



B/ordering the Banlieue: Lived Experiences of Mega-Event-Driven Renewal and Rebranding in Saint-Denis

GEO 511 Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines how residents of Saint-Denis experience mega-event related urban transformations and how these projects (de)construct borders within the city. Focusing on the World Cup (1998) and the Olympic Games (2024), it analyses how new infrastructures and redevelopment reshape everyday life in a historically stigmatised banlieue marked by industrial cultural heritage and fractures. The study draws on walking interviews, semi-structured interviews and field observations conducted across several neighbourhoods.

The findings show that mega-event infrastructures accelerate existing renewal and rebranding dynamics. Three interconnected lived border processes emerge in Saint-Denis: the selective unbuilding of mobility borders, the creation of artificial Parisian Enclaves and the symbolic reordering of residents and space. These transformations soften the borders between Paris and Saint-Denis' renewed corridors, yet deepen internal divides by benefiting event visitors, business commuters from Paris and newcomers, while leaving many local fractures untouched.

The lens of Geographical Imagination revealed that Saint-Denis is a place where multiple imaginations of space coexist and are constantly negotiated, contested and reinterpreted. The framework of (B)ordering revealed that the divide previously drawn between Paris and the banlieues has been shifted into Saint-Denis. (B)ordering processes now unfold between newly created Parisian Enclaves and the more marginal and neglected neighbourhoods, producing new socio-spatial hierarchies within Saint-Denis.

This thesis contributes to debates in mega-event urbanism, urban stigma, border studies and critical infrastructure, offering a perspective on how these processes are lived by those who inhabit the city.

Keywords: Saint-Denis, Banlieue, Urban transformation, Mega-project infrastructure, Bordering, Geographical Imagination, Lived experience, Walking interviews, Urban renewal, Rebranding, Olympics, World Cup

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Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Table of Figures.....	4
List of Tables.....	4
Chapter 1 – Introduction.....	5
1.1 Research Interest.....	6
1.2 Positionality.....	8
1.3 Research Question and Orientation.....	9
Chapter 2 – Conceptual Framework.....	11
2.1 Literature Review and Conceptual Framework Development.....	11
2.2 Geographical Imagination.....	14
2.3 (B)ordering.....	15
Chapter 3 – Methodology.....	16
3.1 Fieldwork.....	17
3.2 Methods.....	22
3.3 Data Analysis.....	24
3.4 Methodological Considerations.....	27
Chapter 4 – Historical Context of Saint-Denis.....	29
Chapter 5 – Findings: (Re)bordering Saint-Denis.....	35
5.1 Saint-Denis a Space of Urban Transformation and Rebranding.....	35
5.2 Mega-Project Infrastructure as Selective Enablers.....	38
5.2.1 Highway Coverage.....	40
5.2.2 Bridges.....	42
5.2.3 Train Stations.....	45
5.2.4 Synthesis Mega-Project Infrastructure as Selective Enablers.....	49
5.3 Mega-Projects (B)ordering.....	50
5.3.1 Economic Border.....	50
5.3.2 Inter-Neighbourhood Mobility Borders.....	59
5.3.3 Symbolic Borders.....	70
5.4 Synthesis: (Re)bordering Saint-Denis.....	76
Chapter 6 – Discussion.....	80
6.1 Ambivalent Lived Experiences of Mega-Event Infrastructures.....	80
6.2 Conflicting Geographical Imaginations in Saint-Denis.....	82
6.3 Interior (B)ordering and Exterior Unbordering in Saint-Denis.....	84
Chapter 7 – Conclusion.....	87
Literature.....	90
Personal Declaration.....	95

Table of Figures

- Fig. 1:** Location of Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 2:** Southern administrative districts of Saint-Denis: Centre-Ville; Franc Moisin - Bel Air - Stade de France; La Plaine-Pleyel (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 3:** Industrial wasteland near the Olympic Village in preparation for new residential area (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 4:** Stade de France (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 5:** Three major urban fractures in Saint-Denis: high-intensity traffic corridors (motorways and arterial roads), the railway tracks leading toward Lille, and the canal (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 6:** Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 7:** Crossing at Rue du Landy, where the A1 motorway has been covered and transformed into a new boulevard (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 8:** Franchissement Urbain Pleyel (FUP) linking Pleyel and La Plaine constructed for the Olympics (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 9:** View from the Franchissement Urbain Pleyel (FUP). In the background, the railway tracks cutting through Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 10:** The new Passerelle Lucie-Bréard linking Franc-Moisin and the Stade de France (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 11:** Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) as well as bridges built as a heritage of the Olympics (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 12:** The two RER stations flanking the Stade de France: Saint-Denis–La Plaine (RER B) and Stade de France–Saint-Denis (RER D) (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 13:** Saint-Denis–Pleyel station (interior) (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 14:** Saint-Denis–Pleyel station (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 15:** Train and metro stations in Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 16:** The Office district of La Plaine (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 17:** Secured Stade de France (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 18:** Pedestrian underpass with graffiti in La Plaine (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 19:** Grand ensemble in Franc-Moisin with parking lot (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 20:** Waste collection point at a grand ensemble in Franc-Moisin (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 21:** Olympic Village as well as Olympic Aquatic Center and Stade de France (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 22:** The Olympic Village in Saint-Denis, nearly a year after the Olympic (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 23:** Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 24:** Highway corridor between Stade de France and La Plaine (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 25:** Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) as well as administrative districts (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 26:** Official map of the renewal of the city center of Saint-Denis (Ville de Saint-Denis 2025)
- Fig. 27:** Rue de la République after pedestrianisation (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 28:** Place Jean Jaurès in front of the Mairie and the Basilique (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 29:** City center with the pedesternized Rue de la République, the moved market which was formally on the renewed Place Jean Jaurès next to the Mairie and the Basilique (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 30:** The Mairie of Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 31:** Place Jean Jaurès, central Saint-Denis with the Basilique and the Mairie (Author, 2025)
- Fig. 32:** The Maison de Quartier of Franc-Moisin and Bel-Air (Author, 2025)

List of Tables

- Table 1** Participant List
- Table 2** Coding Framework
- Table 3** Levels of Government

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Urban planning mega-projects play a decisive role in shaping how cities are lived and perceived. In the Parisian suburbs called *banlieues*, urban planning is often presented as a tool to integrate these marginal spaces into the metropolitan identity (Béhar & Loisel, 2016, Roudier & Avide, 2024). Yet, as this thesis will show these projects can also reinforce existing inequalities or displace long-term residents and disrupt established ways of living together. This thesis examines these dynamics through the case of Saint-Denis, a historically communist and working-class commune just north of Paris (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Location of Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)

Often classified among the stigmatized *banlieues* (see Bacqué & Sintomer, 2001; Vieillard-Baron, 2006), Saint-Denis has, for several decades, been a focal point for mega-events and large-scale urban renewal initiatives, beginning with the construction of the Stade de France for the 1998 World Cup. More recently, it became a central location for the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2024 (Dörr, 2023, Lacroart, 2020, Faure, 2024). These projects aim to rebrand Saint-Denis as a well-connected urban node of Paris with high potential. Consequently, urban transformation projects serve not only as technical infrastructures but also as political instruments of rebranding. Mega-event infrastructures produce effects that extend far beyond the events themselves. They reshape the city's configuration in the long term (Dörr, 2023; Wolfe et al., 2021; Clift, Wilson & Talbot, 2025). Olympic- and World Cup-related infrastructure continues to influence Saint-Denis, reconfiguring everyday mobility, space and local social dynamics. Although the rebranding often carries a positive tone, residents' lived experiences are far more ambivalent. Renewals bring improvements such as

better metropolitan transport, upgraded facilities and new investment, but they also disrupt existing social structures, displace vulnerable groups and generate new forms of exclusion (Collectif Le Revers de la Médaille, 2024).

1.1 Research Interest

This subsection explains how my interest in the thesis' topic emerged. My interest in the relationship between Paris and its banlieues developed during a period of living in the Paris metropolitan area. Before moving to France, my understanding of the banlieues was shaped largely by media portrayals. Growing up in Switzerland, I mostly encountered news images of riots, burned cars and confrontations with the police. These recurring representations fostered the impression of the banlieues as a dangerous and marginalised space. A homogenous area associated with crime, insecurity and social unrest.

Living in the Paris region challenged this understanding, revealing a far more diverse and nuanced reality than the one portrayed in the media. I found myself in a commune officially classified as a banlieue, yet the environment around me looked entirely different from the scenes I had imagined. Instead of large housing estates (*Grands Ensembles*), I encountered a quiet and comfortable residential setting with single-family and semi-detached houses, gardens and boulevards.

These contradictions led me to speak with friends and acquaintances in Paris about how they understood the term banlieue. They introduced me to distinctions that rarely appear in public discourse, such as the existence of “banlieues chics” alongside the more stigmatised “banlieues populaires” (see also Denninger, 2012; Wacquant, 2005). “Banlieues chics” are suburbs where young Parisians usually move to buy houses with a garden and raise their children. These spaces are considered a better environment for children to grow up in than the cramped and busy city of Paris. The “banlieues populaire” are usually a space where people move not because it is considered a better environment but because of the financial affordability in comparison to Paris. They explained that the negative depiction circulated in the media focuses almost entirely on the latter. As a result, the term banlieue often evokes only one specific type of suburban environment, usually associated with economic precarity, limited opportunities and tensions with state institutions. This selective focus hides the diversity of the Parisian periphery and contributes to a generalising and often misleading perception, one that I had absorbed without questioning.

This experience motivated me to explore how people imagine, describe and interpret the banlieues. For a smaller earlier project, I asked individuals with different backgrounds how they understood the term and how they perceived the suburban areas of Paris. This thesis builds on and extends that exploration. I attended, as an outsider, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the banlieues, this time by foregrounding the perspectives of those who live there. Instead of analysing representations produced by outsiders or media commentary, this research examines how residents themselves perceive their environment, how they experience ongoing urban transformations and how these experiences shape their sense of place, identity and belonging.

While much of the literature on Paris and its banlieues focuses on external borders, contrasting the capital with its peripheries (e.g. Almeida, 2023; Wacquant, 2007), this thesis directs attention inward. It investigates how long-term and newer residents of Saint-Denis experience urban transformations linked to mega-projects such as the Stade de France and the Olympics, and how these interventions reshape, reinforce or reduce economic, mobility and symbolic borders within the city. It also

examines how these changes interact with the historical stigma of the banlieue and how they influence residents' everyday lives, identities and sense of belonging.

Saint-Denis is a particularly promising case for studying these dynamics. Once an industrial hub in the poorer northeast of Paris, it carried a persistent stigma as a working-class “ghetto” (Lillo, 2009; Glasze & Weber, 2005). When industrial activity declined, large areas of land became available for redevelopment, while much of the original population remained (Lecroart, 2008). Over the past 150 years, the territory has undergone repeated cycles of transformation and rebranding at metropolitan and national levels, moving from industrial powerhouse to post-industrial periphery, and more recently to a flagship site for state-led mega-projects. Few other communes have been reshaped as profoundly in recent decades, with interventions such as the World Cup (1998) and the Olympics (2024). These overlapping transformations make Saint-Denis an exceptional site for observing how urban planning mega-projects interact with the lived realities of residents.

To limit the scope of the research this thesis focuses on the three southern districts of Saint-Denis, namely: Centre-Ville; Franc Moisin - Bel Air - Stade de France; La Plaine-Pleyel (Fig. 2). The main focus will be on the two mega-events - World Cup 1998 and Olympics 2024 - which serve as key moments for urban transformations.

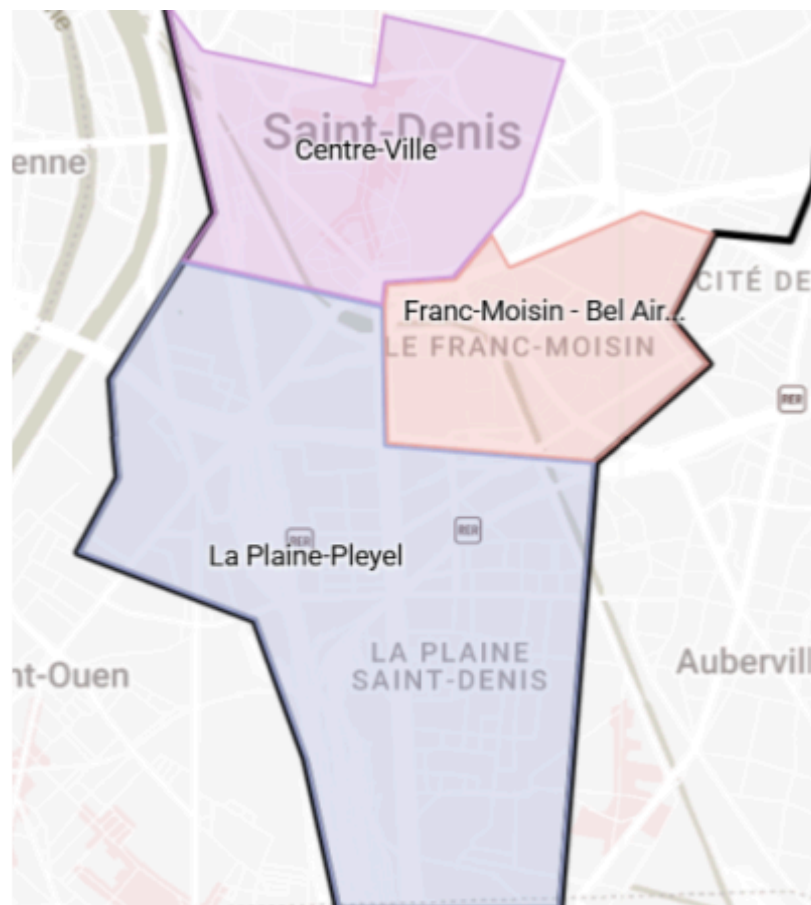


Fig. 2: Southern administrative districts of Saint-Denis: Centre-Ville; Franc Moisin - Bel Air - Stade de France; La Plaine-Pleyel (Author, 2025)

The conceptual framework of this thesis combines Geographical Imagination and (B)ordering to explain how residents perceive, interpret and navigate mega-project related urban transformation.

Geographical Imagination helps to explain how people make sense of space, how they interpret the history, identity and symbolic meaning of a space and its impact on their life. (B)ordering helps explain how space is organised, how connections and disconnections are created, and how social, economic and political borders and hierarchies emerge through planning decisions. Taken together, the two concepts allow us to understand mega-projects as more than infrastructures. They also reshape how residents imagine Saint-Denis and how they move and belong. They reveal that urban transformations create new connections while also producing new exclusions, and that residents understand these shifts through long-standing historical trajectories of stigma and inequality.

1.2 Positionality

In this subsection I will discuss my positionality and its impact on this thesis. I position myself as an outsider to Saint-Denis and to the banlieues more broadly. I did not grow up in these environments, nor do I share the social, historical or political conditions that shape the residents' everyday experiences. My understanding is therefore influenced by my own background and by the distance from which I first encountered the French suburbs. This position carries the risk of reproducing dominant narratives, overlooking internal diversity or misinterpreting social realities. Acknowledging these limitations is essential for approaching the field with caution, reflexivity and humility.

My perspective has been shaped by my academic training in geography and spatial planning, my work experience in spatial planning and my personal experience of living in the Paris region. These experiences helped me recognise the diversity of the banlieues and the gap between external representations and lived realities. They also made clear that my perspective differs from the one of a resident of Saint-Denis also called Dionysien. Rather than attempting to speak for them, I have sought to understand how they themselves interpret their city, how they perceive ongoing transformations and how these processes affect their daily lives.

This awareness of my positionality shaped the methodological choices of this thesis. To access residents' perspectives as directly as possible, I relied primarily on walking interviews, complemented by sit-down interviews when preferred by participants. Walking interviews created a setting in which conversations could develop naturally and where the urban environment itself encouraged participants to recall experiences, comment on ongoing changes or express concerns (Evans & Jones, 2011). Seeing the city through their everyday paths enabled me to ground my analysis in their viewpoints rather than in my own expectations.

Recognising my position as an outsider is therefore not only a matter of transparency but also a guiding principle for how this research was conducted. It influenced how I approached participants, interpreted their narratives and engaged with broader debates on urban transformation, stigma and inequality.

1.3 Research Question and Orientation

This subsection presents the development of the research question and gives an orientation about the thesis.

Emerging from my interest in how the banlieues are represented and perceived and my background in urban planning, this study brings together urban planning and interconnection with the perception and representation of the banlieues. Saint-Denis offers a unique context shaped by several waves of urban renewal and by mega-events such as the World Cup (1998) and the Olympic Games (2024).

Instead of analysing these projects from a policy perspective or through official narratives, the research focuses on the everyday experiences of local residents. It aims to understand how they perceive the profound changes taking place around them. The central research question guiding the analysis is: How do Dionysiens experience mega-event related urban transformation and in what ways do these projects (de-)construct borders?

These questions redirect attention from top-down accounts of renewal to the lived experiences of residents. The study challenges image-driven policy narratives by foregrounding the voices of those whose mobility and sense of belonging are reshaped by planning agendas that often exclude them from decision-making processes. To investigate these questions, the research employs qualitative, resident-centred methods. Walking interviews and informal conversations allowed participants to share their experiences on their own terms and in their familiar environments. These methods not only capture what people say but also how they move through space, how they navigate borders, and how they adapt to or contest spatial reordering (Mason et al., 2023).

Taken together, the research question and the methodological choices allow us to analyze how renewal is experienced from below and how it reshapes both the physical and symbolic landscapes of Saint-Denis. The following section provides a brief outline of the structure and content of the thesis:

Chapter 1 – Introduction introduces the research. It presents the research interest, outlines the author's positionality as an outsider, and formulates the central research question. The chapter explains why Saint-Denis serves as a particularly revealing case and sets out the bottom-up, resident-centred orientation of the thesis.

Chapter 2 – Conceptual Framework develops the conceptual tools used in the analysis. It begins with a literature review that traces key debates on the banlieues, territorial stigma, mega-projects and rebranding, and explains how the conceptual framework emerged inductively from fieldwork in a grounded theory perspective. On this basis, it introduces and elaborates the two main concepts that guide the thesis, namely Geographical Imagination and (B)ordering, and demonstrates how they help to interpret residents' experiences of urban transformation in Saint-Denis.

Chapter 3 – Methodology outlines the qualitative and ethnographic research design. It justifies the choice of a participant-centred approach, explains the fieldwork strategy and access routes, and details the main methods used, including walking interviews, supplementary interviews and field observations. The chapter also describes the process of transcription and inductive coding, reflects on ethical and reflexive considerations, and discusses the limitations and implications of the sampling strategy.

Chapter 4 – Historical Context of Saint-Denis *provides a historical account of Saint-Denis as a post-industrial banlieue. It traces the intertwined processes of industrialisation, deindustrialisation, social housing policies, territorial stigma and state-led urban renewal like the redevelopment associated with the World Cup and the Stade de France.*

Chapter 5 – Findings: mega-projects as Urban Change-Makers *presents the empirical findings and applies the concepts of Geographical Imagination and (B)ordering to residents' narratives. The chapter is organised into three main sections.*

Section 5.1 *examines how Dionysiens describe Saint-Denis as a space of continuous urban transformation and rebranding, and how mega-events are imagined as accelerations rather than ruptures in a longer trajectory, which help rebranding the stigmatised banlieue towards the outside.*

Section 5.2 *analyses mega-project infrastructure as a set of selective enablers that cover highways, build bridges and open stations in strategic areas while leaving other fractures intact. It shows how these interventions improve connectivity in highly visible zones, leaving other fractures unaddressed.*

Section 5.3 *explores mega-projects as (B)ordering practices along three dimensions: economic borders linked to gentrification and rising rents, mobility borders produced by fragmented intra-urban connections and micro-neighbourhoods, and symbolic borders that emerge through limited political participation, shrinking support for associations and widening gaps between Newcomers and Rooted Residents.*

Chapter 6 – Discussion *interprets the findings through the conceptual framework and relevant literature. It discusses how mega-event infrastructures accelerate selective urban repair, how Saint-Denis is differently imagined by outsiders, Newcomers, and Rooted Residents, and how mega-projects simultaneously soften borders with Paris while creating new internal socio-spatial and symbolic divisions.*

Chapter 7 – Conclusion *summarises how residents experience mega-event-related transformations and how these projects reshape borders in Saint-Denis. It synthesises the main (B)ordering processes identified, reflects on the study's contributions and limitations, and proposes directions for future research on post-event developments and evolving neighbourhood dynamics.*

This thesis contributes to border studies and critical infrastructure studies by examining how successive mega-projects shape the social and spatial organisation of Saint-Denis and how these interventions are experienced by those who live with their consequences. Rather than approaching Paris and its banlieues through the often-repeated contrast between centre and periphery (e.g. Aleida, 2023), the study directs attention to the borders that emerge within Saint-Denis itself. By tracing the effects of major renewal initiatives, most notably the Stade de France and the Olympic Games, it shows how these projects participate in the ongoing reconfiguration of everyday life and in the symbolic reimagining of the city. The originality of the approach lies in its analytical perspective, which brings together scholarship on urban planning, mega-events, gentrification, (B)ordering and Geographical Imagination and in its resident-centred approach. Walking interviews enabled participants to narrate and situate their experiences in ways that revealed how they navigate, interpret and contest urban change. Beyond its academic contribution, the study also speaks to policymaking. It highlights that mega-projects are not always perceived as improvements when local needs, concerns or uncertainties are overlooked. By foregrounding residents' perspectives, the thesis highlights the importance of communication and participatory processes in making urban transformation not only technically ambitious but also socially responsive and inclusive.

Chapter 2 – Conceptual Framework

This chapter will give a brief overview about some of the most significant scholars and topics researched in the banlieues of Paris. After this literature review the next subsection will present some literature in the field of mega-events and their impact on hosting cities and their inhabitants. Lastly, the two conceptual lenses of the thesis Geographical Imagination and (B)ordering will be introduced.

2.1 Literature Review and Conceptual Framework Development

This subsection will discuss some of the significant banlieue literatures and from there continue into developing the conceptual framework. Research on the Parisian banlieues has grown out of a wide range of disciplines, and over time it has produced a complex picture of how these urban peripheries appear and are perceived. Early contributions already recognized that the banlieues cannot be seen simply as outskirts of Paris. Instead, they are shaped by political decisions, economic priorities and planning histories that position them at the margins of urban life. A central reference here is Henri Lefebvre (1968, 1974), whose publications *Le Droit à la Ville* and *La Production de l'Espace* introduced a way of thinking about urban space as something actively shaped by social and economic forces. For Lefebvre, the banlieues resulted from capitalist urbanisation and decisions about where large housing complexes would and should be placed, what populations they would accommodate, and how public resources would be distributed. His work also highlighted how the inhabitants often have little influence over the shaping of their own urban environments, which opened up important questions about participation and spatial justice.

David Harvey (2001) expanded this line of thinking. In *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, he examined how capitalism shapes cities through cycles of investment and disinvestment, creating both new opportunities and new inequalities. Harvey's (2003) analysis became more concrete in *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, in which he traces how nineteenth century Paris was transformed under Haussmann (see also Chapter 4 – Historical Context of Saint-Denis). Through this historical case, he shows how modern urban form was tied to political attempts to manage unrest, stimulate consumption and stabilise a fragile economic system. His work positions Paris as an example of how global capitalist forces take spatial form. A related perspective is offered by Angélil and Siress (2012). They demonstrate how the architecture of housing estates, their spatial separation from the city centre and the design of transport networks all contribute to forms of everyday isolation. Their argument emphasises that inequality is not only social or economic but becomes embedded in the built environment itself.

