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Demolition is unsustainable

An interview by Marta Kulawik with Anne Lacaton, who runs the firm Lacaton & Vassal together with Jean-Philippe Vassal. Their projects rarely become urban landmarks. Instead, they focus on what truly improves quality of life – working with the existing fabric, harnessing a place’s potential, and managing resources wisely. It is architecture that, rather than spectacular gestures, offers concrete solutions – benefiting both users and the environment.

Anne Lacaton

Architect and co-founder of the firm Lacaton & Vassal, which she has run jointly with Jean-Philippe Vassal since 1987. Born in France in 1955. In 1980, she graduated from the Faculty of Architecture in Bordeaux, and in 1984, she completed her studies in urban planning at the University of Bordeaux.

She was a professor at ETH Zurich. She has also taught at EPFL, the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and TU Delft, among others. Since 2007, she has been teaching in the Master in Housing program at the University of Madrid.

The Paris-based firm Lacaton & Vassal operates internationally, carrying out projects in residential architecture, public buildings, and urban planning. Their approach is based on the principles of the circular economy and a commitment to creating functional spaces that address the real needs of users, allow for adaptability, and consider long-term social and environmental impacts.

Key to their practice are: working with the existing fabric, reuse, transformation rather than demolition, and a mindful approach to the climate and context of the site.

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Marta Kulawik: *As the Lacaton & Vassal duo, you are advocates of a rational and ecological approach to design. Which of your projects was the first to be created in the spirit of reuse architecture?*

Anne Lacaton: We have always been interested in and intrigued by what already exists. We view such structures as raw material for our projects. The principle of **not demolishing** and the principle of **not cutting down trees** have always guided our projects. The house in Cap Ferret, which was built in 1996 without cutting down any trees, was a project based on the value of the existing site — a fragment of forest on a dune. The Palais de Tokyo is also a significant project for our strategy of starting from what already exists and “collaborating” with existing assets to define a new project. A limited budget forced us to make maximum use of resources and carry out only what was necessary to restore the building and reopen it.

Marta Kulawik: *In 2019, your firm gained widespread recognition thanks to the Mies van der Rohe Award for the Grand Parc project in Bordeaux. Previously, you had completed other similar projects, such as La Chesnaie in Saint-Nazaire, as well as the renovation of the Tour Bois le Prêtre residential building in Paris. What do they have in common, and how do they differ?*

Anne Lacaton: What these projects have in common is our approach of modernizing and transforming

contemporary residential buildings rather than demolishing them, as is often the case with modern housing estates. The projects mentioned are large apartment blocks built in the 1960s as part of social housing initiatives. Initially, their demolition was planned, but this idea was ultimately abandoned in favor of an ambitious renovation, during which the residents continued to live in the buildings. This improved the quality and comfort of the apartments, giving them a new lease on life, all at a cost three times lower than demolition and reconstruction.

above and below:
The house in Cap Ferret was built in 1996; the existing trees were not harmed during construction, as the design was based on the site’s existing character



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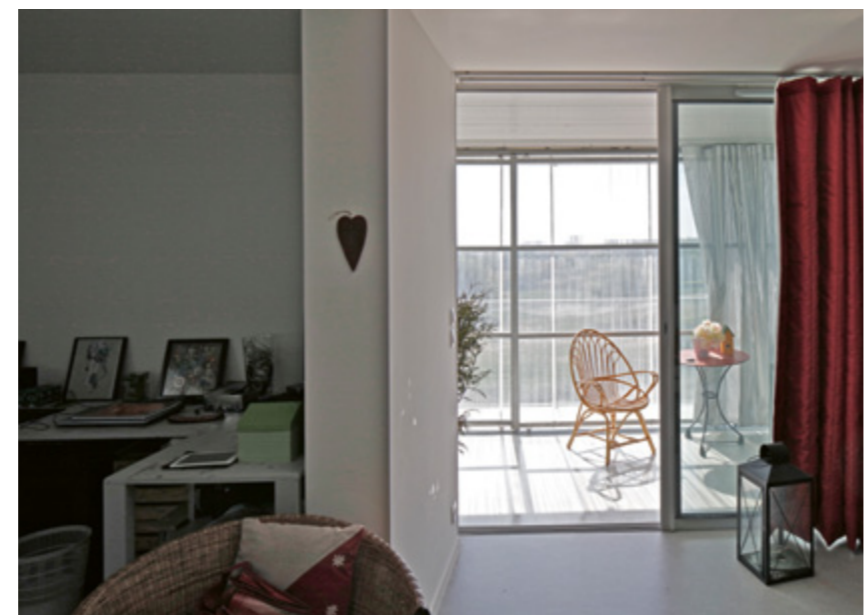


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Every situation is unique; these projects differ in terms of residents, location, and architecture. Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have been engaged in transformation and renovation as an alternative to demolition. Together with our colleague Frédéric Druot, we published the book “PLUS. Large-Scale Housing Developments: An Exceptional Case,” in which we use specific examples to show that redevelopment is a good idea, while demolition is a waste and a squander.

