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RUNNING OUT OF TIME

Reflective reviews and discussion of important issues in person-environment studies

IAPS 26th conference – Quebec City
June 21-26, 2020

Ownership and solidarity to ward off the worrying future

Audrey Courbebaisse and Daniel Pinson

Housing, and more broadly habitat, is a major element of human existence. As Marcel Mauss saw it, housing provides protection from both the harsh climate and enemy aggression, be it animal, viral or human. Housing ensures the safety and physical integrity of the human being.

In the present reflection, which is based on our own empirical work but also on reading the work of many other researchers, we will try to open a perspective based on a history of habitat on a planet that is now threatened.

We will thus see how, from being a protective device, then a comfort device, the home has become a place of irrefragable squandering and how much, nowadays, there is a need to return to a regime of moderation and sharing for everything that concerns the human habitat.

The signs of this new relationship with housing, of this aspiration to remain, are affirmed in the acts of the inhabitants appropriations. They don't limit sustainability to energy saving, but extend it to the search for well-being, for insurance against hazards of all kinds, whether climatic or societal, through the continuous improvement of one's own home as well as in the construction of a peaceful neighbourhood.

Based on ethno-architectural analyses combining living surveys (Pinson, 2016), semi-directive interviews with inhabitants and photographs, we will attempt to bring out the clues to a new relationship with the inhabitant, both in the relationship to housing and in the link to the other through the awareness of a new value system.

We will rely, among other things, on our research on housing estates and collective housing estates built in France, in the regions of Nantes and Toulouse, during the 20th century.

1. *From the Reign of Necessity to the Consumerist Era: Inputs and Crossings of Heteronomous Paths*

Housing has always been at the heart of societal transformations, both vector and witness of the relationship between people and their environment, between people and the collective.

In pre-industrial societies, housing was associated with the place of work, if it didn't confuse with it, countryside for the farmer, city for the craftsman.

At the end of the 19th century, the housing issue became the State's cause and social housing was born. At the very beginning of the 20th century, the state and low-cost housing companies were at the forefront of the fight against slums and thus initiated the promotion of what would soon be called "comfort"¹. This is probably one of the earliest manifestations of « L'État-Providence »².

Comfort, gained throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century until the end of the « Trente Glorieuses », is limited to the « strictly necessary », and remains virtuous, in the search for protection provided by the home. It is also a support and an extension of a domestic culture largely based on self-repair and self-production.

With the over-consumption society according to the « Trente Glorieuses », domestic appliances leave the sphere of this « strictly necessary » to invade modern society. By acquiring these objects, the consumer is encouraged to construct an imaginary world where envy and competition rival, echoes of capitalist appetites, which undermine the values of mutual aid and solidarity present in pre-industrial societies.

The car-pavillon couple, a model of American social and territorial development, reached France at the end of the « Trente Glorieuses », generating, due to the large surface area of the plots required for the construction of detached houses, an important urban sprawl and, consequently, a considerable extension of the networks, whether they be roads or supply and evacuation networks.

In the housing itself, in the urban collective as well as in the peri-urban pavillon, the multiplication of equipment and its sophistication has no equivalent, in the frenzy of accumulation, to their rapid - and programmed - obsolescence, which forces incessant renewal. The packaging of consumables also uses packaging in which plastic have become dominant, leading to the ecological disaster we are experiencing.³

Faced with the risks of this widespread ecological disaster, the last two decades of public policy have promoted a series of laws, restrictive standards and incentive labels for less energy-intensive housing.

¹Le décret du 30 janvier 2002 relatif à la loi solidarité et renouvellement urbains (SRU) de décembre 2000 précise les conditions que doit satisfaire un logement pour garantir la santé ou la sécurité de ses occupants, et les équipements dont il doit être pourvu en termes de surface et volume habitables, de qualité du bâti, de dispositifs d'isolation, d'installation électrique, de chauffage, d'éclairage naturel, etc.

²Voir : <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2586024?sommaire=2586377>.

³<http://www.septiemecontinent.com/nouvelles-publications-scientifiques-pollution-plastique-locean/>.

As for access to hygiene in the 19th century, and for the installation of comfort in dwellings during the 20th century, housing is the first vector of a massive and national transformation. As always, **the State decides and provides**.

