



# Designing the Brief

JEAN-PHILIPPE VASSAL  
IN CONVERSATION WITH PHILIPP OSWALT

Project: Transformation of 530 Dwellings—Grand Parc Bordeaux  
Architect (1960): Jean-Jacques Prévot, André Conte, Paul Daurel, François Brochet  
Architect (2013): Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal, Frédéric Druot, Christophe Hutin  
Client: Aquitanis, home public office of Bordeaux Métropole.  
Location: Bordeaux, France  
Date: 2016  
All drawings © Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal, Frédéric Druot, Christophe Hutin  
All photographs © Philippe Ruault

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.

PO: In an article about your office, the Spanish architect Juan Herreros noted that you approach the role of the architect as someone who imagines second chances for everything in the world, be it landscapes, buildings, or cities.

JPV: It's about the opportunities and capacities of the existing situations, of what is already there: a wall, a tree, a view, a floor, and people who have lived there for many years already. About 80 percent of the project is already there. You need only to propose an additional 20 percent to the situation in order to complete it, reveal it, or improve it. It creates a reaction.

PO: So the client or the user of a building has less of an understanding of the specificity of the context than the architect?

JPV: The client or user sees a situation as it is; the architect sees it as it could be. Clients think in terms of what they know. When it comes to products, the client often knows only the worst and most banal products, because they are the most widespread due to today's standardizations, regulations, and globalization. All the richness of the existing situations, their potential, is totally forgotten; not used, but lost. The work of an architect is to see the possibilities of adapting to a situation.

PO: So the specificity of a project comes less from an architect's subjective authorship than from how he or she develops the situation?

JPV: 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, rivers, 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 only 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 eco-house 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



Grand Parc, a postwar social housing complex consisting of three buildings, was to be demolished. The architects proposed to keep the existing structure and extend it instead. The cost of the transformation was roughly half as much as the erection of new apartment buildings.

## SERVING BY CRITICIZING

Existing



Transformation



Final Project



The cutaway views show the transformation of the facades of buildings H and J. Spacious winter gardens and shallow balconies are added; the existing facade is replaced by large glazed sliding doors.

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 redefine 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 asking for. What are their true wishes, objectives, and intentions—and not the ones that they think are the only plausible answers? If you carry out a brief exactly and to standard expectations, it's as if the client has become the architect. But as an architect, you need to invent a new situation. The invention is not there at the start; you have to work, to look for it. This invention may be perfectly inspired

by the client's request, but it's not the exact brief that the client gives you. You can be much more ambitious. You have to sublimate it, invent it.

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, which is usually a poor compromise between functional needs and politics, between economics and users, with everyone trying to shape the project from their own perspective. Many wishes have been killed off by someone saying: "No, it's not possible. We don't have enough money."

PO: And a lot of conventions and rules are imbedded in a normal design brief.

JPV: You have rules—for example, you cannot go too high or too large. So we always go for the maximum. We don't let a single square meter go to waste. It's

easier to find a form that is already defined by the maximum. With requirements concerning comfort, energy, or access for disabled people, we try to understand what the aim is; the latter aspect in particular is a very important objective, and perhaps we must achieve even more than required. We are less skeptical about the objectives themselves than about the recommended or required methods to achieve these objectives. In this respect we also try to maintain a "common sense" approach.

PO: It's surprising how you have succeeded in redefining briefs for projects that you were then commissioned to carry out.

JPV: This is because we consider what is in the best interests of our client, and try to define a common new ambition. Take, for example, Maison Latapie in Floirac near Bordeaux. The client only had enough money for a 60-square-meter standard home. We discussed it with him, and ultimately we provided him with 180 square meters, using the same budget.

PO: That was a private client—what about the public ones?

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 hard to imagine this happening in Germany, where the reaction would likely be: "Yes, that may be a better idea, but we cannot pursue your idea because it did not stick to the brief."

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 they go, for maximum volume with a minimum of material and money. But we have also lost plenty of commissions and competitions by doing just that.

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. But your 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.

JPV: In France, we have the advantage that some competitions are better paid, so you can go more deeply into the project in terms of cost, dimensions, and on what you think is possible. So when we propose something new, we know that we will

be able to make it happen, perhaps with some adaptations. That said, we are not big admirers of the competition system, as often it lacks a precise relationship to the context, the place, or the program. We think that a client should be interested in everything possible inside the given frame of the budget, the intentions, and some global regulations. A competition should open the possibilities of choice for the jury, and we architects should be willing to take risks in more or less interpreting the brief.

