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## **The French Banlieues between Appropriation and Demolition**

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Among the urban changes that affect the city, demolition is a tool increasingly used by governments as a driving force for the rehabilitation and recovery of urban areas: in particular, it is applied preferentially to the social housing districts. The urban policies undertaken in France are a significant example. These policies, implemented by the city's governmental bodies, often are at odds with the hopes and forces fielded by the suburban inhabitants, who propose alternatives for the redevelopment, expressed through acts of personalization and transformation of their habitat and through practices of appropriation of space. The demolition seems then to be undertaken as an authoritarian act to rid the field from a too complex inheritance and make way for a new phase of lifestyles' homologation, through a more contemporary form of standardization of the principles of living, and by intervening to reduce the complexity of the changing city.

## Introduction

In Europe, several national programmes for the rehabilitation of peripheral residential public neighbourhoods built since 1950 have been established and are operational.

These programs aim to provide incisive solutions to the identified problems, concerning not only the physical quality of the habitat, but also the socio-economic conditions; the economic and social decline, the deterioration of the quality of life, of the urban environment and of the social cohesion are recognized as critical factors common to the local settlement systems.

The intervention planned by the state power aims to achieve higher quality standards of housing through the physical remodelling of neighbourhoods. In this way, the original structures of the places are reset, because they are considered concurrent causes to the social degradation for the isolation within the urban context, the lack of functional diversification and economic attractiveness, the homogeneity of the residential offering intended to concentrate the poorest segments of the population.

In France, the debate on these kind of operations reached a definition of national importance, and they are at the heart of the urban renewal policy of the country: the *Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine* (PNRU), defined by the *Loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la ville et la rénovation urbaine* n. 2003-710, relies primarily on the physical transformation of the shape of the inhabited space by a great plan of action, that in the website of the *Agence Nationale de Rénovation Urbaine* (ANRU) is has been called a radical and rapid «Marshall Plan for the suburbs», a sort of *tabula rasa* of a situation that cannot be longer perpetuated. With the objective of the social *mixité* and sustainable development, the programme aims at restructuring the districts classified as *zones urbaines sensibles* (ZUS), improving the quality of life through urban regeneration operations. In this context, the tool with stronger media impact and greater financial commitment is the total or partial demolition of housing complexes, able to erase in a very short time the morphology of entire suburban sectors to open the field to alternative housing solutions.

## The spread of the *grands ensembles*

The districts affected by these interventions are mainly the *grands ensembles* created in France since 1953, the year of the Plan Courant, up to 1973, the year of the Guichard circular, stopping their construction. In this period about three hundred thousand housing were built each year, of which 90% achieved with the help of the State and hosting, even today, one-sixth of the national population (La Cecla, 2006). The interventions are created to respond to the permanent crisis of housing after World War II, due to the destruction of the real estate, rural exodus, population growth and industrial development; all elements that together accelerate and justify the mass production of housing.

The built complexes are the result of a unified design: models and types refer to features outlined at the time of their origin, allowing a wide dissemination (Dufaux & Fourcaut, 2004). Some 'buzzwords' are identified - such as 'low cost', 'mass production', 'housing for all' - which have inspired the concept from a programmatic and ideological point of view, determining the universal 'success' of the proposed housing models and introducing the idea of 'standardization of housing models'; these models are spread through the homologizing impetus of technicist approaches, centred on the idea of urban and architectural standard applied by planning and construction regulations. The suburbs are thus the product of a radically new way of living carried out by the architectural avant-garde between the World Wars; the architects are in charge of the reform of the popular habitat that is streamlined through the forms of functionalist architecture following hygienist principles applied to the architecture:

«questo vento di trasformazione scavalcherà la seconda guerra mondiale e diventerà il verbo della modernizzazione da applicare a tutto il mondo, come condanna dell'habitat tradizionale e costruzione di una società razionale e funzionale<sup>1</sup>» (La Cecla, 2006; p.33).

1 «This wind of change will override the World War II and become the verb of modernization to be applied to the whole world, as a condemnation of the traditional habitat and a construction of a rational and functional society».



