

# Walking at the Backstage of the City

Hocine Aliouane-Shaw interviews Yvan Detraz



Map of Leftover Spaces in the Bordeaux Metropolitan Area, BRUIT DU FRIGO.

Yvan Detraz is an architect, co-founder and director of *Bruit du Frigo*, a Bordeaux-based transdisciplinary collective bringing together architects, urbanists, artists, makers and facilitators. Since the late 1990s, *Bruit du Frigo* has worked in everyday territories, approaching public space as a common resource to be reactivated, often through in-situ interventions, residencies and long-term collaborations with local actors and inhabitants. In this interview, Yvan Detraz looks back on an approach that emerged from walking through the peri-urban

margins of Bordeaux and the leftover spaces produced by contemporary urbanisation. The conversation traces a path from an initial attention to the “backstage” of the city, to a method of exploration through walking and mapping, and then to collective practices that opened the way to new forms of public use and shared experience in Bordeaux’s peri-urban margins (16/02/2026).

**Hocine Aliouane-Shaw (HAS):** You often trace the origins of your attention to the margins of the city to a student exchange in Brussels in the mid 1990’s, during a design studio at La Cambre around the planned *Promenade Verte* of the

Brussels-Capital Region. What did this displacement — both geographical and pedagogical — allow you to see, and how was this attention later carried forward when you returned to Bordeaux, through the early actions of *Bruit du Frigo* and then through your diploma project?

**Yvan Detraz (YD):** What struck me in Brussels was not so much the sites themselves. We were given potential sites to work on, but the exercise mainly required us to go out into the field, to move around Brussels on foot and by bicycle, rather than simply looking at one isolated site.

What I discovered at that moment was the path between the sites. That was where I saw what one almost never sees in the contemporary city: the side spaces, the backs, the interstices, all the backstage areas of the city. What I found there was an active, living city, but one that

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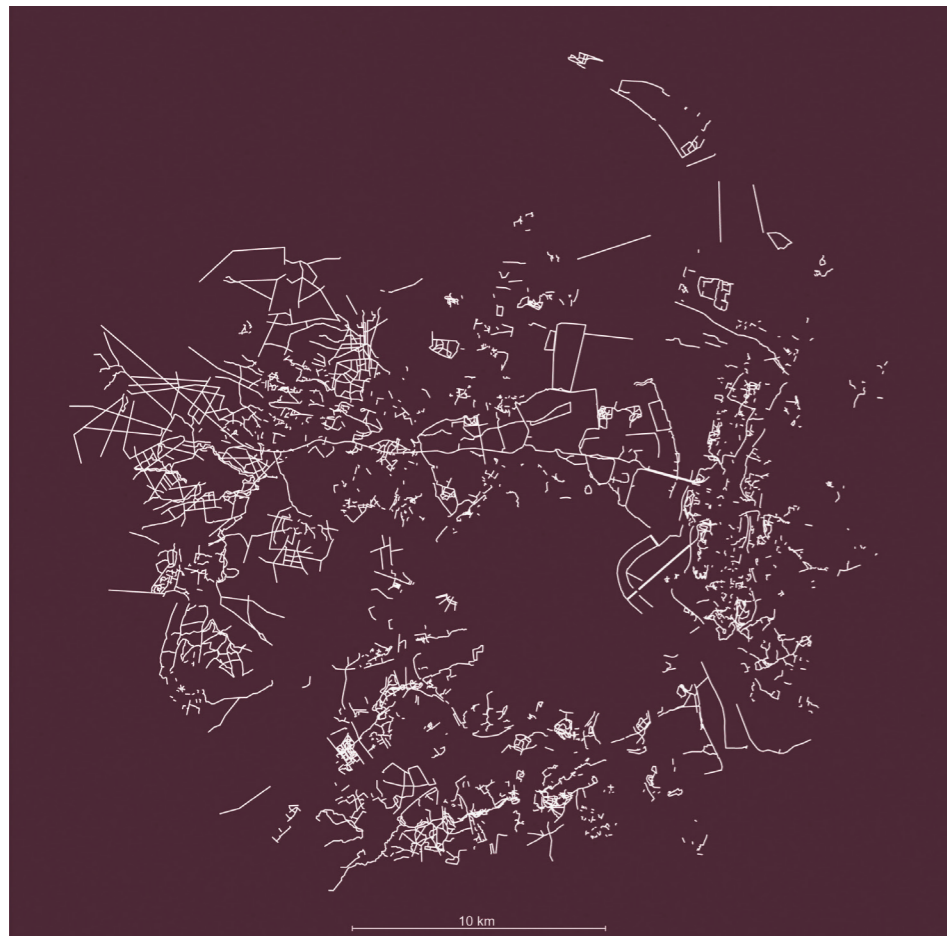
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Map of Pathways in the Bordeaux Metropolitan Area, BRUIT DU FRIGO.

