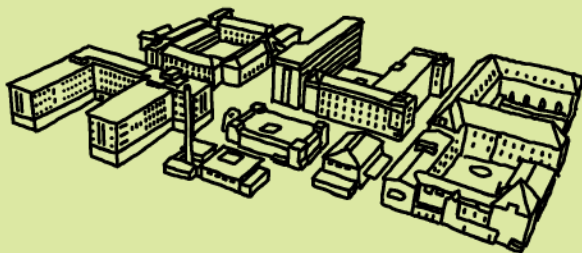


## Les Grands Voisins

A factory of the common good  
from 2015–2020



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France

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Les Grands Voisins was a cooperative utopian solidarity village active from 2015 until 2020 on the grounds of the former Saint-Vincent-de-Paul hospital as a transition project towards the creation of a district that will be completed in 2024. It was a place where diverse groups of people (artists, craftspeople, migrants, unemployed people, women and men, young and old alike) could meet, discuss projects, exchange ideas, and build a unique kind of coexistence.

The Les Grands Voisins project was born with the backing of the Parisian government, with the goal of responding to the housing emergency for migrants and people in vulnerable situations. Thanks to the action and the various skills of the organizations involved – Aurore, Yes We Camp and Plateau Urbain – Les Grands Voisins became a unique place hosting spaces for reception and reflection against exclusion; economically and socially sustainable offices and workshops, activities and cultural events for the city and its neighborhood.

The considerations and experiments produced by this experience, which is now over, have inspired some important elements of the future neighborhood: the preservation of some symbolic places in Les Grands Voisins (La Lingerie bar, L'Oratoire restaurant, Pouponnière hall), the importance of participation, the promotion of forms of "social and fair economy", the introduction of a neighborhood manager and a platform to manage the various commercial activities.



## WHERE

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The Saint-Vincent-de-Paul site has an extension of 3.4 hectares and is located in the heart of the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, between Denfert-Rochereau, the Cartier Foundation and Port-Royal. It consists of twenty or so buildings built during different stages of urban development: founded in 1650, the complex welcomed orphans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then became a children's hospital. After its closure in 2012, Saint-Vincent-de-Paul was identified by the public administration as a place to host a new eco-neighborhood open to the city. While waiting to start construction, the area hosted the temporary social project Les Grands Voisins.

### LOCATION

Urban

### TYPE OF SPACE

Complex of buildings

### ORIGINAL FUNCTION

Religious, educational and healthcare

### YEAR OF CONSTRUCTION

1650–1750: novitiate for Catholic priests  
1814–1914: hospice for children  
1930–2011: hospital specializing in birth and children's care

### SURFACE

34,000 sqm

### OWNERSHIP

Private

### CONCESSION

Free cession

### CONDITION BEFORE ACTIVATION

Abandoned

### COMPOSITION OF THE SPACE

*Accommodation and hospitality:*  
7 lodging facilities for homeless or disadvantaged people

Reception spaces for asylum seekers  
5 landscaped courtyards  
Maison des Voisins – Trocshop (bartering space)  
Camp site (tents and original mini-houses)  
Reception – concierge service  
Sport fields and playgrounds

### *Bars and restaurants:*

La Lingerie  
L'Oratoire  
Chauferrie  
Chez Gada  
3 food distribution counters

### *Culture, wellness and learning:*

Construction workshop  
Pouponnière hall (conference room, cinema and theater)  
Banya (Russian steam bath)  
Amphitheater  
Shared studios  
Arts Voisins Gallery  
Wellness cooperative (Solidarity and educational space dedicated to wellness and health: yoga, therapy, dance, cooking)

### *Boutiques:*

Ressourcerie (store, workshop, storage area dedicated to the reuse of objects and materials)  
Boutique collective (artwork, crafts and small-scale agricultural products)  
Boutiques-ateliers (designers, artists and local craftspeople who create products ethically and responsibly)  
Epicerie (grocery store selling fresh, organic, local, seasonal products cultivated by responsible producers through sustainable agricultural practices)

## WHEN

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### TIME OF DAY USED

Les Grands Voisins was a temporary reactivation experience that ended in 2020, when the complex was closed.

The space was open 24/7 for people working and living in it, while it had opening hours for the public.

