

# Chapter 9

## Social Housing Renewal Challenged: La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, Paris 2012

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No, the human being – or even the living – is not, as Pascal dramatically put it, a lost point, dissolved, absorbed, drowned in space, but he inhabits a place, a bulge, a fold, a singularity of the expanse, a site, that is, thus, on the contrary, quite remarkable (Serres 2011: 4).<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction – The Context of Discovery

This chapter explores the dynamic interrelations between architectural and social change and puts special attention to ways of residing characterised by spatial transgression, symbolic turn and altering residential practices. The chapter attempts to reposition the role of architectural intervention in generating cultural changes. This contribution is based on interdisciplinary research that combines architectural and sociological analysis of the conditions for transforming housing today.

While focusing on the dynamic between social realities and architectural alterations, we draw on a qualitative analysis of the 2012 transformation of *La tour Bois-le-Prêtre* in Paris. The project demonstrates alternative social housing policies and strategies for renovating suburban high-rises, and is considered a successful response to challenges of housing renewal. The chapter also identifies the implications of this approach and its potential for future urban revitalisation efforts.

The interpretations presented here are based on several visits to La tour Bois-le-Prêtre during and after the reconstruction of the block between 2010 and 2013. The on-site visits included observation of re-inhabited flats. Observation together with visual analysis revealed how the architectural changes transformed the symbolic meaning of the residence and laid the basis for residents to create new identities.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis applies a social constructivist approach to onsite observations of the built object and to data generated from in-depth interviews with project author-actors as well as a practicing architect and member of the jury that awarded the project the national prize *l'Équerre d'argent*<sup>3</sup> in 2011. The objective of qualitative interviews was to generate data that would allow us to analyse the architects' conceptual approach, experiences in redesigning and rebuilding the tower block, as well as their reflections on architectural practice.

This contribution reflects on opportunities to rethink the social in architecture and the architecture in the social. It searches for answers to some important questions: How can a building in a low-income suburban district that is stigmatised and slated for demolition, be symbolically transformed through design and reconstruction? How can design strategies that radically transform people's housing conditions win out against a decision to demolish and start over? How should a profound architectural transformation from destitute to desirable be conceived to inspire alternative ways of living?

### Setting La tour Bois-le-Prêtre in a French Social Housing Context

The extensively published and much acclaimed refurbishment project La tour Bois-le-Prêtre (AMC 2012)<sup>4</sup> provides a demonstration of the realisation of the architectural design practices meeting the demand of social housing in France by re-conceptualising the logic for pursuing urban residential resilience.

Departing from the assumption and given that residential qualities are virtually forgotten in current urban planning considerations – although the city obviously is constructed on the basis of residential life worlds – architects Frédéric Druot with Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, have unfolded a particular credo based on the conviction that forming the qualities of residential life is the core of architectural urban creation and thus the primary socio-cultural mission for architects. Frédéric Druot for his part considers that ‘... the basic urban unit of measure and building piece is the residential unit ...’ (Druot 2012b). Likewise Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal state that ‘You must go back to the dwelling, to each dwelling, to each inhabitant. Urban planning begins there’ (Lacaton and Vassal 2009: 158).

The member of the jury for the national prize *l'Équerre d'argent '11* affirms the platform of the authors of the winning project of Bois-le-Prêtre by underscoring that good architecture lies with architects' devotion to learn about the multiple privacies of residential realities:

/ ... / this is a kind of very simple thing to imagine how they (residents) can look at the TV or have two positions of the bed in the bedroom / ... / just to give some choice / ... / (Interview 2012).

Anne Lacaton brings this principle to a wider context of complex and interconnected urban and residential spatiality to be understood in daily practice of inhabitants:

We are developing the idea that urban planning should be done / ... / from inside out / ... /. Creating the space around people and managing the relationship between the spaces, the movement of people, makes the fundamentals of architecture and urban planning (Interview 2012).

This attitude towards the urban residential situation, as proclaimed by the authors behind the alterations of the social housing tower of Bois-le-Prêtre, must be seen within a political reality where a consistent strategy is bent on the destruction of many ‘difficult’ French *banlieues* and has been granted substantial governmental financial support. Paradoxically, at the same time, many new high-rise projects – in particular on the outskirts of the Paris ring motorway – are currently under discussion. As has been asserted by Druot (2012a: 100), the floor area of existing typical flats in housing estates that are scheduled for demolition is generally 15 per cent larger than similar types currently produced in new construction. In addition, there is at present a great shortage of flats and lack of appropriate residential space for low-income households. The National Agency for Urban Development, ANRU,<sup>5</sup> with a budget of €30.1 billion and holding the responsibility for the demolition of suburban housing, spent €15.6 billion in 2007 on demolishing 8,200 flats.

