

Tabula Non Rasa. Toward a Performative Contextualism

Ilka & Andreas Ruby in Conversation with Jean-Philippe Vassal

You once defined your architectural creed as "never demolish, always change, add, reprogram." Interestingly enough for an architect, this position excludes the notion of building anew, which is what most architects would probably see as the essence of their discipline. Why don't you?

I really think that building anew represents only a small share of architecture and not its essence. Essentially architecture is adding things to something existing. Even if you build an entirely new building, you ultimately add on to a preexisting organization of space – be it houses in the neighborhood, a city quarter, a group of trees or a landscape. And I think that an addition can become meaningful when we analyze this *proto-condition* of architecture sincerely, in order to determine what it might lack – for only this should be added. Emilio Ambasz once said that if nature were perfect, we would not need houses. Following this logic, here I would throw in the idea that architecture should only add to reality what it lacks in perfection.

But how do you define the *existing*? In the contextualism of the 1980s, the *existing* was understood as the built heritage of the city. This often led to Postmodernist pastiches of history, a mimicry of existing building configurations devoid of any creative surplus: architecture had become a kind of pre-emptive conservationism. It failed to produce a vital city just as much as the *tabula rasa* thinking of Modernism which contextualism

had sought to overcome once and for all. How do you avoid this pitfall of contextualism?

By identifying those elements, forces, and energies which are genuinely determining the spatial performance of a given situation. And for us, this is very often not architecture, but the activities that take place in or around it, thanks to or despite architecture. The famous square Djemaa El-Fnaa in Marrakesh provides the perfect example. It is one of the most exciting urban spaces I know, but its quality would be inconceivable if you look at it from a purely western-European point of view. The square is essentially a big open space only vaguely defined by a perimeter of fairly non-descript buildings. The urban quality of Djemaa El-Fnaa is not derived from its architecture, but from the ever-changing sequence of events that take place here in the course of a day: in the morning, it is completely flooded with cars driving over it in all directions. After a while, an acrobat, poet or musician sets up a stage in the middle of the bustling traffic and begins a performance. Within moments a circle of passers-by forms to watch him. Soon thereafter, another acrobat joins him. In this way, the square is gradually filled with performers and spectators until it seems to consist entirely of circles of people around which the traffic must weave absurd routes. Later on the square will be transformed into a huge market, and, in the evening, it will be covered by a myriad of fast-food stands. The place is whatever takes place on it.

When we designed Palais de Tokyo in Paris, we basically started out with Djemaa El-Fnaa as a conceptual model.

This leads us to Cedric Price and his definition of architecture as an *enabler*, which poses the question of solid and void, and to what degree they contribute to shaping the space of the city.

Yes, it's a question of priorities. Ultimately architecture is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The meaning of the walls of a house does not reside in the walls themselves, but in the space they define – because you can do something within space, but not within walls. I think there are architects of the solid, who believe that architecture is an absolute value in itself, and architects of the void, for whom the value of architecture lies in what architecture allows to happen though and beyond its own material body. We (Anne Lacaton and myself) tend to be members of the latter species.

How can you practice such an architecture of the void given that architects are mostly asked (and paid) to make solids?

By first and always scrutinizing every commission whether its task makes sense and is necessary. One should never take this for granted. And architects should not automatically build something only because someone has asked them to do so; otherwise, they turn into pure service men. We were once asked by the city government of Bordeaux to do a project in the context of a public space program called *Embellishment of Places*. The



politicians had identified forty or so squares in Bordeaux which they thought needed embellishment. We were given a small triangular square near the main railway station called Place Léon Aucoc, a square like any other in France, certainly not spectacular, but charming in its modesty. When we came to see it, we were puzzled. For us, it was already beautiful the way it was. We could see neither how nor why we should *embellish* it. In order to devise a meaningful intervention, we carefully started to study it. We analyzed the architecture of the surrounding houses, the surface materials and urban furnishings of the square, the organization of traffic, and also interviewed the inhabitants. In the end, we found only minor misfits, none of which would have been *solved* by an architectural project. Instead we drew up a catalogue of maintenance measures which were strikingly obvious and yet, completely neglected, including regularly

