



HOUSEBOAT LIVING ON THE SEINE

Lonely *pénichards* or strong communities?

Sciences Po Master students – Urban School, program
“Governing the Large Metropolis”:

Paola Chapdelaine: paola.chapdelaine@sciencespo.fr

Emeline Dutheil: emeline.dutheil@sciencespo.fr

Lorena Figueiredo: lorena.figueiredo@sciencespo.fr

Marissa Potasiak: marissa.potasiak@sciencespo.fr

Paul Tristan Victor: paultristan.victor@sciencespo.fr

Working papers du Programme
Cities are Back in Town

wppoleville@gmail.com
<http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-villes/>

Abstract:

A stroll along the Seine will alert even the most casual observer to the unique presence of houseboats moored along the river's banks, many of them clustered in small ports and canals. Examining closer, one might even feel a twinge of jealousy at the sight of normally hurried Parisians using the Seine as their own personal backyard — hosting family barbecues, making quick excursions down the river, or simply enjoying long, carefree conversations with their neighbors. However, a real understanding of the linkages between these houseboats — and the people who make their life on them, the houseboaters — requires a more structured process of investigation. We ask ourselves, then, the following research question: How might the conditions of houseboat living on the Seine shape relations between houseboat owners? We hypothesize that houseboaters share practices, produce a specific body of knowledge, and form a sense of common identity in a manner that creates houseboat communities on the Seine. Our paper is organized as follows. We start by presenting a brief account of three classical approaches to community in sociology. Then we introduce the case study of the Port de l'Arsenal (as well as a narrower case study of the Port des Champs-Élysées) to discuss the conditions that give rise to a community in this area. Finally, we present a typology of houseboat spaces as a way to problematize the concept of "community," finding that different locations and lifestyles among houseboaters foster a sense of community in some cases, but not others.

Readers wishing to cite this document are asked to use the following form of words:

Chapdelaine, Paola, Dutheil, Emeline, Figueiredo, Lorena, Potasiak, Marissa and Victor, Paul Tristan (2015). « Houseboat living on the Seine », *Working papers du Programme Cities are back in town*, 2015-1, Paris.

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1. Introduction¹

A stroll along the Seine will alert even the most casual observer to the unique presence of houseboats moored along the river's banks, many of them clustered in small ports and canals. Examining closer, one might even feel a twinge of jealousy at the sight of normally hurried Parisians using the Seine as their own personal backyard — hosting family barbecues, making quick excursions down the river, or simply enjoying long, carefree conversations with their neighbors. However, a real understanding of the linkages between these houseboats — and the people who make their life on them, the houseboaters² — requires a more structured process of investigation. We ask ourselves, then, the following research question: How might the conditions of houseboat living on the Seine shape relations between houseboat owners? We hypothesize that houseboaters share practices, produce a specific body of knowledge, and form a sense of common identity in a manner that creates houseboat communities on the Seine.

To understand the basic theoretical concepts underlying our research, we conducted a literature review on the concepts of “neighborhood” and “community” in urban sociology. According to Talja Blokland, a neighborhood can be defined as a “geographically circumscribed built environment that people use practically and symbolically” (2003, p. 213). Community is a far more complex concept with numerous definitions – definitions which are often vague and contradictory (Blokland, 2003, p. 6). In 1955, Hillery identified 94 different definitions of the concept used by Anglo-Saxon sociologists, with Lyon and Driskell arguing that these multiple definitions indicate the importance of the term in sociology (2012, p. 6). However, according to these authors, it is possible to identify the most important elements that define a community; 64 out of the 94 definitions found by Hillery (1955) contain the elements of area, common ties, and social interaction (2012, p. 5). Thus a community can be defined as “people in a specific area who share common ties and interact with one another.” (Lyon and Driskell, 2012, p. 5). Yet this definition fails to clearly disentangle the two concepts of neighborhood and community. In fact, they remain so intertwined that Blokland describes them as the “Siamese twins” of sociology (2003, p. 6). Another insight is provided by Leo Jeffres, who describes a neighbourhood as a multidimensional concept which can include the notion of community, notably through the bridging power of identity (Jeffres, 2002). Thus Jeffres argues for a reframing of the relationship between neighbourhood and community, not in terms of wide spectrum of variations, like Blokland, but in terms of levels — presenting the neighbourhood as a sub-level of the community (Jeffres, 2002, Prezza et al., 2001). Furthermore, this concept of sub-levels of community can be compared to Levin’s notion of a “pseudo community,” which also employs the idea of levels to describe the more “illusionary” and “temporary” ties that often exist between individuals (Levin, 1980).

In our own analysis, we view the concepts of neighbourhood and community as different, yet closely linked. While neighborhoods are geographically circumscribed, physically defined environments,

1 The authors would like to thank Pauline Prat and Tommaso Vitale for their patient corrections and insightful suggestions in the elaboration of this article. Any errors remaining are our own.

2 The individuals who live in boats kept at particular places on the Seine River are here referred as houseboaters, or sometimes by its equivalent in French, *pénichards*.

communities are networks of people who share common ties, a sense of belonging, and common mores, values, and norms. As the ties that bind individuals together are becoming increasingly divorced from place, today a neighborhood does not automatically give rise to a community. In fact, neighbor relations are an exception to the norm (Blokland, 2003, p. 13). As Blokland says: “Neighborhoods are not, never have been and never will be communities. Still, people use them as a practical and symbolic means of establishing and perpetuating all kinds of communities” (2003, p. 17). In this sense, neighborhoods may constitute communities if the people living in them share durable relationships, common mores, and a sense of togetherness – a three-pronged test which we apply to our own case study of houseboat clusters on the Seine.

