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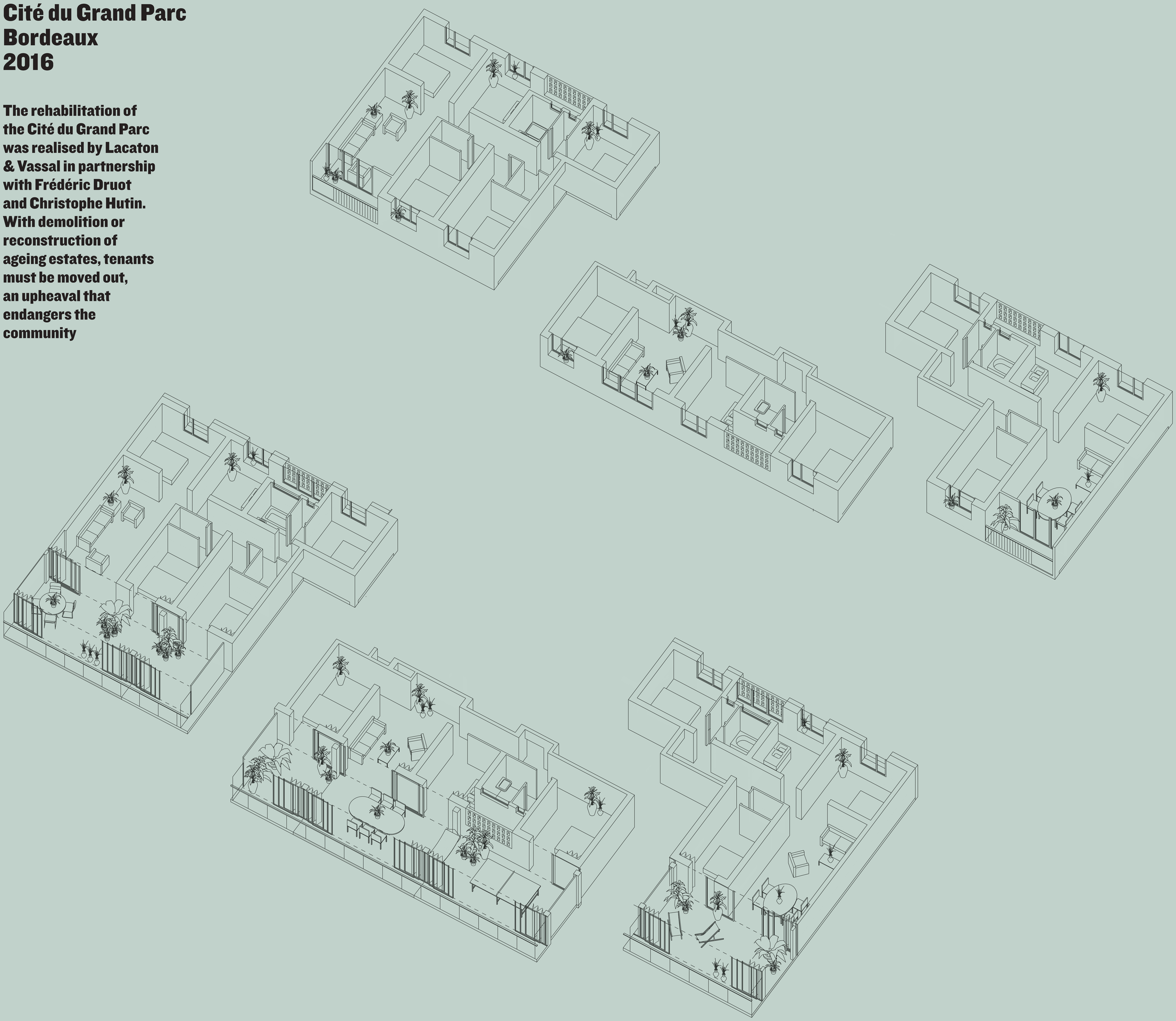
Retrospective
Lacaton & Vassal

