

# **GREEN SPACES IN CITIES SINCE 1918: POLITICS, IDEOLOGIES AND PERCEPTIONS**

## **Rooting vines back in Montmartre: 1933-2003**

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### **Green spaces, urban planning and collective memory**

The ideas developed by André Micoud in his work on the construction of collective heritage based on natural elements<sup>1</sup>, provide the theoretical background I would like to use in this case study. Green spaces can indeed support such a use by offering a medium between environment, social groups and their past or, so to say, between Men, History and Nature. Vegetation may hence belong to collective heritage the same way official monuments do. Its selection, promotion and use embody the way groups reshape their collective memory through space. In addition to their functions of green element and tourist attraction in Montmartre, vines give us the opportunity to study how historical and natural environments can strategically be bound together. The return of vines in Montmartre represents indeed the turning point of the collective action led by inhabitants to protect their space and control urban planning. Along with these vines were rooted back valuable representations of picturesque landscape, which became central in the planning of Montmartre. Through this case study, we are given a hint about how urban collective heritage can surprisingly be set upon vegetation and rural-like elements. Green spaces can stand in for missing monuments if they are supported by suitable representations. They may also embody local history, and thus become a key element for urban planning and collective memory.

### **From wine production to urban planning**

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, religious congregations developed wine production on several hills in downtown Paris and around the city. Montmartre's vines first belonged to Abbots, who were powerful landlords. Vines represented then 93% of the cultivated lands in

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<sup>1</sup> « Entre Loire et Rhône, ou comment des objets naturels peuvent faire du lien », 2000, in *Ce qui nous relie*, MICOUD A., PERONI M. (coordonné par), La Tour d'Aigues, éditions de l'Aube

Montmartre. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, vine owners were mainly merchants from Paris seeking investment opportunities. This wine could be purchased in first-rate taverns. Its production declined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and hardly represented 25% of the cultivated surface in Montmartre (and still 52% in Belleville). Private gardens and houses replaced vines little by little. The last ones were rooted away after the annexation of the former suburbs to Paris in 1860. Intensive wine production had however stopped there much earlier because of the fierce competition led by French, Spanish and Italian wine-growing regions. It is thus interesting to study the revival of vines all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Montmartre, which was not based at first on local economy or ecology.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this hill lately annexed to Paris was still linked to old farms and houses falling apart as well as muddy slums. All of these were partly changed into high Haussmann-type buildings. Local population was a melting pot mixing artists at different levels of fame but also learned municipal politicians. They were mostly organized through cultural and scientific societies. Homeless and poor people represented the majority of the population but they were left aside from collective actions. Montmartre was a fine investment for 1920's real estate speculation because of its numerous wastelands and unused gardens. These areas were hence bought to build new blocks. Two kinds of answers were brought by the inhabitants to prevent such an urban planning. The group of municipal leaders and scientists tried to follow the 1913 legislation and classify the historical interest of the top of the hill. Unfortunately, there was not much to be labelled as "historical monument", for Montmartre did not have the same legitimate heritage as the ancient and central quarters of Paris. So this group lobbied to make the City purchase abandoned lands and keep them free from construction. The City of Paris started buying wastelands but, against all odds, soon planned a wide program of social housing. Artists, scientists and municipal leaders strongly reacted against this planning. They suggested using the area differently by creating a garden, the "Liberty square", which was later turned into vines.

Different cultural groups, which still exist, now claim they were responsible for the introduction of these vines. Even the City pretends it was a municipal decision. According to general history books on Paris, vines in Montmartre were planted by opponents to social housing planning. Members of the local scientific society say their

former president personally struggled to prevent the City constructions. According to them, the “Liberty square” was opened in 1929 and vines were planted by the “Commune de Montmartre”, a cultural group, in 1933. Another local association, created by well-known satirical painters, who called themselves the Republic of Montmartre, usually gives a different point of view. This philanthropic group claims they illegally invested the field in 1929 and planted “freedom trees”, naming the place “the Freedom square”. It was devoted to children. Since the extensive use as a playground damaged it, another function had to be found. The “republicans” were given vines by some acquaintances and the area finally became a vineyard. Nowadays, this remains the best-known explanation.

However, the City withdrew its social housing program at the end of the 1920’s. As a consequence, local vines embodied the resistance against the spread of the big City. Their justification was then organized through the grape harvest feast. The first one took place in 1934 although vines were too young to produce fruits. Grapes were thus supplied by the Beaujolais region. The feast starred music hall singers, movie actors and political personalities like French President Albert Lebrun. The involvement of mass medias promoted the celebration and made it popular. All of this helped institutionalising the vines as a true testimony of Montmartre’s rural past. Vines encountered a huge success among the inhabitants, who invested the place with strong local identity claims. The newborn vineyard finally took up 1500m<sup>2</sup>. Vines were provided by special partnerships with French wine-production regions, mixing different grapes species. Montmartre’s wine took back its former name: the “piccolo”. Since the 1930’s, harvest time has been celebrated every first Saturday of October, even if the real harvests are usually made weeks before. This natural element does not interfere with the regularity of the social calendar promoting local vegetation. Above all, heterogeneous vines planted on the barren northern side of the hill have found a legitimate place in the cultural and natural landscape of Montmartre.

### **Vines as a key element in the picturesque landscape**

The success of vines reinforced the use of green spaces as the cornerstone of urban planning in Montmartre. Based on the 1930 legislation dealing with the protection of “legendary, picturesque, historical and scientific spaces”, the planning of Montmartre

was suggested in 1947 by experts linked to local scientists and politicians. Instead of underlining the historical values of Montmartre, which did not match with genuine monuments, these experts emphasized the role of picturesque vegetation, architecture and “atmosphere”. These ideas were embodied by the rural-like restoration of the houses, streets and gardens. To experts, Montmartre was then to be seen as a huge garden where the presence of an “urban village” was only granted.

