speech: доступное жилье
affordable housing
anne lacaton
more space, more light, more green: a new vision of social housing
interview conducted by denis bocquet
Anne Lacaton was born in 1955 in the South-West of France. She studied architecture in Bordeaux. In 1987 she founded, with Jean-Philippe Vassal (born in 1954 in Casablanca) the Lacaton & Vassal Architecture Studio. During the 1990's they mostly worked on individual houses in the region of Bordeaux, working on the relationship between the house and the context it was conceived for, and promoting an approach to housing that already insisted on the quality of life as perceived and experimented by the inhabitants in their daily life. One of their first important public commission was for a new building for the University of Grenoble, in the French Alps. Here again, they envisioned a building where space and light were provided generously by the architects, with the intent of making life inside the building a more positive experience, connected to the outside rich natural landscape. But they soon also developed, while continuing to work on public buildings and museums, a specific vision of social housing, which made their studio one of the most creative in France. Their main idea, which led them to the invention of new housing spaces, was again to give dwellers more space, more light and more freedom. This resulted in a posture of critical re-examination of existing housing standards inherited from the 1950s, the inertia of which was seen as a limitation for the invention of new forms of collective housing. With their vast spaces, their attention to the context and their trust in the appropriation capacity of housing spaces by the dwellers, and their belief that every operation is unique and deserves to be treated as such, they contributed to a profound renewal in the vision of collective housing in France. Their Cité Manifeste, social housing project in Mulhouse was particularly remarked, as well as realizations in Saint-Nazaire. In 2008 they were awarded the Grand Prix National d'Architecture, the most prestigious architecture award in France and they won in 2011 with Frédéric Drout the Equerre d'Argent, for the rehabilitation of the Bois-Prêtre housing tower in Paris. This completely re-invented tower became their signature project and gave them international recognition. The tower had been built by architect Raymond Lopez in 1959 in the wake of his Paris experiments of 1957 and had become, in spite of an effort of renovation in the 1990s, a symbol of the decrepitude of modernist realizations of that time. This realization gave ideas by Lacaton & Vassal and Drout, against the demolition/reconstruction dominant paradigm in urban regeneration a huge impact and illustrated their concept of renovation without eviction. The façade was transformed into winter gardens and balconies.
Важнее всего обща философия процесса, а не оригинальный дизайн каждого используемого предмета из стекла или стали. Поэтому мы не имеем ничего против использования промышленно-разработанных элементов. Но мы настаиваем на их оригинальной сборке и использовании их как части точных дизайнов, в котором нашим единственным ориентиром является общее качество будущего здания.

ДБ Благодаря оригинальности вашей работы вы добились признания во Франции и международном значении. У вас создается впечатление, что ваше мнение о способности архитекторов касательно абсурдности процесса было услышано, или же это подразумевает более обыкновенного жилищного строительства на освоении образовательной системы?

АЛ Когда мы начинали работать в этой сфере, больше всего в постоянной критике современного жилищного строительства нас шокировало...
решение людей, ответственных за восстановление городской среды, уничтожить целый подвид жилых, особенно не задумываясь о его потенциальных достоинствах. Поэтому да, возможно, можно назвать судьбу некоторых наших коллег, которые его разрушили, было частично уннесено, возможно, действительно, подход к этой проблеме стал более деликатным, чем десять лет назад. Но, даже если наши проекты были приняты с удовольствием, а мы получили за них престижные награды, я до конца не уверен, что мы сильно продвинулись. Очень часто проекты реконструкции носят базовый характер. Казалось бы, доля важных не вносит, им делают новый фасад, и сносят новые инфраструктурные объекты, но общее качество жилья, а значит, и качество жизни, остаются прежними. Внутреннее пространство остается незенным, и бессмысленно устраиваемые жилищные стандарты, разработанные в 50-е годы прошлого века, сохраняются еще по меньшей мере еще несколько десятилетий. Создается двойственная ситуация, и я считаю своим долгом, что посредством работ способствовать изменению представления о пространстве, свете и жилищных условиях.

ДБ Социальное жилье – это, конечно, лишь часть вашей архитектурной деятельности. Вы задуманы и в других сферах, таких как строительство образовательных учреждений, музеев и даже проектирование в целом. Чем вы всегда руководствуетесь в решениях какой бы то ни было задачи?

