



The passéist, modernist and futurist features of some social housing ensembles built during the transitional period of 1960-1970: the case of the Maurelette in Marseille

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Title: “The passéist, modernist and futurist features of some social housing *ensembles* built during the transitional period of 1960-1970: the case of the Maurelette in Marseille”

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Abstract

The history of architecture and urbanism is classically represented as a sequence of major doctrines. However, the well-known architectural “-isms” are bound together with productions of the so-called “transitional” periods, the legacy of which deserves special scientific interest. A significant number of these kinds of “in-between product” in the field of social housing was built during the 1960s and 1970s, between the periods of modernism and postmodernism.

At the end of the 1980s in many European countries, particularly in France, massive renovation processes were started, which continue to this day. Due to political, social and aesthetic changes, a great deal of post-war residential heritage has been radically reconstructed or demolished. This process touches not only ordinary residential groups (so-called *grands ensembles*), but also harms some of the more interesting *ensembles*. Many of them are undervalued and have not been rehabilitated since their creation, with some often doomed to disappear.

The current paper is an attempt to analyse the historical, urban and morphological aspects of the Maurelette residential complex, built in the northern suburbs of Marseille during 1963-1965. The design particularities of the Maurelette complex demonstrate the ambition to create a “non-ordinary” *ensemble* using ordinary and inexpensive construction means and materials. The original interpretation of the traditional square, street and rampart could be considered as early applications of postmodernist ideas of free “expression” of historical urban forms.

This case study intends to raise awareness about the heritage constructed between the major architectural periods, which deserve to be included in the contemporary urban structure without negating or altering their authentic concept. Its existence will contribute to the continued urban environment, thereby making the modern city more resilient.

Keywords: big residential complexes, resilience of modernist urban concept, historical tendencies, city structure, postmodernism

Introduction

The history of architecture and urbanism is classically represented as a sequence of movements and major doctrines. However, the actual evolution of architecture and urbanism does not follow this kind of linear character. The well-known architectural “-isms” are bound together with productions of so-called “transitional” periods, the legacy of which deserves special scientific interest. Thanks to its unique mix of previous and present tendencies, as well as techniques and compositional approaches, this architectural layer is shaping a foundation for future movements. A significant number of these kinds of interesting “in-between product” in the field of social housing were built during the 1960s and 1970s. These *ensembles* were constructed between the periods of modernism and postmodernism, when the postulates of modernism (particularly the ones incarnated in social housing groups) were severely criticized for having poor urban and architectural design. The basic principles of the modernist movement are accused of being incomprehensible to the middle and lower classes for whom it was intended. It even goes towards the idealization of the defects of the historical city. “Sun, silence, fresh air? This



is exactly the opposite that we should wish for. A city consists of little sun, and maybe bad odours and noise”¹, proclaims the famous French architect, Emile Aillaud, criticizing the hygienist principles of CIAM.

By the mid-1950s, young architects were beginning to challenge the principles defined by the Athens Charter, particularly the rejection of traditional urban planning methods, the denial of the historical memory of the cities and the implementation of impersonal forms into the existing urban context. In 1953, an international group of architects was formed, known as Team X (Jacob Bakema, Georges Candilis, Giancarlo De Carlo, Aldo van Eyck, Alison and Peter Smithson, Shadrach Woods). They criticized the radical modernist approach and proposed to reintroduce a human dimension and continuity into urban habitat architecture. One of them, Aldo van Eyck, thought that the real enemy of architecture was modernist urbanism, as well as the complexes it had created².

A few years later, these ideas would lead to a form of cell-structured housing, without the usual towers and bars. This would eventually be widely interpreted in the French PAN (the acronym for the French translation of New Architecture Programme) annual competition entries and finally realized in the new French new cities during 1970-1980. But, in early 1960, the towers and bars, which were colourful, sometimes linked and sometimes dismembered and broken, would still be predominantly found in housing concepts. The Maurelette complex is one of those “compromised” architectural products, which demonstrates an ambition to create a “non-ordinary” *ensemble* using ordinary and inexpensive construction means and materials.