Another important body of literature examines how these structures are lived and experienced. Pierre Bourdieu's (1979, 1993) *La Distinction* and *La Misère du Monde* both show how class relations, symbolic domination and everyday practices produce forms of distance and exclusion within cities.

In *Territorial Stigmatization in the Age of Advanced Marginality*, Wacquant (2007) explains how entire neighbourhoods become marked as dangerous or problematic, affecting how residents are treated by institutions and agencies. His book *Urban Outcasts* extends this through a comparative analysis of American inner cities and European banlieues. Wacquant (2008) argues that the

combined effects of welfare retrenchment, policing and unstable labour markets create new forms of urban precariousness.

Didier Lapeyronnie (2008) adds an ethnographic dimension. He describes a form of double segregation in many French banlieues. Residents face discrimination and economic exclusion from the wider society, yet they also develop internal social worlds with their own norms and tensions. His work shows how inequalities, stigma and strained relations with the state shape everyday life for those who feel positioned at a distance from the national community.

There is also substantial literature that highlights residents' agency, everyday strategies and forms of resistance. Garbin and Millington (2012) responds directly to Wacquant's framework by showing how people actively contest the labels attached to their neighbourhoods. Through their work in the banlieue La Courneuve, they describe how youth groups, cultural associations and local actors create counter narratives that challenge negative portrayals. Truong (2013) further develops this focus on lived experience. Rather than treating young people as a category defined by risk or delinquency, Truong follows their personal trajectories through school, work, family life and encounters with police. His analysis makes visible the forms of reflexivity, ambition and negotiation that shape their everyday choices. Similarly, Michel Kokoreff (2003) shows how networks often described as problematic can also support solidarity, mutual aid and forms of political involvement. His work reveals that the banlieues are not only spaces of marginality but also places where residents build collective identities and new forms of engagement.

Another set of contributions focuses on specific moments of crisis, most notably the 2005 riots. Laurent Mucchielli and Véronique Le Goaziou (2007) provide a detailed account of these events. The volume places the riots within a longer history of discrimination, aggressive policing and youth unemployment. It challenges accounts that portray the unrest as spontaneous or irrational and instead shows how accumulated grievances, everyday tensions and state neglect created the conditions for large scale mobilisation.

More recent scholarship has broadened the debate by examining how the banlieues are represented and politically constructed. Horvath's (2019) shows how media coverage, political discourse and cultural imagery shape public understandings of these territories. He argues that narratives of danger or cultural difference often overshadow the internal diversity of the banlieues and influence how they are governed. Almeida (2023) introduces a different perspective by treating the banlieues as internal borderlands. He argues that administrative practices, policing and public discourse operate through logics similar to those found at national borders. This creates forms of internal (B)ordering that challenge the idea of equal citizenship and position some populations as less fully included in the national community.

Concerning previous research in the banlieues, there is also a risk of over-researching and extractivism. I tried being particularly cautious about this fact. This is why I choose to not enter the field with a fixed research idea. I adopted a grounded theory approach in which the topic(s) and research question were influenced through conversations with Dionysiens. This thesis therefore aligns with scholars who pursue participant-centred research (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993; Almeida, 2023; Dörr, 2023; Roche & Rutland, 2019; Garbin & Millington, 2012; Hancock, Blanchard & Chapuis, 2018; Slooter, 2019). Centering participants in research means for this project speaking directly to

people who live in Saint-Denis and can therefore provide authentic accounts of their everyday lives, as shaped by mega-event related urban transformation. Several themes were identified during fieldwork that emerged as particularly important to residents (Table 2 Coding Framework in Subsection 3.3 Data Analysis). Almost all of the topics could be in some way connected back to the current rebranding and renewal politics of Saint-Denis. This thesis identified the two mega-events World Cup (1998) and Olympics (2024) as essential impacts in this political agenda. Both of them came with the implementation of a significant amount of infrastructure (Lecroart, 2020) and public visibility towards the outside (Chapter 5 - Findings). Consequently, this thesis understands these mega-events more as urban planning mega-projects which had a big impact on Saint-Denis representation and perception in and outward. Also they changed the landscape of Saint-Denis and its interior dynamics significantly.

As these mega-projects and particularly the Olympics are very recent, only limited research has been published in their aftermath, especially regarding how recent infrastructural changes affect residents' everyday experiences. Some studies address the period prior to the Olympics (Dörr, 2023, Lecroart, 2020, Faure, 2024) or examine earlier mega-projects such as the 1998 World Cup (Lecroart, 2020).

Mega-event infrastructure has been widely analysed elsewhere as a driver of urban transformation and a rebranding instrument in stigmatized areas (Wolfe et al., 2021; Clift, Wilson and Talbot, 2025). Wolfe et al. (2021) argue that such projects serve as catalysts for rapid infrastructural development, enabled by exceptional regulatory regimes that allow fast decision-making. However, Clift et al. (2025) add that they also come with high costs that may burden local communities, and benefits are often unequally distributed. Economic growth for some coincides with gentrification or exclusion for others, and these effects can be long-lasting. Rebranding efforts often involve intensified surveillance, securitization, and social cleansing in order to make stigmatized areas appear presentable. While this may weaken negative territorial stigma, it can lead to other negative effects for local communities like displacement, exclusion, and rising rents.

Saint-Denis is home to 113,116 people with diverse ethnic, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds (SIG, 2024), which results in varied experiences and perceptions of mega-projects. This thesis therefore captures only a small sample and many more may exist. Still, each of these lived realities is highly important and valuable for understanding the complexity of lived urban transformations.

2.2 Geographical Imagination

This subsection explains how the concept of Geographical Imagination is used to understand how Dionysiens make sense out of the space they inhabit.

According to David Harvey (1973: 24) Geographic Imagination “enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in his own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them. It allows him to recognize the relationship which exists between him and his neighborhood, his territory...”

In the context of Saint-Denis, Geographical Imagination helps explain how residents perceive the influence of local politics and the landscape on their lives. It helps understand how they make sense of the ways in which they are treated by Non-Dionysiens. Resulting in specific ways in which they form connections to the space they inhabit or its immediate surroundings.

As Harvey (2005) pointed out Geographical Imagination is therefore relational. Saint-Denis, located next to the idealized city of Paris, is constantly compared with its neighbour, which results in hierarchies and constructions of “us” and “them” (Almeida, 2023). Therefore Geographical Imagination helps to understand the power dynamics in place in Saint-Denis.

Gregory (2009) further argues that space is constructed through discourse and representation. Saint-Denis has been and still is repeatedly stigmatized through discursive practices (Glasze & Weber, 2012), banlieue cinema (Austin, 2009), and political and media narratives (Horvath, 2019). These external imaginations influence how people relate to space (Kraftl & Horton, 2009). Geographical Imagination therefore helps us to understand how residents make sense of their city and relate to it based on the way it is imagined from the outside.

Here the researcher’s own imagination of Saint-Denis plays a role. I positioned myself as an outsider to Saint-Denis (Subsection 1.2). This actively impacts how I understand Saint-Denis. This is not a limitation. On the contrary my perception will be representative of the discourse shaped by outsiders’ understanding of Saint-Denis. It will continuously appear alongside the lived realities of Dionysiens presented in this thesis. My understanding of Saint-Denis has also largely changed throughout my thesis. The portrayal of this is important as I have the power to create new spatial imaginations through this thesis according to Kraftl and Horton (2009). This new understanding of Saint-Denis may influence public and political perceptions. Being aware of this influence, I aim to portray residents’ stories as accurately as possible while acknowledging my positionality as an outsider.

In summary, Geographical Imagination in the context of Saint-Denis provides a tool to understand how residents perceive the influence that local politics and the landscape have over their lives. It helps explain how they make sense of the ways in which they are treated by others, and how they form connections to the space they inhabit or its immediate surroundings. Geographical Imagination is also understood relationally, meaning that Saint-Denis is always seen in relation to Paris, and this constant comparison shapes how space is understood. In addition, it helps to understand how residents make sense of their city and relate to it based on the way it is imagined from the outside.

2.3 (B)ordering

This subsection introduces the second conceptual lens of the thesis. While Geographical Imagination explores how space is perceived, the concept of (B)ordering addresses how space is lived and experienced. Borders in this sense, following Paasi (1998), Almeida (2023) and Van Houtum (2010, 2021), are not fixed lines but social constructs created through media, discourse, politics, and everyday practices. Almeida (2023) even goes one step further by describing borders as both constructed and performed. Following these scholars, this thesis understands borders as socially produced through discourse and enacted through everyday movement, routines and interactions.

This lens helps to understand how the representation of Saint-Denis from the outside as well as the inside creates borders. So do the everyday movements of and interactions between residents of Saint-Denis create borders.

According to Paasi (1998), these borders structure how people move, interact, and feel in space, which will be addressed in this thesis as well.

Van Houtum (2010, 2021) emphasizes that borders are omnipresent. They manifest in infrastructures, institutions, and daily practices. Saint-Denis contains many infrastructural borders due to its urban planning history, including railway lines, highways, and the canal (Chapter 4). The concept of (B)ordering is therefore applied to examine how recent mega-projects have altered these historical borders and how the new infrastructures have created new physical and symbolic borders.

Van Houtum and Van Naerssen (2002) identify three processes that shape how borders function: bordering, ordering, and othering. (B)ordering refers to the active creation and maintenance of borders in material and symbolic forms. Ordering involves organising space into hierarchies of legitimacy and value. Othering refers to the construction of insiders and outsiders, which reinforces distinctions between “us” and “them”.

In this thesis, these three processes are being used to explain how Dionysiens experience borders, mobility and belonging to Saint-Denis. Consequently, borders are understood as both physical infrastructures and symbolic structures that reinforce exclusion and constrain opportunities for marginalized communities.

In summary, the concept of (B)ordering is used to understand how space is experienced. Herby borders are understood as socially constructed and performed through everyday practices, shaping movement, inclusion, and exclusion. The lens of (B)ordering is applied to analyse how recent mega-projects have affected the historical borders of Saint-Denis and how residents experience, navigate, and contest newly created physical and symbolic borders.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter will set out to introduce the methodology of this thesis. The motivation for qualitative, ethnographic research will be described as well as its advantages. The following subsections will describe the fieldwork, the methods, the analysis and finally the methodological considerations.

The methodology was shaped by my previous experiences in urban planning. In practice, I often observed the recurring tension between planners and residents. Planners work within financial, technical and political constraints that are not always visible from the outside. Residents, on the other hand, are the ones directly impacted by urban planning decisions. Frequently they feel insufficiently informed about or involved in planning processes. Their concerns may take the form of fears, frustrations or anger. These gaps in communication often produce mistrust, even when both sides hold reasonable and legitimate perspectives.

Knowing this, I entered the field in Saint-Denis with a strong interest in listening directly to residents. Specifically this thesis targeted capturing the facts, on how they experience the ongoing renewal and rebranding while being a neutral party myself. My aim was to amplify voices that are often overlooked in official planning processes, even when they emerge in protest. I wanted to understand how residents narrate and navigate the renewal and rebranding unfolding around them.

This thesis understands urban planning not only as political acts, plans and architecture but as something that is lived and interpreted by the residents of restructured areas. A qualitative, ethnographic orientation was therefore the most appropriate methodological choice. It allowed me to spend extended time in Saint-Denis and get to know the people and dynamics in place. This fosters a deeper understanding. Further, a qualitative approach foregrounds individuals' lived realities.

As already mentioned in Chapter 2 - Conceptual Framework this thesis tries to avoid feelings of extractivism among research participants which is one more reason why ethnographic research is chosen as it has a tradition of immersion, reflexivity and attentiveness to local context (O'Reilly, 2012).

The research design allows openness in the field and residents to decide which issues, places and experiences were most significant to them, instead of imposing rigid hypotheses. Questions developed gradually through engagement with participants. This openness was especially important in a city with a long history of stigma and transformation. Working in Saint-Denis required sensitivity to emotional and social boundaries as well as transparency about the aims and limitations of the study to not give the impression of purely extractive research.

On the contrary, within this context, qualitative research is understood as complementary to planning processes. While it cannot solve structural inequalities, it can document everyday experiences, highlight a wider range of perspectives and provide a more grounded understanding of how renewal is experienced. This is particularly valuable in places like Saint-Denis, where many residents described a growing distance between their own perception of Saint-Denis and the visions promoted by planning agendas, as the findings show.

3.1 Fieldwork

This subchapter explains how I gained access to the field and the difficulties I encountered. It required careful and patient work. As an outsider to Saint-Denis, I first needed to identify possible entry points from a distance. This proved more difficult than expected. My initial attempts focused on digital outreach through Facebook networks that I had maintained since my previous stay in Paris. I asked whether anyone knew residents of Saint-Denis who might be willing to speak with me. Most inquiries did not lead anywhere, but I eventually reconnected with Adrien, whom I had met during my time in Paris. He had recently moved from Paris to Saint-Denis and agreed to meet. Through him, I was introduced to other newcomers who had moved from Paris to Saint-Denis in search of more affordable housing.. However, these early meetings opened the field only within a narrow social profile.

At the same time, I contacted a wide range of neighbourhood, youth and women's associations. This proved challenging as I rarely got replies to my emails. Later in the field, I encountered several people working in these organisations I had contacted. I asked them whether they had received my messages. Most explained that they had indeed received them but lacked the capacity to respond. Many described being overwhelmed by daily responsibilities and burdened by frequent requests from external researchers. They were reluctant to pass on residents' contact details because they did not want to impose additional pressure on people who are already potentially fatigued by repeated requests to share their experiences. Their hesitation was understandable in a context where the banlieues have long been objects of academic and media investigations. These early obstacles led me to reflect critically on my own legitimacy and on the potential risks of contributing to extractive research dynamics (Chapter 2 – Conceptual Framework). My worry about burdening the residents faded when many of them told me that they have never been questioned in such a matter and are actually happy to share their experiences.

Alongside community organisations, I also reached out to academic institutions, especially the geography department at the University of Paris 8 in Saint-Denis, which has long conducted research in the area. Through a Professor I was connected with Camille, a former student who now works in an association aiming to politically empower residents and decision-makers of the banlieues through knowledge exchange with academia and among the banlieues themselves. Camille became a particularly important interlocutor. We held several long conversations and walking interviews, and she introduced me to additional contacts. Most notably, she connected me with Romain, a researcher at the university. Romain accompanied me on a walk and provided extensive contextual knowledge and literature that helped situate the fieldwork within broader debates on the transformations of Saint-Denis.

Camille also referred me to Monique, a sociologist who now works at the Saint-Denis town hall. She informed me about the diagnostic walks and resident workshops organised by the municipality, where inhabitants can raise concerns about local infrastructural issues. These meetings became an important entry point into networks of long-term residents.

My first field visit took place between 20 and 25 February 2025. Before travelling, I had a long introductory phone call with Camille that helped me prepare for the field. During this visit, I conducted several walking interviews with Camille, Romain and Adrien. I also met Monique at the town hall and spent considerable time familiarising myself with the city through long field observations. This phase was essential for developing an understanding of Saint-Denis and for

sensing how fragmented, contrasting and heterogeneous its neighbourhoods feel when experienced on foot.

My second field visit, in early March, expanded the network considerably. One of the first encounters during this stay was a walking interview with Sophie, a colleague of Camille at her association. I also conducted an in-home conversation with Florian and Manon. Florian, who is a friend and colleague of Adrien, added further insight into the experiences of young professionals who had recently moved to Saint-Denis. I also met with the professor Théo from the university who had originally helped me connect with Camille.

Following Moniques' suggestions, I attended a film screening in Franc-Moisin. The film was created by a local women's association and portrayed experiences of being a woman in Saint-Denis. While I did not succeed in convincing any attendees to participate in interviews, several shared immediate concerns, particularly regarding the bus connections to the city center (Subsection 5.3.2). These short exchanges did not lead to formal interviews but helped for contextualisation

Monique had also recommended attending a diagnostic meeting for residents of the Bel-Air neighbourhood, which forms part of the larger district of Franc-Moisin–Bel Air–Stade de France. At this meeting residents were invited to talk about infrastructural shortages in their neighbourhoods with people from the local authorities. This meeting proved productive because active discussion made follow-up conversations more natural. It was here that I met Josiane, a pensioner who had lived in Bel Air for many years. She agreed to go on a walk with me the following day, and this walk provided a long-term perspective on neighbourhood change. Josiane later connected me to several other residents engaged in local associations.

Throughout this visit I also met again with Camille and Sophie referred me to her friend Irina, a resident of the city centre who had chosen Saint-Denis because it offered an affordable living environment. In parallel, I established contact with Pierre-Louis, a local guide living in La Plaine. La Plaine had been particularly difficult to access because neighbourhood networks there are less connected than in other parts of the city. Pierre-Louis therefore provided an important entry point into a part of Saint-Denis that would otherwise have remained underrepresented.

Between the second and third field visits, I conducted two phone interviews that added further richness to the data. The first was with Martine, a long-term resident of the Stade de France area whose contact I received from Josiane. Because she did not feel comfortable walking long distances, we spoke by phone. Martine provided insight into a resident profile that I had not yet been able to reach. She discussed her long-standing involvement in neighbourhood associations and shared perspectives shaped by decades of living in the area. Through her community ties she also connected me to several other residents who later became important interlocutors.

The second phone interview was with Baptiste, a contact provided by Camille. Baptiste is a journalist who has written extensively about the banlieues and their socio-political dynamics. Although he no longer lives in Saint-Denis, he offered a broader contextual reading of the transformations taking place in the city. His reflections helped situate the individual accounts gathered during fieldwork within wider public debates.

My third field visit, in early April, further diversified the sample. I began by meeting Françoise, another contact provided by Josiane. Françoise, who is almost eighty years old and a former university professor, took me on a walk in the park and the city center. Martine introduced me to her

daughter-in-law, Samira, whom I met in a cafe around Stade de France, her area of residence. Martine also connected me to Daniel, a young resident of La Plaine who is active in the local neighbourhood association. With Daniel I discussed the social dynamics of La Plaine and the challenges faced by residents there. Through the same association I met Leïla and Malika, a mother-daughter pair who live in La Plaine and maintain strong ties to Franc-Moisin, where they previously lived. I met both of them in a cafe in La Plaine.

During one of my breaks in a local park I met Jonas, a former long-term resident of first Franc-Moisin and later the city center who works as a park keeper for the municipal administration. He initiated a conversation and later agreed to meet again for a short interview. While his position limited the extent to which he could speak openly about political matters, he nonetheless provided a grounded account of daily life in Saint-Denis and the ways residents navigate ongoing change.

I also took part in a diagnostic walk, this time in La Plaine. The event was intended to gather residents' views on local infrastructure, yet no residents attended. The walk consisted only of researchers and representatives of the local authorities. Municipal staff expressed frustration about the lack of participation and the missed opportunity to gather residents' opinions. For the research, this absence underscored the uneven distribution of engagement across neighbourhoods and highlighted how difficult it can be for participatory initiatives to reach certain groups of residents.

In total, eighteen individuals (Table 1) participated in walking interviews or supplementary conversations lasting from half an hour to four hours. I spoke to some of them several times. Participants ranged in age from approximately eighteen to eighty years old and varied in gender, origin, housing status and socio-economic position. Their length of residence ranged from recent newcomers to more than five decades. Rather than producing a unified community voice, this created a set of diverse standpoints that illustrate how differently the transformations of Saint-Denis are experienced.

Table 1 Participant List

Name	Age group	Profession / Background	Neighbourhood of residence	Years in Saint-Denis	Access path / Connection
Camille	25–35	Geographer; working in an association	City centre	2 years	Via association & colleagues
Romain	50–60	Geography professor	Formerly Saint-Denis, now Aubervilliers	5 years in Saint-Denis	University / academic network

Adrien	25–35	Works for SNCF in La Plaine	L'Île de Saint-Denis	4 years	Personal friend
Monique	50–60	Scientist, local politician	(Not resident)	–	Meeting for contacts only
Sophie	25–35	Works in an association	City centre	4 years	Contact via Camille
Florian	30–40	Works for SNCF	L'Île de Saint-Denis	8 years	Friend of Adrien
Manon (Florian's partner)	30–40	Works in cinema sector (Cité du Cinéma)	L'Île de Saint-Denis	8 years	Friend of Adrien
Théo	40–50	Geography professor	Based in Saint-Denis for research	–	Contact via Camille
Irina	25–35	Works with social housing organisations	City centre	5 years	Friend of Sophie
Josiane	60+	Retired architect	Franc-Moisin	25 years	Met at diagnostic reunion
Françoise	78	Retired researcher	Franc-Moisin	13 years	Contact via Josiane

Pierre-Louis	60+	Tour guide of La Plaine	La Plaine	25 years	Via digital platform
Martine	60+	Active in neighbourhood association in La Plaine and Franc-Moisin	Stade de France (since 2005), formerly Franc-Moisin (1973–2005)	52 years in Saint-Denis	Phone call contact, via Josiane
Samira	40–50	Studied history in home country	Stade de France (since 2004), formerly Franc-Moisin	25 years	Daughter of Martine
Daniel	25–35	Active in neighbourhood association in La Plaine	La Plaine	–	Via Martine
Leïla	60+	Active in neighbourhood association in La Plaine	La Plaine (formerly Franc-Moisin)	24 years	Via Martine
Malika	15–20	Student	La Plaine	Whole life	Via Martine/ Daughter of Leïla
Jonas	60+	Municipal employee	Formerly Franc-Moisin, then city centre, later north of Saint-Denis	30 years	Chance encounter

Baptiste	40–50	Journalist, expert on banlieues	Formerly city centre, now Belgium	10 years	Zoom interview
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Following a Grounded Theory approach recruitment continued until I reached a point of saturation. In practice, this became clear in different ways. In the academic and political networks, participants increasingly referred me to the same small group of colleagues and acquaintances. Among long-term residents, I had spoken with people across different age groups, national backgrounds, genders and five major neighbourhoods of Saint-Denis: the city centre, L'Île-Saint-Denis, Franc-Moisin, Stade de France and La Plaine. Additional interviews began to repeat themes that had already emerged rather than adding new dimensions.

The sample inevitably reflects certain biases. It over-represents residents who are engaged in associations or local political life and under-represents those who avoid such spaces or prefer not to speak with researchers. Rather than treating this as a limitation alone, I consider it analytically meaningful. It reveals something about which voices are most easily accessible and which remain more distant within the everyday politics of participation in Saint-Denis.

Given the scope of a master's project and the size of the corpus already collected, I concluded that the sample had reached both practical and thematic saturation.

3.2 Methods

This subsection is going to introduce the methods used in this thesis. Walking interviews formed the core of my data collection. A growing body of scholarship shows why walking methods are particularly suited for studying lived urban experience. Evans and Jones (2011) emphasise that walking interviews generate place-based narratives because the environment itself triggers memories, associations and reflections that do not emerge in seated interviews. Mason et al. (2023) add that walking brings up political questions, since the ability to move comfortably through a neighbourhood reflects broader inequalities of access, mobility and safety.

Pierce and Lawhon (2015) further add that walking enhances the researcher's local literacy by grounding observations within the temporal and spatial rhythms of the city, which strengthens transparency and comparability in qualitative urban research.

This method was particularly suitable because it allowed conversations to unfold within the very environments that residents were describing. The physical surroundings often prompted memories, shifted the direction of the discussion or brought emotions to the surface. Rather than sitting together in a neutral space, we moved through streets, paths and neighbourhoods that carried meaning for participants. The method therefore allowed me to experience space with and through residents rather than only talking about.

