

Tabula non rasa as a radical strategy

With their PLUS project, Jean-Philippe Vassal and Anne Lacaton, in collaboration with Frédéric Druot, are transforming drab apartment buildings into liveable structures that enable interaction and improve quality of life. They believe every building has its own unique history, and advocate a strategy of adding chapters instead of starting a new book.

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Urban _



Identity destroyed at the push of a button: *tabula rasa* in the banlieues.

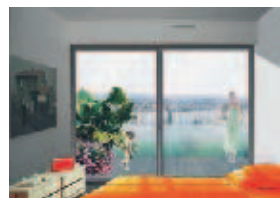
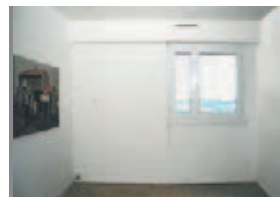
French architect Jean-Philippe Vassal speaks deliberately, with long pauses between statements, describing the work of Lacaton & Vassal using words like “graceful,” “delicate,” and “generous.” What does this mean in terms of architecture and the city?

Continuity – not conservatism

When Vassal was commissioned to propose an architectural intervention in for plain-looking neighborhood square at the periphery of Bordeaux, he conducted careful research and reported to the municipality: “We have a project. The project is to do nothing, to leave everything as it is. We find that everything is there, the place has charm, people like to play soccer there with their children, and there are good benches. We recommend simply cleaning the square more often.” Vassal believes that any intervention must be well considered and carried out with great care and precision. That he shuns the *tabula rasa* approach is not to be misconstrued as conservatism: it has more to do with maintaining continuity in the urban realm. “We accept history and continue it,” Vassal commented. “We should not always begin anew.”

PLUS creates value with an economy of means

How this conviction can be put into practice is revealed by Lacaton & Vassal’s projects in the suburbs of several major cities in France which are full of apartment buildings – the *grands ensembles* erected in the 1950s and 1960s. Though they originally offered a good living standard, with 50 years of neglect, they gradually fell into miserable condition. “Living in these buildings is difficult,” admits Vassal. “Not long ago we saw serious social disturbances in the French suburbs, which led to



Exploiting the potential of existing buildings – adding light, balconies, and communal spaces.



extensive public debate. Some claimed that these apartment buildings must be demolished because they are inhumane.”

Vassal points to the unique paradox that in France, where 1.5 million social housing units are lacking and funding is severely limited, buildings are being torn down instead of being reused. Lacaton & Vassal have proposed a way out of this paradox with PLUS, their concept for revitalizing and expanding existing buildings. “It gives you more building for your money,” Vassal concludes.

Rethink housing from within

Vassal believes that the call for *tabula rasa* stems from a wrong way of looking at things. “If you look at these buildings from far away, you think they are ugly – and you think they create social problems, the origins of which we don’t want to study.” But one must go inside these buildings to assess them. “We want to create new histories of these buildings from the inside. These new histories originate from each bedroom, each kitchen, each living room. We use what we have, improve it, develop it.” Vassal proposes that it is possible to transform every apartment into a luxury villa in a certain sense. “Luxury is not gilded materials – luxury is pleasure, happiness, comfort, and a good rapport with the outside world.”

Identity destroyed at the push of a button

To create this “luxury,” Lacaton & Vassal first meet with residents to find out what was important to them and what they were lacking. “All the people who live in these buildings are sad when their building gets

Existing buildings, and their transformation by Lacaton & Vassal.

torn down. Even when living conditions are poor, their apartment is part of their identity – and it is lost at the push of a button when the building is demolished.”

For a project in Paris, Lacaton & Vassal began by talking with all 100 resident families. Then they went to work. They let light into the apartments, created new outdoor spaces, added additional rooms and even entire apartments. Where 30 families once lived, 60 live now – in brighter, larger apartments, with more social spaces and opportunities for interaction. After undergoing a “gentle” renovation by Lacaton & Vassal, the buildings are hardly recognizable from the outside. But the people who live inside still recognize their apartments, which have been revitalized without any loss of identity.

Legal constraints as a force for positive change

Why does this concept work so well? And why is the doctrine behind it not common currency? Housing in France is strictly regulated by law. If a social housing block is demolished, the same number of units must be built in its place. Residents must be relocated temporarily, and given the current housing shortage, it can easily happen that they must be put up in a hotel. Although it is by far cheaper to renovate buildings than to replace them, it takes an architect like Jean-Philippe Vassal and a novel concept like PLUS to ensure the best results. Lacaton & Vassal see themselves as stewards of the architecture designed by their predecessors, and their goal is to gracefully develop the built environment for the next generation of architects.



Jean-Philippe Vassal graduated from the School of Architecture, Bordeaux in 1980, and spent the following five years in Niger as an architect and town planner. He lectured at the School of Architecture, Bordeaux (1992–1999) and at the School of Architecture, Versailles in 2002. In 1987, he founded the architectural practice Lacaton & Vassal in Bordeaux with Anne Lacaton. They renovation of the Palais de Tokyo contemporary art gallery in Paris was completed in 2001. Openly declaring their commitment to architectural economy, the work undertaken by Lacaton and Vassal focuses on low-budget renovation and construction, promoting dialogue with the building industry.