

JCDecaux, Public-Private Space

by Joanne Pouzenc



Jean Claude Decaux, young entrepreneur
source: www.jcdecaux.bg

Birth of an empire

In 1953 in Beauvais, France, the young and ambitious entrepreneur Jean-Claude Decaux foresees the potential future of public advertisement and communication in the public realm. His activities kicked off by using public walls and glassed shops to display advertisement for third parts companies. By sticking posters in the shops and in the streets, Jean-Claude Decaux manages for several years to run his little business in cooperation with one of his brother, Jean-Pierre Decaux.

Whereas new regulations on advertisement on the public realm constrain his activities in terms of formats and locations, Jean-Claude Decaux imagines in 1964 an ingenious system that would transform urban landscapes as well as his own wealth and future: if the public realm fails to provide supports for advertisement he can use, he will create his own supports and provide cities with extra-surfaces. At the same time, those surfaces would serve another purpose marking the beginning of public-private ventures and combining different interests. His company would install and maintain those supports freely in exchange for the exclusive and non-transparent exploitation of the advertisement potential, for the full length of the contract. Instantly, Jean-Claude Decaux understands his interest in multiplying and expanding the numbers and range of public advertisement supports. Therefore, he develops his first product: the first Abribus (bus shelter) contract is signed in Lyon, where the newly set up firm JCDecaux convinces the progressive and open-minded mayor Louis Pradel to install modern design shelters, and to maintain and exploit them for the next 25 years.



The first model for the Abribus, Lyon, 1964
source: www.jcdecaux-oneworld.com

Seduced by an economical deal one can hardly refuse, where public entities benefit from the embellishment of their cities at no cost, number of cities adopted JCDecaux's proposal. Very fast, JCDecaux developed a range of products that would considerably increase his advertisement offer, based on the win-win-win economical innovation he created. After the Abribus, JCDecaux develops City Light Information Panels (MUPI), Information Points and Animated Services (PISA), Public toilets (Sanisette), Large Format Panels, urban clocks and through the

acquisition of other companies, JCDecaux manages the urban columns (Colonne Morris) and Parisian kiosks. He progressively enters the markets of advertisement in transportation hubs, becoming the bigger global player in advertisement in airports. More recently, he pioneered in the new market of shared bikes systems (Cyclocity). If JCDecaux sells comfort and cleanliness to cities and citizens, his promise to companies and corporations is no less interesting: by generating and controlling urban advertisement surfaces, JCDecaux facilitates the development of big scale targeted communication campaigns for businesses. The little local company shifts progressively into a transnational corporate empire colonizing urban landscapes and creates a new imagery in public spaces.

Beyond the corporate idea of JCDecaux lies a corporate family. The expansion of JCDecaux around the world is made possible through the creation of subsidiaries in Europe of which he gives the direction to his family members. Together, the family Decaux develops the European markets, the American and later the Asian-Pacific and Middle East markets. The firm's expansion is reinforced by the progressive acquisition of stocks and shares of competing companies. From multinational JCDecaux becomes a monopolist, with a constantly growing financial power. For JCDecaux, the complete acquisition of competitors is just a matter of time: from becoming shareholder, to main shareholder, to the complete absorption of its major competitors – including the German Wall AG – after 50 years, JCDecaux's economical deal remains the best offer, largely copied since then.

Beyond political

Since the signature of his first contract to the creation of his empire, Jean-Claude Decaux invests in political relationship. His close friendship to Jacques Chirac, mayor of Paris then French president from 1995 to 2007, allows him to develop and secure the Parisian market for its whole range of products. Further on, from 1993, on the invitation of Nicolas Sarkozy, Jean-Claude Decaux becomes one of the few members of the select club Neuilly Communications, gathering about 30 major businesses leaders around the young and ambitious future president. JCDecaux's financial involvement for the support of presidential campaigns – largely evoked in alternative medias though not officially confirmed – marks the importance of political friendship for the development of JCDecaux's business.

As a matter of fact, whereas municipal as presidential duties in France are limited from 4 to 7 years according to the mandates, JCDecaux's contracts last beyond the political agenda and remain valid for 15 to 25 years' periods. Hence, any negotiation made with a municipality at a time will remain unchanged after the replacement of the political leader, no matter what political party the new leader represents. This

contractual aspect contributed to extract visual communication in public space and urban furniture out of the political agenda. Despite the fact that commercialisation of advertisement surfaces is a highly profitable business that could – if given to the public sector – potentially increase generously public investments volume, only few municipalities took over JCDecaux's mission at the term of the contract. If free market regulations and competition laws transferred some of JCDecaux's markets to its main competitor ClearChannel, the global leading position of JCDecaux has never been truly endangered.

