



Jacques Simon, Landscape architect; Michel Marot, Daniel Tremblor and Robert Cluziat, architects; ZUP (Priority Development Zone) des Charillons, Reims, France, 1966-1970.
The allée of Paulownias. The Mougne Site before the 1998 renovation © Jacques Simon, ca. 1990.

Postwar Residential Housing Landscapes in France: A Retro-Propective Approach

BY BERNADETTE BLANCHON

In the residential districts built after the Second World War, the qualities of landscapes are not, in most cases, taken into account in understanding projects nor are they considered as a resource in renovation projects except as a “compensatory greening” once the main spaces have been divided, privatized and fenced off. We suggest considering this residential landscape heritage as a potentially structuring one, through the landscape approach, based on three levels for interpreting space: that of the relation to the geographic and urban site; that of the neighborhood defined by its open and public spaces; and lastly, that of the materiality of places and practices. We see it as relevant since it is more global and adapted to the current context of projects.

In spite of a strict demolition policy conducted for several years¹, the renovation of housing areas built after the war in France still represents a substantial proportion of architectural and urban development commissions. Is it possible to transform these residential areas by means other than demolition of *heritagization*? In the same way as with the *residentialization* of outside spaces, we believe these practises to be a part of the principle of *tabula rasa* which they are supposed to denounce. Due to the recent crisis, large-scale demolitions were stopped; we believe this provides an opportunity to propose a landscape approach we see as relevant since it is more global and adapted to the current context for projects.

An alternative approach

The nature and qualities of landscapes are not, in most cases, taken into account in understanding projects nor are they considered as a resource in renovation projects. These are proposed as a “compensatory greening” which today more often comes in the form of shared gardens or green corridors, once the main spaces have been divided, privatized and fenced off. However, we think that detailed knowledge of the local history of the site over time and taking into account existing landscapes as an approach method — in combination with existing social and economic approaches — can provide alternative arguments in favor of the transformation of these areas.

Let us start by defining two pre-requisites. Firstly, we believe the architectural design of a housing project must include the outside spaces which are an integral part of housing². In addition, the landscape architecture approach to a project cannot recommend a *heritagization* perspective, since the urban landscape is by essence constantly changing. The living materials which compose it (soil, water, climate, plants, etc.) comprise a specific relation to time which means the landscape is constantly evolving. The practise of

designing the landscape may be considered as “the art of planning for the unpredictable”³. Therefore, to understand a project requires starting from what exists which provides evidence of previous states and future potential⁴.

Although it is common to consider the landscape dimension as being absent from postwar projects, historical and *in situ* studies we have conducted in many housing developments have shown a great diversity in landscape designs which were far removed from the indigent “green space”. These large-scale housing developments constituted a vast field of experimentation for the landscaping architectural profession which was emerging at the time. The young professionals trained in the new *Section du Paysage et de l'Art des Jardins* at the *Ecole d'Horticulture* in Versailles, from 1945, were able to experiment new practises with these projects⁵. In addition, the architects trained in the inter-war period had acquired a culture of the landscape and the garden which is identifiable in many instances. The multidisciplinary heritage of the tutelary figure of the landscape architect Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier (1861–1930) was well-known shared at the time.

For the first professionals, the study of a selection of examples in which landscape designers participated made it possible to identify three stages, each one roughly corresponding to a decade, and which spanned between 1945 and 1975⁶. Initially, from 1945 to 1955, pragmatism and inventiveness made it possible to adapt the previously acquired practise of designing squares and parks to the scale of the large housing project. Then, from 1955 to 1965, a new generation of landscape architecture graduates gradually started to receive public commissions, however, in spite of the creative objectives of the *Section du Paysage*, they had to restrict themselves to greening these housing projects. Having reached maturity, the members of the new generation, who have benefited from their contacts with Northern European cultures, adopt a critical view of French training



01 Henri Pasquier, Paysagiste; F. Jerrold, Fournier et Petit, architectes, *Cité de l'Aubépin, Chalon sur Saône, France, 1952-1961*. The peripheral malls follow the different adjacent contours. © B. Blanchon, 2009.



02 Henri Pasquier, Paysagiste; F. Jerrold, Fournier et Petit, architectes, *Cité de l'Aubépin, Chalon sur Saône, France, 1952-1961*. © B. Blanchon, 2012. The southern beach in 1964, leaflet of the 2^e Congrès National des Syndicats d'Entrepreneurs Paysagistes de France, *Cité de l'Aubépin*. © Henri Pasquier 1964.

03 Henri Pasquier, Paysagiste; F. Jerrold, Fournier et Petit, architectes, *Cité de l'Aubépin, Chalon sur Saône, France, 1952-1961*. The southern beach has become a plant and animal reserve. © B. Blanchon, 2009.