An ambitious programme: to create a form of modernity that respects the genius loci

The North Highway, constructed in Marseille in 1950, makes the city centre accessible from the northern peripheral area and creates favourable conditions for the installation of a new large residential district. Very soon, this area will reflect the typical suburban image of French cities of the post-war period. The La Tour district, which has chosen for the construction of the Maurelette complex, is surrounded by a heterogeneous urban environment, on the site of the former St. Joseph village with the two- to three-storey houses. Meanwhile, the new neighbourhoods to the west of the highway represent some variations of “band” construction, with disseminations of still-surviving castles and parks. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the district was one of many *bastides* (the country residences of the rich bourgeoisie) in Marseille. This sector kept its rural character until the middle of the 20th century (Fig. 1). On the district plan, we can see two castles (Castle Tower in the northern part, which surrounded by walls, and the House of Senior, in the centre of the district), terraces and a sycamore tree lane extending from the Gay-Lussac Street (formerly St. Joseph Way) to the House of Senior.



Fig.1. Extract from the Napoleonic Cadastre in 1817; the future Maurelette *ensemble* with the sycamore alley, the House of Senior and the Castle (in red)

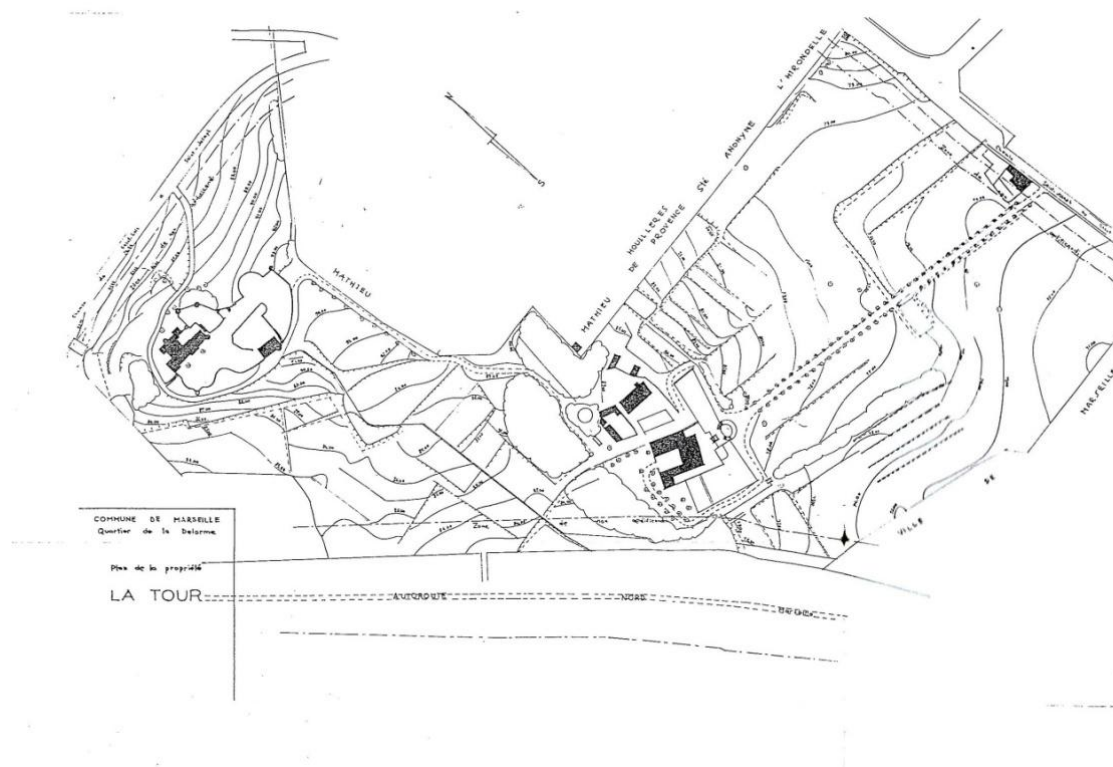


Fig.2. The plan of the La Tour district in 1957

The reason for and the exact date of the demolition of the Castle Tower are unknown. It appears on the Napoleonic cadastre plans and other plans until 1957 (Fig. 2).

The design of the *ensemble* for 745 apartments was entrusted to architects Eugène, Pierre and Jacques Chirié. The workmaster was the La Tour real estate company. Special importance was attached to this operation, as it was considered as an exemplary site. The realization was followed by the Ministry of Construction, General Planning and Equipment, the Productivity Commission, the Ministry of Health and Population, and the Municipality of Marseille. The programme was set up by the Chirié architectural agency after sociological, architectural and technical studies had been conducted for over a year.