Marta Kulawik: *What is the greater challenge in architecture based on adaptation rather than demolition—the design itself or its implementation?*

Anne Lacaton: Such projects require meticulous preparatory work. This approach is completely different from that used in new developments, which start with a blank plot. In the case of a renovation, to develop the project, we rely on the strengths of the existing structure. That is why inventory and preliminary studies are so important. This approach must focus on the precision and details of the elements, rather than on the overall picture of the situation. Carrying out a project on an occupied property should not be viewed as a major challenge. However, it requires planning well in advance and adapting the project to the conditions to ensure efficiency and speed of work while causing minimal disruption to residents who do not leave the building during construction.



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Marta Kulawik: *Your portfolio includes examples of using a historical form in a completely new building—I’m referring to the FRAC cultural center. Weren’t you tempted to—as many architects do—create an impressive, unique form from scratch?*

Anne Lacaton: The FRAC project is a perfect example of our approach, which takes into account the qualities of the existing building. We were dealing with a unique structure: a one-of-a-kind

on the spread:
La Chesnaie in Saint-Nazaire
an apartment building constructed in the 1960s as part of a social housing project, which underwent a successful renovation despite initial plans to demolish it



phot. © Philippe Rausitt

photo: © Philippe Ruault



photo: © Philippe Ruault



on the spread:
The Palais de Tokyo in Paris — a project that emerged from a very limited budget and a strategy focused primarily on using what already existed to define a new space

architectural work consisting of a large, empty hall with a magnificent space filled with natural light. The commission involved designing solutions aimed at filling and dividing the space, which could have led to the loss of this exceptional place. Doubling the size of the existing building by adding a new hall to preserve its original potential and unique character is an architectural

solution that carefully considers the existing qualities while setting ambitious goals for the future of FRAC.

Marta Kulawik: Prefabricated solutions and raw materials often appear in your projects; even non-industrial buildings take on this character, such as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Is adapting industrial buildings to new functions easier or more promising than with other types of buildings?

Anne Lacaton: We are committed to designing spacious interiors that offer users freedom, as well as creating dynamic relationships with climate and comfort. Providing ample living space and allowing it to be used according to one's own preferences are hallmarks of our architecture. Materials and structural systems are the means that allow us to achieve this. These are not predetermined choices. Prefabrication allows us to build larger structures in less time within the same budget, while simplifying the construction process for contractors. The use of standard

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catalog products for large glazed surfaces makes it cost-effective to create, for example, floor-to-ceiling sliding windows. These highly advanced products make the space luxurious, providing natural light, expansive views, and a seamless transition from the interior to balconies or winter gardens.

Marta Kulawik: *In your opinion, is extracting raw materials from municipal waste — urban mining — the future of architecture?*

Anne Lacaton: When it comes to reusing building materials from demolished buildings, our approach is simply not to demolish buildings but to repair them. Demolishing buildings, most often without justification and under the pretext of recovering materials and using parts of them for reconstruction, is absurd, because most of them can still be used for some time. If the components of these buildings are in good enough condition to be reused in a new structure, why not leave them in place and repair or improve the existing building? Furthermore, a significant portion of demolition materials is unsuitable for reuse and ends up in landfills. Promoting the reuse of demolition materials is, in reality, justifying and promoting demolition. **Any demolition is unsustainable.**

Marta Kulawik: *Thanks to projects carried out in the spirit of reuse, you received the Pritzker Prize, the highest honor in the world of architecture. Fame and recognition were probably never an end in themselves for you, but was this prize your dream?*

on the spread:
Grand Parc in Bordeaux winner of the 2019 Mies van der Rohe Award; ordinary apartment blocks were ambitiously renovated — thereby improving the quality and comfort of the apartments at a cost three times lower than the originally planned demolition and reconstruction



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on the opposite page:
FRAC GRAND LARGE
 Hauts-de-France, Dunkirk
 consists of two structures:
 an old building and a brand-
 new one that replicates the
 same shape and highlights
 the architectural qualities of
 the original

below:
**the conversion of a former
 hospital in Paris**
 project currently underway;
 the rendering shows that the
 design builds on the existing
 architecture, but incorporates
 contemporary additions to
 the building complex

phot.: © Philippe Ruault

Anne Lacaton: The Pritzker Prize wasn't something we thought about; it wasn't our dream either. When we received it, we were surprised, but of course we were very pleased by the recognition it brought to our work.

Marta Kulawik: What are your goals for the coming years?

Anne Lacaton: Several projects are currently underway, most of which involve existing buildings. Among them are the conversion of a former hospital in Paris and an administrative complex in Vannes, a small town in western France. Both of these buildings will be converted into residential spaces. There is also the expansion of the Kampnagel Theater in Hamburg, which has a unique atmosphere—it is an exceptional and extraordinary building created forty years ago in a large factory as a temporary installation.

These projects require new approaches and methods of analysis, research, evaluation, and design. The greatest challenge is convincing people of the necessity of implementing these new strategies and their significance. There is still much to be done in terms of experimentation

and demonstration to truly accept this work of transformation as innovation—one that forces us to re-examine and reformulate established methods, habits, and entire normative frameworks set for the construction of new buildings. This is a huge challenge, opening up many new perspectives and approaches to design and architecture.

Marta Kulawik: Thank you for the interview.

interviewed by: Marta **KULAWIK**

Editor at A&B, an architect and urban planner by training after studying at the Faculty of Architecture at the Krakow University of Technology and the University of Ljubljana.

Professionally most closely associated with interior architecture—founder of the FORMAT interiors studio.

Illustrations courtesy of the Lacaton & Vassal studio



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