

A DESIGN PROPOSAL FOR PLACE ANATOLE FRANCE

During my studies in Polytech Tours for the Master Programme *Planning and Sustainability*, we were asked to deliver a **conceptual design proposal of developing Place Anatole France-Tours**. The project was supervised by Prof. *Laura Verdelli* under the unit of *Heritage and Sustainable development*. Each group - made up of four students - had worked on a different proposal, with altered approaches to analyse the project components. This article is devoted to briefly explaining how we understood the project and what is the suggested proposal for developing *Place Anatole France*. Our concept design proposal suggests: **unifying the space and creating interactive nodes** within the site boundary would add a new experience to *Place Anatole France*. The group members are: Abinaya Rajavelu (India), Manasvini Hariharan (India), Alice Frantz Schneider (Brazil) and myself Hadeel Khawaja (Jordan).

The design proposal was divided into three main phases:

- Phase 'A' focused on understanding the project through thorough **site analysis** and divided into three divisions: 1) its urban fabric, 2) studying the previous proposals already made by the municipality/developers for the site area and 3) notes of the site users.
- Phase 'B' focused on coming up with **observations** influenced by the site analysis.
- Phase 'C' is the **concept design proposal**.

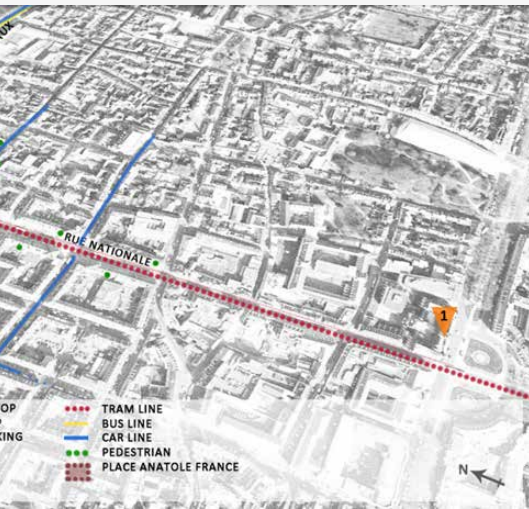
Starting with **Phase (A)**, the urban fabric had examined four components; the thoroughfares, the landscape and streetscape, the building types around the site, and the open public spaces.

Starting at the very beginning, *Place Anatole France* has a crucial location; it sets on the south bank of Le Loire River where it creates a **collector platform**. The site plan (Fig. 1) shows the **means of transportation and routes** from and to the site. Having the tram line halving the site into almost two symmetrical sides



1. Site plan of Place Anatole France.
Source : Google Maps, edited by Hadeel Khawaja





gives the space a unique character. On the other hand, a study for the traffic movement shows that the Place functions as an entrance node to Tours. Car commuters coming from the North through *Pont Wilson*, from the east through *Avenue André Malraux* and from the West through *Rue des Tanneurs* find a main multi story **car parking** just at the centre of *Place Anatole France*. Also, there are four main **bus stops** and a **tram stop** stopping by *Place Anatole France*. That means *Place Anatole France* will be **experienced by foot**, which adds an important value to how we analyse the space. Moreover, from *Place Anatole France* there are **access points to Le Loire River bank** for pedestrians/cyclists where many activities take place, such as jogging, cycling, punting or even just relaxing and enjoying the beauty of nature.

The current design of the **landscape** is simple, with minimal **streetscape** elements. **The vegetation** consists of grass carpets, few flower beds, tree pots and medium-tall trees on both sides of pedestrian path ways. **The tiling** is mainly white tiny stones or light grey asphalt with grey stone tiles shaping the pathways and border lines. **The streetscape** consists of a medium size fountain, very few benches, bus and tram stops (bench, transparent glass canopy and info panel), bicycles parking made of metal bars, advertisement panels and of course street lights. Those components were well analysed, firstly to identify what a space needs, secondly to study the impact of each element on the users. (Landscape Fig. 2, 3, 4)

A quick look around the site shows us that different **building types** exist with various facilities. Most of the buildings are **multi-functional** - retail, offices or residential. Hundreds of **commercial, retail and service facilities** are located along *Rue Nationale* and the side streets, which is considered to be Tours' major commercial district. This is a key factor taken into account

when analysing the area: it means that there are thousands of commuters moving in and out of the site on a daily, weekly or monthly basis for short periods of time (an hour or more). On the other hand, the south frontage of *Place Anatole France* has historical residential buildings adding a unique ambiance to the space. Now, looking at the site from a cultural perspective, the site is surrounded by: U.F.R. Lettres et Langues (educational), Church Saint-Julien (constructed in the 1240 AD), Compagnonnage museum, CACOD (under construction) and George Sand City Library (Fig.1). This rich cultural scene makes the space in a constant occupation by different groups of people.