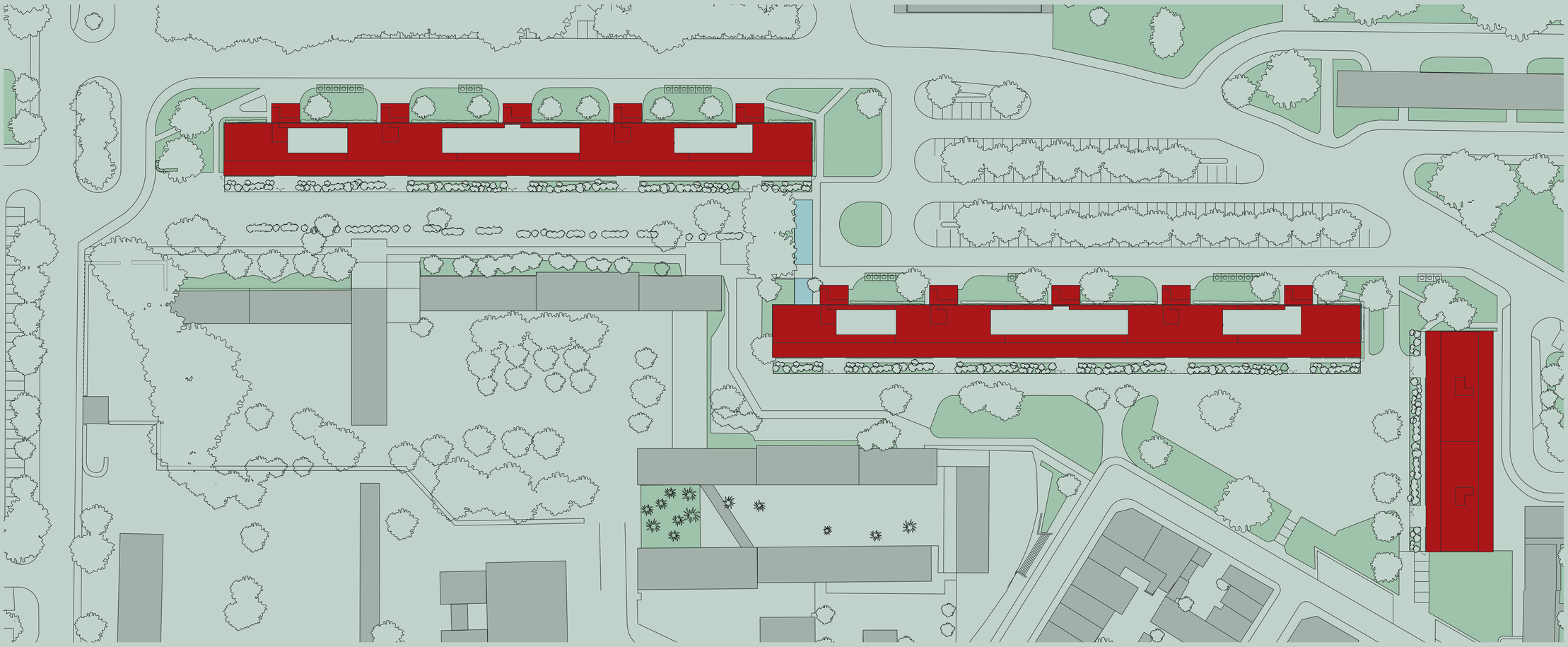
Cité du Grand Parc
Bordeaux
2016

The rehabilitation of the Cité du Grand Parc was realised by Lacaton & Vassal in partnership with Frédéric Druot and Christophe Hutin. With demolition or reconstruction of ageing estates, tenants must be moved out, an upheaval that endangers the community



In the face of a default response to demolish and rebuild social housing anew, Lacaton & Vassal counteract with measures to safeguard both the dwellings and the community housed in them, writes *Andrew Ayers*

Typically, rents of social housing increase with size, meaning many tenants find themselves priced out. By indexing rent to build cost rather than to floor area, Druot and Lacaton & Vassal upgrade these homes at the Cité du Grand Parc, with residents remaining in situ and without a rent increase



‘The duo’s mental archive includes the acclimatisation glasshouses of 19th-century botanic gardens, which suggest all possibilities inherent in the intermediary spaces that are a hallmark of their oeuvre’

archive also includes the acclimatisation glasshouses found in 19th-century botanic gardens, which, they explain, suggest all possibilities inherent in the intermediary spaces that are a hallmark of their oeuvre.

