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A Shared City: Stories of Brest's Transformation

Amandine DIENER and Hélène MARTIN-BRELOT, November 2025

Summary (3,500 characters)

The second POPSU Brest Report, **A Shared Metropolis**, written by Amandine Diener and Hélène Martin-Brelot, traces Brest's urban transformation. The publication explores the city's evolution, from the need to move beyond its image as an austere city shaped by post-war reconstruction to its current ambition to establish itself as a metropolis of regional and (inter)national significance, through the revitalisation of its maritime and scientific identity.

From the 1970s onwards, the local council launched a series of initiatives to redefine the city's image and stem the population exodus. The ambition to become the capital of Western Brittany, championed by Georges Lombard, led to the creation of the Brest Urban Community (CUB) in 1974. The establishment of the University of Western Brittany (UBO) in 1969 marked a significant milestone in this endeavour, as it set in motion the first steps towards inter-territorial cooperation that extended beyond the city centre, which was constrained by its symbolic status as a military enclave.

The economic crisis of the 1980s, characterised by a sharp rise in unemployment (from 5 per cent to 12 per cent between 1975 and 1987) due to job losses in the French Navy, prompted the city to reconnect with the sea. Cultural events (Jeudis du port, 1989, Fêtes maritimes 1992) and the creation of Océanopolis (1990) helped to strengthen the foundations of a collective sense of pride. At the same time, the development of the Brest-Iroise Technology Park (1988) provided the region with distinctive resources in the scientific field, particularly in marine technologies.

In 2014, the Maptam Act granted Brest the status of a 'Métropole' by virtue of its strategic importance on the tip of Brittany, despite its size – with a population of 215,000, it is the smallest of France's 21 métropoles

The city has since embarked on a programme of territorial 'reclamation' aimed at bridging the 'symbolic deficit' left by the effects of a much-criticised post-war reconstruction. The regeneration of the Capucins district (2009–2017) and the construction of France's first urban cable car (2016) have transformed the *city centre* into *the heart of the metropolis*. The city is promoting its history under the '

City of Art and History' and the concept of 'Brest, a palimpsest city', whilst the masterplan 'Brest 2040, a city-landscape in transition' commits the metropolis to ecological transition.

Efforts to boost economic attractiveness appear to be bearing fruit: unemployment has fallen from 9.2 per cent in 2015 to 6.3 per cent in 2022. These efforts are embodied in the new Metropolitan Economic Development Strategy 'Cap 2030', adopted in 2016 following a broad consultation process involving nearly 400 public and private stakeholders, who collectively drew up an assessment and defined the challenges and objectives for the Brittany peninsula region.

The main challenge remains reconciling this competitiveness strategy, based on regional marketing, with the maintenance of key social balances. The negative externalities of policies designed to boost the region's appeal – which, for example, result in rising property prices – primarily affect students and those in the most precarious circumstances. Brest is seeking to reconcile these imperatives (attractiveness and social cohesion) by strengthening its tools for citizen participation and refocusing its projects on the link between economic attractiveness and popular culture.

Summary (long version)

This second issue of the POPSU Platform's journal, * Brest⁽¹⁾ examines Brest's urban transformation and its path towards becoming a metropolis. The text traces the city's evolution, from the crystallisation of an image as an austere city, rebuilt after the war, to the affirmation of its current ambition to establish itself as a metropolis of regional and (inter)national significance, the 'capital of the oceans', based on the re-establishment of its maritime and scientific identity. It explores the challenges posed by its population growth and the quest to enhance its appeal, and traces the development of strategies combining economic growth with improvements to the quality of life. Finally, it analyses attempts to renew its territorial narrative, caught between two constraints: achieving a 'critical mass' on the one hand, and maintaining social cohesion on the other. Ultimately, this book sets out to highlight a local distinctiveness within the metropolitan trajectory.

The two authors are Amandine Diener and H  l  ne Martin-Brelot. The former is a senior lecturer in architectural history and cultures at the   cole nationale sup  rieure d'architecture de Bretagne and a researcher within the Research Group on the Invention and Evolution of Forms (GRIEF). Her work focuses on the training of architects and, more broadly, on the history, theories, and architectural and urban forms. H  l  ne Martin-Brelot is a senior lecturer in spatial planning and urbanism at the University of Western Brittany (UBO) and director of the Brest Institute of Geoarchitecture. Her research analyses consultation mechanisms in spatial planning projects at various scales.

