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Laroche-Clermault

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The construction of twenty-four “HLM”¹ dwellings was decided upon for Laroche-Clermault, a village in the Indre-et-Loire. The site was reserved, and all that needed to be done was to hire the usual architect and ask him to draw the houses according to the usual constraints and then to build the usual French mediocrity, a faithful image of the regulations and their guardians.

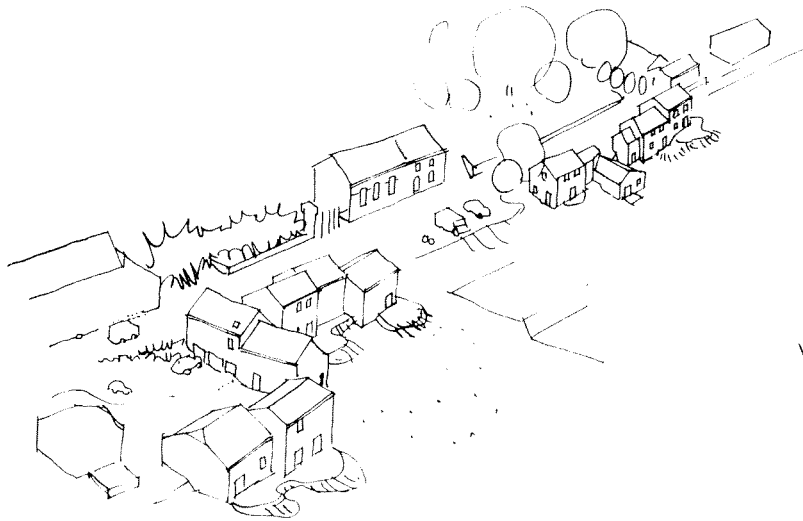
But the mayor of Laroche, whom I had met through a friend, asked me to help him do something more, in association with a very competent local architect. “Yes, but I am not from here,” I said. But he persisted: “How can we bridge the gap?” “We can ask the local inhabitants; there I can help you.”

The village has nearly four hundred residents—farmers, workers, bourgeois. There are hamlets, the remains of a castle, some isolated farms, a major goat farm, the gigantic silos of the agricultural cooperative near the train station, the vineyards within the territory of the *appellation contrôlée* Saumur-Champigny, and notably the caves, natural grottoes of limestone enlarged over the generations, which were inhabited not so long ago.

The village is a street, running halfway up a hill, toward caves bored into the hill. It has no precise center; the church is isolated off at a



I Laroche-Clermault.
Photograph by Lucien Kroll.



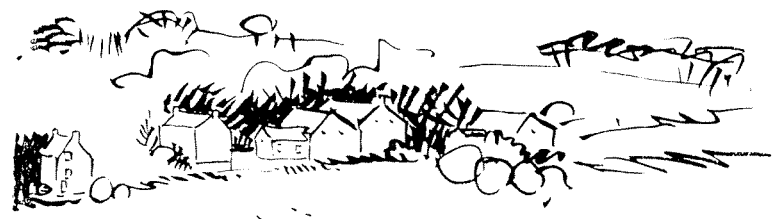
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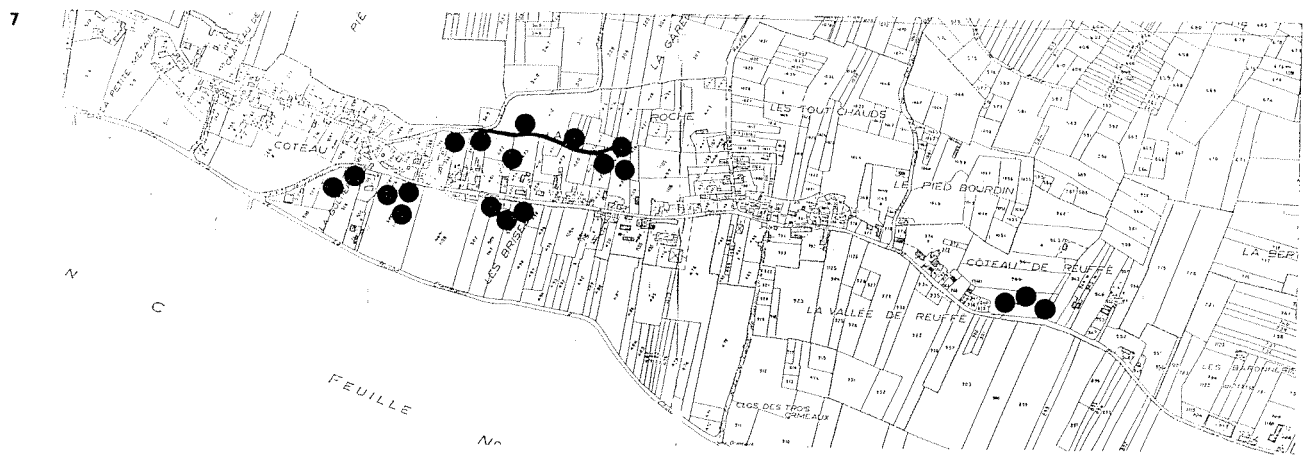
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distance. The HLM units were to occupy the hill just below the village, due south, below the City Hall, in inescapable full view, the precise image of the institutions and their charitable power.²

