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Grand Parc, a postwar social housing complex consisting of three buildings, was to be demolished. The architects proposed to keep

PHILIPP OSWALT: What is the role of the architect in society?

Jean-Philippe Vassal: Our task is to create spaces. To do so we must understand the situation and adapt to the given context. It’s about transformation. We try to work in the most direct and simple way, to understand, to listen, to work, and search from this situation. Our work is related to culture, art, politics, and sociology; it’s about research. And it’s about being in our time. We want to develop our architecture like that; it’s the opposite of tabula rasa. In French, we call it “situation capable”—finding the possibilities offered by the situation.

Architect (2013): Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal, Frédéric Ducrot, Christophe Hulin
Client: Aquitaine, home public office of Bordeaux Métropole.
Location: Bordeaux, France
Date: 2016
All drawings © Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal, Frédéric Ducrot, Christophe Hulin
All photography © Philippe Ruault

Jean-Philippe Vassal: Precisely. Architects inscribe themselves into the situation by finding the path to follow, and by taking existing materials and organizing and playing with them. Take, for example, Place Léon Aucoc in Bordeaux, where we did nothing, and by intentionally doing nothing we were really architects. We defined the project and so established our authorship.

PO: According to what Luigi Snozzi told us at our project Bauhaus conference in September 2015, Paulo Mendes da Rocha made an irritating, but inspiring statement: “Nature is just dirt”—implying that doing architecture is also doing something against the context, against nature. So by inventing something new, human culture makes things that oppose what is given. What would you say to this statement? Is your work really entirely explained by the idea of working from the existing? Doesn’t architecture sometimes need to make a statement, to insert something foreign into an existing environment?

JPV: Perhaps it depends on the situation. In the Brazilian Amazon, this might be relevant (laughs). But I am interested in a different kind of jungle, in the city as a new ground: new buildings, old buildings, ruins, bridges, trees, forests, grass, little patches of humidity where flowers are growing, and so on. I can also say that I have no particular connection to or love for these elements. Sometimes I don’t like them, but I see them all as possible tools, as resources, existing materials, opportunities, capacities. You can forget them, or partly use them, but we want to use them to their fullest potential, and adapt them to the objectives of the brief. Frei Otto’s ecohousing project in Berlin’s Tiergarten is interesting in that respect: even with this huge, radical structure he gave thought to all of the plot’s roots and trees, so that the building totally disappears into the forest. Ultimately, the project was made of two elements: what exists and what he added. We do not produce objects; we just work on systems in relation to other systems: the air that circulates through the apartment, the sun that illuminates it. The view from the window is also part of the apartment. The habitat is created within these relationships; the apartment is as large as how far you can see from its windows.

PO: So would you say that your architecture is less about creating an object, and more a machine that generates situations, connections, and relationships?

JPV: Yes, for example, when we refer to making “apartments as villas,” it means that if we build a residential tower, we

Jean-Philippe Vassal, in conversation with Philipp Oswalt

Designing the Brief
will try to provide a balcony or winter garden so that even on the 15th floor you can go outside or circle around the flat and regain a sense of life at ground level.

DESIGNING THE BRIEF
PO: Most people assume that the client defines the task and that the architect is simply a service provider who implements it. But you reject this idea in many of your projects and reframe the design brief in a very substantial way. Why should architects need to reinvent the brief, and what possibilities do they have to do so?
JPV: It’s important to listen carefully and respond to the client, but also to try and imagine what is behind what they are saying, to understand their needs, objectives, and intentions—and not the ones that they think are the only plausible answers? If you carry out a brief exactly as it is made, you will simply stick to the budget and won’t make any sense, but it often defines the task and what the architect is expected to articulate his dreams and wishes. So we decided to work intensively on making the most of the budget. We approached the budget as a material. The optimization of the budget is a question of the optimization of the material that you employ, of the economy of a building. As architects today, it’s interesting to engage in this question of economy and to push the limits as far as you can. So, we take maximum volume with a minimum of material and money. But we also have to think about things in terms of cost, dimensions, and on what is in the public’s best interest.

PO: What do you mean by invention?
JPV: Observe, listen, understand, work, search, and hopefully find all the possibilities that the situation yields. There are things that exist which the client does not think are possible to use. The architect needs to look beyond the brief, there are things that exist which the client does not think are possible to use. The architect needs to look beyond the brief, and that the architect is not limited by the budget. Or offer generous space instead of offering standard requirements, or freedom. For example, in France, we do not have enough housing, so it’s in the public’s interest to address this, and try to do the maximum with less. Or perhaps do two things instead of one at the same budget. Or offer generous space instead of reducing it.