The fourth component to mention is **the open public spaces**. Looking from a bird's eye view, the existing open spaces occupy a large percentage of the area's urban mesh. What is meant by the open public spaces here: pedestrian pathways, the garden next to the library, all the space of *Place Anatole France*, the back area of the church and the surrounding area of CACOD (School of Fine Art-previously), and of course the south banks of the Loire River. So, overall, this rich urban fabric can be viewed from two perspectives; the sensitivity of any new implementation and the diversity of population using the space.

Moving to the second part of the phase A. site analysis: studying the previous proposals already made by the municipality/developers for the site area. The study actually was devoted to analysing the report made by the Municipality of Tours entitled 'Development of *Rue Nationale*' (5th EUSS Jean-Luc Dutreix). Of course, studying all the report's components is beyond the scope of our work, but we were interested in the components which will have a direct influence on our concept design proposal. A major suggestion made by the PSMV was to deconstruct parts of the two parallel frontages at the end of *Rue Nationale* (where *Place Anatole France*

2, 3, 4. Landscape of Place Anatole France, Tours.

Source: Hadeel Khawaja



begins) in order to offer wider interacting open spaces on both sides of the corridor (currently the tramline). Of course, the deconstruction will be followed later by the reconstruction of other facilities such as retail shops and a hotel, but the study was only concerned about the layout of the proposed open public space curated. Another proposal made by the Agglomeration Community of Tour(s)plus (July 2012) is to construct a Gastronomy centre at the northwestern quarter of *Place Anatole France*, then it proposes to link the centre with the Loire River island.

Moving to the third and last division of phase (A) concerning the notes of the site users. To achieve this, a survey was made of 57 contributors chosen randomly at *Place Anatole France* through different times of the day. The survey aimed at questioning four things:

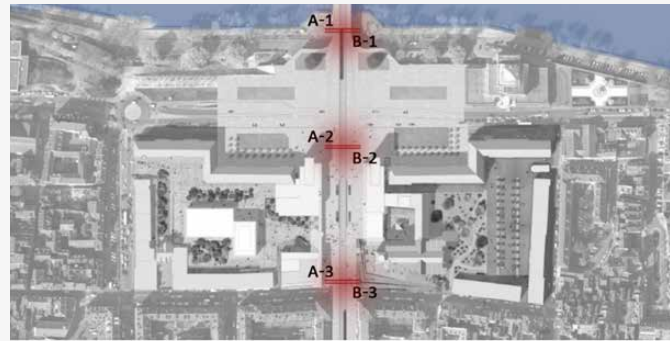
- getting a general idea of who uses the space most (age group and profession),
- what are the most favourable facilities desired to be found at *Place Anatole France* and the area around
- would they like having a Gastronomy centre knowing the fact that trees will be cut down at the chosen site
- how do they feel about the Loire banks.

The results can be found in Fig. 5

The observations concluded in **Phase (B)** are made on the basis of three criteria:

- the physical part of the site,
- the ambiance and
- the occupation of the space.

Having a bird's eye view (or an ant's view) on the site gives a clear impression of how **large the space** is. Therefore, there is a high potential for *Place Anatole France* to gain a major role in the city of Tours' public life. Its significant location makes it an actual **entrance** to the



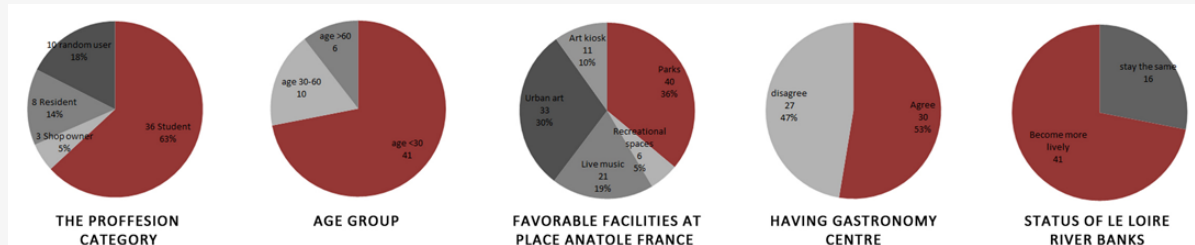
city and the frontage for tourists who are not coming through Tours train station. From a cultural perspective, the **cultural buildings** surrounding the space (Fig.1) assure there will be ever-going visits and constant events, which by default add another value and guarantee that the space would never be abundant or eliminated. On the other hand, **Le Loire River** bank forms the north façade of the space on a

