

## INHABITED IMAGES DRAWING A NEW LIFE FOR HOUSING COMPLEXES

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### Abstract

The theme of inhabiting in high-density buildings has been widely investigated since the Mid-Twentieth century. Still, original researches are now opening new perspectives, creating a common ground in which urban planning and architecture increasingly intersect with studies based on participation, urban policies and spatial justice. The failure of some of the iconic Twentieth-century architectures rose a strong debate that often resulted in their demolition. This process was primarily dictated by market logic, by a change in the residents and, above all, by the lack of all the services needed to build a community. Some experimental alternatives to replacing neglect building complexes have emerged especially in France and Northern Europe. The paper presents a selection of residential projects by Lacaton & Vassal, Mikhail Riches and LAN (Local Architecture Network), which use architectural drawings to propose innovative solutions to local administrations, as well as to initiate planning processes involving resident communities.

**Keywords:** Social housing rehabilitation; Domestic interiors; From home to the city; Dwelling cultures; Evolutionary dwellings; Drawing attitudes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Architects, urban planners, architectural historians and intellectuals are signing public petitions with increasing frequency for the protection of prominent twentieth-century buildings. Some of them are threatened with demolition; others are abandoned to neglect due to lack of funding, waiting for their state of decay to be so advanced that no recovery can be hypothesised. The campaign launched to preserve an office building and housing block for students and young workers built by Michel Kagan and Nathalie Régnier-Kagan in the XIII arrondissement of Paris, in 1991 and 2011 respectively, is only the latest in a long series of actions, often unsuccessful, undertaken to save modern and contemporary architectural heritage. Erling Viksjø's Y-Block in Oslo (1969) was recently demolished (July 2020), as well as the first slat of the Robin Hood Gardens social housing complex in London (2017-18), designed by Alison and Peter Smithson (1966-72).

In the aforementioned cases, the demolition was not primarily dictated by the bad state of conservation of the buildings or the impossibility of increasing performance efficiency, but mostly by market logic<sup>1</sup>. The loss of Robin Hood Gardens is especially severe, considering the small number of buildings realised by the Smithsons and their prominence in the theoretical debate of the second post-war period. Moreover, most of the residents could not sustain higher rental rates for apartments in the same district and were forced to move to even more peripheral areas. The demolition is also a particularly painful process here: the eastern block, still inhabited,

looks at the desolate trace left on the ground by the now dismantled structure, while a dense group of new multi-storey buildings surrounds it ever more closely, clearly showing the gentrification looming over the neighbourhood (Colombo, Saitto 2018).

The flattening and reconstruction of social housing estates open up very thorny issues that exceed the architectural value of the edifices and relate to the high expenditure of public resources it requires, and the necessary relocation of the inhabitants. Furthermore, the resettlement does not prevent the possibility of creating the same conditions of neglect and segregation that sanctioned the failure of the old settlements.

Instead of earnestly analysing the urban planning policies that led to the construction and failure of the *grand ensembles*, politics often condemned architecture, electing the discipline as the main cause and symbol of the loss of social integration projects (Ruby, Ruby 2007: 15-17).

In some extreme situations, local administrations have also decided to demolish entire neighbourhoods. A prime example is the Cité des 4000 in La Courneuve, near Paris, designed by Clément Tambuté and Henri Delacroix in 1956, where the blocks Debussy, Renoir, Ravel and Présov were spectacularly destroyed with explosives, in 1986, 2000, and 2004 respectively. Balzac, the last *barre* of the complex, was, instead, dismantled in 2011.

Some experimental alternatives to replacing neglect building complexes have emerged especially in France and Northern Europe. Here architectural drawings have been employed to propose innovative solutions to local administrations, as well as to initiate planning processes involving resident communities.

Drawing should not be considered a mere tool, since, as pointed out in the 1990s by Franco Purini in *Una lezione sul disegno* [A lesson on drawing], «it is thought itself; indeed, it is the fundamental thought-form of the architect, the elective place in which the form appears, in its purest and most enduring essence» (Purini 1996: 32-33). Although the advent of digital techniques initially led to an impersonal and hyper-realistic representation in architecture, it is possible to identify a line of action that «seems to move in the opposite direction and in which the formal process is not affected by the effects of the

<sup>1</sup> The Y-Block in Oslo sat unoccupied since the July 22, 2011 car bombing by terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, but suffered no significant damages. The tragic event turned the place into a site of memory. In 2014, Norway's Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation decided to move ministries onto the site and redesign the area; the decision to turn down the Y-Block and preserve the sole murals by Pablo Picasso and the Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar was officially motivated by the position of the building, which sits on top of a tunnel deemed susceptible to a terrorist attack (Rogers 2017; Hickman 2020). The demolition of Robin Hood Gardens was primarily ensuing from a large housing project led by Developer Swan Housing Association (Phase Three of "Blackwall Reach" housing complex) and supported by the local council Tower Hamlets. The authorities argued that a renovation project would have been too expensive; moreover, they did not recognise an exceptional architectural quality to the Smithsons estate, that controversially failed to be listed as English Heritage in 2009 (Historic England 2015).

potentiality of the means, but conversely, seeks media that allow defining the architectural object in coherence with the ideation process» (Gulinello, Mucelli 2020: 94-95).