Fig. 1: Place Leon Aucoc, Bordeaux, 1996 . Before and after the intervention.

cleaning the square of dog excrements, in order to make it possible to play the game of pétanque (*boules*) on it once again; cleaning the linden leaves off the benches so that one could sit on them; rearranging the parking spaces; and reorganizing the traffic in order to reduce through-traffic. We also proposed the reintroduction of the St. John Fires, a customary public event which had previously been prohibited by city authorities in the name of security. When we finally presented this catalogue of measures to the city government, the politicians said: Well that's all fine, but what will you actually build on the square? Our answer was: Nothing. And I would like to add, as you referred to the issue of financial compensation for architecture, that we did charge a decent honorary for this project, to make unmistakably clear that this *nothing* was not a case of denial, but a positive contribution. Not building can be as vital an act of architecture as building. Building is not always the answer.

In some cases however architecture needs to deal with the built substance of a context as well. In those cases one conceives the context not only in terms of the void, but of the solid as well.

That's right, but even then the *solid* does not automatically translate as *architecture*. There are many situations whose character, ambiance, and intrinsic logic are not primarily defined by buildings. And it is crucial to acknowledge this material reality of a site, be it architectural or not, and to

precisely understand how it informs the site. For us, it is always very exciting to incorporate those *non-architectural* elements of the *environmental matter* of a given situation. Otherwise, we could never have built our house at Cap Ferret, for instance. The most precious environmental *capital* of the site were its trees and its delicate ground, which was a sand dune, both of which would have been endangered by the construction of a house. In a business-as-usual operation, one would have needed to flatten the dune to make way for a solid foundation, and cut the trees to make room for the house in the first place. But that would have destroyed the very attraction and uniqueness of this place. It was clear that any act of building at this site could only be successful if the architecture was able to inhabit the site as is – keeping the dune, leaving the trees, and instead inhabiting the voids in-between. That's what we did.

For me an intervention is contextual if it succeeds in engaging in a physical exchange with its environment. This must clearly go beyond the traditional notion of contextualism, which is mainly paying lip service to the typological and iconographic parameters of a site's built fabric. But a mere replication of codes is fruitless: what is needed is a material transfusion. In our house in Cap Ferret, the trees are not a decorative tribute to the context, but become part and parcel of the architecture because the trees literally penetrate the living area and impregnate its atmosphere –



you smell the trees in the space and you feel their gentle movement caused by the wind rustling the treetops above the house.

In that sense, we are in search of an alternative between *tabula rasa* and contextualism. The building should neither fill the earth and subdue it, nor subordinate to the context slavishly, but it should be coupled with the environment so that at some point the difference between the context and the intervention starts to dissolve.

The house in Cap Ferret is placed in a landscape with very little built fabric around it to relate to. But how do you realize your agenda of transfusion in an urban context, and not fall into the contextualist dilemma of entropy – i.e., that by adapting to the surrounds, the world starts to look more and more alike?

You can perfectly create this kind of transfusion in an urban context as well without turning into a Postmodern contextualist. In Bordeaux, we built a university building which contradicts the neighboring housing development both in terms of scale and material – which would be a major disagreement with the agenda of traditional contextualism. However, the project works absolutely in relation to its context by integrating and prolonging one essential trait of its material reality: the gardens. The housing settlement, you see, consists of small worker's terraced houses from the 19th century. All of the houses have gardens which inform the character of the quarter at least as much

Fig. 2/3: House in Lège, Cap Ferret, 1998. Living space with trees.



as the houses themselves. Interested in this vegetal quality of space, we noticed that there was a large quantity of rose trees in the gardens. Hence, we decided to *floralize* our university building as well, placing 600 different rose trees throughout its

Fig. 4: Pôle Universitaire de Sciences de Gestion, Bordeaux, 2006. 600 different rose trees form a vertical garden.

outdoor spaces, such as the outdoor galleries and the interior courtyards. It is important to note that these rose trees are not only decorative, but performative as well. Since the building was inaugurated in 2006, people who work in the university together with residents from the neighboring housing quarter have come together and started to tend to the roses – and now they even produce a jam from the rose leaves!