The objectives, which were expressed by the authors in the “Maurelette Programme” and the “Basic Principles for the Choice of the Ground Plan” were:

- to create a pleasant environment to live in, allowing families to escape the feeling of banishment that is too often associated with grands ensembles
- to conserve cherished property elements: the beautiful House of Senior and trees that rise in the field or grove aisles
- to produce a simple and inexpensive structure
- to conserve the outline and fresh appearance of the Maurelette, when seen from the North Highway in Marseille, as a quiet and green area³

The creation of a well-integrated urban structure, clearly standing out on a heterogeneous and discontinued site (Fig. 3), resulted in a programme conceived by the Chirié architectural agency in collaboration with landscaper Jacques Sgard and colourist Bernard Lassus.



Fig.3. The Maurelette on the site structure (in red)

Ground plan for a new "collective bastide" (fortified residential property)

Despite the fact that the designers used a very limited number of well-known and inexpensive typological elements (78 bars with a height varying from two- to four storeys, as well as one 15-storey and four 11-storey towers, all of which were 11.2 meters long and articulated in an orthogonal system), there is no symmetry and repetitiveness in the structure of the Maurelette; neither is there a brutal application of building systems according to the *héliothermique axis*.⁴ Also, there is no demonstration of sovereignty in relation to the existing urban context (a typical approach used by the pioneers of the modernist movement). The morphology of the terrain is taken in consideration in a very original way. The new structure is not completely separated from the existing urban context; however, it is represented as independent and complex, in that is "folded in on itself" (Fig. 4).

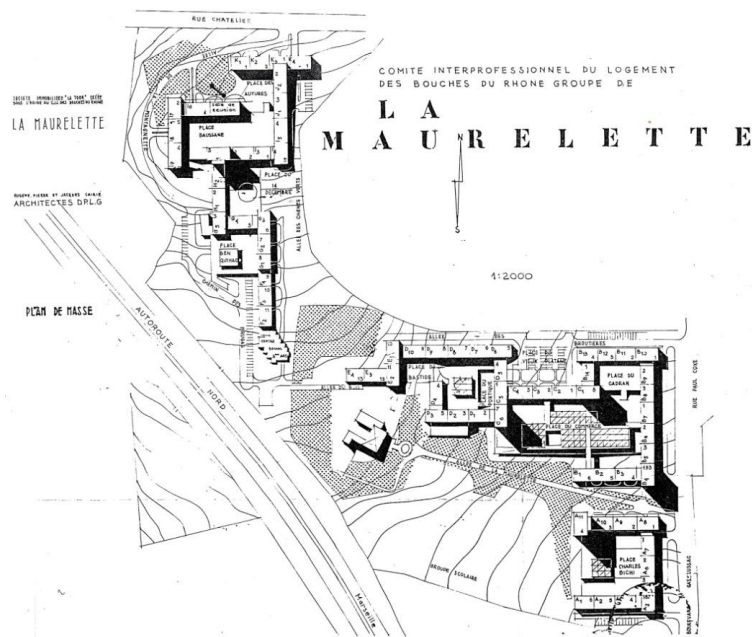


Fig.4. The Chirie ground plan for the Maurelette project



The broken line of buildings placed along the eastern and northern boundaries of the district, which acts as the ramparts along with the main entrance from old St. Joseph Street, and accentuated by the towers, evokes the ambiance of an autonomic and well-defended area. Two building groups (eastern Maurelette I and northern Maurelette II) are organized to suggest a movement towards the centre of the composition. Both groups represent spatial “arrows” flying towards the House of Culture (the renovated House of Senior) and the new Social Centre. Thus, the role of the House of Senior and the old sycamore tree lane goes beyond the simple “conservation of cherished elements of the district”, as mentioned in the programme. Here, they are the main elements predetermining the composition of the eastern part (Maurelette I), which, in turn, suggest that the northern part’s structure (Maurelette II) is a spatial and functional counterweight to the Social Centre.

In fact, the *ancient private* country residence (*bastide*) was replaced by a *modern collective bastide* in the same image of autonomy. This fact was considered by most inhabitants as an advantage. In the early 1980s, the inhabitants, wishing to “defend” the autonomy of their “Maurelette universe”, organized a petition against the decision to make the Social Centre accessible for the inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhoods.⁵ Moreover, this urban approach generated different estimations of different parts. This is not typical for most ordinary, so-called “statistical” residential complexes of the post-war period. The tenants of Maurelette II consider living in a quieter area, away from the noise and bustle of the mall. In fact, Maurelette represents a kind of “concentrated remix” (in both senses of the word: space and time) of a historical residential district with more or less active areas, whose disposition is usually the result of a secular spontaneous development.

