



## Using heritage status to combat segregation: the case of French housing estates

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*Challenging the idea that demolishing housing estates is all it takes to eradicate the social problems with which they are associated, the authors here instead argue for collective housing schemes to be recognised as heritage assets so that they can be renovated and returned to their original function as places of good-quality housing.*

Today, it is acknowledged that for the last 30 years or more – ever since the first riots in the Lyon suburbs and what the media at the time referred to as “the hot summer at Les Minguettes<sup>1</sup>” – French collective housing estates, composed largely of social housing, have been the object of significant discredit (with multiple social causes) related to the urban forms these estates take (blocks and towers), their locations (on the outskirts of cities) and their social composition (concentrations of deprived populations). Faced with these problems, housing projects became caught in a spiral of segregation, as described in the early 1990s by Jean-Marie Delarue in his report to the Minister for the City. To curb this sense of “relegation” (Delarue 1991), urban policies have essentially provided a spatialist-type response and concentrated their efforts on the transformation of the built environment and the redevelopment of spaces in order to change the image of these neighbourhoods. In other words, action has typically been taken with regard to spaces in the hope of fostering new behaviours that are synonymous with a more inclusive and comprehensive social life. But is this theory not in fact based on the questionable belief that spaces determine the ways in which their users live, think, feel and act?

The set of processes that have led to the segregation – even ghettoisation (Lapeyronnie 2008) – of housing schemes has raised, and continues to raise, the question of their very existence. Should we not therefore think more carefully about whether destroying them is really an appropriate solution to “inner-city malaise”? Unlike many policymakers, researchers in the humanities and social sciences (and even certain social landlords) have long been opposed to the drastic measure that is the wholesale demolition of housing schemes. The reasons cited have tended to focus on the intensity of neighbourly relations established over time in what have become familiar spaces. Perhaps more significantly still, opponents have often reminded those in favour of demolition of the considerable outstanding loans contracted by social landlords and the chronic shortage of social housing, making the massive demolition of housing estates simply unthinkable. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that, even today, the shortage of social housing is a highly topical issue in France – so much so that in 2013 the Abbé Pierre Foundation identified 5.2 million people who were in vulnerable situations because of the the housing crisis (pending deportation, living in unsanitary multi-dwelling units, etc.).<sup>2</sup> However, the increasingly marked deterioration of the built environment and rising levels of discrimination, unemployment and crime, among other factors, have forced social-science

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<sup>1</sup> Les Minguettes is an extensive neighbourhood of collective housing (the majority of it also social housing) located in Vénissieux, a suburb immediately to the south-east of Lyon. Since the riots of 1981, the estate has suffered from a poor reputation. The estate covers 12% of the area of Vénissieux (182 ha or 450 acres) and is home to over a third of the town’s population (around 22,000 out of 60,000 residents).

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.fondation-abbe-pierre.fr/en](http://www.fondation-abbe-pierre.fr/en).

researchers to revise their initial positions, with the result that some have come round to the views held by many political stakeholders who wish to eliminate the most stigmatised buildings.

### **When spatialist arguments are invoked to justify urban renewal**

The public authorities' argument in favour of demolishing housing schemes essentially consists of emphasising the excessive cost of rehabilitation due to the state of disrepair and dilapidation of the built environment. Moreover, they argue that destroying tall buildings will make it possible to build new apartment complexes on a much more human scale (no more than four storeys above ground level), as well as houses, enabling to combat criticisms of uniformity and at the same time improve the urban mix of the neighbourhoods in question. Policymakers also put forward the argument that demolition will lead to the eradication of social and spatial segregation. It is in accordance with this logic – in the name of socio-spatial justice based on equal opportunities and conditions – that policymakers choose the option of blowing up tower blocks within housing estates.

However, the implication of this kind of action is that social-housing estates are inherently threatening and pathogenic territories that could contaminate the surrounding societal and urban environment; it is as if these estates have become the setting for a whole “mythology” in which they are depicted as the source of all the ills of our society (Stébé and Marchal 2009). The strangeness embodied by their urban forms (blocks and towers) becomes a “handle”, in the words of Isaac Joseph (1997), that is to say a tangible, physical characteristic that is the root cause of segregative behaviour. Here, it must be stressed that even if we acknowledge that spaces have an effect on social life, this does not mean – far from it – that we have to subscribe to the theories of radical spatialism that are often evident in urban policies of the city, and which posit the highly deterministic role of the spatial on the social. In other words, saying that spaces have an effect on social life is one thing, but saying that they have a mechanical, systematic impact on behaviour is quite another, and indeed is the kind of assertion that relies more on beliefs supported by ecological and ethological assumptions than facts (Baudin and Genestier 2006).