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 probably because our first client—who commissioned the Latapie house—had a budget that normally would have allowed for a very small house. But in the course of our discussions, he started 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 energy of the workers on the site, of the time the construction will take. The question of "less is more"—which I find really interesting considering the history of architecture—has evolved into an economic question as well as an ecological question.

After that, we developed similar questions for our public housing projects, for the School of Architecture in Nantes, and for Palais de Tokyo. The economy is a key issue today, but it's not a reason to reduce ambition, pleasure, comfort, or freedom. For example, in France, we do not have enough housing, so it's in the public interest to address this, and try to do the maximum with less. Or perhaps do two things instead of one with the same budget. Or offer generous space instead of reducing it.

We should not be bound by the constraints, but be free in how we approach them. Sometimes we even say you should not spend any budget to do something that is unnecessary, like at Place Léon Aucoc in Bordeaux. We found out that this increased the ambitions of the project. I think that confronting architecture with the budget as a material in this way, is also a way of measuring it as art.

### INVENTING THE CLIENT

PO: Your PLUS study on public housing from the postwar period and the results you drew from that, go a step further. You reframed the brief so that you would also need to find a new client. How did that come about?

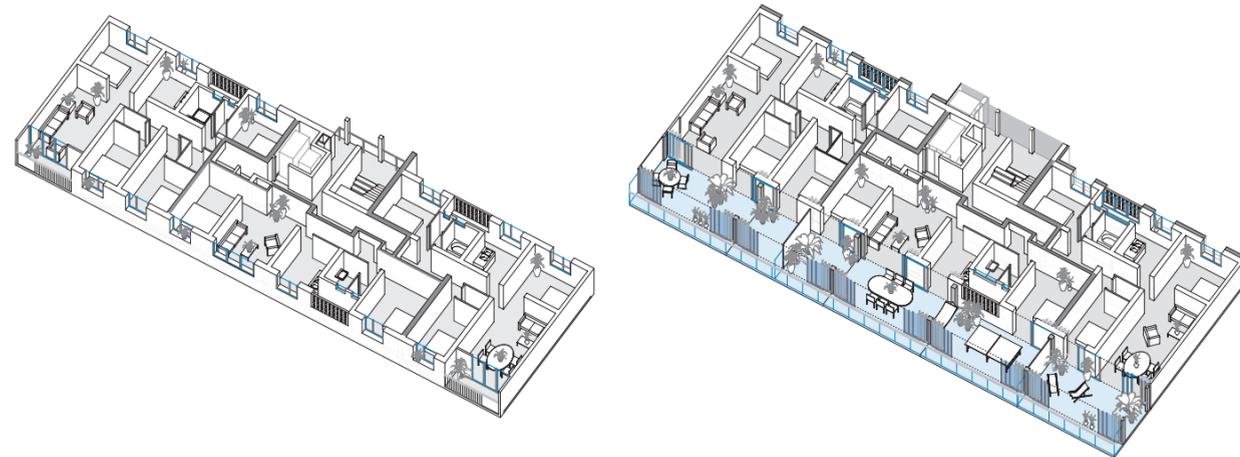
JPV: Together with Frédéric Druot, we were long disappointed by the demolition of a very beautiful curved slab of modern building in the northwest of Bordeaux in the late 1990s, Cité Lumineuse, which had the most fantastic views over the river. All the arguments for the demolition were false. And in the following years, the policy of the French government on demolition became even stronger.

PO: In 2003, the *programme national de rénovation urbaine*, also called Plan Borloo,<sup>01</sup> was implemented, which was a national subsidy program for urban renovations.

JPV: And the demolition of postwar housing had the highest priority within this program. The policy called for demolition at a time in France when there was a lack of affordable apartments. So we tried to convince the authorities otherwise. We spoke with the former socialist minister, then with the colleagues of Minister Jean-Louis Borloo at the Ministry for City and Urban Renewal. But then we realized that we were talking with the wrong ministry. As architects in France, we depend on the Ministry of Culture, for the city is actually a cultural issue. So we went to see the Minister of Culture and proposed our study, which he supported. But when the PLUS study was finished in 2004, he filed it away, because it was exactly the opposite of the policy developments at the time. Finally, we published it in 2007 with the Spanish publisher GG,<sup>02</sup> and it caught the interest of some people.