PO: That was a private client—what about the public sector?
JPV: We can take the School of Architecture in Nantes. Instead of 10,000 square meters, we made it 25,000 square meters. We stuck to the budget and took into consideration all of the requirements—regarding the dimensions of the plot, the program, and the intentions. The jury and the state client recognized that we were offering more than the other proposals, and that ours was in the public’s best interest.

PO: It’s probably because our first client—when commissioned the Latapie house—had a budget that normally would have allowed for a very small built. But in the course of our discussions, he decided to articulate his dreams and wishes. So we decided to work intensively on making the most of the budget. We approached the budget as a material. The optimization of the budget is a question of the optimization of the material that you employ, of the economy of a building. As architects today, it’s interesting to engage in this question of economy and to push the limits as far as you can. So, we take maximum volume with a minimum of material and money. But we also have to think about things in terms of cost, dimensions, and on what is in the public’s best interest.

PO: How did you come to reframe your design approach by questioning a project’s economic model and specifications in terms of the relationship between surface area, space, cubic meters, and cost?
JPV: It’s not the competition that is important, but what is built in the end. Sure, you’ve got standard requirements, defined in terms of cubic meters or square meters. And there is a very important link between the number of square meters and the budget. But a building that is made by Zaha Hadid will not cost the same as a building by Nouvel, or by us, or another architect. This doesn’t make any sense, but it often defines the program of a building. As architects today, it’s interesting to engage in this question of economy and to push the limits as far as you can. So, we take maximum volume with a minimum of material and money. But we also have to think about things in terms of cost, dimensions, and on what is in the public’s best interest.

PO: In France, competitions are differently organized than in Germany. Only a few architects are chosen to submit a project. In a public competition in Germany, on the other hand, you normally have at least 70, 100, or even 500 submissions. As a result, there tends to be little willingness to explore a profound but unusual argument. Judges just go by the images submitted, because it’s not really possible to have an in-depth understanding of so many projects. Our approach is based not only on you as the architect listening to the client, but also on the client listening to you as the architect.

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PO: In Floirac near Bordeaux.
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PO: The tower block was due to be demolished. But a few people at the office of the Mayor in Paris who had read our little booklet on the PLUS study wanted to try and imagine what is behind what they are saying, to understand their needs, objectives, and intentions—and not the ones that they think are the only plausible answers? If you carry out a brief exactly as it is made, you will simply stick to the budget and won’t make any sense, but it often defines the task and what the architect is expected to articulate his dreams and wishes. So we decided to work intensively on making the most of the budget. We approached the budget as a material. The optimization of the budget is a question of the optimization of the material that you employ, of the economy of a building. As architects today, it’s interesting to engage in this question of economy and to push the limits as far as you can. So, we take maximum volume with a minimum of material and money. But we also have to think about things in terms of cost, dimensions, and on what is in the public’s best interest.

INVENTING THE CLIENT
PO: Your PLUS study on public housing from the postwar period and the results you drew from there, go a step further. You refamed the brief so that you would also need to find a new client. How did that come about?
JPV: Together with Frédéric Druart, we were long disappointed by the demolition of so many beautiful modern buildings in the northeast of Bordeaux in the late 1990s, Cité Lumineuse, which had these fantastic views over the river. All the arguments for the demolition were false. And in the following years, the policy of the French government on demolition became even stronger.

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PO: The first project that emerged from that study was the Tour Bois le Prêtre in Paris. How did that come about?
JPV: That was a private client—what about the public sector?
JPV: We can take the School of Architecture in Nantes. Instead of 10,000 square meters, we made it 25,000 square meters. We stuck to the budget and took into consideration all of the requirements—regarding the dimensions of the plot, the program, and the intentions. The jury and the state client recognized that we were offering more than the other proposals, and that ours was in the public’s best interest.
got in touch and commissioned us to refurbish another housing block. Later, when he became the director of a large social housing association in Bordeaux, he organized a competition for another large-scale commission with 530 units, fully occupied, which we won. Although we completed those three projects entirely or almost entirely to our plans, we also worked on plenty of others that failed: in La Courneuve, in Grenoble, Toulouse, Rézé…

PO: What was the difference between the projects that succeeded and the ones that failed?