Nowhere have these winter gardens been used to more spectacular and transformative effect than on the three social housing rehabilitation projects Lacaton & Vassal realised with Frédéric Druot: the 1961 Bois-le-Prêtre Tour in Paris (2005-11, AR December 2011), a 1970s tower at the La Chesnaie estate in Saint-Nazaire (2006–16), and, of course, the 1960s blocks at Grand Parc (2011–16). These three schemes originated in a report the trio completed in 2004 for the French culture ministry after the government of the day announced that billions of euros were to be invested in the Agence National pour la Rénovation Urbaine (ANRU) programme of urban renewal. 'It was great that, finally, there was money available for underprivileged neighbourhoods', explains Lacaton, 'but we felt it should be used the right way.' For, as it turned out, faced with the problem of ageing Modernist housing estates, the authorities were proposing demolition and reconstruction, with the result that, today, '€15 billion has been spent on destroying 150,000 dwellings, which have been replaced with 130,000 new ones. In other words, there's been a net loss of 20,000 dwellings in a context in which there is an ever-growing demand for homes', laments Vassal.

Titled *PLUS* ('more'), the report (published by Editorial Gustavo Gili in 2007) advocated a policy of 'never demolishing, never removing or replacing, but always adding, transforming and reusing'. Its eight case studies showed how, by swapping mean fenestration for wall-to-ceiling glazing in front of which polycarbonate-clad winter gardens are constructed, these dowdy dwellings can be totally transformed: light and views flood in but are tempered by the winter gardens, which form a sort of 'inhabitable insulation', as Lacaton puts it. This not only obviates the need for costly HVAC systems and cladding materials but also brings, in Vassal's words, 'a form of freedom', in which new routes are opened up in these cramped dwellings and unprogrammed, undefined space (is it outside or inside?) allows hitherto undreamed-of latitude. 'You have a person who's lived in the same space for 30 years with a tiny little window and, all of a sudden, there are sweeping views and 25 to 30m² of extra space, and they start to think, "I could put the table over there, a sofa here, plants at the balcony",' Vassal continues. 'And something quite astonishing happens.'

Between theory and practice there is often a gulf, and realising these schemes sometimes turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. By far the most complex was Bois-le-Prêtre, not only because its tower typology involved building new structures on all four elevations, but also because its occupants had become extremely demoralised after years of neglect and mismanagement at the building.

Winning them over was the first battle, as ‘to begin with, they really assimilated us with the men in suits, the enemy’, recalls Lacaton. As they were dealing with an in-situ population, the trio interviewed all the inhabitants to understand the situation in each dwelling, a time-consuming but rewarding process resulting in a complex reconfiguration of the tower’s internal plan to provide the types of accommodation that were missing. After work was completed, some families thus moved (with full consent) to other parts of the building.

At Grand Parc the architects’ task was easier, partly because they were only extending on one facade, but also because the buildings had been much better managed and the housing organisation had spent two years preparing tenants for the upcoming works. The Bois-le-Prêtre experience also helped, not only in the sense of making ‘corrections’ – the winter gardens are a metre deeper in Bordeaux than in Paris – but also because the Grand Parc tenants were able to visit the Parisian flats, something that contributed enormously to their coming on board.

Indeed, for Lacaton & Vassal, working with residents to try to understand and fulfil their desires is absolutely fundamental – imposed from above without consultation or dialogue, any project is less likely to succeed. But what about new-build scenarios when you design for unknown occupants?

In Mulhouse, they say, prospective tenants were shown brochures and given a choice so that, when the project was completed, only people who had chosen to live there moved in. But, more generally, the duo feels that by being generous – the polar opposite to the rabbit-hutch mentality that prevails in both the private and public sectors – a whole host of problems is resolved. ‘It’s obvious you can do more with more space than with less’, says Vassal. ‘Inhabitants who like small rooms can put up partitions, others can open the space up. It’s the same for light: you should always try to provide the maximum because, once you have it, it’s easy to filter or block it out but it’s impossible to bring in more.’ Moreover, Lacaton points out, building bigger would remove the need for many of today’s disabled-access

Not only does the addition of winter gardens to these poky dwellings at the Cité du Grand Parc achieve a quite extraordinary spatial transformation, it also provides ‘inhabitable insulation’: thermal calculations showed it was not necessary to insulate the facades, thereby avoiding noxious insulation materials. As for the winter gardens’ polycarbonate cladding, the architects claim it has a lifespan of at least 20 years and is 98 per cent recyclable

Tour Bois-le-Prêtre
Paris
2011

This first try-out of Druot and Lacaton & Vassal's retrofit proposals was largely the initiative of the City of Paris. But, since completion in 2011, the City has not sought to repeat the experience and, even during inauguration, displayed a rather ambiguous attitude: 'Yes, this is great, but sometimes demolition is necessary', Lacaton recalls being told by an official