The adopted models are common worldwide, in urban situations far away from France, and more generally from Europe, highlighting the intrusive ability towards the traditional ways of living belonging to different socio-cultural milieu.

Examples from the territories of the former French colonies are exemplary in highlighting the phenomena taking place during the construction of the *grands ensembles*: local leaders, influenced by the way of construction common in the '50s in Europe, invest in the development of collective housing complexes, considered as a 'modern' typology of habitat (Mebirouk, Zeghiche, Boukhemis, 2005).

In an attempt to satisfy quantitatively the pace of demand for housing, the spread of the *grands ensembles* creates new urban realities, but at the same time, standardized living spaces unable to meet qualitatively the needs of the inhabitants:

«i grands ensembles, al pari delle periferie di case popolari in Italia, delle periferie spagnole, greche, portoghesi, delle Germanie riunificate, dei paesi dell'Est dopo la caduta del muro, questa enorme realtà omogenea, compatta, che fa sì che uno non sappia in che città si trova, questa periferia che rende il perdersi l'attività unica e prevalente del cittadino marginale, si scarica giorno per giorno di senso<sup>2</sup>» (La Cecla, 2006; p.35).

### **Reaction to the homologation in the public suburbs**

As shown by the vernacular studies (Rapoport, 1988; Rudofsky, 1964), import and export of predetermined urban models breaks definitively the connection established between settled culture, built environment and the role of the community of inhabitants in the production of a sustainable habitat - environmentally, economically and socially - and endowed with high perception quality.

In these projects, the distinction between potential space and real space, set in the late '50s and early '60s, becomes obvious:

Between the physical environment and empirically observable human behaviour there existed a social system and a set of cultural norms which defined and evaluated portions of the physical environment relevant to the lives of people involved and structured the way people would use and react to this environment in their daily lives (Gans, 1968, 1984; p.5).

The actions made by the inhabitants to meet the needs left unmet by the project; the spatial practices of appropriation - through which people attempt to modify, alter, redesign the space in a more suitable way - «realizzano la vita che anima la forma progettata - ed è solo attraverso questo processo che quest'ultima porta a compimento la sua ragion d'essere<sup>3</sup>» (Chiesi, 2010; p.54).

Notwithstanding the customization effort often collides with the constraints of the built project, and sometimes with those imposed by the planning regulations; the trend towards functional and symbolic personalizations is irrepressible (Amendola, 1984; p.52-53).

This trend exists also if it is denied, in an explicit or implicit way, by the project.

The practices of appropriation made by the inhabitants in the environments, originally homologated, of the public suburbs occur at different scales and with different intensities and methods; while it may be difficult bringing together in an overall perspective the many problems that afflict these realities on a global scale, the urban phenomenon, however, has constant factors which cross continents and the most diverse geographies (Dufaux, Fourcaut, 2004).

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2 «The grands ensembles, like the suburbs of social housing in Italy and those of Spain, Greece, Portugal, the reunited Germans, the countries of Eastern Europe after the Wall's Fall; this enormous, homogeneous, and compact reality which does so as that one does not know in which city is located, this periphery which makes the losing himself the unique and prevailing activity for the marginal citizen, day by day it's losing sense».

3 «They realize the life that animates the designed form, and it is only through this process that this fulfills its raison d'être».

To realize their projects and meet their aspirations, not always people put in place strategies leading to lawlessness and forcing the inhabitants to circumvent the rules. In the examples of the French districts covered by this investigation, the expressions of re-appropriation of living spaces are not so strong as we can find in cases from the South of the World (see Bertagnini & Morbidoni, 2012; Mebirouk et al., 2005), but only from the point of view of their formal manifestation, not the symbolic one. The socially produced space (Lefebvre, 1976) within these districts can be analysed by using environmental clues (Chiesi, 2010) - or *marquage* (Veschambre, 2008) - in their different expressions - traces, alterations, adaptations, signs, routines, by making use of all those expressions which, although not totally explicit and intentional, are present and affecting the territory.

