

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Gennevilliers -- Recreating the Image of Luth

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5jd9m30b>

Journal

Places, 9(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Kroll, Lucien

Publication Date

1994-07-01

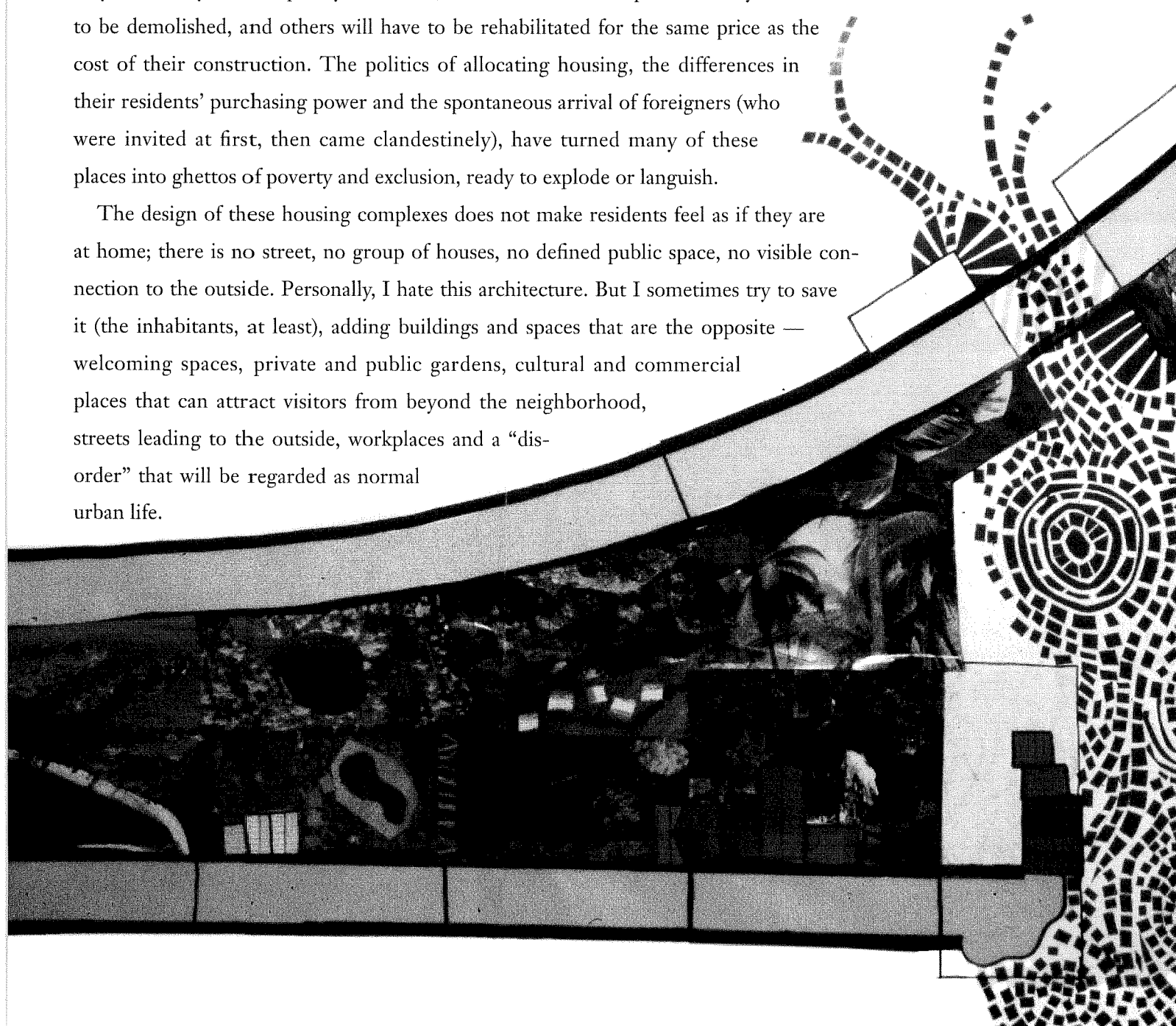
Peer reviewed

Recreating the Image of Luth

Lucien Kroll

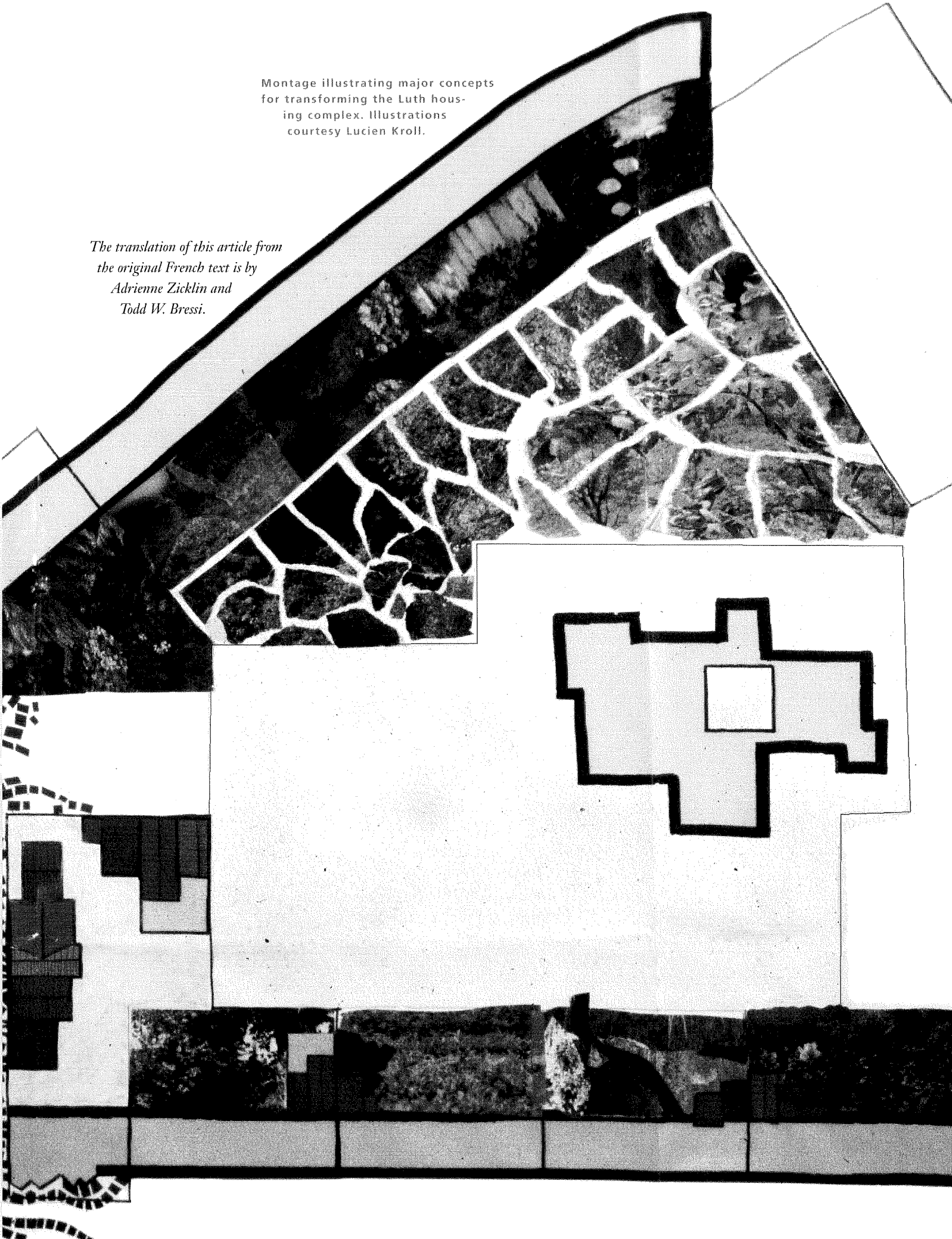
Four million social housing units have been constructed in France during the past 20 or 30 years. Many were so poorly conceived, constructed and occupied that they will have to be demolished, and others will have to be rehabilitated for the same price as the cost of their construction. The politics of allocating housing, the differences in their residents' purchasing power and the