The New Life of the GHJ Building in Cité Balzac

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Some remains of the GHJ building in Cité Balzac rest in the studio of the architect and artist Daniel Purroy, preserved as part of an artistic project exhibited at the 2013 Nuit Blanche in Paris. Elements of its prefabricated façade and pieces of debris evoke, on the one hand, the rationalist origin of the building, as anonymous as the acronym with which it was baptised; and on the other, through the remains of different decorative papers that adorned its interior, they reveal the personal life of each of its inhabitants. In 2012, many of them witnessed the demolition of the building in which they had spent part of their lives. The article recounts the life of this building which overcame its own disappearance and whose remains were part of a collaborative artistic work in which its last inhabitants played a leading role.

The 2013 edition of the Nuit Blanche in Paris featured a surprising installation in the gardens of Hôtel d’Aumont and Cité Internationale des Arts, located in the Saint Paul district of Le Marais, on the banks of the Seine. On a plane parallel to that of the monument which today houses the administrative court of Paris, a fragment of a façade was reconstructed from prefabricated modules salvaged from one of the many demolished buildings in the urban belt of Paris (La Banlieue) (fig. 01). This was the GHJ building in the Cité Balzac housing estate, built in the 1960s on the outskirts of the town of Vitry-sur-Seine.

In addition to the public who contemplated the varied cultural offerings of the Parisian evening event, the intervention in the gardens of the Hôtel was attended by some very special visitors. Many of the building’s former inhabitants attended the inauguration of the installation, some as mere spectators and others as actors involved in a performance that used the reconstructed façade as a stage. Meanwhile, in the background, recordings taken from the neighbourhood itself could be heard on a loop, as a soundtrack to the life that went on there in parallel to that of central Paris.

With the arrival of nightfall, the illumination of the windows which still had their curtains in place produced a magical effect. That night the GHJ took on a new life, in other circumstances, in another context and, in a way, it was redeemed by the memory of the lives it once housed (fig. 02).

The artistic operation was the result of a project entitled “La Cité Balzac de Vitry-sur-Seine à Paris” led by Daniel Purroy, an artist from Navarre who trained as an architect. In 2007 he set up his studio in Vitry-sur-Seine, attracted by the vastness of the old industrial spaces that could be found on the periphery, as well as by the intense transformation that the neighbourhood was undergoing following the decision to demolish some of its buildings. The proximity of his place of work to Cité Balzac allowed him to make contact with the neighbours and learn first-hand about the process of stigmatisation to which they, as inhabitants of the buildings, had been subjected. This contact gave rise to the idea of displacing the negative connotations that the image of the building had acquired and transforming it into something new, into something with a very different meaning, such as a work of art. He proposed to do so, moreover, by using the architecture of the building itself; in this case a fragment of its façade, whose transfer to the heart of Paris would seek to establish a double relationship of otherness between the terms capita/banlieue and cultural/social.

For Purroy, beyond its status as a symbol of a social problem that was to be overcome by its demolition, the GHJ was a collective housing project in a socially marked context that was inextricably linked to the people who lived in it. It was a living space through which a whole generation of individuals had lived and evolved. The traces of this movement, elements with acquired social and political connotations, were preserved in his project in order to develop their value as a representation of these lives. Thus, the event designed by the artist took on the double dimension of an artistic and political gesture at the same time.

Of the various actions undertaken in the project, the most ambitious one, with the greatest media impact, was undoubtedly the rescue of a large fragment of the prefabricated façade (fig. 03). This was a delicate operation that Daniel was able to undertake with the logistical support of the demolition company. However, beyond the spectacular nature of the operation devised by Purroy and its technical difficulty, it was the neighbourhood collaboration that provided the social dimension of the project. The mobilisation of the former inhabitants of the GHJ to recover parts of the building that had housed their lives for years (more than 40 in some cases) was, in itself, an awakening, a tribute and a dignification of their personal memory, which was inevitably linked to the structure that the authorities had decided to demolish and reduce to rubble.

Work to restore the façade began in July 2012 and its modular fragments were carefully transferred to the artist’s workshop in Les Ardennes where they were stored. Subsequently, thanks again to the work of the local residents, the remains were given the necessary framework for their subsequent reconstruction. Shortly after the demolition of the building on 5 September 2012, one of the façade’s modules was erected in the void left by the missing building as an initial artistic gesture. Individually, in groups or in families, the former residents wanted to immortalise their image next to this remnant of the façade, expressly signifying their connection with the memory of the building (fig. 04).