Some other more general figures can provide an image of the national setting within which the related case has evolved. According to a recent report from the *La Fondation Abbé Pierre*<sup>6</sup> – a benevolent and legendary organisation that ‘works for the most destitute to find decent long-term housing’ – 685,000 persons are without permanent residence, while 5 million considered to be in precarious residential situations and 3.6 million citizens are living in inadequate housing conditions.

According to these sources in September 2012 more than 1.18 million people were queuing for social housing (Archiscopie 2013: 24). An explanation to this situation can be found in the higher demand for housing in the subsidised public sector compared to private rental flats of lower quality, short-termed and less secured rental agreements. An exception to this is a special binding subsidy scheme for private rental developers which obliges the landlords to meet the requirement to provide for the social housing sector at special terms (Haffner et al. 2009; Whitehead 2011). Another reason for the shortage of low-cost social housing apparently relates to the financing schemes, which require the providers to cover the actual expenditures through rental income and subsidies and direct them to seek tenants of good standing (Whitehead 2011: 252). Therefore, once established in a flat with low rent, having qualified according to income level and other criteria, the residents maintain their accommodation even if later their incomes are raised far above predefined access income ceilings. The HLM (*Habitations à Loyers Modérés*), the French national system of subsidised social housing provision, having implemented this mission since the post war period, is according to stakeholders like the State, in urgent need of reform. As further argued by Driant, the system is caught ‘between the inertia of the system and the State’s eagerness to reform’ (2011: 130).

In EU perspective, ‘the French social housing sector, which accommodates 19 per cent of households, lies in a relatively large group of countries in the middle of the spectrum’ (Whitehead 2011: 249). It is also significant that with a relatively large private rental sector of 24 per cent the social housing sector has been growing since 2000 while in other countries it has been declining,

as indicated by Whitehead (ibid.). For example, a total of 312,174 units per year were produced during 2010. Among those, approximately 50–70,000 were HLM social housing units. The average flat surface size in social housing is 65 m<sup>2</sup> but is steadily diminishing and considered small by European standards. As described by Driant (2011: 123) the current trend is that younger singles and couples are leaving the HLM sector while older people and impoverished people, the unemployed or those in a difficult health situation, are starting to dominate the social composition of neighbourhoods.<sup>7</sup>

## Residential Qualities and Accelerated Evolutions of Preferences

As concerns the actual evolution of quality in social housing, perceived within a deeper time frame, Eleb and Simon (2013) identify the persistence of emerging transformations, however only occasionally met by relevant offers on the market.<sup>8</sup> The paths to be engaged for the future, as summarised in the following quote, reiterated by other researchers in the field, e.g. also from other European contexts of Holland or Finland (Casanova and Hernández 2008; Pirinen 2014) must consist in closing the gap between persistently diversified demands and adequate offers on the market:

Confronted with all evident transformations of ways of inhabiting, one simple notion comes up: multiply the offer, expand on diversity (Eleb and Simon 2013: 278).<sup>9</sup>

Significant permutations of residential space are on-going: even if residential rooms still retain their traditional names and even conventional layouts, they are continuously redefined along the different situations, moments and biorhythms of everyday life. According to our observations this underlines the conceptual relevance of an accentuated *residential transience*. However, residents' cultural capacity, though differentiated, may be considered a universal phenomenon expressed in any kind of circumstances, emerging out of necessity where the conditions are difficult or the choices are many, essentially, as part of the processes of home-making and identity construction (Paadam 2003). Or as has been asserted by Anne Lacaton, it is the talent of residents that completes an architectural residential project (cf. Paadam 2005). According to the jury member, La tour Bois-le-Prêtre is endowed with these evocative qualities:

/ ... / All the approach and all the generosity of this project / ... / it's not only good architecture, good building / ... / for me it represents very good attitude / ... /, sustainability, / ... / not just aesthetically beautiful but something more important / ... / to respond to the need of the people / ... / to be very attentive to the light, the natural light, or space / ... / to give a good proportion / ... / (Interview 2012).

As acknowledged by the authors of the project and the jury member, the inventive architectural approach applied in social housing is so far exceptional rather than a rooted strategy and this is despite the presence of avant-garde renowned social housing projects throughout the long-standing French tradition of construction of social housing, with some recent distinguished architecture becoming a reference point for private housing construction.

/ ... / for a long time there is a great ambition of social housing to create good housing. Even in the 60's, 70's and all that time social housing in France was more advanced than private housing. So nowadays I think it's still the same but in a way it's not enough / ... / the question of social housing for us is not a right question. When we are thinking of housing we think of the better conditions for people to live in the city and whatever the condition of the people is. / ... / if you think of the housing for everybody, it should be generous, comfortable, it should be the best condition even if it's subsidised housing (Anne Lacaton, Interview 2012).

