

Can Eighteen Centuries of Managing Density Show Us How to Think Outside the Box in the 21st Century in Ventura County?

by Kerry Roscoe

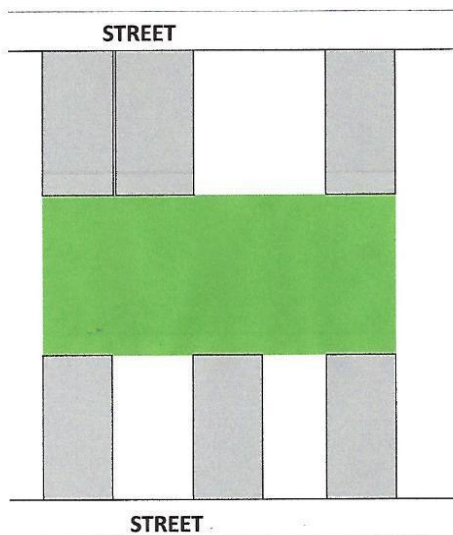
Lack of sufficient housing to meet the needs of a growing population is nothing new. A recent trip to Europe has prompted me to look at the housing crisis in new ways. Cities there have been facing this for centuries and we may be able to learn a thing or two from them about working with what we have and seeking unconventional solutions.



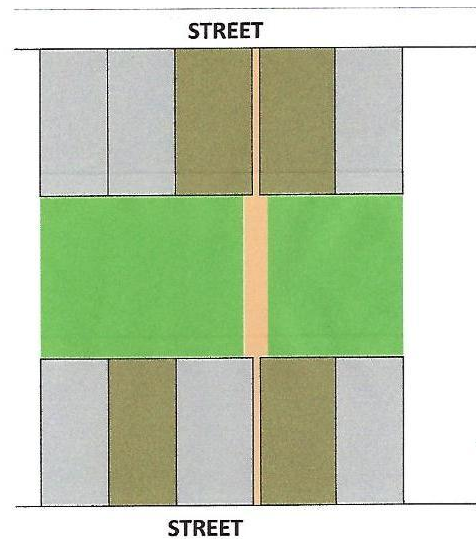
Lyon, France has been dealing with this since the Middle Ages. What was once a small town on the Saone River started to grow rapidly because its strategic location at the confluence of two rivers, the Saone & the Rhone, made it a major trade hub.

Lyon's history shows an interesting way of dealing with an ever rising demand for housing. Founded in 43 BC, the first Roman settlements were on Fourvière Hill. When the aqueducts failed in the 4th Century, the population, located at the top of the hill, had no access to water. Consequently, people had to move down the hill and the "Vieux-Lyon" area started to be populated since it was closer to the rivers. Houses being built along the narrow streets that paralleled the river were limited to 10 meters wide to provide as many as possible. The three story buildings were set right on the street with gardens in the back of the very deep lots.

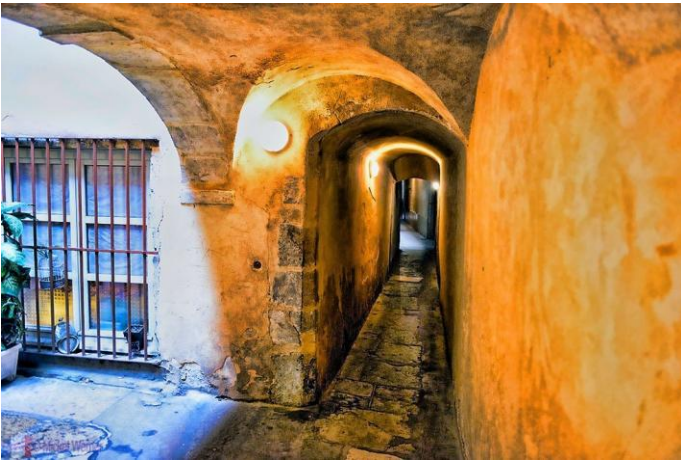
As the population grew, houses were built right next to each other (much like the Baltimore row houses). An unintended consequence was that very long blocks made it tricky to get from one street to the next without having to make a huge detour.