Accordingly, the residential projects of Lacaton & Vassal, Mikhail Riches and LAN (Local Architecture Network) use drawing, photography and models in a new expressive way, which could be defined “humanised”.

## 2. LACATON & VASSAL: FROM THE FLAT TO THE CITY

Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, in collaboration with Frédéric Druot, played a pioneering role in researching strategies that critically tackle the housing problem of the French *banlieue*. The architects first publicly fought against policies promoting the replacement of the degraded high-density building fabric with single-family house settlements, which imply large land consumption and significant economic expenditure. As a result, the team obtained the support of the French Ministry for Culture and Communication in 2007 for the publication of the volume *Plus*, which presents the outcomes of the research started a few years earlier on the conservation, transformation and maintenance over time of existing high-rise residential structures (Druot, Lacaton, Vassal 2007).

The renovation project for the Tour Bois Le Prêtre in 2011, in the Parisian suburbs, demonstrated the validity of the method proposed by the French architects<sup>2</sup>. This first pilot intervention was followed by the transformation of the residential complex Plein Ciel La Chesnaie, Saint-Nazaire, in 2014 and 2016, and the more ambitious Cité Grand Parc in Bordeaux in 2016, in partnership with Christophe Hutin.

Their work was widely celebrated and became a model for the rehabilitation of high-density structures with no exceptional architectural qualities. Unfortunately, the paradigm they propose is often hard to follow, since replacement

policies can generate more immediate economic effects on related industries and image benefits for the developers.

Apart from their final results, it is particularly interesting to analyse the methodology developed by Lacaton, Vassal and Druot, which is centred on an advanced study of the peculiarities of each estate and on a close dialogue with the residents. Drawings and interviews are essential tools for negotiations.

The reconversion of existing estates follows an evolutionary approach based on the careful investigation of the structures and the living conditions within them, to achieve an affordable improvement in both the energy efficiency of the buildings and the quality of private lodgings and collective spaces. A specific community of residents, their needs, habits and desires, become the privileged object of the study and the beneficiary of projects starting from a new idea of interiors. This approach offers designers the great advantage of relating to precise profiles of inhabitants and dwelling cultures, drawing away from purely quantitative protocols.

Their work overturns the traditional planning perspective. It starts from increasing the comfort of the apartment, adding areas –*jardin d’hiver* [winter gardens]– that the occupants can easily make their own; then, it focuses on the quality of the ways out of the building and the subsidiary facilities that could turn useful in that particular context. «Basically, conversion enables us to promote a new way of looking, free of preconceived ideas, a persistent paying of attention to all that exists, to what’s already there, to all those things that develop at times, even without an architect», said Anne Lacaton (ibid.: 69). Design, therefore, becomes a tailoring process that leaves room for incompleteness.

The drawings elaborated by the architects for the projects show an attention to people which, paradoxically, is absent in most of the studies for social housing of the second half of the twentieth century, except for a few exemplary cases such as the works signed by the Smithsons and other members of Team X (Smithson 1968).

Simple axonometry and collages clarify how the addition of external superstructures and the replacement of the original façades with light diaphragms expand the size of the apartments. Large windows open onto the landscape,

<sup>2</sup> Tour Bois le Prêtre was designed in 1959 by Raymond Lopez as an elegant residential high-rise edifice, with split-level and maisonette apartments. He was later drastically remodelled in 1983, when an insulated façade was added to the existing curtain-wall. Still, a well-preserved structure and the possibility to obtain generous interiors suggested dismissing the costlier hypothesis to demolish and rebuild the block anew.

significantly increasing the brightness of the interiors. The new structures also introduce those inventive spaces without defined function which allow for customisation, an aspect that is unusual in public residence buildings and corresponds to a very modern living culture, which is open to future evolutions.

The drawings published in *Plus* didactically illustrate the design strategy: conceptual schemes show the design actions undertaken on each of the dwelling rooms and the collective spaces. Collages are preferred to more artificial renderings, since they always present a recognisable trace of the existing. Even the keywords accompanying the elaborations always hint at manipulating, reorganising and integrating the original spaces with new parts: extension, association, enlargement, relation, connection, opening, decompartmentalisation are recurring terms.

Another central concept in Lacaton and Vassal's philosophy is temporality, which does not imply sacrificing the solidity of the building's framework, but opens up to a potential change in finishes and internal partitions, to adequate to the varying conditions of use in time (Lacaton 2018: 25-26).

Tour Bois Le Prêtre<sup>3</sup>, Plein Ciel Saint-Nazaire<sup>4</sup> and Cité Grand Parc<sup>5</sup> were represented with the same techniques. In this way, the language of architectural communication becomes accessible even to people who are not familiar with drawings. It turns into a debate tool capable of overcoming the residents' mistrust and showing the advantages of the renovation. At the same time, it does not impose them a dwelling configuration and leaves them free to complete the project and personalise the extra space.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal with Frédéric Druot, Transformation of Housing Block - Paris 17, Tour Bois le Prêtre (2011). See drawings and images at: <http://lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=56>

<sup>4</sup> Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal with Frédéric Druot, Housing transformation, Saint-Nazaire, La Chesnaie (competition 2006, completion 2014 and 2016). See drawings and images at: <http://lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=57>

<sup>5</sup> Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal with Frédéric Druot and Christophe Hutin architects, Cité du Grand Parc in Bordeaux, France: Transformation of 530 dwellings, block G, H, I (competition 2011, completion 2016). See drawings and images at: <http://lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=80>