It is within this personal dimension that another of the rescue operations undertaken as part of the project makes sense: the recovery of wall fragments from different dwellings, still covered
by the wallpaper with which the families had personalised their homes. If these large housing structures had been accused of being alienating because of their abstraction and repetition, the presence of these wallpapers, in all their variety and figuration, signified their inhabitants’ resistance to the uniformity that came with this extreme vision of the rational city.

A careful photographic reportage by Corinne Janier Colombel documented the variety and disparity with which the tenants of the GHJ had decorated their homes. After the demolition of the GHJ, the remains of pieces of concrete bearing fragments of wallpaper were collected, as if from an archaeological site, and once separated from their context, inside storage boxes, they acquired the strange condition of artistic objects charged with meaning (fig. O6).

The final point of the whole operation was, as already mentioned, the reconstruction of part of the façade in another context in order to address the cultural dimension of the project and its conception as an art installation. Initially, Daniel Purroy’s idea was to link centre and periphery by taking the material to the Louvre Museum. The artist envisaged the transfer being made on a barge along the Seine, taking advantage of the fact that it flows in that direction, from Vitry towards the centre, thus staging the project’s desire to connect centre and periphery (fig. O6).

The reconstruction was finally housed in the gardens of Hôtel d’Aumont, a site that was perhaps less critical from a social point of view but undoubtedly more fortunate. Its smaller size allowed the monumentality of the three floors that were reconstructed for the occasion to attain a spectacular artistic autonomy and, in this gentler setting, to take on a strange beauty while maintaining the contrast of scales and the different conception of domestic life that the project proposed.

The success of the project’s presentation at the Nuit Blanche was such a success that one year later, in May 2014, the work was exhibited at the Palais de Tokyo as part of the exhibition “Banlieue is beautiful” promoted by the American artist Monte. This new exhibition of the monumental work of the GHJ façade had the effect of consolidating the proposal’s status as an artistic object, thus exhibited in a museum, even though it was dressed in the same experimental and unconventional ways as those of the regenerated building by Lacaton and Vassal in which it was housed (fig. O7).

Once the exhibition tour was over, the pieces of the great puzzle of the GHJ façade returned to Daniel Purroy’s atelier in Les Ardoines, in Vitry-sur-Seine, where they remain perfectly stored after ten years ago.

**CITÉ BALZAC**

Beyond the greater or lesser appeal of Purroy’s installation, it is worth asking about the background and objectives behind the artistic project that took place in the GHJ building in Cité Balzac.

*Cité Balzac* was built between 1964 and 1968 by the Italian-born architect Mario Capra to house a thousand families who had immigrated from the former colonies to the Parisian suburbs in response to the urgent need for labour that the French capital was experiencing at the time.

It was part of the ambitious programme of social housing construction that led to the appearance of a number of similar examples which were built, as in Vitry-sur-Seine, in many other towns in Île-de-France. They were all designed with the same parameters: high density and functional design using large prismatic concrete blocks and serial façade solutions. These sadly famous ‘*barres HLM*’ (habitations à loyer modéré) would end up becoming symbols of marginality and delinquency.

Mario Capra, an admirer of Oscar Niemeyer’s work in Brazilia, designed *Cité Balzac* as a fragment of the city which was created ex-novo to be the political capital of Brazil. Niemeyer himself, then in exile in Paris, was present at the inauguration of the neighbourhood and, accompanied by the project’s architect, visited the large exhibition on the urban planning of Vitry-sur-Seine that was organised for the event (fig. O8).

The typologies used in the dwellings, with all exterior rooms, cross-ventilation and terraces, and the large, tree-lined adjacent public spaces, welcomed their new inhabitants by offering them a new way of living that they had not known in their countries of origin. The operation was an early success. The neighbourhood offered good standards of liveability and older residents recalled, on the occasion of the demolition of the HLMs, how in the early years the neighbourhood had been highly valued by its residents, both for the quality of its modern accommodation and for the fertile coexistence that had developed between the different social groups.

The first problems arose in the early 1980s. Fifteen years later, the spatial quality of the housing was not enough to alleviate the precariousness of the inhabitants’ lives. The slow development of the urban transport system and the lack of facilities did not help either. In addition, the first pathologies began to appear as a result of deficient construction using prefabricated concrete systems that were not sufficiently tested and even the presence of asbestos. All this, together with a lack of maintenance, meant that the initial idyllic image was gradually tarnished. The administration then launched a project to rehabilitate the complex, directed by the architect Guy Duval, with the intention of restoring some of the district’s former splendour and putting an end to the physical and social ruin that it was suffering.

