

# Urban Metamorphosis

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## Abstract

Architecture always means working on the existing substance and never creating from scratch, which leads to the conclusion that one never has to demolish architecture but can always reprocess it. The contextualism of the 1970s saw its main role in the protection of the historical city from the modern steamroller of Internationalism. However, it refused to pay any respect to the architectural remnants of modernism in the same way that modernism had refused to pay respect to history. In contrast to this “eye for an eye” approach the contextualist ethic of our *tabula non rasa* acknowledges the inalienable right to exist of every temporal layer of the built landscape. For us building always means adding, editing, transforming. This maxim remains valid even when the existing fabric appears to offer few or no qualities at all, like the housing blocks of the French *grands ensembles* from the 1960s and 1970s for which we presented a wide-ranging revitalisation strategy in our study PLUS<sup>1</sup>.

## 1 Transformation

As France experiences a serious housing crisis reflected by an increase in homeless and a serious housing shortage, how can a municipal policy aimed at dismantling existing housing be justified? This heavy-handed and predatory initiative – foisted along with the problematic claim that living standards will see improvement – is in no way a closed case.

Concurrently, under the on-going national program for urban renewal, 15,000 Euro are spent on demolishing an apartment, which includes the cost of technical and social support, and 152,000 Euro are spent on erecting a new building. In all, 167,000 Euro are spent replacing a project, while a low rehabilitation costs 8 to 10 times less. No alternative exists in between.

This financial savings is an efficient means for grounding a strategy of adaptive re-use, growing housing production, encouraging social diversity, visibly improving quality, legitimizing established practice, seeking out sustainable materials, optimizing energy consumption and furthermore integrating light-weight equipment and services. The uneven history of housing design (from luxury slabs to modest projects of noteworthy spatial character) points to an unequivocal observation: the value of housing derives not from capital invested but from generosity of design. Declaring preservation to be an “activist” and alternative approach in the face of emergency brings our national stock to task not only within its historical aesthetic parameters, but above all interrogates its contemporary status, its usefulness and its sustainability. Connections must be preserved with what already exists and it must be considered a wellspring of value.

The modernist project underlying the large-scale housing of the 60s has not been preserved for its appreciable qualities. It is in fact a legacy all architects must “recycle” and transform, but without contradicting its structure and without introducing the inappropriate parameters of the Haussmanian project. These large-scale projects carry the seeds of their own redefinition: transparency, visual openness, height, park space, land availability, etc – dormant qualities that must be revealed, developed and transcended.

Begin with a single premise: think housing from the inside and not from the outside, up-close and not at

a distance. That is, never destroy, never divide or replace, always add, change and use. Do more by capitalizing on what already exists and effectively transforming it to cull undeniable qualities: space, balconies, transparency... Starting with what exists, we can achieve greater, better results than by destroying and then rebuilding to today's standards.

This analysis is based on several prototypical housing projects, where in the interior the routine of daily life – as experienced from an emotional perspective, from that of pleasure, frustration, or constraint, infuses public space.

Housing and housing alone will recount history.

The existing structure – as much social as constructed – will then serve as the springboard for strategies of reorganization that are both gentle and vital: strategies originating in assemblage, collage, and montage of factual situations that are both distinct and shared. These approaches, founded on eclecticism, epitomize for us the current preoccupations affecting the design world and its economy, and characterize a realistic and positive manner of acting within and with existing conditions. Constructing new relationships and new presences, re-scripting ways of "coming together" through architecture, is for us a manifest and graceful tact towards the most contemporary of contemporary urban facilities: the housing project.