The book begins by highlighting the negative image that the city of Brest has endured since the destruction caused by the Second World War and the physical form taken by its reconstruction. From the 1970s onwards, however, the local council undertook a series of initiatives aimed at redefining the city's image in order to stem population outflow. It was against this backdrop that Brest established an urban community around itself in 1974 – one of the

¹ Le Moigne Marthe, Prigent Lionel, *'Cooperating through the Metropolis: The Agility of Brest's Pragmatism'*, Cahier POPSU-Autrement, 2023.

first of their kind in France. Forty years later, the Maptam Act² granted it the status of a 'Metropolis' despite its size³, a sign of recognition of its strategic importance.

In its first part, the book traces the city's 'metropolitan ambition' during the 1950s to the 1970s. During this period, whilst Brest's population was growing rapidly (+35.4 per cent between 1954 and 1972), the metropolitan project focused on the economic consolidation of the civilian industrial and service sectors. Georges Lombard, mayor from 1959 to 1973, championed the idea of Brest as the capital of Western Brittany. It was this ambition that led to the creation of the Brest Urban Community (CUB) in 1974. Efforts were directed towards diversifying employment, building on the industrial and port complex and the ship repair industry. The establishment of the University of Western Brittany (UBO) in 1969 marked a significant milestone in inter-territorial cooperation, uniting Brest and its hinterland, whereas the city centre had previously been symbolically excluded as a military enclave. Finally, the development of the Bellevue Priority Urban Development Zone (ZUP) (Brest II) illustrates the desire to manage urban development, attracting civilians through 'attractive urban planning'.

The 1980s were marked by a severe economic crisis, with unemployment rising by 7 percentage points (from 5% to 12%) between 1975 and 1987, due to job losses in the French Navy, ship repair and the construction industry. At the same time, the city suffered a deterioration in its urban environment, which was keenly felt by its own residents. In response, the city council and the CUB, led by the Socialist Pierre Maille from 1989 onwards, stepped up initiatives aimed at improving the city's image and quality of life through housing regeneration and improvements to the bus network. The city set about reconnecting with the sea by organising cultural events such as 'Jeudis du port' (1989), 'Océanopolis' (1990) and the Maritime Festivals (launched in 1992 and subsequently held every four years). All these projects and initiatives have helped to foster a sense of collective pride and raise the city's profile. The development of the Brest-Iroise Technology Park (1988) has enabled the region to distinguish itself in the field of research, particularly in areas related to marine technologies, thereby strengthening the network of SMEs acting as subcontractors to large companies. By the end of the 20th century, the service sector accounted for 74 per cent of jobs (compared with 55 per cent in 1970), whilst major infrastructure projects (the Cavale-Blanche University Hospital, Le Quartz, the expanded airport, etc.) marked the completion of this first phase of metropolitan development.

When François Cuillandre took office as mayor and head of the metropolitan authority (the CUB was renamed Brest Métropole Océane in 2005) in March 2001, clear priority was given to major development projects and enhancing the city's appeal. Brest was then facing a demographic paradox: despite a job market comparable to that of Rennes, population growth was much more modest, largely due to its location in the far west. It was to address this imbalance that the metropolitan area initiated regional cooperation, through the creation – spearheaded by the DATR – of the Loire-Bretagne Metropolitan Area (EMLB), which brings together, in addition to Brest, the five urban areas of Angers, Nantes, Rennes and Saint-Nazaire. The metropolitan status granted in 2014 is seen locally as recognition by the State of Brest's ability to build networks and play a leading role in driving development for the tip of Brittany, despite having a population of fewer than 400,000. However, the expansion of Brest Métropole's institutional boundaries, which was once envisaged, did not materialise, having run into obstacles relating to 'critical mass' and fears of a predatory metropolis ('the size critique') expressed by neighbouring inter-municipal bodies. Efforts to boost the region's attractiveness by encouraging the establishment of

² Act No. 2014-58 of 27 January 2014 on the modernisation of local public administration and the strengthening of metropolitan .

³ With a population of 215,000, it is the smallest of the country's 21 metropolitan areas.

