
BETTER (URBAN) POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES – THE ROLE OF OECD IN TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGES OF PLANNING IDEAS IN THE 1970S

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In the second half of the twentieth century, urban planning was perceived as the government responsibility, at least in centralised countries as France and the UK. Nevertheless, during this period, international organisations came also to play a growing role. This paper examines the influence of the OECD in the exchange of planning ideas during the 1970s, a field the organisation added to its program in the late 1960s. It is based on the assumption that the working methods developed by the OECD contributed to modify the perception of urban mutations in a transnational way and to highlight local experiments as the expression of on-the-ground contemporary trends that needed governments' attention. The organisation played a facilitating role to open a dialogue between scales of decision-making, defending that urban problems had no borders and needed close co-operation of all authorities.

Keywords

OECD, transnational planning exchange, local governments, public policies, urban environment

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INTRODUCTION

Transnational history in the field of urban planning largely focused on the first half of the twentieth century¹, although recent works deal with post-war period or after². The growing role of centralised policies after 1945 explains this trend, particularly in the case of France or United Kingdom. However, post-war period is also the moment when international organisations really began to extend their influence. At first glance, this has nothing to do with transnational exchanges, as these organisations gather national delegates and aim to coordinate national policies. Nevertheless, created in order to advise States, international organisations reveal, through their works, a strong interest for transnational phenomena that do exist out of any centralised policies. By documenting these phenomena, they contribute to the exchange of ideas.

We offer here to highlight the work and influence of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on urban planning matters during the 1970s, using the archives of the Organisation, located in its headquarter in Paris³. Originally, the institution has nothing to do with planning. When it was created in 1961, the OECD had no interest on this regard. But in 1969, driven by its new Secretary-General, Emile van Lennep, it launched a fundamental environmental turn. Within a new Directorate, a Sector Group on the Urban Environment (SGUE) was created in 1971 whose purpose was to exchange national experiences that could help to improve life in urban areas. Its first assessment was provocatively entitled « exclusion of automobile traffic in downtown areas ».

This paper will first contextualise the environmental turn of the Organisation that explains its concern about the ‘urban environment’ and give an overview of the activity of the Sector Group. Then, through the exemple of its first assessment (traffic free areas), it will show the working methods of the group, its contacts at local, national and international levels. Then, the paper will point the way the Organisation disseminate its conclusions and recommendations so as, even in such a centralised country as France, the State administration borrowed ideas from OECD’s works as a basis for official acts, suggesting that urban matters had no borders.

OECD AND URBAN PLANNING

THE GRADUAL EMERGENCE OF URBAN PLANNING ISSUES IN OECD’S WORKS (1961-1969)

When founded in 1961 through the transformation of the OEEC, the OECD aimed to promote “the economic and social well-being”⁴ of people in Members countries. It had initially no program in itself dealing with urban planning, but, over the decade, this field was gradually approached through various aspects. The most significant one was the question of transportation. Between 1963 and 1965, seven expert groups were created attempting to improve traffic as an essential component of economic growth. The approach was originally purely quantitative (how to increase traffic speed and road safety) and there was no specific topic about urban areas. Groups worked on “priority rules”, “speed limits”, “crash injury” or “pedestrian behaviour”⁵ (pedestrians being perceived as a problem for traffic flow). In this regard, OECD handled the subject in the same way as other international institutions in this period, as shown in a synthesis commissioned by the Organisation in 1966⁶.

Under the influence of US delegates⁷, the OECD convened a “Panel Discussion on Urban Transportation”⁸, emphasizing the growing interest for urban planning matters. The meeting was to define future issues for the Organisation. Eleven international experts exchanged their views, among whom British Professor Colin Buchanan, US engineer Wilbur Smith or French engineer Pierre Merlin. The meeting was dominated by functionalist ideas and most of the experts supported the development of urban highways. MIT professor William S. Seifert wrote: “In view of the degree to which the public has accepted the automobile, the manner in which our urban areas

are evolving and the shortcomings of alternative forms of urban transport, it appears that the evolution of auto-highway transportation into a more efficient form offers the greatest long-term opportunity". In a more futuristic view, Pierre Merlin suggested the forthcoming rise of individual helicopters. Only four experts challenged the role of the automobile in urban areas, among whom Colin Buchanan and C. Kenneth Orski, a US senior official.