1.1. Hypothesis and Methodology

Thus for our own research methods, we sought relevant information on houseboat life on the Seine by first collecting documentary sources such as press articles, Facebook group postings, and websites. This collection of secondary sources indicates that there are several houseboats agglomerations and neighborhoods on the Seine, and that some of them are organized through associations or online groups, such as the Facebook community *Vivre sur une péniche* (Living on a boat). According to the Association for the Protection of the Seine (*Association de Protection de la Seine*, in French), there are around 1,600 houseboaters in the Île-de-France region (Baudin de la Valette, 2010). Moreover, this data collection helped us to identify a list of relevant actors, including current and former houseboat owners, the key municipal agency governing rivers and basins in the Paris region, and real estate agencies specializing in houseboats. Thus through this process of gathering documentary sources, we gained a better understanding of the topic and identified relevant actors to be interviewed.

Taken together, this body of documentary research — combined with our own personal knowledge of houseboat living in other cities of the world (particularly in London³ and Amsterdam⁴) and our pre-existing interest in the sociology of community — led us to hypothesize that *Houseboaters share practices, produce a specific body of knowledge, and form a sense of common identity in a manner that creates houseboat communities on the Seine.*

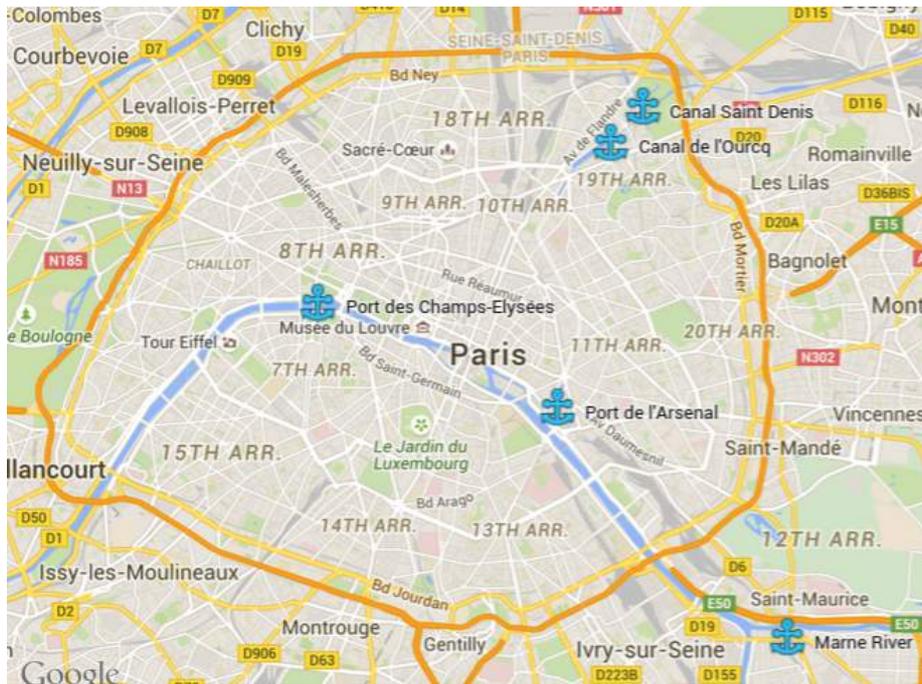
Most of the documentary sources limit themselves to comment the reasons that lead individuals to live on boats — notably economic ones and the desire for a peaceful life (Baudin de la Valette, 2010; Razemon, 2013; Yvelines Première, 2014). Thus to better grasp the relationships between houseboaters and also with their place of residence, that is, to investigate whether there is a shared sense of identity, attached to a given place, the Seine, and to a specific lifestyle, it was necessary to go further and conduct in-depth interviews.

3 See, for instance, the project “Floating Neighbours”, available online from: <http://floatingneighbours.tumblr.com/>

4 See, for instance, the press article “Good Mooring: Dutch rediscover the charms of houseboat living; gone are the squatter barge”, available online from: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323826704578354611140882902>.

We conducted in-depth interviews (n=7) with current and former residents of the Port de L’Arsenal and the Port des Champs-Élysées, as well as one informal interview with an official from the *Voie Navigables de France*. Additionally, we conducted field observations at sites throughout Paris and the surrounding metropolitan region, including the Port de L’Arsenal, the Port des Champs-Élysées, the Marne River in the city of Maisons-Alfort, the Canal Saint Denis, and the Canal de l’Ourcq (see Map 1).

Map 1: Locations in which we conducted field observations and most of the interviews.



Author: Marissa Potasiak.

Through these interviews and observations, we found that the unique, physical demands of houseboat living, the shared challenges of mechanical failures and flooding, common complaints raised in the space of boat-owner associations, and even the close spatial arrangement of the houseboat themselves all worked to create a sense of shared identity that transformed disparate collections of houseboats into communities. However, our study also revealed that this sense of community was hardly universal, with clear divisions existing among boat owners related to their motivations for choosing the houseboat lifestyle, and with varying degrees of feelings of personal connection existing among houseboat neighbors. We also discovered a typology of houseboat spaces – from enclosed ports, to wealthy port enclaves, to more isolated, single moorings, to transitory, single stops – that created a mosaic of experiences of community along the Seine. Therefore, by combining our own findings with the vast academic literature on community, we find that a portion – though not all – of those who live in houseboats on the Seine can rightly be referred to as members of a “community” of houseboaters, clustered in different ports or canals.

Our paper is organized as follows. First, we present a brief account of three classical approaches to community in sociology. Then we introduce the case study of the Port de l’Arsenal (as well as a narrower case study of the Port des Champs-Élysées) to discuss the conditions that give rise to a community in this area. Third, we present a typology of houseboat spaces as a way to problematize the concept of

“community,” finding that different locations and lifestyles among houseboaters foster a sense of community in some cases, but not others. Finally, we conclude by discussing our main findings, presenting the limits of our methodology, and describing the added value of our research.

