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## **How to improve urban and architectural quality in small peri-urban towns in the Ile de France through collective housing**

Claire FONTICELLI, LAREP-ENSP

The BIMBY research program and its fallout in the media has brought out the significance of land potential in built-up peri-urban spaces and in particular in suburban areas. That program focused primarily on individual housing. Nonetheless land stock available for multi-household buildings does exist, in particular since today the production of collective housing in peri-urban Ile-de-France represents nearly 40% of the total volume of built (according to the database SIT@DEL 2, 2013). Moreover, if individual housing has been the subject of much analysis concerning both the mode of occupancy (Rougé 2005) and the specific promotion systems on which it relies (Callen 2010), analyses of peri-urban multi-household dwellings have until now been few and far between. Within these areas, however, densification by way of multi-household housing is increasing, sometimes fostered by local councils, sometimes imposed on the communes by regional or national policy.

The present analysis focuses on this production in peri-urban Ile-de-France.

### **Small peri-urban towns as laboratories of peri-urban maturation**

In the spatial hierarchy inherited from Walter Christaller (Christaller 1933), the small town stands between the village and the city. We here take the small peri-urban town in the sense accepted by INSEE<sup>1</sup>: that is, out-of-town communes of between 500 and 7500 inhabitants that have kept functions of centrality as regards retail (bakery, mini-market...) as much as amenities and services, such as a post office or a primary, and even sometimes a middle school. Our interest concentrates on the specific case of peri-urban areas in Ile-de-France. Based on the "Base permanente des équipements"<sup>2</sup> at INSEE, according to the aforementioned definition there are 252 small peri-urban towns identifiable in Ile de France and in adjacent departments.

In many respects, these small towns can be regarded as the laboratory for peri-urban maturation in the region. They may act as a focus for re-emerging commercial hubs (Aragau 2008) or for re-centring local mobility (Berger et al. 2014) and renewing urban form. To analyze the construction of collective housing in such localities, we initially carried out a quantitative analysis of the production

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<sup>1</sup> The Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques is the official organisation that collects, produces, analyzes, and communicates information concerning the French economy and society.

<sup>2</sup> The Base permanente des équipements (BPE) is a French system producing various data, such as the provision or absence of amenities over geographical areas down to the size of the commune.

of multi-household apartments in urban densification, following this with a qualitative analysis of governance among housing stakeholders (60 semi-structured interviews with the various actors concerned in construction). Lastly, so as to gain a better understanding of the quality of life in dense housing structures in small peri-urban towns, we put a questionnaire to some eighty occupiers.

### **Why build collective housing in small town centres?**

If small towns developed before the 1950s essentially by way of multi-household dwellings, that is, in the form either of linear villages with terraced houses or else as small-scale and relatively dense but low-rise multi-household buildings (Fouchier 1998), today the individual house represents nearly 80% of existing stock and the construction of collective housing in these communes is no longer a foregone conclusion. Many elected officials and inhabitants refuse to see this type of residence built in their area, because it is still associated with the “projects” and other forms of social housing that remain negative models for peri-urban populations (2004). Collective housing remains necessary in that it can foster and accelerate the maturation of peri-urban communes: the single-household house is not adapted to every person nor to every stage in life (Haumont 1966), even though it is readily thought of as the ideal family home. The ageing of arrivals from the first generation, added to the phenomenon of “de-cohabitation” (as when children “leave the nest”) among peri-urban locals—who may though want to stay living in the commune where they were born,—the increase in the proportion of single-parent families on modest incomes all make imperative the diversification of stock in communes where housing continuity has become problematic. By supplying dwellings of small size together with rental properties (social and private), the construction of both social and private multi-household housing can fulfil part of this demand.