Walking also helped soften some of the formality that can appear in seated interviews. Participants chose the pace, the route and the topics they wished to address during the walks. This was central to

my aim of letting residents guide the encounter. Many people decided to show me places they valued or places that frustrated them. These choices often revealed what mattered most to them long before it was mentioned in conversation. In this setting, I positioned myself as a learner. Being transparent about my background and limited knowledge of Saint-Denis helped create a conversational and inquisitive atmosphere rather than one of interrogation. Silences, when they appeared, felt natural and became moments of shared attention to the environment.

My approach was intentionally open. I did not begin with a fixed set of questions but invited participants to take me through their neighbourhoods. For some, mobility was the first topic to emerge. Others focused on changes linked to mega-projects. Some were more interested in describing daily routines, neighbourly relations or changes they had observed over time. This variation was valuable. It showed that residents have different views on urban space and that certain issues matter deeply to some while barely registered by others.

In total, ten walking interviews were conducted. These encounters felt more grounded and balanced than my solitary explorations of the area. When walking by myself with a recorder or taking photographs, I was aware that I appeared more like an outsider observing a place than someone participating in it. Although this feeling reduced over time, accompanied walks created a stronger sense of belonging.

Where walking was not possible or preferred, I offered semi-structured interviews as an alternative. The choice not to walk was itself meaningful. Some participants had physical limitations that prevented longer walks. Others felt less connected to their neighbourhood and had no specific route to show. Some preferred to meet in a café because they do not walk much in their neighbourhood. In these cases, the conversation followed an open structure. A few participants began sharing their stories immediately without any formal prompt. Others responded well to broad questions about infrastructure, mobility or renewal. The aim remained the same in all formats. Residents were encouraged to shape the conversation according to what mattered to them.

The format adapted to different circumstances. Two interviews continued across several meetings. One took place in a participant's home. Another gathered a mother and daughter who preferred to speak together. Some opted for virtual interviews because of time constraints or personal preference. One elderly resident preferred to talk by phone because walking had become difficult for her.

The duration of interviews also varied. Some conversations lasted thirty minutes while others lasted nearly four hours. Participants determined the duration. I paid close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues to know when to end. Out of respect for participants' time and to remain attentive, I limited myself to no more than three interactions per day.

Interviews were conducted in the language participants preferred. Most took place in French. Some moved between French, English and German. My non-native French made certain conversations challenging due to accents or specific terminology but participants generally responded warmly to my efforts. Since many spoke only one language, the mutual accommodation created moments of goodwill. Most were comfortable being recorded, which allowed me to focus fully on the interaction.

Alongside interviews, I conducted solo walks through different neighbourhoods. During these walks, I paid attention to sensory and spatial features such as lighting, noise, barriers, atmosphere and surveillance. These observations were important for contextualising what participants described and for tracing how my own perception of Saint-Denis changed over time.

Two dimensions of experience became particularly important. The first concerned safety and gender. Walking alone as a woman in certain parts of Saint-Denis or at specific times required attention to lighting, visibility and whether other people were present. These factors shaped how I moved, where I paused and how I interpreted space. The second concern involved external representations of the banlieues. Media portrayals framing the banlieue as dangerous, together with warnings from friends and colleagues to remain cautious or avoid walking alone, contributed to the sense of vigilance I experienced during my initial visits. This demonstrates how broader discourses of danger can actively shape personal experiences of place.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis followed an inductive trajectory that unfolded alongside fieldwork. After each walk or interview, the recordings were transcribed in full, with short descriptive notes added when audio was incomplete or when participants preferred not to be recorded. Transcripts were slightly edited for readability but participants' phrasing and tone were preserved as closely as possible, since these elements often carried important meaning.

The coding process began with broad categories such as personal background, local politics, sense of place, and mobility. These categories served only as provisional entry points. More specific codes emerged gradually as I read and re-read the material and noted recurring expressions, concerns, and themes. For example, within the category of "local politics", participants spoke frequently about the mayor, the city's public image, and specific mega-projects namely the World Cup or the Olympics and the renewal of the city centre. In the category "sense of place", issues such as territorial stigma, community ties, cultural diversity, safety, policing, and perceptions of different neighbourhoods appeared repeatedly. In the domain of mobility, accounts of trains, trams, metro lines, buses, cars, bicycles, and walking were closely intertwined with discussions of access, disconnection, and the places participants visited or avoided.

A simplified version of the coding framework is presented in Table 2. It summarises the main categories and illustrates how sub-codes were shaped by what participants raised most frequently, rather than by any predefined analytical template.

Table 2 Coding Framework:

Categories	Codes	
Background Person	Background Person	
Local Politics	Mayor	How do the inhabitants describe and experience the current Mayor?
	Image Creation	Which image is the current politic trying to create of Saint-Denis?
	Urban Transformation Projects: Olympic Games	How are the urban transformation projects connected with the Olympic Games perceived and what impact do they have on local residents?
	Urban Transformation Projects: Place Jean-Jaurès (Centre Ville)	How are the urban transformation projects in the city center perceived and what impact do they have on local residents?
	Urban Transformation Projects: Connectivity	How are the urban transformation projects in the city center perceived and what impact do they have on local residents?
	Urban Transformation Projects: Stade de France	How are the urban transformation projects connected with the Stade de France perceived and what impact do they have on local residents?
	Gentrification	How are the residents experiencing population related change? How does it make them feel?

Sense of Place	Stigmatisation	How do residents feel they are perceived by people outside of Saint-Denis?
	Associations	What role do associations play in Saint-Denis?
	Community Life	How do residents experience living together in Saint-Denis?
	Cultural Diversity	How do residents experience cultural diversity?
	Security (Police)	How secure do people feel in the streets in general and what impact do the police and the security politics have on their feeling of security
	Education	How do residents feel/talk about the educational system in Saint-Denis?
	Neighbourhood/City	How do residents feel/talk about their neighbourhood and other neighbourhoods in Saint-Denis?
Mobility	Trains	How do residents feel about the connectivity in their neighbourhood?
	Tram	How do residents feel about the connectivity in their neighbourhood?
	Metro	How do residents feel about the connectivity in their neighbourhood?

	Car	How do residents feel about the connectivity in their neighbourhood?
	Busses	How do residents feel about the connectivity in their neighbourhood?
	Bikes	How do residents feel about the connectivity in their neighbourhood?
	On Foot	How do residents feel about the connectivity in their neighbourhood?
	(Not) Frequented Places	Where in and outside of Saint-Denis do people go or not. What do they like or not and why?

The analytic process consisted of several iterative rounds. I first annotated each transcript, identifying key themes and initial patterns. These were developed into more formal categories and sub-codes, which were then applied across the entire corpus. I compiled illustrative quotations for each sub-code in an Excel file to keep the material organised. Since the full dataset amounted to several hundred pages of transcripts, I moved through successive rounds of prioritisation: from an initial, comprehensive collection of excerpts to a refined selection that captured the diversity of perspectives without overwhelming the analysis. The final set of quotations reflects this balance.

Inductive coding was not only a methodological choice but also an ethical one. Entering a field in which I am an outsider required avoiding assumptions about what would matter to residents. Allowing codes to emerge from participants' emphases ensured that their concerns shaped the analytical direction.

3.4 Methodological Considerations

As outlined in the subsection 1.2, I entered the field as a non-local, female, white, Swiss research masters student with a background in urban planning. This shaped how I was perceived, how easily trust could be established, and which aspects of residents' experiences were shared with me. Additionally, snowball sampling generated biases, often connecting me with residents who were already socially or civically active, meaning that the perspectives of more isolated individuals remain less visible which was already discussed in subsection 3.1. Rather than repeating these reflections here, this section focuses on the ethical principles that guided the fieldwork.

Throughout the research process, I prioritised transparency and flexibility. Consent was treated as an ongoing process. At each encounter, participants were free to pause or withdraw without needing to justify their decision. Safety and comfort of both participants and me were considered highly important. Information about the goals of the project, the use of data and the handling of anonymity was communicated clearly and when needed repeatedly, especially when conversations unfolded across multiple meetings. The principle of doing no harm guided decisions throughout. Sensitive material was handled cautiously and I avoided reinforcing external stigmatising narratives.

Chapter 4 – Historical Context of Saint-Denis

To understand the current dynamics at play in the banlieue of Saint-Denis, it is important to trace how this place developed. This chapter sets out to do so based on historical research conducted on the banlieues in general as well as on Saint-Denis specifically. This thesis does not discuss the more affluent suburbs of Paris. Therefore, the historical contextualisation focuses on the stigmatized banlieues rather than wealthy ones such as Versailles. It concentrates on the banlieues in the northeast of Paris, particularly the département of Seine-Saint-Denis and more specifically the city of Saint-Denis.

In academic debates, the urban planning of Paris and its suburbs is often held responsible for existing power dynamics and inequalities (Lefebvre, 1968, 1974; Angélil & Siress, 2012). These inequalities are reinforced by the stigma of the “dangerous class,” created through media and discourse (Angélil & Siress, 2012). To understand these dynamics, this chapter traces the past 170 years of developments in Saint-Denis.

Saint-Denis is located in the northeast of Paris. It lies just outside the *périphérique*, the highway surrounding Paris (Lecroart, 2008). It is part of the suburbs or so called banlieues of Paris. Glasze and Weber (2005) explain that the term *banlieue* originates from the Germanic word *Bann*, meaning “ruling power,” and the Latin word *leuga*, meaning a unit of measurement equivalent to 4.4 kilometres, considered the distance that could be covered on foot within one hour. In the seventeenth century, the term was used for areas surrounding the city centre. During the industrial era, the surroundings of Paris, especially La Plaine in Saint-Denis, were used for large-scale metal, energy, consumer goods, and chemical factories due to the available land. Industrialization attracted migrants from the countryside in search of work.

As Paris became dense, with narrow alleys and compact housing, Baron Haussmann was commissioned by Emperor Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte III to rebuild the city both socially and materially (Horvath, 2019, Angélil & Siress, 2012). His task was to create a bourgeois capital defined by order, hygiene, and spectacle (Béhar & Loisel, 2016). Haussmann demolished the medieval street system and created wide boulevards, resulting in a more orderly urban layout (Angélil & Siress, 2012). Between 1852 and 1870, he divided the city into a centre and peripheries (Horvath, 2019, Angélil & Siress, 2012). The peripheries became characterized by gentrification and suburban sprawl (Angélil & Siress, 2012).

Polarization between the centre and its peripheries increased as the centre was renewed and glorified, while the margins became home to the poor and the so-called “dangerous classes” (Harvey, 2003). These relocations caused widespread anger and contributed to La Semaine sanglante (the Bloody Week) in 1871 (Angélil & Siress, 2012). Harvey (1982) argued that the glory of one place often comes at the expense of another, resulting in uneven geographical development and spatial hierarchies.

Angélil and Siress (2012) wrote that the peripheries became known as the “place of the *ban*,” with *ban* meaning “forbidden,” as poorer populations were excluded from the centre both physically and culturally. This is why today the term banlieue carries strong socio-political and cultural connotations

(Glasze & Weber, 2005). While wealthy banlieues exist, particularly in the southwest of Paris, the term banlieue is typically associated with negative ideas in everyday, media, and political discourse (Hancock, Blanchard & Chapuis, 2018).

After World War II, between 1945 and 1975, France experienced a period of economic prosperity known as the “glorious thirty” years (Horvath, 2019, Angélil & Siress, 2012). The French government invested heavily in infrastructure and industry (Glasze & Weber, 2005). Lecroart (2008) describes that in 1940 La Plaine was an industrial zone of 750 hectares offering 50,000 jobs across the municipalities of Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen, and Aubervilliers. The area had a strong working-class identity, and demand for labour attracted workers from Spain, Italy, and North Africa. Lillo (2009) notes that by the 1950s a housing shortage had developed. Informal settlements, sometimes called slums or *bidonvilles*, were established by the urban poor. In La Plaine, for example, there was a Spanish settlement called “La Petite Espagne,” which had its own cultural institutions, churches, and schools where Spanish was the main language. Other slums in Saint-Denis included Le Cornillon, La Campa, Cité Floréal, and Franc-Moisin. In these spaces, the infrastructure was underdeveloped; they were often prone to flooding and were full of garbage and rats.

Urban planning in the 1960s responded to these slums and the housing shortage by demolishing informal settlements and constructing large-scale, government-subsidized social housing (HLMs) (Horvath, 2019, Angélil & Siress, 2012, Glasze & Weber, 2005, Lillo, 2009). During this period, the city of Saint-Denis, governed by communist politics, built approximately 5,000 social housing units (David, 2016), including the cité of Franc-Moisin (Lillo, 2009).

Horvath (2019) notes that to provide housing for increasing numbers of workers from former African colonies, buildings were constructed rapidly, prioritising quantity over quality. Green areas and access to public transport were neglected in the planning processes, resulting in large building complexes called *grands ensembles* or *cités*. Glasze and Weber (2005) noted that despite criticism, these complexes were functional by the standards of the time and well-equipped with sanitation facilities and courtyards. Lillo (2009) added that living standards also improved due to access to hot water, electricity and heating. The banlieues became areas where housing complexes, old houses, factories, and traffic coexisted (Glasze & Weber, 2005).

Harvey (2003) argued that the postwar expansion of the banlieues and social housing estates (HLMs) reflected the deliberate distancing of working-class populations by planners, property speculators, and the state. David (2016) notes that while Paris and the banlieues became increasingly distant, the politics of Saint-Denis strengthened residents’ sense of belonging. Many residents identified more strongly as *Dionysiens* than as Parisians or French. By 1970, Saint-Denis had around 9,000 social housing apartments, mostly in Franc-Moisin. At the same time, fears emerged regarding *mixité sociale* (social diversity), leading to efforts to attract middle-class residents and push out postcolonial populations associated with slums. This resulted in discrimination. Despite these dynamics, the migrant population of Saint-Denis continued to rise. Precarity in the banlieues peaked during the economic crisis and deindustrialization of the 1970s when unemployment increased sharply. Many industries relocated to the Global South, pushing more people into poverty. Long-term unemployment contributed to the rise of a phenomenon in which teenagers from poor families turned to petty crime. School dropout rates rose. Street gangs formed around drugs, vandalism, and violence.

Infrastructure for leisure, transport, and services remained insufficient, and the rapidly built housing required maintenance. The more affluent residents who had initially been attracted by the decent housing of the 1950s moved away, leaving behind mostly migrants with low qualifications from southern Europe or former French colonies. This development caused growing frustration toward authorities (Angélil & Siress, 2012; David, 2016; Glasze & Weber, 2005).

Horvath (2019) notes that since 1979, beginning in the Lyon suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin, unrest has repeatedly erupted in the banlieues. This led to urban transformation projects intended to improve living conditions. The 1973 Guichard Report recommended improving existing infrastructure rather than building new estates to combat degradation, exclusion, and poverty. In Paris, riots occurred in 1981 and 1995 and have become more frequent since.

Since the 1980s, the banlieues have been highly stigmatized as the problem zones of France. Media, political, and public discourse have shaped perceptions of these spaces as areas of poverty, degradation, criminality, and “otherness.” These depictions justified territorial policies targeting socio-economic and ethnic inequalities, which in turn reinforced stigmatization (Horvath, 2019, Angélil & Siress, 2012, Glasze & Weber, 2005).

In 1983, President François Mitterrand launched the urban planning programme Banlieues 89, which aimed to demolish or rebuild grands ensembles and prioritise quality over quantity (Angélil & Siress, 2012). Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1993), among others, were commissioned to study the banlieues and interview residents. Based on their findings, urban projects were initiated to integrate isolated areas and reduce physical and social barriers, although bureaucratic delays slowed down progress (Angélil & Siress, 2012).

In 1991, policymakers declared the banlieues the most urgent social problem in France (Horvath, 2019). The stigmatization was both spatial and ethnic, and reflected a failure to integrate migrant populations (Glasze & Weber, 2005). These issues were depicted in banlieue cinema, such as *La Haine* (1995), which brought further attention to the problem (Angélil & Siress, 2012).

After the economic and social crisis, several hundred hectares of land in La Plaine became available and approximately 30,000 jobs were lost (Lecroart, 2008). The industrial past of the area was visible through urban fractures caused by highways, canals, and railways, as well as noise and air pollution and a lack of local streets, public spaces, transport, and educational facilities (Lecroart, 2008, Lefort-Prost, 2007). Lecroart (2008) explains that the territory of La Plaine spanned multiple communes with independent authorities, which caused conflicts over planning decisions. Although all three communes shared a working-class identity and communist leadership, they disagreed on specific measures. For this reason, collaboration between the central government, the region, the county, local authorities, and the public sector was needed to advance a common project.



Fig. 3: Industrial wasteland near the Olympic Village in preparation for new residential area
(Author, 2025)

Lecroart (2008) describes how new planning projects were launched in La Plaine by the newly established economic interest group Hippodamos 93 to redevelop the former industrial zone (Fig. 3). Projects included covering the A1 motorway, creating public spaces and green areas, improving connections between La Plaine and neighbouring districts, and developing mixed-use buildings. The aim was to achieve greater social and functional diversity by creating new housing and jobs. The area was considered strategic by the city of Paris, which needed a stadium for the World Cup and future Olympic bids. In 1993, the decision was made to locate the stadium in La Plaine, and the existence of the Hippodamos 93 project was decisive for its implementation. Local authorities negotiated the Stade de France Agreement, which required that the stadium be built in a mixed-use district with housing, offices, and leisure facilities; that the project accelerate public transport improvements and the creation of pedestrian spaces, including covering parts of the A1 highway and that jobs be created for local residents. The implementation of the stadium came with state-funded upscaling of the immediate surroundings of the stadium.

Lillo (2009) explains that on the former site of the slum *La Petite Espagne*, the Stade de France was built in the 1990s. The neighbourhood was demolished to make way for the stadium, along with new streets, cinemas, hotels, shops, and two RER stations. Former residents were relocated to social housing nearby.

Lecroart (2008) notes that after the World Cup, private developers became increasingly interested in the area. Office overflow from central Paris relocated to La Plaine, however, the eastern part of La Plaine and other neighbourhoods in Saint-Denis were not affected by these developments.

The communes in the northeast of Paris decided to build on the success of La Plaine's transformation by creating a new inter-municipal authority called Plaine Commune. This authority has its own tax resources, budget, and powers in planning, development, environment, housing, social, and tourism policies (Lecroart, 2008). Table 3 provides an overview of the levels of Government in France contextualizing the levels of government mentioned in the context of urban planning.

Table 3 Levels of Government

Administrative Level	Name	Description
Commune	Saint-Denis	The basic unit of French local administration. Governed by a mayor and municipal council and responsible for services such as primary schools, waste collection, local roads, housing competences, and social provision. Historically linked to the French Communist Party, giving it the identity of <i>la ville rouge</i> .
Intercommunalité	Plaine Commune	A cooperative structure created in 2000, grouping several communes including Saint-Denis. Coordinates urban planning, economic development, transport, and major renewal programmes. Plays a key role in local mega-projects.
Département	Seine-Saint-Denis (93)	Administrative level above communes. Manages middle schools, social assistance, and some infrastructure. Symbolically significant and often referred to as “the 93,” associated with narratives of crisis and resilience.
Région	Île-de-France	Encompasses Paris and surrounding départements. Responsible for high schools, regional transport systems (RER, trains), economic strategy, and metropolitan planning. Co-finances major projects like the Grand Paris Express.
Central State	French State	Retains strong authority over urban planning, infrastructure, and mega-projects (Stade de France, Grand Paris Express, Olympics).

Since the World Cup (1998) the Stade de France has hosted numerous major events, which positioned it as a potential venue for the Olympic Games (2024). The hosting of a second mega-event enabled additional state funding for renewal projects (Lecroart, 2008). Dörr (2023) reports that in 2017, Paris was selected to host the Olympics and Paralympics. New sports infrastructure such as the Aquatic Centre was built, and the Olympic Village was created to house 14,000 athletes. After the Olympics, the Olympic Village will provide 2,800 housing units and include a hotel, schools, daycare facilities, student housing, shops, and offices, which will in turn create new job opportunities.

Dörr (2023) explains that transportation infrastructure had to be developed, in particular the station Saint-Denis–Pleyel, which is part of the Grand Paris Express (GPE) and opened in 2024. The project has further plans to connect metro lines 14, 15, 16, and 17, of which only line 14 currently exists. Adjacent to the station is the *Franchissement Urbain Pleyel* (FUP), a pedestrian bridge connecting Pleyel with the station Stade de France–Saint-Denis (RER D), the Stade de France, and the Aquatic Centre. Funding also covered *Les Lumières Pleyel*, a housing and office project, as well as renovations of the Pleyel Tower. While the funding was welcome, it also influenced local dynamics and demographic compositions. The newly created mega-project infrastructure increased local rents, particularly around transportation hubs. Moreover, the diversification of employment and housing did not necessarily meet residents' needs: available jobs often required higher qualifications, and the new housing proved too expensive for many.

Collectif Le Revers de la Médaille (2024) reports that, similar to the World Cup, the Olympics came with a form of social cleansing in which unofficial housing was dissolved. Thousands of people living in squats, informal settlements, and other precarious housing were expelled—often repeatedly—displacing them from their everyday environments and fragmenting long-standing social networks. These expulsions frequently occurred without adequate rehousing solutions and sometimes outside legal frameworks, leaving many residents without support and causing social services to lose contact with those they had been assisting. These operations were accompanied by intensified policing and frequent identity checks that targeted people experiencing homelessness, migrants, and unaccompanied minors.

Dörr (2023) argues that hosting mega-projects had a lasting impact on Dionysiens. On the one hand, it created jobs, new housing, economic development and public recognition. On the other hand, it led to gentrification and displacement.

Scholars have criticized renewal projects for being guided by ethnic stigmatization, market-oriented efficiency, and surveillance rather than care (Horvath, 2019, Angélil & Siress, 2012). The persistence of uprisings in the banlieues suggests that this “improvement and pacification” political agenda has been largely unsuccessful or even counterproductive (Angélil & Siress, 2012). Mancheno (2020) argues that riots are not the source of violence. Instead, Parisian urban planning functions as a form of (post)colonial violence. However, this is not what circulates in dominant discourses. Media coverage mostly focuses on the rioting residents and glorifies urban planning interventions (Glasze & Weber, 2005).

This historical review shows that the history of urban renewal and socio-economic stigmatization of the banlieues are deeply intertwined. Each is both a cause and a consequence of the others. These trajectories must be traced together to understand the current situation of Saint-Denis.

Chapter 5 – Findings: (Re)bordering Saint-Denis

This chapter examines how recent mega-projects reshape the everyday lives of residents in Saint-Denis by transforming the social and spatial borders and the outwards representations that structure the city. Conversations with residents revealed three recurring patterns. First, mega-projects selectively unbuild existing mobility borders, particularly in the immediate neighbourhood of mega-events infrastructure, creating new possibilities for movement, while privileging certain groups over others. Second, they generate new borders, mainly economic ones, through gentrification. The creation of artificial Parisian Enclaves redefines who can afford to remain in place. Third, they produce symbolic reordering that distinguish between a desired population, targeted by rebranding efforts, and long-term residents who increasingly feel devalued, displaced, and excluded.

The chapter begins by situating these perceptions within the historical experience of Saint-Denis as a territory shaped by constant transformation and persistent stigmatization (see also Lecroart, 2008). It then shows how current mega-projects accelerate these long-standing dynamics by introducing infrastructural changes that selectively enable mobility (see also *ibid*). The chapter concludes by examining the direct effects of these projects, including the emergence of new economic boundaries, shifting mobility patterns, and the growing sense among long-term residents that these transformations are intended for others rather than for them.

