

# A Bridge Through Time

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Pont en Royans, meaning “Bridge to Royans,” is a town with a thousand years of built history (Fig. 1). During this time, the bridge and its town have undergone surprising changes in identity. These changes illustrate how places evolve over time, and what finally, remains.

## ISN'T THERE A BRIDGE HERE SOMEWHERE?

Above the confluence of the respective gorges of the Bourne and Vernaison rivers, the bridge of Pont en Royans connects the high alpine valleys of the Vercors with the plains of Royans.

Entering Pont en Royans from the plains, you pass through the open rolling country of Royans, then descend several hundred feet by sharp switchbacks to the Bourne river. You invariably slow down as you slide between pale, sand colored buildings into the shadows of this medieval town. You stop to let approaching traffic pass in the narrow street, pausing for pedestrians carrying their “flute” of bread, then, as the street rises and opens to reveal a broad “T” intersection with a wall of solid rock in front of you, you have to decide which way to turn; left into the visual drama of the Gorges de la Bourne, or right into the rising road of the Gorges de la Vernaison. At that point, you might well ask, “But where was the bridge?”

There is no sign, no identification, no preparation, not one moment of that thrilling “suspended narrowly over the depths” feeling that seems to characterize the experience of being on a bridge. It is only when you park and walk back to town that you realize the intersection is actually the bridge; widened and paved over, with racks of postcards on its verge, hardly recognizable as a bridge at all (Fig. 2).

The curious fact that the bridge can be so easily missed today is indicative not only of various historical forces, but of actual changes in the *Identity* of the place.

## THE MIDDLE AGES

### Defense: A Fortified Drawbridge

Wood was undoubtedly the first modern product the Vercors produced for market. Its exploitation goes back to Roman times when it was used to fire the neighboring forges. Wood was cut, then hauled, or dragged by mules to streams. The first bridge of Pont en Royans was a drawbridge constructed out of wood in 1031, to carry logs cut from the forests of the Vercors across the Bourne River to a beach from which they could be floated downstream. The bridge was constructed at the narrowest part of the river where an ancient spur of rock jutted across the gorge. The Bourne churned some 12 meters beneath.

The old bourg is still very much the center and heart of the little town. As you look up at the town from the confluence of the rivers you notice that it has a triangular shape, a combination of natural and

man made fortifications. The highest point of the triangle is the cliff overlooking the town where vestiges of the 13th century chateau fort remain. The view from the top is breathtaking. The rampart wall leads you down the hillside through various narrow ladder streets all the way to the river bank where the rampart meets the Bourne, forming the second angle of the triangle. At the third angle is the bridge itself. The three sides of the defensive triangle are the rampart, the Bourne, and the cliff edge descending from the Chateau to the bridge. (Fig. 4) Feudalism being the dominant social order, the lords in Royans attempted to consolidate and defend their area. “The bourg essentially stood for domination: it reigned over a rural district which needed its services — but which also provided its sustenance, for the bourg itself could not otherwise have existed.”<sup>1</sup>

Once the bridge had been built, it was protected.

## THE RENAISSANCE:

### FROM RAGS TO RICHES TO RAGS

#### From Drawbridge to Bridge: A Connection of two Sides

Society had become more stable. The Dauphiné was now part of France. The enemies of the past were less aggressive. As defense became less of an issue, building expanded to the unfortified side of the bridge, which had now evolved from a drawbridge into a permanent fixture. The bridge had become a two-way street. It was not only the way that wood, dairy products, and wool came down from the Vercors to Royans, across the bridge to the plains, but the way cereals, wine, and walnuts came up from Royans and the Isère Valley across the bridge, in the opposite direction, to the Vercors. Trade and exchange became the focus of activity. Proximity to the bridge meant either success or failure in business. Pont en Royans had become a market, a halle, a place for exchange, a point of connection between the products and peoples of two geographical areas, and a very rich bourg in the process.