In addition, multi-household apartments have become increasingly essential due to developments in the law encouraging denser urban forms. Urban densification has become a “public policy objective” (Touati 2010), expressed in statute by the SRU,<sup>3</sup> Grenelle 2, and ALUR<sup>4</sup> laws. For small towns in Ile-de-France, the SDRIF reinforces these obligations by limiting extensions, which can now be carried out only once the gaps in the commune have been filled in. At the same time, article 55 of the SRU law imposing 25% social housing on communes of more than 1500 inhabitants in Ile-de-France (and 3500 inhabitants elsewhere) forming part of an agglomeration of more than 15000, is increasingly impacting on small towns, due to the recent “inter-commune” regroupings spawned by the MAPTAM law<sup>5</sup>, even though subsequent decrees have limited its application in small towns. Many are though still obliged to provide social housing — generally collective — in short order.

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<sup>3</sup> SRU: law covering urban solidarity and renewal.

<sup>4</sup> ALUR: access to housing for a renovated urbanism.

<sup>5</sup> Promoting the “modernisation of public policy in the regions and the consolidation of urban zones.”

### **More complicated, more expensive... the problem of collective housing in small town centres**

Promoted on the national and regional scales, erecting multi-household housing in small town centres is a complex matter. One of the major stumbling blocks is the high cost of land. Plots often present problems due to complexities in land control or the presence of polluted soil. To the costs overruns generated by expenses entailed by such terrains (decontamination, surveying...) are added the building costs of multi-household housing that are higher than those for single-household homes (Castel 2011), for a final selling price that is often lower per square metre.

A difficult balancing act, these operations have not proved especially attractive to major construction players, in particular on the national level. If, due to increased competition from nationwide property developers and a decrease in the number of developments (Callen 2011), it is noticeable how certain local property developers specialized in out-of-town estates are repositioning themselves and promoting the multi-household apartment on a small scale, the phenomenon remains sporadic. Likewise, few national investors, promoters and associations are prepared to intervene in such zones, since it is hard to balance the books below a level of thirty housing units (a threshold seldom attained in small town centres). Local backers may become involved, but the scope of their intervention tends to be limited. In consequence, elected officials encounter difficulties in mobilizing construction players in such communes, unless they have already been gentrified.

The problem of how to make multi-household accommodation (especially social housing) more acceptable to local inhabitants has compounded these problems. The saying (coined in the 1970s by the mayor of Créteil, Pierre Billotte) “a mayor who builds is a mayor who’s beaten” has lost none of its sting and deters elected officials. Negative stereotypes concerning social housing (Vanoni 2003) are also prevalent, in particular among inhabitants of peri-urban zones (Donzelot 2009).

### **A homogeneous architecture: the “neo-village” style**

The architecture of peri-urban Ile-de-France appears relatively homogeneous: structures of a contemporary appearance remain rare, most constructions in small town centres referring primarily to traditional architecture and morphologies that are (ostensibly) typical of such agglomerations. Height is thus limited (from ground and one upper floor to ground and two upper floors with attic), double-pitched at 35/45°, roofing is with small industrial tiles. Coated with cream-coloured render, buildings are aligned along the street in the manner of a terrace and the frontages have no balcony. Facades are adorned with decorative features. Roller shutters are frequently fitted, though they may be accompanied by wooden shutters, the former functioning to improve levels of comfort and the

latter being merely decorative. Other ornamental elements may appear: brick cladding, stone walls reconstituted so as to indicate the street alignment, or porches to enhance the view: everything conspires to recall traditional village architecture. Similarly, in constructions of relatively large size for a small town, as in Plailly (30 residences) and Annet-sur-Marne (27), the frontages have been contrived to give the impression that several constructions are joined together, rather being than single units. The colour of the render on the frontage may vary, like the style of the shutter installed. In Plailly, the sense of rhythm is accentuated by the height of the frontages and roofs varying slightly. In addition, these constructions, dubbed of neo-Brie, neo-Vexin, or even neo-Versailles inspiration, depending on the region where they appear, have little to do with architectural types already present. Thus, in the Oise, for example, though roofs traditionally dispense with attic windows and dormers, they occur in all recent constructions. Hence, contemporary constructions do not actually even pastiche the architecture they ostensibly hark back to, but present a “neo” style that allows for only a few alternatives in accordance with the peri-urban area concerned, creating a degree of standardization (Fonticelli et Moquay à paraître). Recreating the *image* of a small town is then more important than copying a model.