5.1 Saint-Denis a Space of Urban Transformation and Rebranding

The Chapter 4 – Historical Context of Saint-Denis has already situated mega-project infrastructure within a longer trajectory of urban transformation and rebranding efforts that target the banlieues as stigmatized spaces (see also Lecroart, 2008). Acknowledging that the representation and discourses about space impact one's perception (see also Kraftl & Horton, 2009). This chapter shows how historical evolution and the constant stigmatisation played an important role in how Dionysiens imagine the place they live in. Many conversations revolved around the idea that the space “has become” and “is what it is” because of its past. During my second stay, I walked through the area of La Plaine with the long-term resident Pierre-Louis. He guided me through the streets where the slum “La Petite Espagne” once stood and showed me the newly constructed micro-neighbourhoods that have replaced it (see also Lillo, 2009). He also took me along the boulevard created when the highway was covered. As someone who works as a local tour guide, he is invested in sharing the history of Saint-Denis. He sees Saint-Denis as a space that has always undergone change.

"Au Moyen Âge, les changements se faisaient tous les siècles... Depuis le XIXe siècle, tout va plus vite... Avec le Stade de France, l'industrie a laissé place au tertiaire... Le canal de Saint-Denis en 1821 avait déjà coupé le territoire. L'autoroute ensuite a créé une autre fracture. Chaque époque amène son lot de mutations."

"In the Middle Ages, changes happened every century... Since the nineteenth century, everything goes faster... With the Stade de France, industry gave way to the tertiary sector... The Saint-Denis canal in 1821 had already cut the territory. The motorway later created another fracture. Each era brings its share of mutations."

Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025

Whenever the history of Saint-Denis was mentioned in the conversations, it usually began with relatively recent developments, as in Pierre-Louis Clément's accounts. He referred to the industrial era, which brought both urban development and fragmentation, followed by the construction of the Stade de France and the tertiarisation of La Plaine, which again produced new forms of development and new fractures (see also Lecroart, 2008). Interestingly, in residents' imaginations of Saint-Denis, older history rarely played an important role in shaping the identity of the place or the community. The collective memory mainly focused on recent developments and on how Dionysiens have become accustomed to enduring and adapting to continuous change.

Among the most frequently mentioned urban transformation projects were the mega-project (e.g. World Cup 1998, Olympics 2024). These projects were perceived as part of the ongoing processes of renewal and rebranding. At the same time, residents described mega-events as accelerating urban transformations that were already underway (see also Wolfe et al., 2021). This sense of continuous transformation and its intensification also came up during a walk with Françoise in the city centre. She loves walking in the city center and *Le Parc de la Légion d'honneur*. Françoise moved to Saint-Denis in 2012. She is a retired social scientist who bought a house in Bel Air. Having arrived in what she called the aftermath of the first major acceleration, linked in her view to the World Cup, she now observed a second wave of acceleration associated with the Olympics.

"Ce n'est pas les Jeux Olympiques qui ont déclenché un renouveau. C'est parce que Saint-Denis était en plein renouveau que les Jeux Olympiques ont pu être installés."

"It was not the Olympic Games that triggered renewal. It was because Saint-Denis was already in renewal that the (Olympic) Games could be installed."

Françoise, walking interview, 5 April 2025



Fig. 4: Stade de France (Author, 2025)

Pierre-Louis agreed with her impression that the infrastructural changes of the Olympics are a continuation of the developments from the World Cup (Fig. 4) and added that these short mega-events have long-lasting impacts on space by altering its configuration. This agrees with the findings of Clift, Wilson and Talbot (2025) and Dörr (2023). He emphasised that these transformations continue even after the events.

"Les Jeux Olympiques ont accéléré les transformations. Mais le vrai changement a commencé avec le Stade de France. Puis, après 2005, les grands quartiers d'habitation ont commencé à être construits... Aujourd'hui, cette zone est un mélange d'activités diverses... Mais ça reste un quartier en mutation."

"The Olympic Games accelerated the transformations. But the real change began with the Stade de France. Then, after 2005, the big residential quarters began to be built... Today, this area is a mix of diverse activities... But it remains a neighbourhood in mutation."

Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025

In conversations about the history of Saint-Denis the topic of stigmatisation frequently emerged as well. Stigmatisation and constant urban transformation, forms part of the identity of Saint-Denis and its population (see subsection 6.2). Pierre-Louis, for example, perceives Saint-Denis as a space that has long been represented negatively from the outside.

"Sur la représentation de la zone nord de Paris et de la banlieue. Tout ce qui était ramené à la misère. Et donc, c'était considéré comme une classe dangereuse."

"On the representation of the northern Paris area and the banlieue. Everything was reduced to misery. And so, it was considered a 'dangerous class'."

Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025

In the stories I was told by Dionysiens, mega-events also played an important role in the history of Saint-Denis as a stigmatised place. The World Cup and the Olympics were seen as a way to draw attention to Saint-Denis as a space with potential. They were understood as rebranding efforts aimed at improving the reputation of this stigmatised area (see also Clift, Wilson and Talbot (2025)). During a walk in the park, the park guard Jonas focused on the positive effect the Olympics had on the negative representation of Saint-Denis.

"Les JO (Jeux Olympiques) ont sorti Saint-Denis de l'ombre..."

"The Olympics brought Saint-Denis out of the shadows..."

Jonas, walking interview, 6 April 2025

Jonas is an employee of the city who lived in Saint-Denis for more than thirty years before the increasing busyness of the area became too overwhelming for him. He sees great potential in Saint-Denis, especially in its strong sense of community life, but he wishes for greater social diversity. In his view, the Olympics represent an opportunity to make the city more desirable, particularly through the new infrastructure that has been created. This is an interesting insight contradicting the rather negative perception of urban renewal and rebranding by other long-term residents which we will encounter later. Simultaneously, his statements have to be approached cautiously as he is an employee of the city who explicitly mentioned limitations in expressing his political opinion based on his loyalty to his employer.

Florian and Manon, a newcomer couple in their thirties, who have lived on L'Île-Saint-Denis since 2017, also observed the shift in Saint-Denis's image since the Olympics. Both work for companies that relocated to La Plaine, attracted by the urban transformation and the portrayal of Saint-Denis as a space full of potential. They also pointed to a shift in public discourse. Conversations about

Saint-Denis increasingly move away from viewing the area solely as a stigmatised place and toward seeing it as a place of opportunity:

"Beaucoup d'entreprises sont arrivées à La Plaine... on parle de Saint-Denis en termes plus positifs..."

"Many companies have arrived in La Plaine... people now speak more positively of Saint-Denis..."

Florian and Manon, interview in their home, 9 March 2025

Their positive statement about the renewal and rebranding is also connected to their position as newcomers who effectively got attracted by the discourse about Saint-Denis as a space with potential. They profited from the cheapness of space in Saint-Denis which motivated their businesses to move to Saint-Denis as well as the flat they bought cheap in comparison to Parisian prices.

These two accounts show how positionality affects the imagination of space and the perception of urban transformations. Florian and Manon represent the perception of space by an affluent newcomer, who sees the rebranding and transformation rather positive as it comes with a lot of economic possibilities (Subsection 5.2). They belong to the part of the population who benefited from the selective implementation of infrastructure and represent the part of the population that is privileged and considered politically desired by long-term residents as discussed in the subsection 5.3.3.

In summary, the history and perception of Saint-Denis plays an essential role in how Dionysians relate to the space they inhabit and make sense of their surroundings. Saint-Denis is understood as a space that has undergone continuous change and one that has been repeatedly stigmatised throughout its history. In the imagination of Dionysians, urban transformation has been an integral part of the city's identity, especially since the industrial era, which produced both physical fractures and new infrastructures (see also Lecroart, 2008). The mega-events, particularly the World Cup and the Olympic Games, have accelerated these transformations, and their impacts continue to be felt (see also Dörr, 2024; Clift, Wilson & Talbot, 2025). For this reason, mega-events are perceived less as singular ruptures and more as accelerators of long-standing historical trajectories (see also Wolfe et al., 2021).

In addition, they function politically as rebranding instruments and catalysts for external perception, shifting Saint-Denis from a stigmatised periphery to a global event venue, a metropolitan hospitality hub, and, as some describe it, the "21st arrondissement of Paris." This rebranding generates visibility, economic growth (see also Lecroart, 2008). However, as we will further see in later sections, these changes are received with mixed feelings by Dionysians. On the one hand, many feel grateful. On the other hand, they fear the potential impacts on their lives, identities, and the social composition of Saint-Denis. Perceptions of these transformations depend strongly on residents' positionality, which are highly diverse within Saint-Denis.

5.2 Mega-Project Infrastructure as Selective Enablers

This section shifts from discussing the role of mega-projects to their concrete effects. The Stade de France (1998), the Aquatic Center (2024), and the Olympic Village (2024) were more than the construction of event infrastructure. It triggered a series of selective urban transformations in the form of infrastructure that supported the upcoming mega-event (see also Lecroart, 2008).

Saint-Denis carries the imprint of its infrastructural history. Once an industrial hub and transit corridor, it is shaped by networks designed to move goods and people in and out of Paris. This legacy is visible in the dense layering of infrastructures: two highways cut across the territory, the canal and the Seine form aquatic frontiers, and the RER B and RER D rail lines introduce additional divisions (Fig. 5) (see also Lecroart, 2008; Lefort-Prost, 2007).



Fig. 5: Three major urban fractures in Saint-Denis: high-intensity traffic corridors (motorways and arterial roads), the railway tracks leading toward Lille, and the canal (Author, 2025)

These large arteries, together with secondary roads, fragment Saint-Denis into multiple enclaves. The Stade de France, for example, is bordered by highways and the canal. Franc-Moisin is bordered by the canal and a high-traffic road. La Plaine has long been bracketed between motorways and rails, and L'Île-Saint-Denis is isolated by the river on both sides. These fractures create a geography of disconnection, where neighbourhoods are defined as much by the barriers surrounding them as by their internal connections (Fig. 6).

In connection with mega-events, selective interventions have managed to bridge some of these separations, reducing certain physical borders while leaving others intact. The Dionysiens I spoke with shared how they perceive these selective interventions and how these changes affect their daily lives. In the following subchapters these interventions were divided into three categories: 5.2.1 Highway Coverage, a mobility enabler to overcome the urban fracture highway, 5.2.2 Bridges which enabled movement over aquatic frontiers as well as rail lines and 5.2.3 Train Stations to enable better connectivity with Paris and the rest of the metropolitan area.

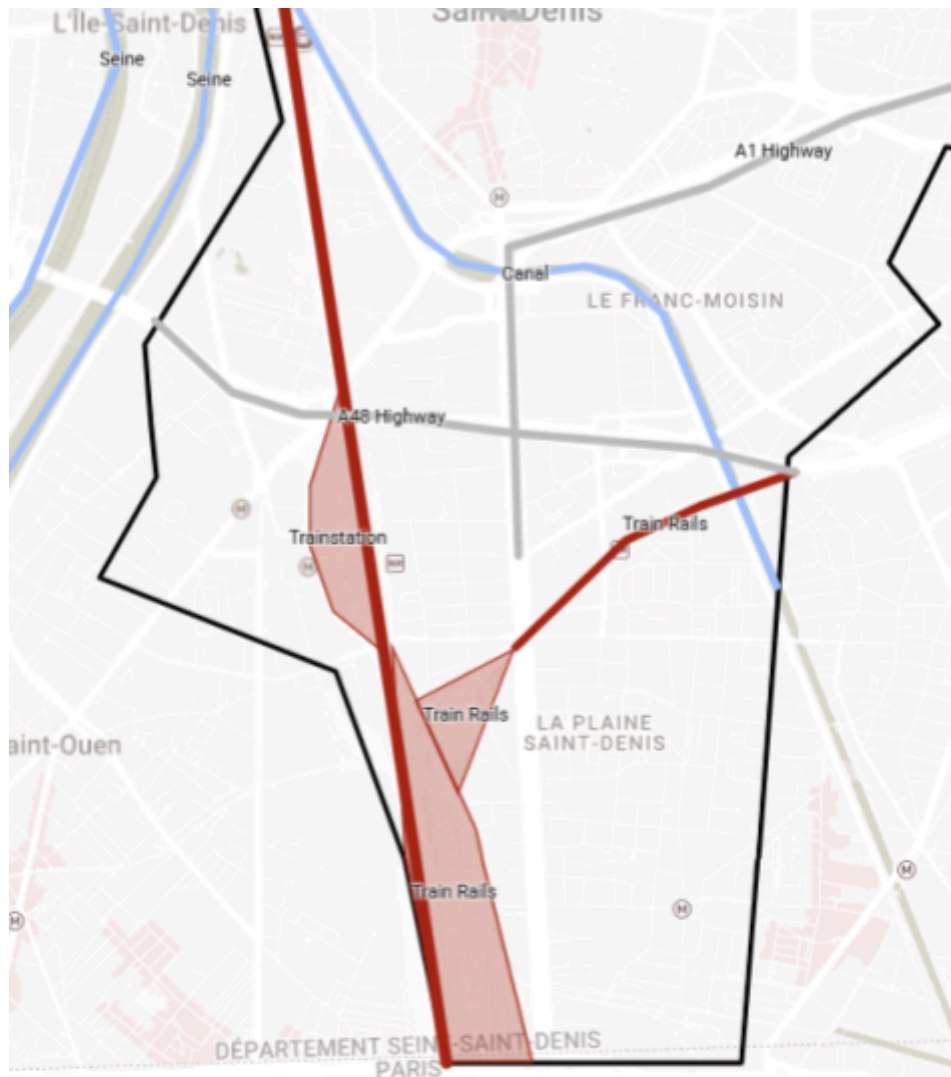


Fig. 6: Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) (Author, 2025)

5.2.1 Highway Coverage

The fracture that was addressed first during the urban transformations connected to the World Cup was Highway A1 (see also Lacroart, 2008). It is the major motorway connecting Paris to Lille and northern Europe. Crossing directly through Saint-Denis, it has long represented both a vital transport corridor and a disruptive barrier for local residents. Built in stages during the 1950s and 1960s, the Saint-Denis section was constructed as an open trench that cut across Plaine Saint-Denis (Le Parisien, 2015). While this engineering choice enabled high-capacity traffic flow, it created a severe urban fracture, reduced east-west connectivity, and lowered local quality of life.

A turning point came with the World Cup and the construction of the Stade de France. To improve both image and functionality, a portion of the A1 was covered by the Tunnel du Landy, which placed the motorway underground and enabled the construction of new decks, public spaces, and pedestrian crossings above it (Fig. 7) (Lacroart, 2008).



Fig. 7: Crossing at Rue du Landy, where the A1 motorway has been covered and transformed into a new boulevard (Author, 2025)

Camille told me about the removal of this fracture during our first video call. Camille works for an association in the banlieues that seeks to politically empower these areas. Combined with her residence in Saint-Denis and her training as a geographer, she has developed a diverse expertise on the area. When she described the coverage of the highway, she focused on several points. First, she emphasised that this urban fracture was addressed specifically because of the mega-event, the World Cup (1998) (see also Lefort-Prost, 2007). In other words, its deconstruction did not happen to purely improve the mobility of Dionysiens. Second, she pointed out that the financial resources required to address this fracture came from funding linked to the World Cup (see also Lecroart, 2008).

"L'Autoroute A1... a été recouverte à cette occasion... auparavant, c'était une énorme coupure urbaine... aujourd'hui... un boulevard urbain et un espace plus agréable. Mais ce genre d'aménagement coûte cher et il est aujourd'hui difficile d'imaginer de nouveaux projets similaires."

"The A1 motorway... was covered on that occasion... before, it was an enormous urban cut... today... an urban boulevard and a more pleasant space. But this kind of development is expensive, and it is difficult today to imagine similar new projects."

Camille, video call, 21 January 2025

Her account conveys both appreciation and realism. The transformation was visible and tangible, but also exceptional, and unlikely to be repeated without funding tied to events of a similar scale. During my research, I also walked with the urban scientist Romain, who has studied the history of Saint-Denis for many years. He situated the same intervention within the politics of negotiation:

"Ils ont proposé à l'État d'implanter le Stade de France, mais en échange de contreparties, notamment la couverture de l'autoroute... Cela a permis... un vrai projet urbain et politique."

"They (local authorities) proposed to the State to establish the Stade de France, in exchange for compensation, notably covering the motorway... This enabled a real urban and political project."

Romain, walking interview, 22 February 2025

Both of them emphasise that the World Cup made it possible to “heal” a long-recognised wound, but only through state funding. Urban stitching therefore reveals a reliance on rare political opportunities. Together, their perspectives show that large-scale “repairs” in Saint-Denis emerge not from everyday planning processes but from windows of opportunity opened by mega-events (see also (Wolfe et al., 2021). This highlights a certain dependence on external actors, due to limited resources at the local level of governance. Consequently, selective unbuilding of urban fractures may not just emerge because of political rebranding intentions but also due to economic restraints faced by local authorities. Camille and Romain recognise these dynamics through their professional lenses, but they may be less apparent to others.

5.2.2 Bridges

Another type of infrastructural border which was addressed during the mega-projects is the multi-track railway. These tracks enable transportation from Paris to the north but limit mobility between local neighbourhoods in the east–west direction. The most recent project designed to overcome this barrier is the Franchissement Urbain Pleyel (FUP), an Olympic-era bridge (Fig. 8). Spanning nearly 48 tracks of the Paris–Nord corridor (Fig. 9), it connects Pleyel with La Plaine and the Stade de France. The structure combines a wide pedestrian promenade and public spaces. The pedestrian section was inaugurated on 16 May 2024, ahead of the Games (Plaine Commune, 2024; Dörr, 2023; Le Journal du Grand Paris, 2016).



Fig. 8: Franchissement Urbain Pleyel (FUP) linking Pleyel and La Plaine constructed for the Olympics (Author, 2025)

During my first field visit the bridge struck me as wide and proper. It is covered with celebratory Olympic posters. My first impression stood in contrast to the stories I was told by Camille about Saint-Denis being highly fractured. The bridge offered instant access to the business district and the Stade de France. Furthermore, the bridge was a comfortable public space which I was told was also a type of missing infrastructure in Saint-Denis.

Later, I came to understand that this area was one of the priority zones for development, and that not all parts of Saint-Denis are as well connected. The bridge connects event infrastructure and office districts with the new train station Pleyel and the Olympic Village. All of this infrastructure primarily

serves only part of the population based on its geographical location. It appears designed for visitors attending mega-events, for office workers commuting from Paris, and for residents of La Plaine commuting towards Paris. Camille, reflected further on this partial “healing” of fractures:

“Ce projet a été célébré comme un élément de “réparation urbaine” de cette grande coupure ferroviaire. Cependant, même si cette fracture a été partiellement atténuée, elle n’est pas la seule dans la ville.”

“This project was celebrated as part of the “urban repair” of this major railway divide. However, although this divide has been partially mitigated, it is not the only one in the city.”

Camille, video call, 21 January 2025

Her statement expresses a sense of partial satisfaction with this urban repair. On the one hand, the bridge provides infrastructure that is urgently needed. On the other hand, a single bridge cannot solve a problem that stretches over several kilometres. She emphasises that urban repair remains uneven. The bridge does not erase all divides. The choice of location as well as timing of the implementation can be perceived as part of the political aim to attract newcomers and businesses as well as accommodate event visitors bringing economic value to Saint-Denis rather than serving the interest of local residents.



Fig. 9: View from the Franchissement Urbain Pleyel (FUP). In the background, the railway tracks cutting through Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)

The Franchissement Urbain Pleyel (FUP) was not the only structure framed as “urban repair”. A second Olympic-period connector, the vegetated bridge over the Seine, often called the *passerelle du Village Olympique*, extends the same logic across the water. Linking part of the newly built Olympic Village on L’Île-Saint-Denis to the Pleyel side. Officials promoted it as evidence that Olympic infrastructure could also serve everyday life by keeping both riverbanks within a short walking distance (Saint-Denis, 2024a). According to Adrien, a homeowner on the island in his thirties, this bridge follows a similar logic as the FUP. It addresses one of the major urban fractures, but the fracture is long, and one additional bridge does not resolve the problem. He acknowledges the improvement but also points to its selectivity:

“They built a new bridge for the Olympic Games... the south is better; in the north you have to go to the main bridge to cross.”

Adrien, walking interview, 22 February 2025

Like Camille, he situated progress within limits: connections improve, but unevenly, and largely in high-visibility zones.

Another long-awaited connection was rebuilt between Franc-Moisin and the Stade de France, where two bridges cross the canal. The older pedestrian bridge, delivered just before the World Cup, had become increasingly difficult to use, particularly for families and people with reduced mobility. When it was replaced by the new Passerelle Lucie-Bréard in 2024 (Fig. 10) (Plaine Commune, 2023b; SBP, 2025; Saint-Denis, 2024b), the the improvement was evident to residents, but so was the fact that its construction was tied to the Olympics. Irina, a young resident of the city centre, recalled many years of neglect followed by sudden Olympic-driven renewal:

"Avant, entre les Franc-Moisin et le Stade de France, il y avait une passerelle qui montait et descendait, mais c'était très compliqué pour les familles, surtout avec des poussettes. Et pourtant, rien n'avait été fait pendant des années. Et là, tout d'un coup, ils refont tout... pour les JO. Les habitants le savent bien. Ils disaient: "Nous, on s'en fout des JO. Ce problème existe depuis des années ! Pourquoi c'est seulement maintenant que des travaux sont faits ?""

"Before, between Francs-Moisins and the Stade de France, there was a footbridge that went up and down, but it was very complicated for families, especially with pushchairs. And yet nothing had been done for years. And then, all of a sudden, they rebuilt everything... for the Olympics. Residents know this well. They said: 'We don't care about the Olympics. This problem has existed for years! Why is work only being done now?'"

Irina, walking interview, 13 March 2025

She told me during a walk in the city centre that she has observed how residents in less-privileged neighbourhoods such as Franc-Moisin are angry about the recent prioritisation taking place in local politics. To them, it appears as if the political agenda prioritises outward-oriented rebranding and renewal over inward-oriented politics. She attends local meetings there because she works for a company that provides social housing. Her account resonates with many others I heard. Long-standing local problems are addressed only when external events make them unavoidable. Gratitude and frustration coexist. The improvement is real, but its timing reveals a hierarchy of priorities. Residents question whose needs matter and feel like they are second class residents whose needs are just addressed as sideeffects of projects designed to attract the new more desired population. This results in the feeling of political exclusion and social ordering which will be addressed in the subsection 5.3.3.



Fig. 10: The new Passerelle Lucie-Bréard linking Franc-Moisin and the Stade de France (Author, 2025)

The Fig. 11 shows an overview of the bridges addressed in this subsection.



Fig. 11: Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) as well as bridges built as a heritage of the Olympics (Author, 2025)

5.2.3 Train Stations

Another type of movement-enabling infrastructure that accompanied the mega-events was the construction of train stations. To accommodate the large numbers of fans travelling to Saint-Denis for the World Cup, two RER stations were inaugurated on 25 January 1998: La Plaine–Stade de France (RER B) and Stade de France–Saint-Denis (RER D) (Fig. 12). Their design and operation were adapted to serve both daily commuters and event-day crowds. La Plaine–Stade de France replaced an older SNCF stop, La Plaine-Voyageurs, which had existed since 1913, while the RER D station at the stadium was entirely new, inserted into a corridor that had long lacked an intermediate stop between Gare du Nord and the historic Saint-Denis station (Lecroart, 2008). These projects addressed the long-standing need to strengthen connections between Saint-Denis and Paris. However, they were made possible only through the investments linked to the mega-event (see also Lecroart, 2008).