I explained, “This is very dangerous. When we ask the inhabitants about housing, they will answer about everything else. So we should plan to have three public meetings, fifteen days apart, and one evaluation meeting between us. No more than that. After that, we will study, draw, and keep the inhabitants informed. We must be very clear on the number of decisions that can be made. For example, what happens if they decide to reject the site?” The mayor answered hesitantly, “No, everyone knows the site was bought for this project, and that cannot be renegotiated. But frankly, if they reject it firmly, we will have to investigate other possibilities. But you’ll see, they will not even mention it.”

During the first meeting, discussion about the siting below the village lasted ten minutes: “Don’t you know that is the last place one should build?” said the inhabitants. The mayor held on for two meetings and then was forced to resign due to an unrelated complaint lodged against him by the community to the prefect.

How could we modify the normal procedures? Maybe

we could avoid the fatal artifice of the initiator, the *Maître de l’Ouvrage et d’Oeuvre*, who would force the project to obey cultural forces that are alien to the place and that sometimes respond to time lapses in the future and the past. The implicit model of contemporary architects is often that which originated in 1935 Germany and in the “Taylorist” school. Is this really preferable to the bad taste of the inhabitants?

We knew well that a question posed in these terms could not result in a geometry that was authoritarian and repetitive: opinions would be diverse and so would be the architecture and its implementation. And without our having to insist, the *Maître de l’Ouvrage* would see the complexities and give up his annoying directives.

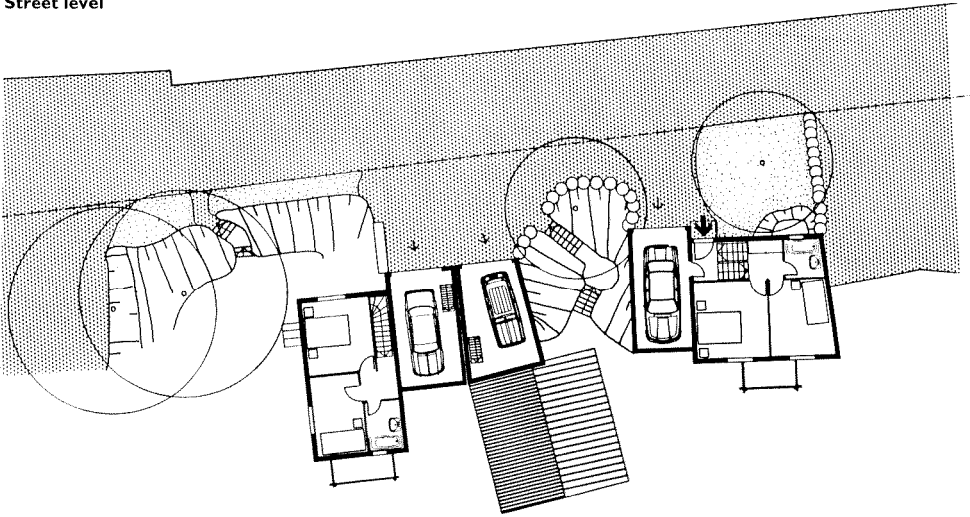
How tempting it is for authorities to be authorities. After our second participatory meeting, the municipal council held a special meeting to adopt a text that was very close to the residents’ desires but premature in its timing. This text was immediately challenged by the residents. Was the council so afraid of losing a small part of its power? Of course it had a right to decide everything, but only after the third meeting and only by justifying very clearly its differences with the people’s opinions. The locals felt trapped and



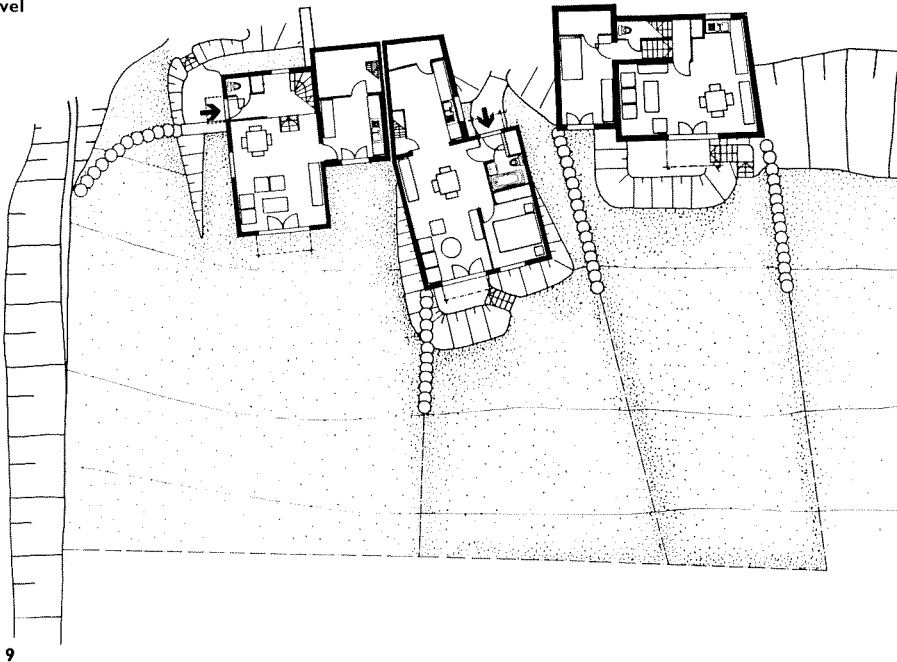
- 2 Project for ten houses along the main street
- 3 The neighbors
- 4 In the area
- 5 Spontaneous architecture
- 6 Continuity of landscape
- 7 Building sites proposed by inhabitants during the participatory meetings.
- 8 A nearby farm

Drawings 2–10 by Lucien Kroll.

Street level



Lower level



frozen by the council's untimely and clumsy text, even though it was almost right. This would all be fixed later on.

The wishes of the inhabitants were rarely novel, but as always they were expressed with an authenticity and directness that we could not argue. "In any case," they said, "we do not want a colony like at Cinais, a nearby village, where a group of twenty-four HLMs is oriented inward, apart from the rest of the village and where the children of the HLM fight at school with the children from the village." It is like South African apartheid.

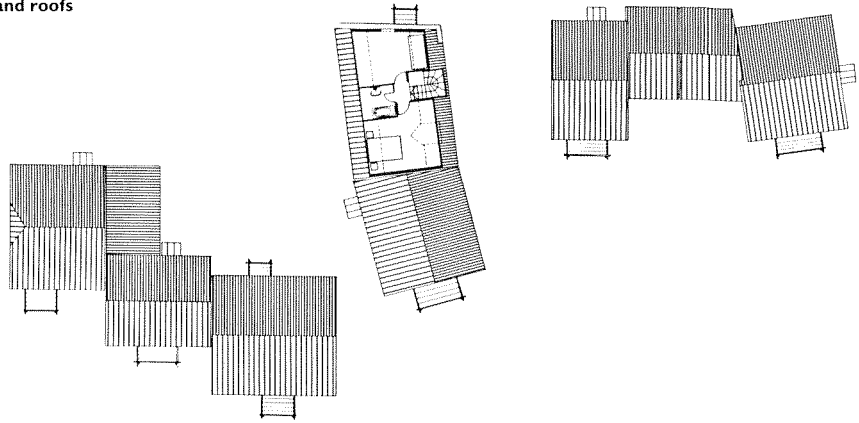
"We do not want new inhabitants that we will not get to know, people whom we would only see as they drive by quickly in the morning and evening after doing their shopping in town. The pavilions should not be recognizable from afar as a group apart from the village. They have to be dispersed. There are ruins which we do not like; rebuild those. There are empty houses; buy them. There are empty sites; build your HLM units there. And if after that there are not enough units, some houses could be built above the chosen site at street level and others below the village, under the little road on the ridge. There is just enough room and they would blend in with the rest."

9 House grouping to the east

10 House grouping to the west

9

Upper level and roofs

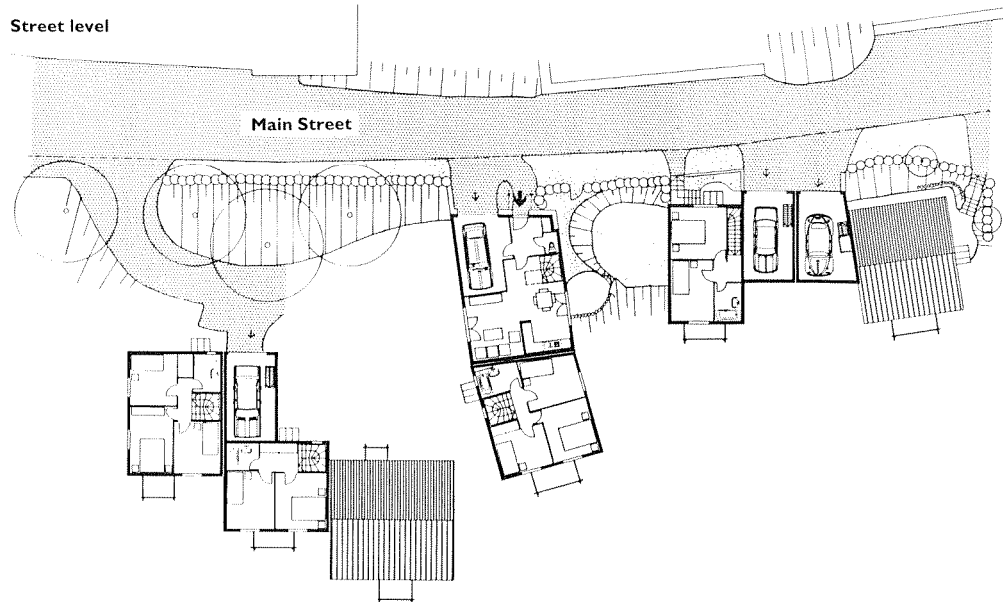


Some of them added with emotion, "It is not that we do not like strangers; quite the contrary, we need them. This village is getting old. There are not many children, the grocery store is gone, the school may close down. We are bored. We want to have a party to welcome the newcomers and get to know them."

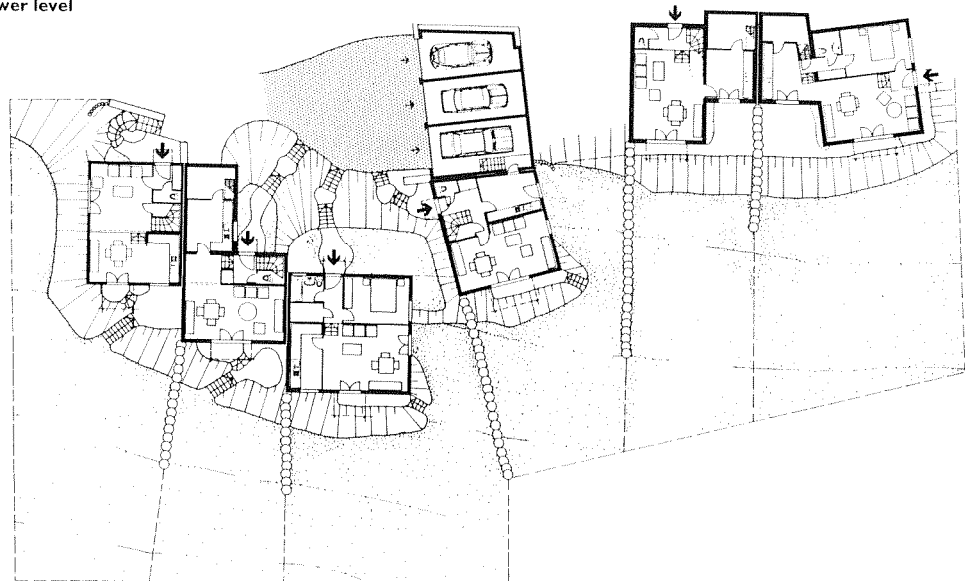
We had shown them three basic organizing principles: a circular arrangement, a grid, a realigned street imitating the existing pattern of crossroads. Yet none of these models was acceptable on its own. For the other meetings, we had maps of the site and views from afar to show the volume of the new houses above and below the village. The locals themselves went across the hill to judge the impact. They knew the parcels of land, the views, their proximity. It is easy to reach an understanding with people who are motivated to understand.