However, as Pont en Royans grew and prospered, the printing press had been invented. With the increasing trade with the outside world came new ideas. The enemy was no longer outside the rampart walls, but in the house next door. Wars of religion were brewing, threatening to end the newly found prosperity. As a result, after the fighting in the sixteen and seventeenth centuries, the population declined from 6000 mostly Protestant to only 1200 Catholic inhabitants. Pont en Royans would never regain its former eminence. The connection to the outside world, once its strength, had become its downfall.

## FROM 1789 THROUGH THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

### A Change in Direction, The Transportation Revolution

The French revolution, beginning in 1789, did not bring bloodshed to Pont en Royans. Pont en Royans was able to make a fairly smooth

transition from a feudal monarchy into a republic. The monks left town. The church was closed for a time. The Lord of Sassenage lost his dominion over the area, but there were some real gains in daily life. A public school for boys, a Post Office, and public fountains were established.

The 19th century marked the end of home artisans and their way of life, and the beginning of factory production. A wood utensils factory moved next to the Halle. The monastery was refitted as a silk factory in 1856, providing not only work for young women, but living accommodations as well.

If the French Revolution did not perceptibly change life, the transportation revolution completely transformed the ancient bourg. Innovations in road construction and explosives made possible the impossible. The road to the Vercors through the Gorges of the Vernaison was built. A previously unthinkable engineering feat begun in 1842, it took 10 years to build, and introduced an as yet new concept into the local economy, tourism. An equally surprising road along the gorge of the Bourne soon followed in the 1860's. (Fig. 6) These two roads met at the bridge in Pont en Royans, creating a spectacular scenic tour of the narrow gorges. The tour was considered a modern wonder of the world. People from all over Europe came to see the attraction in horse drawn carriages. The road along the Bourne towards the Isère was also built at this time.

The results for Pont en Royans were nothing short of revolutionary. The entry to Pont en Royans from the Vercors "reversed." The old cart trail had entered town over the high plateau of the Vercors, through an old door in the rampart wall. Then it followed the Grande Rue to the bridge. Now, the new route from the Vercors, following the water down the Gorges of the Bourne, entered town through the bridge (Fig. 3). The original route to Pont en Royans fell into disuse. The old gate through the ramparts no longer functioned. Instead, it became a kind of back door.

At some point, or probably, at various points, the bridge was widened to allow carriage traffic to cross. The bridge, instead of being along a cart trail, making the transition across the gorge in a linear direction, became an intersection, a "T" where the three new roads met. (Fig. 3) Tourism flourished. Travel, unheard of before, had become possible. However, carriages still went at a horse's pace, requiring a hotel industry to accommodate the new leisure class. The bridge, in effect, was transmuted from its role as a connector between the two sides of the gorge, to being an intersection between routes, with the crossing of the gorge a minor and almost unnoticeable event. The bridge or Pont, at Pont en Royans, lost its 800-year-old rationale, and its 800-year-old presence.

### THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A POST CARD Or, Was That A Town We Just Went Through?

The 20th century would bring more change than all the others together. The automobile necessitated demolishing and remodeling entire neighborhoods so that it could be driven through the, as yet, narrow streets. Places which had been important when the traffic was horse drawn, or on foot, lost their importance if they could not be made accessible to cars. With the advent of the automobile and its increased speed, the bourg was no longer a necessary stop over. Tourism waned.

World War II had a devastating affect on the little town. It was bombed twice in the summer of 1944 during the battle of the Vercors. Numerous townspeople were killed, and old structures destroyed in minutes. Some of the buildings destroyed have been rebuilt, but as is more often the case, most never were. The destruction caused eventually led to redefining some of the central parts of Pont en Royans. The local people tell war stories about hiding under the bridge as the bombs hit. The current bridge was built after the war.

At the turn of the century when the automobile age was just beginning, the first major demolition of houses occurred. This allowed automobile traffic to access the road leading to the Gorges of the Vernaison. The houses which had hung directly over the

Bourne on the unfortified side of the River were torn down to widen the road (Figs.3 and 5).

As an accidental result, the newly widened road opened a vista onto the private, backsides of the houses which fronted on the Grande Rue. The heretofore private side, sporting medieval fishing platforms, henhouses, rabbit hutches, and outhouses, was now made the very public, new front. These houses with the bridge to the side, are referred to today as the Maisons Suspendues. A *site classé*, they are the current, most widely distributed image of Pont en Royans (Fig 1).