Reaction to the homologation in urban regeneration projects. The French case

The identification and signification of the traces aiming to re-enact the behavioural circuits and detect needs of the inhabitants, especially the unsatisfied ones, is a possible tool to be integrated in the operations of urban renewal. Instead, environmental clues are ignored at first, and then deleted in the demolition/reconstruction implemented in the HLM districts by ANRU.

The demolition seems to intervene in a complex environment by deleting the existing 'signs of distress', by allowing creating a *tabula rasa*. This prepares the ground for the insertion of a new model that, in this way, no longer needs to communicate with the existing. Although very expensive from a social point of view, an immediate solution that will not leave 'physical evidences' is preferred to those solutions, which are considered to be too expensive from the economic and temporal point of view.

In this way, the demolition occurs as a means to erase all forms of symbolic appropriation of space through another form of appropriation based on the material expression of power (Veschambre, 2008).

Within the demolition/reconstruction programmes carried out by the French government, the role of the inhabitant as a conscious actor in the making of the meaning of its future place of living seems to be programmatically entrusted to the principle of the consultation (in French, *concertation*); the program text of ANRU states that «impliquer le plus tôt possible les habitants dans le développement des projets est une clé de la réussite de ceux ci à court comme à long terme<sup>4</sup>».

However, the term *impliquer* is used without the meaning of the word is clarified. As can be seen in the numerous examples in France, the term embraces many different procedures, including also practices where the implication of the population is almost non-existent (Villanova de, 2012). This occurred in the case of Les Mureaux<sup>5</sup> and as pointed out by Deboulet (2011; p.6) after several investigations in areas affected by urban renewal programmes:

«la concertation est en fait souvent de nature consultative sans être délibérative, elle est invocation plutôt que pratique. Et les échanges réellement engagés laissent aux résidents impliqués ou invités un goût amer de décisions déjà pliées en amont. En effet, plus encore dans les dispositifs Anru qu'ailleurs, la prise de décision ne relève pas que des élus et équipe de rénovation locale ou même des bailleurs sociaux mais de dispositifs d'évaluation et d'approbation à distance dans lesquelles la démolition fait figure d'impératif».

4 «To involve as soon as possible people in project development is a success key at the short and long term».

5 The town of Les Mureaux is situated in the valley of the Seine, about forty kilometers west of Paris; it has about 32,000 inhabitants. The perimeter of the *Grand Projet de Rénovation Urbaine* (GPRU) involves seven districts that collect about 15,000 inhabitants, more than a third of the municipal population and a quarter of the urbanized area of the municipality. The partnership agreement was signed in 2006 and the programme includes the demolition of 1,076 housing and rehabilitation operations and *résidentialisations* involving a total of 4,157 units. The observations in this paper mainly relate to five districts of the city: *Bècheville, La Cité Renault, La Vigne Blanche, Les Bougimonts, Les Musiciens*. The research is based on a field study began in 2009 within the project «Renouveler les pratiques de conception du projet urbain: renforcer l'écoute et la coopération entre les professionnels de la ville, les associations et les citoyens en Ile de France» (Programme PICRI - *Partenariat Institutions Citoyens pour la Recherche et pour l'Innovation*), coordinated by Agnès Deboulet. First investigations on the field were carried out with the help of the anthropologist Roselyne de Villanova.

6 «The nature of the negotiation is in fact often advisory and not deliberative; it is an invocation rather than a practice.



The decision to invest in a neighbourhood with an urban regeneration is generally agreed upon by a convention which establishes the plan of measures, signed only by establishment figures such as ANRU, the State (represented by the Prefect), the City (in figure of the mayor) and the *bailleurs sociaux* (i.e. the owners of the real estate affected by the project), without any prior consultation of tenants' associations, committees of citizens, neighbourhood associations or who might in some way represent the most direct beneficiaries of these operations. The site analysis prior to the draft of the urban renewal project are made by technicians and specialists, by relying only on expert knowledge and ignoring daily experience and contextual knowledge.

