Log

Winter / Spring 2012
Architecture Criticism

35° 38' N, 139° 44' E
Shirokane, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Both installation and performance, Arata Isozaki's *Incubation Process / Joint Core System* was created in October 1962 as a critique of visionary urban planning in general and the Metabolists in particular. In September 2011 the piece was restaged at the Misa Shin Gallery in Tokyo together with new images and Isozaki's original text, excerpted here:
The transformation of our city begins with an enormous fissure. / A new incubation process begins with the engulfment and destruction of a city of virtue and ease by viscous, formless matter welling up from the earth. / The cataclysm is violent and indiscriminate; it will terrify and kill you. / The task we are fated to undertake is to give dynamic order to formless matter. / This joint core is the point from which urban space will be generated. / The city that has thus been incubated is destined to be destroyed. / A ruin is the future of our city, and the future city is ruin itself. / Our contemporary city therefore lives for a short "time," emits energy and returns once more to matter. / Our effort in each and every proposal is therein embedded, and the incubator is again built. / That is the future.

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Craig Buckley

Never Demolish: Bois-le-Prêtre Regrows in Paris

The persistent stories of gloom and economic uncertainty dominating recent headlines from Europe have little room for much in the way of good news. One bright spot, however, is the completion of Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, and Jean-Philippe Vassal's project for the Bois-le-Prêtre Tower in Paris, awarded the annual l'Équerre d'argent prize for architecture in November 2011. Developed over the course of nearly half a decade, the project completely transformed a low-rent housing block originally built in 1959 by Raymond Lopez at the edge of the 17th arrondissement. Bois-le-Prêtre is arguably as much a manifesto as it is a project; the architects' rejection of the demolition of such large-scale, postwar housing blocks starkly opposes the drift of recent urban policy in France. Their stance is motivated less by a concern to preserve such buildings as monuments than to engage the potential for transformation and rehabilitation. Bois-le-Prêtre's concern at multiple levels for economy – of aesthetic means, of materials, of capital, and of energy – takes on a particular pertinence at this moment, precisely because it is not an argument for austerity, but rather for investment, expansion, and even luxury. Given the current challenges facing Europe and the magnitude of its aging public housing infrastructure, the argument concerns a built landscape as fraught, architecturally and politically, as it is decisive to France's urban future.

Large-scale demolitions of housing blocks have been progressing for decades in France. For Druot in particular, the interest in alternatives began in Bordeaux in the mid-1990s, after experiencing the demolition of the massive Cité Lumineuse public housing project, built in 1960.[1] In the early 2000s, a period marked by unrest in the Paris suburbs and elsewhere, state urban development policy incentivized such demolitions. A 2003 urban renewal act – the Borloo Law – envisaged the demolition and reconstruction of nearly 200,000 units of housing in areas designated "sensitive urban zones" by the state. In response, Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal,

1. See Frédéric Druot, "Ne pas démolir est une stratégie/Not tearing down is a strategy," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 374 (October–November 2009): 65–73.

Raymond Lopez, Bois-le-Prêtre Tower, Paris, 1959. Photo: Pavillon de l'Arsenal. Right: After a 1990 renovation. Photos courtesy the architects.

with financing from the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, made a study of alternatives for the rehabilitation and expansion of different types of HLM towers in urban contexts ranging from Aulnay-sous-Bois in the Parisian *banlieue*, to Le Havre in Normandy and Nantes in the Loire.[2] Its first line was "Never demolish," followed by "Always add, transform, and use." The tenor was less a report than a counterprogram that advocated ways of enlarging the existing surface area of the individual units, the reorganization of circulation and access points, and the introduction of greater degrees of transparency. Significantly, the argument found sympathetic reception at Paris Habitat, a public housing agency, which, as part of a larger redevelopment plan for the Porte Pouchet area, organized a competition to rehabilitate the Lopez tower, which Druot, together with Lacaton & Vassal, won in 2005.

To arrive at Bois-le-Prêtre from the metro is to traverse a landscape profoundly shaped by the evolution of policies concerning public housing and urban planning over the course of the last century. After crossing a zone of actively occupied stone and red-brick courtyard buildings, examples of a wave of large-scale, publicaly subsidized housing erected on the former site of 19th-century fortifications demolished after World War I, a more disorienting urban panorama unfolds. A strip of public playgrounds and sports fields buffers this housing from the elevated concrete *périphérique*, an urban expressway that divides central Paris from the *banlieux*, a mix of vestigial 19th-century blocks, low-rise gas stations, and high-rise office and housing towers, all crowned with corporate signage. This is where the argument "Never demolish" must engage the specificities of the city.