6. Sections along the tramway, Tours.

Source: Hadeel Khawaja

5. Questionnaire results.

Source: group survey



lower elevation, and passing by *Place Anatole France* is a must to ascend downstairs to the banks. Through the site observations, there is no **visual connection** of Le Loire from the upper elevation where *Place Anatole France* sets. From a touristic or social point of view, it is very important to reconsider the connectivity criteria when redeveloping *Place Anatole France* in order to link both sites, visually at least.

The current status of *Place Anatole France* states as a “transit” space, passing through it to different directions or to take a transport. (Fig. 1) shows the conjunction node for the different means of transportation. Based on the site visits, there are thousands of commuters passing by the space daily, very few stay. Why? When walking through the site, within different times of the day, **the space is felt bare and soulless**. The current **tiling materials and colour** give the space a cold, flattened and neutral impression. To best describe this, we have taken 3 different points along 200 meters of the tram line –which divides *Place Anatole France* to two sides (east and west). From each point, two photos were captured; one toward the north and the other toward the south. The results demonstrate that; almost the same scene is seen along the tram line (Fig. 6). The scene seems repetitive, and the space misses a spontaneous or premeditated human interpretation, such as urban art or street furniture.

Furthermore, the **landscape and vegetation** chosen do not create a cosy or sentimental atmosphere. That goes for the flower beds, that are randomly distributed and too small to be an inviting element to enjoy, and the trees, that do not actually function as a collector pole or even a shelter. They are planted in a way that makes them look like decorative elements or a walking-through pathway (Fig.7).

Looking on to the streetscape, the **street furniture** used at *Place Anatole France* and *Rue Nationale* is minimal, especially when it comes to benches. According to the concept design of *Rue Nationale*, it was an intentional decision not to put benches along the street in order to make it ‘a commercial strip’ for people to shop-and-go or to use the areas offered by the cafes and restaurants located along the trip. However this concept, even if applied in *Rue Nationale*, should not be applied at *Place Anatole France* because it subverts the core concept of a public space, i.e. to have a space, publicly owned and occupied by various activities for various age groups, and benches are a major component to habituate a public space.

Moving on to the square’s occupation criteria, based on the results of the survey, most of the public space users were students or from an age group younger than thirty years old. Of course, this doesn’t mean literally that it is a fact, but since the survey was made through different times of the week, day and night, this point was taken in consideration. This young age group is the beating heart of any public space, whether through their live music, scattered assemblies, graffiti may be or spontaneous touch, especially that students of a young age do actually form a large percentage of the population. Also, 36% of those interviewed favoured having “a park” at *Place Anatole France* which means that the current condition of the space doesn’t act like a park, or in other words, it doesn’t act enough to look like a place being used as a public space, which explains why the space looks bare and torpid. Of course, the location of *Place Anatole France*, set between a main road access network, will not allow it to become a park in the traditional definition of the word, but what is meant is to obtain the characteristics of a park as a pleasant open space to enjoy.

7. West view for Place Anatole France.

Source: Hadeel Khawaja



The second favourable desired facility is to have urban art elements at *Place Anatole France*. In fact the presence of art installations means a **tangible and perceptible experience** for different age groups and backgrounds and is considered a crucial element in any open public space, especially if the space had a significant location and function. Urban art gives character and spirit to a public space, it also raises the feeling of belonging and uniqueness. Relatively speaking, it is well observed that France is in the forefront of the present movement to introduce art into public spaces, and at the local level, the design of Tours tramway was made by a design team headed by the agency RCP Design, in collaboration with several artists including Daniel Buren, Roger Tallon and Louis Dandrel.

