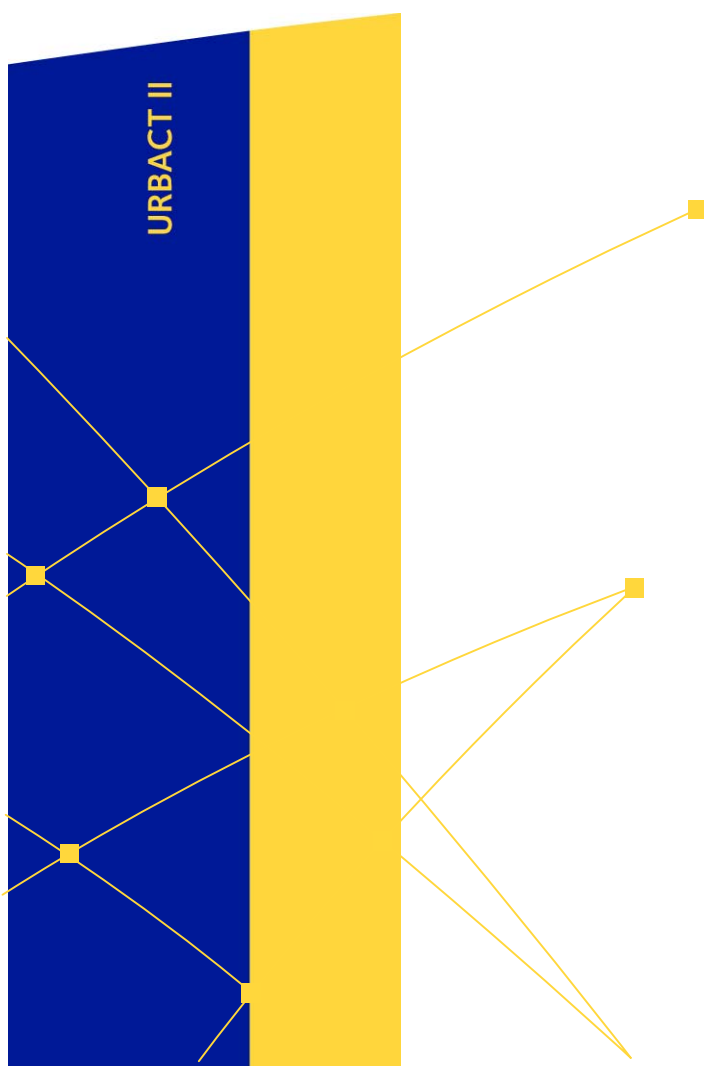




REPAIR Good Practice Example: Charente-Maritime, Rochefort



Connecting cities
Building successes



Following the advice of Colbert, King Louis XIV, chose the site of Rochefort on the Charente to develop a naval dockyard in addition to those existing in Brest, off the coast of Brittany, and Toulon on the Mediterranean.

Due to its navigability far into the hinterlands, the Charente River offered natural protection from the wind and from enemy attacks.

The architectural plans for the Naval Dockyard, attributed to the Knight of Clerville, military engineer to the King, were drawn up in 1665. They reflected military requirements developed around the notions of urban planning of the 17th century. By 1666 the works had started on the buildings of the Naval Dockyard and the construction of the first boats was under way. The new town was constructed behind the Dockyards.

The Naval Dockyard had to respond to three main objectives: this is where the vessels of the French fleet were to be built, repaired, equipped and armed.

It is easy to understand how Rochefort came to rely on this major activity. In fact, the town is still thriving after 260 years. Just 20 years after its creation, Rochefort already counted 12,000 inhabitants (in 1685), a figure which quickly rose to 23,000 in 1758. In the 19th century it was a sizeable town with 33,000 inhabitants. Nowadays, there are 27,000 inhabitants in Rochefort, which now occupies an area 4 times its original size. These figures clearly reflect the rapid rate of growth of the town and of its population, which is mostly related to the presence of the Naval Dockyard. From 1691 onward, the Dockyard produced one third of the vessels of the Royal Fleet. The city's development is closely linked to the rise and fall of the Dockyard. It has had to face alternating periods of prosperity and recession, often linked

to times of war or peace, and changing Navy policy.

The history of Rochefort has always been closely tied to its maritime heritage and any decline in its nautical activities inevitably affected the town's development. As maritime technology developed and led to increasingly complex requirements where facilities were concerned, the town became more and more difficult to reach. In 1927 the Navy decided to close down the dockyards indefinitely. As a result, the 8000 people employed by the dockyards remained jobless and the town was faced with major economic hardship.

An economic aid program was finally launched in 1975 to help remedy the disastrous situation of the town. Indeed, the closure of the Dockyard and the subsequent economic decline of the town led to the ever-increasing poverty and deterioration of the inner city areas.

- A rehabilitation program was launched for ancient residential areas. Renovation efforts and occupation of buildings in the centre of the town were promoted through substantial financial support. In order to help the most degraded areas, the Town set up a number of projects aimed at encouraging further development, including the rehabilitation of public areas, the restoration of public buildings and the relocation of social and administrative services which, at that time, were seriously lacking in the town centre.
- The Town had to be redeveloped to encompass its new identity. A detailed urban planning study was carried out in 1981. The objectives of this study entailed defining the identity of the town. This new plan thus successfully reflected the spirit in which the town was initially conceived.

Finally, the Town concentrated its efforts on rehabilitating a previously unpopular area occupied by post-WWII social housing. Over the years, this area had been subjected to increasing degradation of its buildings and public areas, and to worsening social conditions (high unemployment, single parent families).

A vast rehabilitation program was undertaken and implemented with the cooperation of local residents. One of the major challenges in this process was successfully integrating the area back into the general dynamics of the town.

Emphasis was placed on the Rope Factory, the major building in the Dockyard. Designed by François Blondel, the Rope Factory measured 374 meters in length and was suitable for producing the longest ropes required by a vessel. Although it was listed as a Historical Monument, it was in a state of ruin and was still owned by the Navy.

Land ownership laws were therefore enforced and the town was able to undertake the restoration of the building and to introduce a utilization program based on the historic purpose of the building.

Today it houses the Chamber of Commerce, the League for the Protection of Birds, the National Coastal Conservation Society (Conservatoire du Littoral), the Town Library and the International Centre for the Sea, all of whose activities are connected with the sea.

If the aesthetic quality of the building exterior is in accordance with the original architecture, the inside of the building has been rehabilitated more contemporary manner. The room's ground floor is composed of concrete and the building to be in accordance with the current needs is completely heated by geothermal energy. If you consider the size of the navy dockyard, the costs to heat this building are reasonable.

This project was the first of its kind and resulted in similar operations being instigated all along the river Charente. The town began by deciding to control all transfer rights connected with land. Then it used all the legal and financial powers it had to improve and conserve its cultural heritage.

In this vein the large Gunpowder Store was turned into a Rock Music Centre for young people, the smaller Gunpowder store into a Gardening Centre, the town slaughterhouse and many of the old warehouses became offices which the town rented at attractive prices; the ancient refitting area (the dry dock) became a shipyard, the port's pharmacy became the Head Office of the Social Housing company, the old commercial docks a yachting harbour and finally the old barracks were turned into Council Housing and administrative offices.

In the face of this rebirth, private initiatives began to develop alongside public projects. Industrial enterprises settled on the Dockyard site carried out similar operations. The ancient Port Control Centre and Naval Construction Centre were renovated into offices to house an aeronautical construction company; the old sculpture workshops became offices for a company producing pneumatic boats, the original naval hospital became a private housing complex and the original naval artillery headquarters became a luxurious hotel.

To promote its cultural (architectural and urban) heritage the town wanted the Charente to be the focal point of urban development efforts. Since 1985 significant attention had been dedicated to the Riverfront. Its inhabitants had abandoned the old workshops along the banks of the Charente, military land until the seventies. The rebirth of the Rope Factory, "la Corderie Royale," naturally led to the possibility of repopulating the banks of the Charente.



The Rope factory which now houses the Chamber of Commerce, the League for the Protection of Birds, the National Coastal Conservation Society, the Town Library and the International Centre for the Sea.



Once the Rope Factory had been restored, a program to revitalize the area surrounding this historical monument was then implemented. In 1982 the "Concours National du Parc de Charente" (a competition where nationally renowned landscape architects submitted designs for the creation of the park) involved a detailed examination of the problems to be faced and a feasibility study for the Park. From an

urban planning point of view this Park was to serve as a link between the Town and the Rope Factory, thus creating a natural "cove" for this historical monument, which epitomizes the past life of the Naval Dockyard.

The rebirth of the Rope Factory in Rochefort thus set off a general reaction of community involvement. Rehabilitating the banks of the Charente allowed people to return freely to the edge of the river. Nowadays, the riverbanks offer an attraction for residents and tourists alike, and they are host to one of the major

testimonials of France's achievements and nautical heritage. The reproduction of the Hermione, the frigate that carried La Fayette to Boston, is one of the many projects, which fits into this new vision.

This project is a live illustration of the workings and organization of an ancient shipyard and this frigate epitomizes the essence of Rochefort: the Naval Dockyard has been brought back to life.

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