As a result of the outcomes of the Panel Discussion and other meetings⁹, OECD created the "Consultative Group on Transport Research" (CGTR) in 1968, gathering delegates from Transport Departments of Member countries. Despite its broad denomination, the Group concentrated its program on transportation issues in urban areas during its three-year long activity. Four assessments were completed by the CGTR: "Improvements and innovations in urban bus systems", "Transportation systems for major activity centers", "Urban movement of goods", "Air transport access to urban areas"¹⁰. It also led a policy analysis on "Urban traffic noise". At the end of the 1960s, OECD showed a greater interest for urban planning through the prism of transportation matters. Even if the approach was partial, it gave the Organisation its first contact with this field of planning.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL TURN OF THE OECD (1969) AND THE FOCUS ON THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

In September 1969, Dutch politician Emile van Lennep became Secretary-General of the OECD, succeeding to Thorkill Kristensen. As soon as he arrived, Lennep opened the way to an essential turn in the priorities of the Organisation, asked by a Ministerial Council meeting in February. In a first memorandum entitled *Problem of Modern Society*¹¹, the new Secretary-General pointed out the importance of the environment as part of economic growth. He circulated another document in December 1969, entitled *Problems of Modern Society: Economic Growth, Environment and Welfare*¹², in which he developed further the arguments for a in-depth reorientation of OECD works:

"[...] the Organisation should interpret the challenge facing Modern Society in such a way that in defining the growth for the next decade emphasis is placed on the qualitative as opposed to the quantitative aspects of growth. That is, for the 1970s, we should put more emphasis on welfare, and less on growth for its own sake."

One of the major concepts was the "external diseconomies" caused by growth that should be taken into account. The document was welcomed by national delegates and the reorientation formally endorsed in May 1970¹³. With this turn, the Organisation appeared to be closely in line with contemporary concerns. The same year, British Government created a Ministry of Environment by merging the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the Ministry of Transport. In France, a first *Ministère de l'Environnement* was created in 1971.

It was then that OECD paid prominent attention to urban planning. Within a new Environment Committee, created to coordinate the new research program, one of the five specialised sector groups was devoted to the "Urban Environment"¹⁴.

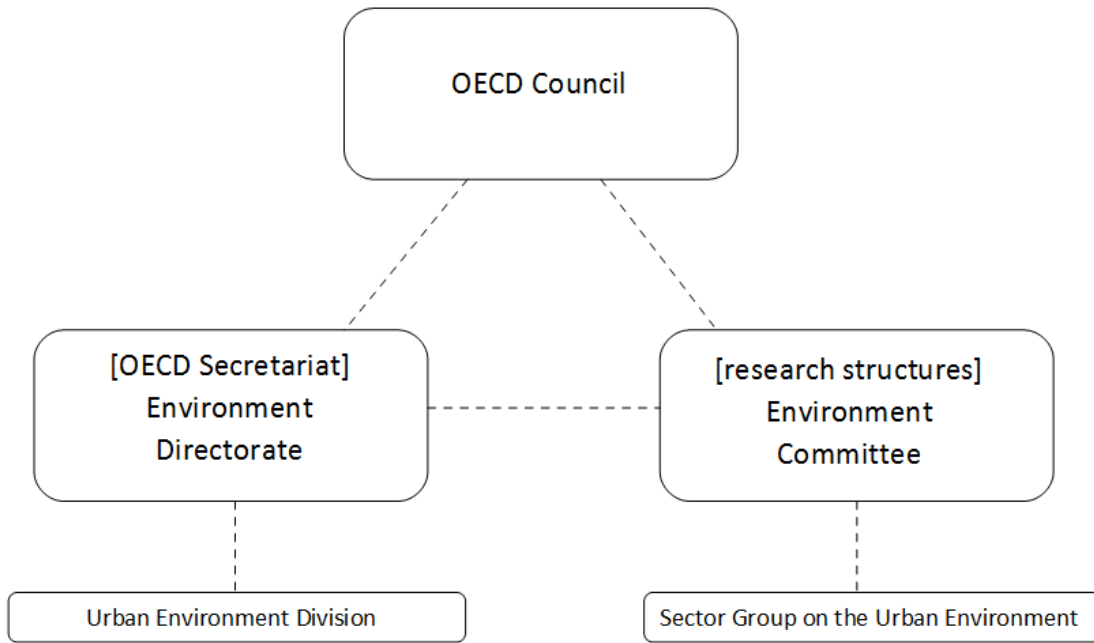


FIGURE 1 Urban Environment as part of OECD's working program. Simplified organigram showing structures dedicated to urban research after OECD reform in 1970.