2. Approaches to “Community” in Sociology

In framing our research we began by comparing the three main classical approaches to community in sociology. First is the social ecology approach, defended by theorists of the Chicago School such as Robert Park (1952) and Louis Wirth (1938). These theorists regard neighborhoods as natural areas – or geographically independent entities – that naturally evolved into culturally homogeneous areas. It is this homogeneity which transforms a neighborhood into a community of people with common lifestyles, standards, and values (Blokland, 2003, p. 44). Hence, by identifying community as a spatial phenomenon closely linked to neighborhood, this approach draws virtually no conceptual distinction between the two concepts (Lyon and Driskell, 2012, pp. 31-42).

The second approach is advanced by network analysts such as Barry Wellman (1988, 1996) and Ulf Hannerz (1980, 1992), who suggest that an individual's personal networks need not overlap with their geographical location. Thus, for these authors a network is what defines a community, meaning that community and neighborhood are two distinct concepts (Blokland, 2003, p. 211). A neighbourhood can only be a community if its networks of residents greatly overlap, and only if its networks are restricted to the confines of the neighbourhood (Blokland, 2003, p. 12).

The third approach is the conflict approach, developed by Neo-Marxist urban geographers, which suggests that the spatial patterns of the city reflect the exploitative injustices inherent to capitalism and, consequently, represent privileged sites to express the contradictions and conflicts of the capitalist system (Harvey, 1973). In this sense, spatial constellations are expressions of power relationships, where space is a vessel of active practices, rather than static properties (Blokland, 2003, p. 9). Castells states that “locally based identities intersect with other sources of meaning and social recognition” within these spaces, meaning that local environments *per se* do not induce a specific pattern of behavior, or a distinctive identity, but rather express meanings that are socially constructed (Castells, 1997, p. 60). In short, location does not intrinsically produce community.

These three approaches shed some light on the fact that the sociological literature around the notion of “community” is heterogeneous, disputed and complex. It also indicates the usefulness of not adopting one of them in a definitive manner without seeking support on empirical evidence first. In this paper, we aim at reconnecting the importance of the shared physical space in fostering a specific lifestyle and shaping relationships, like the first approach would do. But we deny that these are the only possible communities to be formed, once it appears obvious today that people connect to each other in different spheres, or, as the second approach would say, networks. Albeit recognizing the value of the third approach, it is not particularly advanced in our research; a conflict dimension will however be sketched by our interviews.

Then, we resort to the empirical evidence to hybridize these approaches, without aiming at simplifying the concept of “community” or finding generalizable answers.

2.1. Ports as Communities: A Case Study of the Port de l’Arsenal

2.1.1. Mapping the boundaries of the community

We then began our study through a case study (involving participant observation and three formal interviews) of the Port de l’Arsenal, whose spatial characteristics seem uniquely designed to facilitate the development of a sense of community. The Port de l’Arsenal is located in Place de la Bastille and is reachable by a set of stairs, creating a kind of “enclave,” according to one inhabitant of the port. Place de la Bastille is a neighbourhood in the Eastern side of Paris, formerly popular. Investment in prestige infrastructure such as l’Opera de La Bastille, finished in 1989, contributed to foster some dynamism in the area, especially along the Canal-Saint Martin, in the form of gentrification. The port de l’Arsenal is located at the tip of the Canal Saint-Martin, built in the 19th century, which connects to the Seine via the end of the port. Until 1983, the Port was a commercial one, and it now serves as a marina. Important to note is that, once the entrance and a part of the Canal Saint-Martin are underground, this creates a “natural” enclave for the port as there is no real “open” space around: it is locked between the Bastille circus (with the canal running underneath), and the Seine.

Living on the Seine underwent some changes during the 20th century. Boating activities used to be run by families that lived on their boats and went from port to port with their children. Subsequently, there were also people choosing to live on a boat because they were attracted to the lifestyle tied to boat living (mobility, unconventionality, conviviality, as we will see later), and now, more and more people choose to live on a boat because it is considerably cheaper than most regular apartments and houses, especially the well-located ones, close to the riverfront, within the limits of the city of Paris. Thus, three motives for boat living can be outlined: first, professional reasons (which almost disappeared, and are not relevant anyway to our study, as we focus on marinas), second, lifestyle choices, and third, economic. The two last reasons will be of importance in our research.

The port is large, with approximately 200 (177) boats spaced very close together, which keeps individual privacy to a minimum (see Picture 1). To reach their boats, port residents often have to cross a pontoon that passes from boat to boat. Thus spatially, the Port de l’Arsenal seems to be a favourable environment for interactions between its inhabitants; as one resident mentioned, she sees “people all the time.” (Interview 3, on November 11th, 2014).

Looking deeper, we discovered a corpus of informal rules and norms that define the Port de l’Arsenal as a community. For one, we noticed that many interviewees claimed that there was a diverse social mix within the port, with one noting that lawyers, architects, college professors, musicians, and “even one unemployed” individual all called the port home. This socio-economic diversity may be due to the fact that life on boat is relatively inexpensive at the Port de l’Arsenal, particularly compared with apartment living in Paris; according to one long-time resident, the port’s largest boat moorings rent for between 250 and 300 euros per month, on top of a yearly “taxe de séjour” of 180 euros per year. This interviewee also stressed

the fact that there were few social divisions among the port's inhabitants, suggesting that shared habits and constraints act as a kind of "equalizer" between the residents.

Picture 1: Port de l'Arsenal, an enclosed port area, where most boats function as main residence, and where people have a relatively proximate contact with each other.