Fig. 12: The two RER stations flanking the Stade de France: Saint-Denis–La Plaine (RER B) and Stade de France–Saint-Denis (RER D) (Author, 2025)

The Olympics followed a similar logic. Saint-Denis-Pleyel is the largest single node of the Grand Paris Express, a metropolitan rail programme initiated in 2007 to restructure regional connectivity. The station opened on 24 June 2024, timed to coincide with the Paris Olympic Games. Pleyel did not replace older metro infrastructure but was built in a former industrial rail zone, transforming railway yards into a major metropolitan interchange (Dörr, 2023; Grand Paris Express; Le Parisien, 2024; RATP, 2024; Metalocus, 2024).

Its opening was also the culmination of a broader wave transport investments in Saint-Denis, including the extension of Metro Line 13 to Saint-Denis–Université in 1998, the arrival of Metro Line 12 at Front Populaire in 2012, and the development of tram lines T5 (2013) and T8 (2014), which progressively knitted together formerly from the capital Paris disconnected neighbourhoods (Wikipedia, 2024a; Wikipedia, 2024b; Wikipedia, 2024c).

I visited Pleyel during my first field visit on 21 February 2025 (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14). It was a very particular experience, especially because it was my very first impression of Saint-Denis. I will share this impression based on my field journal:

Taking the metro out of central Paris into the banlieue, I initially felt uneasy. Stories from colleagues and friends had often framed Saint-Denis as dangerous, and I carried these imaginations with me during the journey. Yet upon arrival at Gare de Pleyel, this expectation was not met. Inside the station, I was struck by its scale and design: high ceilings, glass façades, and wide escalators evoked the atmosphere of an airport. Despite its monumental size, the space was calm and almost empty, populated mainly by business people. A visible police presence contributed to a sense of safety rather than insecurity.

Having expected a sharp contrast between the glorified city of Paris and the counterpart banlieue, I had the impression to have actually entered a counterpart of Paris in an even newer, cleaner and safer environment. Stepping outside the area felt clean and ordered, with new architecture all around.

The depiction of recent milestones (e.g. Olympics, Stade de France...) of the area caught my eyes. In my head I observed the train of thought: "Oh, all these monumental things happened here". Which shifted my attention away from my initial unease and the negative stigma of Saint-Denis.



Fig. 13: Saint-Denis–Pleyel station (interior) (Author, 2025)

In retrospect, I began to understand that this station is a central element of the renewal and rebranding agenda of Saint-Denis. As the station serves as a gateway into the city, it is the place of first impression. For outsiders like me, whose imagination of Saint-Denis is mostly shaped by media portrayals, entering banlieue through Pleyel can be a positive surprise. It prompts visitors to question their preconceived image of Saint-Denis and perhaps even of the banlieues more broadly.

I came to understand who this station is primarily designed for. It serves visitors attending mega-events such as the Olympic Games or football games and concerts at the Stade de France. It also serves employees working in the business district of La Plaine, who are often highly educated commuters from Paris. In addition, it is the station for the future residents of the Olympic Village, a new residential area with relatively high rental prices (see also Dörr, 2023) which will be further discussed in the subsection 5.3.1.



Fig. 14: Saint-Denis–Pleyel station (Author, 2025)

Florian and Manon, a couple who moved to Saint-Denis in 2017, see this station as a major improvement for the area, as it reconnects neighbourhoods that have historically been disconnected to Paris.

"Saint-Denis est en train de se désenclaver énormément. On le voit avec l'arrivée de la ligne 14 et le franchissement de Pleyel, qui permet de gagner énormément de temps."

"Saint-Denis is being very much 'unlocked'. We see it with the arrival of Line 14 and the Pleyel crossing, which saves a great deal of time."

Florian and Manon, interview in their home, date 9 March 2025

Florian and Manon decided to move to L'Île-Saint-Denis because it was one of the few places where buying a flat was still affordable, and they saw great potential in the area due to the upcoming urban renewal projects, especially those related to connectivity. Both of them work in La Plaine, Florian for the SNCF (Société nationale des chemins de fer français), the national railway company, and Manon at the Cité du Cinéma, a large film studio complex. For them, their workplace has become significantly better connected, particularly to Paris itself. This improved accessibility is highly convenient for residents who regularly commute between Saint-Denis and Paris for work and leisure.

The new infrastructure reduces the historic Paris/Banlieue border by facilitating mobility. Paris, which once felt distant, has become increasingly more accessible. This increased accessibility has made Saint-Denis attractive for new housing and office developments, offering lower prices than Paris

while providing equal or even better connectivity (see also Lecroart, 2008; Dörr, 2023). The Fig. 15 summarizes the resulting landscape of train and metro stations in Saint-Denis.

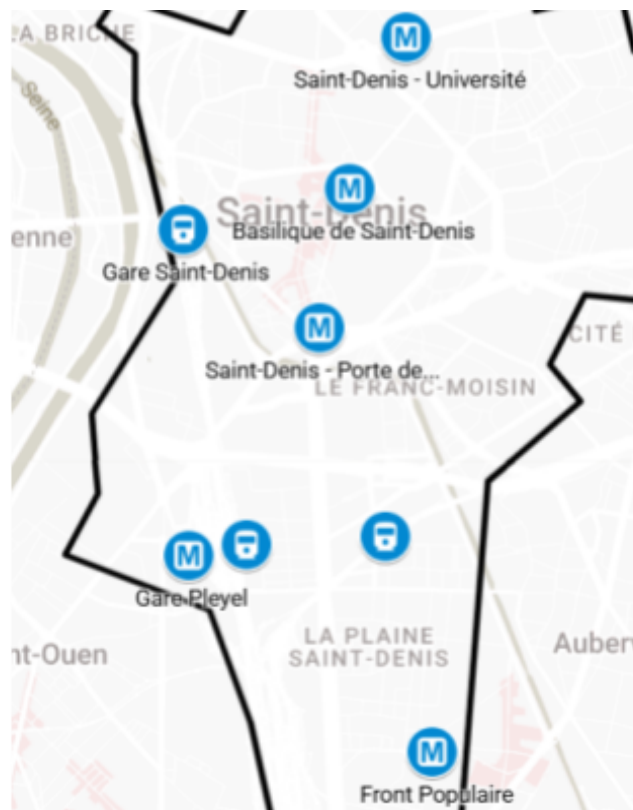


Fig. 15: Train and metro stations in Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)

5.2.4 Synthesis Mega-Project Infrastructure as Selective Enablers

In summary, mega-event infrastructures function as selective enablers in Saint-Denis. Projects such as the A1 coverage, the Pleyel bridge, the new passerelles, and the event-linked train stations have addressed long-standing fractures in the urban landscape (see also Lecroart, 2008; Dörr, 2023). In addition to these flagship projects, the cumulative effect of earlier extensions, such as the northern continuation of Metro Line 13 in 1998, the arrival of Metro Line 12 in La Plaine in 2012 and the development of tram lines T5 and T8, demonstrates how event-driven investments often catalyse broader mobility upgrades (see also Wolfe et al., 2021).

The examples discussed in this chapter illustrate a recurring pattern. Whether highways are covered, bridges constructed, or large stations opened, investment follows the visibility of the mega-event rather than the everyday needs of Dionysiens. Improvements concentrate around the Stade de France, the business district of La Plaine or the Olympic Village, while other fractures remain untouched. Many residents perceive them as real improvements, but also as selective repairs that reinforce feelings of uneven attention and reduce the feeling of belonging. The following dynamics will be further discussed in the subsection 5.3.

5.3 Mega-Projects (B)ordering

"Les JO ont permis des investissements, comme le Franchissement urbain Pleyel, qui réduit une fracture majeure; mais à long terme, ces transformations profiteront-elles aux habitants ou accentueront-elles la gentrification ?"

"The Olympics enabled investments, such as the Franchissement urbain Pleyel, which reduces a major urban fracture; but in the long run will these transformations benefit residents or intensify gentrification?"

Camille, video call, 21 January 2025

So far, mega-events were described as tools that accelerate urban transformations and contribute to the rebranding of a stigmatised space. Furthermore, the mobility related infrastructures constructed as part of these mega-events were identified as selective enablers that help overcoming infrastructural borders created during the industrial past of Saint-Denis. Meanwhile they connect different neighbourhoods of Saint-Denis with Paris. Although these urban renewal interventions are much needed, residents respond to them with mixed feelings. The selectiveness of investment and the logic of rebranding create a complex reality in which residents are torn between the positive and the negative effects of these transformations as Camille's quote above indicates. This subsection will analyse these ambivalences by examining the new kinds of borders that are emerging as a result of the rebranding of Saint-Denis.

5.3.1 Economic Border

This subsection is dedicated to the economic consequences mega-projects have on the composition of Saint-Denis. Mega-events and the associated rebranding have brought an economic boost to the surrounding neighbourhoods (see also Lecroart, 2008). La Plaine has become an increasingly attractive location for large-scale businesses such as the SNCF and the Cité du Cinéma, where Florian, Manon, and Adrien work (5.1 Saint-Denis a Space of Urban Transformation and Rebranding).

During my first walk through Saint-Denis on my own, La Plaine was the second place I visited after the train station Peyel (see Fig. 16). I noted in my field journal:

Tall office buildings of multinational companies dominate the area, their glass façades mirroring the newly built infrastructures. The streetscape is strikingly modern and polished, yet lifeless. Fitness studios and cafés appeared underused, and few people are present apart from scattered office workers. The district seems designed for daytime flows and corporate routines rather than neighbourhood life.

This first encounter reinforced the sense that large-scale renewal in Saint-Denis was geared towards external visibility and metropolitan integration rather than everyday lives of long-term residents. Spaces mostly used by office workers from Paris and event visitors appeared designed to reflect the rebranding of a safe and modern Saint-Denis. It provided a striking contrast to the less renewed residential areas like Franc-Moisin which I would encounter later.



Fig. 16: The Office District of La Plaine (Author, 2025)

In addition to the business district many new residential areas have been built (see also Lecroart, 2008), which the local guide Pierre-Louis Clément pointed out during our walk (5.1 Saint-Denis a Space of Urban Transformation and Rebranding). These modern neighbourhoods form part of ongoing gentrification processes (see also Dörr, 2023).

Historically, Saint-Denis was often the place where the “unwanted” populations were relocated. Over time, these groups were repeatedly displaced whenever urban renewal projects required it. During the transformation of La Plaine, former residents were again forced to relocate (Chapter 4 – Historical Context of Saint-Denis). With the recent rebranding, the improved connectivity, and the construction of new neighbourhoods, many Dionysiens feel that they may once more be pushed aside. Camille summarised this process as follows:

"Le quartier de La Plaine, autrefois industriel, est devenu un pôle d'affaires et de bureaux après la Coupe du Monde de 1998. L'augmentation des loyers pousse progressivement les classes populaires vers d'autres quartiers."

"The La Plaine district, formerly industrial, became a business and office hub after the 1998 World Cup. Rising rents are gradually pushing working-class residents toward other neighbourhoods."

Camille, video call, 21 January 2025

The increasing rents have a direct impact on her. She and her girlfriend have been searching for a new apartment in the region but rents have become unaffordable, especially in the city centre and in La Plaine. They fear that they may have to leave the area and move even farther away from Paris. She is not the only one who told me such stories. Sophie and Irina, who also live in the city centre, shared similar experiences. All of them moved to the Saint-Denis city center within the last five years because of its previously affordable rents but this situation has changed rapidly since the Olympic era (see also Dörr, 2023).

The mobility infrastructures, including the RER stations and especially the new Gare de Pleyel, have made the area attractive for new housing and office developments (see also Lecroart, 2008). This has drawn newcomers, particularly younger professionals between the ages of 25 and 45 like Adrien,

Florian and Manon. Many arrived from Paris in search of larger or more affordable flats to buy. Office workers of La Plaine also chose to settle nearby, valuing the proximity between their homes and workplaces. For these newcomers, the new developments represent opportunity, accessibility, and comfort. Sophie pointed out this connection between connectivity and raising rents:

"Et surtout, dans les zones où ce sera vraiment bien connecté... les prix vont tellement monter que tous les gens qui habitent là maintenant ne pourront plus y habiter."

"And above all, in the zones that will be really well connected... the prices will rise so much that all the people who live there now will no longer be able to stay."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

These accounts demonstrate how mega-events and related mobility infrastructure do not just upgrade the space architecturally but also come with an economic impact. New infrastructure and better connectivity result in raising rents creating gentrifying processes. This shifts spaces which are affordable more to the margins creating new economic-border lines. These borders are no longer between Paris and Saint-Denis but more so between neighbourhoods of Saint-Denis itself. Some neighbourhoods become first-class neighbourhoods infrastructurally equipped, while others remain marginal but affordable.

According to Camille the gentrification of Saint-Denis is politically often celebrated as *mixité sociale* (social diversity). By attracting younger and better-off residents, local authorities present renewal as a rebalancing strategy in a city long dominated by social housing. Yet for many tenants like Camille, this strategy of social diversification is experienced as displacement and replacement instead. She expresses the fear of being substituted by a more desired population:

"L'extension de la Ligne 14 et la nouvelle gare de Saint-Denis Pleyel transforment complètement le territoire. Ce projet fait grimper les loyers et pousse progressivement les classes populaires vers d'autres quartiers. Il s'agit moins d'une mixité sociale que d'une substitution progressive des habitants."

"The extension of Line 14 and the new Saint-Denis Pleyel station completely transform the territory. This project drives up rents and gradually pushes working-class residents toward other neighbourhoods. It is less about social mixing than about a progressive substitution of inhabitants."

Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025

In her quote Camille clearly describes how these new economic borders change the demography of Saint-Denis especially in renewed neighbourhoods like La Plaine but also other well connected neighbourhoods like the city center. This depicts how improved connectivity to the metropolitan center urban renewal and rebranding becomes a direct cause of gentrification which leads to stronger hierarchies between the affluent newcomers and the long-term residents. The current urban renewal politics order who is desired and matters politically and who does not. This leads to a counter-positioning of long-term residents and newcomers, especially in descriptions of one another. This will be further discussed in 5.3.3 Symbolic Borders.

Martine, a long-term resident who has lived in Saint-Denis for more than fifty years, first in Franc-Moisin and later near the Stade de France, expressed these dynamics with fear. She voiced

strong frustration about how little long-term residents seem to matter in local decision-making and how this results in gentrification:

"Oui, ils veulent attirer plus de gens de Paris... on a l'impression qu'ils veulent nous chasser et nous remplacer..."

"Yes, they want to attract more people from Paris... we feel they want to chase us away and replace us..."

Martine, phone call, 14 March 2025

She has very strong neighbourhood ties and is active in the *Maison du Quartier* (neighbourhood association) in both La Plaine and Franc-Moisin. For her, the mega-events and their rebranding efforts disrupt long-standing neighbourhood networks. This topic will be addressed more deeply in the subsection 5.3.3.

One of the largest new neighbourhoods to be constructed is the Athletes' Village also called Olympic Village, one of the most ambitious redevelopments linked to the Games. Covering 46 hectares across Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen, and L'Île-Saint-Denis, the Village was designed to host athletes before being converted into a new mixed-use district. Yet alongside these ambitions came social costs. Expropriations displaced industrial sites, a migrant workers' residence and student housing (Collectif Le Revers de la Médaille, 2024; Dörr, 2023). For some, this reinforces the perception that the project represents a substitution of existing communities with affluent newcomers who can afford to live in the revalorised district.

Romain, who lives in nearby Aubervilliers and has conducted extensive research on the commune, walked with me through the Olympic Village. At that time, the houses were completely empty of life, even though they looked clean, polished and appealing as places to live. Romain described the artificial character of these new districts:

"Plutôt pour des gens qui ont les moyens... quartier artificiel, construit d'un coup..."

"Rather for people who have the means... an artificial neighbourhood, built all at once..."

Romain, walking interview, 22 February 2025

According to Pierre-Louis, this neighbourhood is not only artificial in its architecture but also in its geographical positioning. It is a space that, in his view, does not truly belong to its surrounding environment:

"Ce sera un quartier hybride, partagé entre Saint-Denis et Saint-Ouen. Si tu habites dans les nouveaux immeubles du Village Olympique, tu ne sauras même pas si tu es à Saint-Denis ou à Saint-Ouen. Ça sera un développement particulier, un quartier créé de toutes pièces."

"It will be a hybrid district, shared between Saint-Denis and Saint-Ouen. If you live in the new buildings of the Olympic Village, you won't even know whether you're in Saint-Denis or Saint-Ouen. It will be a particular development, a district created from scratch."

Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025

Similarly, the future residents will also be "artificial". This neighbourhood is not affordable for the average Dionysien (see also Collectif Le Revers de la Médaille, 2024; Dörr, 2023). It will eventually be inhabited by an entirely new population with the financial means to live there. This population will,

according to Romain and Pierre-Louis, most likely come from Paris. So the newly created neighbourhoods will form some kind of parisian enclave. It starts being a place well connected to Paris mobilitywise but not at all connected to Saint-Denis symbolically. This created economic as well as symbolic border contributes to the impression of a constructed place designed for “the other”, for those who are expected to come rather than for those who are already there. Long-term residents consequently feel excluded from urban planning decisions.

On a hopeful note Camille concludes that it is still unclear how the new housing will ultimately be used, as it is not yet certain whether there are enough prospective buyers or tenants.

"Le plus gros changement viendra de l'usage des logements et bureaux des JO... peinent à trouver preneur, prix très élevés..."

"The biggest change will come from how Olympic housing/offices are used... they struggle to find takers, prices are very high..."

Camille, video call, 21 January 2025

According to her the desired population is evident from the rental prices. The rebranding has already effectively worked in other neighbourhoods but this project comes on a whole new scale. The question remains whether the rebranding has been effective enough to attract this many new residents at once. The newly attracted population in the city centre did not just impact the real estate market. They show different expectations regarding services and infrastructure. As a result, the urban landscape is changing in terms of everyday amenities such as shops and local services. Camille observes these deeper gentrification processes with concern.

"Des commerces plus chers et plus “branchés”remplacent les anciens commerces populaires."

"More expensive, more ‘trendy’ shops are replacing older popular businesses."

Camille, video call, 13 March 2025

It is going to get harder for the long-term residents to afford not just the rent but also other costs of living, which reinforces economic borders. These gentrification processes can be observed mostly in La Plaine, the Stade de France area, and the city centre, which are the neighbourhoods that have been affected the most by new infrastructures. Neighbourhoods such as Franc-Moisin are not yet experiencing gentrification to the same extent.

To get a broader understanding of these gentrification dynamics and to depict one neighbourhood at the margin in contrast to the glamorous renewed neighbourhoods. I will give an insight into my field journal. During my first field trip I visited the Stade de France neighbourhood and Franc-Moisin. The Stade de France represents an “upgraded” neighbourhood in contrast to the neighbourhood of Franc-Moisin. As these neighbourhoods are adjacent to one another the contrast couldn’t be more striking for an outsider's eye like mine. I noted the following in my field journal:

I crossed from La Plaine to Stade de France through an underpass, the urban landscape opened suddenly onto the stadium. Its monumental scale, clean surroundings, and tight security presence (Fig. 17) created yet another contrast. Surrounding the stadium are newer blocks of housing and offices mixed with large retail outlets and sports infrastructures. At first sight, the area appeared modern and well-maintained. Yet this impression was undermined by its isolation. Bounded on all four sides by highways,

railway lines, and the canal, the district functioned less as a neighbourhood than as an enclave. Constant noise and the difficulty of access reinforced the sense of being trapped within a ring of infrastructure, making it a space to pass through or consume in, but not one to linger in.



Fig. 17: Secured Stade de France (Author, 2025)

Turning eastward toward Franc-Moisin, the transition was tangible: glossy Olympic infrastructures and monumental sports facilities gave way to residential streets, bakeries, and small shops. Crossing the canal via one of the new pedestrian bridges marked a threshold, both physically and symbolically, into a different part of Saint-Denis. At this point in my first encounter, I chose not to venture further. The reputations of danger I had absorbed made me cautious. I briefly entered the edge of the neighbourhood but stayed on main streets, noting my unease. In hindsight, the discomfort was less about the immediate environment, where families, children, and shops gave signs of everyday life, than about my own imagination.

After later walks with local participants, I felt more confident to explore Franc-Moisin alone:

Entering via Stade de France – Saint-Denis (RER B), I crossed the canal at a different point and came across an underpass marked by graffiti and industrial surroundings (Fig. 18). The smell of sewage was overwhelming, and the space felt hostile. A passage rather than a destination.



Fig. 18: Pedestrian underpass with graffiti in La Plaine (Author, 2025)

Deeper inside Franc-Moisin, the Grands Ensembles dominated the landscape. In front of several blocks the parking lot overflowed with cars, leaving little room for public life (Fig. 19).



Fig. 19: Grand ensemble in Franc-Moisin with parking lot (Author, 2025)

At a waste collection point, trash spilled beyond the containers, reinforcing impressions of neglect (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20: Waste collection point at a grand ensemble in Franc-Moisin (Author, 2025)

These impressions contrasted the celebratory Olympic rebranding and the renewal observed in other neighbourhoods. Franc-Moisin aligned with the imagination I had as an outsider of the banlieues as an infrastructurally neglected space. These socio-economical differences engraved in space manifest the borders caused by selective urban investments.

Yet I also noted everyday normality like greetings on the street, children leaving schools, municipal cleaners. Franc-Moisin appeared infrastructurally not as welcoming as other parts of Saint-Denis but in contrast the community life was more sensible and welcoming than anywhere else. This characteristic will be targeted more in depth in the subsection 5.3.3 as it is of high importance in the long-term residents' understanding of Saint-Denis and particularly Franc-Moisin.

The renewal of neighbourhoods always came hand in hand with better connectivity like the implementation of bridges or train stations. Franc-Moisin as Fig. 21 illustrates did not benefit from much new infrastructure except for the new Passerelle Lucie-Bréard. There is no train or metro station within the neighbourhood and the enclavement between highway and canal is limiting outward mobility. As previously discussed, better connectivity leads to upgraded neighbourhoods and consequently to increasing rents. Franc-Moisin which was rather neglected in regards to mobility infrastructures consequently experiences not just mobility (B)ordering but also economic (B)ordering. These two (B)ordering processes construct a landscape in Saint-Denis where residents mostly move inside and relate to their neighbourhoods. This will be explained more deeply in the subsection 5.3.2.



Fig. 21: Olympic Village as well as Olympic Aquatic Center and Stade de France (Author, 2025)

The mega-events' rebranding of Saint-Denis has generated an economic boost, particularly in La Plaine and around Pleyel, where new housing and business developments have multiplied (see also Lecroart, 2008). Yet these upgrades also accelerate gentrification and create new economic borders. Rising rents and shifting commercial landscapes make it increasingly difficult for many Dionysiens to remain in their neighbourhoods. What is officially framed as *mixité sociale* is often experienced as a gradual displacement of working-class residents.

The most emblematic example is the Olympic Village: a newly built, polished district that feels detached from its surroundings, unaffordable for most locals and designed for a population that may not even materialise. For many, it symbolises a broader trend in which upgraded neighbourhoods are created for "others" rather than for current inhabitants. This results in some kind of Parisian Enclaves which start existing within Saint-Denis.

Yet, this gentrification is uneven. It is mostly occurring in neighbourhoods with great connectivity whereas neighbourhoods like Franc-Moisin are suffering less from these effects. Simultaneously, Franc-Moisin also profited less from the selective infrastructural investment.