was hidden, concealed, never really brought into view. There were many spaces with no apparent function, somewhat neglected, somewhat marginal, but where forms of life, hospitality and human activity could nevertheless take place. And above all, there was a continuity. You could move through that peri-urban meander, on foot or by bicycle, through those spaces.

I kept that experience somewhere in the back of my mind, with the idea that I might perhaps take it up again in Bordeaux. In the years that followed, in the early days of *Bruit du Frigo*, we began to run educational urban exploration workshops, particularly with young people. We worked a lot in the city centre, because it was practical, but sometimes we would go further out, to the edges of the city. And quite quickly, we also started returning more regularly to interstitial spaces, leftover spaces, large industrial sites, especially on Bordeaux's right bank. So I don't feel there was a clear break between Brussels, the early actions of *Bruit du Frigo*, and my diploma project. It was

something that matured gradually. Walking gradually became the obvious approach: it was a way of recognising these territories, but also of testing their possible public use. My first idea, for the diploma project, was even to make a walking guide to the peri-urban landscape, with routes and descriptions, using the codes of traditional walking guides. I wanted to show that these territories, contrary to what one might expect, were particularly suited to walking, to hiking, including long-distance walking.

**HAS:** *When you began your work in Bordeaux, you were not simply setting out on random walks. There were maps, initial reconnaissance, hypotheses, and then a process of testing them on the ground. How exactly did this chain between mapping, walking and returning to the map take shape?*

**YD:** At the time, I did not have much data. I had an old printed aerial photograph, which was already partly out of date, a few cadastral documents that I had managed to get from a'urba, and

above all an IGN map. There was no Google, and I think that if Google had existed, I would not have done this work in the same way.

I first looked for the blank areas on the map. When there was a blank, it meant that the map did not really know how to show what was there. For me, it was a clue: there might be open, unbuilt or leftover spaces. Then I looked at the bus lines that could get me as close as possible, and I tried to reach the first blank area. From there, I found my way by sight. I took my eyes off the map. The idea was to explore each space, then move from one leftover space to another while passing as little as possible through the established urban fabric, in order to test this hypothesis of continuity. I mostly took photographs, a few notes, sometimes sketches. I paid particular attention to passages, obstacles, boundaries and traces. In the evening, while it was still fresh in my mind, I would transfer what I had seen back onto the map. I redrew the outlines of the spaces I had explored, the routes, the existing paths, the passages I had taken or identified. That is how the map of leftover spaces began to appear: not as a map produced from a distance, but as the result of a back-and-forth process between very limited data, walking, and returning to the map.

What also mattered was the sense of discovery. I did not simply feel that I was checking something I had already seen on a plan. I had the feeling of moving behind things, where almost nobody goes, as if I were exploring unknown territories. I was not the first person to set foot there, but the feeling was very strong. And it was also this pleasure of walking, this way of discovering an environment through its backstage areas, that I later wanted to share.