Thus, to compensate for the poor insulation of housing built during the "Trente Glorieuses", renamed for the occasion "energy sieves", social landlords and owners are encouraged to carry out heavy interventions of packaging, demolition and reconstruction, by means of grants from national organizations and tax credits. Companies even offer the insulation of your house for only 1 euro.

Behind these incentives, it is the use of a battery of new products that is encouraged : Photovoltaic panels, insulators and frames of ever-increasing performance in line with increasingly demanding standards.

More worryingly, the generalization of such practices, with the accumulation of materials that will have to be renewed in a few years, leads to the disappearance of architectures that bear witness to their time.

As in the case of hygiene and comfort, the fitting of housing, in the sense of transition, is supposed to contribute to the well-being of the inhabitants and society. However, by choosing the prescriptive path (rather than the proscriptive path, which leaves more possibilities for implementation), the State imposes more than it encourages the inhabitants to participate in the transition. A recent survey of inhabitants of so-called "passive" new housing in Brussels shows the discrepancies between compliance with regulations on materials (insulation) and construction technologies (double-flow, renewable energies) and the habits of the inhabitants, which are heavily influenced by cultural habits.

Here we agree with the architect John F. C. Turner who denounced, in his all too infamous "Housing by people" (1976), to what extent "the usefulness of housing for its main users, the occupants, is independent of the material level of the goods and services provided" and how much "needs are not things that are produced by organizations, they are the intimate priorities of people"..

If we equate the need for an ecological transition with the material equipment of housing and as long as it remains imposed in a **top-down mode**, we will only be blaming the social and territorial inequalities from which our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods suffer today. The pandemic we have just gone through shows how unequal we are in our relationship to housing. The pursuit of this heteronomous path, (indifferent to the inhabitant autonomy's aspirations) is an assured failure.

2. Preventing a predicted disaster

Being before having : renaturation, sobriety and sharing

In the 1970s, home ownership (Godard, Cuturello, 1980) paved the way for more freedom for residents. Our empirical research (Pinson, 1988) shows in fact that those who have previously lived in low-rent housing can deploy practices in the space of the house that were difficult to carry out in the space of the low-rent housing, strongly restricted in its use by the narrowness and rigidity of the rooms. In home ownership, all these limitations are significantly relaxed, only subject to the requirements of the housing code. In addition, the **free parts of construction on the allocated plot make possible annexes or extensions**, authorized or not.

The broad autonomy that the purchaser finds in the interior distribution as in the exterior image of his house accompanies his aspiration to distinguish himself (Bourdieu, 1979) and to get out of what we have called the "identiquité" of HLM housing.

This expression of this **autonomy** was initially limited to **transgressing** what was not allowed in the HLMs and gave rise to improvements in terms of comfort to bring it into line with the expectations of its inhabitant and its domestic culture, **the productive part of which (do-it-yourself, sewing, gardening, flowering, etc.)** had been eliminated by the composition and distribution of the HLM housing.

Among these improvements, there are also those which, for quite a long time, since the first oil crisis, aim to save the energy by isolating and acquiring equipment helping **to reduce this expenditure**. In addition, for those who practice gardening, arrangements can be made to collect rainwater and make compost from household waste. Often this sense of economy comes from the part of the peasant culture of which the generations born immediately after the last war are still holders, inherited from their parents or grandparents or, from young households sensitized through the over-consumption society and looking for alternatives to waste and the accumulation of material properties.

The « captive » tenants, those who have not been able to access the house of their dreams, sometimes break free from the control of landlords to install a DIY workshop in their cellar or simply transform a room that was unoccupied for the manufacture of models, following the children departure.

For their part, women of these same generations, who, when they do not devote themselves to the passion of embroidery or knitting, have learned the basics of sewing, have less difficulty reserving, in certain rooms, corners where they can engage in these self-productive occupations.

These **self-production practices are tending to be updated**, particularly in working-class neighbourhoods (classified as priorities by the State). Living then takes on another dimension, that of **resistance to the inequalities of life**: it often results in networking and collective participation. Associative initiatives, such as "Haute Couture ", "APRES", or "Le jardin des 1000 fleurs", contribute to making the inhabitants actors of their living places, generate solidarity and alleviate difficulties due to people's isolation.

Most of the time, the freedom that tenants, especially men, who have not found it in the dwelling itself, exercise it in the space of the worker's or family garden that they have taken from the side of a railway track or from some abandoned piece of land, unless the landlord, by force of insistence (Pasquier, 2003), has agreed to allocate it to them.

