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HOW CAN PARIS' BANLIEUES SURVIVE?

Refurbishment of a high-rise residential building
Architects: Frédéric Druot, Lacaton & Vassal, Paris
Address: 5, bd du Bois-le-Prêtre, Paris 13
Year of construction: 1959





THE RISKY BUSINESS OF META-MORPHOSIS

The transformation of the Bois le Prêtre tower is causing a stir in the Parisian landscape. Its visual impact has opened up a sensitive debate on the economic and architectural issues involved in revamping existing social housing stock.

The project shows the spectacular results that can be achieved when performance and pleasure are introduced to a building where these features have never been known.

By Karine Dana
Photography by Torben Eskerod

THE BOIS LE PRÊTRE tower, situated in the north of the 17th district close to the Paris ring road, is unrecognisable. Its former air of sadness and dejection – an image that still afflicts the nearby Borel tower – has been well and truly obliterated. Its location – where the municipalities of Paris, Clichy and Saint-Ouen come together – is highly typical of an outlying urban area that has slowly evolved over the last 50 years. This area of Paris was shaped by the ambitious plans of architect Raymond Lopez in the 1950s, and has an elevated section of the ring road running through it, the Batignolles cemetery, utilities sites and social housing. These days, by virtue of the different uses to which it is put, it is a vulnerable, fragile area, fairly densely populated and informally focused around pockets of activity. But there's a feeling that it is about to be knocked into shape – covering some 15 hectares and with around 1,000 residents, it is part of a major urban renewal project aimed at 11 Parisian areas considered a priority. There's a hoarding on site explaining what's going on. A screen opposite the ring road shows images of offices and hotels. There's going to be a new public square and the utilities will be relocated.

Apartments are being built – new ones on the rue Rebière in particular, while the day nursery of the Bois le Prêtre tower is being demolished and rebuilt, and the Borel tower and the northern part of the adjoining block are being knocked down. The Bois le Prêtre tower, though, has a somewhat ambiguous position as an involuntary icon of a preserved past and will be spared. It is the very first undertaking in this major urban project, and looks out of place in a district that has undergone such fundamental remodelling over the years that it has lost its identity. The tower embodies a feeling of certainty that it's still possible to plan a city and the hope that there will be lasting cohesion, fluidity and tranquillity. But it's hard not to retain a touch of scepticism – it would be naive not to. Does the day nursery at the bottom of the Bois le Prêtre tower really have to go? Couldn't anything have been done with the Borel tower and block? Was there no way of preventing the rue Rebière, with its absence of shops and cafes, from looking like a dormitory town? There's a feeling that the town planners could have come up with something a bit different and applied the attitude and vision that they adopted towards the Bois le

Prêtre tower – enhancing and caring for the existing – to the whole area. The heavy urban machine, which invariably creates manufactured environments, could then have been stopped in its tracks. For the project to transform the Bois le Prêtre tower has been a long time in the making. It is the story of resistance, and the culmination of a thought process kicked off eight long years ago by the Ministry of Culture, which challenged architects to come up with an alternative to the very expensive policy of demolition and reconstruction that Jean-Louis Borloo, Minister of Urban Planning at the time, had introduced as part of the Law on Solidarity and Urban Renewal. The architects submitted an analysis in favour of transforming high-density housing estates and opposing their demolition, which they viewed as a cultural and economic travesty given that these assets were effective and often imbued with great qualities. They wanted to show they could achieve a better and more pleasing result by spending less – it costs 100,000 euro to transform an apartment, compared with 170,000 euro to demolish and rebuild it – than by building new housing.

THE MAGIC OF WINTER GARDENS It was a truly bold move. The old facades of curtain walling – double-skin asbestos-fibre parapets and inward-opening panels – have been replaced by layer upon layer of cheery-looking see-through extensions. The existing structure – comprising concrete floors and cross walls on a 7.5 metre framework that was separate from the original facade – provided an excellent base from which to make the stunning transformation. The objective was to achieve a comfortable temperature and improve on the smallness of the housing units and the lack of natural light in the communal foyers and other areas.

A further problem was that the 50-metre tower, comprising 17 floors and 96 apartments (32 with 6 rooms, 28 with 3 rooms and 36 with 2 rooms), lacked any large apartments classified as T4 or T5. During the transformation, four units were added and the surface area of all existing apartments was increased by 40% through the addition of winter gardens – unheated buffer zones capable of creating different ambiances – on the east and west facades, and a number of heated extensions created by extending the floors along the north and south sidewalls. All the apartments have been rewired and replumbed and had new ventilation units installed.