Live music is a more sensitive activity, especially if the public space is in the heart of the city. However, at a more abstract level, the ‘sound of space’ is a dimension not to be missed. Music brings people together and creates a positive feel of togetherness. During summer time, Tours city does in fact open *La guinguette* on Le Loire banks. *La guinguette* offers various activities such as an outdoor cinema, bar, concerts, dance hall, etc. which brings life to the square. Another successful event is during the Christmas season when, various activities take place at *Place Anatole France* such as the Giant Wheel, skiing, and the Carrousel which create an attracting pole bringing people into the area. Hence, in order to best enjoy a public space, audio-visual activities are positive experiences, contributing to a higher potential for the location, as long as the limitations (not too often, finish on time etc.) are adhered to.

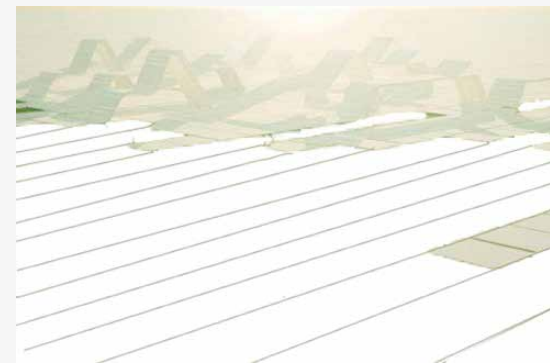
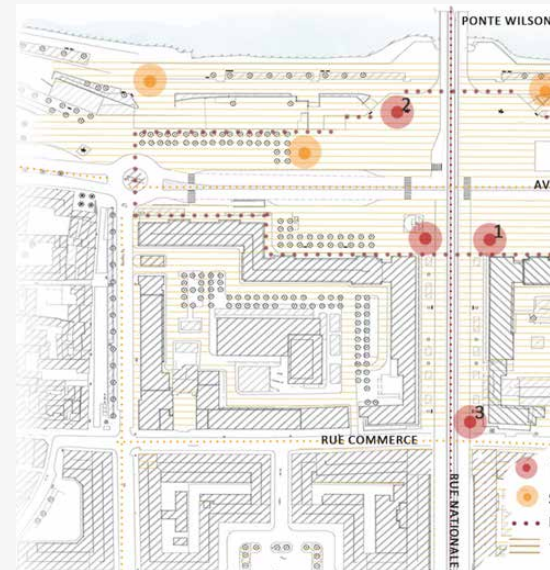
Now, coming to **Phase C**, the question is: how to make such a crucial open space in the heart of the city dynamic, welcoming and vivid, and still maintain the characteristics of the area?

The first idea was to **consider the whole area**, from Le Loire River bank till the intersection node of *Rue National* with *Rue Commerce*, as **one**

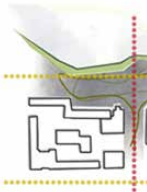
space, then unify the space and treat it as **one entity** by connecting the area visually and physically. As shown in Fig. 8, the space was divided into 4m strips, including the open spaces within the cluster of buildings. Those strips are first transformed into 2D tiling, implemented only horizontally and parallel to Le Loire River. The concept is to psychologically elevate the motion of the river to the upper level of the public space and “design” the pedestrian’ movement parallel to the river bank and the vehicles’ motion. Secondly, the 2D tiling elevates vertically on the Z access to create a third dimensional element into the area, which looks artistic and offers more benches, designed vegetation spaces, vivid pathways for a rolling coaster...etc. The best way to describe this concept is by looking at the school of “Folding Architecture”. (Fig. 9) which shows an inspiring case study by Veronica Martinez.

The second idea of the concept design proposal is to form interactive nodes allocated at particular points. The **interactive nodes** aim to achieve three major goals. Firstly, **add an artistic, dynamic impression to the space**, made by the users themselves through their interaction with the installation itself, and has a direct impact on the public space. Such an approach is believed to strengthen the bond between the users and the space. Secondly, some of the nodes will give the space **a definition and a unique character**, which, as a result, raises both the tangible and the perceptible value of the space, in addition to having a positive influence on the memories of tourists. The third goal aims to **create a strong and inspiring attraction** to take the people on a journey from the mentioned intersection node to Le Loire River. Through this journey, *Place Anatole France* will be discovered and experienced instead of being just used as a “terminal”.