Lastly, if a “neo-village” look may appear justified in small town centres where ABFs<sup>6</sup> are well entrenched and PLUs<sup>7</sup> most restrictive, this does not explain why this type of architecture is has sprung up in every small town—low-density suburbia, industrial zones, station districts, and even high-rise blocks. There is then, as the officials met in the course of the interviews made clear, a genuine fondness for this “neo” type. Reassuring, it makes increased housing density less obvious and appears less off-putting to inhabitants and elected officials alike (Fonticelli 2015).

### **Collective housing as project**

From the Malthusian-minded commune that deploys every conceivable legal shenanigan to prevent the construction of multi-household apartments on its territory to deprived zones (in the sense of the SRU statute), obligated to build social housing in short order, the situation facing small peri-urban town differs widely. The imperatives facing small towns are contradictory and occasion a range of responses: if densification, advocated on the regional and national scale, is rejected on the local, national housing provision challenges seem ill-adapted to a moribund neighbourhood market.

Sustainable development too can serve as an alibi for shelving a construction project; on the other hand it can be understood and embraced by municipal politicians who then become more receptive to urban intensification in an effort to rebuild the city in the city. In Moussy-le-Neuf (77), a commune of 3000 inhabitants, a project for almost one hundred housing units has, in addition to proposing

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<sup>6</sup> Official body of French state architects.

<sup>7</sup> Official local town plan.

commercial buildings, rehabilitated a public space round a recently built market hall and a newly renovated church. Arranged around telltale indicators of urban life (retail outlets, public spaces), the project still displays many features of village identity (church, market). In Chevannes (91), a project for converting a farm into about thirty social housing units has incorporated mechanisms to rekindle commercial activities (a cafe and a baker's) and for catering for pedestrians, as well as for limiting car use in public spaces. Finally, at Houdan (78), where densification through collective housing has proved a recurrent theme in municipal policy for twenty or so years, the success of this approach means that today the commune benefits from shops, jobs, and some remarkable facilities for its 3500 inhabitants. These examples demonstrate how, beyond simply providing dwellings, collective housing, unlike estate developments, make it possible for true small town plans to by reinvigorate commerce, services, and even amenities within a more urban fabric. It can be perceived by elected officials as a means of ensuring functional and social diversity and for making a small town a living place, so it once more becomes a village. Moreover, the provision of a comprehensive plan for village development can smooth the way for greater acceptance of construction projects. These approaches translate the aspiration to what has been termed *alter-rurality* (Jousseau 2016), the longing for a long-lost rusticity—a desire such projects are expected to help realise. These projects are viewed as a means of regaining functional autonomy by becoming (once again) a centre beyond the Parisian metropolis in which such communes have been perceived hitherto as peripheral “outskirts”.

### **A mixed reception among occupiers**

The question of how inhabitants live in small peri-urban towns in which the traditional housing option is the detached house (the proportion of households occupying such dwellings can reach 90% in some small towns!) now arises.

Interviews undertaken with inhabitants of these communes have highlighted three profiles or types of motivations for living in small towns.

#### *Peri-urban collective housing as an episode in a housing experience.*

For these households, often young and childless, living in multi-household accommodation is envisaged as a transition. Many are putting money aside for a house, some as a long-term project and others shortly before moving. Though they might testify to being satisfied with their housing conditions, they emphasise that this is only relative. Multi-household residences are perceived as an acceptable housing opportunity for a given period in the course of a trajectory in which the house is seen as the ultimate goal.

Households for which collective dwelling forms an episode in a longer housing experience include the elderly. Following a life spent in single-household accommodation, the older people often lack the

physical stamina or financial means — in particular in the event of widowhood — to maintain a house.