We see the same approach – that is, both traditional and modernist – in the road organization. The inner side of the area is treated as a continuous pedestrian walkway that avoids crossing the traffic routes. The car service is organized from the Gay-Lussac and Chatelier Streets, with the six-metre wide alleyways, which are distant from the buildings and have no crossings in-between (Fig. 5).

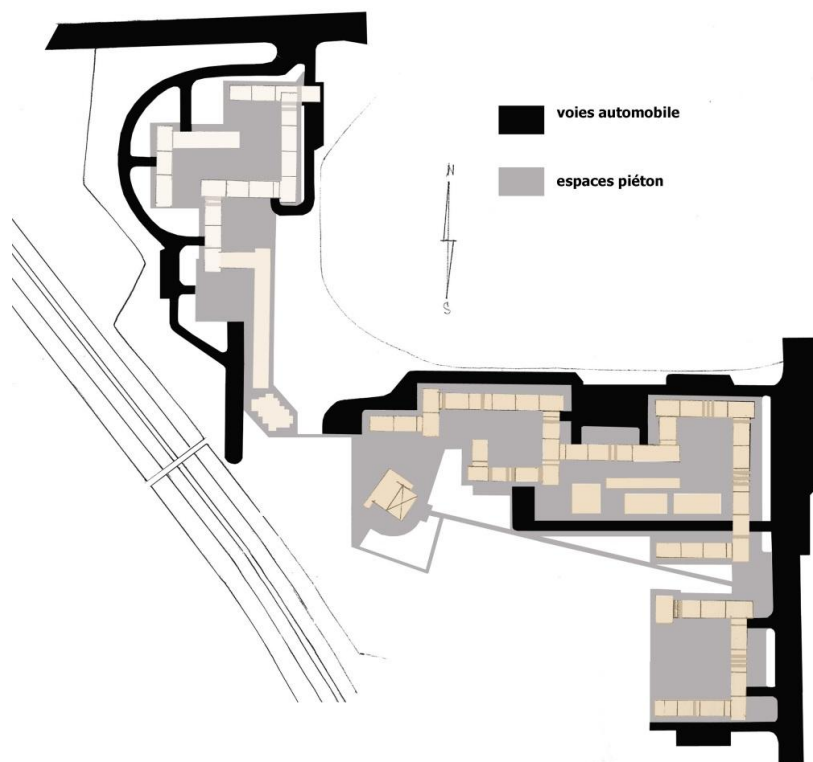


Fig.5. The road organization in Maurelette, with morphological analysis by N. Chilingaryan

The obvious ambition to shield the Maurelette *ensemble* from any motor noise has led to the creation of a free zone, which is 50 metres wide, along the Northern Highway. Similarly, most of the parking is organized in underground garages. Outdoor parking lots are arranged near the walkways outside the buildings groups. Thus, the application of a classic modernist principle – namely, the separation of pedestrian and automobile tracks – in



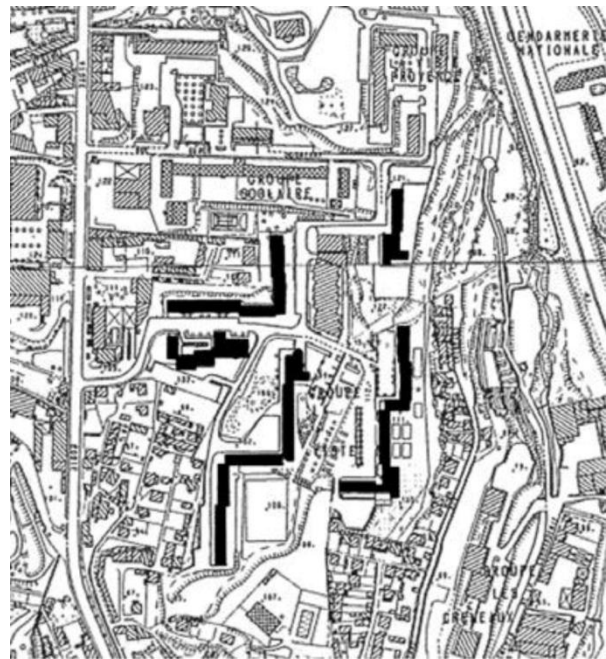
the case of Maurelette could also be considered as an additional measure to protect the privacy of the “secure collective property”, which is non-penetrable by others.