However, this renewal was not very successful and by the end of the century the image of *Cité Balzac* had deteriorated even further. The loss of clear horizons for the new generations, faced with the monsters of unemployment and school failure, ended up pushing the neighbourhood as a whole towards marginality with a consequent increase in delinquency and conflict in its streets. Added to all this was the growing difficulty French society was having in accommodating certain groups, such as Muslims, who were on the rise and drifting towards radicalism, which even today threatens to end in a violent cultural clash.

**THE GHJ BUILDING**

The GHJ building was one of the three ‘*barres*’ built by Mario Capra in 1967 in *Cité Balzac*. It housed 168 families on fourteen floors above a high ground floor (45 m high in total). Like the rest of the neighbourhood and with the objectives already mentioned, it was renovated in 1989; a prefabricated cladding was installed on its original façade to correct the damp and improve energy performance.

However the episode that most marked the GHJ occurred on 4 October 2002, when the burnt body of young Sohane Benziane was found in the building’s bin room. Although she fought for her life, she died in hospital just two hours later. Her killer, a 19-year-old North African, tried to defend himself by claiming that it was a crime of passion, but the courts did not believe him and society mobilised against the disregard for life that was revealed by the brutal murder. The fact that the victim was a woman especially galvanised the female community, not only Muslims, and Sohane became a symbol for the feminist movement that launched the slogan “*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*” which eventually spread beyond the borders of France to the rest of Europe.

The decline of the neighbourhood, pushed further by these events, led to the demolition of the ABC and DEF *barres* in 2007 and 2010 respectively. In the case of the GHJ, marked by the cruel murder of the young woman, the first evictions began in 2006.
and the building remained empty long before its demolition. By the time it was demolished in September 2012, it had long since achieved the status of a sad symbol of a social initiative, full of good intentions, which had ended in total failure\(^7\).

**DEMOLITION OF CÎTE BALZAC AND OTHER SIMILAR NEIGHBOURHOODS**

Although the demolition of the GHJ was strikingly symbolic and its media repercussion was highly significant (fig. 09), it was by no means an isolated case. Many of the housing estates built around the same time and with the same parameters on the outskirts of Paris followed the same path, with the demolition of their larger buildings and a profound remodelling of the rest of their layout. This was something that had also happened outside of this setting. In the last quarter of the 20th century, numerous urban developments on the outskirts of large cities, built according to the radical directives of the Modern Movement and intended for social use, entered a spiral of degradation that turned them into veritable ghettos of marginalisation whose radical solution was demolition. The best known case is the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St Louis, Missouri, whose total demolition in 1972 was hailed by the British critic Charles Jenks as the end point of Modern Architecture\(^8\).

In the Paris area, the demolition of CÎte Balzac and other grands-ensembles built around the same time was part of a broad urban renewal plan that sought to break with the status of unhealthy ghettos for the underprivileged classes. It aimed to replace them with new housing developments with a much lower density and a new design that would make them attractive to the middle classes and thus move towards a more open and diverse profile for their inhabitants, even allowing the possibility of access to property ownership.

To this end, the PNRU (Plan National de Renovation Urbaine) was created in 1996, which identified a total of 761 urban areas affected by the same problems\(^9\). Although social measures were initially implemented, it soon became clear that a spatial reconversion of the different neighbourhoods was necessary and in 1998 the alternative of demolishing the most problematic buildings was approved. This operation was combined with comprehensive rehabilitation work, such as that led by Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, and a facelift for buildings with a friendlier volumetry\(^10\) (fig. 10). Thus, in CÎte Balzac, the successive destruction of the three original barres was accompanied by a radical transformation of the neighbourhood's physiognomy: the linear Malleret-Joinville block was cut back, a new avenue was opened and the urban voids were filled with new, lower-density built-up areas. Today the neighbourhood has a different image, with a markedly residential character, and its population has been renewed in part because, although many of its former inhabitants have moved away, a significant number have also decided to remain in the remodelled development\(^11\).

**ON THE LIFE OF BUILDINGS**

Based on his experience in areas similar to those of CÎte Balzac, Jean-Philippe Vassal stated that “people do not want to be evicted from large housing estates, they feel deeply attached to their flat”\(^12\). This was one of Lacaton and Vassal's most important premises in their struggle within the PRNU for a different response to the systematic demolition of buildings, based on economic, social and ecological arguments that advocated transformation by making existing buildings better. At that time, this strategy marked a change of trend towards a more sustainable architecture which was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2021. Nonetheless, many buildings were demolished and thousands of families were displaced from their homes in the Paris area alone. For those who suffered, for all those demolished buildings, the story in this article describes an artistic process that tried to mediate by focusing on the battered building and, once its demolition had been carried out, on the inevitable mourning of its inhabitants. Artistic actions were used in order to deal with healing the relationship with their memories\(^13\). The fact that in this event the building was once again present, represented by its fragments, and the neighbours were also present in each stage of the project, is related to the aesthetic-pedagogical thinking of the German Joseph Beuys and his view of art and the artist as a social transformer\(^14\), which Daniel Purroy himself refers to as an influence.