Design, Innovation and New Technologies

To maintain its product attractiveness and negotiate renewed long-term contracts, he proposes the complete replacement and update of the past urban furniture. To that end, JCDecaux invests in innovation and design. Through the years, more than 50 international architects and designers worked on the urban furniture products series including Norman Foster, Philippe Starck, Peter Eisenman, Matali Crasset, Marc Aurel, Jean Michel Wilmotte, Mathieu Lehanneur, Patrick Jouin, etc. Seeking to encompass new services and new technologies, its innovation relies on the fusion of several products and on the addition of extra services oriented towards the citizen-consumer. As such, a public toilet becomes a public toilet / urban column, a bus shelter becomes a bus shelter / phone booth or a large format panel becomes a large format panel / bus shelter / urban clock / information panel.



Large Format Panel + Bus shelter + Urban Clock + Information Panel, 1988
source: www.jcdecaux-oneworld.com

With the newly designed *Escale Numérique* (Digital Stopover from [Mathieu Lehanneur](#)) JCDecaux proposes new forms of urban shelters and creates not only a product, disconnected from transportation networks and mobility strategy, but a totally new public use in a new public room. The shelter, thought as a connected public space, proposes to plug and connect on a free internet hotspot and offers flexible sitting positions, becoming potentially free co-working public rooms colonizing parks and squares.



©JCDecaux, L'Escale Numérique.
Design: Mathieu Lehanneur
2012

Moreover, thanks to the contribution of JCDecaux in multiplying advertisement formats and surfaces, brands and products have invaded our streets. With the possibility offered by social medias and the spread out of one's own personal photos, advertisement strategies orientate nowadays towards the creation of urban events, seeking the spectacular, reinterpreting JCDecaux's furniture and designs in the most creative way. Advertisement stopped limiting itself to surfaces and started becoming volumes. Ironically, by adapting communication campaigns to JCDecaux's urban objects, global brands became the best advocates for JCDecaux products in return.



©JCDcaux, 2015
 « Nespresso dominates Boston and Chicago | JCDcaux North America », Youtube



source : www.adsarchive.stfi.re

Protests / Hack-tions

To counteract the omnipresence of visual communication in public space, some initiatives start to emerge. From the political side as well as from the popular side, the common claim is the right to the city. They act toward the diminution and/or the interdiction of advertising in

public spaces.

In 2014, the city of Grenoble banned advertisement in public spaces marking the beginning of public concern for visual environment. The city removed more than 2000 m² of advertisement supports to replace them with trees. Instead, a new public system of small size panels at destination of cultural and municipal information is currently in development. Nevertheless, this new regulation does not concern JCDecaux's bus shelters, under contract until 2019.

Aside Grenoble's statement to forbid advertisement in the public space, several collectives and associations engaged actions against the omnipresence of advertisement in public space. Together they claim the right of citizens to chose or influence the visual information displayed in the public realm. For example, the [Déboulonneurs](#) attack advertisement supports in order to denounce the right to use the public realm for advertisement purposes and the raise of private profits at the people expenses.



source: www.deboulonneurs.org

But do they protest only against the presence of advertisement in public space? Or do they contest the identity of the profit maker? Would those actions take place if the profit made was going to the people instead of private corporations? As source of inspiration, new initiatives on the digital public realm start appearing announcing possible future for the visual occupation of street walls. For example, the young French start-up [Lilo](#) is an online browser that proposes to redirect advertisement money from internet researches – usually directed to Google – to support social projects that the users can chose to finance individually.

This system allows oneself to spend money that was never his – and would never be – but that was flowing from one private entity to another because of him. By analogy to the physical world, what Lilo does is in fact to provide more advertising supports, additionally to the supports belonging to the monopolist – in that case, Google. What if, while waiting for the end of JCDecaux's contracts, new additional supports would appear in our streets that would indirectly finance social common projects, local public spaces, local services and non for profit activities? Necessarily, the projects developed with the advertisement benefits would serve local purposes, reflect the actual community needs and contribute to restore neighbourhood identities. An additional social benefit within a successful economic scheme would probably seduce 21st century politicians as well as businesses in need of social-green washing. Is that the next urban start-up? Who's in?

Joanne Pouzenc is a French architect and urban explorer who found an urban refuge in Berlin. She tries to escape from her beloved architectural fate by diversifying her centers of interests and offering her views on the contemporary urban conditions via designing, curating, writing, photographing and living.

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