When viewed from below, the sparkling facade of the apartments in strong sunlight causes the viewer to raise an eyebrow. It soon becomes clear that this is not a cheap trick but hints at the cunning design inside. The apartments have been fitted with blinds more commonly seen in greenhouses. And because some of the blinds are open and some are closed, they create an unexpectedly lively air around the winter gardens – which measure 7.5 m by 3 m and come with a prefabricated metal frame and concrete floor – and make them look deeper than they really are. Glimpses of life.

It takes a bit of nerve to envisage a building so clearly when there's already one in existence... Passers-by enjoy imagining what it's like to live in one of these glazed cabins. They look soft and unobtrusive, and not all of them are fully fitted out. The local residents haven't had much time to get used to them. One striking feature is that you can make out people sitting in them, coming and going, watering the plants, going about their business. They enter and leave as they would a small house. The facade is definitely unique. In fact, it's not a facade at all, but an urban feature.

"By allowing the residents to define the usage and climate of their new surroundings, this project allows them to change their living space like a stage set – something rarely encountered because of a lack of alternatives and interior space."

Karine Dana

Lifts have been attached to the facade to provide street-level access to the apartments. Communal lobbies and other areas have been re-modelled. The old uniform sterility on all sides is gone. The safety doors are transparent, as are the cross walls. Each landing gives the feeling of a protected external area, a ground floor in mid-air. It would be good to see them put to new use, now that they are so nice and bright. They are no longer cells, but distinct spaces.

This is an ambitious project, designed around sympathetic and enjoyable relationships with space. Relationships such as these are very rarely considered in the production of social housing, which is driven so much by saving energy that the key principle of sustainability – people's attachment to where they live – is relegated to the bottom of the pecking order.

SUDDENLY, THE INTERIOR SWITCHES

We enter a single-aspect two-room apartment. It originally measured 45 m², but the floor of the living room and the bedroom has been extended to make an 18 m² winter garden and a 1 m wide balcony. It's fitted with triple glazing and looks really inviting. The existing curtain walling has been replaced by a full-length glazed facade comprising aluminium sliding doors with a flush sill. It opens on to an intermediate space with fixed and mobile panels glazed in polycarbonate. A balcony with transparent screens runs along the length of the new facade and – like an open border – provides the winter garden with the backdrop it needs to be an inside space. In addition to increasing the living area and light, this project allows residents to change the habitable space according to the season. The existing floor plan for this area remains the same, with the kitchen located in

the living room and receiving indirect daylight. Because it opens onto the outside and is brighter, the space becomes a retreat, like a viewing platform. The bedroom, which previously had only one entrance, is connected to the living room via the winter garden. It is no longer a dead end, but a starting point, which improves the size and proportions of the living room enormously. The winter garden is a sensitive space, like a skin. It becomes the main room during mild weather, freeing up the kitchen. In cold weather, the residents will most likely move back into the existing living room to sit, while the winter garden becomes a safe place for children to play and for gardening. By allowing the residents to define the usage and climate of their new surroundings, this project allows them to change their living space like a stage set – something rarely encountered because of a lack of alternatives and interior space. Residents can create an ambiance to suit their mood, depending on the position of the sun (using curtains), the amount of air that comes in (there are several points of ingress), and the level of intimacy created in the sitting area. They can sit in different areas and try out different combinations and positions according to the weather. The residents were in situ when the works took place, so they were very much involved in taking the project forward and adapting it. This was a very challenging process, but one that started a relationship and helped the residents gradually come to understand the architects' intentions. They were able to see that relationships with new things are all the stronger if they develop alongside existing situations. This is a much more powerful experience than simply entering a new environment because it creates a new vision from two states of existence. Although

the apartments did not undergo a massive restructuring, they have all profoundly changed. Such a switch can be highly confusing: life contains the same things, but is driven by something completely different.

A winter garden cuts heating costs in half, and at the moment costs are not charged according to the increase in habitable area. In France, heating is often approached from the angle of materials and barriers, but when you go into an apartment in the Bois le Prêtre tower, you understand how beneficial it is to view this issue in terms of openings, light and flows.

It goes without saying that we need to return to the tower in several months' time to find out how its occupants are transforming it. But in any event, this operation has now set a benchmark for creating social housing in France. It must not become an exception. It must inspire, be reproduced and set in motion as many ways of increasing existing capacity as there are situations. It represents a new approach to city economy, and a step further than anyone has ever gone before.

Karine Dana, a qualified architect, was section editor at the French architecture review *amc* for 12 years and now works as an independent author and journalist. She regularly works with Lacaton & Vassal and has contributed to their new monograph, which is due to be published by GG.





Interview with Ms Jean-Charles

"Once the walls had been taken down,
I could see it was going to be magnificent!"

Ms Jean-Charles, 44, has lived on the 16th floor of the Bois le Prêtre tower since 2000. She was really pleased with the transformation to her apartment and told us how her way of living had been radically changed.



