adequate balance of similarities and differences between them, able to be used in comparative exercises. Regarding the climate, although there exist slight variations due to latitude, we can consider its range to respond, at both sides of the Pyrennees, to a similar pattern, that would depend basically on the position regarding the cross section of the territory: with a high influence of the sea when close to the shore (in temperature and humidity), and a progressive more continental behaviour when approaching the backline mountain ranges. In many senses, our territory can be assimilated to what Alberto MAGNAGHI



**Figure 2:** The mediterranean arch of the Région Occitanie, as drawn by the authors of the 'Mission Racine' (source : archives départementales de l'Hérault)

has called a «bio-region» (MAGNAGHI, 2014), with quite homogeneous geographical, economical, and social issues, that transcend administrative cutting of the nations, and even the regions, that it is formed with.

### 3. Problems and opportunities of the trans-border region

This context has been recognized by the European Union with the creation of the EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation) called «Eurorégion Pyrénées-Méditerranée». Although this administrative structure has allowed a number of opportunities (such as described in VICENTE, 2021), its border, nowadays, still lacks of porosity and relations. Especially if compared with northern European cases, like those, for example, separating Germany from France (in Strasbourg) or Switzerland (in Basel), or Belgium from France (in Lille).

This resistance to a further integration can be explained by a range of different reasons. These would go from the mostly agricultural and natural character of the lands close to the border (as opposed to the cases just mentioned) to the distance between the main cities; and, probably and as pointed by certain authors (De KEMMETER, 2024), a certain distrust of the Région Occitanie towards the much more dynamic Catalonia. But the main difficulty nowadays still has to do with infrastructure; although the french A9 and the Spanish AP7 can be considered, together, as a very efficient main axis of the European highway network, a critical funnel persists in the rail lines between Perpignan and Montpellier. This sector is nowadays the only portion of a cross-european corridor, sparing from Seville to Hamburg where trains cannot run with high speed standards, and the



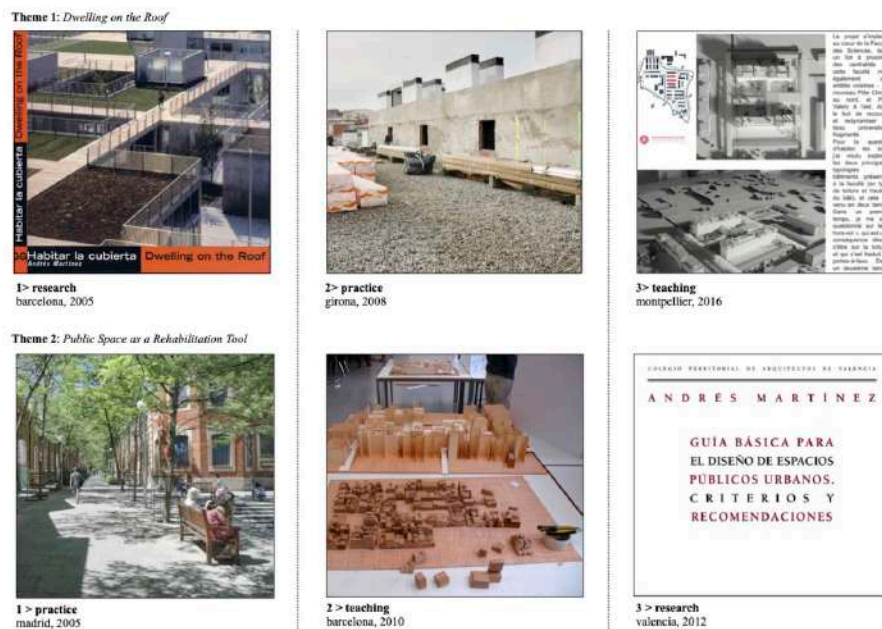
**Figure 3:** several of our activities over the last years have been centered in explaining at the other side of the border the issues of the euro-region, as with this image of Port-Leucate for a conference in Barcelona (source: the authors)

accomplishment of the LNMP («*Ligne Nouvelle Montpellier-Perpignan*») is not planned to be finished before 2035, as earliest.