2. The acronym HLM stands for *Habitation à Loyer Modéré*, or low-rent housing. The tower is part of a large network of publicaly managed social housing units that offer rent at below market rates. See Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, and Jean-Philippe Vassal, *Plus: Large-Scale Housing Developments* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2007).

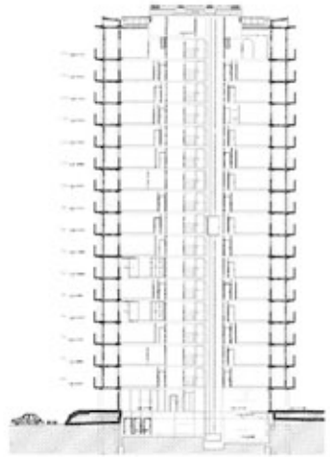
Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal, Transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre Tower, Paris, 2011. Neighborhood view. Photo © Philippe Ruault.

The preservation and transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre reveal a level of complexity beneath the slogan. The redevelopment plan actually included the demolition of a second, identical tower and another slab adjacent to it, all of which had been built as part of Lopez's original plan. The tower and slab were judged to be too close to the *périphérique* to be worthy of preservation. Bois-le-Prêtre's greater distance from the highway, combined with the significant number of inhabitants who wanted to remain in the tower, saved it from the wrecking ball. An extended process of consultation between the residents, Paris Habitat, and the architects informed the rehabilitation project. At Bois-le-Prêtre, as at other sites, demolition would have meant the dispersal and relodging of residents, exacerbating the social strain that urban renovation policies seek to mitigate. Just as important for the architects, resisting the politics of demolition also meant a careful reading of the building in question, not as a generic member of a class, but for the potential structural, architectural, and urban transformations it contained. The completion of Bois-le-Prêtre now confirms that extensive rehabilitation and structural additions can be achieved for a third less than the cost of demolition and reconstruction.[3]

The 17-story tower is now strikingly different from its surroundings; the taller buildings in the neighborhood are marked by the largely opaque facades that Bois-le-Prêtre once sported as well, applied during problematic renovations in the mid-1990s. As one approaches, the tower becomes more optically elusive. Its form has neither the slenderness of a point block nor the breadth of a slab, its new transparency gives off no single, dominant impression, and even its color remains hard to describe.

3. The final construction cost was 11.4 million euros for 100 dwellings. The average cost of demolition and reconstruction is 170,000 euros per dwelling. See Karine Dana, "Druot, Lacaton, & Vassal: Appartement Témoin, Paris 17e," *AMC* 178 (April 2008): 104–06.

Transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre Tower. Views of winter gardens, open and closed. Photos © Philippe Ruault.

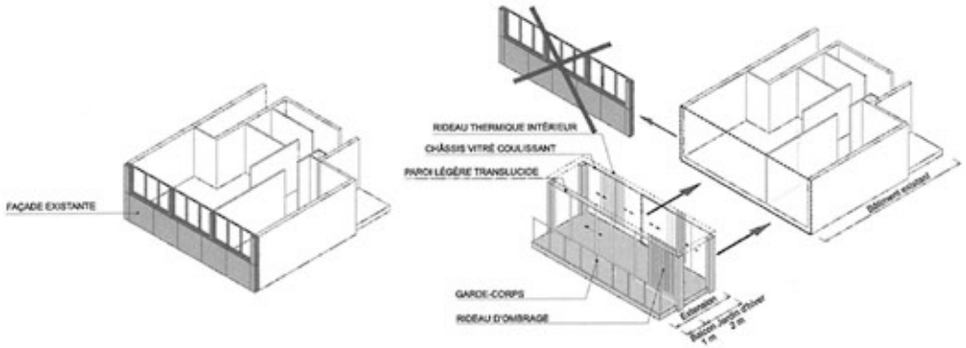


Transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre Tower. Section.

This effect is a direct outcome of the architects' central, egalitarian decision: to open up and extend the depth of every unit in the tower by three meters through the addition of a structural layer of winter gardens and continuous balconies composed of prefabricated concrete and steel decks, glass, metallic curtains, and translucent polycarbonate sheet – materials more characteristic of light industrial and greenhouse construction than of housing. The architects converted light, cheap, and ordinary materials into what they call an enhanced spatial "luxury." This concept has been evolving in Lacaton & Vassal's work for nearly two decades, first explored in the low-cost corrugated steel and polycarbonate Latapie House near Bordeaux (1993), then used in a series of 14 experimental public housing units realized in Mulhouse (2005), where the use of greenhouse structures – perched like horticultural ready-mades atop concrete bases – allowed for considerably larger spaces than is standard for low-cost construction.