Due to the automobile, Pont en Royans lost, in some ways, its viability as a place. The bridge has become merely another photographic opportunity. It is understood by those who pass through, as a view, rather than as a place to be experienced. The bridge at Pont en Royans, with all of its rich history, has become an "image," to be consumed.

In the last five years the commune has built a remarkable park with a waterfall and wading area (reminiscent of a mountain stream) on the side of the Bourne facing the Maisons Suspendues. (Fig. 6). This area was originally the site where logs entered the stream. It has been an abandoned flood plain for centuries. The Commune has made a place which allows for, and commemorates the new stock image of their bourg. The view from the park is of the Bourne with the Maisons Suspendues and bridge above.

This is cause for celebration. Though the stock image of the town is being reinforced at the park, a wonderful "place" has been made. The "image" is now being incorporated back into the "place."

### A BRIDGE GOING BACK TO THE FUTURE

The main attraction of this area is its dramatic landscape. At Pont en Royans the high alpine plateaux of the Vercors finally become the open plains of Royans. The narrow gorges of the Bourne and Vernaison rivers abruptly open out into Royans. The bridge marks the threshold of the transition between two distinct geographical areas, between two distinct climates, and between two distinct kinds of space. As you stand on the grass in the park below the bridge, and look up through the supporting arch of the bridge into the shadows of the narrow gorge, you realize you are looking through a kind of portal, a conceptual door which marks the geographical transition from Royans to the Vercors, from the broad plain to the narrow gorge (Figs. 1 and 5).

Pont en Royans is a special place. Born out of and because of its location, its landscape is an integral part of Pont en Royans. Landscape issues have always been paramount here. The bridge was built because of the natural rock formations found here; the cliff and the river were part of the medieval defenses. Certainly, geography dictated ladder streets and the hillside building style.

More recently the landscape has been seen as the enemy. It needed to be conquered in order to create room for automobile traffic. The original identity of Pont en Royans was lost in the process. If Pont en Royans is a very difficult place to drive through, walking through the Grande Rue with traffic is downright dangerous.

By working with, rather than against, the landscape, the wonderful quality of life in this place can be recaptured. The challenge now facing Pont en Royans, according to mayor Yves Pillet, is not to increase tourism, but to attract people and jobs back into the community. They want to preserve their special history and place, while recreating a wonderful place in which to live.

The commune is looking at ways to preserve its heritage. One proposal would recreate the terraced gardens and paths which used to wind up the hill above the bourg under the chateau; another would reclaim the village green currently being used as a parking lot. Yet another would close the old part of the bourg to automobile traffic. As witnessed by these proposals, the commune is emphasizing the quality of life in the original place, not the consumable touristic image. If they succeed, Pont en Royans will have consciously rediscovered itself.



Fig. 1

We would like to see the old walled bourg returned to a pedestrian area. Rather than driving through the center of town, vehicular traffic could be re-routed across the Bourne before entering the old bourg (Fig. 3). Perhaps the bridge itself could be narrowed and returned to its "bridgeness," re-constituted as a wooden drawbridge. Should the Grande Rue return to its mercantile origins, home owners could sell traditional goods and local products from their front room windows. By luring artists and artisans to settle there, and by closing the bourg to automobiles, the visitor would actually be enticed into the medieval town on foot, on its original terms.

#### IN CONCLUSION: THE LANDSCAPE / THE IDENTITY OF PLACE

A longstanding natural and human environment such as Pont en Royans is a living entity. Each subsequent generation has added its own special imprint onto the whole. For those of us who live in more recently built places, places perhaps quickly built with little thought given to their "placeness," the present is often so overwhelming and the past so short, that we lose the perspective of the "long run." The landscape, however, is the only permanent part of our places, whether they be old or new.