In fact, it's true more and more that social housing is more interesting in France / ... / and in this moment / ... / private housing starts to follow social housing / ... / (a jury member, Interview 2012).

But experimentation is still occasional and average production prevails even when compared to the more dynamic years following from 1980 with legendary ground-breaking but singular radical projects by Jean Nouvel; e.g. *Nemausus* in Nîmes 1985–87 (Gromark 1993; Boissière 2001). Twenty years later followed the equally ground-breaking experiment *Cité Manifeste* in Mulhouse 2001–2005 (Gromark 2007, 2008; Guth et al. 2013). The demand for residential design has changed and diversified with the diversification of lifestyles, of which housing form constitutes a substantial dimension and which relates to the process of identity construction, as argued by Paadam and Ojamäe (2013). *Transfiguration* in terms of residential flat structures and programme components comes very slowly forward in a largely conservative world of construction – but it does come forward.

Anne Lacaton reflects:

/ ... / if I'm optimistic I would like to believe that we have a kind of influence on some owners or public owners or some mayors of cities that say: 'Okay, that is what we would like to do'. But we, on the other hand, we meet the same difficulties. / ... / it would help if we do not have to convince anymore to ... (Interview 2012).

The change of path requires political decisions on strategic approaches, investments and trust in the expertise of architects combined with enhanced participation of residents, which has been one of the main strategies for the Bois-le-Prêtre team of architects.



Figure 9.2 La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, loggia after reconstruction, Eiffel Tower on horizon

Source: © Frédéric Druot Architecture 2012.

### Understanding the Profile and History of the Project

As a prelude to the realisation of the Bois-le-Prêtre project, the by then already internationally well-known team Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal (cf. Ruby and Ruby 2002, El Croquis 2015) joined architect Frédéric Druot for a government initiated research of case studies on alternatives to demolition. This interim report from 2004 (Druot et al.) was later published in 2007 as *plus+* (Druot et al. 2007). As a result of these studies, the team was invited in 2005 to apply their findings in an architectural competition regarding the renewal of the tower block La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, built in 1959–60, and located on the outskirts of Paris's northern inner-city perimeter.

A winning proposal and a following commission in November 2005 led to the first realisation of their approach, based on calculating the benefits of improving the existing residential structures in comparison to the over-all costs for an eventual demolition. This formula represents a huge potential of implementation possibilities in France as described in the above research report and obviously also in similar situations elsewhere. In moral and ethical terms, the project projects a mind provoking image of the enhancement through well

meditated alteration – under the ‘never resort to demolition’ formula advocated by Frédéric Druot (Druot 2009: 65) – instead of downright demolition, not to mention the solid weight of structural sustainability preserving existent structures and the respect for established ways of life on site considered in terms of social sustainability. Despite the obvious social as well as economic benefits of rebuilding, the authors of the project had to fight down stereotypical political dispositions, which tend to favour demolishing and new construction instead of reconsidering other options of improving the quality of social housing. Anne Lacaton comments:

/ ... / the reason for demolition is not in that common sense condition, it’s because it’s a kind of political approach of the social problems and / ... / demolition is also a way to change very fast the appearance of the situation, to remove people and in a very short while solve some social problems / ... / for the city it should not be something exceptional, it should be the minimum / ... /, for us the only important thing is that at the end it provides very, very good housing conditions (Interview 2012).

The project budget was €11.2 million for the finally offered 100 refurbished flats, almost €861/m<sup>2</sup> or €115,000 per flat. This is to be compared with the estimated cost for demolition and new construction, in this case doubled at €20 million with potentially a lower number of flats on the same plot due to active urban plan restrictions of building heights. In France, the average cost of demolition per flat is calculated to €15,000 while new construction is estimated to €152,000 with a total cost for demolition and new construction at €167,000 (Druot et al. 2007: 63). These figures are confirmed in statements from the municipality of Paris (Paris 2012).<sup>10</sup> The major substantial effect in sustainable terms for the expansion is a minimal 50 per cent energy cost reduction according to figures referred to by Ruby and Ruby (2012) – and an equivalent added considerable noise reduction – as especially vital in this location close by the motorway – due to the efficiency of the multi-layered insulating extension to the façade.

To sum it all up as the essence of the effect induced by this approach according to authors:

For the money needed to tear down one existing apartment and to build a new one, you can renovate and expand three to four existing apartments (Ruby and Ruby 2012: 80).

The tower block La tour Bois-le-Prêtre – also called *La tour Raymond Lopez* from the name of the original architect – consisted of 17 levels with 96 flats. The building was at its time of inauguration in 1962 a bit unusual with 32 huge six room flats – five bedrooms and a living room – divided by a stair between the two half levels, designated for large families. This existing limited typology was, following residents’ specific requests, transferred to a tailored wider range

of options. If residents remained in the same size flat after alteration they were not charged extra for the loggia and balcony expansion zones. For this addition newcomers had to assume a modest raise to the rent.