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Nevertheless, we also identified a kind of "filter" for admittance into the Port de L'Arsenal, which often includes a previous knowledge of its rules, and a contact with somebody who already lives in the port. Indeed, in one interview with a married couple, they explained how they found their boat through a friend of a friend who was selling his boat in the port, revealing the extent to which personal connections matter in becoming a houseboat owner. Similarly, another resident revealed that while it is technically illegal to live on a boat full-time at the Port de l'Arsenal, there is an unspoken agreement between the port residents and the *capitainerie* (the organisation in charge of the port) which ensures this rule is not enforced. Nevertheless, *capitainerie* employees often "frighten" newcomers by warning them that living aboard a houseboat is prohibited, without revealing the current informal arrangement.

Therefore, both informal networks between residents, newcomers, and authorities seem to determine who gains admittance into the Port de l'Arsenal, networks which shape the boundaries of the port space. While this does not mean that Port de l'Arsenal is closed-off to outsiders (as we have noted the arrival of newcomers to the port), they face real barriers to entry. Thus it seems that both residents and local port authorities monitor their boundaries carefully, as a means of preserving the uniqueness of their shared space. This shaping of boundaries constitutes one aspect that defines Port de l'Arsenal as a community (Bruhn, 2011, p. 13).

2.1.2. Fostering Relationships Within the Community

What factors work to create relationships between inhabitants at the Port de l'Arsenal? One such factor appears to be the everyday, material constraints of houseboat living – which often serve as means of forging relationships between neighbors. For example, several interviewees recalled helping neighbors in the winter by throwing salt on their pontoons. Concerning these material constraints, our interviews with port residents also revealed a division between older, long-time residents and younger, less experienced port residents. One of the older residents we met spoke of a young woman that “did not know anything” about how to repair the electricity on her boat and thus asked for his help. Another resident in particular seems to be widely admired by others for her age and experience, but also for her genuine willingness to help newer residents, exchanges which, according to her, make her “feel useful” by being “part of something” larger. Other relationships seem to form in the port around common, shared spaces. One interviewee describes these deeply personal interactions this way:

“For any kind of reason I am outside: in the morning, I take my shower, I am outside. I wash my clothes, I am outside. I also share a lot of things with the people, because in the morning I meet them in the shower... (laughs). There are not a lot of people who see this, who meet their neighbors in the shower.” (Interview 3, on November 11th, 2014.)

Membership in the port association also appears to be a powerful tool of community building at the Port de l'Arsenal. All the residents we spoke with mentioned the local association, the “Yacht Club du Port de l'Arsenal,” which holds regular meetings and organizes various social activities, the most important being the weekly barbecue. In the words of a member of the club, this barbecue is truly a port “institution.” Similarly, another older resident mentioned this barbecue with pride, indicating that it is an important space for newcomers to integrate into the community.

Indeed, as Putnam (2000) and Brint (2001) assert, here the physical space of the port provides opportunities for interaction that allow relationships and a sense of shared identity to emerge (Vaisey, 2007). Thus it is in this sharing of practical knowledge about houseboat living – and of normally private activities like showering – that the Port de l'Arsenal seems to transform from a collection of disparate houseboats into a community. Overall, these various forms of interaction, facilitated not only by the environment of the port but also by the residents themselves, work to define the Port de l'Arsenal as a community – a place where its inhabitants experience a “we-feeling” (Vaisey, 2007).

2.1.3. From a Community to a “Petit Village?”

Taking our analysis one step further, we wondered whether we could define the Port de l'Arsenal as a “petit village.” Our interviews and observations would suggest this is the case, as most of our interviewees mention the word “village” at one point or another. One couple mentioned it when comparing life in the port to apartment living, saying:

“ — It is a little village, it's a community, a human community. So it's...

— It's like a village, a small village.” (Interview 2, on November 9th, 2014.)

Similarly, another houseboat-owner we encountered during our fieldwork observation used the term “village” to describe the intimate and facilitated relationships between residents and the larger port community, declaring that at the port, everyone knows each other. An older resident took the term even further, saying: “The port, it’s my family. Here I am never lonely. It’s like a village.” (Interview 3, on November 11th, 2014.) In this manner of speaking about her relationship with the port, she is not outside the “village,” but she is rather at the center of the community, identifying herself as part of a larger “family.”

However, in some cases during our interviews, the word “village” took on a more negative connotation and, interestingly, was employed as a contrasting image of life in the port. For instance, one resident declared that the Port de l’Arsenal “is not as in a little village where you spy on you neighbors through the window to see who is talking to whom.” Thus more generally, while the expression “petit village” is used by port residents in different ways, it always takes the form of a relational category that enables each actor to place himself/herself in relation to the larger community. By contrasting the port with a village, this last interviewee does not deny the strong relationships that exist between residents, but instead highlights the elements she enjoys in the port community, such as a sense of privacy. However it’s used, this category of “village” seems to refer to a space that can be distinguished from the wider city by its overall “sharedness” and ties of solidarity – concepts which authors such as Smith (1998, 2003) and Taylor (1989) highlight as necessary conditions for the growth of a community (Vaisey, 2007).

2.1.4. The Case of Port des Champs-Élysées

We chose the Port des Champs-Élysées for several reasons: contrary to the Port de l’Arsenal, it is not physically enclaved. The space of the port is much more open and accessible. Second, once the location is quite different, located in the heart of Paris, with views on the major monuments, we suspected that this would have an impact on the population residing there. Also, it is also located in an area which has undergone major changes: the riverbanks of the Seine are now a vibrant place of the Parisian nightlife, and the area around the Bridge Alexandre III (which is where the port is located), is one of the most favoured by Parisians. Lastly, the area being highly touristic or aimed at entertainment, there is little residential space around, contrary to the Port de l’Arsenal, which could be a factor to take into account, especially regarding the third dimension of community highlighted above, the dimension of conflict.