АЛ Ваша жизнь не проходит только в стенах вашего собственного дома. Это и есть объединяющая черта: мы хотим, чтобы жилье было комфортно: везде, и в школе, и на работе, и во время досуга, и в родных местах. Идея использования ограниченного пространства в комнате случайно не сводится только к нашему жилищу: пространству это единый опыт с множеством граней. Именно так мы и сформировали свой подход. Мы отказались от использования конкретных категорий, которые только ограничивают восприятие. Если вы примете какую-либо категорию вместе со всеми её предопределёнными характеристиками, вы оказываетесь в замкнутом круге. Поэтому мы всегда протанцовали открытые подходы, откликнувшись на категоризацию и не можем по-иному относиться к какой-то сфере, в которой тот момент должен быть работать. Что касается социального жилья, мы не могли допустить, чтобы возможность жилья и жилец чувствовать себя внутри своего дома зависела от социально-экономических условий. Как архитекторы, мы не видим смысла в ограничениях, в том, как могут быть жильцы в том или ином здании.

ДБ Поэтому архитектура – это из ключевых принципов в вашем подходе.

АЛ Да, это так. Я думаю, нам нужно доверять людям право по-своему распорядиться тем пространством, которое мы им предоставляем. Квартиры должны быть поддаваемы передаче, они не должны быть статичными. То, что создает архитектор, это не священное место, к которому жильцы должны как-то приложить и назначить: это пространство для жильцов, которое должно ощущать вашу собственность. Поэтому именно частные дома служили нам вдохновением, а частные дома больше возможностей. Как архитекторы, мы привыкли думать в категориях пространств, не в категориях неизменных форм. Пространства должны быть гибкими. Я привыкшая с ощей, что разрывания жилья на части и социальное чувство отпадает. Чтобы не продолжать поглощать пространство вокруг наших разрастающихся городов, нам нужно научиться создавать промежуточные формы жилья, объединяющие качество жилья, личное пространство, чувство уюта, присущее частным домам, и компактность многосемейных жилых зданий. Качество не должно быть более пропорционально плодности населения. Я даже думаю, что чем меньше мы с пространством, тем лучше решить глобальные проблемы с плотностью населения.
Denis Bocquet  With your achievements in Paris and Mulhouse, among other operations, you are now known on the international scene as one of the inventors of a new way of conceiving social housing. How did you come to such an achievement in the evolution of your own work?

Anne Lacaton  What we were interested in was the question of housing in general, whatever the context, the format and the type. We have always been reluctant to the use of the term of social housing, which for us shouldn’t constitute a specific category. Working in the context of subsidized operations doesn’t require one to change his own way of thinking and of imagining the best possible living conditions for the people. There is no fundamental difference between the conception of private housing buildings and social housing. This is how we came to the issue: through a more general reflection on housing. And then came the competitions and the single projects in cities like Mulhouse, Saint-Nazaire and Paris. What is different however when you work on social housing is the type of financing: working with public funds requires specific procedures. But we always kept in mind what was the main question for us: what are we able to propose in the field of housing that could help raise the quality of life and the sense of appropriation of their own living spaces by the dwellers. Our experience of designing and building individual houses might have helped us doing so. We always insisted on the fact that it was important to bring some of the positive aspects of such individual houses into collective housing projects, at least in terms of light, space, view and sense of feeling at home. Density and the superposition of habitation units are absolutely no reason for the abandon of high expectations in terms of quality of life. For us, the work of the architect begins from the inside: starting from the point of view of the future.
experience of the dweller in his own space is a guarantee against the constraints of a thinking that would come to this at the end of a long chain of causes and consequences.

DB You also promoted a new perspective on existing social housing projects, refusing the fatality of demolitions.

AL This idea indeed has also been important in our vision of our role. We work in a context where the state has been promoting for now a decade a policy of urban renovation based upon demolition and a constantly negative view on the existing. But why should we demolish such a vast quantity of buildings which do have qualities and are relatively young? The starting intent of those who conceived them was generous. I think we have to respect it, even if it must be improved. We have to reinvent it. The initial idea was to give everyone the opportunity of accessing decent living conditions. In spite of a series of problems due to the rapidity of the construction, as well as to planning concepts which are now outdated, these buildings do have qualities. It is also a matter of urban sustainability. In terms of energy and resource consumption it is much better to reuse the existing than to demolish and rebuild. The cost, both financial and ecological, of the 120,000 apartments France has demolished in the past years is absurd. This is why we came to the idea of promoting alternative solutions (together with a friend architect, Frédéric Druet). We started with what we considered as the real assets of existing buildings: their generally robust structure, the views and also above all, the people living there. The rest of the technical features is of course often outdated, but it is normal after 50 or even 30 years. We wanted to start from the positive elements and from there to add what was lacking. More light, more air, more space were the main directions we chose to work on. The price for this kind of perspective is only a third from what a traumatic demolition/reconstruction process would cost. It is always a good deal, for all actors: the financiers, who are given the opportunity to
save a lot of money, but also the inhabitants, who avoid the traumatic phase of the eviction and of the blast to their memories, and I would say the notion of urbanty in general.

**DB** But this method poses a lot of practical problems, starting with the necessity of working in spaces still occupied by their inhabitants.