This new diversity – *three* types expanded to *seven* with many supplementary variants – was partly made possible with the added southern wing extension, especially the studio apartments at 45 m<sup>2</sup>. To the existing 8,900 m<sup>2</sup> were added 3,560 m<sup>2</sup>. This recombination process of reshuffling the residents within the building thus enabled a *re-appropriation* of the existing structure with raised residential qualities and offered a spatial transfiguration for the release of a wider spectrum of ways of residing and household types prematurely unarticulated in the building.

/ ... / not to think that you should make 100 different spaces but the question is much more to say: ‘We will give 100 maximum situations’, so that the people can appropriate in different ways / ... / the opportunity must be pushed at the maximum. It doesn’t work if it’s restricted. So our question (is) to try to extend all the time the capacity (Anne Lacaton, Interview 2012).

The common entry area zone was also restructured for more light and transparency adding also rooms for the local residents association along with exterior garden area improvements. On top of that, the addition of a transparent elevator enables full access to all half levels for the physically impaired and brings daylight through into the formerly sombre staircases – all of which was added for a minor extra charge on the rent.

The most significant structurally inventive approach to these alterations consisted in keeping the existing flats intact inside the expansion zone even if the whole typology of the structure was reconfigured following residents’ articulated demands for smaller or bigger flats. The self-bearing 3-metre-wide extension zone was attached outside the existing façade, replacing the former front of the building with an adjustable glass wall with climate, thermal curtains and sliding doors from floor to ceiling. This added screen offers an enhanced variable lighting situation, a noise and energy reductive adjustable filter composed of several layers. It provides for a non-climatized loggia expansion to each flat – a winter garden for multi-purpose use, two metres wide and varying in size between 16 and 33 m<sup>2</sup> depending on the type of flat. This zone is in turn enclosed towards the exterior by semi-transparent polycarbonate walls with sliding doors, and yet another interior layer of thermal curtains, beyond which you find an open-air balcony zone one metre wide, ranging 6 to 18 m<sup>2</sup>, at every level all around the house. This design makes it possible to expand the interior spaces towards the exterior if the weather permits, depending on season, but also to gain even more space by merging the interior rooms with the loggia and the balcony. An additional important surplus value produced by these arrangements is the enrichment of circulation patterns within flats from room to room via these added spaces.



Figure 9.3 La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, ... found its place in a re-designed flat  
 Source: © Katrin Paadam 2011.

The result is an open and fluid residential space that expands or detracts seamlessly towards the outer world and cityscape – open for use during most of summer, until late in autumn and from early spring. The decision to create this almost total 100 per cent transparency from the formerly existing sombre 40 per cent window openings was taken almost unanimously by the residents themselves as presented by the architects.

This project is characterised by the specific procedure of direct involvement of the local residents as a process of *deliberation* from the start even taking part in the choice of architects in the competition. Every single flat was visited and individual demands and desires were registered. This revealed the surprisingly rich amplitudes of life style dependant interior adaptations and decorations but also the sometimes cramped and overloaded rooms.

The architects received a great degree of trust from the households in the building, although it was not immediate as these residents had but little earlier experience in negotiating their interests. Anne Lacaton recalls:

At the first meetings we had to present the project and nobody was talking. A lot of people and they would say: ‘We don’t have anything to say’, because they were totally inward and they didn’t know if they had to talk (Interview 2012).

Discussions with inhabitants lasted for six months before the start of design. The adopted principle was to listen to every voice in the building in support of the ambition to meet every possible individual demand. A substantial achievement of the adopted approach was definitely also the subtle adaptations to a wider range of demands for diversification in different types of flats that residents evoked in the discussions with the architects. The tenants were also offered additional personal and alternative choices regarding the interior arrangements.

The architects' ambition to meet the residents' individual requests, bespeaking the ethos of their professional approach, bears upon an act of compliance we witnessed during one of our early visits to the site, then partly under construction. While we were being introduced to one of the flats at the almost final phase of refurbishment a huge commode caught the eye of the visitors. Since there were no other pieces of furniture and no residents having moved back yet, the mysterious commode obviously raised a question of its presence. The explanation given by a member of the executive team of architects was simple – the commode from the old collection of residents' furniture had to be moved to the flat at that early stage to make sure that it fit with the newly installed wall panel separating the living room from the kitchen space, which now discloses as an extension of an extra 10–20 cm wall panel.