Concerning teaching and research, bi-national regional movement is almost non-existent, with the exception of some punctual collaborations in the fields of medicine, agronomy, or law. No visible cooperation appears, neither, on planning nor urbanism at a certain scale, except those cases linked with very practical issues close to the border line. However, common problematics arise in all the fields, that we think would be easier, and more logical, to treat and solve in cooperation.

### 3. Disciplinary issues

As architects and planners, we believe that many of our current challenges cannot be furthermore addressed in a classical way. This affects both methodology we use for working (that tends to be more collaborative, and further anchored to research), and the subjects we treat: these have now the necessity to be linked with major crucial issues, such as the impact of climate change in our territories. This is why we consider this trans-boundary context, with its high quality but also extremely fragile landscapes, and with its range of cities showing all of today's problematics, to be an opportunity full of potential for experiencing new protocols for acting as designers.



**Figure 4:** different orders tested for the place of teaching in the «Applied Research Triangle», as presented in Westminster in 2019 (source: the authors)

We propose to update, at this occasion, the theories of «Research by Design» (established mostly by the english school of thought around applied arts) to nourish our practice from research and teaching activities. According to RUST (2007, 48),

*«(...) the history of another field [of knowledge] is instructive. Medical research in the modern era began with the study of pathology in the 19th century. However that effort offered few if any 'cures' and it was only in the 1940's that a century of scientific effort began to be translated into practical progress for doctoring. At that point a new discipline of clinical research arose to provide the tools for innovation in medicine but it was a severe challenge to the medical schools of the day, and posed new ethical and intellectual questions that took decades to answer. We are so used to today's culture of clinical research that it is hard to remember that, in the lifetime of some of us, that tradition was tentative and not understood by the great majority of doctors of their teachers».*

Although RUST adds that *«(...) we should recognize (...) that a research culture cannot mature overnight, and new methods cannot be expected work reliably without a period of experiment and reflection»*, we think that time has come to get into proper realizations to what, in architecture and planning, has basically been a theoretical debate. Applied to architecture, the authors that, in our opinion, came closer to what proposes RUST and what we aim to our experiment were VIGANÒ and SECCHI, and especially their analysis of the Veneto to link the physical support, and particularly its ecological issues, to contemporary ways of living, in what Francesco



**Figure 5:** cartography drawn by Saverio MURATORI for the region of Grassano, Italy (source: Archivio Muratori, Biblioteca Poletti, Modena)

INDOVINA called the «*citta diffusa*» (INDOVINA, 2009), and with a methodology, according to Bernardo SECCHI, of a «*practice charged with theory*» (SECCHI, 1995).

Apart from these main references, we are also interested in our work in two other complementary approaches. On one hand, one that would consider the graphic analysis techniques developed by Saverio MURATORI to establish a complete cartography of Italian regions, that we intend to use as an inspiration for our cartographical approach to this territory. On the other hand, and with a direct application to our region, we are interested in the way the team of architects involved in the «Mission Racine» worked to plan and build, between 1960 and 1980, a series of holiday towns in the windy and sandy shores of the Languedoc-Roussillon; first, with the thorough diagnosis they made of the problems and potential of the territory and its particular sites, and later on with the capacity they had to use it for a multi-scale regional plan, sensitive simultaneously to landscape, urban, infrastructural, social, and even (if understood with the mentality of those years) ecological issues (see DELORME, 2022).

#### 4. Structure of the trans-border partnership

Although wishing to establish basically a scientific approach, and searching for its applied results, this franco-spanish partnership aims to have an implication, in a progressive way over the years, in different formats of collaboration. We consider ourselves now capable to answer two questions we asked back in 2019 in two different scientific forums, about the role of teaching in the creation of knowledge preceding applied research: in Westminster University, we asked ourselves what







**Figure 6:** the «*citta diffusa*» in the Veneto, as drawn by VIGANÒ-SECCHI (source: VIGANÒ, 2010)

came first in what, at that time, we were calling an «Applied Research Triangle» (MARTÍNEZ, 2019); in another proposal for Antwerp University, we defended the capacity of a method of teaching architectural studios that we called «horizontal», to «launch research themes» (MARTÍNEZ *et al.*, 2019).