Overall, while the rebranding brings new opportunities, it also produces new spatial divides through an economic and infrastructural ordering of neighbourhoods. This in turn implies to long-term residents that the population gets ordered. The newcomers able to afford housing in the renewed neighbourhoods become the politically desired population, while long-term residents feel displaced, devalued and excluded. This positions each group as 'the other' in relation to the other, producing a spatially and symbolically divided population.

5.3.2 Inter-Neighbourhood Mobility Borders

The previous sections discussed the implementation of improved mobility infrastructure connecting Saint-Denis to Paris and the rebranding efforts associated with the mega-events. We also discussed how enhanced outward connectivity has contributed to gentrification processes. Dionysiens described to me how these broader dynamics have in turn altered their mobility patterns within Saint-Denis itself.

To understand how mobility has changed, this subsection first offers an overview of the spatially fractured landscape of Saint-Denis and the major centralities that structure daily movements. From there, it examines how the rebranding of Saint-Denis has reshaped mobility patterns by on the one hand enabling movement selectively and on the other hand creating new mobility borders. The subsection will further discuss how these borders lead to an even more fragmented Saint-Denis despite the newly enabled metropolitan connectivity and the politically intended increase in *mixité sociale* (social diversity).

As discussed in earlier chapters, Saint-Denis is a highly fragmented space due to infrastructural barriers inherited from its industrial past (Fig. 23). The city is divided into multiple neighbourhoods separated by roads, railways, and waterways.



Fig. 23: Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) (Author, 2025)

During my first walk in Saint-Denis, these fractures felt the most tangible while crossing from one neighbourhood into the other. In the subsection 5.3.1 I already shared my experience of crossing from the neighbourhood Stade de France into Franc-Moisin over the newly built Passerelle Lucie-Bréard. Another example is the border between La Plaine and Stade de France. I noted in my field journal:

The wide boulevards and corporate façades of La Plaine gave way to heavy traffic corridors, where six-lane highways, service roads, and railway lines cut across the landscape. Crossing these infrastructures required descending into underpasses or using narrow pedestrian passages, spaces that felt noisy, polluted, and uncomfortable. Here, the bordering effects of infrastructure on mobility were most tangible. I had to slow down because of frequent street crossings, yet simultaneously speed up to escape the loud noise and unpleasant smell. The sense of ease I had experienced in Pleyel and La Plaine disappeared. Pedestrians were scarce, reinforcing the impression of these crossings as inhospitable transit zones rather than places where one might linger.



Fig. 24: Highway corridor between Stade de France and La Plaine (Author, 2025)

These physical barriers discourage walking or cycling between neighbourhoods. Although some convenient cycling routes or pedestrian paths exist, they are relatively rare. Baptiste a journalist who used to live in Saint-Denis described how he experiences moving between the city centre and the neighbouring town of Saint-Ouen:

"Zwischen Saint-Denis und Saint-Ouen zu Fuß: die Hölle, Autobahnen, dunkle Straßen... Es fehlt an sicheren Radwegen und Quer-Netzen."

"Between Saint-Denis and Saint-Ouen on foot: hell, motorways, dark streets... There is a lack of safe bike paths and crossing networks."

Baptiste, phone call, 31 March 2025

These obstacles discourage him from walking or cycling into neighbouring areas. As a result, Dionysiens usually move within their own neighbourhood, travel from their neighbourhood to the nearest public transport access point or rely on cars. The main public transport nodes are concentrated around the city centre and La Plaine.

According to Camille, mobility in Saint-Denis follows a pattern shaped by existing centralities. If one were to walk from the south to the north of the city, a clear divide would appear. Residents in the north tend to orient themselves toward the centre of Saint-Denis, while those in the south look more toward Front Populaire in La Plaine or even directly toward Paris. Pierre-Louis has observed the growing popularity of Front Populaire since Metro Line 12 was extended to this station in 2012:

"Front Populaire est devenu la grande centralité... point de convergence entre Saint-Denis, Aubervilliers et Paris."

"Front Populaire has become the great centrality... a convergence point between Saint-Denis, Aubervilliers, and Paris."

Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025

While this extension created better connectivity to Paris, it also produced a new centrality that is poorly connected to the city centre and other parts of Saint-Denis, as Camille noted:

"Front Populaire est mal connectée au reste de Saint-Denis..."

"Front Populaire is poorly connected to the rest of Saint-Denis..."

Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025

As a consequence, southern Dionysiens often identify more with La Plaine or even with Paris than with Saint-Denis itself, relying on infrastructures located outside the historic city centre. This divide effectively splits Saint-Denis into two. Yet, according to Camille, this is not the only internal division within the commune.

"J'ai l'impression que... tout est fragmenté... Franc-Moisin, La Plaine, Front Populaire, Village Olympique... Tout ça semble déconnecté."

"I have the impression that... everything is fragmented... Franc-Moisin, La Plaine, Front Populaire, Olympic Village... All that seems disconnected."

Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025

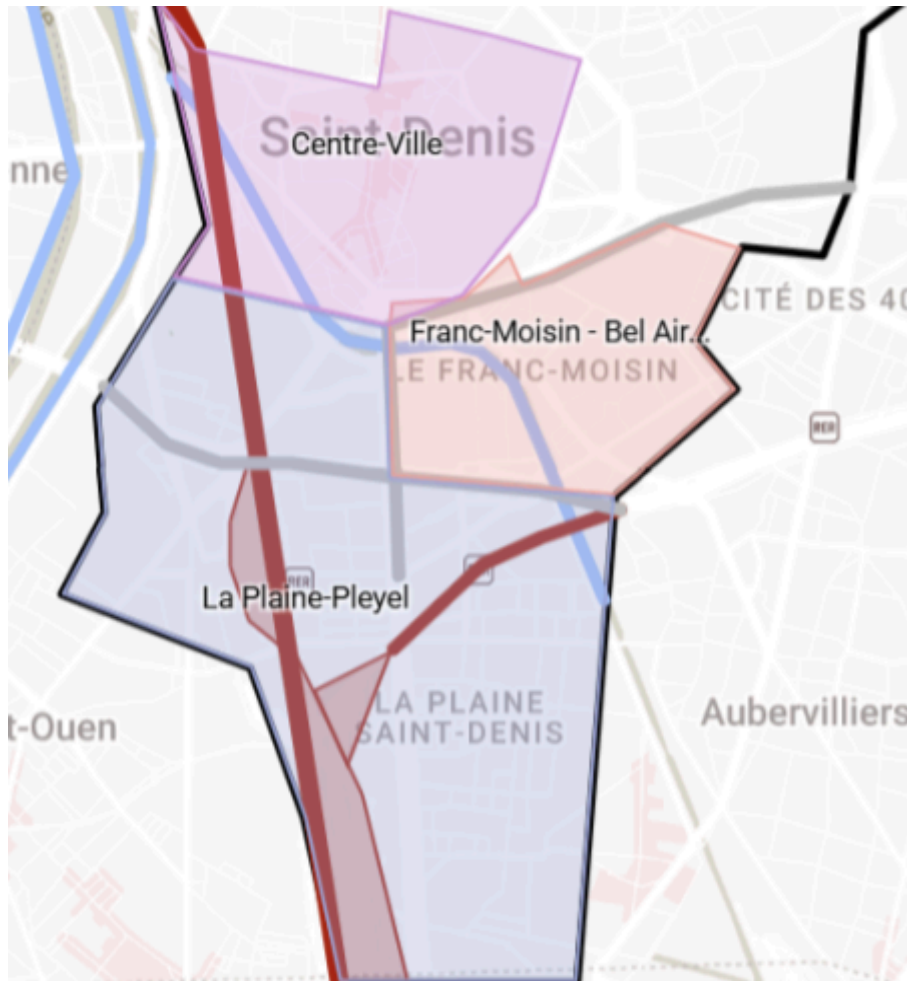


Fig. 25: Fractures of Saint-Denis (water in blue, rails in brown, highway in gray) as well as administrative districts (Author, 2025)

This divide stems partly, as already mentioned, from the industrial infrastructural borders separating neighbourhoods and their two main centralities (Fig. 25). However, there are additional reasons for this divide, which brings us back to the core theme of this thesis: the mega-projects linked to the mega-events and their associated rebranding efforts.

As discussed in the previous section, the ongoing gentrification of Saint-Denis has brought several waves of new residents (Subsection 5.3.1). Their socio-economic background greatly shapes how they move through the city. In Saint-Denis, several mobility patterns can be identified. They depend strongly on the type of resident being described. A number of factors influence mobility: length of residency, tenure status (owner or tenant), and degree of community attachment.

Some of these factors are interlinked. In general, tenants demonstrate stronger attachment to place and more developed community ties than buyers, who often orient themselves more toward Paris. A longer time of residency is also frequently associated with stronger place attachment and involvement in local networks. To simplify terminology, I will use the term Newcomer to describe residents with a relatively short time of residency (often buyers) and little attachment to Saint-Denis beyond their flat or immediate surroundings. The term Rooted Resident will be used for those with stronger place attachment, often due to association involvement and longer residence. Of course,

this is a generalisation and I also encountered people who only partially fit into one category or the other. Still, this division simplifies the following explanations.

Previous sections revealed that the mobility infrastructure produced through mega-projects is metropolitan rather than local (Subsection 5.2.3). This is particularly attractive to people with strong ties to Paris who are seeking a more affordable alternative to living in Paris, with good connectivity to the capital (Subsection 5.3.1). For these Newcomers, mobility within Saint-Denis often consists of narrow daily corridors linking their home to the train station or nearby shops. Their everyday lives are typically oriented toward Paris. They are commuting for work, leisure and cultural activities, while engaging minimally with local services or community life. Sophie, a resident of the city center since 4 years, observed this pattern among many of her neighbours:

"...je rencontrais plus des gens d'Île-de-France qui habitaient là, mais qui... travaillaient à Paris, faisaient leurs activités à Paris..."

"...I met more people from Île-de-France who lived here, but who... worked in Paris, did their activities in Paris..."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

She would have liked to find more places where she could spend time with other Dionysiens but according to her, this is difficult unless one engages in several local associations. Since she also moved here relatively recently, many of her social contacts remain in Paris and she does not have enough time to engage deeply in local community life, even though she would like to.

Adrien, another Newcomer in his thirties, similarly feels out of place in Saint-Denis. Having recently bought an apartment on L'Île-Saint-Denis because of lower housing costs, he works in La Plaine but spends most of his leisure time in Paris. His attachment to Saint-Denis is weak. His mobility within the commune is limited to his daily commute and occasional jogging:

"So yeah, mainly I only take this way to go to the station and to come back home... I've got nothing to do there [city center]."

Adrien, walking interview, 22 February 2025

Many of his comments show that, although he moved to Saint-Denis because he saw future potential in the area, his imagination of the unfamiliar parts of the city is still shaped by stigmatized discourses from the outside rather than by his own experiences.

His account shows how Newcomers experience mega-project mobility infrastructures renewed neighbourhoods as positive. These developments motivated them to move to Saint-Denis. They often appreciate the Parisian Enclaves he inhabits. Simultaneously, the interaction with the rest of Saint-Denis spatially and socially remains minimal. This minimal interaction in Adrien's case is connected to an active othering of long-term residents of Saint-Denis with whom he desires little interaction due to their differences. Sophie on the contrary shows interest in local dynamics but due to an already existing social life outside of Saint-Denis she does not have the capacity to engage in local community life. Both examples show that the political intention of increasing *mixité sociale* (social diversity) works statistically but is neither experienced nor lived by the Newcomers of Saint-Denis.

Pierre-Louis, by contrast, offers the perspective of a Rooted Resident of La Plaine. His reflections show how everyday mobilities have narrowed even for long-term residents:

"Les gens ne vont pas d'un quartier à l'autre sans raison... la vie de inter-quartier d'avant a disparu..."

"People don't go from one neighbourhood to another without reason... the inbetween neighbourhood life of before has disappeared..."

Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025

Pierre-Louis experiences Saint-Denis as fragmented. According to him residents tend to stay within their immediate surroundings, with limited appropriation of urban spaces even when the municipality invests in upgrading them. So the limited mobility within Saint-Denis is not just lived by Newcomers. Due to ongoing urban transformation and rebranding efforts, connectivity between Saint-Denis and Paris has expanded, yet connectivity within Saint-Denis has not improved to the same extent. Infrastructure that would enable everyday mobility between neighbourhoods, for example pedestrian paths, cycling routes or bus links, remains limited except in those high visibility areas around mega-projects. Sophie, among others, emphasised that major transport investments continue to be oriented toward central Paris rather than toward facilitating daily life between the different neighbourhoods of Saint-Denis:

"Ils sont encore faits pour connecter le centre-ville de Saint-Denis et pas vraiment les quartiers eux-mêmes..."

"They are still made to connect the city centre of Saint-Denis and not really the neighbourhoods themselves."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

Moving between neighbourhoods such as Franc-Moisin and La Plaine remains difficult because of fractures like the canal, highways and rail lines. Buses and trams do exist, but they are often overcrowded and poorly adapted to transversal mobility needs in her experience.

"Et même les bus. Si tu les prends dans un bon horaire, ça va. Mais si tu as le malheur de les prendre en heure de pointe..."

"And even the buses. If you catch them at a good time, it's fine. But if you're unlucky enough to take them at rush hour..."

"Tu prends le T1, c'est vraiment le tramway de l'enfer. Il est toujours blindé. Les gens sont stressés, ils ont chaud. Aucun souvenir agréable."

"You take the T1, it's really the tramway from hell. It's always packed. People are stressed; they're hot. No pleasant memories."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

These testimonies show how technical improvements in the connections between Saint-Denis and Paris coexist with overcrowded and stressful everyday travel within Saint-Denis. The focus on inter-metropolitan links leaves transversal and intra-communal mobility needs largely unaddressed. Some residents even expressed that their need for intra-communal connections was not only ignored by local authorities but, in some cases, worsened.

The following passage recounts the story most frequently mentioned in this context of uneven mobility investment. It concerns the urban transformation of the city centre (Projet de Rénovation du

Centre-Ville de Saint-Denis) (Fig. 26). The redevelopment of the central area around Place Jean-Jaurès has been a core element of the municipality's renewal strategy. According to local authorities, major works began on 10 July 2023 and included the redesign of the square and surrounding streets (Plaine Commune, 2023a) (Fig. 27 and Fig. 28). At the same time, public transport routes were significantly altered for the sake of pedestrianisation (Fig. 27). The bus lines 153, 239 and 253 were diverted around the centre instead of passing through it (Ville de Saint-Denis, 2025).



Fig. 26: Official map of the renewal of the city center of Saint-Denis (Ville de Saint-Denis, 2025)



Fig. 27: Rue de la République after pedestrianisation (Author, 2025)

In addition, the outdoor market that had long occupied the square was relocated to Place du 8-Mai-1945, which was described as "more spacious, accessible and better served" by local authorities (Plaine Commune). The transformation of Place Jean-Jaurès itself was presented as the

creation of “a vast public space” equipped with “playful installations and water features” (Plaine Commune, 2023a).



Fig. 28: Place Jean Jaurès in front of the Mairie and the Basilique (Author, 2025)

Taken together, these measures represent a strategic shift. The city centre has been reimagined as a calmer, pedestrian-oriented urban core. This reimagination makes a welcoming impression for outsiders like me, whereas for long-term residents it disrupts long lasting-dynamics (Fig. 29). For many of them, these changes have reduced accessibility rather than improved it. As Camille explained:

"La Rue de la République a été piétonnisée... réorganisation des lignes de bus, qui ne traversent plus le centre-ville... Pour personnes âgées, mères isolées... une nouvelle frontière invisible."

"The Rue de la République was pedestrianised... reorganisation of bus lines, which no longer cross the city centre... For elderly people, single mothers... a new invisible frontier."

Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025



Fig. 29: City center with the podesternized Rue de la République, the moved market formerly located on the Place Jean Jaurès next to the Mairie and the Basilique (Author, 2025)

According to Camille the urban renewal of the city center created a new mobility border. This border is less visible in comparison to the rail tracks, the aquatic borders or highways discussed previously. Still, it comes with the same effect of limiting movements in between neighbourhoods and a fragmentation of space. Previously, residents could take a bus directly to the city centre and to the market. Now, to reach the city centre many must transfer at Porte de Paris and climb the staircases to the metro, which is a serious burden for older people or women with strollers. Samira, a mother living in the Stade de France neighbourhood, expressed her frustration:

"Il n'y a plus de bus qui ramènent au centre... à 70, 74, 80 ans prenez bus puis métro? ...des mamans seules... des pétitions pour garder quelques bus."

"There are no more buses that bring you to the centre... at 70, 74, 80 years old, take bus then metro? ... single mothers... petitions to keep some buses (were submitted)."

Samira, interview in cafe, 4 April 2025

Samira's mother-in-law Martine is no longer able to walk long distances. In the past she could simply take the bus to the city centre. Today she depends on her son or daughter-in-law to drive her to the market by car. Residents of Franc-Moisin and the Stade de France neighbourhood took action by organising petitions against the bus rerouting but they felt unheard by local authorities.

Sophie reflected more broadly on the transformation of the city centre:

"le centre-ville devient "une enclave de Paris" et les autres parties plus isolées."

"the city centre becomes 'an enclave of Paris' and the other parts more isolated."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

Her statement links back to the rebranding efforts pursued by local politics. In subsection 5.2.3 train stations have been addressed as gateways into the banlieues from there we usually encountered

immediate neighbourhood areas that were upgraded and which we understood as Parisian Enclaves. These modern spaces function as a continuation of the gateways which represents a new and safe area of potential. Here, the Rue de la République goes directly from the train station towards the city center with the townhall (Fig. 30) where visitors usually visit the famous basilique where French kings were buried (see also Lecroart, 2008) (Fig. 31). To rebrand Saint-Denis the improvement of the most used corridors by outsiders is very effective. Simultaneously, this selective investment creates the impression of Parisian landscape being continued into the banlieue. This is what Sophie describes as an enclave of Paris as the city center no longer appears as part of Saint-Denis. The city center's transformation into a Parisian enclave, together with the emergence of an invisible mobility barrier for Rooted Residents, contributes to the growing fragmentation of Saint-Denis. On one level, this fragmentation is physical, driven by restricted movement between neighborhoods. On another, it is symbolic: a central space that no longer aligns with the identity of Saint-Denis, leading Dionysiens themselves to feel increasingly out of place in their own city center.



Fig. 30: The Mairie of Saint-Denis (Author, 2025)

While pedestrianisation may appear attractive from an outsider's perspective, it disrupts long-standing mobility dynamics. The market in the city centre was highly important not only for Dionysiens but also for residents of neighbouring towns. It functioned as an identity-forming meeting point that reflected the multicultural character of Saint-Denis. For the sake of rebranding, this space, which belonged to Rooted Residents, has been gentrified and transformed into an enclave resembling Paris. This is also how I perceived the space during my first field visit:

As I moved toward the city centre from the canal, the atmosphere shifted again. The crowded streets around Place Jean-Jaurès, framed by the Basilique and the town hall, contrasted sharply with the depopulated stadium zone and the neglected corners of Franc-Moisin. Construction fences still surrounded parts of the square, where the market had been relocated as part of the renewal project. The redesigned layout projected a clean, Parisian aesthetic. Shops and cafés spilled onto the streets and the Basilique square appeared almost majestic. Unlike the neighbourhood of La Plaine or the Grands Ensembles, this felt like a bustling urban core.



Fig. 31: Place Jean Jaurès, central Saint-Denis with the Basilique and the Mairie (Author, 2025)

Using myself as an example, coming to Saint-Denis with an imagination shaped by media representations of a stigmatized banlieue, the city centre was a positive surprise. Yet beneath these rebranding efforts lie exclusionary processes affecting the mobility and political participation of Rooted Residents. For many of them, the impression emerges that Newcomers appropriate the upgraded centre, while those with deeper local attachments feel pushed out and unheard. This dynamic will be further discussed in the subsection 5.3.3.

Based on the reduced mobility from Rooted Residents as well as the previously discussed limited mobility patterns of Newcomers Pierre-Louis Clément observed the emergence of what he calls “micro-quartiers”, where daily life revolves around very local hubs.

"...il y a une partie qui fonctionne comme un micro-quartier... Les déplacements se jouent beaucoup autour des écoles... L'école, c'est vraiment le centre de ce quartier-là."

"...there is a part that functions like a micro-neighbourhood... Movements are structured a lot around schools... The school is really the centre of that quarter."

Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025

According to him, daily movements often cluster around schools or small commercial centres. These neighbourhood islands take on different meanings depending on their location. In newer residential enclaves in La Plaine, they remain mostly functional spaces. Spaces to buy food, drop off children or complete basic errands, without fostering deeper identification. In contrast, older districts such as Franc-Moisin continue to nurture strong neighbourhood ties and everyday encounters that reinforce a sense of belonging. The identity dynamics of micro-neighbourhoods in the latter case will be discussed further in the subsection 5.3.3.

In summary, the rebranding efforts in Saint-Denis, driven by urban transformations linked to the mega-events, have reoriented the city's mobility system primarily toward Paris. New metro and train connections strengthen inter-city links and contribute to what many describe as a growing “Parisianisation” of Saint-Denis. In this sense, the mobility as well as the symbolic border between Paris and Saint-Denis has been softened.

At the same time, these projects have created new borders within Saint-Denis. Measures such as the pedestrianisation of Rue de la République, the rerouting of bus lines and the relocation of the market have disrupted long-standing routes used by Rooted Residents. These changes are supposed to make the renewed centre more attractive and accessible to outsiders, while reducing everyday access for those who previously relied on direct connections. What is celebrated as an upgraded, calmer and more “Parisian” centre is experienced by many Rooted Residents as less reachable and less “theirs”. This creates new mobility and symbolic borders inside of Saint-Denis. Meanwhile, Newcomers reported to rarely spend their time in this upgraded space either as most of their social life still takes place in Paris. This leaves the city center as an inbetween space where neither group feels like they really belong.

The overall effect is a city that functions less as a connected whole and more as a patchwork. For Newcomers, Parisian Enclaves serve as practical bases within a life oriented toward Paris. For Rooted Residents, their neighbourhoods remain the heart of identity and community. Yet for both groups, cross-neighbourhood encounters have become increasingly rare. The mobility and symbolic borders that mega-event infrastructures were meant to soften at the metropolitan scale have, paradoxically, deepened within the territory of Saint-Denis itself.

5.3.3 Symbolic Borders

The previous sections had one theme in common. All urban transformations linked to the rebranding of Saint-Denis were met with mixed feelings by Rooted Residents. These mixed feelings stem from the selective ways in which infrastructure was implemented and from the resulting question of who these infrastructures and the rebranding efforts are actually for. This section focuses on how residents make sense of these rebranding and renewal processes and how this impacts their feeling of belonging. Moreover, this section depicts what really matters to Rooted Residents, how they would like to be perceived from the outside and how they perceive the current rebranding by local politics as unaligned with key values of Saint-Denis. As a consequence of this misalignment, I describe how these different imaginations of Saint-Denis lead to an increased feeling of devaluation and exclusion among Rooted Residents .

Sophie, in her quote, brings together many of the perceptions indicated in previous chapters. She relates the Olympics with ongoing rebranding processes. Simultaneously, she perceives this positive rebranding of space is directed outward, not toward the Dionysiens themselves. She perceives it as directed towards what we defined in subsection 5.3.2 as Newcomers. She perceives the Newcomers as the desired “other” which brings economic value.

"Saint-Denis s'est dit: "On va être le cœur des JOP."... beaucoup de communication... comme les panneaux... slogans très positifs sur les JO... Je ne suis pas sûre que ça s'adresse vraiment aux habitants... Ça semble s'adresser à l'extérieur... ou aux gens qui ont de l'argent."