FRÉDÉRIC DRUOT

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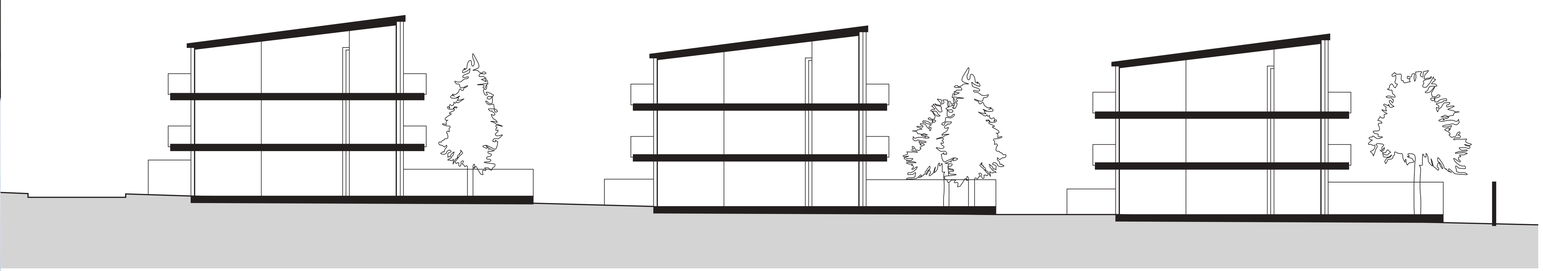

53 HLM apartments
Saint-Nazaire
2011

A densification project commissioned by the local housing company, this development, consisting of 53 social-sector dwellings, had to negotiate the transition between six-storey social-sector blocks and neighbouring suburban houses. A second phase of work by Lacaton & Vassal is planned for the rehabilitation of the older six-storey buildings

regulations that, with the current battery-hen approach, result in bathrooms and kitchens getting larger at the expense of living rooms, which become ever tinier.

However, the generosity Lacaton & Vassal have long been advocating, risks falling foul of market forces. ‘After we’d persuaded Pierre Zemp to build 150m² dwellings at the Cité Manifeste, his next question was, “How am I going to let them? Rental value is calculated per square metre, and I can’t expect my tenants to pay twice as much”,’ remembers Vassal. Instead, the rental value here is indexed to the construction cost, so the tenants pay the same as those in standard 70m² apartments. Where their three social housing renovations were concerned, the situation was more ambiguous: neither quite inside nor outside space, did the winter gardens count as increased floor area? ‘At Bois-le-Prêtre, we insisted that, as the operation cost far less than a reconstruction or demolition, there was no reason for the rent to go up’, Vassal explains. ‘Or, at any rate, that the total annual sum paid by residents – as energy costs are reduced thanks to the winter gardens – should remain the same.’ But, adds Lacaton, while the housing company at Bois-le-Prêtre committed to not raising rents for existing tenants, she wonders if this was the case for new arrivals.

While it’s true that most of Lacaton & Vassal’s housing work has been social, she insists, ‘we don’t actually see any difference between the social or private sectors, between generous and restricted budgets. We always say that the only question is doing the maximum’. But, she analyses, ‘today it’s very clear that the social sector has become an architectural and spatial category, something different from “normal” housing.’ This is partly, she thinks, due to the way these dwellings are financed: in France there are different amounts available depending on category – for example very-low-rent housing or dwellings aimed at first-time buyers.

In theory, Lacaton & Vassal would be happy to work for a private developer but, in practice ‘we’ve almost never done so because very quickly we run into exactly these problems’. In France, as in many countries, there’s a policy of forcing developers to provide affordable housing. Vassal remembers a development they were working on in Boulogne: ‘The developer said to us, “You can’t have the same balcony width for the social housing as for the private dwellings”. Which made everything much more complicated and expensive’. But even when they showed the developer the figures, he wouldn’t back down, because as