### OPENING HOURS

Open to public (2015–2020):

Workdays 7am – 9pm

Weekends 10am – 9pm

Workdays 50%

Weekends 50%

### AVERAGE USERS PER DAY

4,000 visitors per day

2,000 people living and working at all times

1,000 homeless people hosted by

Aurora

46,500 were welcomed in the reception center for asylum seekers and refugees  
600,000 visitors over 5 years

## WHAT

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The main activities of the common could be categorized as follows:

Accommodation center and employment support. The Hôpitaux de Paris hosted more than 1,000 people experiencing housing difficulties and tens of thousands of asylum seekers through emergency accommodation services, stabilization and integration processes and a hostel for foreign workers.

Affordable workplaces. Hundreds of workshops, stores and work spaces were designed and opened to help realize projects that had problems in accessing the traditional rental market. The goal was to promote the return of craftsmanship to the heart of the city, and spread manual, artistic and agricultural know-how with circular economy and environmental sustainability in mind.

Cultural events. More than 300 cultural,

educational and artistic free events were organized. The cultural agenda, with free events open to everyone, offered sharing and training opportunities to the residents of the reception spaces, but also to the neighborhood and the city at large. At the same time, it offered opportunities for experimentation and creation, mixing cultural events and artistic projects in outdoor spaces.

### SURFACE IN USE

34,000 sqm

### THEMATIC AREAS

Commercial

Coworking and workspace

Culture and arts

Design, crafts and production

Entrepreneurship

Housing

Welfare

### USER DEMOGRAPHIC

The activities were open to everyone.

Under-represented people: homeless people, migrants

### COLLABORATIONS

Artists and creatives

Associations and collectives

Citizens and local community

Companies

Other commons

Professionals and freelancers

Public administrations and public authorities

Universities and schools

### NETWORK

Local

Regional

National

International

## WHO

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Les Grands Voisins is a virtuous example of cooperation between institutions and a team of private organizations formed by the associations Aurore and Yes We Camp and the cooperative Plateau Urbain, which were responsible for the management and economic sustainability of the project.

### MANAGING ORGANIZATION(S)

1. Aurore (association, 1871)
2. Yes we Camp (association, 2013)
3. Plateau Urbain (cooperative, 2013)

### PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE MANAGEMENT

20

Over 5,000 volunteers

## HOW

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The governance system of Les Grands Voisins was composed of a General Council and three working groups organized monthly and open to interested parties, on the following topics: set-up of the spaces, social work, and cultural agenda. Finally the Conseil des Voisins, open to everyone, was organized every two months to exchange ideas and updates, and to make decisions regarding collective projects. The meeting was also a cheerful moment when people shared common values. In addition, the three main organizations had weekly meetings to deal with problems in daily management. The main expenses were investments in the development of the common areas, the salaries of the coordination team, and the operational expenses (site maintenance, security, artistic scheduling, routine maintenance).

### NATURE OF THE INITIATIVE

Codesigned

### TYPE OF MANAGEMENT

Horizontal

### ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Commercial activities  
Public grants  
Rental income  
Tickets and entrance fees

### TYPE OF ACTIVITIES

50% Free  
50% Paid



Listen to 29 podcasts  
about daily life in Les  
Grands Voisins

## Did you know?

### The evolution and heritage of Les Grands Voisins

In December 2012 Cécile Duflot, the Minister of Housing, launched an appeal to the owners of vacant buildings in order to find a solution to the housing emergency in Paris. In response, the Assistance Publique - Hôpitaux de Paris (APHP) trust decided to offer the unused premises of the maternity ward of the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul hospital to the association Aurore. As a result, the first two emergency reception centers were opened on the former hospital premises.

In 2014 the City of Paris, which had become the owner of the complex, offered the Aurore association the opportunity to occupy all 3.4 hectares of space while waiting for the works that would see its transformation into a mixed-use, predominantly residential district, with the political will to make the spaces useful to as many people as possible.

Upon the invitation of the municipality of the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, the association Aurore tried to diversify its activities by combining housing with other social activities. To this end, the association was joined by two organizations: the cooperative Plateau Urbain and the association Yes We Camp. Plateau Urbain helped to formalize an economic model for the management of the complex, making some spaces available to associations, small businesses, artisans and artists in exchange for a small fee. Yes We Camp was responsible for planning and developing a cultural program open to Parisians and local residents.