"Saint-Denis said: 'We are going to be the heart of the Olympic Games. ...a lot of communication... 'Like the signs... very positive slogans about the Olympics... I'm not sure it really addresses the inhabitants... It seems aimed at the outside... or at people with money."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

Baptiste, as a long-time observer of Saint-Denis for many of his articles, has noticed this perception among many residents. In his view, the core problem is the lack of meaningful political participation.

"nicht wirklich die JOP... eher die Beteiligung der Bevölkerung... die Anwohner... finden, dass diese Projekte nicht für sie gemacht sind."

"Not really the Olympics... rather public participation... residents feel these projects aren't for them."

Baptiste, phone call, 31 March 2025

Returning to some of the examples discussed earlier, these dynamics become very clear. One illustration is the new pedestrian bridge built between Franc-Moisin and the Stade de France (Subsection 5.2.2). This piece of infrastructure had been missing for a long time, yet the need for it was not addressed until external factors, namely the Olympics, made the improvement necessary (and financially possible). A similar pattern appears in the petitions sent to the mayor Mathieu Hanotin about the need for better bus connections to the city centre (Subsection 5.3.2). Rooted Residents repeatedly felt unheard.

This introduces a crucial additional layer of bordering. It concerns the inclusion and exclusion of residents within political processes related to urban transformation. For Martine and many other Rooted Residents, this reinforces a sense of being unwanted. Not because they oppose development, but because development appears directed at someone else while their own needs remain unaddressed.

"De l'extérieur, on croit que les JO ont amélioré les choses pour les habitants, non. On ne se sent plus à notre place."

"From outside, people think the Olympics improved things for residents, no. We no longer feel we belong."

Martine, phone call, 14 March 2025

Martine indicates a paradoxical reality where the infrastructural improvements and the rebranding of Saint-Denis have effectively changed the imagination of Saint-Denis from the outside. Saint-Denis is seen as a less fractured, better connected and economically attractive space. Meanwhile the Rooted Residents' lived experience is ambivalent. They experience the healing of fractures as selective and the renewal and rebranding of space addressed towards the outside like the city center or the Olympic Village (Subsections 5.3.2 and 5.3.1). The perceived ordering of space and people makes Rooted Residents feel excluded and devalued. With the feeling of not belonging comes anger and desperation. Leïla, a long-term resident in her fifties and her daughter Malika, eighteen years old, voiced this frustration:

"Les JO, c'est juste pour le Grand Paris, pour leurs projets à eux. Nous, les habitants, on ne profite de rien. Pas d'héritage culturel, pas d'impact durable. Même le logement: il faut 4000 à 5000 € de revenu pour en avoir un... Tout ce qui est beau maintenant, c'est nous qui allons le payer."

"The Olympics are only for Grand Paris, for their own projects. We, the residents, don't benefit from anything. No cultural legacy, no lasting impact. Even for housing: you need €4,000 to €5,000 in income to get one... Everything that is beautiful now, we will be the ones to pay for it."

Leïla and Malika, interview in cafe, 5 April 2025

Not only were these urban transformations not carried out for them, but they also had to pay the price for them in the form of gentrification as discussed in the subsection 5.3.1. Behind Leïla's and

Malika's statement lies a broader fear of additional financial impacts still to come. Sophie has already felt the financial consequences of the rebranding:

"beaucoup d'argent... du coup il y en a moins pour d'autres choses."

"a lot of money... so there is less for other things."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

Sophie works for an association that seeks to politically empower the banlieues. This association was relocated out of Saint-Denis because of budget cuts affecting local community organisations. She is increasingly worried about the consequences of urban rebranding. According to her and several other residents the budget cuts for local associations are directly linked to the costs of urban renewal projects. Martine also links the recent urban transformations and rebranding to a lack of resources in other sectors, especially local associations. Her anger is directed explicitly at the mayor Mathieu Hanotin of Saint-Denis, whom many residents hold responsible for these recent developments:

"Le maire a supprimé beaucoup de lieux culturels et d'associations... devant la mairie c'est magnifique, mais le reste est laissé à l'abandon... Ce n'est pas pour les habitants."

"The mayor closed many cultural places and associations... in front of the town hall it is magnificent, but the rest is left abandoned... It is not for the residents."

Martine, phone call, 14 March 2025

Her statement links back to the urban renewal project of the city center discussed in the subsection 5.3.2. She indicates the selectiveness of improval. Martine is very active in the neighbourhood associations of La Plaine and Franc-Moisin. To her these institutions are an integral part of Saint-Denis identity and history (see also Kokoreff, 2003). The closing of these institutions endangers her imagination of Saint-Denis. She sees the current political strategies as a threat to the identity of Saint-Denis.

The political strategies of Saint-Denis have changed with the current mayor Mathieu Hanotin. Camille summarised it in the following way:

"...le maire... aile droite du PS... politique de gentrification, d'apaisement et de renouvellement du centre-ville."

"...the mayor... right wing of the Socialist Party... politics of gentrification, pacification, and renewal of the city centre."

Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025

We have seen these perceived political tendencies in previous sections in the findings except for the pacification which was not directly addressed in this thesis but the Chapter 4 – Historical Context of Saint-Denis indicated how mega-events often come with securitisation. Additionally, the same chapter mentioned how urban renewal in stigmatized areas gets legitimated through the argument of pacification.

Consequently, the mayor's politics can be understood all in the name of overcoming the negative image of Saint-Denis, but it comes with a high cost for Rooted Residents. Baptiste explained that there has been a major shift in the political landscape of Saint-Denis. For most of the twentieth century, the city was governed by the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF). Its political ideology strongly emphasised support for the working class and the promotion of

anti-capitalist principles. Saint-Denis developed a culture of solidarity and collective engagement. Social housing, low rents and communal services such as childcare structures and cultural centres were central priorities in these “banlieues rouges”.

"...Cette idéologie... des Banlieue rouge... n'est plus là... les nouveaux projets ont une moins bonne réputation."

"...This ideology... of the Red Banlieue... is no longer there... the new projects have a worse reputation."

Baptiste, phone call, 31 March 2025

Many of the previous statements have positioned recent political decisions as the opposite of the city's communist heritage. These communist values remain central to the identities of many Rooted Residents and play an important role in how they understand both themselves and Saint-Denis. The taking away of funding of association therefore is perceived as something endangering one of Saint-Denis core values. The urban renewal is understood as the cause why funding is missing, it is consequently to blame for the political neglect or even abandoning of Saint-Denis' core values.



Fig. 32: The Maison de Quartier of Franc-Moisin and Bel-Air (Author, 2025)

Many Rooted Residents still practice a culture of solidarity and collective engagement in the communist heritage. This is mostly done through associations (Fig. 32). The importance of associations has also been observed by Newcomers:

"...un tissu associatif très fort... à l'époque communiste, Saint-Denis a énormément développé cet aspect..."

"...a very strong associative fabric... in the communist era, Saint-Denis developed this aspect enormously..."

Florian and Manon, interview in their home, 9 March 2025

"Il y a beaucoup d'initiatives associatives... il y a plein d'associations qui travaillent avec les habitants, qui font de l'aide aux jeunes."

"There are many associative initiatives... there are plenty of associations that work with residents that help young people."

Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025

Still, most of them did so far not or just rarely participate in associative activities. This is often due to the social life they still live outside of Saint-Denis discussed in subsection 5.3.2.

In addition, Daniel, a young resident who moved to La Plaine a few years ago, also sees part of the missing integration of Newcomers in the associations in failing communication. According to him, it is difficult to reach out to Newcomers and integrate them into local dynamics, particularly in La Plaine:

"...défaut de communication énorme... Si tu n'es pas déjà 'dans le truc', tu ne sauras pas ce qui se passe."

"...huge lack of communication... If you are not already 'in the loop', you won't know what is happening."

Daniel, walking interview, 5 April 2025

These processes produce a growing divide between Newcomers and Rooted Residents. As a consequence associations remain institutions mostly visited and supported by Rooted Residents. Therefore, the withdrawal of funding of association is understood by them as a political decision against their needs and values. They feel devalued in the political agenda.

The rebranding taking place in Saint-Denis seeks to create a positive image by focusing on infrastructural improvements rather than on elements inherent to the culture and lived experience of the city. Rooted Residents, however, emphasise the strong community life in their stories about Saint-Denis (see also Kokoreff). They keep on fighting for their heritage and see it as the positive counter-image to the stigmatisation of Saint-Denis. Françoise, a seventy-nine-year-old homeowner in Franc-Moisin who moved from Paris 13 years ago and still works as a researcher at a Parisian university, described her neighbourhood as a kind of village. Although she is not deeply involved in associations, she values the everyday familiarity that comes from local encounters:

"On se connaît tous. Enfin, c'est des villages Saint-Denis, c'est une collection de petits villages... on se connaît tous. Chacun regarde pour chacun. C'est vraiment extraordinaire. Une vie de quartier que moi, je n'ai jamais eue à Paris, jamais."

"We all know each other. Well, it's villages. Saint-Denis is a collection of small villages... we all know each other. Everyone looks out for one another. It's really extraordinary. A neighbourhood life that I never had in Paris, never."

Françoise, walking interview, 5 April 2025

Françoise creates this whole new comparison between Saint-Denis and Paris. It is no longer a comparison between the glorified Paris and the stigmatized banlieues. It is a comparison between the personal community centered Saint-Denis and the anonymous Paris. This represents the counter-narrative to the "dangerous banlieues" discourse among the Rooted Residents. Current local politics use the stigmatisation of the banlieues as legitimations for urban renewal, while neglecting the potential rebranding through the core values of Saint-Denis: Solidarity and collective engagement. On the contrary, these core values get neglected and abandoned.

Rooted Residents feel like part of "becoming" and "being what it is" of Saint-Denis (which we identified as crucial in their understanding of Saint-Denis and the role space plays in their identity in chapter 5.1 Saint-Denis a Space of Urban Transformation and Rebranding) is left behind for a new future. A future where not just these values and institutions matter less but also the population connected to it. Consequently, they feel disappointed and hurt when this core aspect of their identity

is threatened by the withdrawal of financial resources. Samira recalls nostalgically how much richer the range of activities and services once was in neighbourhood associations, which is no longer the case due to the decline in public support:

"...il y a 15 ou 20 ans, il y avait beaucoup plus de choses... plus de subventions pour les maisons de quartier... maintenant c'est un peu plus difficile, mais ils restent actifs."

"...15 or 20 years ago, there was much more... more subsidies for neighbourhood houses... now it's a bit harder, but they remain active."

Samira, interview in cafe, 4 April 2025

Some of the associations have been closed, others offer less. Leïla reflected on the everyday difficulties involved in keeping these community spaces alive. With the missing financial resources participants have to either bring the equipment, change or even cancel certain offers.

"...je tiens un atelier à la maison de quartier... on n'a pas de matériel... obligés de ramener le nôtre..."

"...I run a workshop at the neighbourhood house... we have no equipment... forced to bring our own..."

Leïla and Malika, interview in cafe, 5 April 2025

This brings us back to an earlier quote of hers, where she stated that the local residents are the ones paying the price of the Olympics. According to her the financial prioritizing of political agendas comes with new economic hardship. People with little means need to now live in a space where new neighbourhoods and infrastructures gentrified whole neighbourhoods and pushed Rooted Residents to the margins (Subsection 5.3.1). They live in a space constructed to accommodate Newcomers needs while creating symbolic borders which exclude Rooted-Residents.

Her memories of "Saint-Denis of the past" carry a tone of nostalgia, mixed with sadness about the erosion of associational life. She emphasises that she will not give this up, even though she sometimes considers moving elsewhere. It is difficult for her to witness the gradual disappearance of a space that she and other Rooted Residents have actively shaped over decades.

"...on a cassé l'image de Saint-Denis d'avant..."

"...they broke the old image of Saint-Denis..."

Leïla and Malika, interview in cafe, 5 April 2025

The economic and mobility borders just seen as physical infrastructure had an impact on Rooted Residents. This impact gets much stronger if the symbolic layer is added to the border processes. The way Rooted Residents perceive Saint-Denis during this period of rebranding and renewal does not align with the way they imagine Saint-Denis. The physical spaces created appear artificial and out of place. They appear to be for somebody else, in a space which used to be theirs. The investments in infrastructures are just partially aligning with their needs. The Saint-Denis they desire is a Saint-Denis of the past with strong community ties. This place is endangered by current political agendas. Moreover, current rebranding policies increasingly create dynamics of "old versus new" Saint-Denis, positioning Newcomers and Rooted Residents as groups with different expectations of the space they share. Saint-Denis becomes a place where these groups coexist physically but remain socially distant. Their interests, routines, and attachments to the city diverge, and encounters between them are

often limited. There is a symbolic border between old and new spaces, old and new imaginations of space, Newcomers and Rooted Residents and old and new needs and values.

The political agenda is perceived by Rooted Residents to favour the new spaces, new imaginations, Newcomers and new needs. This clearly orders in who matters politically. These political hierarchies recreate the “bordering, ordering and othering” once experienced between Paris and the banlieues (see also Almeida, 2023) but now within the banlieue of Saint-Denis itself.

Despite these borders, many residents expressed a continued affection for their city. Leïla and Malika concluded on a hopeful note:

"...beaucoup de choses positives... on est contents de notre ville... on veut que tout le monde soit réuni."

"...many positive things... we are happy with our city... we want everyone to be united."

Leïla and Malika, interview in cafe, 5 April 2025

Their quote is particularly valuable as it underlines that neither the city as a space nor the Newcomers are blamed for these dynamics. Rooted Residents just wish to keep the solidarity and the community life, as it is central to Saint-Denis and their identity. Moreover, they wish for their needs to be valued and heard equally in local politics. It is a demand for more political inclusion.

In summary, Rooted Residents experience the rebranding of Saint-Denis as a process that often excludes them from decision-making. Improvements are appreciated, but their timing generates frustration. Long-standing needs are addressed only when outside interests require them, while local priorities remain secondary. This selective attention reinforces the feeling that new infrastructures and the rebranded image are designed for others rather than for Dionysiens.

Many residents connect this sense of exclusion to shrinking support for associations, cultural spaces and neighbourhood services, which once formed the core of Saint-Denis's communal identity. As political priorities shift away from historical values of solidarity and collective engagement, the distance between Newcomers and Rooted Residents grows. The result is a city that is now less divided by physical borders and more by political and social ones. Yet, despite these tensions many residents continue to express affection for their neighbourhoods and hope for a more united Saint-Denis.

5.4 Synthesis: (Re)bordering Saint-Denis

The findings of this thesis have shown how recent mega-projects reshape the everyday lives of residents in Saint-Denis by transforming the social and spatial borders that structure the city. Drawing on walking interviews, regular interviews with residents and field observations, three interconnected lived border processes emerged: Selective unbuilding of mobility borders, particularly around mega-event infrastructures and between Saint-Denis and Paris, creation of artificial Parisian Enclaves that create new economic and spatial borders, and symbolic reordering of residents and space. Together, these processes do not as politically intended simply integrate Saint-Denis into metropolitan Paris. They redistribute and internalise the historical Paris–banlieue divide within the territory of Saint-Denis itself.

In this chapter we understood Saint-Denis as shaped by its industrial past, resulting in a highly fractured landscape through infrastructures like highways, rail tracks, the canal, and the Seine (see also Lecroart, 2008; Lefort-Prost, 2007). These infrastructures functioned as visible mobility borders, separating neighbourhoods such as La Plaine, Pleyel, Franc-Moisin, L'Île-Saint-Denis and the Stade de France area from each other. Residents repeatedly described Saint-Denis as a fractured space, where moving east–west or between neighbourhoods requires passing through underpasses, noisy, polluted corridors and over bridges.

Mega-projects such as the World Cup (1998) and the Olympics (2024) have selectively unbuilt some of these physical borders. The coverage of the A1 motorway, the construction of bridges such as the Franchissement Urbain Pleyel, the passerelle of the Olympic Village, and the new Passerelle Lucie-Bréard over the canal are emblematic examples. Similarly, are the RER stations built for the World Cup and the opening of Saint-Denis–Pleyel as new gateways into Saint-Denis from Paris for the Olympics.

Residents recognise these interventions as long-awaited “urban repairs” that partially stitch together previously separated parts of the city and enable better access to Paris. At the same time, they are very clear about “where and why” these repairs happen. The unbuilding of borders is concentrated around mega-event infrastructures like the stadium, business districts like La Plaine, and new residential enclaves like the Olympic Village or the city center. It follows the corridors of outward visibility and economic value.

What emerges is not a generalised softening of borders, but a selective unbuilding of mobility borders that benefits event visitors, office workers commuting from Paris and Newcomers living in new or upgraded housing in some kind of artificial Parisian Enclaves, while leaving many other fractures largely untouched. Intra-communal movement between, for example, Franc-Moisin and La Plaine, remains inconvenient and stressful. This creates among Rooted Residents the sense that infrastructural ‘repairs’ are carried out only when the needs of external actors become pressing, rather than in response to the years of requests made by residents themselves. Thus, mega-projects soften the physical mobility borders, but they do so in a very selective way leaving residents with ambivalent feelings.

On the basis of these selective mobility improvements, mega-projects trigger the creation of artificial Parisian Enclaves that generate new economic and spatial borders within Saint-Denis. Neighbourhoods around mega-project sites, notably La Plaine, Stade de France, Pleyel, and parts of the city centre have been upgraded through new housing, office developments, and public spaces. Improved connectivity via new stations and bridges makes these areas particularly attractive to businesses and to Newcomers seeking more affordable property than in central Paris, but with equal or even superior metropolitan accessibility. This creation of artificial Parisian Enclaves has several effects: It raises land and housing prices in renewed areas, it attracts younger, more affluent residents and large companies, it transforms local commercial landscapes, replacing older “popular” shops with more expensive and “trendy” businesses and it produces neighbourhoods that feel “artificial”, as several interviewees describe the Olympic Village and La Plaine.

Long-term residents experience these developments as the emergence of economic borders that cut through Saint-Denis itself. Areas that were once affordable become inaccessible. Rooted Residents fear being pushed further out to the margins, sometimes beyond Saint-Denis altogether. For them, policies officially framed as *mixité sociale* translate less into social diversity than into gradual substitution. So, the renewal and rebranding through mega-events in Saint-Denis leads to

gentrification (see also Clift, Wilson & Talbot 2025). At the same time, neighbourhoods that do not benefit from renewal, such as Franc-Moisin, remain relatively affordable but bear the costs of infrastructural neglect and persistent stigma. The contrast between modernised Parisian Enclaves around mega-event sites and neglected areas is sharp, especially in adjacent zones like the Stade de France and Franc-Moisin, where a simple bridge crossing marks a transition. Urban renewal and rebranding therefore creates new spatial divides. Most of which are less visible as borders, yet remain inscribed in space through their differences.

The third mechanism uncovered in this chapter is symbolic reordering. Rooted Residents describe the feeling that current transformations are not designed for them. They see infrastructures arriving in perfect time for mega-events and in a spatially selective manner. They note that petitions for improved intra-neighbourhood connectivity, identified as a local need, are ignored by the mayor. They also observe that associations lose funding precisely when large sums are being invested in mega-projects located in central and highly visible areas. This fuels a perception that local politics now work for others. In their narratives, a new hierarchy of who matters becomes visible. On one hand, there are desired residents: Newcomers with purchasing power, business commuters from Paris and event visitors. On the other hand, there are devalued residents: Rooted, often migrant, working-class inhabitants whose needs and values are perceived as less central to the city's future.

This symbolic reordering does not only concern people, it also concerns space. The selective renewal of neighbourhoods produces an economic and spatial fractured Saint-Denis consisting of: First-class spaces which are well-connected, upgraded, and appealing to Newcomers and businesses but more expensive and second-class spaces which are less connected, under-maintained, stigmatised and due to their affordability still home to many Rooted Residents. First-class spaces are often perceived as Parisian Enclaves, as direct extension of Paris into Saint-Denis through the newly created gateways. Rooted Residents feel as if a place that used to belong to them belongs now to outsiders, visitors and Newcomers.

Rooted Residents hold on increasingly to a cultural, and historical imagination of Saint-Denis as a collection of villages built on solidarity, community life, and associative engagement. This image is especially strong in neighbourhoods like Franc-Moisin, where everyday encounters, mutual care, and shared histories are still central. Many Rooted Residents perceive the reorientation of funding away from associations as an attack on the core values that define Saint-Denis in their eyes. This makes them feel even more devalued, creating a growing division between Newcomers and Rooted Residents.

The residents of Saint-Denis start to be divided between: Newcomers, whose everyday life is often oriented towards Paris and who benefit from the new mobility corridors, rarely engage deeply with local associative life. Rooted Residents, whose identities are tied to local networks and historical struggles, experience the rebranding as a project that sidelines them and threatens their heritage. The result is a symbolic ordering and othering between “old” and “new” Saint-Denis, between spaces and people that are valued and included and those that are left behind.

Taken together, these three mechanisms selective unbuilding of mobility borders, creation of artificial Parisian Enclaves and symbolic reordering of residents and space reveal how mega-projects reorganise, rather than remove, borders in Saint-Denis. On the one hand, mega-projects and related infrastructures soften the border between Paris and Saint-Denis by making the banlieue more accessible, economically attractive and partially less connected to spatial stigma. On the other hand, these same processes shift and multiply mobility, economic and symbolic borders internally. In this

sense, the classical Paris–banlieue divide is not simply overcome. It is internalised within Saint-Denis. Parisian Enclaves, in terms of aesthetics, socio-economic profile, and mobility, now exist inside the commune, while peripheralised neighbourhoods reproduce many of the exclusions historically attached to the banlieue. The old stigma from outside is only partially repaired through the rebranding, while new forms of marginalisation appear from within Saint-Denis. Yet, despite these tensions, many residents continue to express strong attachment to their neighbourhoods and a desire for a more inclusive future. Their insistence on solidarity, community life, and political recognition points to alternative ways of imagining and governing Saint-Denis that do not rely on border-making through selective renewal and symbolic exclusion.

Chapter 6 — Discussion

This chapter brings the empirical findings of Saint-Denis into dialogue with the conceptual framework developed earlier. It demonstrates how mega-event related transformations have been experienced by residents analyzed through the concepts of Geographical Imaginations and (B)ordering. Beforehand this chapter discusses how the findings align with literature on mega-event infrastructures in stigmatised areas. Then the imaginations of Saint-Denis by outsiders and Rooted Residents will be discussed. Lastly, the concept of (B)ordering will be applied to look at the different types of borders emerging and unbuilt in Saint-Denis in connection to mega-projects.

6.1 Ambivalent Lived Experiences of Mega-Event Infrastructures

The findings of this thesis correspond closely with existing research on mega-event urbanism. Wolfe et al. (2021) argue that mega-events typically accelerate the construction of infrastructure that would otherwise unfold slowly or not at all. Saint-Denis follows this pattern. According to Françoise *“Saint-Denis was already in renewal”* and then the World Cup and *“the Olympic Games accelerated the transformations”* as stated by Pierre-Louis (Françoise, walking interview, 5 April 2025; Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025). Romain and Camille further specified that the special political and financial conditions of mega-events made it possible to quickly repair long-standing infrastructural borders through state-funding (Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025; Romain, walking interview, 22 February 2025). Camille underlined these special circumstances by noting that *“this kind of development is expensive, and it is difficult today to imagine similar new projects”* (Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025). Romain added that the implementation of state mega-event infrastructure like the Stade de France happened *“in exchange for compensation”*, namely the funding for urban repairs such as the A1 trench or missing pedestrian connections for the hosting city Saint-Denis (Romain, walking interview, 22 February 2025). They were made possible because mega-events generated urgency and funding.