It would, however, appear that this is such a strong and widespread belief among the decision-makers and the officials that run French cities that they have decided, under the national urban renewal programme (French guidance and planning law of 1 August 2003 on the city), to accelerate and extend the demolition of certain parts of French housing projects. The aim of the policy of demolition and reconstruction advocated by Jean-Louis Borloo, when he was Minister for the City and Urban Renewal from 2002 to 2004, was as much to produce a psychological shock as to create redevelopment opportunities.

Have the urban excisions performed in some underprivileged suburbs (since 2007, the average number of housing units demolished each year stands at just over 13,000) achieved their goal? Over the last decade or so, a number of researchers, including Pierre Merlin (2010), have said that this is far from clear, and that such high-profile interventions have helped to further stigmatise the neighbourhoods concerned, not to mention the fact that these operations have often been perceived as real provocations both by residents and by those without decent or even permanent housing. Moreover, are these demolitions not an admission of failure, or even the manifestation of a more or less publicly stated desire on the part of the municipalities and social landlords involved to move difficult and insolvent tenants, and thus avoid accommodating others? The reasoning behind this destructive approach was to remove the blocks and towers – the symbols of negative representations – from the landscape. But it is now clear that the root causes of segregation – that is, the existence of stigma and ostracism, and more generally the processes that lead to poverty – are in no way eradicated (Stébé and Marchal 2011).

## Why not protect housing estates as architectural heritage?

The relationship between built reality and experienced reality cannot be reduced to an outright dichotomy, as a number of studies have demonstrated. Here, we might refer in particular to research by Joan Stavo-Debaugue and Danny Trom (2004) on the heritage of the Vieux Lyon district (the old town in Lyon, dating back to the Renaissance). This work seeks to understand the complex relationships that exist between the physical arrangement and layout of the city and the associated social dynamics. In this particular case, it highlights the extent to which heritage campaigners and (uninitiated) residents of Vieux Lyon are not naturally predisposed to coming to an agreement on the future of the neighbourhood. Heritage campaigners in Lyon took advantage of the traditional Festival of Lights (*Fête des Lumières*), held around 8 December each year, to invite residents to take a night-time tour of the old town, emphasising key architectural features that had been advantageously lit up for the occasion. This priming and presentation of the built environment was complemented by extensive efforts to raise awareness among the public of the high heritage value of the neighbourhood and the benefits of welcoming visitors who flock in their thousands to a place that is now shown off to its best advantage. This research shows that Lyon's experience of promoting heritage combines: (1) operations to enhance the built environment; (2) an aestheticisation of the values of authenticity; and (3) residents' acceptance of a new interpretation of their day-to-day living environment. This demonstrates that built realities and experienced realities can complement one another in a context of co-construction. In the light of this approach, it is surely possible to build on this example in order to formulate a means of legitimising housing estates and safeguarding the heritage assets they have to offer.

Recognising heritage, aside from boosting property prices, is an attractive measure because it offers a living environment that is atypical and of high cultural value. Architecture that is a legacy of housing that was once rejected or even considered pathogenic, very much like social-housing estates are today, sees both its use value (quality of life) and its exchange value (gentrification) reconsidered as a result. In this regard, Le Corbusier's Cité Radieuse in Marseille shows how a building can have multiple meanings and be subject to different valuations over time: the listing of the building as a historic monument in 1964<sup>3</sup> upgraded its status from "*la maison du fada*" (literally "the madman's house", the building's local nickname) – that is to say an eccentric building that does not meet the needs of its residents – to a private residence of recognised historic importance symbolising membership of the intelligentsia. In general, any heritage policy contains within it a certain ambivalence, in that it involves both a market-based approach and a socio-symbolic approach.