04 Henri Pasquier, Paysagiste; F. Jerrold, Fournier et Petit, architectes, *Cité de l'Aubépin, Chalon sur Saône, France, 1952-1961*. Plant growth and fences render the spaces less discernable, and close the openings. © B. Blanchon, 2009.



05 Henri Pasquier, Paysagiste; F. Jerrold, Fournier et Petit, architectes, *Cité de l'Aubépin, Chalon sur Saône, France, 1952-1961*. Wooded spaces and hedges embellish the site. © B. Blanchon, 2009.



06 Jean Camand, Landscape architect; René Boileau & J. Henri Labourdette, architects, *Ville Nouvelle de Sarcelles-Lochère, France, 1956-1970*. Entrance to the Parc Kennedy. The free angles of the buildings open deep transversal views providing visual and mental perspectives. Associated with plantings and ground modeling they provide articulations and expand the sense of space. © B. Blanchon, 2009.

and professional practises. At the end of the 1960s, a change of direction in the culture of reference of landscape designers away from horticulture was a part of the multi-disciplinary movements which then inspired French architecture⁷. Instruction at Versailles was increasingly provided by people coming from artistic disciplines such as painting, the decorative arts, and architecture, who focused on composition issues. Landscapers then became landscape architects able to design projects and master the living milieu. The technical, horticultural and botanical dimension gradually shifted into the background, before being considered in the 1990s as a reforming element in the practise of landscape design.

Gradually, via architectural composition and by claiming an independent status for the landscape project, landscape designers established an original approach. They were able to associate landscape design with the living milieu in their search for specific solutions. We shall now present this landscape design method as a way of interpreting existing situations and as a matrix for potential proposals through a selection of case studies. To observe and study them in space and through time we rely on the *landscape component* of the habitat which relates to three different levels for interpreting space and which are interconnected: *the level of the relation to the geographic and urban site; the level of the neighborhood* and of the structure defined by its open spaces and places of social contact; and lastly, *the level of the materiality of places* and of the practises that bring them to life⁸.

Discussion on the general coherence of rehabilitation projects

Our selection illustrates the different stages, from the perspectives of social housing policies, of architectural thought, and of the landscape design practises evoked earlier: the *Cité des Aubépins* in Chalon-sur-Saône (1952–1961) was one of the first experimental operations conducted by the French Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Planning [*Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme-MRU*], the housing project of Sarcelles-Lochères in the North of Paris (1954–1976) came at the peak period for such projects, and the urban development zone of Chatillons in Reims (1966–1970) are representative of the search for new alternatives.

In the *Cité des Aubépins*, built on the site of a former tile factory, the parallel housing blocks (built higher to the west, on the side of the prevailing winds and factories, and lower on the side facing the town center) are disposed around a large, slightly lower central area. Designed by the landscape architect Henri Pasquier (1909–1993), peripheral *allée*, sufficiently large to absorb the parking spaces which succeeded the areas set aside for boules players, adopt different forms and tree species, and generate different atmospheres to establish links with the adjacent areas (Figure 01). The careful remodeling of the terrain transformed the clay excavations into fish ponds which now harbor a greatly appreciated profusion of flora and fauna (Figure 02). The open spaces, in the form of meadows, play areas or sports grounds surrounded by dense plantations established by the landscape designer's use of forestry methods, are closing up and becoming less discernible pending coherent mainte-

nance which will complete the ongoing renovation of the buildings in this residential park (Figure 03). The landscape designer has also artfully deployed hedges, associated with the leveling of the ground, which filter light and establish connections between paths and links between the different spaces (Figure 05).

In Sarcelles-Lochères the carved stone buildings are set within an orthogonal pattern which follows the spaces that have been opened up. The architects have taken inspiration from the work of Robert Auzelle for the open-angled square design used to arrange 4-story housing blocks. The free angles of the buildings open deep transversal views providing visual and mental intersecting perspectives distinct from any formalized flows of movement (Figure 06). Two large malls structure the fabric of richly planted squares and are staggered around the main central space comprising a park and a commercial and administrative center. The project sits within the soft slope of the site aided by steps, low walls and embankments. This planted area designed by the landscape architect Jean Camand (1924–1989), enhances this socially stigmatized⁹ housing estate (Figure 07). Taking into account the fringes of the neighborhood, which have for the most part been neglected — due an abandoned motorway project — provides substantial potential for the current renovation work. So far, the original qualities providing subtle transitions, visual fluidity, and pathways have not been taken sufficiently into account in the redevelopment of the site. Although welcome openings have been made on the edges of the park and massive demolition work has been avoided, some of the housing blocks have had to make way for a new housing area. The installation of these “post-modern” buildings has not taken into account the slope in the site, generating disruptions in the links between spaces; the venerable trees which had remained in the sloping terrain perished, in spite of efforts to protect them, due their being encased in asphalted ground (Figure 08). A team of landscape architects has been called in to design a public park adjoining the neighborhood but they have not been commissioned to conceive its foundation and structure in relation with the original qualities of the site and local situation.