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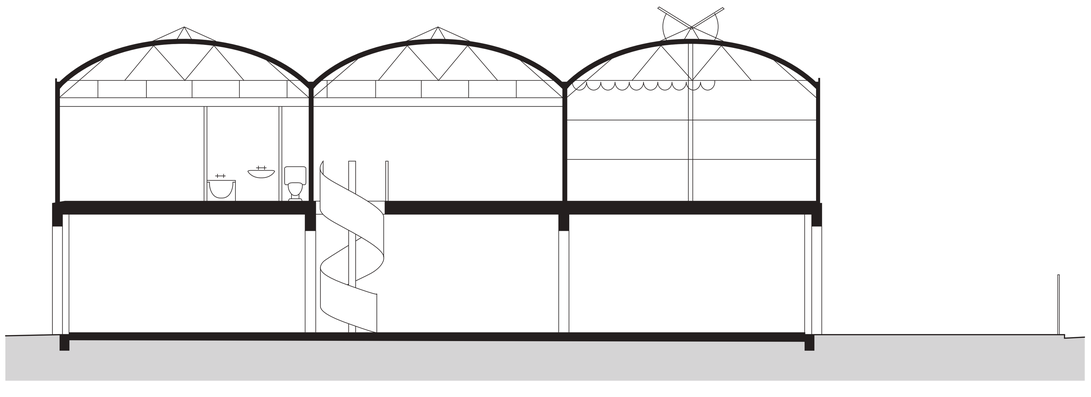

Cité Manifeste
Mulhouse
2005

Since this project was completed in 2005, concrete has come under scrutiny for its environmental impact. Lacaton & Vassal say they would quite happily build in wood if it made environmental and economic sense. But, they point out, as their use of concrete is so sparing, and as wood would require a much larger structure, it probably represents a false economy

far as he was concerned, in the logic of the market, you had to show that there were rich and poor people. Refusing to give way, the architects pulled out.

Yet it was a private home that launched Lacaton & Vassal’s career: Maison Latapie (1993) in Floirac, for two railway employees on a modest budget of €55,000. ‘It was the first commission we received’, remembers Vassal, ‘and also the only one we had, so we spent a lot of time on it.’ The dialogue they opened up with the client, ‘really influenced us both in terms of looking for ways to save money and the power that space can have to provide quality, pleasure and light. We said to ourselves that if they hired an architect, it was to have something better than the little house they could order from a catalogue. And it became a very strong commitment for us, a sort of obsession to make it work’.

Realised in the type of inexpensive materials found in agricultural buildings – corrugated galvanised steel, corrugated polycarbonate, plywood – Maison Latapie offers a spacious 120m² of accommodation, in addition to which the clients enjoy 65m² of double-height winter garden at the rear. It was a project that ‘freed us from a host of restrictions architects put on themselves with respect to both construction methods and aesthetics. It was then that we started thinking a low budget wasn’t necessarily a restriction, and that reducing costs was actually a tool for liberty’.

Despite the obvious good sense of their approach, Lacaton & Vassal’s impact on the housing sector has been limited – a handful of projects in France, the odd commission in Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, a possible renovation job in Australia, the occasional copying of their winter gardens and one or two retrofits by other firms. Moreover, in the current economic situation, their ideas are doomed to remain marginal, especially concerning the reconditioning of postwar estates.

Demolition and building anew is much more attractive for a mayor or local authority as, not only does it send out a clear message about their power to resolve pressing social problems (while, in the process, they covertly gentrify), but it also, where short-term return is concerned, results in far more money and jobs churning around in the system. Mayors need business taxes to run their administrations so will seek to encourage economic activity; the building industry wants to sell more so will push for norms requiring more-complicated HVAC systems and greater quantities of cladding materials – and let’s not start on the obvious, murky nexus of interests that bind mayors, developers and construction companies. All of which has led Lacaton & Vassal to conclude, pessimistically, that unless there is strong political will to introduce major market correctives, nothing will change. But that certainly doesn’t mean they’re going to give up the fight.

Maison Latapie
Floirac
1993

Maison Latapie was Lacaton & Vassal's first project, and set them on the path they have followed to this day. Aiming to provide maximum space for minimum cost, they sparingly employed inexpensive materials found in the agricultural sector (corrugated steel, polycarbonate, plywood). None of these, says Lacaton, have had to be replaced, despite the house now being 26 years old

Tour Opale
Geneva
2020

Currently under construction in Chêne-Bourg near Geneva, this mixed-use development, comprising shops, offices and housing, was commissioned by the canton and by SBB/CFF, the Swiss national railway company. ‘Living in more space and living in a house’ are, say Lacaton & Vassal, the desires expressed by city dwellers; this project aims to reproduce the ‘qualities and character of a villa’ in a 19-storey high-rise

SBB CFF FFS