The sites you spoke about thus far are all sites with amiable qualities – dunes, forests, gardens, roses – spatial assets, which every architect would be happy to relate to and cultivate architecturally. But what about a context that lacks any such qualities? How do you relate, for instance, to those modernist cities built in the periphery of Paris and other big French cities during the 1960s and 1970s, places that are characterized by a less-than-attractive architecture, urban spaces that are often problematic and, on top of it, cursed by the conundrum of hard-to-overcome social problems?

The worst thing to do is certainly what the French government is currently doing: in 2003, the state inaugurated a national program for urban renewal – one of the biggest operations of demolition ever in the history of modern urbanism. 250,000 apartments located in the so-called Grands Ensembles – large mass-produced housing complexes built in the 1960s and 1970s throughout France – are scheduled for demolition (and

a substantial number of them have already been demolished). Please remember that all of these apartments are inhabited! What's more, there is an unfulfilled demand for social housing: we're talking about numbers between 600,000 and 800,000. And last winter there were 25,000 homeless people in Paris alone.

Obviously, this program for *urban renewal* is not intended to solve a housing problem, but an image problem. The population of these Grands Ensembles is generally made up of people from lower income groups, a large proportion of whom are North African immigrants. The social and ethnic segregation of today results in high unemployment levels and criminality. The social tension created by this situation has given the suburbs a notoriously bad image that politicians seek to urgently improve (even more so after the severe riots that sprang up in some of these neighborhoods in the past years). Confronted with this problem, politicians have begun to look for a culprit, and what do they find? The large-scale Modernist apartment complexes that represented too visible a monument to the social plight of the suburbs and the failure of French integration policy. Due to their alledged ideological contamination, they are poised to disappear – out of sight, out of mind, as it were.

What happens to the residents that are currently living there?

They are temporarily relocated in hotels until new housing units are built. This is not only highly



troublesome for the residents (a family of four does not live well in a hotel room for months), but also entails highly unsustainable urban consequences. Whereas the Grands Ensembles were based on high-density and small-footprint building typologies, such as towers and slabs, the new housing units will be low-rise developments occupying a large ground surface that is more typical of suburban areas. Due to the scarcity of available building land in city centers, most of these new housing developments will be located farther out of town which means longer commuting times for the residents.

But beyond the dubious social repercussions of this contrived resettlement policy, the economical implications of the program are simply unheard of. The government program provides 167,000 EUR

Fig. 5: PLUS study, apartment-blocks of the 1960s with dormant qualities like transparency, visual openness, height, park space, land availability, etc. that must be revealed, developed and transcended.

in total for the demolition of an apartment, the temporary accommodation of the residents, and the construction of a new apartment. If you consider that a standard renovation of any of these apartments in question is 8-10 times cheaper, you start to understand how high a price the French state is willing to pay only to avoid dealing with the problematic consequences of the heritage of Modernist urbanism.

Officially pretending to mend the effects of Modernism's tabula rasa urbanism, the current *urban renewal* policies are nothing but a revival of the tabula rasa mentality, re-enacting the problem at hand instead of overcoming it. The problem of Modernist mass housing was the issue of quantity – it was considered tantamount to any other reflection on architecture. Housing the greatest amount of people for the least amount of money was the order of the day. The question of quality was thought to be negligible. The space of one flat only took up a square centimeter on the drawing. It was easy to draw hundreds, thousands of them. Like on a conveyor-belt. And today, it's just as easy, seemingly, to dispose of them. But it's only easy on paper. In reality, it's very rough for the people who suffer the consequences.