**HAS:** *In your architectural diploma project at ENSAP Bordeaux, the idea of the Terres Communes appears. What did this notion allow you to formulate about the peri-urban condition, and about the possibility of another kind of public space?*

**YD:** The idea was not to say: there are plenty of available spaces, so we can continue to roll out the city, stitch it back together, restructure it, fill in the gaps. I was formulating the opposite hypothesis: these spaces have a quality of their own. They are not necessarily meant to be filled. They can serve the community, become a common good, and play a social role again in peri-urban territories where this question arises in a rather stark way. At the time, we did not speak about the commons as we do today. I was drawing more on the idea of rural common land: forests or cultivable spaces where one could take a resource, cultivate, grow vegetables, and which were held in common, managed in common. I took up this idea to ask how these leftover spaces could be brought out of oblivion without immediately making them vulnerable. Because as soon as you shed light on them, you give them value, particularly land value. So it was necessary to imagine a mechanism that could protect them, safeguard them, and turn them into terres communes.

That did not mean that something necessarily had to be done there all the time. A piece of common land can also be land that is left as it is, where one accepts a process of ecological reconquest, before asking again later what could be done with it collectively.

What was also decisive was that, during these surveys, I did not only encounter abandoned spaces. I encountered life: huts, play areas for children at the end of housing estates, places where people came to picnic, have barbecues, gather things, cultivate clandestine vegetable gardens. I even saw someone putting sheep in fenced industrial sites and moving them around in a kind of urban transhumance. These people were using spaces within reach, without necessarily appropriating them, without wanting to possess them. That had to be preserved: these spontaneous, sometimes marginal uses, which pass under the radar. The project absolutely could not become a form of policing that prevents, forbids or normalises

these practices. The matrix of the *Terres Communes* comes from there. Once the surveys were completed, I tried to see how all this potential — the leftover spaces, the existing paths, the parks, the cycle paths, certain existing public spaces — could form a coherent network. Choices had to be made, things had to be prioritised, a matrix had to be built that would reach everywhere and allow each inhabitant of the Bordeaux peri-urban area to be only a few minutes' walk from the *Terres Communes*. The idea was that one could set off on an adventure from Bordeaux itself, walk for days, but remain within the metropolitan area.

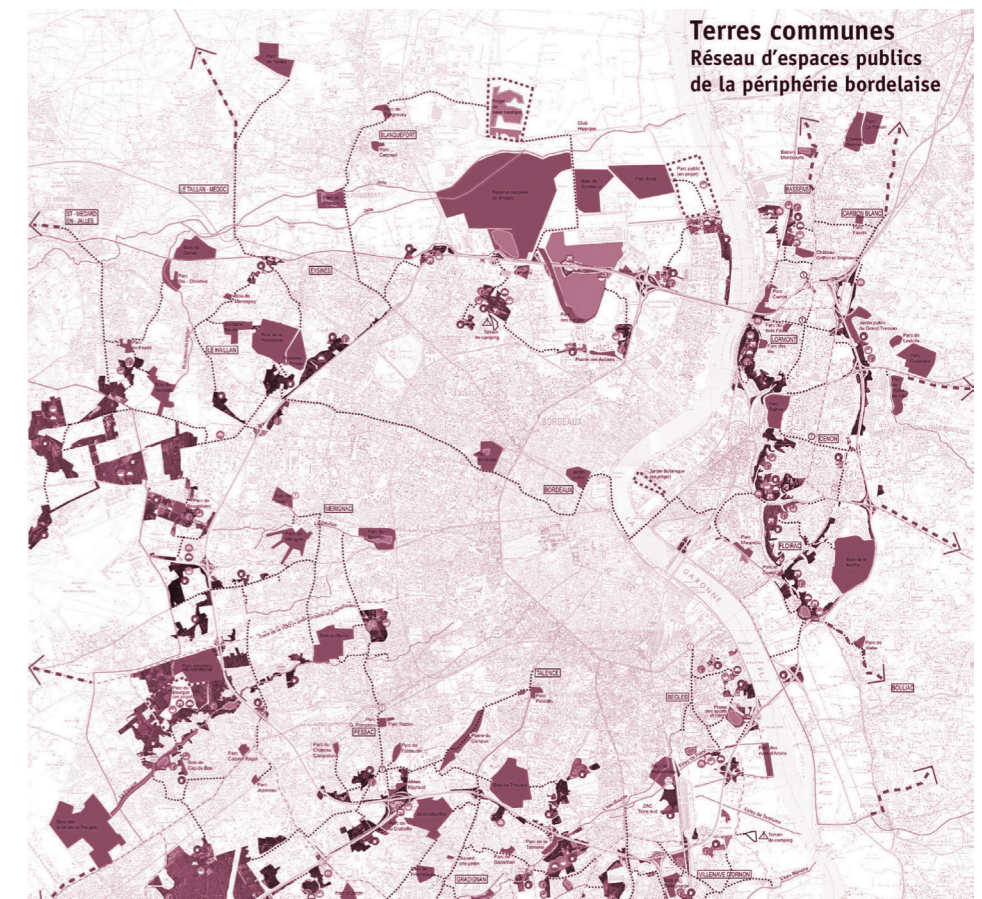
The starting point of my diploma project was also this question: What kind of public space for the peri-urban? In the established city, public space structures, connects and distributes. In the peri-urban, contemporary urbanism tends instead to produce large patches, zones and pieces that do not fit together very well, a bit like a badly assembled puzzle.