Space organization: apparent spontaneity, hidden hierarchy?

Some documents compare the spatial organization in Maurelette with the La Viste residential complex, which was built in the same period and, like Maurelette, was realized in the framework of the construction programme for 4,000 new residences in Marseille. Some researchers claim that, in Maurelette, “the influence of Team X is clearly evident, especially the principles applied by Candilis, Josic and Woods at La Viste”.⁶ However, a detailed study of these two complexes reveals the very different approaches of their designers. In fact, this similarity is limited to a bird’s eye view of the plans, due to the use of bars, towers and angled buildings, which are juxtaposed to comparable proximities. This similarity could be explained by the application of an orthogonal plan system, which facilitates relatively inexpensive construction. The two complexes are well inscribed in the surrounding urban context, albeit in very different ways: La Viste has an open morphology, which is penetrable from the south and the north. The plan represents the building branches, the traces of which strictly follow the territory limits to form the incomplete structures. These branches could be continued if necessary (in line with the basic principle of Team X about indeterminate, continuous urban forms). This transparent, accessible and continuous composition of La Viste (conceived by the militants who opposed the indifferent and exposed structures of the CIAM pioneers) paradoxically makes it similar to the phalanstery of Le Corbusier (founder of CIAM), which was presented in a project competition for the reconstruction of the unsanitary sector, known as No. 6, in Paris in 1936 (Figs. 6 and 7).



**Fig.6. Proposal for the reconstruction
of the No. 6 sector in Paris,
Le Corbusier, 1936**



**Fig.7. The ground plan for La Viste in Marseille,
Candilis, Josic and Woods, 1964**

Unlike La Viste, the creators of Maurelette used all means “to finish”; in other words, to give an identity and personality to the spaces. The names found around the squares (names of alleys and patios refer to the ancient domain and major events from the history of Provence), as well as the landscape design, which not only maintains the existing beautiful trees, but doubles the surface of planted areas, reflect an ambition to create a real Marseille site, which is attached to its context and not an abstract modernist residence model that is more



or less humanized. The structure of Maurelette does not contain any sign of evolution or continuity. If the basic element of La Viste's composition is the continuous bar that is punctuated by towers (in other words, the **volume module**), the structure of the Maurelette remains a **space module**, meaning it is sometimes enclosed, sometimes open, but always clearly defined. The analysis of this spatial element (called a "square" by its authors) demonstrates the very specific approach applied by designers and deserves a special attention.

The use of a square in its classical sense as a structural element of a traditional city requires the presence of two other essential elements (streets and courtyards), which are absent from Maurelette. The concept of a square, when selected by the architects as a foundation unit, also loses its original meaning because of its overuse beyond the traditional city: 10 squares formed by 80 buildings located on the territory with a total surface area of only 11 hectares. Thus, the squares in Maurelette have an ambiguous nature: being firmly attached to the context of the site, they are absolutely decontextualized, in the original sense of the term, in the same way as traditional urban components. This allows us to consider the Maurelette as a kind of precursor of the postmodernist approach by reintroducing elements and forms of the past as symbols freed from their historically formed "support".

The typological analysis of the Maurelette squares allows for them to be classified into three typological groups linked by hierarchical logic. Square-types are divided into the following three classes:

1. The first type is a square with low buildings on opposite corners, with one or more towers (with 11- and 15-storeys). We will refer to it as a **"main square"** because the two spaces of this type (namely, the Commerce Square and the Baussane Square) play a decisive role in the morphology due to their dimensions and positions, as well as the presence of common services (Fig. 8).