PO: The first project that emerged from that study was the Tour Bois le Prêtre in Paris. How did that come about?

JPV: 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 see if our idea was a viable alternative for this building. So they organized a competition, which we won and implemented. More people became interested in our PLUS study, and the director of a social housing association in Saint-Nazaire



Left: The layout of a typical floor of buildings H and I before the transformation.

Right: The layout after the transformation including the additional winter gardens. Inside the flats facilities and finishes were refurbished during the transformation of the facade.

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



The tenants were able to stay in their dwellings during the short periods of construction works that were achieved in only 12–16 days per unit, thanks to prefabricated modules. Furthermore, rents were not increased after the transformation.



The 3.80-meter deep extensions widen the usable space of each housing unit.

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 spaces and structures, such as in an old garage or industrial building, by using transformation, extension, addition, multiplication, and layering. Approaching the city as an assembly of lofts would transform it, leading to a different vision of architecture and urbanism. You need to be there, to see the capacity, feel the emotion; to work from the inside out. You can't transform a city in this way only on the basis of a figure-ground diagram.

PO: The conceptual change is that one considers the given city not as a final shape or object, but as a raw material, which can be reinvented and transformed and developed.

JPV: Yes, this is very different from the idea of refurbishment or historical renovations, which are also sometimes needed. The idea is that you consider the city as a new ground, as a starting point, using the 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 unfinishedness in your architecture, where the spatial experience becomes completed by the user?

JPV: I would not say unfinished; I would say "appropriable." 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. The possibility of choice is important, where 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?



The new lightweight facade of transparent, corrugated polycarbonate panels and glass in aluminum frames is assembled and equipped with reflective solar curtains.



The winter gardens function as passive solar collectors and improve the energetic performance of the building envelope.



JPV: Yes, because a school without children is not a school, and a house without inhabitants is alienating.

PO: Juan Herreros mentioned that some of your buildings need a great deal of care and maintenance, requiring a more intense relationship of the user with the architecture.

JPV: The question of simplicity is linked to upkeep and maintenance. It's best to consider the inhabitant as the person who will keep the flat functioning. We provide inhabitants with very easy tools—doors, sliding doors, curtains, different spaces, and climates—for defining their own comfort and pleasure, to have the maximum of possibilities, to adapt to the day, the night, the seasons, the mood, the place, the context, and so on. This seems to be the most obvious and ecological way to achieve sustainability and save energy. If you don't think about who will live there, you are treating the living space like a machine with the inhabitant as a standard figure that reacts in the same way every time. That limits their freedom.

PO: The idea of use is also linked to the idea of informality. In two of your projects, I see a potential danger of informality becoming more a symbolic gesture than

a matter of freedom. Your pavilions at *documenta 12* were presented as structures that were adaptable for the user. But in fact, the exhibition space was highly controlled. There was art valued in millions, insurance, air conditioning, so that the idea of informality was more a visual symbol than a performed quality. And I also see that to an extent with Palais de Tokyo. Even though I enjoy the space, the informality was staged and used to market the place.

JPV: Documenta was a project that was not entirely successful, as we were not in charge of the whole process. The project was carried out by the *documenta* organizers, who made major costly modifications against our will, which deformed the very meaning of the project. Even if it was quite disappointing at the time, I can look back at it now in a more positive way. We considered the pavilions as part of a larger system that included the Neue Galerie, the Fridericianum, the Orangerie, and the park. It was the curators' task to choose the right place for the right art piece within this complex, in which each building had its own function, character, and qualities. A normal greenhouse system with natural ventilation, such as the one we designed, would have provided better climatic conditions for

the public and certain artworks. It was carefully developed in consideration of the topics and references the curators wanted to address, but it proved to be difficult to adapt these issues to the reality of the art market.

Palais de Tokyo was a similar situation. It stands opposite the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art. The two sides are complementary and offer both artists and the public many possibilities for experimentation and discovery. Branding and marketing are not my problem; that will probably disappear after some years, and the space with its own qualities will remain.

#### STANDARDS AND NORMS

PO: Earlier in our conversation we spoke of rules, standards, and norms, which have a certain tradition in modernism. Classical modernism approached building with the mindset of an engineer: to calculate and construct based on an ideology embracing functionalism, standards, perfection, technology, and so on. But even though you share modernism's affinity to prefabrication, you use them very differently, rather as a bricoleur than as an engineer, in Claude Lévi-Strauss's terms.