The building process lasted from the start of April 2009 until final delivery in October 2011. Each day, the façades of 5–6 flats were exchanged in one single action. This was an extremely difficult period for all inhabitants, given the – to all actors involved – underestimated and prolonged disturbances of noise and dirt, in case they had decided to stay in the building during the construction period in other temporary accommodation in the building. This was made possible due to the 15 empty flats at the start of the project's implementation. Meanwhile at least one family actually stayed in their own flat all through the construction period taking on all the nuisances of the proximity of a construction site for the whole period (Ruby and Ruby 2012: 25).

On a more general level the effect of this spatial 'advention' crucial for identity construction could also be like the story Frédéric Druot relates about a young man that after renovation feels he is virtually back in that desirable hotel room in Bangkok he so much appreciated on his holiday trip to Thailand. Now he lives permanently in that special vacation atmosphere and presumably he thereby also takes on a different alternate identity.

Table 9.1 Project La tour Bois-le-Prêtre – major milestones

Year	Event
1962	Inauguration of the building La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, architect Raymond Lopez.
1990	First alteration executed of the type PALULOS; addition of renewed building envelope for exterior thermal insulation.
2005	Workshop with residents organised by architect Hélène-Françoise Jourda. Competition for the alteration of the building announced.
2005 November	Commission awarded to the competition-winning entry by the architects Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal.
2006	Project elaboration of the project with participation of residents.
2007	Residents vote 90 per cent in favour of the project – Building permit delivered.
2008	Tender documents for construction works distributed.
2009	Commission for construction works given to construction company Brezillon.
2010 April	Start of construction work while residents stay on site in offered temporary lodgings primarily in other empty flats in the building.
2011 October	Delivery of the project.
2012 January	Project awarded National Prize of Architecture, Prix de l'Équerre d'argent 2011, Grand Prix National du Moniteur, Le Moniteur (AMC 2012).
2012 February	Official visit by Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë and staff in company with the three architects.

Source: Paris 2012.

### Adapting to an Unusual Offer: Observing the Residents' Response

There is no doubt this project can be considered an exceptional residential situation: as a singular situation of symbolic transgression. But the particularity of this project does not stem solely from the originality of the additional spaces generated. These kinds of residential situations or layered spatial arrangements of veiled transparency towards the outside world are common in contemporary architectural design practices and can be found in many exclusive situations under much more affluent social circumstances.

The exceptional is that the recreated spaces in Bois-le-Prêtre are offered to a fairly low-income population, within a specific social housing context, as an invitation to discover unforeseen residential spatial experiences linked to a potential redefinition of identity that can be projected to the outside world.

This offer has been received in multiple ways: as an event passed largely unnoticed or completely ignored, or met with acts of sheer celebration, highly appreciated and enhanced by acts of mental reorientation creating opportunities to develop reconfigured residential identities, as witnessed in figurative interior decoration and furniture arrangements. Visual analysis alone does not allow drawing an argument on residents' motivations or behaviour patterns as they might face other pressing foci and orientations in a particular moment of time in their life.