Throughout one interview with a woman who lived at the port from 2006 to 2012 (and currently rents her boat to her dentist), the concept of “community” continually emerged. In particular, she emphasized the ways in which the spatial arrangement of the houseboats, as well as the shared physical demands of houseboat living, fostered relationships between the residents of the Port des Champs-Élysées, creating a small “village,” similar to the one found at the Port de l’Arsenal. According to her, at the Port des Champs-Élysées “the people had been living on their boat for years. For decades.” (Interview 1, on November 5th, 2014.). Bonds between these long-time residents perhaps grew out of the spatial arrangements on the houseboats themselves. As the houseboats would often moor side-by-side, sometimes up to three boats deeps, residents needed to cross their neighbor’s boat to reach their own.

However, unlike residents of the Port de l’Arsenal, this interviewee frequently mentioned the physical challenges of living on a boat, particularly as she grew a little older, saying, “You have to be in good health.

Because you have to manage the mooring ropes and to moor and well it's physical...That's why I left the boat, because I had problems with my back and I had slipped disk. And if I'm stuck close to the engine. If can't move anymore, it would be a big problem for me." (Interview 1, on November 5th, 2014.) The shared experience of flooding on the Seine also seemed to bond residents together, by requiring neighbors to help one another to complete the "very physical" task of reaching the street level. These physical demands of houseboat living seem to be an important bridge between residents – with neighbors helping neighbors with boat-related mechanical problems and issues. Thus this interviewee described her ultimate feelings for houseboat living this way:

"There's a solidarity, it's a sort of small village. And I know, or I knew, that if I need something I can call my neighbors... And if they are there they come and help. And as they can call me and I can help too. There's a solidarity between boats that I think is very special." (Interview 1, on November 5th, 2014.)

Echoing many of our findings at the Port de l'Arsenal - from the community-building power of close spatial proximity to the use of the word such as "village" and "solidarity" to describe relationships between residents – the case of the Port des Champs – Élysées provides yet another test of our hypothesis, suggesting that, in fact, the presence of houseboat communities on the Seine is hardly as isolated phenomenon.

3. Living on the Seine: A variety of locations and lifestyles

3.1.1. A typology of locations

Using these case studies in conjunction with field observations of several houseboat clusters throughout the Paris metropolitan region, we arrived at a kind of typology of houseboat spaces along the Seine – spaces which exhibit various degrees of community (and some not at all), providing an important contrast to our above-mentioned case studies. This typology is presented below.

The Village

For any type of housing, location and spatial structures often create different opportunities for the building, or the stifling of community. Ports, for example, are unique because they offer a closed space where opportunities for personal interactions are more numerous. Administrative designations and regulations, i.e. the type of port one is living in, also play a large role in community development. In fact, according to an informal interview conducted with a VNF official, ports have more boat-owner associations than every other structure under VNF control. Moreover, these associations were created under the patronage of the Federation of Associations of River Housing (*Fédération des associations de l'habitat fluvial*), a frequent VNF partner.

We defined our case study, the Port de l'Arsenal, as a "village," a place where both community dynamics take place on a sustained, permanent basis, and with its own conflict resolving mechanisms. We further note that the structure of the port itself allows for sustained interactions, as the boat-owners live in

the port almost year-round. The owner of the port only requires that the boats leave the port for twenty-one days per year. One resident confirmed this fact, explaining: "I sail to La Villette every summer. Because we are forced to move out, here, for 21 days (per year, ed.) at least." (Interview 3, on November 11th, 2014.) This is the result, according to our VNF contact, of an institutional arrangement between the capitainerie and VNF. The latter tolerates houseboating, although no proper recognition of houseboating has been made by the authorities, a point confirmed by one of our interviewees. Indeed, according to the VNF representative, "a boat is not [officially] considered a habitat." (Interview 6, on December 2nd, 2014.) This ambiguous legal designation perhaps explains some of the additional constraints of houseboat living, such as the use of separate street address and the 21 day exit requirement, which is used as a way to determine if the boat is fit enough to sail, which allows the port owner to justify its "port de plaisance" license, according to our informal discussion with the VNF official.

Thus boat owners are "tolerated," but live in a legal vacuum that makes port associations an essential part of their survival. This might provide another explanation for the emergence of communities: legal constraints forced the organisation of ports into communities as part of strategy of negotiation and justification with the authorities. Additionally, as in any community, port villages have mechanisms of internal conflict resolution, which can be divided into two tiers: internal resolution for minor conflicts and conflict resolution through the *capitainerie*. For instance, one of the interviewees revealed that in one recent conflict between two neighbors, the *capitainerie* used its power to move one of the individuals to another part of port so as to cease the conflict.

As the port is under the responsibility of the *capitainerie*, this institution operates like a natural social regulator, a fact which was confirmed during our interviews and observations. As they manage the port, they have to provide the necessary leeway for a community to emerge through careful negotiations both within and outside of the port. Its permanent role make the *capitainerie* a key actor in ports on the Seine and a key explanatory factor behind community building, as they both impose constraints from the outside, such as the yearly exit, while easing some constraints on the inside, through negotiation and conflict solving.

It is important to stress that the specific structure of ports plays an important role in community building, as many of them are enclosed for reasons of security. This may again provide opportunities for community building, as their physical separation may create a sense of "belonging" to the port, by inducing an additional layer of "differentiation" from their surroundings. On the other hand, the port village differs from so-called "enclaved" or "gated" communities because of its social mix. Social strata do not seem to play a defining role in its community. Homogeneity at Port de l'Arsenal appears to be better expressed in terms of adaptation to houseboat living than of social class, age, educational level or prestige. What matters is that residents master the practical side of living on a boat to become integrated into this community, whereas their occupation and income do not seem to be an issue. As one resident explains: "This relationship is not function (...) of the social status of a person, of its wealth. I myself, know quite a number of people in the port without knowing what they are doing for a living. It's not what matters."