JPV: Sometimes you don’t succeed in reinventing the brief. When something is already planned, it’s quite difficult to change it, even with the strongest economic arguments. For example in Berlin with the Palace of the Republic. The demolition was a political decision, and nothing else was possible — none of the explanations, the convincing arguments, not even its inventive interim use.

PO: So if the political process has already formalized a decision, it is very hard to change things?

JPV: To go against the national program of urban renewal is very difficult, even if you meet people who agree with you. Credits are granted, and the state gives you money to demolish your buildings when you hesitate. There are both economic and strategic interests in transferring a “problematic” population to different areas. With the first project in Paris, Tour Bois le Prêtre, the situation was more open because the tower is not in any of the suburban areas that are defined by law as a zone urbaine sensible (sensitive urban zone) and included in the program. There was an idea to demolish the building, but it had not yet been formally decided by the City of Paris. In Bordeaux, it was the same: little care had been given to the three big housing blocks over the 20 last years because people thought they would be demolished. The situation got worse and worse, but a concrete decision had never been made.

PO: Could you also get funding from the national government for the transformation?

JPV: No, that’s precisely why it was difficult. The housing associations didn’t really want to demolish the buildings. The loan for the buildings that were built in the 1960s and 1970s was already paid off, and they were making a profit on the rents. So the government said, “We will give you money for the demolition,” so they would only have to pay for the construction of the new buildings. During the first years, 110,000 apartment units were demolished, and only 100,000 rebuilt, for a cost of 15 billion euros, at a time when more than 1 million people were searching for affordable or social housing. It was an incredible waste of money. We could easily show that non-demolition, just an ambitious transformation, without funding, was still much more economically efficient than demolition and new construction with funding.

PO: So far, the projects you worked on tended to be located inside the city lines— and not in the villes nouvelles, like Évry-sur-Seine, Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, or Marne-la-Vallée, many of which are beset by serious social problems. Critics have said that these places also suffer from a fundamental urbanistic problem, that they do not work as a social space.

JPV: We worked on a few projects there, such as La Courneuve—and it was indeed a more difficult situation. In the last 15 years, around ten tower blocks have been demolished there, one after the other. We encountered young people...
who had to constantly move, because their apartment buildings were demolished one after the next. The violence is not coming from the buildings themselves, but from their demolition. I don’t think it’s a problem of architecture or urban planning. Sometimes the buildings could have been better, but in fact you have the same typology in these suburbs as you have on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, only the latter have large balconies and a view of the sea. So we thought it should be possible to add them. The problem is that nothing has really been done for the past 30 years in terms of services or transportation. The poorest population has been systematically neglected. It doesn’t mean that more money must be spent. The solution is to be much more ambitious while spending much less money. A project of transformation, not demolition; a delicate and gentle project, not a violent one. If we could add a new living room and open up the view, it would make for a fantastic, luxurious apartment.

PO: You conducted the PLUS study in 2004. What type of project or planning issue would you like to address today?

JPV: I think that housing is the most interesting challenge, not limited to the apartment, but starting from that and extending to all parts of the city, to streets and landscapes, with the idea of inhabiting everywhere—with comfort, pleasure, and space for each and every one of us. The city is a house. From the idea of the loft, we can imagine housing in existing capacities, which can be added to, transformed, and multiplied. If you demolish something it takes you back to zero; you cannot multiply anything. What’s interesting with multiplication is that it’s a system that grows very quickly.

THE USER

PO: The user seems to play an important role in your work. How do you relate to the user?

JPV: If you know the user, it’s easier. Mr. Latapie, for example, was very clear and precise in defining his needs. So we never invented possible wishes for him; we worked with his wishes. And he never took on our role as architects.

But sometimes you don’t know the users’ wishes. For example, when you have a social housing project, you work for a company that will rent out the flats later. In that case, we try to develop a situation of simplicity and freedom. What’s easier can be more easily adapted. Something larger, for example is easier to adapt than something smaller. A fully transparent facade is more adaptable than a concrete facade with a few little windows. With a glass facade you have more possibilities to control the light—to filter it, make it dark, retreat from it, or not—than when you live behind the little windows, because you cannot break the concrete around them. It’s about the question of quality and quantity (or diversity) of space, linked with the idea of freedom, which offers a multiplicity of choices. And very often, it’s cheaper to work like this, because it’s much more simple and efficient. We try to push the possibilities to the maximum. Inhabiting is the most essential question—not only for housing, for a single apartment, but also for an architecture school, or any program: you are an inhabitant of a university, a school, a library, or a museum, an office, a street, a city.