At its first meeting, the Sector Group on the Urban Environment (SGUE) gave a broad understanding to the concept, close to the then actual notion of “quality of life”:

“The Group may, therefore, prefer to take such a creative approach and extend its interest to include all elements that together make up urban quality : housing, transportation, public services, clean air, freedom from noise, privacy, the rational use of land, the safety and amenity of urban living and the appearance of the city.”¹⁵

This assertion extended considerably the areas of interest of the OECD regarding urban planning. In fact, the SGUE only replaced the CGTR and, officially, shared the same aims and objectives (its programme is copied from the CGTR)¹⁶. But a major change was operated in its composition. In the CGTR, all delegates belonged to national Transport Departments, whereas most of them, in the SGUE, came from various ministries all dealing with urban planning in their countries. Of its origins, the Sector Group retained a field of predilection for transportation matters. It was headed by Brian Richards, a UK architect and a public transport expert. In a provocative manner, the first assessment the Group was to conduct was entitled “Exclusion of automobile traffic in downtown areas”.

FROM LOCAL TO TRANSNATIONAL THEN NATIONAL: THE FACILITATING ROLE OF OECD IN THE EXCHANGE OF URBAN PLANNING IDEAS

DOCUMENTING TRANSNATIONAL PHENOMENA: THE BOTTOM-UP PROCESS OF AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION

The function of the Sector Group on the Urban Environment was not to elaborate itself new ideas in the field of urban planning but to “bring to the attention of public officials significant approaches and innovative concepts”¹⁷. The SGUE played a role of identification. It had to point out initiatives of major interest that do exist but were not generalised. This could include policies experimented by a single Member state or only few of them, as well as projects led by local authorities or private actors. Recognizing these initiatives, the SGUE must seek for significative examples and collect precise informations (costs, benefits, feasibility, external impacts). This investigation might end up with a statement of conclusions that, once validated by OECD Council, should lead Member States to initiate new policies.

This working method implied a bottom-up process, unusual for a period dominated by centralised policies – at least in France or in the UK. The task of the Group was to identify on-the-ground realities (local scale) in order to shape contemporary topics of interest (transnational scale) and recommend Member States plans of action (national scale). This pattern was induced by the logic of an international organisation. OECD research programs would only be meaningful if they contribute to highlight phenomena that were not led by States themselves. Significantly, the founding charter of the SGUE was entirely built around concepts of “innovation” and “experimentation”.

“Finally, the Group may wish to throw its weight behind attempts to introduce a more experimental spirit in dealing with urban problems. [...] There would be greater likelihood that innovation and experimentation in urban development would be viewed as something significant rather than of marginal values.”¹⁸

No precise definition was given to these concepts, but the SGUE underlined the importance of placing the notion of “pragmatism” at the heart of its works. This gave the opportunity to highlight local schemes led by city governments, outside the framework of national policies. Till the beginning of its activity, the SGUE gave a prominent place to local scale as a privileged ground for innovation in the field of urban planning, taking into account the social, human and environmental matters altogether. Among the first ten assessments completed by the Group, most of research programs effectively dealt with local experiments: “Vehicle-free areas in cities” (1970-1972), “Policy instruments for influencing the form and structure of urban development” (1972-1974), “Urban noise abatement” (1973-1975), “Low-cost improvements in the outdoor urban environment” (1973-1975), “Management of publicly-owned land” (1975-1977), “Traffic policies for improvement of urban environment” (1975-1976).

Nevertheless, this orientation did not intend to oppose local governments to State administrations. It rather underlined the interest of national ministerial delegations for any idea that would be likely to embody the new concern for environment in urban planning. It also recongnized that local planners and councillors were best placed to mesure the “diseconomies” of growth.

AN EXAMPLE: FIRST ASSESSMENT ON TRAFFIC-FREE ZONES IN CITY CENTERS (1970-1972)

The first assessment (“Exclusion of automobile in downtown areas”) clearly illustrated SGUE’s working methods. In 1970, none of OECD Member States had a clear policy about automobile traffic limitation in downtown areas. First initiatives came from local governments in the early 1960s. In November 1970, SGUE delegates were requested to identify best experts in that field in their countries and to invite them to present their experiences. Seven experts were heard by the SGUE at its first meeting in September 1971¹⁹. Five of them were city planning officers, a then thriving profession: Kai Lemberg (Copenhagen, Denmark), Alain Gaspérini (Rouen, France), Alfred A. Wood (Norwich, UK), Wilhelm Niehusener (Essen, Germany) and Curt Elmberg (Goteborg, Sweden). In both cases, the experts selected had initiated the very first pedestrian precinct experiment in their countries without going through any national policy. The two experts remaining were the famous US planner Victor Gruen, who gave a general introduction²⁰, and Sidney Davidoff, right-hand man of New York Mayor John Lindsay, who supported the project to turn most of Madison Avenue into a pedestrian mall²¹.

