Lyon, the second city in France after Paris, is well-known for its history of town planning, and although the tram network in operation there between 1880 and 1956 was not one of the first to be built worldwide, it was destined to become a noted feature of the city. In 2001, in accordance with the Plan Local d’Urbanisme (PLU), which in turn incorporates the Plan de Déplacement Urbain (PDU), two new tram routes began operation, the T1 (Parrache – la DOUA-IUT Feysinne) and the T2 (Parrache – St. Priest), the first of 11 high capacity public transport routes which are planned to cater for the city and conurbation.

The first tram route of what was to become an extensive network of services in the city began to operate on 11 October, 1880, now considered to be the starting date for the city’s modern public transport system.

Initially, each route was run by a different company and each company had its own system of operation. Soon there were several different track gauges in use, and this situation continued until the network ceased operation in 1956, although the fact that the different companies finally merged to form a single large operator led to the newer routes being more similar in character. The larger firms gradually absorbed the smaller operators, and in the end there remained only the Compagnie d’Omnibus et Tramway Lyonnais (OTL) and the Compagnie Tramway de Lyon a Neuville (NLT), one of the best-known companies in the city, which in spite of being owned by the OTL, operated independently and maintained its own equipment and livery.

The period of greatest expansion was from 1880 to 1914, during which time thirty-five new routes came into operation, but in subsequent years problems began to multiply, aggravated by the outbreak of the First and Second World Wars. First came demands from employees for increased wages, and there were continuous problems concerning maintenance of the network, acquisition of new power cars, uncomfortable passenger accommodation, etc., all of which persisted until the final years of the service. In addition to these internal problems, the 1920s saw the expansion of the automobile industry, which produced cars and buses offering greater comfort and higher speeds than the ageing trams. But it was not until 1950 that the age of the car came to France, and from then on the tram routes began to disappear, and large numbers of cars, buses and trolleybuses filled the streets, notwithstanding the efforts of the OTL to improve the network and the rolling stock.

Already in 1935 there had been the Plan Général de la Commune de Lyon which gave planning priority to a system of ring roads connected to the centre of the city. There was already an eastern by-pass and in the same year the Plan de Circumliaison des Voies d’Accès a Lyon was published. These two plans were followed by a period of great urban expansion between 1930 and 1960, which soon made necessary a series of planning measures designed to guarantee sustainability. As from this time, traffic routes were no longer designed to cater for public transport, a situation which continued until recent years, when the need was recognised for ambitious public transport policies to guarantee sustainability in large cities.

The infrastructure, trackbed and stations of Lyon’s new tram system are integral parts of the city planning, and the system is designed for to be “modern”, “safe” and even “luxurious”. The new CITADIS TGA 302 tram has been designed and manufactured by ALSTOM and can carry 200 passengers (56 seated). The tram consists of five articulated modules, travels at an average speed of 18 k.p.h. with a maximum of 40 k.p.h., and passenger comfort is outstanding. These vehicles contrast sharply with their predecessors during the first period of tram transport in Lyon, when the most advanced composition consisted of a power car and trailer, with a
maximum payload of 70 passengers (32 seated), bench seats greatly inferior in comfort to the present vehicles, and considerably lower speeds. These improvements are explained solely by the technological progress achieved over the years, as the earlier vehicles were also state-of-the-art products when judged by the standards of their time. Indeed, electrical transmission systems have changed very little, and improvements to the infrastructure have consisted mainly in reduction of vibration from the track.

Lyon is located on two rivers, the Rhône and the Saône, and has steadily expanded since its foundation in Roman times. First there was the "Vieux Lyon", which expanded toward the east and south-east, until the modern city came to occupy the present-day 55 communes, an area of some 50,000 hectares. Planning of the conurbation is controlled by the Plan Local d'Urbanisme (PLU), a development of the Plan d'Occupation des Sols (POS), whose first documents date from the 1970s.

The Plan d'Urbanisme Directeur was published at the end of 1969, and was soon superseded by the Plan Directeur d'Aménagement et Urbanisme and the POS. These were not superseded or modified, and in 1992 there appeared a new Plan Directeur for the conurbation, with the POS being revised in 1994. The final step was to replace the POS with the PLU in 2001, establishing conditions concerning land use, and showing the thoroughfares due to be widened in public areas, plans of new roads and other facilities.

The PDU came into effect in 1997 with the aim of reducing noise pollution and degradation of the atmosphere, and limiting vehicular traffic in the city centre. In 10 years, the aim is to promote use of public transport, bicycles, and pedestrian and intermodal zones, thereby reducing congestion and pollution in the centre, creating a more efficient network to make communication easier between all parts of the city, improving productivity of surface transport and generally improving transfer between the different modes of transport. In order to achieve these goals, there will be eleven main public transport routes running on their own lanes or track, and outlying areas will be connected to one of the two main centres of the city (Perrache or Part Dieu). This public transport network will consist of both radial and circular routes connecting strategic points and the "parcs-relais" on the outskirts, and will allow easy intermodal connection between different means of transport.

In short, it can be said the PDU and PLU in Lyon aim for a high degree of integration between the public transport system – in particular the new tram service – and the layout of the city. For different reasons public transport has been structured in such a way that the Metro serves the centre of the city, the tram the outlying areas, the train and fast trams the conurbation and the conventional bus and trolleybus services cover those parts of the city that cannot be easily reached by tram or metro.