

CREATE streets

Missing teeth – why is it easier to build small sites in France than in England?

There are plenty of differences in building regulations and planning between the UK and France. The certainties in the codified French planning system make it relatively simple for a small developer to identify a potential building site and evaluate if a viable project can be produced there. This is particularly important on small plots, the kind that make a gap in the street.

These unused gap sites are everywhere particularly in the British townscape. There are mini markets, one story retailers, fast food outlets, detached houses in streets that should be denser, endless outside car parks and plenty of unusable 'green' space. In French this type of potential infill site is evocatively called *une dent creuse*, a missing tooth.

In France a developer is able to know from day one what the planning system will let him build. This means he can put together realistic financial plans from the outset. Risk is taken out of putting a project together. A small developer does his financial analysis and buys the plot. Normally though he prefers to sign a contract with the property owner promising to buy in a few months once he has planning permission. That's better for cash flow and there are of course some minor risks in the French system.

Now the little street plots we talked about are still economically tricky to develop even without planning risk. The car park, detached house or retail unit already there has worth. A developer has to demolish and rebuild and yet still increase the worth in sales or as a rental landlord. He's going to have to put together a tidy little project with as many flats as possible.

Building regulations are another hurdle that the developer has to deal with. Again, in France the system is easier for the small developer trying to build 10 or 20 flats. Fire safety requirements are less demanding in France at this scale, perhaps because ladder rescue is not totally discounted as in the UK.

Another interesting difference is found in the rules for basement car parks. In an outer London borough or provincial town centre, the target clients for selling these flats are maybe first time buyers. The developer is going to need to include parking in his project. In France unlike the UK, basement car parks under small groups of flats are commonplace, why is that?

Again the UK system is phenomenally more demanding on small developments. Ventilation requirements for single level basement car parks in France are almost 1/10th those demanded by the UK building regulations¹. However that is only if the developer is hoping to put together an economical small project with natural ventilation only. If he is planning a large multi-level car park, like he might build under a fancy new tower block, he's better off in the UK, where requirements for ventilation machinery actually appear more lenient.

¹ *Article 89 of Arrêté du 31 janvier 1986 relatif à la protection contre l'incendie des bâtiments d'habitation requires 2 ventilation openings of 0.06m² per car or mechanical rates of 600m² per hour per car. Building regulations [Approved Document F](#) section 6.20 requires ventilation openings of 1/20 floor area (roughly 2 openings of 0.5m² per car) or mechanical rates of 10 air changes per hour (roughly 500m² per hour per car)

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Cities were traditionally built building by building, plot by plot. They generally evolved as their population increased again by re-building plot by plot. Providing covered horse stabling or car parking has always been part of this way of doing things.

Economies of scale work against mid and small sized development projects. A healthy planning and regulatory system should take care not to compound this problem with more bias against small development. This is sadly the case in the UK today. Small and medium size developers, the ones that can only work at this smaller scale, are key to a healthy competitive house building sector.

In France it is easier to develop the small humdrum 'gap' sites in neighbourhoods where people want to live. Furthermore, because the French planning system is form-code based, planners and local councillors are by default pro-actively involved in development. To return to the dental analogy, we could say France's planning system and simpler regulations make it easier to replace missing teeth, create kissable streets and put the smile back in neglected neighbourhoods.

"Hey, while I am in the chair dentist, I kind of regret those high-rise fangs I had put in last year, could you remove them?"

"That's tricky. More painful to pull them out than put them in."

"But they hurt and make me look evil..."

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