spontaneous arrival of foreigners (who were invited at first, then came clandestinely), have turned many of these places into ghettos of poverty and exclusion, ready to explode or languish.

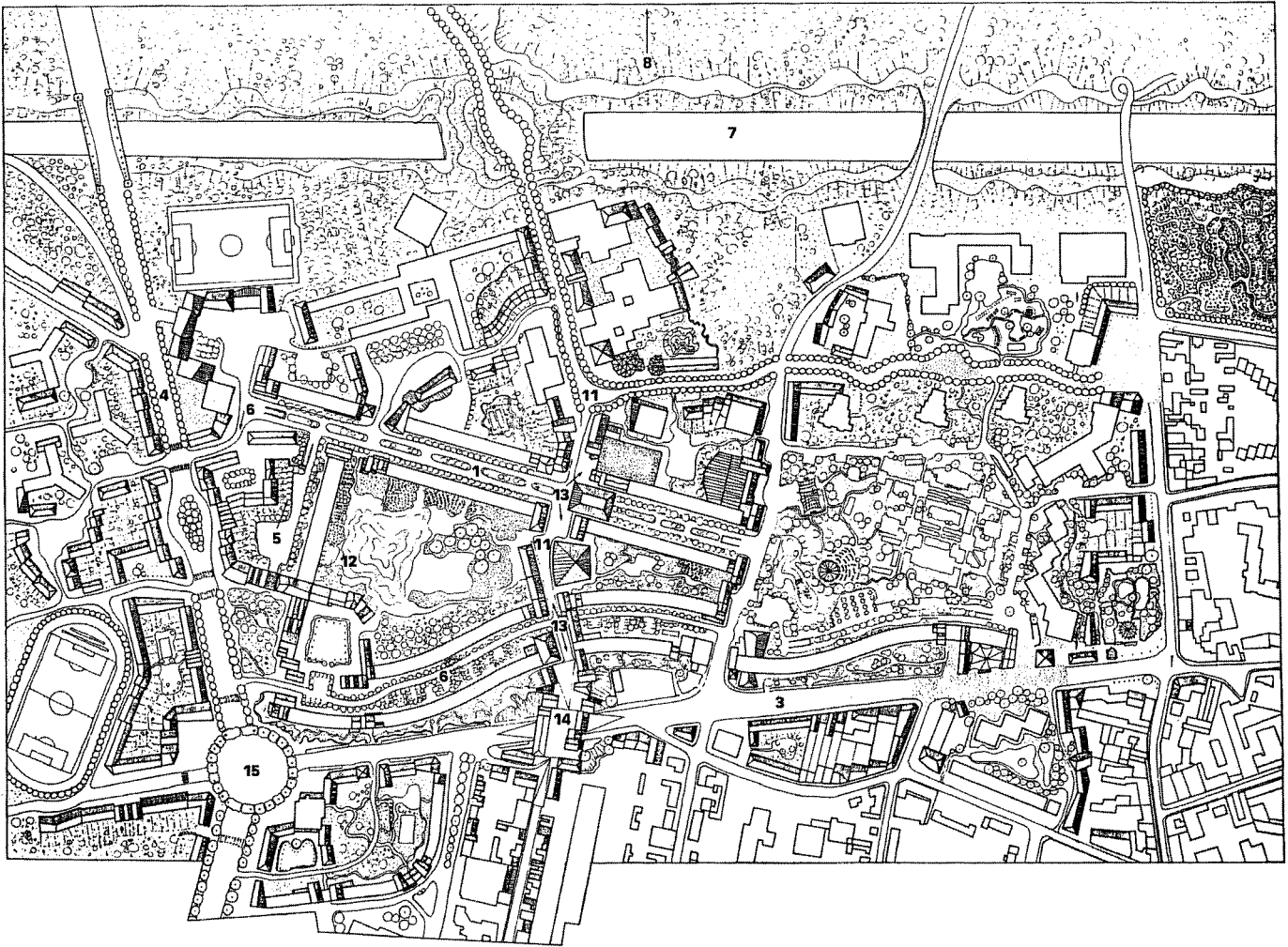
The design of these housing complexes does not make residents feel as if they are at home; there is no street, no group of houses, no defined public space, no visible connection to the outside. Personally, I hate this architecture. But I sometimes try to save it (the inhabitants, at least), adding buildings and spaces that are the opposite — welcoming spaces, private and public gardens, cultural and commercial places that can attract visitors from beyond the neighborhood, streets leading to the outside, workplaces and a “disorder” that will be regarded as normal urban life.