At Bois-le-Prêtre the winter gardens and balconies, as well as two heated extensions on the northeast and southeast corners of the building, are borne on a structural frame independent of the existing building. Both the structure and the decision to prefabricate the platform units were motivated by the need for incremental construction, which would allow inhabitants to stay in the building by temporarily relocating to empty apartments while the work was completed, an approach that reflected the residents' commitment to both the tower and the architects' project. Before attaching the platforms, a new glass facade was installed behind the existing panelized facade, which, when dismantled, fully opened the interior to the new extension. While tectonically unremarkable, the additional structure of the balconies has completely altered the tower's relationship to the ground. The 1990s renovation had made the base into a wall of blank surfaces, security bars, and stairs, impeding both visual and physical access. Now, new landscaping has leveled the ground with the lobby, which has been opened up with new glazed walls. Clever decisions about where the balconies begin relative to the existing half-level shifts in the floor plates created an undercroft of varying heights that accommodates various new elements, from shared external storage and refuse disposal to gardens, a small terrace for communal facilities, and the main entry.

The additions to the tower connect to the existing slab lightly, becoming physically continuous from within, but remaining thermally and structurally separate. The stacked winter gardens imply both a literal and metaphorical growth



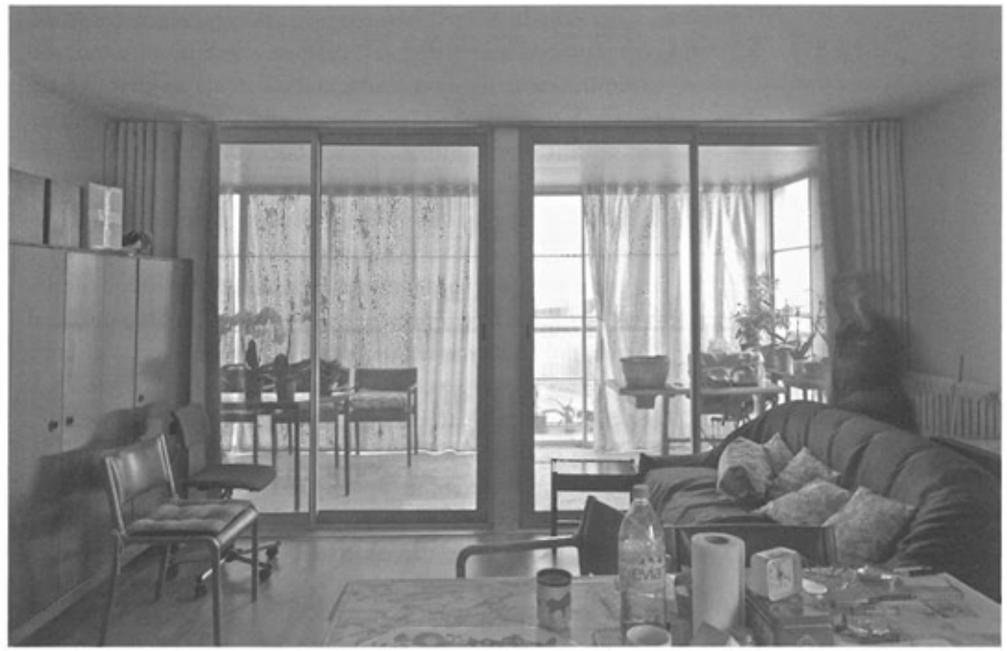
Transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre Tower. Diagram of existing facade and winter garden extensions.

– of the expanded tower, of the plant life they can shelter, of the amount of space and quality of light at the disposition of the inhabitants. Fitting for a project assembled from greenhouse materials, the winter gardens also promise to economize energy use through passive solar gain in the cold months and natural cooling in the warm months. The unheated space also provides extra square footage while not adding to the rent calculation, which for HLM residents is derived from norms related to habitable square footage.[4]

More than in either Bordeaux or Mulhouse, each winter garden at Bois-le-Prêtre forms an intermediate space that is interior relative to the outside balcony and exterior relative to the apartment. As such, the winter gardens give the units a degree of transformability they did not previously enjoy. In the larger apartments, different bedrooms are connected by access to a common winter garden, from which they can also reach the living room and kitchen. In the smaller apartments, bedrooms are accessible either from the living room or from the winter garden. Other interior modifications, such as the elimination of partitions, have tended to maximize the *séjour*, or living room, a central pivot to which kitchen, bath, bedrooms, and winter garden all connect. Larger and more diverse units were created by combining smaller ones to accommodate larger families and increase the overall desirability of the tower.