JPV: What we are building is not very complex, because we prefer to use standard elements. We want to make our

own choices in terms of the building's structure, affordability, climatic situation, and energy efficiency. Based on that, we define the work of our engineers and economists, and involve them only later in the project. We prefer to start with our personal intuitions and intentions.

PO: So using standardized elements is somehow liberating?

JPV: Yes, we use the standard, but our thinking is never standard. The complexity is in our way of thinking; the complexity is to find the simplicity. We are not interested in designing a complex building. If you use the same component a hundred times over, it's boring. But if you move one of those components, it can change everything. So you can create a very efficient situation for 99 percent of the building, because you know that moving just one part will have a stronger impact than if you move all of them. We use standards and regulations, but always with this possibility of adaptation and their precise transformation. So yes, you can call it bricolage, and it can happen at any scale of the city.

#### MODERNISM

PO: You often place yourself in the tradition of modernism, referring, for example, to Mies van der Rohe. How would you place yourself in relationship to the classical avant-garde?

JPV: I definitely feel closely related to the modernist period, and to certain examples in particular: Le Corbusier's Dom-Ino House, the Immeubles-Villas, his Algiers plans, and the Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago by Mies van der Rohe, which represent optimum precision in the organization of apartments in blocks. The Case Study Houses program was an important next step in radicalism and simplicity after the Farnsworth House. It's important to adapt this period to the reality of the existing city, and questions of precision and delicacy in respect to the territory and context. In terms of urbanism, this can be found in the works of Friedman, Archigram, Cedric Price, the Smithsons...

PO: Would you agree that modernism for you is a raw material, that can and must be transformed? So on the one hand you have saved housing blocks from the 1960s and 1970s, but you also 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 capacity for transformation. To not only do the minimum, but to be ambitious, despite budgetary constraints.

PO: You are redefining modernism not only on the physical level but also on an ideological level.

JPV: Modernism—not functionalism, or things that happened later like post-modernism, deconstructivism, and so on—is important for me. It brings a necessary complement to the historical city. It's important to recognize and understand what qualities and characteristics modernism has provided in comparison 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 housing. How should 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 surfaces of 50,000 or 100,000 square meters sold to investors remain abandoned and unoccupied ten years later. There are central locations in Berlin, like in Lichtenberg, where large plots have been built with single-family homes with gardens, which have no special quality. The economy of the city and the benefits for its citizens are also important aspects to consider.

PO: But urbanistically, how do you think this new housing demand could be met?

JPV: We are currently working with our students on the idea of producing large numbers of apartments in very precise, but very small, locations in Berlin. The challenge is to have a minimal footprint in an incomplete, unfinished, or unloved situation, with the highest density possible, in order to provide everyone with more space and more context.

We have worked on areas such as Lichtenberg, Hohenschönhausen, and the railway station Berlin Südkreuz. One topic was to develop ways to save the voids, and to keep and develop the "green archipelago"<sup>03</sup> as a system of islands, connected in a comfortable and efficient transportation network.

It's a sort of acupuncture with big housing projects, nearly invisible on the map and a reference to the traditional density of Berlin's housing blocks—revisited in terms of light, transparency, and openness, or 50 times the process undertaken by Frei Otto in Tiergarten. Because what an incredible luxury and pleasure it is, to leave the old Tempelhof airfield empty.

PO: Does this approach lead to a new type of housing?

JPV: High-density based on small footprints requires extreme precision. The necessary overlay will lead to new typologies and a mix of programs and qualities, with vegetation, existing trees or forests, and small industrial activities or offices, combined with transportation networks.

This brings us back to the question of modernism. In music, there is sampling, when you produce new music not from scratch but by mixing, combining, adapting, and layering. I see it as an interesting way to work with much more lightness. To reuse modernism in this context is particularly exciting and promising.

<sup>01</sup> Named after Jeans-Louis Borloo, former Minister for the City and Urban Renewal between 2002 and 2004, who initiated the plan.

<sup>02</sup> Frédéric Druot, et al., *Plus: Large Scale Housing Development; An Exceptional Case* (Barcelona: GG, 2007).

<sup>03</sup> See Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas, *The City in the City: Berlin; A Green Archipelago*, ed. Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2013).