Montage illustrating major concepts for transforming the Luth housing complex. Illustrations courtesy Lucien Kroll.

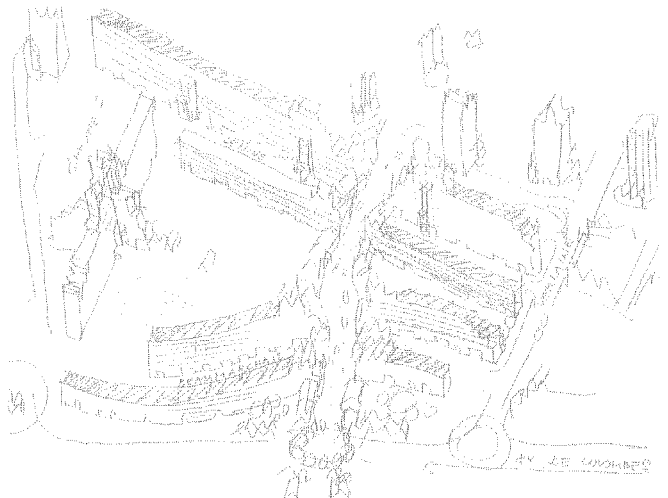
The translation of this article from the original French text is by Adrienne Zicklin and Todd W. Bressi.





Sketch of Le Luth with major proposals and illustrative concepts indicated.

1. Rue Lénine
2. Rue Beaumarchais
3. Avenue des Colombes
4. Boulevard Coubertin
5. Rue Gerard Philippe
6. Rue Guy de Maupassant
7. Autoroute
8. Port of Paris
9. School district
10. Private and semi-private gardens
11. New commercial street
12. "The Peak"
13. Cuts through existing buildings
14. Bridge over avenue des Colombes
15. Redesigned Colombes-Coubertin crossing



One of these areas is Le Luth, a district in Gennevilliers, a suburb 10 kilometers west of Paris, where 11,000 people live in 3,500 apartments. Le Luth is enclosed on the north by an autoroute, on the east by boulevard Coubertin (an urban autoroute, which is not acknowledged), on the south by the avenue Colombes (always difficult to cross) and to the east by the rest of the old city, which is dense and of a cordial character.

Inside those boundaries, the neighborhood is divided into groups of occupants — those located to the west (renters) and their compatriots to the east (co-op owners) — who have no contact with each other. Between the two is a small commercial center (which is enclosed, without any outer windows), a very nice public garden set up in a fence, and towers that are too high, too long, too rigid and too identical. (Two of them curve and form a single building that meanders for a length of 600 meters.) The density is no more than half that of the historic neighborhoods of Paris.

The first surprise for a visitor approaching the neighborhood is that it is shut in. The neighborhood seems as if it is exiled. The neighborhood is blocked from the river gate and psychologically separated from its neighbors and from the city of which it is part.

The second surprise is the configuration of open spaces and interior streets, which are not really intended to be streets, just spaces for cars. One street (rue Beaumarchais) is curved, the other (rue Lénine) is (too) rectilinear. To make a street out of that non-human space, one needs a whole process: structuring several spaces alongside them, furnishing them a little (without too much parking) and, above all, reducing the number of windows that look upon them directly; one can plant tree screens that mask the buildings and make them less visible.

Like similar places, the neighborhood suffers from mono-functionality (a factor in anesthetizing the environment) of housing and nothing else, then a little commercial center with its parking and, finally, a school zone completely separated from the houses.

In 1990, the mayor of Gennevilliers invited four architects to take part in a competition of ideas for the redesign of Le Luth. Because of the French law that says all important public projects must be submitted to a competition, hundreds of competitions have been organized in recent years. They are published, discussed in symposiums, then realized and evaluated.

The documents of the competition described a very large number of social actions in the neighborhood coming from all sorts of groups, opinions, manners and ends. We were very surprised and very touched that such activity was occurring in a place where the malaise was said to be so profound. We won the competition in partnership with Massimiliano Fuksas.

Actions

To make the area resemble a neighborhood in a real city, we must invite all the diversity of people and activities that normally live and operate in the commonplace parts of cities and give them their richness. A certain number of housing units will be transformed in small increments, and others replaced in part by a redensification.

The method: We intend not to propose any form that does not respond to an issue posed clearly by a particular lifestyle (otherwise, we would be making only cosmetic changes). We do not want to create theories and activities of rehabilitation that only satisfy the architect. We offer here a fertile image that is meant to stimulate the thought process; it is not a solution or even a proposition but a catalogue of possibilities.

To adopt a form coming from an action, we first invented the action. We imagined a fairy tale. A crowd of pedestrians coming from the south of Gennevilliers wanted absolutely to cross Le Luth to the north and reach the Paris port (on the Seine River). So they did, and they demolished a long trench through the buildings, like a hurricane would. But as they were pedestrians (so they were civilized people) they remolded what they had just demolished, but following their own style: disorganized, diverse, unpredictable, after an evolving program, with popular forms of architecture and spaces. That created the south-north street (not north-south, as usual) of our project.

Ecology: For us, the first ecology is the social ecology, not the urban ecology, not green engineering. It isn't necessary to put up solar panels; rather, inhabitants should be enabled to become active voluntarily in a movement to fight pollution, a movement of communication, of rooting, of interface with the context. Ecological urbanism is a relational urbanism.

Economy: The elimination of this area as an enclave comes through heterogeneity: there will be more activities spread out diversely through the course of the day and the week, and even more, the residents will no longer feel as though they are living in a cul-de-sac. Local employment of all types is a mechanism for diversifying the area.