Between these pieces, interstices appear. When they are mapped,

these interstices can redraw the figure of a network and carry the potential of a peri-urban public space, with its own vocabulary, where fields can sometimes take the place of squares.

**HAS:** *After the initial surveys, forms of activation appeared very quickly: picnics accompanied by small route guides, then collective walks. What did these formats allow you to test or share?*

**YD:** The picnics and the walks did not have exactly the same role. With the picnics, the idea was quite simple: there were extraordinary sites within the metropolitan area in terms of experience, places that produced a visual and aesthetic shock, sometimes a real emotion. We wanted to share them. The picnic was a fairly obvious way of doing this. You had to convince people to take their car, a bus or their bicycle, sometimes to travel thirty or forty minutes, to go to a place where they would never have gone spontaneously. Sharing a meal, spending an afternoon or an evening together, made that experience possible. People were not just coming to look at a place:



Common Lands Map, Bordeaux Metropolitan Area, BRUIT DU FRIGO.



From *Zone Sweet Zone*, final architecture diploma project. Yvan Detraz, 2000

they were coming to settle there for a while and share a moment in a place where they would not have expected to do so. At the same time, I had started making small route guides. They were folded sheets, with a map, a route of three, four or five hours' walking, and a description. I distributed them during the picnics. I am not sure that many people actually went and walked the routes afterwards, but the idea was already to instil something: to make people understand that these territories could be walked, described and passed on, as territories for walking.

The collective walks raised another question. Long-distance walking is more demanding. I had to see whether people other than myself could take pleasure in crossing these spaces. I myself felt a very strong pleasure there, but I had to see whether it could become a shared experience. The first real collective walk came just after my survey in the summer of 1999. A small group of us set off for several days, with bivouacs. Then, over time, we saw that it took hold. In the following years, some walks brought together one hundred, sometimes two hundred people, with a very diverse group of participants. At that point, we understood that it was not only a personal intuition: it was a practice that could exist collectively.

What was also important was that we were not alone. Quite quickly, we discovered that in other cities, artists, architects, landscape architects or walkers were starting from similar questions: tracing paths, making guides, bringing people out to walk in peripheral areas.

**HAS:** *The Parc des Coteaux seems to have played a turning-point role in this story. How did walking, and then the Panorama contemporary art biennial, help this territory become recognised as a continuity, even before it had been developed in that way?*

**YD:** Of all the spaces I had walked through, what would later be called the Parc des Coteaux held a particular place. First because I already knew part of it, especially through the Parc de l'Hermitage, and also because it was one of the places where the experience of walking was most stimulating. For me, it had a value of its own.

I knew that the Grand Projet de Ville, the urban regeneration programme on Bordeaux's right bank, was already working on this territory with the four municipalities concerned, and that there was an intuition that these parks needed to be connected. But the approach remained fragmented, with several smaller parks, perhaps a path to link them, and the possibility of building

around them. There was not yet necessarily the idea of a real green continuity. For me, the value lay precisely in the whole, and in the continuity.