The transformation of the Cité Grand Parc was presented as a potential model for the social and physical rehabilitation of the mass-housing estates of modernism at the Copenhagen Architecture Festival 2017, with the exhibition "Never Demolish", curated by Ilka and Andreas Ruby<sup>6</sup>. The display in SPACE10 in Copenhagen simulated the experience of staying in the winter garden through the setting-up of a 1:1 scale furnished mock-up, with life-size images reproducing views of the living rooms, the neighbouring balconies, and sights towards the city. The same scene was also recreated within a former apartment in the Gellerup housing complex in Aarhus<sup>7</sup>, a place perceived as being one of the most economically deprived in Denmark. While local authorities are discussing plans for the renovation of the buildings and densification of the area in Gellerup, the provocative interior perspective and additional methodology embraced by Lacaton and Vassal demonstrated how moving aside the logic of the *existenzminimum* could concur in changing the negative iconography usually associated with these estates.

### 3. PARK HILL HOUSING ESTATE: RE-LOADING AN ICON

Building renovation raises particularly critical issues and requires an even more cautious planning when dealing with architectures of remarkable value. Studio Egret West was involved in the regeneration of Park Hill Housing Estate in Sheffield, one of the icons of British brutalism, inscribed in the National Heritage List for England in 1998 as a monument to be preserved, "Grade II\*: Particularly important buildings of more than special interest".

Park Hill was designed by Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith in 1961 and consisted of four segmented buildings of different heights, ranging between four and fourteen floors and lying on a gently sloping ground not far from the city centre. The project was strongly influenced by the architectural and urban theories discussed at the CIAM congresses.

<sup>6</sup> <http://ruby-press.com/projects/never-demolish/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://ruby-press.com/projects/never-demolish-in-gellerup-museum-aarhus/>

Built with a “cellular” concrete structure inspired by the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, the blocks develop according to “stem” aggregation schemes (Woods 1960/1968) and are connected by high-level bridges and decks, which are reminiscent of the Smithsons’ “street in-the-air” (Smithson 1982: 7). The complex originally housed 995 flats with subsidised rent.

English Heritage’s inclusion of Park Hill in the Grade II list had aroused much controversy. The physical dilapidation and social decay of the neighbourhood were so evident that the council had seriously evaluated the demolition and rebuilding the settlement. The high costs, the preservation status and the solidity of the structures, however, prompted a regeneration plan, which was entrusted to the real estate company Urban Splash<sup>8</sup>.

The first phase of the project was developed in 2011 by Hawkins&Brown with Studio Egret West and the landscape architects Grant Associates. Mikhail Riches was appointed for the second phase, which was more respectful of the original architecture.

Mikhail Riches’s project maintains the concrete structure, the brick cladding, and most of the wall partitions, leaving visible on the façades the original chromatic progression, which varies from terracotta in the three levels served by the first sky deck, to light red in the second one, up to a cream colour.

The renovation will not alter the streets-in-the-air significantly, limiting to slightly enlarging the apartments in correspondence with the kitchens, introducing glazing in front doors and hallways to provide a view from kitchens out. Finally, the architects better define the entrance thresholds, using new sound-absorbing doormats.

The dwelling interiors have been optimised and sometimes expanded, eliminating bedsit flats. The energy performance has been implemented through modern windows and insulating materials. Further changes regard the common areas, with the creation of a new double-height lobby in the lower part of the block affected by the intervention.

<sup>8</sup> The renovation plan provides for maintaining a percentage of social housing, the privatisation of many units and the inclusion of commercial activities, offices and services on the ground floor.

A particularly remarkable aspect of the project is the study of colours, used in the external balcony reveals and on the entrance doors to increase the recognisability of the lodging units.

During the competition for launching the second phase of the rehabilitation, Urban Splash assigned to each of the six shortlisted architect practices<sup>9</sup> a flat and a two-week time-lapse in which they could investigate the structure and design their vision.

Visiting the empty apartment, Mikhail Riches’s architects were struck by the traces of colour that the resident families had left on the reveals to differentiate their house within the homologating seriality of the frontage. These gestures of appropriation became the starting point for the façades renewal, which started by sketching, writing notes and reporting quotations on the walls of one of the flats, as if to sanction the intention to recall the positive aspects in the history of the building<sup>10</sup>. They also used the stencil technique, which is typical of the street culture and hints at the numerous graffiti that cover the walls of the quarter<sup>11</sup>. The team then made maquettes of the façade and a dwelling unit.

A base colour palette, in tones of red in the lowest levels, yellow in the centre and light blue on top, complementary to the adjacent brickwork, was associated to each street. Different nuances, selected after a study of the original project, and the architecture and art of the period, confers individuality to the apartments and extend to the entrance doors.

A primary aim of Mikhail Riches’s project is to rebuild the celebrated sense of community that marked the early years of the estate, when the innovative architecture and the great care taken to settle people in, sometimes rehousing previous neighbours together, seemed to appeal to different generations and create social cohesion.

<sup>9</sup> The shortlisted architecture practices were Mikhail Riches architects, Alma-Nac, Architecture 00 and Project Orange from London, Group Ginger from Leeds, and Sheffield based OS31.