**AL** Yes, of course, the method requires a series of organizational solutions and a specific attention to details. Working in occupied spaces demands a peculiar working site methodology. We proceed apartment by apartment. Every single living space is unique and deserves to be treated as such. Our philosophy is to add qualities to the existing on a set of precise questions, the thermal properties of the building and its acoustic properties counting among the most important. Our goal is also to add 20 to 50m² additional space to each apartment in order to let people breathe. It’s fundamental as for the quality of life and the perceived comfort of a living space. Our main keyword is pleasure and beauty. Our philosophy is to make them enter into the obvious vocabulary of social housing.

**DB** Your idea of beauty applied to social housing also connects to gardens and green spaces. How do you manage to introduce this dimension into your projects? And what about the question of the additional costs implied by your quest for more quality?

**AL** It is of course much easier with new buildings than when we deal with the renovation of existing projects. But the idea is to always facilitate the access to and the view on green spaces. In Mulhouse and in Saint-Nazaire, we insisted on the positive effects on the quality of life of small private gardens connected to as many apartments as possible. Of course, you can develop this kind of vision only with partners who accept it and find it positive. It has been the case in these cities, and I’m sure the idea is now more generally accepted. Of course, quality has a cost, but the adequate architectural design can sometimes provide surprisingly simple solutions and our goal is to provide this quality without increasing the cost and within the budget given for the project. We also try as much as possible to use technical solutions and materials that already exist and can be found among standard commercial products: you don’t have to reinvent everything at every step of your work. What counts is the general philosophy of the process, not the original design of every piece of steel or glass used in this process. That’s why we have nothing against the idea of using industrially developed elements. But we insist on their original assemblage and use as part of a precise design in which the general quality we want the building to have constitute our only road map.

**DB** You have won recent recognition in France for the originality of your work, and a lot of international attention. Do you have the impression that your points about the absurdity of the logic of demolition have been heard, or is it only a small drop in a still adverse ocean of inertia?

**AL** When we began working in this field, what shocked us most in the systematic critique of the heritage of modern housing was that those in charge of urban regeneration policies had chosen to tear down a whole typology without seriously examining its potential assets. So, yes, maybe, our discourse, as well as the one a series of colleagues with whom we share this sensibility, has been partially heard, and yes, maybe, things are now more nuanced than a decade ago. But, even if our projects have received positive attention, and even if we received prestigious awards for them, I’m not sure that thing really evolved after all. Very often, renovation projects are still quite basic. When housing towers are not destroyed, they are given new facades and new insulation features, but in the end, the overall quality of the dwellings as for quality of life doesn’t really change. Internal spaces remain the same, and the inertia of standards of living conceptualized in the 1950’s is prolonged for another few decades. It is very ambiguous in my opinion, and I think we should take the opportunity of such renovation works to promote a real shift in the very conception of space, light and living conditions.

**DB** Social housing is of course a portion of your activities as an architect. You are also very active in other fields, like educational facilities, museums and even planning in general. What is the common feature in your approach?
AL Living somewhere does not only refer to your private home. This is the common feature: we want people to feel at ease in all the spaces they live in, from school to work and from leisure to home. The idea of being the user of a definite space is in no way limited to our own private living space: it is a daily experience with multiple facets. It is also the way we conceived our approach to social housing, refusing to lock ourselves into specific categories, with the consequence of absorbing all the limitations in thinking that relate to them. If you accept the category and all the chain of predetermined features that relate to it, you’re like in a circle, with not exit. That’s why we always tried to adopt this open approach on both sides of the question, refusing the category and refusing to think separately for every field we had the chance to be called to intervene in. As for social housing, it was really unthinkable for us to differentiate the desire of the inhabitants of feeling well at home according to socio-financial categories. As architects, there is absolutely no reason to integrate this kind of limitation not only in design, but also in the very conception of what life in the built environment should look like.

DB That’s why appropriation is also one of the key-words of your approach.

AL Yes, indeed: I think we have to trust the people’s capacity of inventing the best use for the space we propose. Apartments have to be adaptable, they have to integrate the notion of movement. What the architect creates is not a sacred space in which the dweller has to fit: it’s a space for the dwellers, in which enough elements are to be found for a genuine appropriation. That’s why the idea of the individual house as an inspiration is so important: it multiplies the possibilities. As architects, we have to think in terms of space, and not in terms of rigid forms. Spaces have to be ductile and adaptable. Even the dichotomy between individual houses and collective buildings should be abandoned: it order not to continue consuming space around our sprawling cities, we have to accept intermediate forms which provide both the quality of live, the privacy and the sense of comfort of individual houses and the compact dimension of collective residential projects. Quality is not the contrary of density, I even think that the more one is generous on space the more global goals of density are achievable.