The image of the districts that emerges from public statements and from press releases relating to the operations is built on what is stated by 'external' actors, technical and political, justifying the demolitions with terms such as *désenclavement*, *ghetto*, *mixité*, helping to create negative images of the neighbourhood and impinging on the feeling of exclusion of the inhabitants.

The project, then, is subject to discussion with the people in very advanced stages, when the demolitions are carried out and the process of population transfer in progress.

In the intent of the public machine, the demolition, as a resolute and imaginative event, assumes a central position and the problem of the 'after' (of what rebuild) fades into the background: the solution is entrusted to the unpredictable market dynamics.

In this step, the theme of creation of the *urbanité* assumes a great importance, as defined by Choay: «l'ajustement réciproque d'une forme de tissu urbain et d'une forme de convivialité<sup>7</sup>» (Choay, 1994; p.28). The historian warns against what she calls the sophism of creation *ex nihilo*, and indicates the possibility of the demolition as a way of renewal - institutional or material - on condition of being able to build new foundations, based on the interrelation with the environment as a condition of the development of meaning:

«la demolizione che si pretende di giustificare oggi in nome della necessità storica non è ormai quella della tradizione, non costituisce più il rovescio dell'edificare. La sua negatività non è compensata da alcuna positività. La tabula rasa, una volta rioccupata da oggetti nuovi, rinnovata e 'ricostruita' [...] non è, nonostante questo, né architettura né ricostruzione dell'urbano: rimane tabula rasa per sempre<sup>8</sup>» (Choay, 2008; p. 85).

In the proliferation of demolition and subsequent reconstruction, what often seems to occur as the first effect is not an attempt to strengthen the identities and local social relations, but the replacement of part of the population with the highest income brackets and a new sort of normalization of space and ways of life with a consequent trivialization of the residential complex (Le Garrec & Ricci, 2007).

The proposed design seems to represent new forms of standardization and homologation of housing models, a «*nouvel hygiénisme*», (Matthey & Walter, 2005), based on new and more updated slogans - such as 'security', 'sustainability', *mixité* - which was likely to create dynamics similar to those of the past.

About demolition/reconstruction, we can then ask whether, in fact, there is a risk of falling back into a stalemate, as was the case for the hopes connected with the creation of *grands ensembles*, as it is wondered by Bonard and Matthey (2010) about the supposed virtues of the increasingly popular eco-districts:

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The really undertaken exchanges leave a bitter taste to the involved or invited residents, as decisions already taken *a priori*. Indeed, more still in the Anru devices than elsewhere, decision making does not concern only the elected officials and team of local renewal or even the social lessors, but the evaluation and remote approval devices in which the demolition looks like a requirement.»

7 «The mutual adjustment between a form of urban tissue and a form of conviviality».

8 «The demolition, today pretentiously justified in the name of historical necessity, is no longer that of the tradition, it is no longer the other side of building. Its negativity is not compensated by any positivity. The *tabula rasa*, once reoccupied by new objects, renewed and 'reconstructed' [...] is not, in spite of this, neither architecture nor urban reconstruction: it remains *tabula rasa* forever».



«des impasses liées à un oubli chronique de quotidienneté des territoires, de ce que Michel de Certeau appelait la ville à ‘fleur de sol’ et qu’on nommerait, aujourd’hui, un souci du contexte, un intérêt pour le lieu de l’opération»<sup>9</sup>.

As La Cecla (2006; p.32) suggests, to «curare le periferie» (to take care of the suburbs) we should try to move away from the abstraction and anonymity that informed the original design of the public periphery and that still inform the project proposals of today, designed as a remedy for a spread disease. This can be achieved «cominciando dalla ricchezza delle storie dell’abitare che comunque e nonostante tutto si sono sviluppate in questi luoghi»<sup>10</sup>.

## Conclusions

In different ways and with different degrees of involvement, the point of view of those producing a *marquage* opposes the demolition, which is always a deletion of traces and signs, and thus a symbolic violence against those who identify themselves in it (Veschambre, 2008: 115). But, in the analysed processes of urban regeneration, the look of the inhabitants on their place of living is mostly unnoticed.