<sup>10</sup> See Mikhail Riches’s drawings and images at: <http://www.mikhailriches.com/project/park-hill-phase-2>

<sup>11</sup> Apart from the famous writing “I love you, will u marry me?”, scrawled in 2001 on one of the footbridges, now replicated in a neon and risen as a symbol of Park Hill Estate, there are various relevant graffiti in the area, including the portraits of former residents left on some windows of the now empty block along Rhodes Street and Duke Street by local street artist Gary Hindley in 2015.

The recovery of this spirit was also at the main target of Group Ginger's proposal, which identified the possibility of appropriating the space by the inhabitants as another cornerstone. «There is an economy of adaptation and appropriation where new life and a forward looking perspective is achieved but without total eradication of the past»<sup>12</sup>. It is no coincidence that the privileged representation technique was once again the collage – the competition panels include a fragment of Richard Hamilton's *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) – and that the project was based on the Duchampian idea of ready-made.

#### 4. LAN: FLEXIBILITY AND EVOLUTIONARY DWELLINGS

Studio LAN (Local Architecture Network) was founded in Paris in 2002 by Benoit Jallon and Umberto Napolitano and is a reference for the practitioners working in social housing today. The high number of residential interventions they elaborated in recent years and the careful illustration is immediately perceptible from their website<sup>13</sup>: explanatory texts, auteur photos and sophisticated drawings document the projects presented in the image gallery and the portfolio of works.

Three projects, carried out in France between 2014 and 2015, are particularly useful to outline the evolution of a specific idea of flexibility and its representation, which culminated in the exhibition display for "Reporting from the front", curated by Alejandro Aravena for the XV Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016.

40 Housing Units in Batignolles, Paris (2010-2014), is the first project analysed.

The architects proposed a monolithic edifice, strongly connected to the city and its history (Fig. 1). The idea pays homage to Haussmannian Paris and the *immeubles de rapport* that were a common type of buildings «of intrinsic intelligence»<sup>14</sup>, conceived from the volume and without a specific intended use.



Fig. 1. LAN, 40 Housing Units, Paris. View of the housing complex. © LAN.

The new façade has a regular and modular alternation of solid parts and voids, which makes the plant reversible for other possible purposes.

Indeed, the building has been conceived as a residential block housing 40 dwelling units of various typologies and dimensions, still, the characteristics of the architecture could be suitable to other potential uses (such as offices, laboratories, etc.), thanks to a clear structure, the ground floor open to the street and extending up to the mezzanine, the variable height of the floor and the variety of openings.

The originality of the project exceeds the linguistic, formal and technical solutions, to extend to the communication technique: LAN's drawings explicitly express the adaptability and changeability of the interiors (Fig. 2).

The "inhabited" section (Fig. 3) shows the high flexibility of the space and is openly inspired by *Les cinq étages du monde parisien*<sup>15</sup>, an 1845 illustration by Eugène Lavielle depicting life in an *immeuble de rapport* (Fig. 4). In both representations, carefully dressed figures, furniture and furnishings unveil the life of the inhabitants.

The elegant, continuous and "democratic" façade with large openings is comparable to a collection of stories: looking at the building from the outside, especially at dusk it is possible to sense the personal stories of the residents (Figs. 5-6). The overall effect recalls the work *Out my window* by the American photographer Gail Albert Halaban, where the windows of the houses – ideally mirroring of the souls of the inhabitants – reveal the most intimate and

<sup>12</sup> See the first competition panel submitted by Group Ginger. <http://www.groupginger.com/project/park-hill/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.lan-paris.com/>

<sup>14</sup> LAN used this expression to describe the *immeubles de rapport* in the text published on their website to illustrate the 40 Housing Units in Batignolles. <https://www.lan-paris.com/en/projects/paris-xvii>