The self-built garden shed or delivered with the plot quickly becomes, with the fine weather, an outlet for excessively sedentary life in the HLM and we can quickly add a trellis shading a « garden living room », allowing family or neighbours meetings. Vegetable gardens and flowerbeds no longer have the function of improving the ordinary family menu as much as of allowing their beneficiaries to engage in an outdoor activity that reconciles them with nature, an activity over which they have full control. **In the neighbourhoods of large housing estates, shared gardens drive out other unlawful practices.**

With global warming, while landlords are putting in place measures aimed at individualising consumption, the same tenants are paying more attention to **simple arrangements to reduce heat loss**. Long windows (dear to the Modern Movement) thus see their width reduced by drapery or other devices allowing both the occultation and the thickening of the wall (Courbebaisse, 2018). Modest co-owners of affordable housing built in the 1950s and 1970s, are more active in carrying out such developments, on an individual basis, when the co-ownership is late in carrying out work on all the dwellings. We can also mention this self-rehabilitation experience in a degraded co-ownership in Marseille where the inhabitants have joined forces with the ONG "Les Compagnons Bâtitseurs" to repair their buildings. Through this association, they have thus acquired knowledge and skills that facilitate the internal renovation of their homes and the maintenance of their property over time (Berra and Pinson, 2015).

It is interesting to recall the experience of certain co-ownerships from the 1960s, former HLM cooperatives where access to housing, through a lease-cooperation contract, included future residents in the project from the design beginning. United by strong social values of sharing and mutualisation, these inhabitants still occupy their homes and defend, alongside the younger generations, the good life in their neighbourhood. In these examples, the intergenerational mutual aid, the impulse of exchange and **conviviality moments and the ecological cause sensitivity** of a small leading group of inhabitants (Courbebaisse 2020), show other ways, **favorable to the installation in space and time.**

While the initiative of the Habitat Groupé Autogéré was only an ephemeral and punctual experience of the 1970s, participative housing is currently experiencing in France (as in other European countries which preceded it in this way) a force demonstrated by the meetings that this structured movement has been organizing regularly since 2006 (more than 600 projects in 2019 potentially representing 5 to 7,000 dwellings).

Its dynamism made it possible to include in the latest housing law (ALUR, 20141) provisions facilitating the implementation and management of collective and individual housing projects that meet high environmental quality standards. In addition to a family space corresponding to the expectations of their self-promoters, these complexes in-

clude shared services (workshop, laundry, sports room, etc.). The initiators are generally small groups of ecological sensitivity, marked by a fairly homogenous social background, but a more assertive generational mix. They are united by their projects development and thus cultivate, at the end of the work, positive neighbourhood relationships and solidarity (S. Bresson, 2016).

To conclude,

Between the early times indigence and the late modernity consuming addiction (Rosa, 2012), between precariousness and predation, **a path opens up based on moderation and sharing**, of which cooperative housing would be the ideal model.

This ideal model, combining poetic (active participation in the design and construction of one's living space) **and political** in the primary sense of the term (management of the city), exists in latent form in the autonomous (individual ownership) and heteronomous forms of housing (collective rental) and is translated into more or less extensive appropriations of the existing space, depending on the possibilities offered by the initial architecture and the limits set by the lessors.

The ideal model underlying the appropriations observed in ordinary housing may be similar to the participatory housing approach, which is still in its infancy and marginal (7,000 dwellings). It does not limit **sustainability** to the use of materials and heating/cooling systems aimed at ensuring energy-efficient housing, as public authorities too often tend to present it, but **as a way of life** and living driven by the desire to guarantee those who adopt it a domestic comfort and a type of consumption compatible with the ecological footprint.

Currently, the scale of these initiatives hardly exceed more than a dozen households each. They now find, in a structured movement ("Habitat participatif France "1), the support and advice to carry out their project. **Self-promotion, self-construction and self-management** play an important role and the architectural solutions chosen are attentive to their location, to control the cost of land and distances to other living areas (work, equipment), to the overall architectural design and details (orientation, density, choice of materials, maintenance, shared and planted spaces ...).

The « Vivre ensemble » of these communities is also based on rules established by consensus: they hardly need to be recorded in any text. They provide the group with **security, solidarity and collective responsibility, for each person** towards his or her neighbour and for each person **towards our common home, planet Earth.**