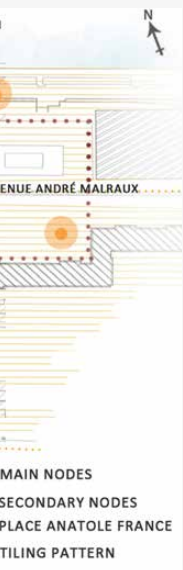
The node installations vary in their size, purpose and design, and can be used by all age groups and backgrounds. Fig.10 explains the proposed



CONNECTIVITY OF LE LOIRE RIVER AND ITS BANK TO THE CITY OF TOURS



IMPROVING ACCESS AND QUALITY OF THE SPACE

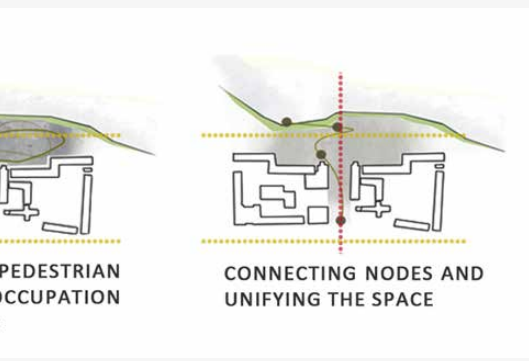


8. Concept design proposal for developing Place Anatole France, by creating unified tiling scheme and interactive nodes.

Source: Hadeel Khawaja

9. MARE outdoor furniture by Veronica Martinez of ENESENTIA.

Source: <http://www.morfae.com/xa385-veronica-martinez/>



10. illustrated visions of the proposed concept design.

Source: graphics by Abinaya Rajavelu

locations for three main and four secondary interactive nodes. So, what sort of installations are we looking at? The site analysis and observations demonstrate that *Place Anatole France* is acting as an entrance for Tours city. Therefore, the design proposal suggests installing a **3D lettering, slogan or sculpture** that best defines Tours city. The impact of defining or marking the city's entrance is essential as it leaves an impact on both categories of users: the daily commuters and the tourists. Moreover, using an artistic installation to design the hardscape of an open public space, and not use artistic figures only for decorative purposes, is a successful tool for redeveloping an open space. Successively, Node 1 in Fig. 10 was chosen as the best location for the sculpture because it is technically visualized from all three entrance routes (east, north and west), and where the all three car, bus and tram stops are located. On a side note, the current perceived element in the space is the car-parking elevator box which doesn't actually add any value for the space especially because it's not artistically designed.

The second main node is located at the upper elevation of *Le Loire River*. Considering the importance of the visual and physical connectivity between *Place Anatole France* and *Le Loire River*, **telescope installations** are suggested at Node 2 (Fig. 10). So, in addition to the tiling patterns design being parallel to the river flow in 2D and 3D shapes, the telescope nodes could function as a feature to attract the curiosity of people to explore it. Moreover, as proposed in Fig. 6, the Gastronomy centre will be linked in one way or another with the island on Le Loire, therefore, having a telescope node will embrace the visual connection with the island which will launch agricultural activities related to the Gastronomy centre.

The installation on the third node took a **modern high-tech** approach. Basically the idea is to implement installations that collect

information about the moving 'elements' within a chosen site boundary. Those elements could be vehicles, humans or anything else. The collected information will be translated into colourful *waves/bars/twirls* displayed on screens put up at Node 3. The idea behind establishing this node is to reinforce the objective of creating a pulling force by bringing the invisible scene of *Place Anatole France* and *Le Loire* to the middle of Rue Commerce. This idea of linking the space through visual and physical design will bring the three nodes together, and preserve the unity of the public space. On a side note, the third node installation is inspired by a case study called 'Display and Reactive Sparks' by *Markus Lerner*. Last but not least, the creation of the secondary nodes was influenced by the survey results and observations, which showed that 50% of the candidates favoured having live music and urban art installation in the square, which we believe will boost the vibe of the space and promote its dynamism for the users and by the users. The concept design proposes a very schematic and initiative idea inspired by international case studies such as the musical swing in Montreal and water light graffiti, musical fountains, The Bean... etc.

The following illustration explains the visions of the proposed concept design (Fig. 10).

Place Anatole France is a vital and inspiring open public space in Tours. Besides the history of the area, and Anatole France himself whom the space was named after, there are both present and the future opportunities going begging to recreate the space and engage the public to be part of its gleam. That's where the concept design proposal now stands. By introducing simple and dynamic implantations, and recreating a hardscape design that respects the character of the area yet offers a new vivid form that brings a vibrant atmosphere to the public space and for the people.