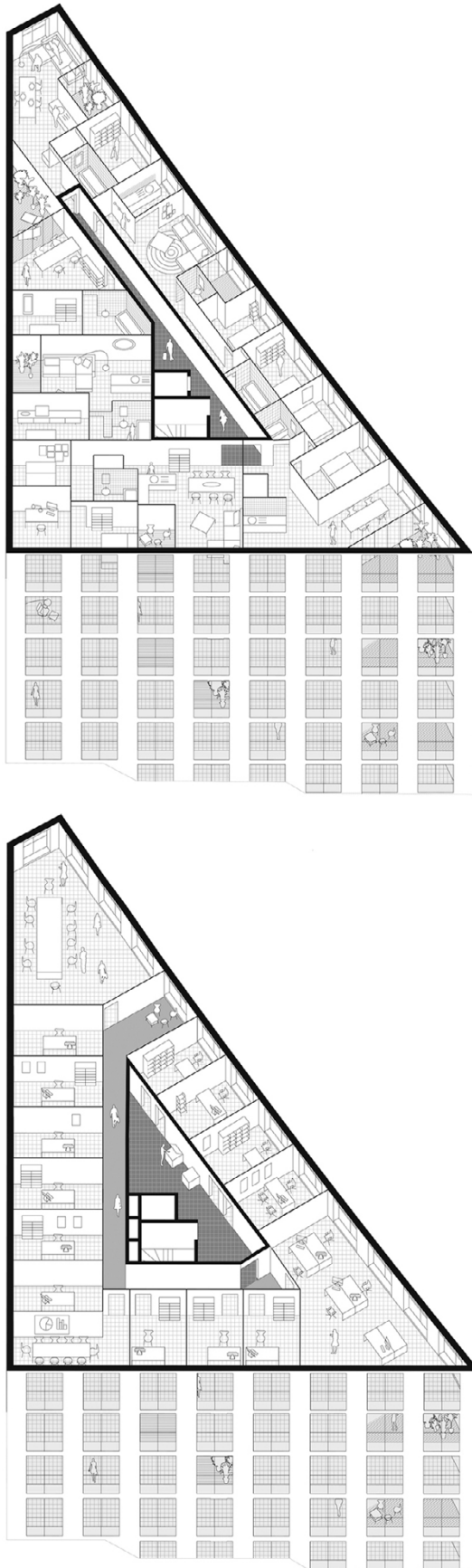


Fig. 2. LAN, 40 Housing Units, Paris. Type plan. © LAN.

authentic aspects of human life. The two works escape voyeurism and represent a point of contact between the observers, who imagine people's lives, and the real everyday life of the persons portrayed.

LAN's particular way of seeing architecture and its interiors, of imagining their use and possible evolutions, is well illustrated by the models exhibited at the XV Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016.

The architects presented two projects, conceived for improving the quality of the existing suburbs starting from two opposing assumptions: the first, 79 Collective Housing Units in Bègles (2009-2015), is a residential complex built after the demolition of a *grand ensemble*; the second, Urban Renovation of Lormont Génicart District (2009-2015), is a regeneration plan. «In both cases, the challenge is to achieve enough density while rethinking the notion of collective dwelling and human scale. Both situations can contribute to the formulation of a new system of standards, values and expectations, acting as a sort of updated version of the Athens Charter, in which hygiene and efficiency give way to a city regarded as a shortcut to equality» (LAN, 2016: 34).

Two detailed scale models occupied the exhibition space. Moreover, the walls of the room hosted four rows of photographic "windows" with faces of residents in Bègles and short writings reporting ideas for the future development. Some imagine building a gym, others a studio, others wished an extra room to expand their family. Their desires were reflected in the objects, furniture and human silhouettes filling the spaces of the model (Fig. 7).

A three-dimensional section of one of the towers in Lormot completed the narration. On the one hand, the model revealed the nature of the new "skin" covering the building, capable of radically redefining its functionality, on the other it offered views of the interiors, showing the residents while performing the most diversified activities (Fig. 8).

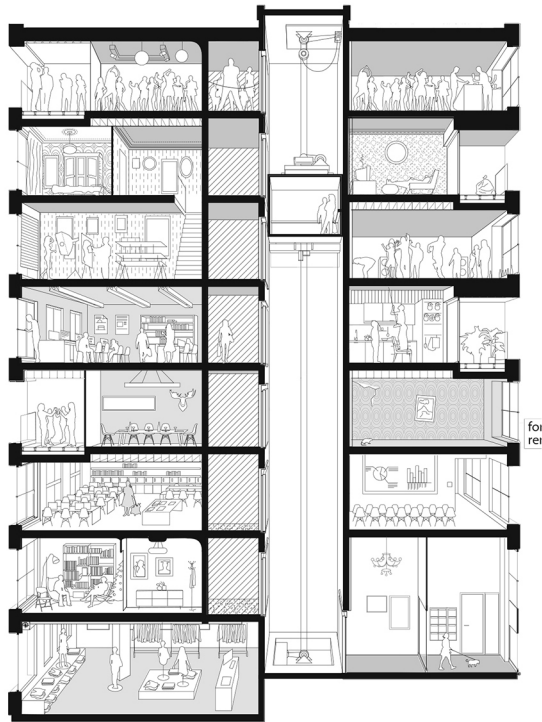


Fig. 3. LAN, 40 Housing Units, Paris. Inhabited section. © LAN.

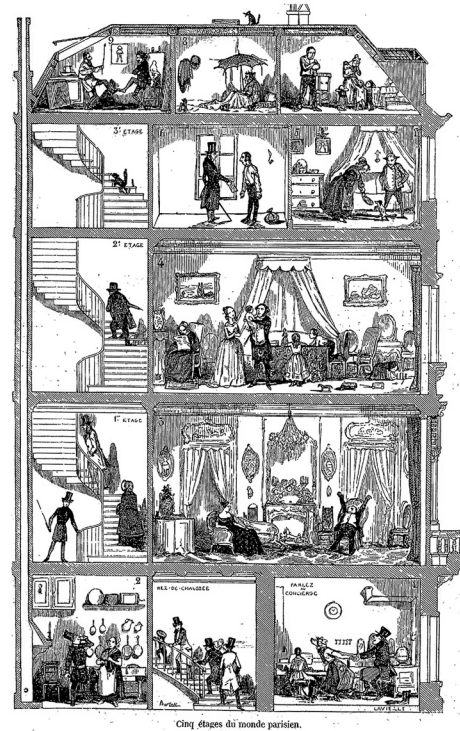


Fig. 4. Eugène Lavielle, *Les cinq étages du monde parisien*, Paris, 11 January 1845.



Fig. 5-6. LAN, 40 Housing Units. Day and night views of the housing complex. © LAN.

The narration was difficult to realise<sup>16</sup> but effective, accessible to all and as inclusive as the works presented.