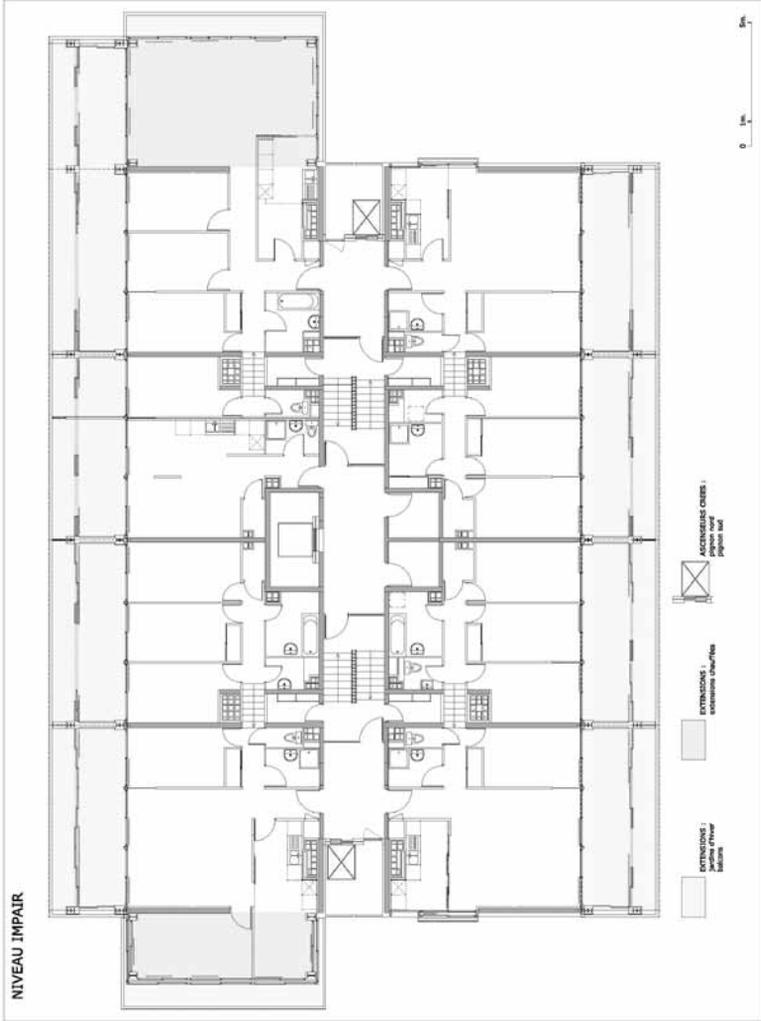


Figure 9.4 La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, flat plans with extensions and additions after alterations  
Source: © Frédéric Druot Architecture 2014.

Such information is unavailable to the outside observer. However, it is common knowledge that people react differently to novelties such as conditions unfamiliar from their past experience, as noted also by one of the authors of the project, Anne Lacaton:

/ ... / some people who don't use very well the winter garden and if you ask to them they say: 'Okay, finally, I don't need it' but anyway, maybe in five years somebody will come and will ... / ... / people are free to use it or not. But the question is to give this maximum (Interview 2012).

This consideration is reinforced in a jury member's comment. Architecture according to her has the capacity to shape the demand for space by introducing new opportunities for using home space and subtly directing individuals towards enhanced appreciation of new ways of residing:

/ ... / take advantage of the space to make something very nice./ ... /if they have the possibility to discover good architecture, they will understand more and it will perhaps (affect) their taste / ... / the knowledge of the people will improve with the building (architecture offered) (Interview 2012).

So it has been observed that the residents react in very different ways to this extra space and the abundance of natural light offered: some reveal virtual eruptions of design ideas and full use of space, others use space in a very restricted scale, drawing the curtains so that the daylight and expansion of space can only be imagined. Some use the winter gardens entirely for storage and some have expanded their living rooms into the winter gardens, have furnished them for sitting and resting. Some grow flowers there; some have made it a space for their pets or have left the space to teenagers to hang out in or for smaller children to play in, as well as making it the site for big family dinners and celebrations of special occasions.

The resulting diversity is clearly publically projected onto the facades in a way that was invisible and hidden in the former building. The observation allows asserting that these innovative spaces have also become invitations, even incitements or catalysts to acts of personal residential creations and inventions for the re-enchanting of everyday residential situations, just in solitude, just pondering the urban view or sharing a special moment there with friends and family, sometimes gathered around a spontaneously erected symbolic shrine with apparent emotional charge.

There are different reasons for these multifold reactions. Drawing on Bourdieu, it may be suggested that this has to do with distinct *habitus* of residents, their capacity to adapt to the changed conditions relative to their earlier experience, their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and their present social position – which is not necessarily the lowest, the poorest, the least educated in cases of residents of social housing in France.



Figure 9.5 La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, personal 'shrine', bar corner in loggia  
Source: © Sten Gromark 2013.



Figure 9.6 La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, ... and space for a pet ...

Source: © Katrin Paadam 2013.

The residents form a very mixed contingency. Gaining entitlement to a rental flat in the social housing sector represents a significant achievement and economic advantage in life, but perhaps even more an opportunity for securing a sense of home at a qualitative change conducive to personal creativity. And this is instead of living in fear of losing the familiar place for a less attractive alternative in a building threatened with demolition.

It appears evident from the ways the flats were presented to us that the residents have a strong emotional relation to the building and the site – they were highly *affected*, this was really their *home – le chez-soi* – and a *Parisian* urban home on top of that, not isolated but connected to the city, meeting that way the intentions of the architects.

/ ... / we have brought in the apartments a kind of no space limits, because if you open the window you see at / ... / ten kilometres, you see the world / ... / for us what's important is that the limit of the space is not the walls, it's what you see (Anne Lacaton, Interview 2012).

It is easy to see how this alteration produces an effect of potential *spatial liberation* when confronted with images from the previously narrow interiors and the confinement and overstrained uses of the existing flats before refurbishment. When the visual confrontation finally occurs between the extant heavily overloaded interiors – with their extreme variations, abundantly ascribed strict personal symbolic meaning, which were respectfully left intact – and the spatial qualities of the new additions across a transparent seamless threshold, a dynamic accelerating expansion is created that stretches far out onto the exterior urban world. At the same time the interior world is now publically presented in full view, projected just next to the heavily trafficked circular motorway, a transfigured image of a building that seems to have been re-erected altogether anew. This is the moment when two worlds meet to promote the emergence of an intensified strange ‘third place’ or ‘third reality’, concepts the authors themselves refer to (Lacaton and Vassal 2011: 166).