PO: Would you speak of a certain kind of unfurnishedness in your architecture, where the spatial experience becomes completed by the user?

JPV: I would not say unfinished; I would say “appropriate.” Our buildings are close to finished; for users it should not be difficult to adapt the space to the situation they want or would like to have at some point. There is a moment in every project where it’s better to stop as an architect, because if you take one step more, you might limit the freedom of the user. Palais de Tokyo was not unfinished for us; it was precisely the moment where it would be interesting for artists to deal with the space. That’s the kind of situation that offers freedom and reveals actual possibilities.

PO: Your partner Anne Lacaton once said that you do not want to impose a particular way of life on the users. Even though you identify a lot with the modern movement, you reject the functionalist idea that the architect should optimize a building’s function by precisely defining how it should be used. Instead, you focus on the usability.

JPV: There are many reasons why function shouldn’t define the volume or the architecture. What exists now will perhaps be different in ten years: buildings are changeable. The important thing is the maximum of capacity. We focus on providing floors and spaces with different qualities. We approach floors like the ground: almost all of them go from inside, to intermediate spaces, to outside.

It’s more about the idea of a space, its characteristics and dimensions—spaces that are more or less light, narrow, or wide. Such qualities allow plenty of functions to happen. You define the frame and the space, with a skeleton or envelope. But not every space has to allow every thing. One thing is possible here and other things are possible there. A space of nomadism is what enables a sedentary position.

PO: Different from most architects, when you publish your work you mostly show photographs of the space in use. So the idea of the object is not the object in itself, but how the object is used by the user. And it only becomes a complete architecture when it is used?
becoming more a symbolic gesture than I see a potential danger of informality idea of informality. In two of your projects, way every time. That limits their freedom. It's like a machine with the inhabitant as a state, the context, and so on. This seems to be the most obvious and ecolog- the place, the context, and so on. This seems to be the most obvious and ecolog- the maximum of possibilities, to adapt to tools—doors, sliding doors, curtains, used to market the place. We have worked on areas such as the Neuf Elektrische, the Fridericianum, the Orangerie, and the park. It was the cura- tion and discovery. Branding and maintenance, requiring a more space, the informality was staged and so that the idea of informality was more so that the idea of informality was more such as the one we designed, would have intense relationship of the user with the used to market the place. we have saved housing blocks from the 1960s have a certain tradition in modernism. STANDARDS AND NORMS PO: In our view, the idea of informality to investors remain abandoned and unoc- the lack of housing sets the need for housing be addressed? Modernism—not functionalism, or things that happened later like post-modernism, deconstructivism, and so on—is very important for me. It brings a necessary complement to the historical city. It's important to recognize and understand what qualities and character- istics modernism has provided in com- parison and addition to the older moments of the city, and that need to be explained, adapted, and extended to the maximum. Modernism is for us an important source of inspiration and a reference— if adapted and updated to actual situations.

NEED FOR HOUSING PO: You mentioned that there's a big need for apartments in France. Many German cities have this need as well, and now we have a million new migrants who need affordable housing. How can this huge need for housing be addressed? JPV: The lack of housing sets the scene for speculation and higher rents. In Paris, a nine-square-meters bedroom can be rented out for 600 euros a month. These are the most profitable conditions for investors. So the crucial question is how the city government will try and change the situation and find alternatives. In Berlin, buildings with huge floor spaces of 50,000 or 100,000 square meters sold to investors remain abandoned and unoc- cupied over ten years. There are central locations in Berlin, like in Potsdamer Platz, where large plots have been built with single-family homes with gardens, which have remained vacant for 10 years, 150 years and 1970s, but also you took them as a starting point to achieve something new? JPV: I would not rebuild those housing blocks if they did not already exist. Some of them are in good condition; very often they were not well built or have been poorly maintained. But today they are there, with their problems as well as their qualities. They are part of this new ground, and the task is to find out how to transform this. It's about having an interest in the unloved part of cities, about the way you look at them, the places where people live under bad conditions, and to find in these situations their capac- ity for transformation. To not only do the minimum, but to be ambitious, despite budgetary constraints.

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