All presentations focused on the local ability to solve a problem and to break with the mainstream car-dominated model of urban planning. Particular attention was paid to local negotiation process, demonstrating a pragmatic approach. Local scale enabled innovation. From that point of view, Norwich City Planner was probably the most assertive²². In his paper, the city was not considered as a sole experience, but as a fundamental step that would allow all cities through the UK to follow this example, without fearing to make mistakes. Alfred A. Wood insisted on the activity of Norwich Planning Department as the unique responsible for the scheme: it initiated the project, conducted an international study tour in Germany and Denmark to gain experience (implying that the UK Transportation Department was of no assistance) and negotiated with reluctant local politicians, shopkeepers and so on.

Following this first meeting, the SGUE carried the second phase consisting to translate the various local experiences into a synthesis that could lead to national policies or even to an international cooperation in that field. It appointed John Michael Thomson, a British transport expert, to elaborate a report allowing to shift from technical to political considerations at a national level. In the beginning of the 1970s, automobile restraints were a very sensitive subject. Thomson worked on a standardization that would not be perceived as too controversial. “Exclusion of automobile” became “Policy towards the creation of vehicle-free areas”, in a more positive approach typical in OECD’s rhetoric. In its statement of conclusions, circulated in April 1972, the SGUE argued that “what is needed to promote vehicle-free areas is not a revolutionary change in existing policy and practice, but a shift in emphasis”²³. In support of this, the document cited the “experience from many cities all over the world” as an existing phenomenon that should persuade States to support these initiatives.

In July 25th, 1972, the OECD Council unanimously adopted the statement of conclusions enjoining Member States to promote pedestrianisation in city centers, giving an international visibility to a phenomenon limited to local experiments.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE OECD ON URBAN PLANNING

DISSEMINATING CONCLUSIONS

The work of the Sector Group on the Urban Environment was not to be limited to OECD's internal activity. In charge of monitoring the group within the Secretariat, an Urban Environment Division was also dedicated to the dissemination of conclusions at a larger scale. Headed by US senior official and transport expert C. Kenneth Orski, the Division was particularly active to promote SGUE's works about the first assessment. The very first initiative took place as soon as September 1971 (a few days after the first meeting of the Group), through a publication in the Spanish official planning review *Ciudad y Territorio*. The issue²⁴ gathered papers from city planning officers responsible for first pedestrian schemes in their cities, without recommendation from the OECD – due to the early date of publication. In June 1972, Orski coordinated himself a special issue of the US review HUD International Brief entitled "Vehicle-Free Zones in City Centers: The European Experience"²⁵. The volume reproduced the previous case studies but new reports were added, among which Thomson's work on the way to initiate national pedestrian policies and a synthesis written by Orski that presented – with optimism – pedestrianisation as a global phenomenon.

This publication activity peaked in 1974 with an official synthesis edited by the OECD and entitled *Streets for People*²⁶, in reference to Bernard Rudofsky's book published in 1969²⁷, although the project was quite different. It gathered all case studies plus some new ones and all synthesis produced during the first assessment, with an emphasis to political aspects. At that time, this represented the most complete study on the subject. Some books were published before, but they were only collections of case studies realised for a limited audience²⁸. The volume became soon a reference and was still cited by experts in the beginning of the 1980s²⁹.

With this first assessment, the activity of the OECD related to the urban environment and urban planning gained higher visibility at a time these issues were more and more considered as future-oriented for Member States. In April 14th-16th 1975, the Environment Directorate of the Organisation organised an international conference entitled 'Better Towns With Less Traffic', mobilizing past and present works of the SGUE around the theme of low-cost improvements of urban areas. More than 330 persons attended the conference, including representatives from 60 ministries/secretaries from 22 countries, 45 representatives of municipal governments (most of them from Europe) or world-famous experts as Sir Colin Buchanan. Following SGUE's working methods, the program highlighted seven case studies: Uppsala, Munich, Nottingham, Bologna, Besançon, Nagoya and Singapore. Again, but at a higher level, OECD facilitated the circulation of innovative ideas in urban planning from local to transnational.