Pont en Royans, a town created from its geography, is reawakening to its original concept. Once again the people of Pont en Royans are recognizing the importance of their unique landscape. So should we awaken to ours.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to accord special thanks to *Yves Pillet*, Mayor of Pont en Royans, for graciously taking time out of his busy schedule to



Fig. 2

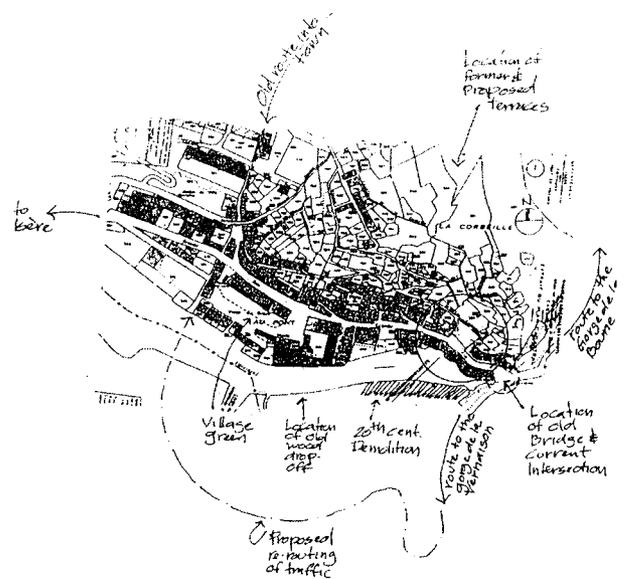


Fig. 3

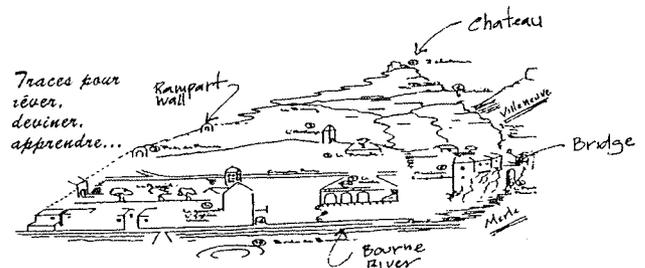


Fig. 4

speak with us of his goals and his vision for his bourg, to the employees of the Marie for all of their help, and to *Martine Garunq* of the Office de Tourisme for her historical tour of Pont en Royans.

#### NOTES

- 1 Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 163.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

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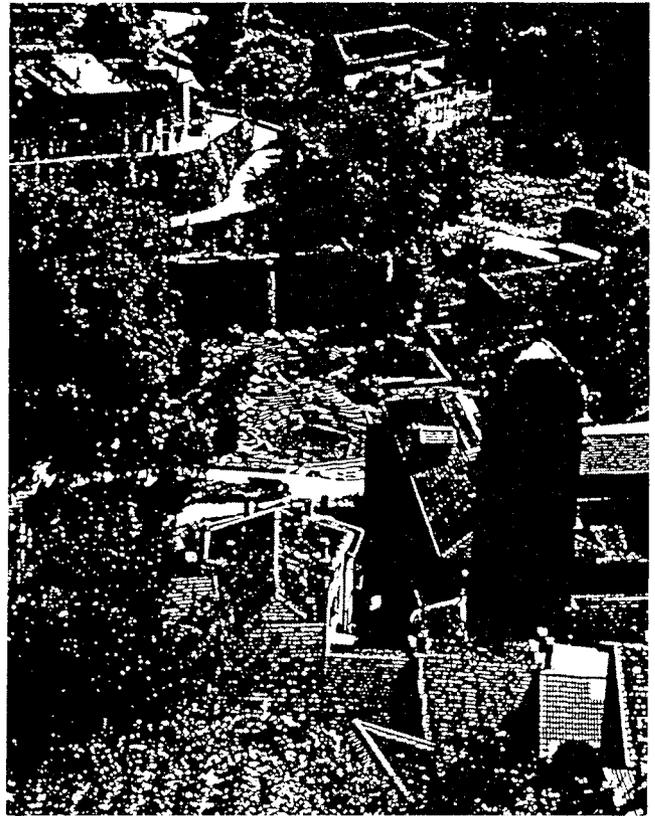


Fig. 7

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