The walk we did in the early 2000s played an important role. It traced out, on the ground, what would later become the fil vert. It was filmed, and the film was then shown to the mayors of the four municipalities it passed through; some of them were discovering places they did not know, sometimes within their own municipality. I said something to them along the lines of: "You don't see it, but you have Central Park on your territory." The phrase was obviously a little striking, but it did express the scale of this green heritage and its capacity to become a metropolitan public space.

A few years later, this recognition of the Parc des Coteaux continued with the creation of the Panorama contemporary art biennial. The idea was to work on the recognition and use of the park through art and culture, even before there were any developments, paths or furniture. Invited to propose a project for this first edition, we suggested doing the 2001 walk again, to see what had changed ten years later, and testing a first refuge, Le Nuage.

Along the route of this walk, there were also works, performances and artistic moments. Walking

was part of our artistic proposal, and it was then institutionalised in the following editions through the Marches de Panorama. Le Nuage appears in this context, but it also opens up another stage: that of the refuges.

**HAS:** *With Le Nuage and then the peri-urban refuges, one moves from a temporary experience to a public project on a metropolitan scale. How did this shift happen, and what questions does it still raise today in terms of maintenance, responsibility and use?*

**YD:** Initially, we did not think of opening Le Nuage as overnight accommodation. During the *Panorama weekend*, people could visit it, but not sleep there. I then negotiated with Jean Touzeau, the mayor of Lormont, the possibility of leaving the refuge on site for an extra month, putting it into real use. During that month, I managed the keys myself, through *Bruit du Frigo*, as well as the occupancy agreements, arrivals and departures.

After *Panorama*, we put out a call to see whether people would be interested. In two days, the thirty nights were booked. I honestly thought there might be nobody, and in fact it worked very well. At that point, I felt there was something there. So I asked for a meeting with the mayor, telling him that I thought we had a potential concept for a fairly unprecedented urban use: sleeping in the city's parks, a practice that is in principle forbidden in France.

But by framing the refuge as a performative artwork, one that was activated when people stayed there overnight, it became possible. We had to respond to very concrete questions: handing over the keys, managing the relationship with people, toilets, daily management. The Lormont tourist office agreed to play a role in this arrangement, and we worked with a lawyer on the legal framework. It took a few months to answer these questions. With an almost fully worked-out arrangement, Jean Touzeau agreed that we could try the experiment. The refuge was reinstalled, and the

season filled up very quickly. I then began writing a dossier to show that this prototype for a peri-urban refuge could be extrapolated to the metropolitan scale, with a trail linking several refuges. It was at that moment that Vincent Feltesse, then president of the Bordeaux Urban Community, called me.

He was interested in the idea of allowing inhabitants to discover another kind of heritage, and developing a metropolitan tourism less centred on historic Bordeaux. I showed him a map, with a theoretical trail marked out by refuges. He immediately understood the project's potential, and the idea of new refuges was launched. After that, we had to defend a way of doing things: an artistic curatorship, with works, artists or collectives chosen for specific sites. We were proposing a method for working with places, which was ultimately followed.

The question of transfer of responsibility came later. Initially, the refuges belonged to *Bruit du Frigo*, since they had been produced with public subsidies. We were responsible for them, we insured them, brought them back in over the winter, repaired them. At a certain point, it became too complicated. We then defended the idea that the refuges had become a public facility, fragmented into several pieces and distributed across the territory, and that the metropolitan authority had to take responsibility for them.

Today, the question arises differently. Some refuges are in poor condition, and we need to know whether they should be rebuilt, transformed, moved, or whether new ones should be imagined.

In any case, the economic and material issues have to be kept separate from the question of use. The success of the refuges has not faded. There is still just as much demand, just as much attachment. So for me, the argument that the project might one day be stopped because there is no money is not valid if the use is still there. And at the moment, that is still the case.



From *Zone Sweet Zone*, final architecture diploma project. Yvan Detraz, 2000