Installed on a site possessing no notable qualities, the residential area of Chatillons in Reims, where the landscaper Jacques Simon worked, is a good example of the attempt to establish links between the different green rooms delimited by the buildings and linked together by a network of passages and porches inside as well as outside the neighborhood and along an extended mall lined with *Paulownias* (Figure 09). This inner landscape composed of hillocks in scale with the buildings and built using construction debris, dilates the space towards a possible horizon. Silver poplars planted in dense copses appear to dance on the hillocks and punctuate the many children's play areas invented by the landscape designer. The whole project is infused by a strong poetic inspiration that provided a playful and sensory basis which was greatly appreciated by the inhabitants (Figure 10). After the buildings were refurbished — in 1987 — the outside spaces were the subject of a severe reappraisal which pointedly ignored the original qualities of the

site. This reappraisal mentioned aspects such as the aging of the installations and illegal parking, the poor quality of the trees or the narrowing of the field of vision from the apartments due to the hillocks (is it preferable to see the wall of the opposite building than a planted hillock?) and recommended a gradual privatization of the spaces after erasing the hillocks, the introduction of so-called noble tree species (prunus and birches, etc.), and the installation of planter boxes or of inner fences. These re-installations, based on a vague consensual notion of what a planted environment should be like, rendered the spaces commonplace and soulless (Figure 10). Some of these areas were *residentialized* by privatizing the gardens, which remain little used. In spite of all this, strangely enough, some of the original qualities of the site remain!

Conclusion: The landscape as a common ground

These spaces designed by pioneers of landscape architecture or urban art are on the point of disappearing. The idea is not to turn them into sanctuaries, even though some elements, albeit very few, deserve being preserved. The aim is to recognize the qualities of these sites to which little attention is paid and to try to understand the elements and the origins of the landscaping approaches underpinning them. Understanding the history of the site and the different periods may enable more relevant and appropriate interventions. At the moment of the birth and structuring of the profession, these pioneers contributed to its creation by coming to grips with the shift in scale of these projects and by inventing new modes of intervention. In the majority of cases the loss of knowledge, which could have inspired the management and transformation of the spaces being redeveloped, is regrettable. Planted spaces which have reached maturity represent a simple opportunity for preserving their atmospheric and landmark qualities, thus rooting these neighborhoods in a past which is prolonged into the future.

The aim is not to reproduce past projects either, but rather to understand and adapt their contributions to ensure they relate to current social, environmental and economic issues. We recommend, beyond the profusion of vegetation or participative gardening which landscaping often boils down to, that the open space — or space which is unbuilt and open to view and social uses — should be considered as structurally defining. We therefore believe that conceiving the urban landscape as being based in this residential landscape heritage, with its three levels, makes it possible to focus attention on neighborhoods, the architecture, and urban components, some of which may be commonplace or even mediocre¹⁰ and which are, sometimes a little too hastily, earmarked for demolition. The landscape method makes it possible to widen the notion of built heritage beyond the scope of architectural objects to give precedence to the consistency of urban entities in which ordinary and often unnoticed elements as well as forgotten local information play a part, and where even the notion of the space as a quality in itself remains undefined. Vegetation is one of these landscape components and the management practises of planted spaces should contribute to the identity of the

site, if possible in the knowledge of the initial objectives of the design. Such an approach is able to take on board current questions by reflecting on ways of organizing vegetation, and on how to address environmental and social issues while giving shape to them".

To embed the project within the memory of its extended site is to rediscover the interlinking systems of free spaces dear to the pioneering landscape architect Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier, and to reconstitute physical and visual openings; to form an understanding of the structure of the site based on its empty spaces is to fight against the propensity to fill in and clutter up space, and it is a refusal to see in all open spaces opportunities to appropriate land. It involves not considering the shape of the terrain simply in terms of maintenance problems but thinking of the playful dimension by preserving the hillocks which are the basis of the habitat. In terms of uses, the many plant forms associated with the shaping of the terrain order the hierarchies between spaces. They should make it possible to ensure a relevance between the skills of the gardeners and the thinking underpinning the project. In addition to the division of space through *residentialization*, many views and openings have been lost and blocked by plant growth and could be reopened by moderate pruning, and spaces could also be reconnected by recreating ecological environments favorable to biodiversity. Without neglecting the importance of the need for security and privacy, we believe the expertise of landscape architects offers alternatives to erecting more fences.

