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CITIES



## Rennes - hotel of projects

# Experimental approach to renewing heritage buildings

Rennes has put citizen empowerment and experimentation at the heart of a project to find a new purpose for a former science faculty building. The resulting 'hotel of projects' welcomes diverse temporary initiatives reflecting the immediate needs of a community in motion, establishing a new kind of inclusive creative and learning space.

“ We had this heritage building but didn't have the funds to renovate it and didn't want to abandon it so we asked the community to come up with ideas for making use of it - and it has become an important part of city life. ”

*Stephanie Poppe, European affairs manager, Rennes*

Rennes was keen to preserve the 19th century Pasteur building as part of the city's heritage, but the cost of renovation and transformation into a traditional cultural centre was prohibitive, running into tens of millions of euros. Instead, the city chose to view the mainly obsolete building as an opportunity. A chance to find out how citizens would like to use the space and whether refurbishment costs could be reduced through an innovative approach that would not result in a specific single-purpose development.

The city hired a group of experimental urban architects already working at grassroots level to catalyse local needs and aspirations to run the project's participatory phase. Through workshops and gatherings, inhabitants, developers, councillors and council services came together to discuss and propose different uses for the building. During this time, individuals, associations, schools and institutions were also able to occupy the building and test and develop different ideas and ways of working.

### Establishing a novel 'hotel'

By the end of this two-year phase, assessment of the various activities the building had hosted led to the emergence of the 'hotel of projects' concept. This enables users to check into the hotel for an hour to three months to explore ideas through trial and error. Unlike a hotel, though, the main spaces remain open and undefined to allow greater flexibility and more diverse uses than a conventional cultural facility with a fixed programme. This inventive solution also meant the project could be easily 'reversed' and another purpose found for the building in the future.

cities in action

November 2019

where: Rennes, France  
what: participation  
when: 2012 - ongoing

The city's public development company was tasked with leading the hotel of projects, and the urban department with overall assessment. An on-site project coordination and communications team was also established. Stakeholders keen to commit further to the project established a partner assembly whose mission was to gradually nurture adoption of the building and to establish a collegial body. This body created a charter outlining the hotel's decision-making process and operating rules.



These spaces allow people who are at a certain point in their lives to step aside, to exist in and for the city. They are places of individual emancipation in a collective setting, places of transmission and learning. And perhaps from these exchanges will come projects that exceed them.

**Sophie Ricard, coordinating architect,  
hotel of projects**

## Enabling learning by doing

When the last remaining occupant of the building, the university dental faculty, decided to relocate, the decision was made to use this space for a nursery school. In keeping with the project's focus on meeting the community's needs, local children contributed ideas for the school and the neighbourhood will also benefit from a reading room, a lunch room and a room for physical therapy. Funding from the education department was enough not only for these new facilities, but also for the structural renovation of the whole building.

Refurbishment of the hotel spaces are following the project's low-cost, participatory model. An on-site construction school welcomes citizens and schools wanting to get involved, and collaborative groups take on specific tasks. Twelve young adults supervised by an association dedicated to empowerment through creativity are, for example, working under the guidance of a local artist to design and fit a new floor for the hotel's kitchen. The hotel's experimental digital laboratory, EDULAB, is also participating. With a view to linking manual, craft activities with their digital counterparts, it is producing digital lathes and cutters to help with the work.

## Encouraging collaborative opportunities

While this work continues, the hotel remains open to all. To a sports charity that brings boxing classes to the poor. To a recycling project in need of a free place to test its model before opening to the general public. To contemporary artists wanting to stage their own exhibitions. And to techno nights, fashion shows, experimental mental health courses and French classes for migrants. For all these users, the hotel is not just about finding a place open to their ideas. It is also about finding opportunities to collaborate with others beyond their usual worlds and unlock even more.

The momentum maintained by the hotel of projects - which has cost the city council €3.26m so far - has exceeded all expectations. The team behind it admits there was always the chance that excitement about experimentation might give way to the routine and the planned. That this hasn't happened is, according to the team, testament to the participatory process. This has meant that every aspect of the hotel's operation suits people and their projects: there was no guesswork required by the administration. The project was chosen for the French pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale as an example of an emerging 'perpetually unfinished' approach to the rebirth of large disused buildings.