The tools that can be deployed in the construction of a *regard partagé* (Villanova de, 2012), shared with the inhabitants, are many. Among the tools in the hands of technicians, de Villanova suggests the recovery of the method of the ‘commented routes’: an important tool for understanding through storytelling, memory, the toponyms attached by people to the places, that part of non-formal appropriation, which was made on the living spaces. In *Les Mureaux*, she stresses:

«on peut voir que l’habitant est capable de restituer l’image complexe de son quartier avec ses difficultés et ses qualités. Son discours plein de contradictions reflète la complexité de la réalité et la manière dont il doit jouer de l’image qu’il donne comme de sa propre représentation de lui-même»<sup>11</sup> (*Ibid.*; p.250).

In addition, the urban renewal operations induce the inhabitants - namely the inhabitants of districts targeted by demolition - to strengthening the rootedness in their own place and to building a new form of *citoyenneté urbaine*, that is considered by Deboulet (2010) as the set of plural practices, visible or not, of individual and collective commitment to the city.

The challenges of the urban renewal have raised attention of people towards the urban project. The commitment of citizens, initially unfamiliar with technical design and the adopted themes (re-housing, demolition, etc.), has allowed the birth and the development of critical skills towards the imposed ‘buzzwords’ (*mixité, résidentialisation*, etc.) and planning skills about the future of the district:

«en diversifiant leurs compétences, les militants les plus impliqués sont devenus des relais indispensables des locataires en matière d’évaluation des qualités du logement, des espaces intermédiaires et des possibilités de réaménagement des lieux»<sup>12</sup> (Deboulet, 2011; p.8).

In the examined districts, the construction of *citoyenneté* can be addressed as an attempt to re-appropriation of the places of life marked by a more or less obvious expropriation; as a new willingness of people to participate in the construction of ordinary habitat.

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9 « Impasses related to a chronic forgetfulness of the everyday of the territories, of what Michel de Certeau called the ‘flush floor’ city, and would be called today the concern for the context, the care of the place of the operation».

10 «Beginning from the wealth of stories of living that and despite everything they have been developed in these places».

11 «We can see that the inhabitant is able of reproducing the complex image of his neighbourhood with its difficulties and its qualities. His speech full with contradictions reflects the complexity of reality and the way in which he must exploit the image he gives as well as his own self-representation».

12 «By diversifying their competences, the most involved activists became essential references for tenants in the assessment of quality housing, intermediate spaces and opportunities for redevelopment of the sites».



This capacity of understanding and intervention in the definition of their living space, however, remains relegated to secondary forms of 'participation'. In some cases they have been implemented through social policies of the city during the previous redevelopment phases of HLM districts, which are now denied by demolition operations. While remaining within the limits prescribed by the administrative official, there are many examples of how people can intervene in the definition of their habitat: the *Atelier d'autoréhabilitation accompagnée*, even if limited to the private sphere of housing unit, consists of rehabilitation works carried out by an expert team with the involvement of tenants themselves; *les jardins familiaux*, organized in public open areas pertaining to HLM districts are divided into plots and freely managed by caregivers; the adaptation of conventional housing units to the needs of polygamous families of Malian origin occurred taking into account the needs expressed by a dwelling culture not foreseen by the original project.

Who is called to intervene on the transformation of the existing habitat should acknowledge the territorial heritage (Magnaghi, 2003) through the numerous tools provided to the technicians by the researchers. The identification of local - material and cognitive - values and of the *savoirs habitants* would avoid the danger of reading the demolition and the subsequent erasing of the traces as the will of devaluation, symbolic expropriation, destruction, denial of the recognition of the populations who inhabit the buildings and spaces to be deleted. As Matthey (2005) suggests, only by restarting from the consideration of the «territoires ordinaires» (ordinary territories) as «des espaces appropriés par leurs habitants, qui les ont dotés d'une épaisseur sémiotique et symbolique» (spaces appropriated and endowed with a semiotic and symbolic depth by their inhabitants), we can «faire la ville à venir» (make the tomorrow's city).

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