Efforts to attract major companies (such as Ikea), improve transport links (with the tramway and cable car), and build large cultural venues (the Arena and Capucins) have failed to halt this cycle of demographic stagnation in the city centre.

The second part of the book tells the story of a revival. The reconstruction of the city centre, led in the post-war period by Jean-Baptiste Mathon, had been criticised for its imperviousness, its concrete-clad inner blocks, and its lack of access to the sea. But it was not until the 1980s that initiatives aimed at addressing this 'symbolic deficit' were undertaken. In 1982, the 'A Heart for My City' ideas competition ushered in an era of cultural-urban projects, viewing art as a catalyst for the transformation of public spaces. This momentum continued, even after the change of government in 1993 (with the arrival in power of a right-wing mayor, Jacques Berthelot), with the installation of the Siam fountains by Marta Pan (1988–89) and the redevelopment of the Place de la Liberté by Bernard Huet (1996).

As part of this ongoing process of reclaiming the city, the organisation of the Fêtes Maritimes (1992) marked the residents' rediscovery of the banks of the Penfeld. At the same time, the city gradually reclaimed military land, leading to the creation of a marina (2010), the regeneration of the Plateau des Capucins (between 2009 and 2017), and the installation of France's first urban cable car (2016). These projects have had the effect of extending the geographical boundaries of the city centre towards the port and the right bank, transforming the 'centre' into the 'heart of the metropolis'. The city is also working to showcase its history and architecture, particularly that of the post-war reconstruction period. The 'City of Art and History' designation was awarded in 2017 on the basis of a guiding principle centred on 'Brest, a palimpsest city', intended to highlight the city's ability to reinvent itself and stand out. Finally, the 'Brest Life' brand was registered in 2015 to promote the region and attract young professionals and students, as part of a regional marketing strategy.

In terms of urban planning policies, in 2021 the Metropolitan Area adopted the master plan 'Brest 2040, a city-landscape in transition', designed by Studio Paola Viganò, which proposes a new definition of the region based on the concept of a 'city-landscape', aiming to reshape residents' perceptions and initiate an ecological transition in a city that is not immune to rising temperatures. The 'Siamorphose'

' in the city centre, meanwhile, aims to increase green spaces and reduce soil imperviousness as part of the fight against global warming. The completion of the second tram line, scheduled for 2026, and the regeneration projects for the Saint-Louis market halls and Pontaniou prison are intended to reinforce this momentum for regeneration underway in the heart of the city.

The third and final section of the text focuses on policies designed to boost both economic and residential attractiveness. The adoption of a Metropolitan Economic Development Strategy (SMDE) in 2016 prioritised addressing the infrastructure deficit, focusing on three main areas: rail accessibility, the port, and ultra-fast broadband. These efforts appear to have borne fruit, as the unemployment rate has fallen from 9.2 per cent in 2015 to 6.3 per cent in 2022, whilst the metropolitan area has risen from the bottom of the national rankings. However, the demographic challenge remains crucial. The new 'Cap 2030' Economic Development Strategy identifies eight sectors with promising futures, building on the agenda to boost attractiveness and competitiveness, against a backdrop where demographic challenges persist: marine renewable energy, healthtech, the space sector, cybersecurity, the cultural and creative industries, the utilisation of marine biomass, the silver economy and artificial intelligence. The strategy emphasises Brest's unique character, highlighting the 'free spirit'

' forged by its connection to nature, its capacity for transformation and the 'Brest social model', characterised by strong social cohesion and lower inequalities in living standards.

In this regard, the roll-out of policies to boost the city's appeal and the promotion of Brest as a tourist destination mean that the city must manage tensions that could potentially undermine social cohesion. The rise in property prices (+32.2 per cent between 2015 and 2020) is thus having a particular impact on the student population and putting pressure on social housing stock. To address these potential imbalances, public policies are seeking to draw on citizen participation for urban regeneration, whilst ambitions for scientific and technological competitiveness are being combined with initiatives aimed at preserving natural resources and environments. Flagship projects currently underway, such as the transformation of the Saint-Louis market halls into a community hub or the conversion of Pontaniou prison into a cultural venue, confirm the commitment to reconciling economic attractiveness, ecological transition and popular culture.