<sup>16</sup> The backstage snapshots of the exhibition setting up show the challenging assemblage of the two models. <https://www.lan-paris.com/en/miscellaneous/backstage>

LAN's 79 Collective Housing Units project in Bègles faces to the economic and social problems existing in the municipality of Bègles, as well as in many places across the world, with a high-density new residential complex, consisting of affordable habitats that marry a desire for intimacy with the pleasure of socialising (Fig. 9-10).





Fig. 7-8. LAN, Models of the projects 79 Collective Housing Units in Bègles and Urban Renovation of Lormont Gènicart District at the XV Biennale di Venezia, “Reporting from the front”, Venice 2016. © LAN.



Fig. 9. LAN, 79 Collective Housing Units in Bègles. View of the housing complex. © LAN.

Fig. 10. LAN, 79 Collective Housing Units in Bègles. Detail of the facade and the external loggia. © LAN.

Two blocks with a modular structure house sixty-nine “evolutionary” lodging units. The buildings are capable of responding to the plurality of residents’ needs, thanks to prefabricated systems that facilitate their morphological and functional transformability (Fig. 11-12). Each accommodation has four free walls and is equipped with a winter garden that could be used to expand the internal living area without needing building permits (Fig. 13).

The planning diagrams and the drawings of the cladding system clarify the transformability of the spaces, while the two elevations highlight the changefulness of the frontage: the first one represents the state of the building in 2015, the second postulate the set up in 2030 (Fig. 14).

The estates in Bègles and Gènicart Lormont actualise the ideals of a mobile community,

of flexibility, of *mixité* – which is not only functional but also social – pursued by iconic housing projects of the twentieth century, which sometimes survived through the years only thanks to the inhabitants’ arbitrary appropriation actions (Fig. 15).

The Gènicart district is predominantly residential, comprises 10% of the city’s municipal territory in Lormont and accommodates 50% of the population. The new urban plan provides for the rehabilitation of the existing buildings and the creation of new collective spaces.

Four different residencies – Saint-Hilaire (387 units), Leroy (114 units), La Boétie (105 units), and Villon (104 units) – are part of an entirely pedestrian public park with green areas, sports facilities and playgrounds. The focus of the intervention is the treatment of the façade and



Fig. 11-12. LAN, 79 Collective Housing Units in Bègles. Day and night views of the housing complex. © LAN.

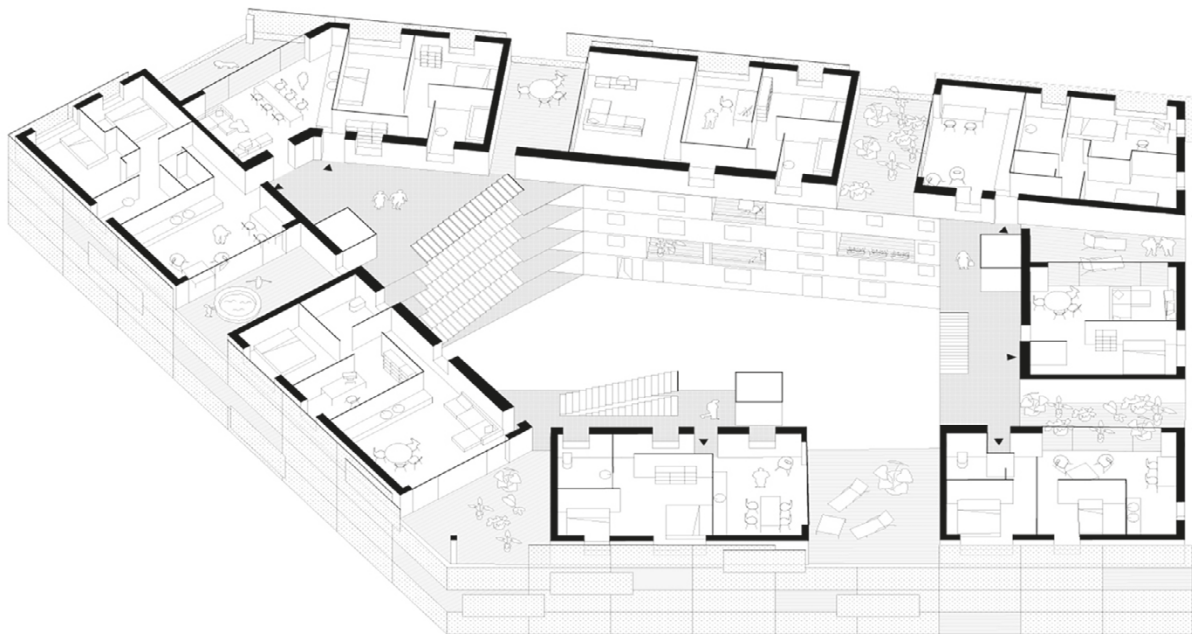


Fig. 13. LAN, 79 Collective Housing Units in Bègles. Type plan. © LAN.

the enlargement of the interior space of the three towers of St. Hilaire, comparable to the works of Lacaton & Vassal. The added frontage of the buildings expands the internal space: the pre-existing balconies are turned into 160 cm deep loggias, which can be shaded by means of movable panels in opaque glass.

The new “skin” gives a mutable appearance to the structures and guarantees better functional, acoustic and climatic performances.