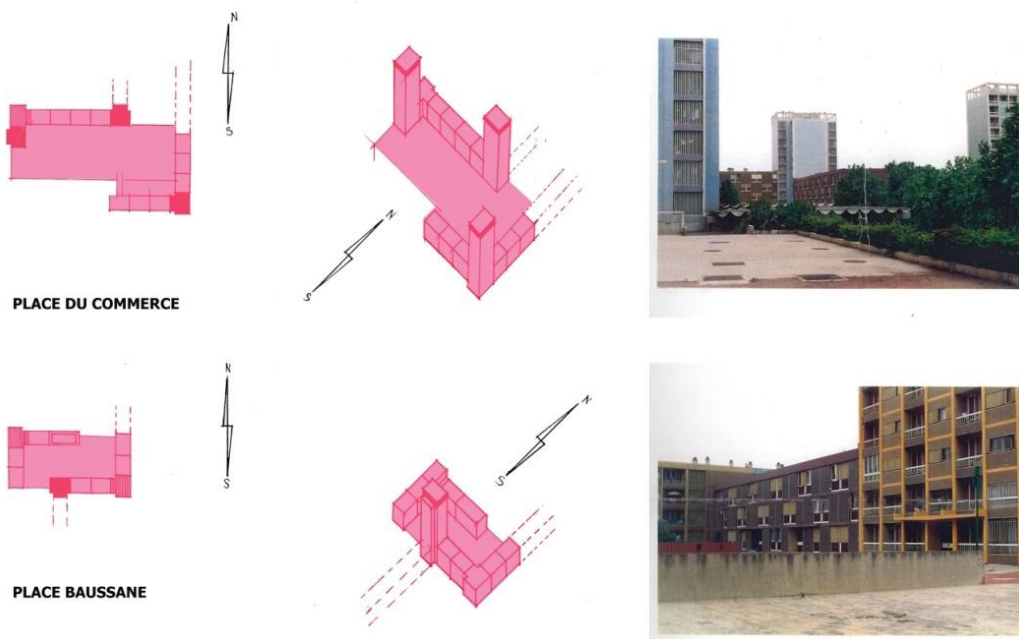


Fig.8. The "main squares", with typological analysis by N. Chilingaryan

2. The spaces surrounded on three sides by low buildings and accentuated by a tower. We will refer to this type as a **"current square"**; five of the 10 squares in Maurelette belong to this type. These are Charles Bichi Square, Portique Square, Old Sycamore Square, Cadran Square and the Square of 14 December" (Fig. 9).