How was this on-site transformation project explained to you?

There were lots of meetings, which created a much closer relationship with the locals. At first, everyone was sceptical. The older people were anxious about packing away their memories in boxes and having to get rid of things. But I was up for it. This project embodied a new start. At the beginning, no one believed it would work. We thought it was impossible to do this sort of thing. The architects converted an apartment into a show apartment so that the residents could get a better idea of what was going to happen. From that moment on, we were really able to imagine it and get on board.

What was it like living in the tower while the works were going on?

I was one of the first residents to have the works done. Because my daughter is asthmatic, we spent two and a half months in temporary accommodation. It was difficult living there, even though we were very nicely set up and looked after. What kept us going was the project itself. Once the walls had been taken down and the existing facade removed, I could see it was going to be magnificent!

During the works, the firm and the architects came to see me frequently to ask me to choose the wallpaper, the colours and the tiles. I think it's really important to involve people and give us the right to change our lives. The advice

the architects gave me on fitting out the rest of my apartment was very useful too. I really appreciated these meetings.

What was your initial feeling about the transformation?

My apartment was one of the smallest in the tower, about 50 m², and now it's about 80 m², and my rent hasn't changed! The transformation has really changed our life style and the way we live, even though very little was done to our existing apartment. It was repainted, and the bathroom was renovated; it's better equipped now. The only real change is the extra space, this extra room. We now have space, which is the most important thing, and lots of light. You feel less enclosed. I used to live in the countryside in Martinique, so I really appreciate having this freedom. But I don't know what this room is going to be like in winter as it's not heated.

What do you do in the winter garden?

It's become my main room. I have breakfast there, tend my plants and I read. And I write there – that's my passion. This place is very calming; it's my little Zen corner. I feel calm and inspired when I'm in it. And I never go in my old living room now! Even when guests come round, we automatically eat in the winter garden. And I get some great sunsets in the evening.

How do you manage this space in terms of climate and maintenance?

When it's hot outside, it feels like there's a sort of natural climate control. The awnings are effective so it's always cool. Before the transformation, when it was hot outside, the living room would be like an oven – it was unbearable. I had to shut all the windows and doors.

As for maintaining the space, I've bought a steam cleaner for the windows. So they're pretty easy to clean now.

Has this new space changed your relationship with the city?

Absolutely! The panorama means I can see new things and feel closer to outdoors. The city always has something going on. I feel like I'm more involved. Before, when I opened the windows, I used to get a real feeling of vertigo.

I think that if they carried on with this project, it could change people's mindsets.

Changing things inside a person's home can be all that's needed to change how they view things.



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Ms Jean-Charles



Mrs Dorsemaine, 90, has lived on the 6th floor of the tower for more than 30 years. Although she was upset by the works to start with, she has just started to enjoy some major benefits from the transformation.



Did you feel involved in the way this project was carried out?

Yes, I was very active in the many meetings that took place about the project. I got involved to defend the residents and I think people still respect me for that today. My husband and I found it difficult to visualise the project. We didn't think it would be possible to extend the apartments out into space. But we were reassured by the fact that there were balconies. My husband has since died; he didn't see the final result...

I think I might be the only resident who stayed in their apartment throughout the works. I was scared they would break my things. The works were very disjointed and caused me a lot of inconvenience – there was dust everywhere all the time. I've only just started to enjoy my apartment and see the positive aspects.

And what are they?

The living room hasn't changed but as it adjoins the winter garden, you get a totally different feeling of depth. It gives the impression that this room is larger, and most of all that you're no longer confined by the walls. That's very important, even though there are lots of glass surfaces to clean now.

And I've put a desk where my bedroom used to be and moved my bedroom next to the winter garden. It's much more pleasant like that because it leads out to somewhere and there are two ways of getting to it now.

Is your apartment more comfortable now, in particular in terms of warmth and air quality?

I love the warmth, it doesn't bother me. I have no problems managing it. I move around to find where it's hot, not to avoid it. The small external awning is more than enough to manage it. The thermal curtain seems useless to me. I told the architects at the very beginning that I didn't want it because it wasn't to my taste. I already have double-lined curtains which are just the job. I've always felt good in my apartment. It's different now. There's more air and I can sit in several places. I can walk around. But I've always felt good here, even before the works. This room gives me more space, which I appreciate. I can put small things here without cluttering up my living room. I sit on the sofa or in the armchair; I plant herbs – parsley and chives. I like tending this bit of outdoors. I have more options for moving around.

Also, I often go on to the balcony and put other small things there. I really like having air. I see the surroundings differently now. Last night I watched the sunset, and I could see Mont Valérien really easily, over there, directly opposite. I really should go up there one day.





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