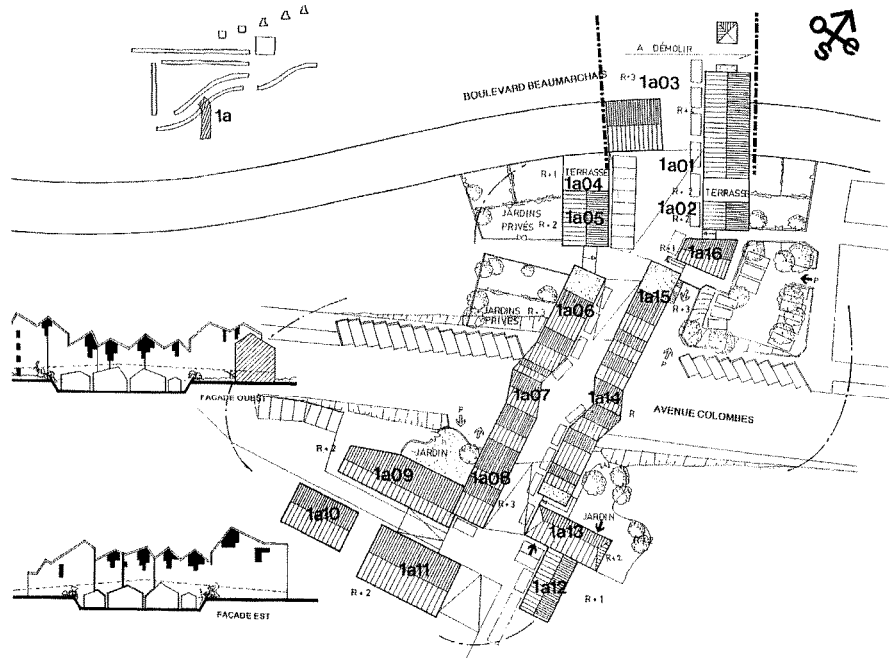
At the moment, adding workplaces in the neighborhood is forbidden, but it is scandalous not to use this urban refurbishing as a tool for encouraging jobs. We should encourage jobs by building some workplaces before people ask for them and inviting people to work there.

Security: Le Luth was a well-known place for buying hard drugs. The police couldn't eradicate drug sales. But now the people are leagued against drug dealing.

The more the spaces are enclosed, the more there will be a feeling of security. Spaces that are shapeless and free, that allow everyone to go everywhere, understandably make resi-

One major proposal is to create a new south-north street that cuts through existing linear, high-rise apartment buildings.

(Far right) Sketch of plan of new south-north street. (Right) Plan and axonometric of segment of the new street that crosses an existing boulevard and cuts through an existing building.



dents anxious. The more easily a street, square or public space can be controlled, the safer it will be.

It is clear that the height of the apartment buildings is a factor in the lack of responsibility and indifference people show; they sometimes throw garbage out windows, probably because the surrounding spaces do not really belong to anybody.

Residents: The participation of residents aims towards at least two moments of social contact: the inquiry and elaboration of suggestions and their verification. We no longer have the attitude of the '60s, when all was talked about and little worried about. Since then some methods have been experimented with, primarily contenting themselves with a small, representative group (it isn't useful to work with the great masses) who are easy to contact, can explain the life experience of the larger group and can effectively provide us with some control (and occasionally even legitimization). *Greenery:* There is too much of a difference between the private initiative residents have taken on the balconies, which are sometimes wonderfully adorned, and the public areas, which are always dry deserts. A campaign of increasing the plantings will give a more contemporary-organic allure to the development and will give relief from the seemingly ferocious density and the repetitive architecture. It will be easy to interest the residents in the support and maintenance of the plants, even more than the private gardens (charming) that can be organized at the base of the buildings (and form a transition there).

The climbing plants will give legitimacy to the buildings; they will root themselves to the buildings and cover the concrete facades. Some of the additions will have balconies that will enable the building to reflower with greenery.

Commercial center; marketplace: The shopping arcade has two entrances/exits. There is only one cafe facing the outside, a

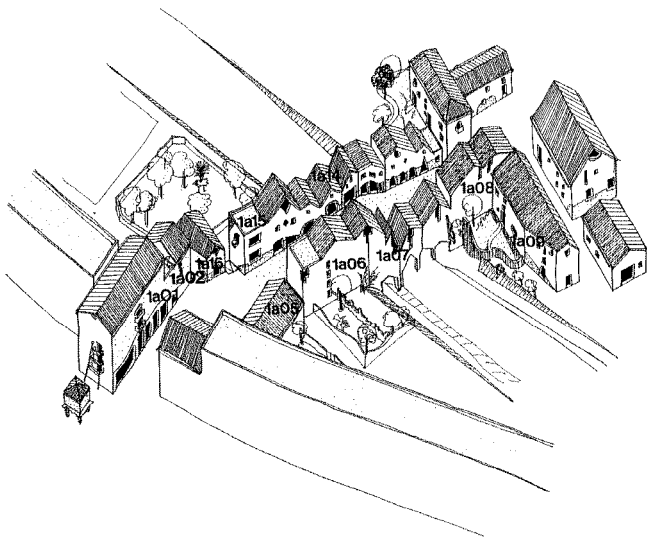
parking lot and a few abandoned cars; nothing else can be seen. We will be able to remodel the commercial center in the form of the south-north street and reorganize neighborhood parking. The arcade will be able to act an engine for the formation of a true European public space — an area that is closed in on all sides and surrounded by boutiques and maybe apartment building entrances.

The Project

Two ways of living are colliding as if in a combat of giants. The first we know well, it was built in Le Luth, it dates from the years of confidence, of objectivity, of redemptive workings. It is military from birth. The second is civil. It is the complex city, which slowly wants to recolonise the first and to try to manage it. It is composed of entirely different elements, a less aggressive appearance, ecology, history, curves and oblique angles (not too many right angles). It does not admit repetition.

A main street: An opening will be demolished through the buildings to make way for the new path (principally pedestrian). The street begins its cutting on the south bank of the avenue de Colombes, visually disrupting the traffic (without diminishing efficiency). Then it crosses rue Beaumarchais and rue Lénine (breaking through what crosses its path) and ends north of the road between the schools. There it divides, jumping over the autoroute (with a bridge and trees), heading to the Port of Paris. It has a destination, it is no longer a cul-de-sac.

Scale: We have chosen to consider Luth not as a great territory to examine, but as a mosaic of independent and coordinated small blocks of housing. The size of each block has been determined according to the range of view a pedestrian would have in taking a quick glance. We concentrated on the prob-



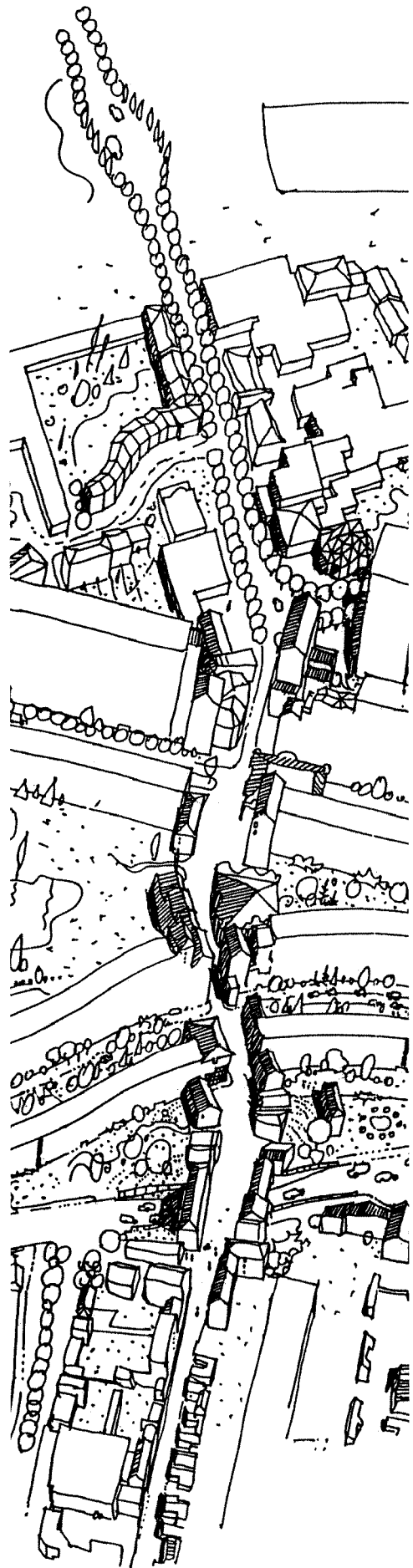
lems of each block independently from the others, then we examined the relationship between each its neighbor, preventing us from hurrying us into making comprehensive decisions.

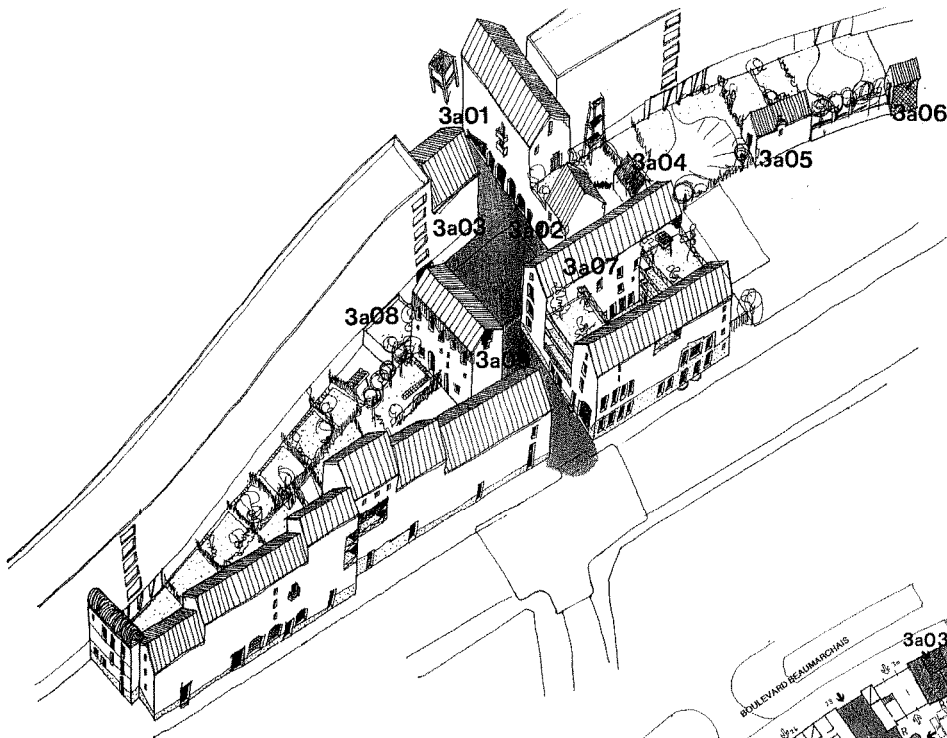
The actual sequence of interventions must be outlined by those responsible and involved. It must never emanate from our general plan for the area; the details must be left for the neighborhood to decide, as in a democracy. Otherwise, even our vocabulary has a military stench. It doesn't address a plan (of battle); it only addresses map-making (cartography), a simple statement, a document that does not possess any decision-making power. It is an instrument of control, of management, of appreciation and of action, but never an instrument of creation.

Avenue de Colombes: A few years ago, planners believed they had to create an autoroute, or at least a high-speed boulevard, here. We reconsidered the avenue as a Parisian boulevard, surrounded by interesting, active facades that turn one's attention to the streetwall and define some of the more urban spaces that are currently residual and setback spaces.

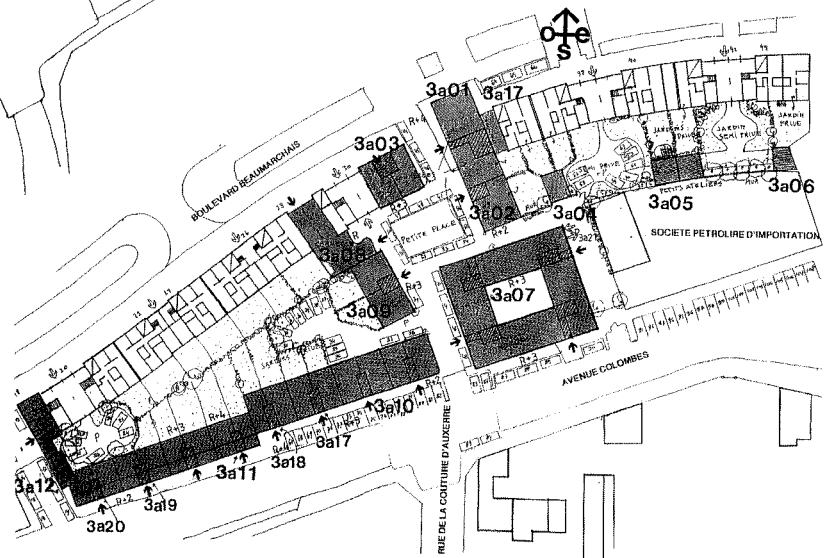
At first, we proposed an inhabited bridge over the street, but this was a mistake — that would give the automobile the right to drive fast and feel at home! We now propose to eliminate the planted median strip, in order to assure openness and visibility along the length of the avenue (priority to pedestrians). And in order to contrast the avenue's longitudinal direction, we impose some transversal visual relief and some transversal arcades towards the crossroads of the Couture d'Auxerre.

The proportion of public spaces: I have been able to work on an interesting experiment at Berlin-Kreutzberg, at the time some old buildings were rebuilt and converted into social housing. The blocks' internal spaces had been reserved solely for the residents. They had been planted and provided with a small amount of equipment for children and walking paths. When I





New, low-rise buildings would be added along streets, like in this illustrative proposal for avenue de Colombes. The space between buildings would be transformed into private and semi-private gardens.



saw those spaces later, they had been subdivided into even smaller spaces. Those who were managing the project said that when residents could not see all the space to which they had access and know everybody entitled to cross the garden, their insecurity grew rapidly.

The buildings: It seems urgent to change the image of the facades of the prefabricated buildings and, above all, the impact of their giant dimensions. We have the means to do it: exterior insulation and additions to the buildings can change the perception of scale and divide the great length of the facades into more comprehensible pieces. Each stairwell would receive a covering different from its neighbor.

Existing buildings will be as varied and bustling as possible. Their entrances will be clearly identifiable. There will no longer be entranceways that cut through the building — those false entrances that open into the rear space, not to the street, that do not give residents and visitors access to facilities, activities or gardens but are simply culs-de-sac. Additions will be of a traditional type; they will not be expressive of architectural style or construction technique.

Additions at the bases of buildings: Additions will permit new uses and diminish the great heights and lengths by masking them with solids of one to five levels. Additions will be con-

structed following ordinary procedures (building permits, financing, etc.) through arrangements made by owners and tenants. We demolish nearly nothing. We superimpose a new net, contrasting with existing buildings while keeping and respecting them (but not for their authority and repulsive character).

Offices: The two faces of the existing apartment buildings actually have different uses. One, well-oriented, contains rather spacious rooms (living rooms and bedrooms). The other, and especially in the center of the building, contains smaller spaces (including powder rooms). In their present state, the buildings will be very difficult to use for offices.

We propose to add new floor space to the whole northern facade and to cover those facades with a new skin that demonstrates the changed use — reflecting glass, as in all recent offices. These additions will be easy and cost little to build because all the services and accessories already exist.

There will not be a great concentration of offices. A minimum volume will be required so the offices can be recognized among the housing. In principle, all the spaces served by a single stairwell should be transformed into office space to avoid mixing with the housing.

Gardens: The urban form of the prefabricated apartment buildings is weak, their relationship to each other is cold;

buildings have been placed in space without significance, without concern for their precise location. That is exactly contrary to the comfort of the people who live there, to creating a welcoming environment, to traditional urbanism. In our urban tradition, spaces have always been visibly marked as public, semi-public or private.

We attempt to repartition that indifferent space. We assume that people will behave differently if they are facing the front (the street) or back (the garden); those distinctions have disappeared in the Modern order. This will strengthen the streets and public places, making them precise and delimited, designed for the urban acts of passage, meeting and communication.

At the foot of the buildings, we propose non-public gardens. They will be reserved to be used by a family, the ground-floor inhabitants or those who live above (by means of a simple staircase). They will have friendly but efficient fences. They will be used either by families that use a single stairwell, and kept up between them, or by all the families in a building (or part of a building) and divided into areas for different uses.

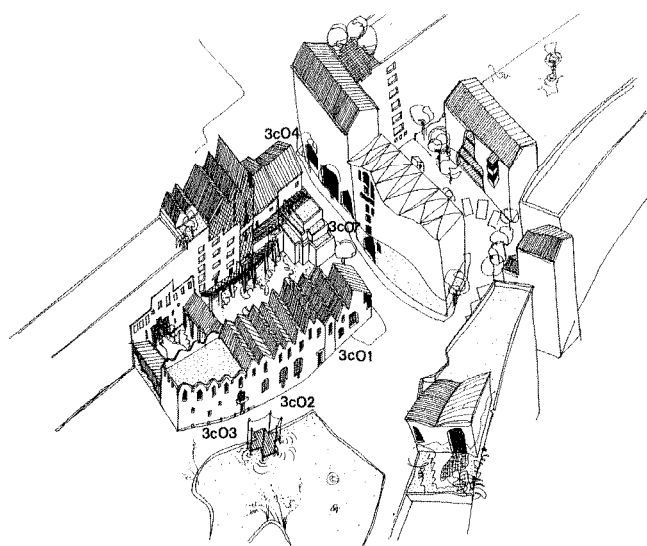
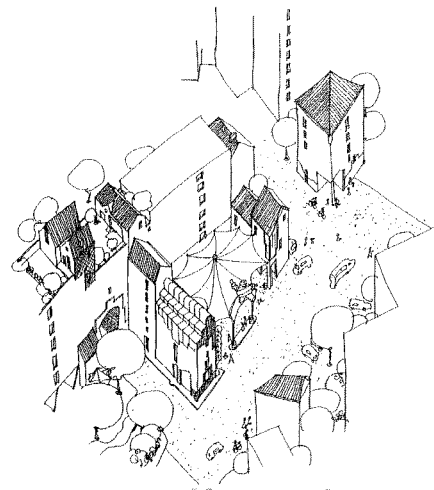
We have seen that some residents want private gardens, some want a semi-private garden (facing crosswise to an entrance) and some want a very specialized space. The organization of the gardens will, perhaps, be delicate (jealousy, difficulty of upkeep, waste that falls from windows above, etc.), but that is always less serious than indifference.

A peak: The apartment building on rue Gerard Philippe is doubtless the most monstrous. But we hate to recommend its complete demolition. We propose adding two transversal wings that would extend over its top with a demonstrative mass of several extra floors served by one stairwell. The first ensemble will rejoin the group of buildings proposed along boulevard Coubertin. The other wing attempts to rejoin the nursery in the park and passes at the foot of the towers whose base it scales.

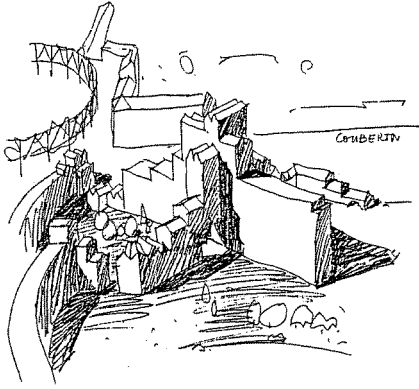
Gateways: To make Luth look more connected to the adjacent neighborhoods, it is necessary that our new additions extend beyond the natural boundaries of the development to the neighborhood's outer limits.

The large intersection of Coubertin-Colombes creates a vacuum around itself. Without diminishing its volume, we are giving it a "party," a crown of trees and are sculpted in the form of a high cylinder of foliage. Before the trees grow sufficiently, the artificial construction of trunks and branches. From a distance, this intersection will seem closed off, and traffic will slow down spontaneously.

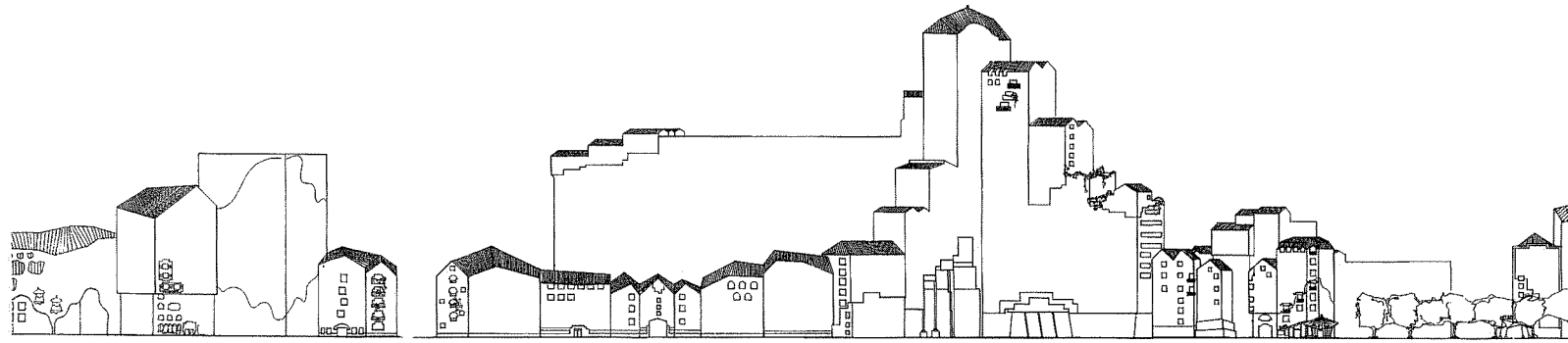
Interfaces: All of the elements across the street from each other are coordinated. For example, we propose buildings of varied function on each side of avenue Coubertin, giving it a street form. Currently, the numerous pedestrians do not cross between the two banks of the avenue.



The plan encourages shops, work-places and smaller parking areas along streets and around the bases of high-rise buildings.



The height and bulk of the neighborhood's tallest building would be tempered by a pair of wing-like extensions that slope down and become linear low-rise buildings. Its long, flat roof would be enlivened by the addition of a peak.



On avenue de Colombes, the alignment of the trees and of the facades on opposite sides of the street make, in the looseness of their arrangement, a veritable Parisian avenue without receding the lanes for circulation. It will actually be like rue Pierre Timbaud, which extends beyond avenue de Colombes and handles the same traffic volume quite well. Without these facing facades, the “desenclavement” will not be successful.

A few opinions: Each use will have its own expression, avoiding the neomodern obsession of emphasizing sameness ... all available materials will be used, just as in a real city ... different architects will be commissioned on the condition that they understand the fragmentation ... we will avoid making new buildings the same height as each other and as the old buildings ... flat rooves will be for walking or planting upon; otherwise we will opt for a variety of forms, angles and materials ... the buildings will define the borders of the public spaces, not pre-decided geometries in a plan ... there will not be large parking areas but small clusters here and there ... facades of the existing apartment buildings will be broken up by watertight and insulating pieces that will be stuck on; these suspended additions will also add more details ... the line of the rooves will be modulated by adding some wood-structure houses

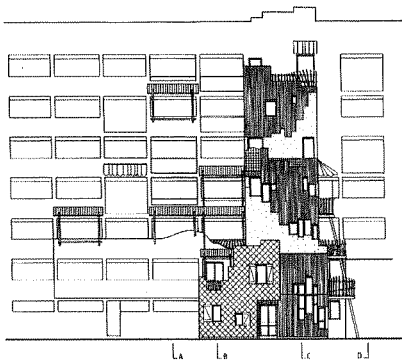
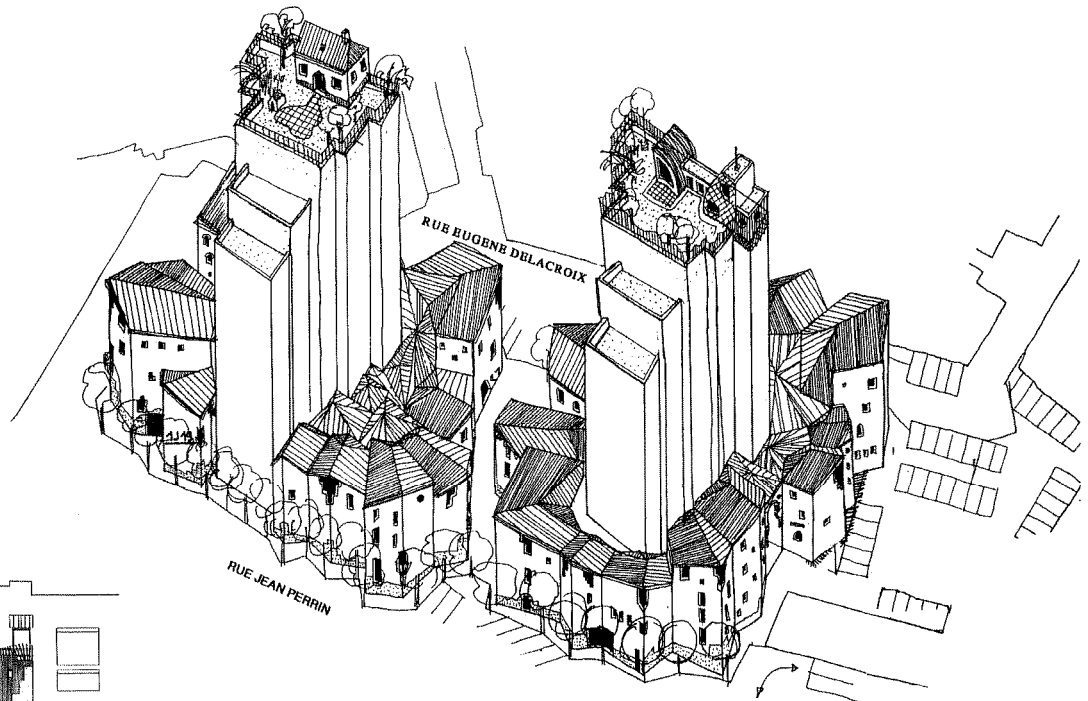
To be sure not to project our preconceptions and not to obscure existing and future reality, we had recourse to the observation and judgment of our colleague, anthropologist Arlindo Stefani.

This will not be a personal work of architecture, in the sense of the preceding period, but a continuity of architectural substance that will entrust continuing differentiation to occur piece by piece, in a mosaic, by a large number of non-narcissistic architects different from each other and motivated by their participation.

Each architect will be joined in a common movement (like in all the cities) and will try their best to make their participation as personal as possible (with their contradictions and disputes) in the situation with which they will be entrusted (like in all the cities). Those choices will happen later, after we have completed a sufficient prototype.

Already, for the first prototype, I have created a team with two other architects, all of us quite different and contradictory. I kept for myself the job of (dis)organizing the three, dividing the project so that each of us has a piece of work encrusted in the work of another. Each intervention must be as recognizable as possible to create that chaotic landscape which, at a certain point, becomes a harmonious living landscape.

The housing complex will become urban tissue: All that we proposed in our competition proposal for “disenclaving” Luth was obliged to regard the area as an agglomeration of independent elements but bound in an urban complicity. To be adopted by the municipal administration, that attitude must become formalized legally in regulations.



Some sections of the existing high-rise apartment buildings could be converted into offices. Low-rise housing, shops and workplaces could cluster around existing buildings. The changes would be incremental, directed by owners and tenants and designed by many architects.

These large complexes are homogenous (this is truly contrary to the urban tissue, which is by all rights heterogenous). All their behavior was precise, like the army and the factory. They pertained to a hierarchy (the same as if they are anonymous). It is not the inhabitants who make the law; at best, they revolt against or negotiate with those in control.

We have, in all our projects, looked to express that image of responsibility, that structure of being subsidiary in making the bet that the new, fragmented form would help the birth of heterogeneity, of non-uniformity, come about smoothly.

Again, this change is necessary to enable the fragments to come forth and regain autonomy. And so they unite, they rely on the inside on a "moral," on a common rule of behavior, of politeness, of urbanity. And they inscribe those arrangements in a text and on a map explaining the rules. So, each element can be constituted in its own way, without having to give an account to any authority who can block initiative; each fragment can invent. Each element will know its options as well as its neighbor's.

The Action and the Inhabitants

After having reflected on our projects for a long time, having discussed them among themselves and with us so that they could understand them better, the municipality finally alerted the residents of Luth.

First meeting, tumultuous, violent, for mutual information. Political, this one. Then others calmer, constructive. A group was created, became committed, forgot its egocentric demands and little by little, saw interest in the neighborhood!

It took several meetings and our neutrality (we know we helped facilitate) for them finally to take action, in staircases (like the image that we had shown them), with little rooves (they are the nicest), of advances (activities), the bowling alley (more than 500 members), the little volumes along the north-south autoroute (they make several stores), the additions of stories (my terrace breaks through towards my neighbor's below), a fountain (a goblet filled with water), houses under the roof (that varies) of trees, of benches, a place for dogs (an obsession). They even worked physically taking away pieces of plastic foam with a saw that we brought, transforming the model of the Lenine building.

Remark made during the last meeting: "Astonishing: All that we have said is incorporated in the model." So we can begin the project with the first intervention: breaking through rue Lénine.

At the end, the image of the great ensemble will have disappeared and the Luth will become a normal neighborhood, familiar, without precise limits, without anxiety, stitched together and communicative, like all the others.