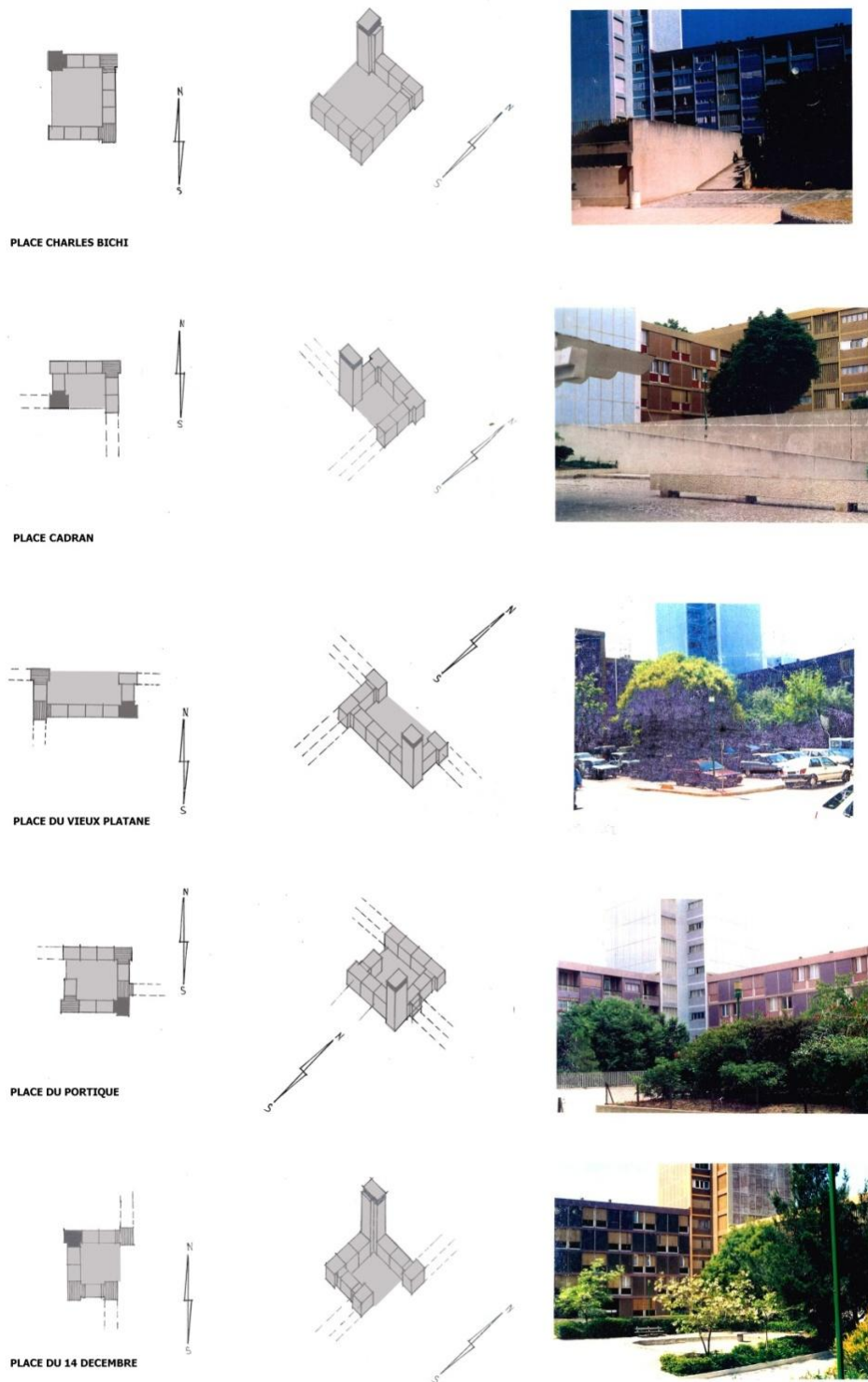


Fig.9. The “current squares”, with typological analysis by N. Chilingaryan



Fig.10. The “piazzetta” (smallest square), with typological analysis by N. Chilingaryan

3. The third type is the “piazzetta” (smallest square), which is deprived of towers and bounded by angled bars. We find three squares of this type: Bastide Square in Maurelette I and two in Maurelette II (Autures Square and Ben Quihado Square) (Fig. 10). These are the most modest, but indispensable, public spaces in the hierarchy. Being located right next to the central dominant volumes (House of Culture and Social Centre), they provide a kind of “pause space”, meaning a consecutive passage to the spaces with more active public vocation (Fig. 11).

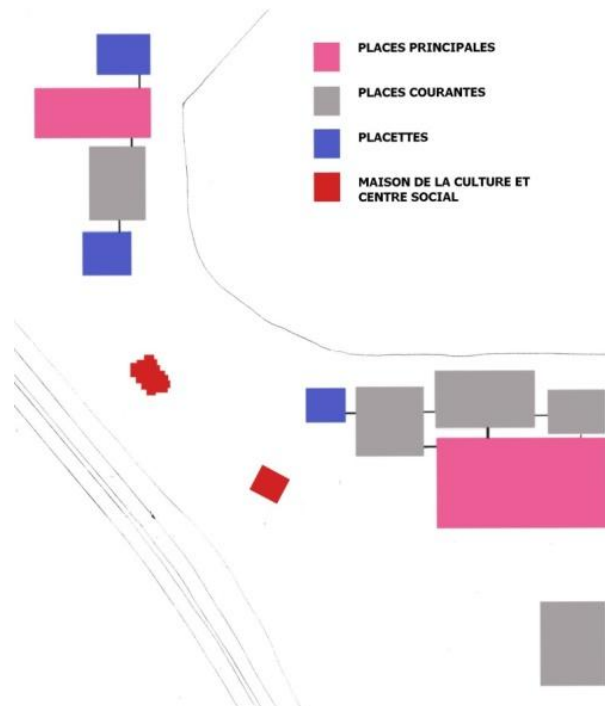


Fig.11. Diagram with the position of square-types in Maurelette, with morphological analysis by N.Chilingaryan



Thus, this polyvalent space module, which is really neither a square, court nor street in the classic sense, practically assumes the roles of these three main components of a traditional urban habitat. The creators were able to give every gradation of the ambiance of a traditional city district to the site: from private to public, from agitation to relaxation, from greenery to mineral surface. All these were simply made by the intelligible alternation of the same, delicately changed spatial element.

The Maurelette is free of “unexpected surprises”, such as windows–leaves or big sculptures of snakes in the middle of a court, similar to Emile Aillaud’s Pablo Picasso complex in Nanterre (Fig. 12). Rather, it is inspired by everyday poetry, where the nuances take priority over the singular event. The Maurelette complex, which was created in the interim period between the “time of rationality” and the “end of interdictions”, represents a remarkable architectural symbiosis. This *ensemble*, in the larger sense of Kisho Kurokawa's definition, is itself an “intermediate space”, where experience of the past matures and crystallizes in order to give life to the future.



