

Robert Wagner: a new look at Vélizy-Villacoublay

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The city of Vélizy-Villacoublay wouldn't be what it is today without the will and aspiration of a man: Robert Wagner. The "father" of the new town of Vélizy-Villacoublay was elected mayor of the town on May 9, 1953. He occupied this post until his death in 1988.

The years following the end of the second world war conflict were marked by plans to reorganize the Paris region. In this context, the State has great ambitions for the territory of Vélizy-Villacoublay. Through the urban planner Robert Auzelle, a project to build a city of 170 000 inhabitants is born.

Despite ambitious plans for his city, Robert Wagner rejects this program involving the destruction of the air base. His unusual personality, his recognition in the political world and above all his attachment to the city will make him the initiator of a new exemplary urban project.

The arrival of an Alsatian engineer at the head of the city

Robert Wagner was born in Thann in 1911. After studying engineering at the Zurich Polytechnic, this Alsatian of pure strain is oriented towards industry, where he makes a brilliant career. He settled in Vélizy-Villacoublay with his wife just before the Second World War.

In the municipal elections of 1953, he presented himself as head of the Republican Union for the defense of communal interests in front of the socialist list presided over by the outgoing mayor, Eugène Morand. The city, with a strong socialist tradition, then falls to the right. For 35 years, the Véliziens will plead the action of Robert Wagner maintaining him at the head of their city.

A convinced Gaullist and a man of influence, Robert Wagner has close ties with the political world. In 1958, under the label of the Union for the New Republic, he was elected deputy of Seine-et-Oise (which became the Yvelines in 1968) and remained there for 30 years. In 1971, he became President of the District of the Paris Region, which prefigures the present regional council. His concern for the environmental issue led him to sit on the boards of the National Agencies for Waste Recovery and Air Quality. His charisma and his constant investment attracted the sympathy of the great names in politics: General de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, Michel Debré, Jacques Chirac, and so on. Pierre Messmer, former Prime Minister, will pay him a brilliant homage to his death.

Robert Wagner thus benefits, through the Gaullists, of a network on a national scale. This recognition will enable him to carry out his urban project in Vélizy-Villacoublay.

Ambitious future prospects for Vélizy-Villacoublay

"To prepare the Region of Paris for its future is to make life better for the millions of men and women, its inhabitants today and tomorrow. This will make the region a more efficient economic tool for the national community. It is to highlight an ancient beauty, to create a new beauty, which the Parisian as the visitor of the distant country can love."

Master plan for planning and urban planning in the Paris region (1965).

Robert Wagner arrives at the head of the City hall of Vélizy-Villacoublay in a very particular context. Since the Industrial Revolution, the process of intensive metropolization has begun. As early as the 1930s, the Paris region was at the heart of urban issues with the central issue of decongestion of the capital. In 1939, the Plan d'Aménagement of the Paris Region was approved. It serves as a guide for the reconstruction and development projects of the distressed communes after the war. The territory of Vélizy-Villacoublay is at the heart of the debates.

Robert Auzelle, a renowned town planner, is in charge of the development of the Jouy-en-Josas sector, Vélizy-Villacoublay, Meudon, Clamart and Bièvres, by the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Planning. The plateau of Villacoublay is chosen for the implantation of a large housing project of 170 000 inhabitants, involving the downgrading of the air base. This project would include homes, central administrations, scientific universities and recreation areas. In a context of European construction, this gigantic city close to Paris is supposed to allow France to become the center of Europe.

Towards a more modest but resolutely modern project

Robert Auzelle is forced to abandon this program. The main reason is the rejection of the state's disaffection with the airport. The base is indeed very dear to the eyes of General de Gaulle. The project is also compromised by the refusal of the Breguet factories to move their activities.

For Robert Wagner, the elaboration of a mega-agglomeration contradicts his vision of urbanism. To meet the massive demand for housing, he prefers to consider the construction of a city with a human size not exceeding 25,000 inhabitants. It is part of the design of the 1960s: the establishment in the open fields of blocks of dwellings served by a network of roads and small shopping centers in neighborhoods. A more modest project is therefore adopted. In ten years, a modern city emerges from the fields.