Another possible reflection derived from Purroy's work with the GHJ is related to the suitability of the social space for fostering an encounter between art and architecture. By focussing on the destination of the work of both disciplines and underlining their shared condition as a service, the tools that correspond to each of them become blurred, as do their limits or frontiers. The capacity to influence social construction, which both artists and architects have, implies a responsibility that should act as a brake on the narcissistic temptations that often assail them.

In this way, in recovering some of the architectural elements of the 'barre' of CÎte Balzac and in establishing a new relationship between them, a modification of their meaning is achieved, eliminating the negative connotations attached to the original object. A new recomposed image is offered which is capable of acquiring new meanings of a very different order from the previous ones, which even allow the new object to be considered as a work of art, as it was presented in the exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo.

All this means that, returning to the question of the life of buildings and their memory, we can affirm that the GHJ shows us, perhaps too emphatically, how buildings, once built and inhabited, have their own life which gives them a symbolic significance or reduces them to anonymity due to circumstances that rarely have anything to do with the intentions that guided the architects in their design process.
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Notes
02. In the process, Purroy was accompanied by Charles Robinson http://charles-robinson.blogspot.com/ (consulted on 13 February 2023) and Pasquaile Calone https://www.pasquailecalone.com/video (consulted on 13 February 2023), an Italian writer and filmmaker-photographer.

The presence of these two artists, together with some other collaborators, gave the initiative a plural and multidisciplinary dimension.


05. Palais de Tokyo, “Banlieue is beautiful”, https://palaisdetokyo.com/evenement/banlieue-is-beautiful/


06. On the importance of the HLM institution in France and the current state of social housing in France, see STÉBÉ, Jean-Marc, Le Logement social en France, PUF, Paris, 2022.


08. MANZANO’s text gathers testimonies from the neighbours of Cité Balzac which show its first sweet moment “it was a good time (...) there were always people outside, I remember, in summer the mothers used to make us go out, and they would sit outside until 11 o’clock at night (...) yes, it was nice” as well as its subsequent degradation “there was vandalism, broken shop windows, (...) They would race motorbikes through the aisles, cars would go inside the shopping centre” in MANZANO, ÓGOMEZ, Noel Antonio, “Espacio Público en una periferia de París: Vitry-Sur-Seine”, in Ciudades, 2014, 17, pp. 208-211.


12. “Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri, on 15 July 1972 at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts), when several blocks of the infamous Pruitt Igoe project were shot to death with dynamite. Prior to that, they had been vandalised, mutilated and disfigured by their black residents and, although millions of dollars were invested in trying to preserve the place (repairing lifts, windows or repainting everything) it was put out of its misery” JENCKS C., (1978) The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, New York: Rizzoli, p. 24.


14. On the results of the Renovation Plan, see CASTRILLO ROMÓN, María, “El urbanismo de renovación de grandes conjuntos de vivienda social en Francia, 2004-2008” in Revista Proyecto, Progreso,


17. The process of the artistic work in relation to the GHJ building was, at all times, documented by the artist himself and his collaborators. On the YouTube platform, it is currently possible to access the documentary that was made with the different photographs and recordings that were collected during its development https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzQZrthUzac (accessed on 19 January 2023).


Images
01. (corresponds to the image that opens the article) Image of Daniel Purroy's installation in the gardens of Hôtel d’Aumont. Source: Archive of Daniel Purroy.


03. Sequence of images of the dismantling of the façade of the GHJ building. Source: Archive of Daniel Purroy.


05. Wallpapers and rubble that form part of La Cité Balzac project. Sequence of images of the interior of the dwellings. Source: Archive of Daniel Purroy and Corinne Janier.

06. Initial proposal for the Cité Balzac installation in the courtyard of the Louvre Museum. Source: Archive of Daniel Purroy.


08. The visit of Georges Gosnaut, Oscar Niemeyer and Mario Capra to the Vitry Urban Planning Exhibition. Source: Tumulte dans l’ensemble, Diego Beja Inglez de Souza.

09. Footage of the demolition of the GHJ. Source: Archive of Daniel Purroy.

10. Image of Cité Balzac. In black, the original buildings still standing; in white, the demolished ones. Source: own elaboration.