Fig.12. The Pablo Picasso complex in Nanterre, E. Aillaud (architect), 1972

Conclusion

The Maurelette residential complex in Marseille could be considered as an early application of the postmodernist ideas of decontextualization and free “expression” of historical urban forms. It appears as a “cultural bridge” connecting the past, the present and the future. Fortunately, until the present day, this *ensemble* is almost intact, while, in 2006, it received the “Heritage of the 20th Century” label as Maurelette Park. However, its “survival” could be considered as a rather extraordinary phenomenon than a typical one.

Since the end of the 1980s in many European countries, particularly in France, massive renovation processes have taken place, which continue to this day. Due to political, social and aesthetic changes, a great part of post-war residential heritage has been radically reconstructed or demolished. This process touches not only ordinary residential groups (so-called *grands ensembles*), realized right after the Second World War with very limited means and techniques, it also harms some of the interesting *ensembles*. Many have been undervalued, not rehabilitated, since their creation, while some are often doomed to disappear.

The Maurelette case study intends to raise awareness of the heritage constructed between major architectural periods (for example, modernism and postmodernism), as it represents an interesting architectural symbiosis with hidden values. Such heritage deserves to be included in the contemporary urban structure, without negating or altering its authentic concept. Moreover, its existence will contribute to the continuous, uninterrupted urban environment, thereby making the modern city more resilient.

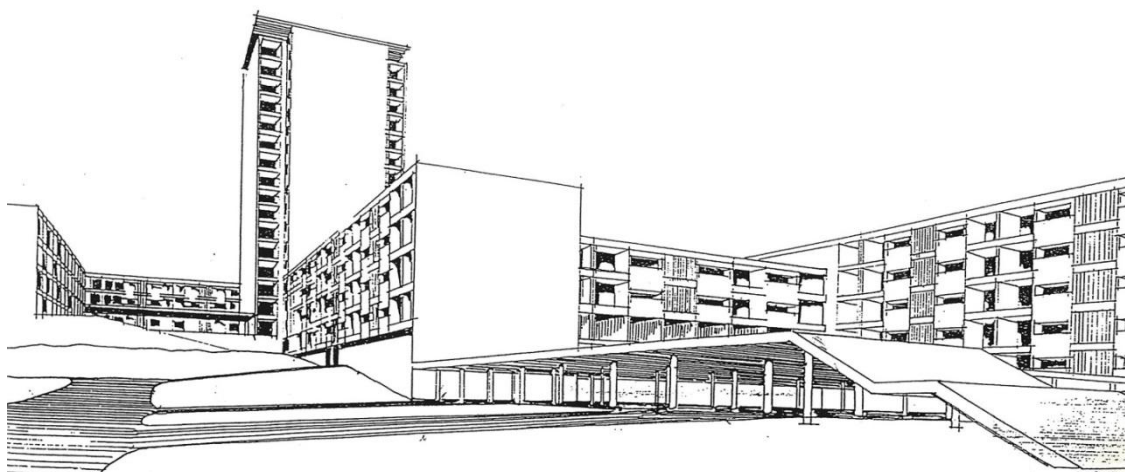


Fig.13. Ben Quihado Square by N. Chilingaryan, 1994

¹ Benevolo L., *Histoire de l'Architecture Moderne, Tome 3: Les Conflits et l'Après-guerre*, Paris, Dunod, 1999, page 209.

² Haddad E.G., Rifkind D. *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture: 1960-2010*, Ashgate, 2014, page 23.

³ *Les Matériaux du Projet de la Maurelette*, Archives Départementales de Marseille.

⁴ North-south Orientation of Residential Buildings, in Rey A., Pidou J., Bard C., *La Science des Plans des Villes*, Payot, Lausanne, 1928, page 10.

⁵ Testimony of Mrs. Fresneda, Director of the Social Centre of Maurelette, in Tchilingaryan N., *Cité de la Maurelette à Marseille: Une Expérimentation du Logement Social dans les Années 60*, Mémoire de Fin de CEAA, Ecole d'Architecture de Marseille-Luminy, 1994.

⁶ Dourousseau T. *Patrimoine du XXe siècle en PACA, Ensembles & Résidences à Marseille 1955-1975, Notices Monographiques*, page 6.

Disclosure statement

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Fig. 6. Corbu, <https://fr.pinterest.com/martabrandao/corbu>.

Fig. 7. Dourousseau T. *Patrimoine du XXe Siècle en PACA, Ensembles & Résidences à Marseille 1955-1975, Notices Monographiques, 1521 – La Viste*, <http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr>.

Fig. 12. Dhuis J.F. *L'Architecture Selon Emile Aillaud*, Paris, Dunod 1983.