This is clearly a political problem. How can you engage critically as an architect with this issue for real? As an architect you are usually called in too late, namely, after demolition has



already taken place and replacement is needed.

That is sadly correct, and that's why we felt the need to eject ourselves from the reactive position of the architect who simply responds to project commissions. We felt the need to make explicit the suppressed political dimension of this problem. Together with Frédéric Druaut, we (Anne Lacaton and myself) undertook a research study entitled *PLUS* to search for ways that the money

Fig. 6/7: PLUS study, interior before and after the transformation.

made available for the demolition could be far more sensibly used for the preservation and long-term maintenance of the dwellings in question. There can be no question that the architecture of the Grands Ensembles in general is mediocre to atrocious. But this does not mean that it is devoid of any qualities. If you care to look behind the cream-colored facades, you will find the same kind of skeleton frames used for high-rise apartment buildings in the smart areas of Paris – the difference being that in the latter case the facades are filigree constructions of steel and glass. We realized that the high-rise blocks of the banlieue could look just as good as the fancy Parisian high-rises if they were treated with the same appreciation. Consequently, we started with the facades and replaced the unattractive external walls perforated with windows that are far too small with transparent floor to ceiling glazing so that, for the first time, the residents can enjoy the height and the location of their building in the form of light-flooded living rooms with panoramic views of a largely flat landscape – a quality they always latently had, only their architects never cared to exploit it.

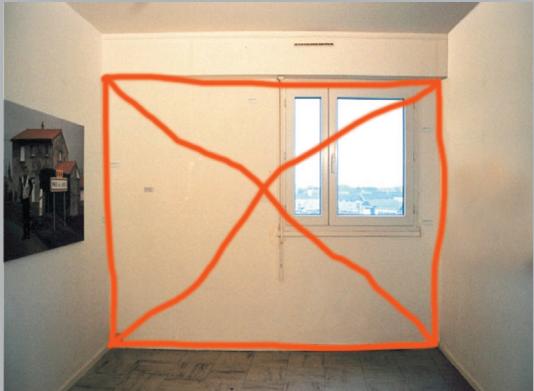
But clearly it's not only the modest appearance of Modernist housing that is at stake here. What makes most Modernist housing schemes to some degree incompatible with contemporary living standards are their often tiny apartment sizes. If in 1970 a family of four may have been happy to move



into an apartment of 80 m², today the same family is likely to expect more space.

Yes, and they have all the reasons to do so! The apartment size standards applied in the

Fig. 8+9: PLUS study, apartment-block in Trignac, Carré de Certé, before and after the transformation.



construction of Grands Ensembles was, as in any public housing project in the postwar period, a late offspring of the 1930s doctrine of *Existenzminimum* (existence minimum). We have always

been opposed to this ideology as we think it is cynical to elevate the minimum to a standard. It is clearly an ideological choice as the minimum standard is only applied for a certain social strata – the poor – while more privileged social strata are eligible to enjoy more generous spaces. But we think everybody should be eligible for such spatial generosity, and, hence, we have always tried to question the very concept of a *standard* by pushing the envelope. Looking at the numbers of the state's demolition program (it really should not be called *urban renewal* in the first place), we realized that with the 167,000 EUR – allocated to the demolition of a single apartment, the temporary relocation of its inhabitants, and the building of a new home – we could not only rehabilitate that existing apartment, but also double its living area. This is made possible by a strategy of addition that we have experimented with in earlier projects – in both the Latapie House, the house in Coutras, and the social housing in Mulhouse – where we placed an extra space in front of the actual living area, which, in its thermal comfort, resembles a winter garden that can be programmed by the residents themselves. In the *PLUS* project, we applied the same principle in the form of an extension that extends each apartment outwards with a kind of integrated loggia. This measure is possible because the addition is entirely structurally independent of the existing building. Its weight is carried by its own structure and places no additional load on the