This book thus traces the development of the city of Brest against the backdrop of its history. As France's smallest metropolitan area, it has managed to overcome demographic challenges and turn its geographical and military ambivalences (a city facing the sea but with limited access) into a strength, thereby forging a new narrative. To this end, current public policies focus on fostering a sense of belonging and attachment to the city. The book also highlights the negative externalities of policies aimed at boosting attractiveness and territorial marketing, starting with the risk of the metropolitan narrative being exploited for the sake of performance-driven objectives, which could potentially upset the social balance.

Debates and issues

The text highlights several crucial debates and tensions that underpin public policy in Brest – and in other metropolitan areas. These debates concern the legitimacy of the city's status, the reconciliation of economic attractiveness and social equity, and how to combine the physical reconstruction of the city with the rebranding of its image.

1. Critical size and critique of size

One of the debates raised by the book concerns the legitimacy and boundaries of the metropolitan area, due to Brest's demographic paradox. On the one hand, Brest ranks as the smallest metropolitan area in France. It was granted this status in 2014 by way of an exemption from the demographic threshold of 400,000 inhabitants, as recognition of its political strategy and its ability to form networks, rather than on the basis of its population size. However, this is not without implications for the metropolitan area's ability to coexist alongside and compete with cities such as Rennes and Nantes across the wider west of France. On the other hand, the development of the Brest metropolitan area has given rise, amongst its neighbours, to fears of seeing a predatory metropolitan area take hold, one that would drain economic resources for its own benefit. Finally, the combination of these two factors raises the question of how the costs associated with its central role are to be funded. Is the Brest metropolitan area in a position to fund facilities whose influence extends beyond its eight member municipalities?

2. Economic attractiveness and social cohesion

As in all metropolitan areas in France, and in virtually all local authorities, public policies are caught between two imperatives that are partly contradictory; or, at the very least, the full achievement of the objectives of one may contribute to undermining the other. How can a strategy for attractiveness and competitiveness be developed (in this case through the 'Cap 2030' Strategic Economic Development Plan and its eight sectors with promising futures) without creating new socio-spatial inequalities? How can scientific

and technological competitiveness with care for the most vulnerable groups and the natural environment? Is urban marketing the most appropriate tool for reshaping a territorial narrative? How can we tackle the housing crisis – caused in part by the renewed attractiveness of the Brest property market and which risks destabilising social cohesion by exacerbating the precarious situation of students and those seeking social housing?

3. The promotion of heritage and the question of urban identity

In connection with the above, the book offers a thought-provoking reflection on issues of urban identity and physical reconstruction. In a city marked by the destruction of war and subsequently by a reconstruction that has given rise to denigration, or even stigmatisation, the challenge of restoring the city's image – and, by extension, its urban identity – has been central to public policy for half a century, with the aim of bridging this 'symbolic deficit'. It is in this way that the authors place labelling schemes (City of Art and History) and *city branding* initiatives ('Brille palimpseste') within a long-term historical context. It is also from this perspective that they propose to analyse the relationship between history and contemporary projects, such as the masterplan 'Brest 2040, a city-landscape in transition', which seeks to forge a continuum of urban development between historic Brest and the 'new' Brest.

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📖 [POPSU Notebooks] 'A Shared Metropolis: Accounts of Brest's Metamorphosis', by Amandine Diener and Hélène Martin BreLOT

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Long associated with the image of a grey city with a predominantly military focus, Brest is now seen as a dynamic and attractive region. As early as the 1970s, the city initiated urban development strategies to revitalise its centre and assert its identity. Having become a metropolis in 2014, it is now capitalising on its history – marked by human and territorial solidarity – and on its maritime role to position itself as the capital of the oceans. This study explores the evolution of its urban narrative and the accompanying public policies.

- How has France's smallest metropolis reinvented its urban narrative to reconcile scientific competitiveness with a unique social model?
- How did the city break away from the image of an austere region inherited from the post-war reconstruction period? How did it manage to reconnect with the sea by investing in science and technology, major cultural festivals and urban development projects?
- How, despite its size, did it manage to secure 'metropolis' status during the debates leading to the adoption of the Maptam Act?
- How is it striving to combine economic attractiveness through urban marketing tools with the preservation of Brest's social model, which is based on social cohesion and a collective pride in belonging to the region?

👉 You can find this Cahier via the following link: XXX

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