The findings in Saint-Denis additionally indicate that the aligned timing of mega-projects and healing of urban fractures is often not thought of in connection to the enabled funding. The urgency for such infrastructures due to the upcoming events is usually foregrounded by residents. Irina observed how many residents question the event-aligned timing of healing, as the problems were not addressed for many years while residents repeatedly expressed a need for them: *“We don’t care about the Olympics. This problem has existed for years! Why is work only being done now?”* (Irina, walking interview, 13 March 2025). Many long-term residents see this coinciding timing as evidence that healing of fractures is for the needs of “the others”, for the desired Newcomers, outsiders and event visitors. They connect the happening of the mega-events to a broader political agenda of rebranding the stigmatised Saint-Denis towards the outside: *“I’m not sure it really addresses the inhabitants... It seems aimed at the outside... or at people with money”* (Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025).

The findings indicated that mega-project related healing of fractures was not just timingwise considered as selective but also spatially, which resulted in the perception of long-term residents of being addressed to specific people. Wolfe et al. (2021) also demonstrate that such transformations rarely benefit all residents equally. They identify selective implementation, uneven upgrades and

unequal access as recurring consequences of mega-event infrastructure. In Saint-Denis, movement enabling infrastructures like the A1 coverage, the passerelles and the train stations addressed long-recognised problems only in specific areas. These areas were primarily those linked to event flows, business districts or zones targeted for Newcomers. Improved connectivity was created between highly visible areas like the Stade de France or Parisian Enclaves like the city center or the Olympic Village and Paris. Other infrastructural borders, especially around Franc-Moisin or the northern part of L'Île Saint Denis, remained largely intact. Camille underlines this selectiveness by saying the following about the rail tracks cutting through Saint-Denis which have been addressed by the *Franchissement urbain Pleyel*: *"Although this divide has been partially mitigated, it is not the only one in the city"* (Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025).

Furthermore, Clift et al. (2025) argued that mega-events often trigger gentrification and displacement. This connection was indicated by Camille *"The Olympics enabled investments, such as the Franchissement urbain Pleyel, which reduces a major urban fracture; but in the long run will these transformations benefit residents or intensify gentrification?"* (Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025). Gentrifying processes were mostly mentioned related to artificial neighbourhoods also perceived as Parisian Enclaves by long-term residents which have been constructed in the surrounding areas of the mega-events. These neighbourhoods aim to or have already attracted Newcomers with higher incomes. Newcomers like Florian and Manon started perceiving Saint-Denis as a space which is *"being very much 'unlocked'"* (Florian and Manon, interview in their home, 9 March 2025). Newcomers' interest in Saint-Denis and an increase in rent in the respective areas is already observed by residents like Sophie who moved to Saint-Denis because of its affordability: *"In the zones that will be really well connected... the prices will rise so much that all the people who live there now will no longer be able to stay"* (Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025). According to her, rents rose significantly in these areas benefiting from new connectivity. Many residents like Camille expressed concerns about being priced out or pushed away from their neighbourhoods: *"This project drives up rents and gradually pushes working-class residents toward other neighbourhoods"* (Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025).

This dynamic creates new marginality where the stigmatised working-class of Saint-Denis gets condensed in specific neighbourhoods like Franc-Moisin which are still affordable. This connects to the effect observed by Clift et al. (2025) that while mega-events may reduce territorial stigma by projecting positive images, their social effects include displacement, exclusion and intensified inequalities. In interviews, residents recognised that Saint-Denis now appears more attractive, for businesses, Newcomers and outsiders. At the same time, gentrifying processes have displaced residents (see also Lillo, 2009; Dörr, 2023; Collectif Le Revers de la Médaille, 2024), the local politics have excluded them and the previously existing inequalities between Paris and Saint-Denis have now been shifted inward (Subsection 5.4). The perception of these dynamics and the newly created borders will be discussed further with the concepts of Geographical Imagination and (B)ordering in the next subsections.

Overall, Saint-Denis is consistent with the patterns described in mega-event literature. Mega-events produce rapid investment but these benefits are distributed unevenly. They reduce external stigma but increase internal disparities. They generate new opportunities but also new forms of displacement and exclusion. Saint-Denis is therefore not an outlier but a characteristic example of how mega-event infrastructure reshapes urban space and social relations. Still, it offers an interesting

insight as it is a very recent European example for the rebranding of stigmatized areas through the hosting of mega-events, whereas this topic is mostly discussed in the context of countries in the Global South (like Clift, Wilson & Talbot, 2025). Also Saint-Denis is interesting in its dynamics as its location is right next to Paris which is a glorified not stigmatized space. How the stigmatisation of Saint-Denis and this sharp contrastation with Paris is important in the dynamics of mega-event related rebranding will be discussed in the following subsection.

6.2 Conflicting Geographical Imaginations in Saint-Denis

In this section, the findings of this thesis are analysed through the conceptual lens of Geographical Imagination as defined by Harvey (1973) and Gregory (2009). Saint-Denis has long been reduced to a component of the stigmatised banlieues (Glasze & Weber, 2012; Austin, 2009; Horvath, 2019; Bacqué & Sintomer, 2001; Vieillard-Baron, 2006). According to Gregory (2009), such discourses and representations influence how I, as an outsider, perceived Saint-Denis, how political agendas seek to rebrand the city, and how residents understand themselves (see also Kraftl & Horton, 2009).

Personally, I entered Saint-Denis with an initial sense of fear due to the persistent anxieties voiced by family members, friends in Paris, and faculty members. Based on stigmatized representations, many outsiders still consider Saint-Denis a no-go zone. This external stigmatisation was clearly described by Pierre-Louis Clément, who noted that “the representation of the northern Paris area and the banlieue, everything was reduced to misery. And so it was considered a ‘dangerous class’” (Pierre-Louis, walking interview, 13 March 2025). As his statement indicates, this perception has begun to crumble. These older narratives now coexist with newer rebranding discourses that seek to overcome stigma and bring the image of Saint-Denis closer to that of a glorified Paris.

According to Harvey (1973) the place of residency can have an impact on how one gets treated by others. Wacquant (2007) specified that the problematisation of the banlieues of Paris had an impact on how institutions and agencies treated them. Many scholars show that urban planning has been used to control or manage the banlieues (Gonick, 2011; Enright, 2017; Harvey, 2003; Scott, 1998; Weber, 1977). Gonick (2011) interprets large-scale interventions as attempts to discipline populations perceived as problematic. Mega-projects are promoted as tools to overcome the negative image of the banlieues and to integrate them into a modern metropolitan identity (Béhar & Loisel, 2016; Roudier & Avidé, 2024). In this way, rebranding becomes a means to reshape Geographical Imagination. As Camille noted, the current mayor Mathieu Hanotin pursues “*politics of gentrification, pacification, and renewal*” (Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025). Mega-events and infrastructural upgrades have proved a successful strategy in transforming how Saint-Denis is imagined from the outside. Jonas summarised this shift: “*The Olympics brought Saint-Denis out of the shadows*” (Jonas, walking interview, 6 April 2025). Florian and Manon also observed that “*many companies have arrived in La Plaine... people now speak more positively of Saint-Denis*” (Florian and Manon, interview in their home, 9 March 2025). These statements illustrate how residents recognise a more positive external representation emerging around their city (see also Clift et al. 2025). Such discourses also shaped my outsider imagination of Saint-Denis. Before entering the field, I imagined Saint-Denis as a potentially dangerous or neglected space, an imagination derived from media representations and political rhetoric. Encountering newly upgraded Olympic infrastructures and rebranded gateways into Saint-Denis challenged this expectation.

Yet this “Parisianisation” of Saint-Denis does not fully align with the way many Rooted Residents imagine their city. They continue to understand Saint-Denis through its working-class history, solidarity-based practices and communist associative heritage. These elements form the basis of a strong intra-communal identity centred around community ties, solidarity and an extensive associative fabric. As Florian and Manon described, there is *“a very strong associative fabric... in the communist era, Saint-Denis developed this aspect enormously...”* (Florian and Manon, interview in their home, 9 March 2025). This aligns with Kokoreff (2023) findings that marginal spaces often described as problematic meanwhile can create strong collective identities based on solidarity and mutual aid. Similarly, Lapeyronnie (2008) indicated that residents who face discrimination and economic exclusion tend to create internal social worlds with their own norms. This sense of internal identity was also strongly articulated through everyday neighbourhood life in Saint-Denis. Françoise described Saint-Denis as *“a collection of small villages... we all know each other... A neighbourhood life that I never had in Paris, never”* (Françoise, walking interview, 5 April 2025). Her account shows how the history of Saint-Denis has produced an identity that is strongly present in everyday encounters. She also introduces a relational comparison between Paris and Saint-Denis. Contrary to most outside representations, she emphasises the positive aspects of Saint-Denis in comparison to Paris. The Dionysien identity frequently served as an intra-communal counter-narrative to stigmatisation. Rooted Residents often expressed a desire to be perceived in this way from the outside as well.

The political agenda of rebranding is often perceived by Rooted Residents as an attempt to replace this long-standing identity. As Baptiste put it: *“This ideology... of the Red Banlieue... is no longer there”* (Baptiste, phone call, 31 March 2025). He further explained that, in light of this political shift, *“the new projects have a worse reputation”* among Rooted Residents (ibid.). Although they appreciate certain improvements, many feel that the current political agenda disrupts the local dynamics that have shaped their lives. The transformations are interpreted as distancing the city from its historical identity and from the practices of solidarity that many consider essential to Saint-Denis. For these residents, the place is not only changing materially but is also undergoing a shift in meaning. This creates tension between different ways of imagining the city and between different expectations of what Saint-Denis should become.

In summary, the concept of geographical imagination has helped illuminate how residents of Saint-Denis make sense of the space they inhabit. This chapter showed that Saint-Denis is understood through three coexisting imaginations of space: a stigmatized outsiders’ imagination, a rebranded imagination and a historical identity based imagination. These competing geographical imaginations shape how residents experience everyday life, how they interpret ongoing transformations, and how they understand their place within the city. They also influence how local politics approaches planning decisions and how much residents feel considered in these processes. Taken together, these findings reflect Harvey’s (1973) argument that geographical imagination enables us to grasp the role of space and place in shaping biographies, as well as Gregory’s (2009) emphasis on the power of discourse in producing spatial meaning.

6.3 Interior (B)ordering and Exterior Unbordering in Saint-Denis

This section shows how recent mega-events in Saint-Denis reshape residents' daily life by creating and overcoming borders, which affect residents' sense of belonging. The findings are discussed through Van Houtum and Van Naerssen's (2002) framework of bordering, ordering, and othering, complemented by insights from Paasi (1998) and Almeida (2023). The results show that mega-events have simultaneously facilitated the unbuilding of certain borders while reinforcing others, producing a Saint-Denis that is now bordered more symbolically than physically.

The preparations for the World Cup (1998) and the Olympic Games (2024) triggered significant infrastructural interventions that contributed to the selective unbuilding of borders associated with Saint-Denis' industrial past. These projects facilitated movement between previously disconnected neighbourhoods and improved accessibility between Paris and Saint-Denis (see also Béhar & Loisel, 2016; Roudier & Avidé, 2024). According to Almeida (2023), borders are performed through everyday mobility. Many Newcomers, event visitors, and commuters now use these newly created gateways. Accordingly, the increased movement between the renewed areas of Saint-Denis and Paris renders the longstanding Paris–banlieue divide more porous. Paasi (1998) notes that borders emerge not only through patterns of movement but also through how people feel while moving through space. The outward-oriented rebranding discussed in subsection 6.2 has weakened the symbolic border between Paris and the renewed parts of Saint-Denis. Newcomers like Florian and Manon described Saint-Denis as “being very much ‘unlocked’” (Florian and Manon, interview in their home, 9 March 2025). They also emphasised that this softening of borders can already be observed as “many companies have arrived in La Plaine” and “people now speaking more positively of Saint-Denis” (ibid.). Taken together, these findings suggest that rebranding and the healing of urban fractures have reduced the bordering mechanisms at play between Saint-Denis and Paris.

While borders between Paris and certain parts of Saint-Denis have softened, the findings show the emergence of new (B)ordering processes within Saint-Denis itself. The implementation of mobility infrastructure has been spatially selective, concentrated mostly around high-visibility areas (see also Wolfe et al.). As a consequence, redevelopment projects produced what residents describe as Parisian Enclaves. These neighborhoods architecturally resemble Paris and are considered too expensive by many current residents. Romain described them as “*artificial neighbourhood(s), built all at once...for people who have the means*” (Romain, walking interview, 22 February 2025). These enclaves operate as spatial and symbolic extensions of Paris inside the banlieue. The city center functions as an example. My field journal stated: “*The redesigned layout projected a clean, Parisian aesthetic*”. I noted similar observations entering Saint-Denis via the newly designed Pleyel trainstation: “*Having expected a sharp contrast between the glorified city of Paris and the counterpart banlieue, I had the impression to have actually entered a counterpart of Paris in an even newer, cleaner and safer environment*”. These field observations mirror the experience of an outsider feeling unexpectedly comfortable, welcomed, and impressed by the renewed gateways into Saint-Denis. However, these gateways do not erase the traditional Paris-banlieue borders but shift them in between neighbourhoods of Saint-Denis.

Camille linked these Parisian Enclaves directly to gentrification, an economic (B)ordering mechanism: “*The La Plaine district, formerly industrial, became a business and office hub after the 1998 World Cup. Rising rents are gradually pushing working-class residents toward other neighbourhoods... It is less about social mixing than about a progressive substitution of inhabitants*” (Camille, walking interview, 21 February 2025). This aligns with the findings of Lillo (2009), Collectif Le Revers de la

Médaille (2024) and Dörr (2023) who all identified gentrification as a side effect of the rebranding and renewal of Saint-Denis through mega-events. Martine even specified the desired future residents, noting that the political agenda wants *“to attract more people from Paris”* (Martine, phone call, 14 March 2025). Further she adds that the creation of expensive Parisian Enclaves and the constant rebranding and renewal directed towards the outside makes Rooted residents feel like *“they want to chase us away and replace us”* (ibid.)

These dynamics shift the previously dominant affordability borders long defined between Paris and Saint-Denis toward a new internal line separating gentrified enclaves from older, infrastructurally neglected neighbourhoods. This development corresponds to Van Houtum and Van Naerssen’s notion of ordering, whereby socio-economic hierarchies are spatialised. The newly redeveloped areas become ‘first-class spaces,’ associated with desirability, investment, and international visibility, while older neighbourhoods become ‘second-class spaces,’ continuing to represent the stigmatisation once associated with the banlieues as a whole. This aligns with the notion of Angéil and Siress (2012) that inequality is not just social or economical but embedded in the built environment. Consequently, the urban planning history of the 19. Century Paris repeats (see Chapter 4). Sophie summarizes this for the case of the city center: *“the city centre becomes ‘an enclave of Paris’ and the other parts more isolated”* (Sophie, walking interview, 8 March 2025). Long-term residents feel increasingly displaced not only by rising costs and persistently lacking intra-neighbourhood mobility, but also symbolically, as they perceive new infrastructures and renewed neighbourhoods as being constructed primarily for Newcomers and outsiders. As a result, they report discomfort in the upgraded spaces and limit their everyday mobilities to their immediate neighbourhoods. Following Almeida (2023) and Paasi (1998), such patterns of spatial routine reinforce internal borders and deepen the separation between the renewed enclaves and the more peripheral areas of Saint-Denis.

The emergence of spatial hierarchies also produces forms of othering between resident groups due to limited interaction between Newcomers and Rooted Residents. Newcomers tend to socialize either in Paris or within the redeveloped enclaves, rarely entering older neighborhoods. One Newcomer, Adrien, exemplified this pattern clearly: *“So yeah, mainly I only take this way to go to the station and to come back home... I’ve got nothing to do there (in the city center)”* (Adrien, walking interview, 22 February 2025). Conversely, Rooted Residents, feeling increasingly excluded or unwelcome in the gentrified areas, withdraw from these spaces. The lack of encounters and the assumed differences attributed to the respective ‘other’ widen the divide between the two resident groups. Furthermore, discourses about the ‘other’ begin to circulate, which reinforces these symbolic borders even more (see Almeida, 2023; Paasi, 1998). The political agenda deepens this divide by prioritising the needs of Newcomers over those of Rooted Residents. Long-term residents report feeling undervalued and less visible in local political priorities, which contributes to a growing sense of symbolic exclusion. In everyday talk, residents from each group often describe the other as fundamentally different. For instance, Newcomers are perceived by Rooted Residents as showing little interest in the cultural heritage of Saint-Denis. These differing lifestyles and needs contribute to identity-based othering.

Taken together, the findings show that mega-events reshape Saint-Denis through bordering, ordering, and othering. While infrastructural investments selectively reduce the border between Paris and certain redeveloped areas of Saint-Denis, they simultaneously produce new socio-spatial hierarchies and deepen internal divisions within the commune. In short: Mega-events reduce borders

between Paris and the more accessible, newly redeveloped parts of the banlieue of Saint-Denis, while intensifying borders within Saint-Denis itself.

Chapter 7 — Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the research question: How do Dionysiens experience mega-event related urban transformation and in what ways do these projects deconstruct or construct borders. To address this question, the empirical findings were analysed through the concepts of Geographical Imaginations and (B)ordering. These lenses made it possible to understand how residents relate to the spaces they inhabit, how these relationships are shaped by external representations and political agendas, and how borders are produced through infrastructures and everyday practices.

The findings showed that mega-event related transformations do not simply modernise the physical environment of Saint-Denis. They reorganise borders at multiple scales and influence how residents make sense of their city. Based on walking interviews and semi-structured interviews as well as field observations, the thesis identified three interconnected lived (B)ordering processes. These were the selective unbuilding of mobility borders, the creation of artificial Parisian Enclaves and the symbolic reordering of residents and space. Together, these dynamics showed that mega-event infrastructures soften certain long-standing borders, especially between Paris and the renewed areas of Saint-Denis, but at the same time intensify internal borders within the city.

Mega-projects such as the World Cup and the Olympics enabled the repair of some infrastructural fractures that had shaped Saint-Denis since its industrial past. The coverage of the A1 motorway, new bridges and new train stations improved movement between previously disconnected areas and created new gateways into Paris. Residents described these interventions as long-awaited improvements. At the same time, they were very aware that these improvements were selective. Investments were concentrated around highly visible mega-event infrastructures, business districts and neighbourhoods aimed at Newcomers. Other areas, especially Franc-Moisin or the northern part of L'Île Saint-Denis, remained almost unchanged. This selectiveness created the feeling that the needs of Rooted Residents were secondary to the needs of outsiders, desired Newcomers and event visitors.

These selective improvements created the conditions for new spatial and economic borders. Neighbourhoods around major event sites were renewed in ways that attracted more affluent residents and companies. Long-term residents often described these places as artificial Parisian Enclaves. They considered them modern and clean but also expensive, unfamiliar and disconnected from the everyday life of older neighbourhoods. In contrast, areas that did not receive such investments remained affordable but continued to carry the burden of infrastructural neglect and persistent stigma. A new geography started to appear, with first-class spaces oriented toward Newcomers and global visibility, and second-class spaces that continued to house many Rooted Residents.

The lens of Geographical Imagination showed that these material changes are closely connected to shifting meanings and identities. The findings indicated that three geographical imaginations coexist in Saint-Denis. The first is the long-standing outsiders' imagination that portrays Saint-Denis as dangerous, marginal and stigmatised. The second is the rebranded imagination promoted by political actors who want to bring Saint-Denis closer to the image of Paris. The third is the historical imagination held by many Rooted Residents, who understand the city through its working-class past,

neighbourhood-based solidarity and strong associative life. These competing imaginations shape how residents interpret the ongoing changes. Many Rooted Residents appreciate certain improvements but also feel that the rebranding process is oriented toward the outside and threatens the values and histories that define their sense of belonging.

The framework of (B)ordering helped to show how these changes reorganise borders through everyday practices. Mega-event infrastructures contributed to the unbuilding of some borders between Paris and the renewed parts of Saint-Denis, since movement became easier and the image of the city improved. At the same time, the findings showed the emergence of new internal borders. These were created between renewed enclaves and older neighbourhoods that did not benefit from similar investments. Newcomers often moved along narrow urban corridors between their homes, the train station and Paris. Rooted Residents often restricted their movements to familiar neighbourhoods because they felt uncomfortable or unwelcome in the renewed areas. These different mobility patterns strengthened the internal divide between older and newer parts of Saint-Denis.

The emergence of spatial hierarchies also contributed to othering between resident groups. Newcomers and Rooted Residents rarely interacted, and many described the other group as different from themselves. These feelings of difference deepened the internal borders created by the new infrastructures and reinforced the perception that the renewed areas were built for outsiders rather than for long-term inhabitants. In this way, (B)ordering took place not only through physical changes but also through identities, perceptions and everyday routines.

Overall, the findings show that mega-events produce a dual dynamic. They reduce borders at the metropolitan scale but intensify them within Saint-Denis. They improve visibility and accessibility but contribute to new socio-spatial hierarchies and feelings of symbolic exclusion. They soften the Paris–banlieue divide but redistribute this divide internally, between first-class enclaves and second-class neighbourhoods. Saint-Denis therefore becomes not simply more integrated into Paris, but internally reordered in new ways. As a very recent European example of mega-event driven rebranding in a stigmatised area, the case of Saint-Denis provides insight into dynamics that are often discussed in the context of the Global South.

This research was shaped by several limitations. Access to the field developed slowly, and early interviews were mostly with researchers and politically active inhabitants whose perspectives reflected their professional engagement. Only later did I meet more deeply Rooted Residents whose experiences were essential for understanding the dynamics analysed here. The participant sample therefore represents only a segment of the population. Conducting interviews in a non-native language may also have influenced the flow of some conversations. In addition, the thesis focused mainly on residents' perspectives and did not analyse the motivations of planners, municipal actors or developers. This means that the account remains one-sided and reflects how residents perceived the transformations rather than how they were designed.

Future research could build on this work in several ways. Because this study was conducted shortly after the Olympic Games, many long-term effects are not yet visible. It would be important to examine how the new districts develop once they are fully inhabited and how Newcomers integrate into existing neighbourhood life. Further work could explore the particular identities of each

neighbourhood since the mosaic character of Saint-Denis suggests that (B)ordering processes unfold differently across the commune. A longer-term project could follow Rooted Residents over time to understand how their experiences change. Another promising direction concerns political participation, especially how trust between residents and local authorities can be rebuilt and how participatory processes can become more inclusive. Finally, this thesis could not examine (B)ordering effects during the Olympic Games themselves, such as securitisation and temporary access restrictions. These aspects would be important for a more complete understanding of how mega-events reshape urban life before, during and after they take place.

In conclusion, this thesis showed that mega-events not only transform infrastructures but also reconfigure the symbolic and social borders that shape everyday life in a historically stigmatised city. The findings highlight how these projects influence belonging, visibility and value within Saint-Denis. Understanding these dynamics is essential for imagining more inclusive futures for the residents of Saint-Denis and for other cities undergoing similar transformations.

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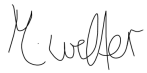
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Personal Declaration

I hereby declare that the submitted thesis is the result of my own, independent work. All external sources are explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

In line with the recommendations on the use of generative artificial intelligence at UZH, I further declare that the following generative AI tools were used during the development of the work: ChatGPT5.1 for brainstorming, translation and linguistic improvement like rephrasing. These AI tools have specifically helped to improve the language quality of this thesis. I assume full responsibility for the content of this thesis.

Winterthur, 30.11.2025

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Welter'.

Michelle Welter