THE IMPACT OF OECD'S RECOMMENDATIONS ON NATIONAL POLICIES: THE CASE OF FRANCE

The impact of OECD's works and conclusions is not documented through the archives. No appraisal was conducted to this end by the Organisation. Nevertheless, an example may help to illustrate the way OECD's results could be reused by a national administration. In the late 1970s, pedestrianisation was considered in France, a country renowned for its centralised system, as the result of a circular note published by the Minister for Equipment in Jacques Chaban Delmas' government, Olivier Guichard, in December 29th, 1972, entitled *Creation of pedestrian precincts in city centers*³⁰. In fact, first schemes were initiated at a local level by city governments in the late 1960s (Rouen), but, significantly, the circular note was perceived as a turning point.

French experts from the Minister for Equipment knew about pedestrian experiences in Europe till the mid-1960s³¹ but never launched such a policy. The circular note was the very first effort in this sense. It was published only two months after OECD circulated the conclusions of SGUE's first assessment (October 1972). If both documents are compared, they seem to be similar in substance. The Minister reused arguments taken from the recommendations promulgated by the international organisation to establish the circular note addressed to prefects:

| OECD'S RECOMMENDATIONS, OCTOBER 1972 (VOTED JUNE 1972) | CIRCULAR NOTE BY OLIVIER GUICHARD, DECEMBER 29TH, 1972 |
|--|--|
| “Demonstration projects should be promoted and supported in selected towns and cities in Member countries” | “I ask you to give city governments the opportunity to know how vehicle-free zones can dramatically improve the living environment [...]” |
| “Planning for urban areas and, in particular, urban land use and transportation studies, should include consideration of pedestrian movement” | “I consider it very important that all local authorities add the concern to create pedestrian precincts to their everyday reflections and actions in the field of urban planning.” |
| “Governments should, where appropriate, review current financial, legal, administrative and institutional arrangements for encouraging the creation of vehicle-free areas in cities” | “I wish to support these initiatives. My services will always be available for local governments that would launch such actions [...]” |
| “Governments should carry out and support studies of pedestrian movement” | |

TABLE 1 The influence of OECD on a national policy. Comparison between OECD’s recommendations about vehicle-free areas in city centers (June-October, 1972) and the circular note from French Minister of the Equipment Olivier Guichard (December 29th, 1972)

A guidance note, attached to the circular note³² and setting out three arguments in favour of pedestrianisation, followed the same process. The arguments were exactly the same as those developed in OECD’s recommendations: a pedestrian precinct does improve the urban environment ; it contributes to reinforce social life ; it helps to increase turnover. This is all the more striking because, in both cases, the french text did not add any argument to OECD’s list.

Pointing out this parallel does not mean that the OECD was the sole origin of a national policy. Other aspects need to be taken into account. The circular note formed part of the launching of the *politique des villes moyennes* (medium-sized towns policy) and the recommendations arrived at the right time. It is also possible to assert that this reusing process demonstrates how a national ministry get acculturated to the importance of a topic through the role of OECD. By translating an on-the-ground phenomenon into a political framework, the Organisation allows the appropriation of new concepts by national administrations.

CONCLUSION

Created in the early 1960s to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world, the OECD gradually integrated urban planning as a component of its research program. A shift in emphasis was carried out through the environmental turn of the Organisation in 1969-1970, when a specific Division was dedicated to the Urban Environment, associated to a research Sector Group on the same topic.

This initial approach of OECD’s role highlights an uncommon process in the circulation of urban planning ideas during the second half of the twentieth century. Because the task of an international organisation is to inform Members countries of innovative and rising phenomena, OECD’s working programs articulated levels from local experiments straight to transnational observation, before translating results into recommendations for national policies. In this sense, the Organisation contributed to make cities more visible actors in the field of urban planning, at a period dominated by the role of centralised administrations. This anticipates the mechanisms described by Patrick Le Galès regarding the impact of European Union policies in the rise of European cities till the early 1980s³³.

OECD’s methods illustrate, since the early 1970s, some dialogue between local and national levels through an international organisation. Even in such a centralised country as France, local authorities were able to develop innovative experiments by their own. Without exaggerating the significance of this phenomenon, national administrations were in turn open to learn from the local scale, especially if experiences expresses a transnational reality. The OECD’s played here a facilitating role. Collecting informations about innovative experiments across all Member States, the Organisation contributed to make transnational phenomema visible and to give them a meaning, using a great variety of ways.