Landscape designers have always sought to create places which answer the expectations of modern society but which are also able to contribute to its introspection. The mission of the landscape method today is to produce a social and ecological environment of quality, unencumbered by ideologies preventing its comprehension. It is by taking into account this vision of the redevelopment of existing urban housing, that we shall be able to address current expectations relating to the social uses and management of sites. ■

Notes

- 1 The National Agency for Urban Renovation [*Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine, ANRU*], founded in 2004 and which was given more resources following the riots in 2005, was intended to finance the transformation of over 530 residential areas by 2013 through public-private partnerships. This transformation often entailed demolition work which was sometimes required to obtain subsidies. At the same time, *heritagization* actions were conducted for some of these operations, such as the attribution of the 20th Century Heritage label [*Label Patrimoine du XX siècle*] for 40 residential housing sites in the Île-de-France region in 2009. ANRU 2, since 2014 has apparently been defending a different approach.
- 2 Housing includes practises which span beyond the strict scope of the private dwelling to include aspects ranging from the urban situation to the window framing the sky and providing a view...
- 3 Alexandre Chemetoff, *Visits. Town and Territory — Architecture in Dialogue*, Birkhäuser, 2009.
- 4 Previous states will be reconstructed "backwards" based on the current state; see in *Colonnes*, 2011, "Archives et paysage: du site comme agent historique", 52–55, and Bernadette Blanchon, "Pratiques paysagistes: quelles archives?", 64–67.
- 5 It is not possible to present in this article all the findings of our research which are published in the form of research reports and articles in French and of which only a few have been published in English. See *Landscape Research*, 2010, featuring an article which presents examples

07 Jean Camand, landscape architect; René Boileau & J. Henri Labourdette, architects, *Ville Nouvelle de Sarcelles-Lochère*, France, 1956-1970. Parc Kennedy. Many vegetation structures gradually disappear. Namely the hedges which are not replaced, whereas the shrub covering is the best means of ensuring the biodiversity sought today. © B. Blanchon, 2009.



08 Jean Camand, landscape architect; René Boileau & J. Henri Labourdette, architects, *Ville Nouvelle de Sarcelles-Lochère*, France, 1956-1970. The district of Sablons in Sarcelles. The ground upon which the new buildings are set is higher than the natural ground level of the partly demolished neighborhood. Large old trees whose collars have been buried have died. © B. Blanchon, 2012.



09 Jacques Simon, landscape architect; Michel Marot, Daniel Tremblot and Robert Clauzier, architects, ZUP (Priority Development Zone) des Chatillons, Reims, France, 1966-1970. The allée de Paulownias. © B. Blanchon, 2011.



10 Jacques Simon, landscape architect; Michel Marot, Daniel Tremblot and Robert Clauzier, architects, ZUP (Priority Development Zone) des Chatillons, Reims, France, 1966-1970. The allée de Paulownias. The Mougne Site before the 1998 renovation © Jacques Simon, ca. 1990.

- reflecting the 3 main stages of these postwar landscape design practices.
- 6 See: Bernadette Blanchon, 2007 or the research report, 1998.
 - 7 Bernadette Blanchon, "Jacques Simon et Michel Corajoud à l'AUA, ou la fondation du paysagisme urbain", in Jean-Louis Cohen, Vanessa Grossman (dir.), *Une Architecture de l'Engagement: l'AUA 1960-1985*, Paris, Editions Carré, Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, 2015, 214-225.
 - 8 This method was used in the following study, conducted in 284 Housing districts: Bernadette Blanchon, Denis Delbaere, Jorn Garleff, *Le Paysage dans les Ensembles Urbains 1940-1980*, 2 tomes, Ministère de la Culture, DGP/ENSP, Versailles, 2010. See Blanchon, Delbaere & Garleff, 2010, 2011.
 - 9 Due to the fact that the district of Sarcelles was identified with the malaise experienced by inhabitants of the new suburban districts in 1960s which the press referred to as "Sarcellite" (which one might translate as "Sarcellitus" in English).
 - 10 See for example, the renovation of the *Ecouin-sous-la-Combe* district in *Vaux-en-Velin* (Greater area of Lyons), by Latitude Nord, Gilles Vexlard and Laurence Vacherot, landscape designers, 2004-2012.
 - 11 See Meyer, 2008.

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Bernadette Blanchon

(b. 1958, France). Certified Architect, Associate Professor at *Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Paysage* in Versailles, and a research fellow at LAREP [*Laboratoire de Recherche de l'Ecole de Paysage*]. She has collaborated with *Bureau des Paysages*, led by landscape architect Alexandre Chemetoff. Her teaching and research work focuses on landscapes in the urban environment of the post-war era. She has contributed to various publications, and lectured at international conferences and various universities. She is a founding editor of the academic journal *JoLA, Journal of Landscape Architecture*, where she has been in charge until 2014 of the section "Under the Sky" that offers critical readings of contemporary landscape architecture.