Fig. 10+11: *PLUS* study, interior transformation, facades with small punched windows are replaced by floor-to-ceiling sliding doors, balconies and winter gardens are added.



old building. This increase in the total living area allows the floor plans to be designed in a more generous way. Non-structural spatial partitions could be removed, and, out of a number of tiny rooms, a flowing spatial sequence could be made that, thanks to the transparent facade, also includes the external spaces. Furthermore, by wrapping the existing high-rise building with a structurally autonomous spatial layer, the disruption to residents' lives during construction was reduced to a minimum. All of the individual works can be carried out one after the other, always leaving a number of

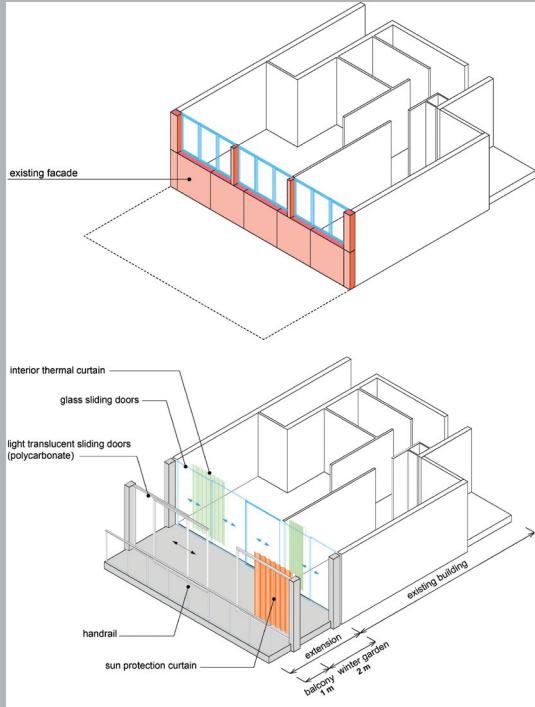
rooms in each apartment inhabitable. The entire new front structure is pre-fabricated in individual stories and placed against the old building. The outside wall of the old building is then taken away and replaced by the new glass facade, which only takes a couple of hours to install.

What was the effect of this study in France?

It was widely discussed among architects and non-governmental organizations while ferociously ignored by official politics. The initial report of the study was distributed in a small edition of a few hundred copies.¹ Sold out in no time, we started

Fig. 12/13: Apartment building Bois-le-Prêtre, Paris, existing building before and after transformation.

¹ Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal, *PLUS. Les grands ensembles de logements, Territoire d'exception*. A study undertaken for the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Direction de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, Paris, 2004.



to prepare a substantially enlarged book version which was published in 2007 (at Gustavo Gili in a trilingual edition, French, English, Spanish)². But in France this book was ignored by the press, architectural or otherwise, as if there were some sort of silent agreement that it doesn't even exist.

The most tangible reaction we got was from the Paris Public Housing Agency (*l'Office Public*

d'Habitations à Loyer Modéré de la Ville de Paris, OPAC). They were interested in our approach and launched a small competition for the rehabilitation of one of their apartment towers situated next to the northern section of the *Périmérique*, the peripheral highway of Paris. We won the competition in 2006, and the building is now under construction. The original building was designed and built by Raymond Lopez in 1959 (who built a similar version of the design at the *Interbau* in Berlin, the *Hansaviertel*). What we are doing is to enlarge the usable surface of the 96 flats by creating new floor slabs on the outside of the building, which enables not only for the living room to be enlarged, and winter gardens and continuous balconies to be created, but also the comfort, views, and isolation of the flats are improved. The inhabitants will either keep their flats or be able to move to a bigger or smaller flat in the same building. And it will not be necessary to vacate the flats during the building work. After feeling a little insecure in the beginning, the residents soon began to embrace the project and are now very happy with it. Only our client is not quite so satisfied – they seem to be under the impression that the newly created common areas – such as the proposed lobby – are too generous for a social housing project.