In 2015 the experiment found its name, Les Grands Voisins, and common goals were set: to promote social diversity, encourage the creation of a place for the community, and propose new forms of resilience in the city.

A “prototype” phase, which lasted until December, was established to test the cohabitation of different demographics: residents of the temporary housing center, tenants of commercial premises, visitors, campers, and activists for the period of COP21.

Between 2016 and 2018, Les Grands Voisins was home to 250 associations and enterprises, accommodating nearly a thousand people, and welcoming up to 5,000 visitors per day.

In October 2020 Les Grands Voisins closed its doors but the experience inspired the planning authority Paris & Métropole Aménagement in its reflections on the future of the neighborhood: the importance of participation, the need to pursue activities with a strong dimension of “social economy and solidarity”, the need for a neighborhood manager, the importance of integrating a center for the reception of people in need, and attention towards common gathering spaces. The administration also decided to preserve some symbolic places of Les Grands Voisins: La Lingerie bar, L’Oratoire restaurant, and Pouponnière hall.



## How did your story begin?

Plateau Urbaine was a young organization when it identified a big opportunity: a hospital in the Paris city center was about to be demolished to give way to a new housing project. The project was delayed so the local government decided to do something different: they contacted the association Aurore, an important organization engaged in social service projects, and proposed the idea of using the rooms of the former hospital to host homeless people and refugees awaiting documents and permits.

Back then, Aurore, which already knew Plateau Urbaine and Yes We Camp, asked us: “Why don’t we try to do something different, something bigger?”

We received political support from the Ministry of Housing and started a collaboration with the city council, which gave birth to Les Grands Voisins. Yes We Camp was responsible for the opening to the public, taking care of artistic direction, public communication, local partnerships, cultural agenda, visual identity, design of common spaces, etcetera. Plateau Urbaine was responsible for technical coordination, space management and designing a

“Les Grands Voisins was a place that meant a lot to all the citizens of Paris. Giving this place back to the community was our biggest achievement.”

sustainable economic model attentive to social needs and future development. Aurore, in addition to the operational management of the day care center and reception centers, was responsible for the technical and financial management of the

project. It was a wonderful five-year experience, thanks to a proactive, trust-building approach that showed how Les Grands Voisins was a temporary and effective alternative to private owners for preserving and reusing buildings.

Even though the experience of Les Grands Voisins is now over, it will never disappear: it was well documented with photos and a documentary, but most of all it positively influenced the real estate project: after this experience, the new neighborhood that will rise in the place of Les Grands Voisins will have social areas where people can meet, a shared garden, and work spaces that are more affordable than market prices. So, even if the project doesn’t exist anymore, part of its madness survives.

## Is there a practice or value that represents you and you think may be an inspiration to others?

The year Les Grands Voisins closed, we organized a big party, opening the doors to all the people who contributed to the project for an entire day: people living or working in the complex, politicians, and employees of the urban planning department and the social sector.

We set up a stage where people could meet, there were podcasts to listen to and learn about the project, and in the evening we had a big meeting in the former nursery, which was also broadcast on the radio.

At one point we asked the audience to share their memories. A man stood up and told us, “Even if you know me, you don’t know that I was born right in this place, 70 years ago.” He had lived his whole life in that neighborhood of Paris and he wanted to share that the importance of the project was that it gave new life to a place that had a special meaning for people who lived in Paris, especially in this neighborhood of Paris, because it was a place where people were born, had children, and sometimes died.

This account offered us a different perspective: this was not just the place where we would come to develop an urban project, it was a place that meant a lot to all the citizens of Paris. Giving this place back to the community was our biggest achievement.

## What is the secret ingredient that makes your story unique?

Two things are needed in projects like Les Grands Voisins: creating a group where people talk to each other, and generating trust among people. Through dialogue, we were able to solve internal problems, support the growth of the project and help the people coming to Les Grands Voisins, sometimes from difficult situations.

So, for me, the secret tool is: “always be open to dialogue and trust people even when it seems like a crazy thing to do, because most of the time, when you think something terrible is going to happen, it doesn’t actually happen”. This is the foundation of the common: it doesn’t belong to you, it belongs to everybody. And if you don’t talk to people and you don’t trust them, it’s not a common, just something that resembles it.

*Interview with: Martin Locret*

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