To sum up the typology of the “village,” we may say that these are enclosed spaces bearing highly endogenous constraints (both material and legal), which enjoy effective conflict resolving mechanisms both internal (through the *capitainerie* or regular neighbourhood interactions) and external (through advocacy groups and institutional players). They are also rooted in patterns of limited mobility, where social stratification does not play a role in shaping the community.

The Enclave

Another form of houseboat living we identified is the “enclave,” a type exemplified by the Port des Champs-Élysées. In this port, social rather than physical barriers separate it from the surrounding area – barriers rooted in its highly sought-after location, high cost of living, and economically homogenous population. Indeed, the main difference between the village and the enclave seems to be the latter fact. The Port des Champs-Élysées is relatively small (home to approximately 50 houseboats, compared to the 174 of the Port de l’Arsenal) and is the oldest port in Paris, built in 1933. A prominent sign near its entrance proudly proclaims that the port is an UNESCO World Heritage site – perhaps unsurprising, given its postcard-perfect location. The Eiffel Tower, Place de la Concorde, Assemblée Nationale, and the Musée d’Orsay are all directly visible from the port, landmarks enjoyed by an endless parade of tourist boats.

Picture 2: Houseboats in the Port des Champs-Élysées, with the bridge Alexander III in the back



© Marissa Potasiak

Apart from its prestigious location, other factors point to the socio-economic homogeneity of the port residents. An observation of the port revealed that a large percentage of Port des Champs-Élysées residents own cars, with parking spaces reserved especially for them. What is more, a former port resident described the cost of living at the port as very “expensive,” with rent costing 500 euros per month (double the cost of the Port de l’Arsenal) – not including the cost of buying and maintaining the houseboat itself.

While perhaps less expensive than the typical Parisian apartment in the area, these costs are nonetheless substantially higher than other Parisian ports – contributing to the Port des Champs-Élysées' enclave status. This former resident also described the other residents as members of high-paying professions: "There's an architect, there's a professor of the university. And my neighbor, my next door. He's working for the television. And there's a doctor, physician." (Interview 2, on November 9th, 2014.)

Finally, the main source of conflict within the Port des Champs-Élysées – the noise generated by nearby nightclubs such as the Showcase – is perhaps revealing of a kind of NIMBYism within the port. Our interviewee revealed that she was a member of an association at the Port des Champs-Élysées, which meets once a year to bring collective problems to the attention of harbor manager, with the noise generated by nearby night clubs coming in at the top of their list. She later revealed that both the noise and the ubiquitous presence of drunks was enough to make some residents leave the port for the weekend, saying: "My friends, who have a...their *péniche* is quite close to the Showcase. And when, on weekends, when there will be a night, a hot night! They go to their country house, in Normandy." When asked if the residents were told about the development of a new, second night club near the port, she replied:

"Of course not! No it's not the same. The river is managed by VNF or Ports de Paris, but what is on land is managed by the Mairie de Paris. It's different. They don't talk to each other, it's normal." (Interview 1, on November 5th, 2014.)

Thus it would seem that the port association represents a crucial space for residents to make their concerns known – and engage with river authorities – creating a sense of shared interests and togetherness that forms the essence of a community. Overall, these factors suggest that Port des Champs-Élysées is a kind of "enclave" community, due to its prestigious location, high cost of living, socially homogenous population, and common complaints expressed in its port association, making it a distinct category of houseboat living on the Seine.

Temporary stops

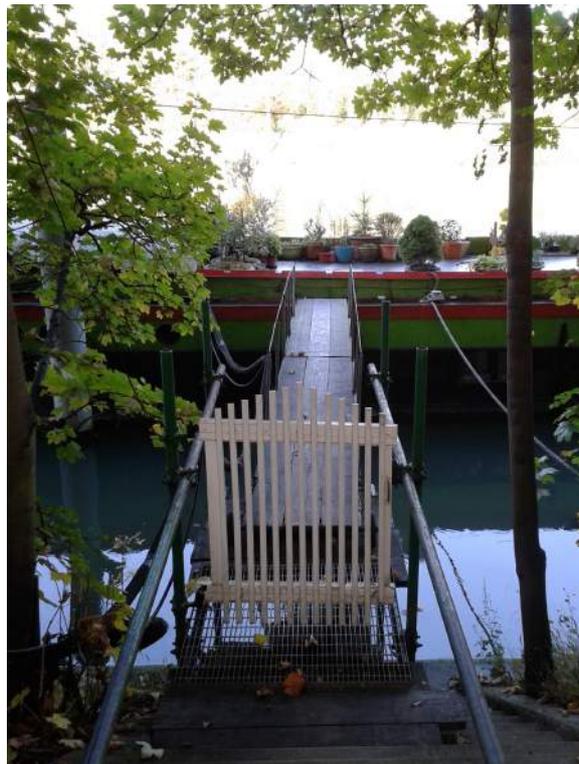
Temporary stops, the so-called "haltes," represent another distinct houseboat space on the Seine, which favor different types of interactions. Although they share some key characteristics with ports, *haltes* favor shorter periods of interaction and higher rates of boat turn-over. In the Halte Nautique in la Villette, for example, we found out that people were actually living there. However, according to VNF, these residents were more transitory compared to other ports. Thus, it may be the case that these temporary stops are home to a specific type of boat owner, namely those who actually "navigate" the river for a part of the year. Our observations revealed that the people living in the *halte* were very different from the people living in the surrounding neighbourhood of La Villette, with our observations revealing that many of its residents were older white males. According to a barista at a coffee shop popular among *halte* residents, "good neighbourhood" relationships exist at the halte, meaning that people interact in a friendly way. This sense of cordial and friendly relations was also confirmed by the inhabitants themselves during the observation. Thus while their lifestyle is highly mobile, these residents may share a common identity rooted in the now-disappearing practice of navigating a river by boat. This old "boat mentality" may indeed constitute a shared identity that gives rise to a sense of community.