Are there other ways of applying the approach of the *PLUS* project to the transformation of the built environment of France on the whole?

Yes, but it's not easy, especially in France,

² Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal, *+PLUS*, (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2007).

Fig. 14: Apartment building Bois-le-Prêtre, Paris, enlarging the existing apartments by adding winter gardens and balconies.

as the policy of demolishing and rebuilding has become the preferred modus operandi and often even an obligatory component of competition briefs. For instance, we were invited to a housing competition in St. Nazaire in France. Dubbed *Le Petit Maroc*, the site on the estuary of the Loire River was occupied by a postwar housing settlement containing 36 flats altogether. As these apartments were considered too small, the competition brief called for demolishing them and replacing them with 55 new dwellings. We studied the settlement and found it perfectly in order, with a series of well-kept public spaces with trees, gardens, and pathways. There was no need to destroy this place. Also we realized that it was perfectly possible to increase the number of flats per plot of land and preserve what already existed. We then proposed the idea of keeping 27 flats and building 28 new ones. We expanded the existing houses with winter-garden constructions, as described above, and in addition we built one entirely new house. Interestingly enough, after the jury reviewed the projects, they informed us that they liked our proposal the most, as they were positively surprised about the possibility of fulfilling the demand for housing surface without demolishing the existing buildings. However, as the demolition of the existing buildings had already been stated in the competition brief – as if it were a nonnegotiable prerequisite – they were now legally bound to this formulation and could not award our project the

first prize. We had consciously overstepped this stipulation because we found it wrong. That is to say, we knew the risk and got caught. It was an act of civil disobedience that was clearly incompatible with the legal framework of the competition. Nevertheless, the effort was not in vain. Unhappy with the outcome of the competition, the city's social housing director presented our project to the mayor of St. Nazaire, Joel Bateux, who instantly understood the general approach of the project, and that one could apply this approach in a lot of situations in the city. Ultimately, he entrusted us to a similar project on a different site, which we are currently working on.

Your add-on housing strategy allows you to engage with the existing body of the city, to tune and improve it. However, there are places in the world that call for entirely new cities to be built from scratch, and in a short time. How would you deal with this type of commission? Would you accept the commission of designing the master plan of a Chinese city for, say, 500,000 people?

First of all I think there is no such thing as a tabula rasa. At least I personally have never been to a place where there was *nothing*. And even if you make a city for one million people in China, unless you erase the land beforehand, you will always have something to deal with: be it rocks, trees, little rivers, or the existing population of the place.

But even with a tabula-non-rasa condition, I would not want to make a master plan. When you



Fig. 15/16: Social Housing, St. Nazaire, existing situation and situation after adding construction.



Fig. 17/18: Social Housing, St. Nazaire, existing apartment and enlarged apartment with winter garden.

design a housing project with, say, a 100 units, you understand already that there is something wrong, something strange. You are organizing people. And to organize people is a strange feeling. But I think it is possible to design a city for 500,000 people without a master plan – it begins with one house.

But what about infrastructure? It would need to be designed for the entire system, wouldn't it? Would you start with one house, add another, and then another, and put in the supporting infrastructure only at the end?

Why not? Cities have developed like this. Tokyo, for example, was once a little house, then a village, and eventually it became a city. For me, the question is to think about the system of development, rather than to make a master plan. After you have done one house, you ask yourself how the next one will be. After you have made ten houses, you ask yourself how the next ten will be. As soon as you have twenty houses, you need a street, and with 200 houses, you need an avenue. This is an evolutionary system that can create facility, capacity, generosity, and freedom within the function of its own growth, not as a premeditated ideal state that may never be achieved. Its much better to work with a system that always remains open.