Besides reproducing the architectural solutions, the inhabited sections described two different

worlds. The first related to the past, as showed not only by the original 93 cm deep balcony, but also by compartmentalised apartments and “classical” furnishings, which are expression of the traditional dwelling culture (Fig. 16). The second represents a modern concept of living, which is designed for sharing, and a new mediation space poised between inside and outside (Fig. 17).

The drawings and models of these projects show mutable and indeterminate spaces filled with objects. The photos of the interiors, instead, are free from equipment and people as to invite to

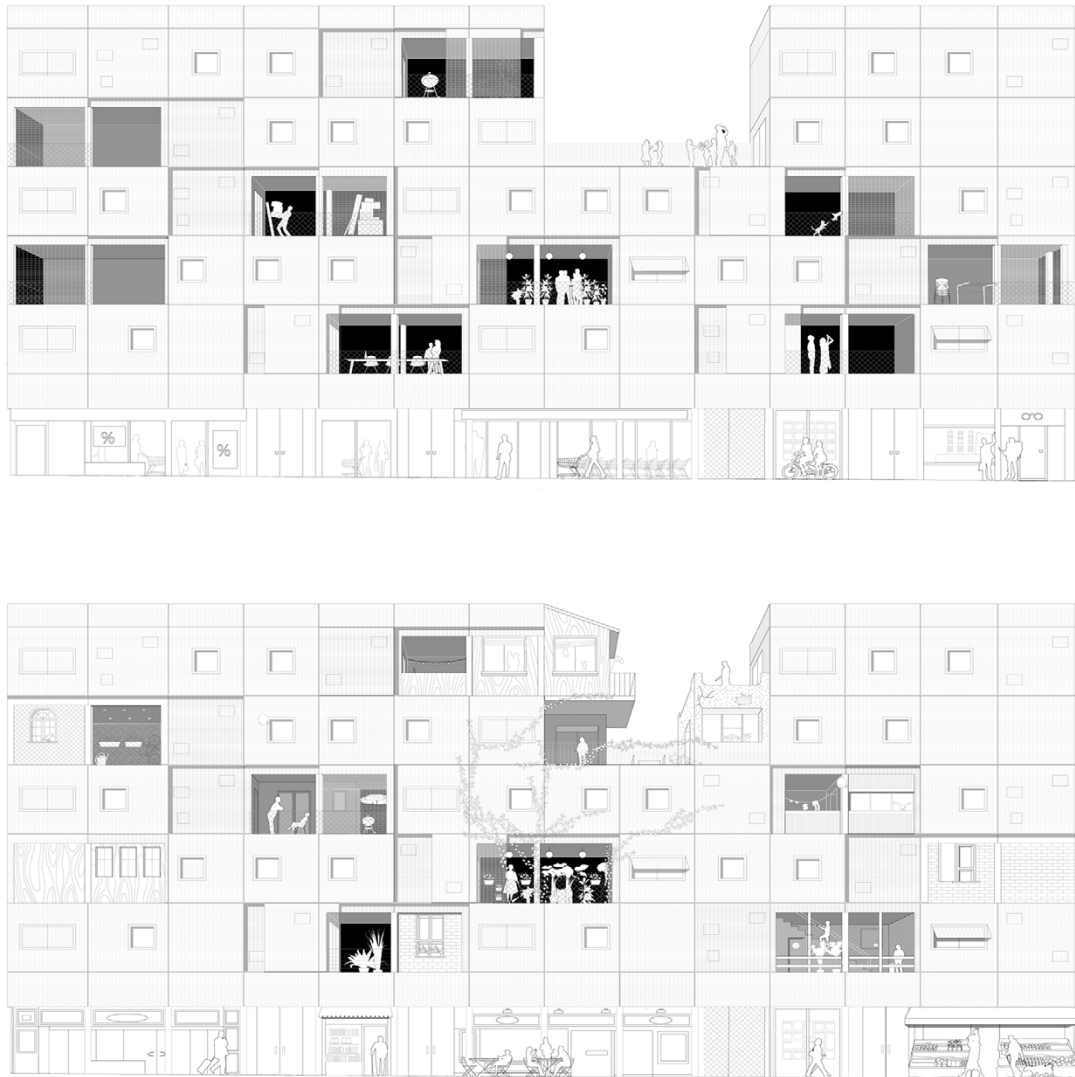


Fig. 14. LAN, 79 Collective Housing Units in Bègles. Inhabited façades. © LAN.

observe, and imagine architecture as the “space of possibilities”.

The flexibility of the domestic space is, in fact, a possible answer to the uneven and urgent housing demand of our time. If the research has produced interesting proposals for the configuration of communal spaces, buffer-zones and interstitial open-air areas, viable solutions related to the modifiability of domestic space are rare.

LAN’s architectures reflect on several critical contemporary issues: functional hybridisation, temporal and spatial indeterminacy of the projects, and consider the residents as bearers of instances, rather than unassertive users.



Fig. 15. LAN, Urban Renovation of Lormont Génicart District. View of the housing complex. © LAN.