Besides its overall “good neighboring” relations, the Halte in la Villette shares other similarities with ports such as the Port de l’Arsenal; it is enclosed and separated from the rest of the neighbourhood, is home to individuals who live there for extended periods of time, and has its own *capitainerie*. Interestingly, the Halte is also used by some residents of the Port de l’Arsenal during their yearly exit. Overall, the Halte can be described as a place dedicated to mobility, attracting residents with a distinct boat-mentality, and thus favoring the growth of shared practices and norms (Blockland, 2003).

Single moorings

Single moorings, such as the Marne in Maisons-Alfort, are places where houseboats have no visible interactions, or far less than the ones observed elsewhere. From our observations it was clear that few of the physical constraints which seem to engender a sense of community are found here. In fact, unlike the Port de l’Arsenal and the Port des Champs-Élysées, there was no trace of shared utilities (utilities were individualized), nor shared access to boats (most of the access to boats is in fact individual). These were, however, places of stable living, as evidenced by the small gates in the front of their boats, plants on the terraces, and the presence of domestic animals

Picture 3: Gate in the entrance of a houseboat in the Marne River in Maisons-Alfort, a sign demarcating private property and indicating a stable place of residence.



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A single mooring in Poissy fits well with this typology, as according to our interviewee there:

“So finally, with the port, one could say ‘oh there is a community of boats, there are parties with the other boats, etc.’ There’s nothing. I don’t even know the people from the port, although its 50 meters away.” (Interview 4, on October 6th, 2014.)

This is a very different picture from the one we discovered elsewhere. Interactions seemed to be scarce and conflicts even scarcer, with some residents claiming they lived a more isolated lifestyle than even the typical Parisian apartment-dweller. Our interviewee in Poissy affirmed this, saying:

“What is different than in an apartment for instance, is that (...) we are very independent. Actually, there is no co-property, there aren’t even party walls where there could be stories with the neighbors, being like “oh there are too many plants”, etc (...) Here there is no reason that we would have conflicts with the neighbors because we are very autonomous” (Interview 4, on October 6th, 2014.) (emphasis added).

Single-moorings are thus types of boat housing which follow a more individualistic logic, at least in relation to physical space. Nonetheless, we observed a will for community building. For instance, our interviewee in Poissy is the author of the Facebook page “Vivre sur une péniche,” created with the goal of growing and deepening networks between boat-owners. In this case, we see the emergence of networks of individuals that are not defined in terms of place, but connected around common interests (Bruhn, 2011, p. 24-5). This could form a networked community, a phenomenon which perhaps warrants further study.

In the end, regardless of online interactions, we do not define single moorings as constituting a community (at least not a strong one) defined by neighborhood interactions and connection with a place. This is in alignment with the work of Prezza and his colleagues (2001), which suggests that the strongest predictor of a sense of community is the degree of neighbor-to-neighbor interactions (Bruhn, 2011, p. 15-6). The term “autonomous,” as used by our interviewee, seems to be the defining characteristic of single moorings. Boats mooring in that type of environment are autonomous, creating little dependency between boat-owners – a constraint found in more recognizable houseboat communities. Moreover, there are few common practices, a sense membership, or a “boat-mentality,” which might altogether explain the absence of community in single moorings like Poissy and Maisons-Alfort.

3.1.2. Different uses for diverse profiles

Departing from this typology, our interviews of various boat owners revealed two recurring motives behind their individual decisions to make the Seine their home. We divided these motives into two categories, which are in turn related to several patterns identified by Blokland in her study of the concept of the neighborhood (Blokland, 2003, p. 157). These patterns analyze how residents interpret their neighborhood and how these interpretations contribute to a sense of community. Blokland identifies four such patterns; one, people who impart no particular significance to their location; two, people who used their neighborhood only for practical reasons; three, people who viewed their neighborhoods symbolically; and four, people who associate their neighborhood with a specific lifestyle (Blokland, 2003, p. 157).

Using these categories as inspiration, we divided our respondents into two categories – those who valued houseboat living for its sense of community and nautical aspect (Blokland’s category 4), and those who valued houseboat living for purely economic reasons (Blokland’s category 2). Most of the people

we interviewed at the Port de l’Arsenal described themselves as being part of this first category. Yet even within the Port de l’Arsenal, there were clear divisions between these two groups, with those individuals who valued the economic benefits of houseboat life referring to the first as “pénichards” (a pejorative term when used in this context). One interviewee who lives in Poissy perceives these pénichards as being members of an older population, associated with the “good old days” when living on a Péniche was alternative and unique. She described them as being a part of the “hippie” generation. She felt that these people expressed a slight sense of superiority – that they were the most legitimate adopters of this boating lifestyle.

Alternatively, the second category contains those individuals who chose houseboat living for more practical, economic reasons. One boat owner declared that some people were buying boats with the aim of living in them like in a “traditional apartment.” Indeed, our interviewee in Poissy matches this description, as she confirmed that her main reason for moving into a boat was the “very cheap [price] compared to a house,” saying, “our péniche is 200 sq. meters and we payed it 365.000 euros. We can say that a house in our neighborhood, a house of this size, it will be 1.5 million...” (Interview 4, on October 6th, 2014.) The main criticism of these pragmatically-minded boat owners (made by others living in houseboat communities, in this case in the Port de l’Arsenal), was that these people lived as if they were living “on a parking lot,” without the “spirit” of the boat culture - describing this attitude an “affordable housing mentality” (“mentalité HLM”). One of the older residents at the Port de l’Arsenal identified this mentality as one of the causes of a decline in neighborliness more generally, saying that more and more people are “shutting themselves away” from others (“*on se claquemure*”, in French). (Interview 3, on November 11th, 2014.)