If older residents were encountered, they were, however, very much in the minority (five households out of 80 interviewed). Moreover, they had seldom lived in the commune at the outset: some were onetime inhabitants, who, having first retired to the south of the country, had moved back to the peri-urban area to be closer to their children. Others, originally from other peri-urban communes, had been obliged to move due to a lack of suitable provision of collective housing near their home.

Although this is the kind of argument elected officials deploy in the hope of making multi-household dwellings more acceptable to electors (they are for “our” old people, “our” young, and “our” single-parent families), the reality is rather different.

#### *Peri-urban collective housing as a choice*

Certain households harbour a real desire to live in a multi-household residence. In gentrified communes, such as Bois-le-Roi and Montfort l’Amaury, they can be found both in the social and private catchment, as well as in communes enjoying superior commercial facilities and services, and thus more features of urban life (as in Houdan). Households occupying social housing stock which formerly resided in the suburbs, and in particular in communes characterised by the inhabitants of peri-urban zones themselves as “sinks” (Grigny, Creil, les Mureaux, Trappes), express particular satisfaction. For them, the most important thing is their address. The fact of living in collective housing is largely compensated for by the quality of the peri-urban environment and small town life generally: proximity to the countryside, but also retail outlets or the school’s good reputation.

Occupiers benefiting from a garden or some other external space (terrace, balcony) tend to be especially content with their housing. This is particularly visible in Itteville: in a social program of 17 units, part of the inhabitants live in residences of a typology best described as intermediary, whereas others live in a rehabilitated building without an outside space. The considerable differences in appreciation demonstrate how crucial access to a private external space remains in peri-urban zones. The high level of approval for intermediate typologies poses a challenge for “neo-village” architecture in which little provision is made for access to external space (limited to balconies).

#### *Trapped: peri-urban collective housing as a last resort*

Finally, there are those who are unhappy with peri-urban multi-household accommodation. For some, this is a symptom of a disappointing housing experience, as when, for instance, the family house has been sold due to some misfortune or other—such as divorce and/or unemployment. In this case, collective housing is seen as the best of a bad job and its defects take centre stage: noise from neighbours, the difficulties of joint occupancy, the absence of outdoor space, less privacy than in a house, etc.

Overcrowding in certain residences has also been identified in a number of certain communes (five people to one two-room apartment in Moussy-le-Neuf, four in a similar surface area in Plailly). For the most part tenants in the private sector, these “recluses” voice dissatisfaction with this type of housing.

### **Collective housing in small town centres: a specific way of life?**

We undertook our investigations in an effort to discover whether living in peri-urban collective housing changed occupant lifestyles—in particular as regards shopping in the local town and car use. If the data collected cannot be compared to that of the INSEE on car use in peri-urban areas, it is clear that it remains the dominant form of transport. Most couples possess two cars, while only very few elderly households and one single person have no car at all. Finally, people do not tend to shop at the small town’s corner stores—and in any case not on a daily basis: shopping generally takes place in out-of-town supermarkets.

Living in a small town centre is generally experienced as satisfactory, even if this satisfaction depends on the town in question—and in particular on the number of retail outlets it has. Traditional downsides (poor public transport) are rarely mentioned, though criticism of inadequate commercial activity in a number of small towns is voiced.

### **Conclusion: collective housing under pressure**

If multi-household housing construction appears necessary in small town centres so as to further peri-urban maturation and to diversify the housing stock, it remains difficult to bring about. In communes where the individual dwelling is the norm, the private house remains an ideal, the conclusion of the housing arc for some, a thwarted desire for others. Save for a handful of exceptions, among the inhabitants encountered there appears no actual desire to live in an apartment. Doing so can at most be characterised as a compromise or transition, except for those benefiting from access to an outside space who feel “like in a house.”<sup>8</sup>

This conclusion invites a rethink of small collective unit architecture, which too seldom incorporates an access to an external space, owing to the constraints of the “neo-village” style.

At this conference I would be extremely interested to learn of examples of such architecture in which a consensus between the aspirations of new occupiers of local housing and historic residents has been reached.

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<sup>8</sup> Part of an interview with a household occupying an apartment giving onto a garden in Montfort.



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