Vines were rooted into local legends and tours. They entered the list of the “monuments” to be visited in Montmartre and were given both a decorative and a commemorative function. In between vine rows, different flowers were planted to create an aesthetic effect. Roses, which are legitimately used in French vineyards, were mixed with common public park vegetation like boxwood, with countryside flowers such as daisies, with wild vegetation like ferns and also with edible plants. It was thus difficult to say if this green space was a vineyard or a vegetable garden, a public park or even a wild green place. Its colourful and multifunctional aspect helped supporting local memory as well as “folklore”. A commemoration plaque was unveiled there in 1967 to honour the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founder of the Republic of Montmartre. In the 1940’s, the City took hold of the wine production and became the main organizer of the grape harvest feast. Cellars were created in the basement of the local City Hall. As a tribute to the original charity program of the Republic of Montmartre, wine was sold by auction, the benefits of which went to social structures for children and invalid inhabitants from Montmartre. People could purchase a six-bottle wooden box, the top of which was created by local painters such as Bernard Buffet for instance. The bad taste of the wine was difficult to hide, but its high cost was justified by recalling the artistic value of the purchase and its social use. The well-known diuretic virtues of the “piccolo” were also underlined to prove how close to tradition the wine was.

Vines were used by the inhabitants of Montmartre to claim their monopoly on the picturesque and rural-like landscape in Paris. Renovating vegetation and architecture promoted the place and indirectly enhanced tourism.

### **From urban planning back to wine production**

The spread of both green spaces and local identity started being generally claimed by Parisian politicians and associations in the 1980's. As an ideal response to urban planning in former popular areas, the City planted vines in new public parks, which took the place of slums (in Belleville) or ancient industrial plants (in the 15<sup>th</sup> district). Vines from Montmartre were nevertheless not really competed by these new places. They were given another type of legitimacy by fitting local environmental concerns. The inhabitants of Montmartre, who were influenced by ecological ideologies, promoted the environmental values of the site in addition to its picturesque landscape. With the new surface planning legislation, known as the "Plan d'Occupation des Sols" (POS), local green spaces encountered more attention. The City even suggested that the inhabitants of Montmartre should introduce vines in their private gardens in order to stress the traditional rural identity of the place. Next to the vineyard, Saint Vincent's square was turned into a "wild" garden where plants could grow "naturally" without the control of gardeners. The place would open only once a week. From the Museum of Montmartre, which dates back from 1960, visitors can see the vines and the wild garden standing right beneath. These green spaces emphasize the museum exhibitions, which explain the rural past of the hill and its special atmosphere.

Vines still gathered different functions. The Commanderie of the Clos Montmartre, a group which was created in 1983 by the leader of the Republic of Montmartre, kept reinforcing its cultural and patrimonial aspects. Dressed up with dark red togas, its members joined the parade around Montmartre for the grape harvest feast. They enhanced new partnerships with villages of Champagne, Saint Emilion and Beaujolais, as well as with the wine museum of Osaka (Japan). The Commanderie of the Clos Montmartre was also involved during the 1990's in the restoration of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century water tower, which became its headquarters. It thus gave Montmartre a new element of collective heritage through what used to be a deserted place. Nevertheless, its promotion of local wine slowly moved from a folklorique to an expert touch. The Commanderie activated to change the "piccolo" into a legitimate vintage. Aside from its decorative and patrimonial functions, vines of Montmartre took the shape of an authentic vineyard where professional gardeners and specialists intended to produce genuine wine.

The vineyard is now strictly devoted to wine production except during the municipal Feast of Gardens that makes it look more like a public square. Special types of grapes like black pinot and gamay were selected in order to make the wine more homogeneous and fitter for trade. Wine quality and quantity improved as experts introduced techniques, which were commonly used by legitimate French wine producers. The newly hired wine expert asserts vines from Montmartre are now as well cultivated as that of Chateau Pétrus, although its wine still tastes “slightly” different. To him, the “piccolo” changed into some rather good wine called the “Clos Montmartre”. The production reaches about 400 litres a year and its merchandizing had to be reorganised. The Clos Montmartre is now sold by half-litre bottles at the Tourist Information Centre and at the Commanderie headquarters. It costs about 40 euros. The benefits still go to local charity programs. The name of a famous personality or institution of Montmartre has been given to every vintage since 1994: Toulouse Lautrec, le cabaret du Lapin Agile, le Moulin Rouge... Local identity is strongly claimed through these symbols. The artistic touch is also strengthened by the label, which is created by a local painter. Besides, the annual sponsors of the vintage are chosen among the artists who live in Montmartre.

Incidentally planted vines are thus no longer seen nowadays *as if* genuine: they *became* genuine, producing real wine, in what inhabitants pledge to be the last “urban village” of Paris.

Strategic uses of green spaces, which revealed the picturesque landscape of Montmartre, helped creating a monopoly in the urban environment. This unexpectedly managed to attract tourists while the central quarters of Paris were still being promoted through their ancient historical heritage. Politicians and inhabitants of Montmartre used vines as an answer to the lack of legitimate monuments and as a means to struggle against urban planning. Vines have not been perceived the same way since 1933, for they have not embodied the same functions. The different shapes and uses of this peculiar green place reveal how social groups match selected elements of the past and vegetation to create local history and identity.