The architectural alterations of Bois-le-Prêtre have contributed in a sense to a major *situationniste* event, *un détournement*, a complete turnaround of social significance and cultural meaning. A precarious residential situation has been rescued from long-time neglect and cultural denigration. While preserving its residential historic identity it has been converted into its extreme opposite: an occasion for empowerment, for enablement, inviting acts of spatio-cultural liberation and resurrection of lost symbolic capital, inducing hopes for a better future and elevating the level of self-reliance amongst the residents.



Figure 9.7 La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, ‘exploding and imploding’; interior and exterior

Source: © Frédéric Druot Architecture 2012.

### A Design for Affect in Effect ...

The symbolic transgression of a social frontier has a liberatory effect in its own right because it enacts the unthinkable. But it is itself possible, and symbolically effective, instead of being simply rejected as a scandal which resounds on its author, only if certain objective conditions are fulfilled. In order for an utterance of action (...) aimed at challenging the objective structures to have some chance of being recognized as legitimate (...) and to be seen as exemplary, the structures that are contested must themselves be in a state of uncertainty and crisis that favours uncertainty about them and an awakening of critical consciousness of their arbitrariness and fragility (Bourdieu 2006 [En 2000, Fr. orig. 1997]: 236).

The transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre, as above, has some characteristics of what Pierre Bourdieu could be referring to as a situation of *symbolic transgression* – as an act of liberation – of sudden empowerment instead of constant denigration – serving as a clarifying demonstration at large to the theoretical implications, challenges and provocations inherent in the architecture of Lacaton and Vassal, and Frédéric Druot. Their professional attitude reveals a stubborn intention to redefine the radical modernist tradition as visible in the alterations of Bois-le-Prêtre.

The ambition is to recover the very basics of architectural qualities in terms of space, light and environmental residential comfort, seen as fundamental prerequisites that ultimately enable the promotion of *situations of becoming* through symbolic and structural inventions directed towards a specific social subject.

Embedded in a *situational* ethic as aesthetic, the concept of beauty in the works of the team of architects goes beyond a conventional understanding. It is far from the elevated and abstract considerations of form as such which tends to be associated with modernism. ‘We must free ourselves from the notion of form ...’ Lacaton and Vassal stated early on (Lacaton and Vassal 1995). ‘Beauty’ here is conceived primarily as the very *affects* that the conceived spaces actually mediate in terms of sensations and of emotions engendered in the minds of the residents in their everyday world.

The question of the image was never a question for us. Finally the image is brilliant – image of a very good modern housing block where everybody would like to live (Anne Lacaton, Interview 2012).

It is a design *for affect in effect*.

For the transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre tower block all the layers remain identifiable, despite the renovation. It is that which renders these extensions so astonishing. The earlier furniture tells the extant state; it now spreads out in the winter garden, but differently so, with another intention, that of living something else, not only function. To breathe differently in the flat, to see further, to be able to return to one’s own flat, the interior of one’s lounge or of one’s bedroom. To no longer feel any boundary, visual, physical or mental (Lacaton and Vassal 2011: 163–5).

Their ways of promoting intertwined situations of *social and architectural invention* conceived as transgressive alterations of the already existing is claimed as the prime mission of architects. They thereby provide a contribution to an urgent and compelling debate on the rethinking of the social in architecture. To conjure up the unfolding of unforeseen situations of social and cultural change is the ultimate objective. The architectural act of making is the crucial means to achieve this. But this intervention must always be directed towards a specific and identifiable social subject. The initiated transformation must build upon a respect for whom and for what is already on site, including what has been there long before.

At best, the *affect* of these actions procreates the resulting ‘miracle’, as the authors put it themselves. It will be experienced as evident, profound and bewildering. To make all this possible the strategy consists in the simple ambition to separate the maximised open structure from the programme and to induce as much future spatial freedom as possible to make anything happen:



Figure 9.8 La tour Bois-le-Prêtre, location of project in Paris; 17<sup>e</sup> arrondissement, with rue Rebière project on the street south of the grave yard

Source: © Sten Gromark 2013.

Our goal is always to use as little material as possible to build the largest volume possible, while supporting the greatest number of activities imaginable (Lacaton and Vassal 2011: 164–5).

### Conclusions: A Singular Situation of Symbolic Transgression

The approach adopted by the collaborating team of architects in the case of Bois-le-Prêtre is an implementation of explorative practices based on thorough research preparations and practical realisation as the continuation of an architectural competition. The results of this have reached far with repercussions beyond the borders of a seemingly locally confined and isolated project like Bois-le-Prêtre. Thus it has had a considerable impact on innovation approaches to be applied in similar situations and on a wider urban scale.<sup>11</sup> It provides us with relevant and economically viable visions of resilient residential futures.