Five years later, we wish now to establish a permanent structure able to work in the way we proposed in those papers written back in 2019. First action in this sense, and following that «launching role» accorded to teaching, we are now able to start, in September 2024, a double degree in architecture between our two institutions: on the French side, the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Montpellier (ENSAM), and, on the Spanish side, the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura del Vallès (ETSAV, in Barcelona).

Both schools depend on public universities, both are of similar (and reduced) size, and both have a clear experimental and metropolitan character. The aim is to deliver, together and simultaneously, two European architectural degrees, with an organization based on two main criteria: on one side, a back and forth mobility, on a semestrial basis, of the students of both nationalities, that will work always together, between the sites of Montpellier and Barcelona; and, on the other, the existence of a

QUARTIER CLAPIERS	Habitants / Ha	Logements / Ha	Densité (emprise au sol / en %)	
Lea Brocq	159	43	53	
Tom Crélin	150	28	48	
Thomas George	148	37	49.7	
Alice François	170	42	48	

**Figure 7:** a «capacity test» on a mid-density neighborhood : graphic comparison of a quantitative approach measuring different parameters of density, and its consequences in urban form (source: students of S4 at ENSAM, 2020)

binomial teaching in studio, always counting simultaneously with a faculty from each nationality.

We wish to insert this initiative in the roots of two declared intentions of the European Union. First, the establishment of a common European teaching and scientific space, for which the main issue, according to recent European officials declarations (NAVARRO, 2024), is the creation of common trans-national degrees; we want this double delivery of french and Spanish degrees to be considered as a first step towards that eventual European unique degree in architecture. Second, we think the importance given by Europe, for several decades now, to trans-border regions, is still very relevant nowadays. In our context, this concerns both funding (with specific programs, like the INTERREG or SUDOE), and the creation of particular administrative structures, such as the Eurorégion Pyrénées-Méditerranée (EPM) mentioned above, that through its Eurocampus offers two different initiatives that suit well our interests: the creation of higher education partnerships (in particular the establishment of double-degrees, like the one already started in the field of Law between the universities of Toulouse and Barcelona), and the interest for common study and transformation in Environment, Climate, and Energy.

For the launching of this double-degree, we count already with the support of national french authorities, such as the Ministère de la Culture through its aid to international initiatives of architectural schools, and the explicit support of the French foreign authorities in Spain, both through the consulate in Barcelona, and the embassy in Madrid. At the same time, we are still seeking for co-funding of regional and local authorities that would help collaborate for student and faculty mobility, such as the Région Occitanie, the Generalitat de Catalunya, and the Métropole de Montpellier.

In the structure being mounted, the teaching collaboration would only be a first step to a wider partnership involving scientific activities in our research laboratories, the «*Laboratoire Innovation Architectures et Milieux*» (LIFAM, Montpellier), and the «*Centre de Recerca i Serveis per l'Administració Local*» (CRAL, in Barcelona). On its financial side, we intend to respond together to a specific call for the creation of



**Figure 8:** the three steps of the definition of a mid-density pattern: the unity, the lot, and the neighborhood (source: Théophile LEROY, student S4 at ENSAM, 2021)

international research networks proposed by the French «*Agence Nationale de la Recherche*» (ANR), named «*Montage de Réseaux Scientifiques Européens ou Internationaux*» (MRSEI), on its call due in September 2024. We will need to be associated (as demanded by the call) with a third research institution, probably in North-West Italy, to complete geographically the western Mediterranean arch. On the institutional side, a research chair «*Pour une esthétique du changement*», is planned to start working soon. It is currently on process of being labelled by the French authorities of the Ministère de la Culture, and it will allow the entrance of private co-funding in our research activities<sup>1</sup>.

However, the final funding aim of this partnership is to apply together to high range European programs, like the Next Generation program (and in particular its chapters dealing with renewable energies and self-sufficient communities), and those proposed by the European Research Council (ERC).

#### 4. Specific thematic proposals

While progressively mounting this structure, we plan to work at least in two levels of definition. The first one intends to establish an operational cartography of the bi-national territory, to be done mostly through our teaching activities. This cartographic production should be able to go further than a simple technique of analysis or diagnosis, to allow an observation of reality which is able to highlight relevant issues,



Agricultura periurbana  
(El Parc del Llobregat)

##### b) Espacio público y figuras de planeamiento

Estamos acostumbrados a reivindicar la importancia del diseño urbano como disciplina, pero no debemos caer en la tentación de infravalorar la de su cercana hermana, que es el planeamiento, y que se encargaba de producir la normativa por la que se ha de regir el desarrollo de la ciudad (abona también el territorio): un tejido urbano bien tratado y equilibrado, un territorio eficiente y sostenible. Bahara Pons se sirve de forma muy pedagógica del famoso acrónimo S, M, I, M de Rem Koolhaas para ordenar, en orden creciente, todas esas escalas en que podemos desarrollar nuestro proyecto de espacio público<sup>2</sup>. Añade aquí a su catalogación una hipótesis de correspondencia con las diferentes figuras legales del planeamiento que ahora están en vigor en España, tomando como referencia la lexicografía y figuras vigentes en la Comunidad Valenciana, ámbito de actuación del Colegio que publica este manual. Su extrapolación a las figuras de las otras comunidades autono-

<sup>2</sup> La autora, Baha Giner Barberá, «De la arquitectura al paisaje». Dentro de la serie 20 (parte de la propuesta editada en los *Terceros Encuentros de Arquitectura y Urbanismo* bajo la dirección de los autores). ETSAM, Madrid, 2018.



Parque agrario e infraestructuras metropolitanas  
(Parque Agrario del Baix Llobregat)

nomas es casi siempre evidente, pues cambia solo alguna palabra, a veces ninguna; aclarar también que la asociación de una figura y una escala concreta debe de ser por definición elástica y no restrictiva, pues muchas veces una figura puede actuar en varias escalas. Veremos, eso sí, que todas ellas (las figuras de planeamiento) acaban ocupándose, de una u otra manera, con mayor o menor detalle, del problema del espacio libre.

Según Pons, en la escala más pequeña (S: small), las intervenciones se pueden medir en metros cuadrados, e incluirán los proyectos de jardines, terrazas, cubiertas o patios. El cliente será única y el beneficiario, por lo general, también, son intervenciones que no suelen necesitar (por su reducido tamaño) de ordenación específica, aunque deban —eso sí— cumplir con lo que estipulan las figuras más bajas de todo el rango (pueden ser, por ejemplo, de Estudios de Detalle —ED—), la autora pone como ejemplo paradigmático los jardines sobre la terraza del Ministerio de Educación de Brasil, de R. Burle Marx, y también pueden considerarse pertenecientes a esta escala las intervenciones de microurbanismo que aprovechan y cambian de uso pequeños intersticios en densos, actuaciones a menudo no diseñadas ni planificadas y resultado, muchas veces, de la acción espontánea de algunos ciudadanos o colectivos.

En la escala media (M: medium), los proyectos se movierten en el rango de los miles de

**Figure 9:** some of our previous publications treated the potential of the agricultural metropolitan parks as a new form of public space and heritage (in the image, Parc Agrari del Baix Llobregat, in Barcelona) (source: the authors)

<sup>1</sup> translated to english: «Creation of European and International Research Networks» (for MRSEI), and «In Search of an Aesthetic of Transformation» (for «une esthétique»...)

by representing them through different layers to be crossed in different combinations. This could be done taking profit of the architectural drawing skills of our students students, and taking as a graphic model the experiments of MURATORI, mentioned above.

At a second level, and to be developed in the scientific axis, we intend to establish a comparative applied research by the design, and construction, of selected pilot-projects at both sides of the border, with the will to transfer the results obtained as design recommendations, first addressed to public authorities in charge of housing and planning, and further on to private developers through the form of «Market Replication Models» (MRM).