Having said that, we feel an important sub-category must be added to our first distinction. Some boat residents seemed to view houseboat living as a type of “escape” from Paris, as well as from the monotony and isolation of apartment life. Our interviewee, a former resident of the Port des Champs-Élysées, described houseboat living as a kind of “vacation” from daily life, saying: “I think that it’s something special I felt when I was living on my boat. Everytime I put my feet on the boat I thought, ‘I’m on vacation! I’m not in Paris, it’s vacation.’” (Interview 1, on November 5th, 2014.) This idea was also expressed by our interviewee in Poissy, who declared that her houseboat was always a popular destination for her friends, saying: “Many friends call us saying ‘Oh hey, can we come along this week-end at your place?...We sleep better here, it’s calmer.’” (Interview 4, on October 6th, 2014.) While this interviewee stated that her own feelings of community at Poissy were essentially non-existent, living on a boat reinforced existing ties with friends and family due to her atypical lifestyle, which attracted to her a large circle of acquaintances. Further expressing the idea of boat living as a type of “escape,” the former resident of the Port des Champs-Élysées directly contrasted houseboat living with apartment living, saying:

“You know the life is really different, you are quite close to the river, to the wind, to the weather, the rain...Well if you arrive, if you come back to your apartment, it’s ordinary life. Stable, with walls.” (Interview 1, on November 5th, 2014.)

The break from the monotony and isolation of “typical” apartment living thus seems to be an important factor behind her decision to live on a houseboat, and likely motivates other residents of the Port

des Champs-Élysées, given its ideal Parisian location. This proximity with the nature was also mentioned by others, who acknowledged that “what changes [compared to an apartment, ed] is to be completely in the middle of nature,” further adding, “We live as the seasons go by, with the different birds...many animals, the changing nature...We are truly linked to nature in fact.” (Interview 1, on November 5th, 2014.) This tells us that our categories are not completely hermetic, and that, overall, there are some common aspects of houseboat living enjoyed by different type of people on the Seine.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that our hypothesis – that houseboaters share practices, produce a specific body of knowledge, and form a sense of common identity in a manner that creates houseboat communities on the Seine – was largely confirmed, although with several important caveats. Our interviews and observations showed that houseboaters do indeed share practices, from the personal – sunbathing, gossiping, and hosting dinners with one another – to the public, holding community BBQs, participating in port associations, and following specific VNF regulations. Similarly, houseboaters gain – and share – common knowledge related to boat mechanics, regulations, and flood-mitigation strategies, and form a sense of common identity by mobilizing to address collective problems – from the noise of a nearby nightclub to new, disruptive harbor construction. This sense of community came through again and again in discussions with residents of the Port de l’Arsenal and the Port des Champs-Élysées, who often described their ports as a small “villages.”

However, this sense of community was hardly universal. For one, our research revealed a typology of houseboat spaces, where differences related to location, regulatory demands, and resident mobility produced varying degrees of community – and, in some, none at all. Closed ports, such as the Port de l’Arsenal, and enclaves, such as the Port des Champs-Élysées, seemed to foster a greater sense of community thanks to the close physical proximity of boats and boat owners, the unifying presence of the *capitainerie* and port associations, and regulations which encouraged more permanent residency. On the other hand, *haltes* and single-moorings seemed less designed for community, with greater physical isolation and regulations mandating transitory residency producing few opportunities for interaction (or, in the case of the Halte Nautique in La Villette, moving interactions to alternative spaces, such as local *cafés*).

However, even within closed ports and enclaves, residents expressed different degrees of communal ties and feelings. We found that these different perceptions of community within single ports reflected conflicting motivations for choosing the houseboat lifestyle. In the Port de L’Arsenal, those who chose houseboat living for economic reasons often expressed a feeling of disconnect from more community-oriented “pénichards” – old time residents who valued houseboating for its unique, nautical lifestyle. Another class of individuals – those who sought out houseboat living as a means of “escaping” the chaos of Paris – similarly differ from these economically motivated houseboaters, and often felt a stronger connection with their neighbors. Thus, we can say that multiple communities exist on the Seine, each shaped by specific interactions, geographies and regulations, as well as norms and values.

It is important to note that our research has some limitations. The number of interviews and observations was not so large, and, as a consequence, just a few areas of the Seine were studied. Therefore, our research is largely based upon a case study of Port de l'Arsenal, with a more limited emphasis on Port des Champs-Élysées, in addition to sites such as the Marne River, the Canal St. Denis, and the Canal d'Ourcq. If we had covered more areas and more interviews, we would likely have gained a broader understanding of the different forms of houseboat living, with their unique practices and characteristics. Furthermore, in regards the sociological dispute over the definition of the term of community, we do not, in the end, commit ourselves to any one approach. Instead, we analyze different approaches and take from them those contributions which add theoretical strength to our case study of houseboat living on the Seine. In this sense, this paper does not substantially build a theory around the term "community," which one could regard as a potential limitation. On the other hand, we uncovered strong empirical material that could later serve as a basis for expanding established theories. In particular, our work on the margin between neighbourhood and community might highlight potential articulations between existing frameworks that could prove fruitful going forward. Finally, our analysis does not take into account the content of online Seine communities (such as the Facebook page "Vivre sur un péniche") which could be an interesting area of further study, as it has been noted elsewhere that communities are not only found in physical spaces, but also within the more fluid networks of individuals, which share looser constellations of interests and values.

However, in spite of these limitations, our research has produced a good deal of added-value. As far as we are aware, this is the first qualitative study of houseboat communities along the Seine, making our research both novel and relevant. Furthermore, as we have seen, the concept of "community" is one of the most important – and hotly debated – concepts in urban sociology. Our research adds to this body of literature by highlighting the spatial, regulatory, and lifestyle-based characteristics that lead to the uneven development of communities along the Seine, bolstering a diverse array of theories on the subject of community by – perhaps for the first time – including Parisian houseboats in the conversation.

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