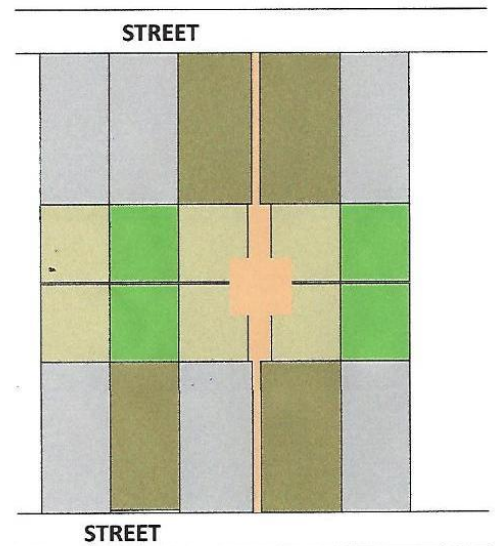
Early houses (grey) were built directly on the street with large gardens (green) behind them.



As new houses (brown) were built abutting each other, *traboules* (pink) were needed to allow passage from street to street.



The city decided that they would require that *traboules* (narrow, covered passageways connecting the parallel streets) be built every so many houses to link the streets and allow easier transit for residents and merchants. As more and more houses were built, these traboules became the main access to other streets and the river.



As housing demand rose, the garden spaces were replaced by two additional units (tan) accessed by a small central open air courtyard

Through the Middle Ages, the city developed on both banks of the Saone, but could not keep up with the growing population. As trade boomed in the 14th and 15th centuries, the gardens behind the street side houses were built up with more houses.

The 15th century arrival of Italian commercial bankers brought an infusion of money and the influence of the DiMedici style was becoming evident in the architecture. During the later Renaissance, the population increased from 25,000 inhabitants around 1450 AD to 35,000 people in 1520 AD, and to twice that figure thirty years later.



When upper stories were added in later centuries, the small open air courtyards allowed for stairways.

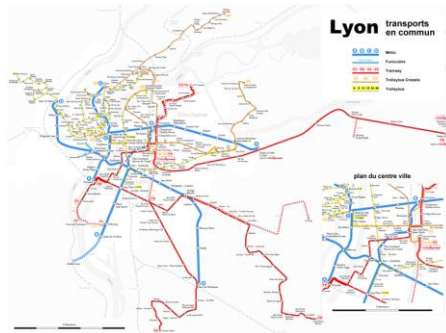


Pushed by the 16th century housing demands, the city, having already filled in the garden areas with a double row of housing accessible from open air courtyards off the traboules, decided to “build up,” adding two to three more stories to many buildings. The change in architectural style in these upper stories is clearly reflected in the configuration, window design and ornamentation. Winding stair cases took residents from the small courtyards to the upper residences.



In the centuries since, the city built out to the north and east as industrial development grew, and the old city center started to deteriorate. In the 1990s the Lyon Department of Urban Planning started a program of restoration and maintenance to encourage public access to the historic passages with an innovative agreement between the city council and the inhabitants of the pertinent buildings. The city bought up many of the properties surrounding the traboules, refurbished them, and made them available as low-cost housing, but with strings attached. Residents around a traboule had to agree to keep it open to the public between 8 am and 7 pm, but like the traboules themselves, the agreement was a two-way street. Visitors were expected to be quiet, and respect the fact that the apartments surrounding the fascinating old passages were private homes. The buildings have been artfully restored and maintained, providing low income families with safe, modern housing conveniently located in beautiful, historic surroundings.

Today the city of Lyon has over half a million inhabitants. The city proper has a population density of 10,000 people per square kilometer (27,000/square mile). Together with its suburbs and satellite towns, Lyon forms the largest agglomeration (urban area) in France outside Paris with a population estimated to be 1.7 million.



Lyon handles its large population and terrain issues well, with extensive multi-level underground parking, a reliable metro system and even several funiculars. Pedestrians, both locals and tourists, move easily about the city. While the city over the last century has expanded west of the Rhone, it has maintained a strong core.

The way Lyon has addressed housing issues over the centuries, dealing with what they had, thinking outside the box, and continuing to change and adapt solutions to the evolving situation, should be an inspiration. Maybe this will encourage us to think more broadly and spark some creative ideas for our own situation.