One of the research themes we propose is the creation of mid-density residential patterns (in the way these are defined by authors such as, for example, KROPF, 2013). These new forms of neighborhoods can, through the establishment of self-sufficient energetic communities, respond at the same time to problems such as the integration of renewable sources in urban tissues, the changes provoked by electric mobility, or the restoration of a balance with natural resources, considering these as a new form of public space, in the metropolitan environment.

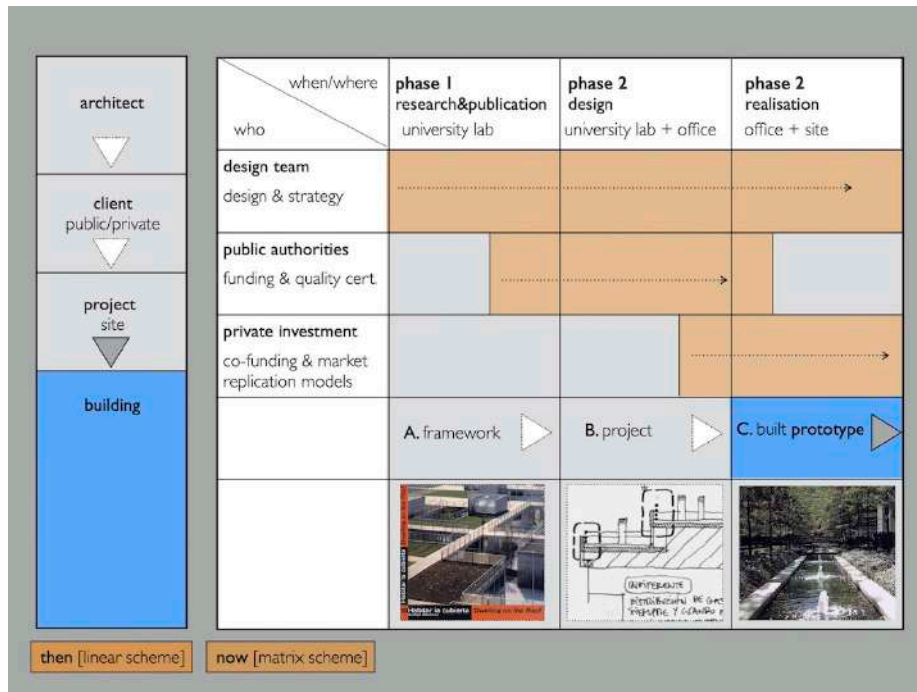
Our intentions on this particular axis concern mostly housing and urban structure issues... but not only. We consider these questions cannot, nowadays, be treated apart from concepts such as «urban habitability» (as defined by BLANC, 2009), access to services, quality of public space, or anything contributing to the community realm, the sense of «urbanity», and, of course, the consideration for re-use and transformation of existing patterns. This, altogether, should allow us to properly respond, first with a local and particular approach, and further on with more general



**Figure 9:** our proposal (see MARTÍNEZ, 2023) for the site of the first mid-density pilot project to be designed. In the border between an existing metropolitan urban pattern (el Prat del Llobregat, Barcelona), and the Parc Agrari del Baix Llobregat, with all its pre-existing elements. Currently planned as a high density new neighborhood, to be, ideally, modified (source: Institut Cartogràfic de Catalunya)

applications, to the challenges caused in certain European regions (like this western mediterranean basin) by climate change, the impact of renewal energies in landscape, or deep social transformations currently ongoing.

It is important for us to point out that this whole experiment is linked, and updates, a number of historic threads on housing and urban production in European history. Some of these focus on the links between building typology and urban morphology, represented mostly by the Italian school (i.e. CANNIGIA and MAFFEI, 1984); some others insist on what they call «landscapes of energy», that is all the urban fabric created, in one way or another, around production and energy (MANGIN, PANNERAI, 1999); lastly, we are also interested in those that treat the importance of housing and urban tissues built for specific communities, mostly working populations, but not only (KIRSCHENMANN and MUSCHALEN, 1980). For us, these new types of metropolitan communities could, at the same time, be considered some sort of «specific population», linked by «energetic issues», and their patterns created, in part, according to typo-morphological laws. Two other more recent questions, should, however, be considered: the one of the metropolitan landscape used as public space, that of the re-use of the existing built environment.