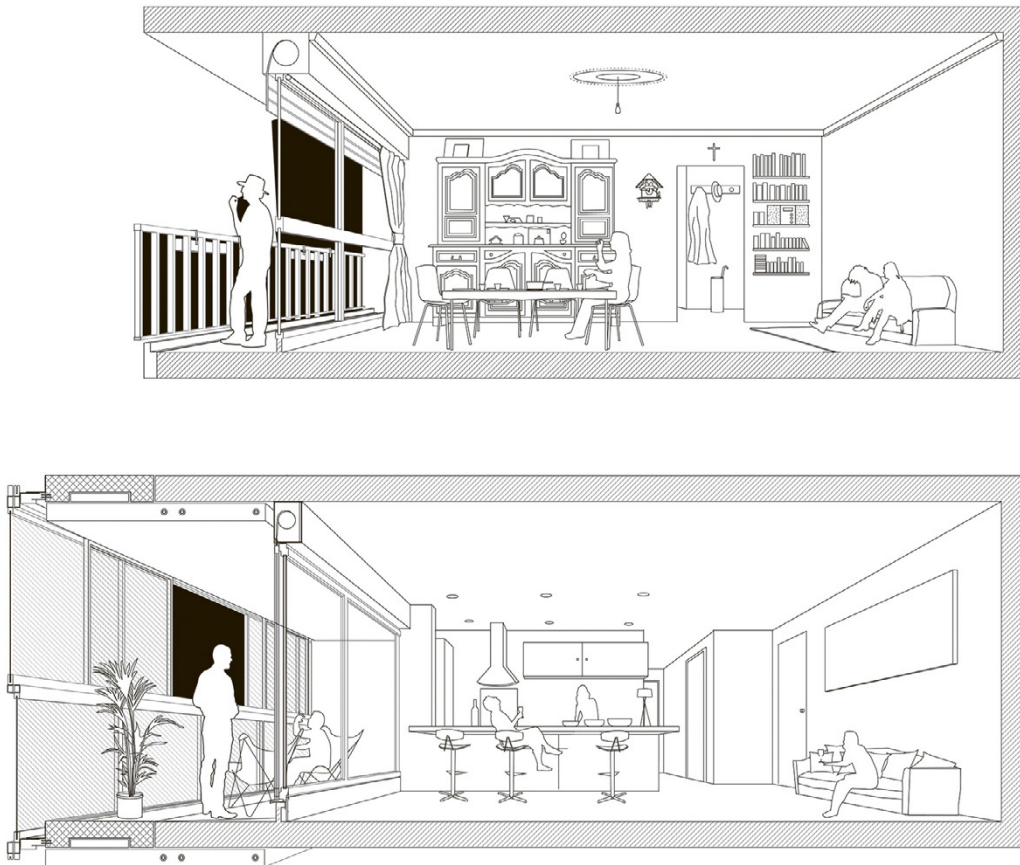


Fig. 16-17. LAN, Urban Renovation of Lormont Génicart District. Inhabited section. © LAN.

«Discontinuity is, in sciences as in common life relationships, the category of our time: modern Western culture has definitively destroyed the classical concepts of continuity, universal law, chance relationships, phenomenological predictability, renouncing to elaborate general forms able to define the world as a whole, in simple and definitive terms. New categories have entered the contemporary language: ambiguity, insecurity, possibility, probability» (Eco 1962: 212). The projects presented above are, in fact, open to the infinite interpretations of the users. Similar structures entail being imagined and represented with the expressiveness and instantaneity typical of real life in order to be built..

## 5. CONCLUSION

An increase in people's independence and a proliferation of the cohabitation forms characterise the contemporary dwelling culture. Accordingly, the theorists of complex

systems believe that flexibility should become a ubiquitous parameter in architectural practices and urban policies. Planners should abandon pre-established programs; fostering forms of self-organisation; generating social networks capable of transforming conflicts into opportunities for development.

The projects illustrated react to the decline of iconic twentieth-century housing strategies and the more recent sterile interpretation of sustainability as mere energetic saving. Their innovative approach goes beyond the simple renovation of the façades and the adaptation to current performance standards. The improved quality and comfort of the interiors, the accurate design of common areas can certainly prevent the deterioration of housing buildings and residential neighbourhoods. These architectures are an efficient and economical alternative to the demolition of the *grand ensembles* and show the effectiveness of an approach which opposes purely quantitative and standardising urban

planning policies. «A complex process, which requires imagination and courage, projected towards profound transformations of the very substance of architecture [which aims] to achieve a multifarious language that can adapt to changing circumstances, to the passing of time, to diverse levels of knowledge and perception, to the plural expectations of many potential users» (De Carlo in Rossi 1988: 241).

Bruno Zevi stated that there is no way to fully represent the interior space in architecture; above all, no one can comprehend it without a direct experience (Zevi 2009 [1948]). The introduction of the human figure and the temporal variable in the representation of the selected projects makes their interpretation immediate and clear: an alternative, mediated fruition which is an architectural journey. They describe the world «as it evolves, rather than as it is. Newton's mechanics, Maxwell's equations, quantum mechanics, etc., tell us how events take place, not how things are. We understand biology by studying how living beings evolve and

live. We understand psychology [...] by studying human beings' interactions and thinking... We understand the world in its becoming, not in its being [...] The absence of time does not mean that everything is frozen and motionless. It means that the incessant happening that tires the world is not ordered by a time line; it is not measured by a giant tick-tock. It does not even form a four-dimensional geometry. It is a vast and disordered web of quantum events. The world is more like Naples than Singapore» (Rovelli 2017: 91-92). This is perhaps the spirit of the case studies presented: they are "events" characterised by an endless and indeterminate network of situations, mirroring and encompassing unpredictable lives.

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