In alignment with Pierre Bourdieu, we could conclude that the radical alteration of domestic interiors and exteriors is a vital component for the realisation of life projects and for the creation of an urban livelihood. In his discussion on the *effects of place*,<sup>12</sup> pursuing an understanding of the dual interdependency of *habitus* and a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), he argues that ‘If the residential situation contributes to the becoming of *habitus*,

*habitus* also conditions the becoming of a residential situation ...' (Bourdieu 1993: 259).<sup>13</sup>

So as Bourdieu remarks in his sociological *Summa*, the *Pascalian Meditations*,<sup>14</sup> formulating his legacy, summarising the crucial point concerning what has been at stake here:

One of the most unequal of all distributions, and probably, in any case, the most cruel, is the distribution of symbolic capital, that is, of social importance and of reasons of living ... there is no worse deprivation, no worse privation, perhaps, than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognized social being, in a word, to humanity (Bourdieu 2006 [En 2000, Fr orig 1997]: 241).

The architectural project, and in particular residential reality and materiality as project, conceived as a *socialised materiality* and *materialised sociality*, can never be considered neutral in the clashes between cultures and classes, as Henri Lefebvre proclaimed, but rather as a tool for symbolic violence on the one hand and for potential liberation on the other: 'Spatial investments, the production of space, is not just an incident in passing, but a question of life or death' (1974: 479).<sup>15</sup>

Bois-le-Prêtre therefore expresses the delicate dialectical interrelation between *sociality* and *materiality*. Or rather, it displays identity construction confronted with or incited by acts of spatial 'advention', as a major event of symbolic, structural and subjective transgression.

The singularity of this project originates from the fact that the new spaces are added upon or intimately confronted with something already existing. The profound alteration carries an inverted meaning of social significance that due to the sharp contrasting effect between two worlds – the former and the future – considerably reinforces the impact of the *design for affect* approach.

Finally, the striking impact also comes from the way the building's new exterior aspect now projects onto the surrounding urban reality quite another social connotation than the one before. Given the extreme visibility of the building by the heavily trafficked motorway, a cultural message of claimed possession of symbolic capital of individual and collective nature is overtly communicated to the wider public world in the surrounding urban landscape – as a singular situation of symbolic transgression.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Authors' translation from French original.
- 2 The analysis presented in this chapter, is part of an ongoing joint comprehensive study that includes a biographical analysis of residents' experiences to be presented in a forthcoming publication.
- 3 The French national prize for architecture, 'The Silver T-square Prize', awarded by the media and publisher company group *Le Groupe Moniteur* and announced annually in their architectural review *AMC*. It is given in the main category as the best architectural project of the year, as in this case, but also in a number of secondary different sub-categories of awarded building designs.
- 4 For project descriptions cf. Gromark and Paadam 2010; Dana and Eskerod 2011; Gromark 2012, 2013a; Kimmelman 2012; Mandoul 2012.
- 5 ANRU, in French: l'Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine, established since 2004.
- 6 Cf. for the complete report, [www.fondationabbepierre.fr](http://www.fondationabbepierre.fr), accessed n.d.
- 7 For the French situation set in relation to other EU countries cf. Chapter 2 in this book.
- 8 Two publications from a recent exhibition display significant approaches of residential inventions within the French social housing sector (2009 and 2012), *Vers de nouveaux logements sociaux*. Paris: Silvana Editoriale.
- 9 Authors' translation from French original.
- 10 The municipality's official corroborating statement: 'Les travaux, financés par la ville de Paris, la Région Île-de-France et l'Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine (ANRU), pour un montant de 11.2 million d'euros, se révèlent finalement moitié moins élevés que pour l'opération de démolition-reconstruction initialement envisagée, dont le montant aurait été d'au moins 20 million d'euros (hors foncier)'. And concerning the composition of financing sources: 'Financement de l'opération, – Marché travaux: 11.2 million € HT, soit 113,000 € par logement' (Paris 2012). Composition of financial contributions among partners: 'Financement coût de revient global: Ville de Paris: 4.2 million €; Etat (ANRU): 1.2 million €; Région Île-de-France: 320,000 €, Paris-Habitat: 2.8 million €; Prêt Caisse de Dépôt et Consignations (CDC): 5.6 million €' (Paris 2012).

- 11 Cf. The local urban residential development context with adjacent rue Rebière (Périphériques 2007), the ambitious urban renewal programme for the agglomeration of Bordeaux (Druot 2012b, 2013; Désveaux et al. 2013; Gromark 2013b) and for the Paris region at large (Gillette 2013).
- 12 Fr. *Effets de lieu*.
- 13 Authors' translation from French original.
- 14 For a clarifying discussion on this seminal book by Pierre Bourdieu (cf. Cléro 2012 and Cités 2012).
- 15 Authors' translation from French original: 'L'investissement spatial, la production d'espace, ce n'est pas un incident de parcours, mais une question de vie ou de mort'.



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