**Figure 11:** matrix for the organization of an applied architectural research procedure, from publication, to pilot-project, to completion in site, as presented in a congress in Stuttgart in 2009 (source: the authors)

Apart from this main theme, we keep on our backminds some other thematic proposals, that we will just name here briefly. One, for example, would have to do with the rehabilitation of social housing of the 60s formed by towers and bars, through interventions that would be both functional and spatial, rather than only technical and energetical. On the other hand, a very particular issue for this territory, that is the potential of reconversion of the architecture of mass tourism, prevalent in the shore of both countries and basically out of date in several ways. With some sectors like the one mentioned of the Mission Racine, considered among the most valuable modernist production in housing in the second part of the century.

### 5. The drift from applied research into planning

We believe this bottom-up approach (that starts on applied architecture and urban design with comparative research methods) can lead, later on, to the definition of efficient trans-border planning practices and policies, suitable across administrative bi-national divisions.

As already pointed out, there is a specific will of knowledge transfer of the results of these procedure, both to the public authorities and the market actors through MRMs. In fact, some of the ETSAV's post-degree actions (like the Master MArq) already point in this direction, by treating specific issues after requests of the local

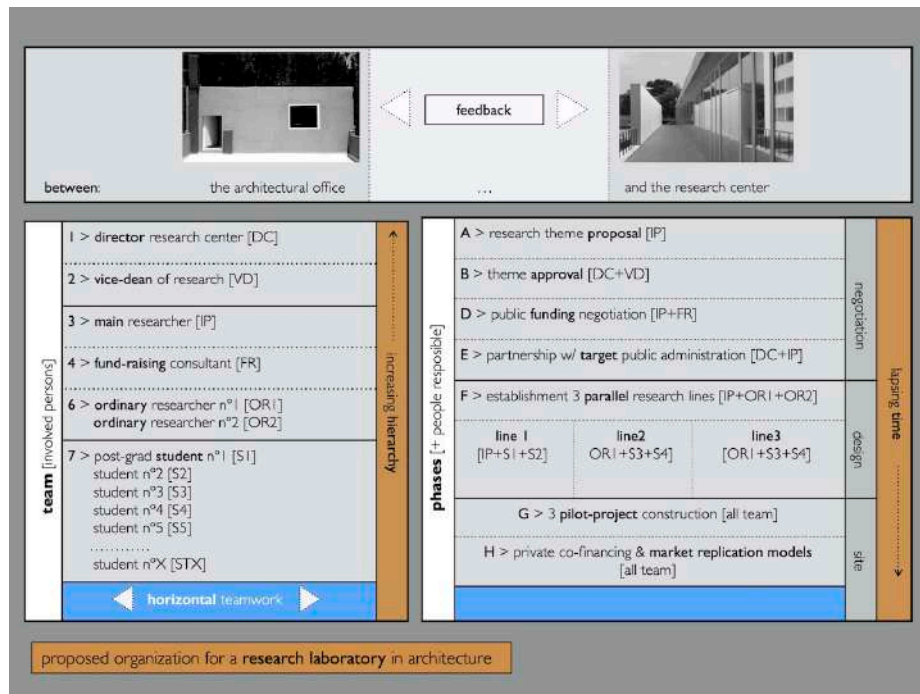


Figure 12: possible scheme of the organization of a university laboratory in applied research (source: the authors)

metropolitan authorities, and normally involving several scales of intervention, from housing formats to large landscapes.

Our contribution to this congress wishes to present this cooperation, currently under construction, to a wider audience outside our institutions or universities. In order to get, simultaneously, proper feedback before its implementation, and to contribute to the debate of turning planning into a game-changer for more just, and sustainable, regions, as proposed by the organization.

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Word count: 4.136 words