The very nature of housing projects – the technical revolutions that made their construction, their impact and their role in society possible – enable this urban form, however unpopular it may be, to make a legitimate claim to being architectural heritage. Studies by Vincent Veschambre (2008) and Bruno Vayssière (2000), for example, show how housing estates can achieve new legitimacy as heritage. This is not a case of granting heritage status from a historical standpoint, but rather in the contemporary sense of the term, as something that fosters connections and a re-engagement with culture, far removed from any kind of exclusive marketing strategy, as tends to prevail at a time of mass culture, as Françoise Choay has warned (2009).

It is about giving housing projects, in place of a degrading "mythological" burden, a rehabilitative objective value – or, to put it another way, to reconnect with its original function, namely to house city-dwellers while avoiding falling into the trap of gentrification and commodification. This (ac)knowledge(ment) does not mean designating all housing estates as heritage sites; the proof is that, in the case of industrial architecture, few buildings have been listed as historic monuments. What should be remembered in the specific case of housing estates from the 1950s, '60s and '70s is that some of them represent exemplary manifestations of the Modern Movement. It was therefore

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<sup>3</sup> Although the exterior of the Cité Radieuse in Marseille was listed as a national historic monument in 1964, it was not until 1995 that an apartment in the building was listed in its entirety.

not surprising to see that, when municipal officials wanted to destroy part of Émile Aillaud's "Serpentin" – a "snake" composed of three long, serpentine housing blocks – built between 1957 and 1964 in the Parc des Courtilières in Pantin (in the north-eastern inner suburbs of Paris), a number of architects joined forces to remind them of the significant heritage value of this unique housing complex. As a result, the estate's residents have recently taken to referring to the Serpentine as "the Monument" (Bertier 2013).

Putting the spotlight on housing estates is an encouragement to go against the tide of current demolition and reconstruction policies, by proffering the idea that this type of architecture, today held up to public condemnation, could instead be placed at the heart of heritage-based approaches, whether politically driven from the top down or socially driven from the bottom up. Initiating a process of formally recognising the heritage value of housing schemes would thus enable these buildings to achieve their original destiny, which was to provide healthy and comfortable housing for as many people as possible. In other words, changing the social representations of housing estates in order to make the prospect of listing them as heritage sites a real possibility essentially amounts to linking, in an unprecedented way, their *ab initio* function, their intrinsic qualities and their characteristic urban form to principles of (re)legitimation.

### **The ambiguities of recognising housing estates as heritage sites**

While we believe that heritage recognition makes it possible to reincorporate housing estates into their residential function, this process nevertheless raises certain questions. First, is it truly possible to live in strictly controlled heritage-listed housing, as it is protected in accordance with administrative standards that risk making day-to-day life difficult? For it must be remembered that heritage policies involve a number of legal obligations: to make "residences" accessible to tourists, to prohibit unapproved changes to façades, etc. Second, is a heritage policy not something of a false solution for working-class housing, as it would also – and above all – operate via processes akin to gentrification? After all, isn't heritage status a new factor of social stratification? Finally, while it can provide a new way of envisaging the destiny of social-housing estates and a new way of thinking about the ways in which the working classes live, can this new socio-cultural and political orientation – that is, heritage listing – truly coincide with the concerns of the underprivileged populations who currently live there? In other words, should housing projects be heritage-listed at the risk of creating a socio-architectural atmosphere that no longer makes sense to those who live there (Paquot 2010)?

While these risks are very real, they must be weighed up against the benefits or otherwise of the policy of demolishing blocks and towers that has been implemented in recent years in France, mentioned earlier. Indeed, as soon as we start demolishing, we radically remove all traces and marks of those who have lived in and experienced a particular space – which amounts, as Vincent Veschambre has argued (2008), to denying the symbolic past life of residents (memories) in favour of buildings and materiality. Formally recognising the heritage of housing estates allows us instead to imagine that people could be part of a shared emotional and memory-based "kinship", and thus once again be proud to live in area that has regained its symbolic legitimacy. But desirability is not based only on social representations; it also requires a certain number of "priming" measures (Stavo-Debaugue and Trom 2004), in order to present and highlight the urban form for what it is. Indeed, it is only by working to enhance the symbolic, practical and physical value of these housing projects that we are able to judge the compromises that are necessary between the loss of collective memory and attachments on the one hand and the slippery slope towards gentrification on the other. There can be no doubt that housing estates are not without their qualities in this regard.

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