Many aspects remain to be studied, in particular the balance of power between national delegations within the OECD that could clarify research programs choices. For example, US delegates played a important role in the creation of the Urban Environment Division (by the way headed by a US senior official, C. Kenneth Orski) and the SGUE in 1969-1970. Nevertheless, the first assessment on “auto-exclusion” remained focused on the European experience and US were the only delegates to distance from the OECD’s statement of conclusions³⁴. The international organisation was not a neutral observer. Launching a research program ensued strategic choices. In that sense, the activity of the OECD reveals as much the transnational dimension of urban planning till the second half of the twentieth as it highlights the increasing but selective and uncomplete awareness by the national governments of this trend.

Notes on contributor

Cedric Ferial holds a Ph.D. in history (University Paris-Saclay, 2015) and is assistant lecturer at the University Rennes 2. His research focuses on the revitalization of historical inner-city areas during the second half of the twentieth century and on the exchange of planning ideas. His Ph.D dissertation dealt with pedestrianisation of city-centers in Europe and the USA in the 1960s-1970s as a transnational urban mutation conducting by city governments.

Endnotes

- 1 Ewen, Saunier, *Another Global City*, 2008.
- 2 *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 29, n° 2, 2014.
- 3 OECD Library & Archives, 2 rue André Pascal, 75116 Paris.
- 4 *Convention of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, Paris, 14th December 1960.
- 5 OECD archives, DAS/CSI/67.1.
- 6 OECD archives, DAS/CSI/67.1, *Catalogue of International Organisations concerned with traffic problems*, 5th January 1967.
- 7 Between 1965 and 1967, OECD Council’s minutes repeatedly show the interest of US delegates for urban transportation topics.
- 8 OECD archives, DAS/CSI/67-82.
- 9 Among which the meeting of the Ad Hoc Group of Experts on Urban Simulation Models, in December 1967. OECD archives, DAS/CSI/67.104.
- 10 OECD archives, U/ENV/71.1.
- 11 OECD archives, C(69)123.
- 12 OECD archives, C(69)168.
- 13 OECD archives, CM(70)15.
- 14 The concept was not invented at this occasion. It was already part of the issues covered, for example, by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development till 1965.
- 15 OECD archives, U/ENV/71.5, appendix D.
- 16 The comparison between U/ENV/71.1 (last meeting of CGTR) and U/ENV/71.5 (first meeting of SGUE) reveals that texts are similar.
- 17 OECD archives, U/ENV/71.5.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 OECD archives, U/ENV/71.4.
- 20 His intervention was entitled “the Taming of the Motor Car”, as was the chapter 16 of his well-known book *The Heart of Our Cities*, 1964.
- 21 Launched in 1970, the project was buried in 1973 when Lindsay lost the elections.
- 22 OECD archives, U/CKO/71.451, A.A. Wood, *Traffic Restraint and Foot Streets in Norwich*, May 1971.
- 23 OECD archives, U/ENV/72.4, SGUE, *Policy Towards*, 20 avril 1972.
- 24 *Ciudad y Territorio*, n° 3, jul-sep 1971.
- 25 HUD International Brief, n° 16, June 1972.
- 26 OECD, *Streets for People*, 1974.
- 27 Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People*, 1969.
- 28 John G. Gray, *Pedestrianised shopping Streets*, 1965 ; Wood, *Foot Streets*, 1966 ; Greater London Council, *Pedestrianised Streets*, 1972.
- 29 For example in John Roberts, *Pedestrian Precincts*, 1980.
- 30 Circular Note: Olivier Guichard, *Création d’espaces piétonniers dans les centres des villes*, Paris, MATELT, 29 décembre 1972.
- 31 Joseph Elkouby, an engineer working for the Minister, was rapporteur of the session “Pedestrian zones” during the International Congress for Road Safety held in Barcelona in 1966. Papers for the preparation of the 6th National Plan in 1969-1970 also show that urban planning experts were well informed in that field.
- 32 MATELT, *Note d’orientation sur la création d’espaces piétonniers dans les centres des villes*, 29 décembre 1972.
- 33 Patrick Le Galès, *European Cities*.
- 34 US delegates refused to recognise that pedestrianisation systematically increases turnover, claiming that the US experience gave no indication in that sense.

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