## 1.1 PLUS

The study „PLUS“ is a case-study for a radical transformation of the apartments of the Grands Ensembles. Bleak façades with miserable punched windows are replaced by floor-to-ceiling glazing, which grants the inhabitants of the apartments for the first time the advantages of the high rise, namely living spaces flooded with daylight and featuring panorama vistas on the surrounding landscape. Another important aspect of transformation focuses on overcoming the antiquated modernist ideology of „Wohnen für das Existenzminimum“ which has contaminated social housing for too long. Such the study foresees to double the available living area of each apartment. This is made possible by an added construction which extends each apartment by a kind of loggia in to the exterior space. This added construction is totally autonomous in structural terms; hence its loads are not imposed on the existing building. This enlargement of living surfaces makes it also possible to dispose of unfavourable interior partitions and provide for more generous floor plan layouts. Enlarging the existing building by a structurally independent spatial layer makes it possible moreover for residents to keep inhabiting their apartments while the added layer is being built (which is based on pre-fab components that are simply fixed to the old building after the existing façade has been taken down and replaced by floor-to-ceiling glass sliding doors). The strategy of enlargement also applies to the programmatic structure of the housing. Especially the lower floors which are usually less wanted by inhabitants due to their view disadvantages are reclaimed for the needs of the collective. They contain programs such as public laundry, restaurant, kindergarten, hamam, swimming pool and small office spaces. Thus the mono-functional program of the stereotypical modernist residential development is challenged by the introduction of various collective programs to ensure a social sustainability of the community.



Figure 1: interior transformation



Figure 2: interior transformations and extensions



Figure 3: Trignac, carré de Certé, existing situation and situation after the transformation

## 1.2 Tour Bois-le-Prêtre, Paris

Built in the early sixties along the ring road of Paris, this high rise block of 16 storeys includes 96 apartments. The demolition, firstly envisaged, has been avoided and a project of transformation decided. Winners of the competition we propose a generous extension of the apartments.

New floors, built as a self-supporting structure, are added on the periphery of the existing building at every floor, to extend the living rooms, create closable terraces and balconies. The existing facades with small windows will be removed and replaced by large transparent openings, so that the inhabitants will profit of the exceptional view on Paris all around.

Ground floor the entrance hall will be refurbished. The floor will be made on a level with the exterior.





Figure 6: added winter garden with view

### 1.3 Social Housing, St Nazaire

Located in the port of St Nazaire on the Atlantic Ocean, the site, named Little Morocco, is atypical and extraordinary, exotic, between estuary and harbour. It is a situation of semi insularity, opened to the ocean. It is a sort of village like a middle of nowhere, so fragile and isolated, but also very present and important in the city. Inside the atmosphere is friendly and warm. People are living there for a long time and set great store by their neighbourhood. It reigns harmony, charm, beautiful feelings, a life that we feel invaluable.

The 36 apartments on the site are scheduled to be demolished within the context of a new master plan, to let the place free for building a new social housing programme of about 55 apartments.

The existing quality, the atmosphere, the good condition of the construction is interesting enough to develop a beautiful project from the situation: keep the inhabitants here, keep the uses, keep every tree, every rose in the gardens. It is like a landscape already there that we would preserve delicately. Just add what is lacking. Do with what already exists is in this case more interesting than demolition + rebuilding.

In this way, the project proposes to keep the existing houses and the gardens and public areas around and to raise harmoniously the number of apartments. The second goal is to provide beautiful apartments with nice views to the sea, with balconies or terraces, and generous liveable spaces that should be twice bigger than the standards of social housing, because we consider that nowadays these standards are really insufficient.

The additional apartments are built in a new construction on the place of some deteriorated apartments already empty that cannot be kept. The existing apartments are extended by adding new constructions to increase their area. All the new constructions are steel structures built on piles so that they touch the floor with a minimum of impact in order to keep the existing areas and the atmosphere of the gardens.

This project is the continuity of a research on the housing high rise estate of the 70th in the context of the decision to demolish most of them. The research is focused to the question: how to re-use and refurbish these buildings and take advantage of their potential to provide better living spaces in a most effective cost that allows finally, in an equivalent budget to produce more apartments.



Figure 7: existing situation and situation after adding construction



Figure 8: existing apartment and apartment with winter garden extension

## Literature review

<sup>1</sup> Druot, Frédéric; Lacaton, Anne and Vassal, Jean-Philippe, 2004, *PLUS. Les grands ensembles de logements, Territoire d'exception*, a study undertaken for the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Direction de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine.