

Towns are made from houses

Jean-Pierre Watel (1933-2016)

BY RICHARD KLEIN

When describing the history of towns through the distorting mirror of modern urban design, historians barely attempted to find out what simple material was used to build towns in the past. The answer was obvious however: towns were made from houses. It was houses that made towns. If we had remembered this obvious fact, then the urban sprawl would not have taken us by surprise.¹

Jean-Pierre Watel (1933-2016) has not been forgotten in the history of contemporary architecture. Gérard Monnier recounts the architect's success in the 1960's, his single-family houses and "a domestic modernity largely linked to his design of North European-style houses": a central living room, an assumed horizontality and large sections of glass.² His main constructions were mentioned or have featured in the professional magazines as well as in the more mainstream press - ensuring recognition from his peers and the aspirations of potential clients.

The houses grouped together into new towns were also lavishly commented on for their stylistic affiliations:

forming harmonious ensembles of contemporary Nordic design, these elegant brick houses were built with factory-prepared elements - a wooden frame and brick cladding. Their offset plan is a good example of the assimilation of a proven-formula in Denmark.³

Jacques Lucan underlines the rigor of the proposals within the context of the multiplication of town house projects,⁴ Pierre Joly and Véra Cardot photographed them from all angles to such an extent that Jean-Pierre Watel is one of the most represented architects in photographic archives.⁵ Two buildings illustrate a text devoted to him in the dictionary of 20th century architecture.⁶ Finally, for Daniel Le Couédic, Jean-Pierre Watel's architecture falls within the scope of Modernist *naturalism*⁷ like that of the Sallier, Courtois and Lajus team in Bordeaux or Christian Gimonet in Bourges: examples of architectural forms often developed far from Paris, compilations of Japanese, American

and North European references which renewed the regional genre of domestic architecture.

Even if Jean-Pierre Watel's buildings served industrial, commercial and service programs as well as some housing estate projects, it was his houses that made his reputation. Individual family houses, the most spectacular of which were lavishly laid out like the best American examples of the time, or small housing estates in which he specialized. The dialog with his clients and the examination of their family life conditioned above all the architect's interest in this program, in the plan and interior.

His father, Jean Watel, was an architect. He graduated in Lille in 1923 and was active from 1925 to 1972. He was closely linked to the regional Catholic community and designed the Sacré Cœur Church in Mouvaux (1964) with Maurice Novarina.

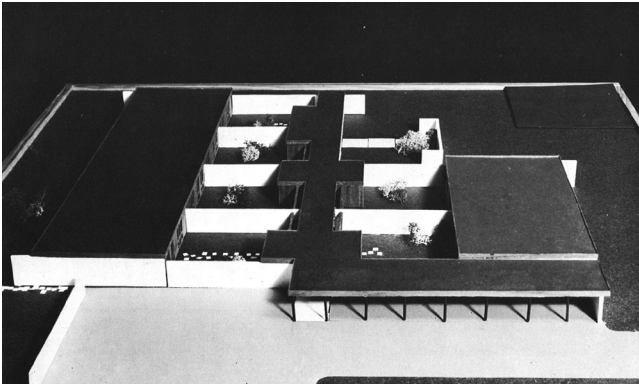
Jean-Pierre Watel was trained at the Fine Art School and at the Saint-Luc School in Tournai. At Saint-Luc, the classes he attended benefited from the input of Jean Dubuisson, Pierre Pinsard and Pierre Vago. He readily retained from Jean Dubuisson his capacity to "design on a postage stamp" but also, it would seem, his focus on Northern Europe. Jean-Pierre Watel created his agency in Bondues in 1963 and in 1964, won the competition for the "European house" commissioned by the Belgian National Housing Institute and the EEC in Strasbourg. Then he was selected for the Villagexpo in Saint-Michel sur Orge by the Ministry for Infrastructure. The dwellings he designed in 1966 for the Villagexpo with *La Construction Horizontale* were clearly different from the other models presented. The L-shaped houses, structured in zigzag

fashion offered an early compromise to the simultaneous expression of individuality and the collective, by placing the openings onto gardens facing South. His participation in the Villagexpo in Wattignies in the North was based on a more radical mode of introversion, since the housing groups illustrated the idea of a horizontal collective based on a continuous surrounding enclosure with a passageway which led, after a turning gate, to the annexes and interior gardens of the dwellings.

At the time of the first Villagexpo, houses with patios were already fashionable in Europe. Excerpts from the architectural journal *Baumeister* present material from a manual titled *New houses with patios*,⁸ and demonstrated their historical roots that go back to the Roman Empire. The rationale generally taken up by practitioners was to pursue a version of modern architecture with its roots in the long tradition of family houses.

These trends were to find a favorable context in the new towns. In Villeneuve d'Ascq, the collaboration between Jean-Pierre Watel the developer Philippe Motte, head of the SEDAF (Real-estate study and implementation company),⁹ resulted in the commercial success of the model. From 1966 onwards, the different areas of the Brigode housing estate between the old villages of Annapes and Ascq were developed on the basis of an urban plan conceived by Gérard Deldique. Jean-Pierre Watel, but also other designers such as Yacek Waclaw Sawicki, designed five hundred houses in hamlets in a recomposed landscape round a golf course. The Jean-Pierre Watel formula became a signature style which was reproduced several times: the white brick walls formed a screen on which the vegetation took on a sculptural

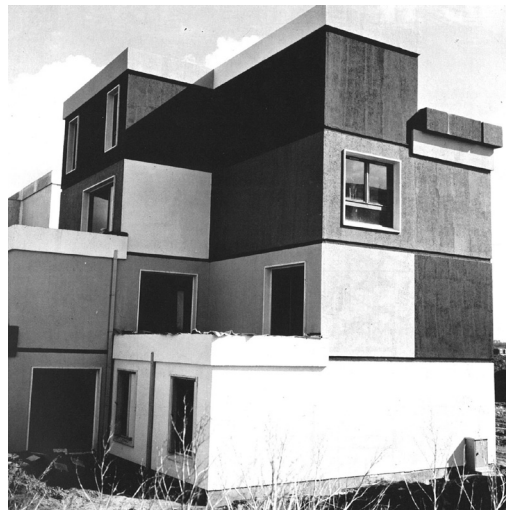
01 Model for *Villagexpo* in Wattignies, in *Watel 63-73*, Paris, sipe édition, 32.



02 Model for the 64 houses of the Château Hamlet (1976) in Villeneuve d'Ascq, 64 houses. Archives J. P. Watel.



03 View from the garden of the houses for *Brigode* (1973) in *Watel 63-73*, Paris, sipe édition, 31.



04 The Sigma prefabrication system use for the Courtille residence in Villeneuve d'Ascq, Archives J. P. Watel.

dimension and which continued beyond the perimeter of the house, with horizontal lines of black painted wood and generous bay windows which disappeared to let this simple and contrasted design stand out.

In the Château neighborhood in Villeneuve d'Ascq, in 1976, Jean-Pierre Watel and the same developer created a housing complex called the Chateau Hamlet which illustrated the architect's research on groupings of individual houses. The project led to innovative solutions for integrating elements of everyday life such as the car - based on contemporary architecture which renewed the use of traditional brickwork and demonstrated the hope for a new urban lifestyle driven by the dynamic of new towns. Pierre Joly describes the principles of composition dictated by the architect:

The "material" used in this instance is a square that can be assembled on its four sides: an undifferentiated element as it were on its own scale. This material is worked in a totally abstract way, by ignoring the individual aspect and developing empty spaces: lanes, little squares... by taking into account exterior constraints (the terrain, existing roads). Once the urban plan is

established, we reconsider each house in itself, the direction it faces, the exterior openings, the intimacy that needs preserving. At this stage, we decide between the individual and the collective in order to reach the best compromise.¹⁰

The Château Hamlet, thanks to the topography of the land and the different combinations, produces a picturesque silhouette which really suits the idea of merging the new town with the old town of Flers. Built on a 12 x 12 meter plot including a small garden, the houses sometimes include an extra story. The construction of a series of four garages on the ground floor facilitates the creation of two stories for a few more unusual versions which include a terrace on the first floor instead of a patio. About twenty or so ensembles based on this model and its variations were to be built in other new towns such as Cergy Pontoise or elsewhere in France. A year after its completion in 1977, the Architecture Academy, presided at the time by Robert Auzelle, gave an award to the Jean-Pierre Watel agency for their focus on individual dwellings and groups of houses.

At the end of the 1970's, Jean-Pierre Watel developed in more intensive fashion the

procedures for light industrialized houses with factory-built wooden frames. "Cladded frames" which enabled him to rethink the building process¹¹ was not the only aspect of prefabrication he was interested in - there were also attempts to use modular components such as in the *Sigma* procedure which he used with the *Flandres-Artois housing company* which launched, from its Violaines factory in the Pas-de-Calais area, the production of industrialized housing.

Jean-Pierre Watel was fiercely opposed to vertical densification despite several attempts with a few projects on this theme notably in Dunkirk, and often looked to demonstrate that his groups of houses enabled a density of 50 dwellings per hectare which was comparable to the density of four story collective housing blocks. He also tried to propose a credible alternative to the mediocre housing estates that were spreading to the suburbs, far from service facilities with their excessive use of land and the banality of the landscape that they generated.

If Jean-Pierre Watel has not been forgotten in history, it is however most likely that the place he occupies seriously needs to be re-examined. What should be retained of the

declared link between the collective dwellings by Jean-Pierre Watel and the Nordic developments? This link is both a reality but also a cover since the cultural crossovers, transfers and influences were at the heart of his practice.¹²

The architect referred with pleasure to his trips to Denmark, and his surprising meeting with Arne Jacobsen. Indeed, Arne Jacobsen lived in a house similar to those he had imagined for others in a now famous housing estate. Jean-Pierre Watel remembered first and foremost the simplicity of this encounter, a simplicity which explained *why architecture refrains from superfluous gestures, effacing the form from the "receptacle" which enables people to live, to be.*¹³

However, the houses designed by Arne Jacobsen in Klampenborg were perhaps not the design that Jean-Pierre Watel assimilated in the most obvious manner. The presence of a mineral base, the opening of the bay windows onto the neighboring houses are particular features of the Jacobsen model. One needs to look to other Danish buildings that Jean-Pierre Watel did not always specifically mention: those of Jørn Utzon, the Kingo houses (1953-1955) in Helsingør, their L-shaped plan closed by a courtyard sited on a sloping terrain on the edge of a lake, the Fredensborg housing estate (1959-1963) or again, later, the more densely

arranged prefabricated houses of Albertslund (1963-1968), to the South of Copenhagen designed from plans by Peter Bredsdorff, Knud Svensson and Ole Nørgaard. All these examples embodied the ensembles imagined by Ludwig Karl Hilberseimer or Mies Van der Rohe at the beginning of the 1930's. Like Jørn Utzon who was influenced by the vernacular architecture of Morocco, Jean-Pierre Watel never missed an opportunity to present the popular architecture of the Magreb as a source of inspiration: the idea was to extol the merits of the wall, the way it was made and its capacity to protect intimacy with an elemental simplicity where the beauty was to be found in its proportions. But, he also tried in a discreet fashion to resolve a more contemporary problem. With the Citroën DS visible in Arne Jacobsen's garage and the one featured in the advertising brochures of the SEDAF, the relationship imagined by Jean-Pierre Watel between the car and the domestic environment was crucial. In the context of a new town which based its doctrine on the separation of urban flow, the endeavor at the Trianon Hamlet to treat the roof of a car-park as the central public space of a group of houses, the aesthetics of the car port associated with the kitchens which avoided the Brigode houses from displaying the vulgarity of a banal garage door, or the ingenious way the built zone is organized

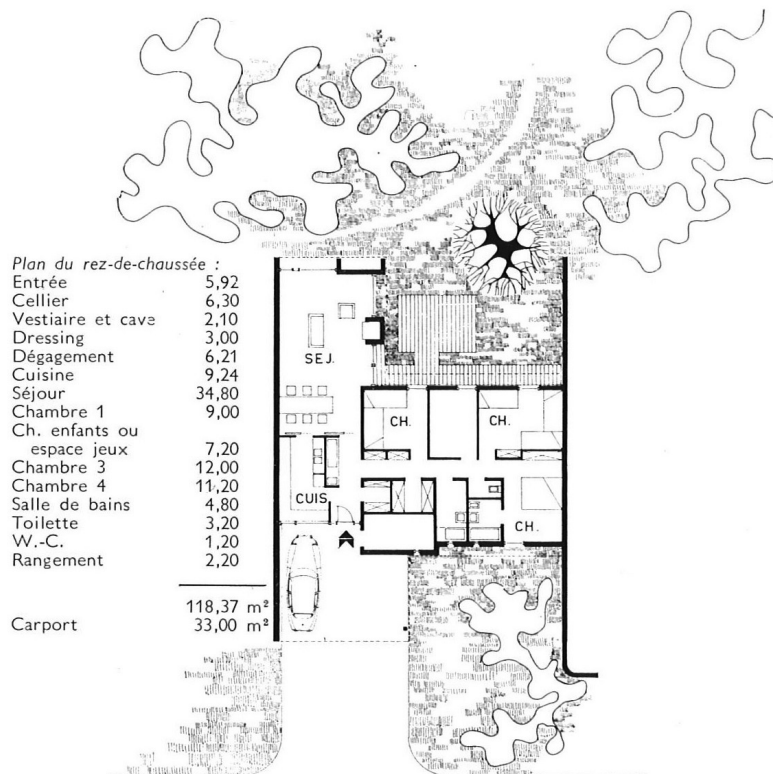
around the Château Hamlet to accommodate cars show that Jean-Pierre Watel was constantly thinking about a reasonable co-existence between the automobile and domestic space. This essential problem that he attempted to resolve by domesticating the car is further proof of the vitality of a brief period of communion between modernity and modesty, between simplicity and architecture which he brilliantly embodied.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Joly, "Le Château, logements sociaux. Ville nouvelle de Lille est. 1977", *Techniques & Architecture*, No. 316, October-November 1977, 116.
- 2 Gérard Monnier, *L'architecture moderne en France, tome 3, de la croissance à la compétition*, Paris, Picard, 2000, 166-167. Gérard Monnier mentions several times in this publication the thesis by Claudette Déom-Fournival, *L'architecture de la maison individuelle en France depuis les années 1960: références et invention dans trois agences d'architecture*, PhD Thesis, Univ. Paris 1, La Sorbonne 1996.
- 3 Gérard Monnier, *L'architecture moderne en France, Vol. 3, de la croissance à la compétition*, Paris, Picard, 2000, 164.
- 4 Jacques Lucan, *Architecture en France (1940-2000). Histoire et théorie*, Paris, le Moniteur 2001, 270.
- 5 The archives of Véra Cardot and Pierre Joly (Kandinsky Library, Musée d'art moderne, Pompidou centre) include a very large number of photographs of the works of Jean-Pierre Watel. The relationship between the architect and the critic went beyond the professional framework and they became friends through the different articles.
- 6 Jean-Pierre Ménard, "Jean-Pierre Watel" in Jean-Paul Midant (Dir.) *Dictionnaire de l'architecture du xx^e siècle*, Paris, Hazan, Institut Français d'Architecture, 1996, 949.
- 7 Daniel Le Couëdic, *La maison, une identité galvaudée*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003, 151.
- 8 *Maisons nouvelles à patio, collection architecture de notre temps*, Paris, Eyrolles, 1966.
- 9 On this subject, Marie-Pierre Sampson, "Le projet de Brigode à Villeneuve d'Ascq (1966-1981)", Richard Klein & Gérard Monnier (Dir.), *Les années ZUP, architecture de la croissance 1960-1973*, Picard, 2002. The Villeneuve constructions occupy an important place in the work of Jean-Pierre Watel, 63-73, Paris, Société Internationale de Presse et d'Édition, 1973.
- 10 Pierre Joly, "Le Château, logements sociaux. Ville nouvelle de Lille est. 1977", *Techniques & Architecture*, No. 316, October-November 1977, 116.
- 11 Jean-Pierre Watel, "Lossature bois, deux décennies d'expérimentation", *Techniques et Architecture*, No. 321, October 1978, 75-78.
- 12 Richard Neutra, one of the most important figures of the crossovers and reciprocal influences between the United States and Europe, visited the constructions by Jean-Pierre Watel when he came to Croix near Roubaix when he was designing the Delcourt house (1967-1970).
- 13 Jean-Pierre Watel, *Le faux problème de la maison, recherches et réalisations sur l'habitat individuel groupé par JP Watel architecte*, 1977. Tapuscrit.

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05 Plans of a house for *Brigode* (1973) in Villeneuve d'Ascq, Archives J. P. Watel.