Not insignificantly, the winter garden is accentuated by the particular layering of transparency and translucence: the balcony parapet is glass; the outer membrane of the winter garden is a sliding partition composed of two-thirds translucent polycarbonate and one-third glass; the innermost partition, where the old cladding was removed, is entirely sliding glass panel. At the outer membrane, the degree of exposure or privacy is controllable by means of a lightweight solar curtain commonly used in greenhouses. At the interior membrane

4. While the additional, unheated square footage will not be added to the rent calculation for current residents, as part of the transformation's approval process a planned rent increase was agreed to by the residents to offset Paris Habitat's investment in the project. "Réfection de la tour Bois-le-Prêtre à Paris," *Metropolitains*, France Culture 1, November 6, 2011, http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-metropolitains-hommage-a-jean-dubuisson-refection-de-la-tour-bois-le-pretre-a-paris-2011-11. Special thanks to Jean-Louis Violeau for bringing this episode to my attention.



Transformation of Bois-le-Prêtre Tower. View through new facade and winter garden extension from existing apartment. Photo © Philippe Ruault.

is another, specially designed curtain with a reflective mylar face to the garden and fabric to the interior, thus serving as a visual and thermal barrier that allows the winter garden to be entirely open and exposed, entirely closed and intimate, or playing with degrees of translucence, transparency, or reflectiveness.

The architects have said little about the exterior. Indeed, Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal's polemic is that architects' preoccupation with exterior form and surface has been at the expense of interiors and the simpler considerations of everyday life. Yet the tower's effect is both considered and considerable. The outermost glass of the running balconies gives the mid-rise an indistinct edge, and despite the large amount of glazing, Bois-le-Prêtre's overall transparency remains complicated and layered. The particular combination of metal and glass is not chiefly concerned with communicating a clear image of structure. Rather, the exterior is a shimmering, fine-grained low-relief of corrugated metal, glass, polycarbonate, and woven metallic solar curtains. This shallow depth, modulated by the shifting layers of curtaining and glazing, makes it difficult to speak of a facade in the traditional sense of the term. It is an insistently vertical texture cut by the lines of the glass-edged balconies, offset in half-level shifts; a blue-green-gray-silver tone against which the random colors and forms of plants and objects placed on the balconies pick up an unusually intensity.

At Bois-le-Prêtre, two often antithetical strains of 20th-century French architectural culture – on the one hand, the commitment to lightness and metal construction characteristic of *constructeurs* such as Jean Prouvé and Edouard Albert, and on the other, the uniformity and plasticity of concrete favored by architect-planners such as Le Corbusier, Georges Candilis, or Lopez – seem to have been grafted together to produce a new hybrid. At its core is a concern for a poetics of economy together with a relentless insistence on more generous and flexible spaces. Such spatial "luxury," as opposed to minimal norms, the architects argue, is one key to the success of urban initiatives. In this particular instance, the neighborhood benefits from both an extensive redevelopment plan and a relative proximity to the city that many other *grands ensembles* do not enjoy. Even if the capacity of such dwelling spaces to shape the future of a place like Bois-le-Prêtre remains to be seen, the project's relationship to its modernist legacy is compelling at another level. Here it is less a question of style than the way in which Bois-le-Prêtre reengages aspects of that legacy – transparency, structural rationality, vertical density – while altering and rejecting others – clarity of form, tabula rasa urbanism, and the emphasis upon spatial minima. Druot, Lacaton, and Vassal's project links this reengagement to a call for a different consciousness regarding the existing infrastructure of public housing as a resource secreted within the city and whose potential can be unlocked through architectural and urban acts capable of preserving while profoundly transforming. The project's economies are modestly radical, operating simultaneously between two very different yet intertwined scales; on the one hand, that of the inhabitants who appropriate and continue to transform the spaces that have been produced, and on the other, seeking to influence public housing agencies and the policies shaping their actions. Considering the challenge of both scales, the very existence of Bois-le-Prêtre appears as a hopeful sign in an uncertain landscape.

Craig Buckley teaches at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, where he is also the director of print publications.