In our role as unfamiliar foreign architects, we were at the same time fragile and invulnerable: fragile, since we had little local clout, we were suspected of stealing work from local architects, and we could be disposed of easily; invulnerable, since we were not dependent on the *Maitre de l'Ouvrage* and the local authorities, so we could side with the inhabitants and imagine and impose solutions that local architects could not suggest without committing

Street level



Lower level

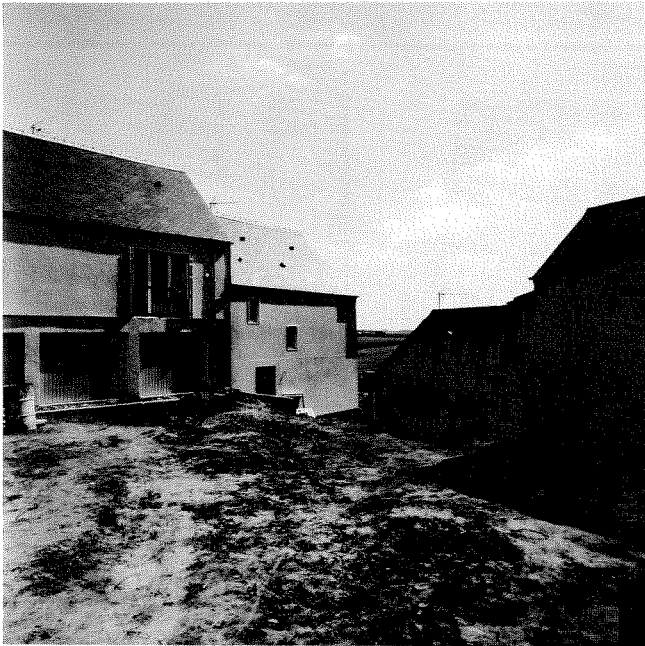




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professional suicide. Of course, this can work only once.

We were able to measure the risks in this course of action during our tough negotiations with the designated *Maître de l'Ouvrage*. Used to doling out orders, the OPAC³ was stunned by our responses, disgruntled at having to follow the advice of the peasants, and we, being slightly off balance, thought ourselves to be more backed up than we actually were. Very naively we thought the *Maître de l'Ouvrage* and the local architect would show up at all the meetings enthusiastically to see how the locals lived with the products of their own devising. But they were not very interested. They only came later when everything had been said.

The *Maître de l'Ouvrage*, powerful and generous, came to visit and walk the chosen site on top of the village. Visibly, the discreet siting of the units seemed to him a preposterous idea; one should be able to see the HLMs. He pretended that there were caves in the subsoil—even though there were none—refused to drill borings, and finally declared, “It is too complicated; I don’t want to build here. We choose a site; if the locals only want to build on the top of the village, they can only have ten units.” That was nevertheless a much better solution.



15

11, 12, 13, 14, 15 HLM project
at Laroche-Clermault.
Photographs by Lucien Kroll.



16

16 HLM project at Laroche-Clermault. Photograph courtesy of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd' hui*.

After that, everything happened in a more conventional fashion, since we were unable to obtain the list of the future dwellers to discuss with them the details of the job. Drawings as well as models were presented at the City Hall. The building permit process went smoothly. Finally, a difficult open bid period ensued, for the houses, though simple, were each different, hugging the steep slope of the site on different levels.

We certainly missed important events, consciously or not. It is hard to present the three somewhat jarring meetings, the blunderings, and the ultimate architectural product as a project that was completely produced by the village. The result was only a common denominator, an interpretation of what we heard, and it was greatly damaged by the local authorities. Unfortunately, the houses were not dispersed among the village, there were none on top of the hill, and most seriously we were not able to solicit the participation of the future dwellers. Furthermore, the discussion was limited to the construction of the project according to HLM regulations. We were never able to discuss the creation of a more liberal and participatory apportionment of the land or to find ways to connect this project with community development and make the two interact. For example, the contractor could have been required to

hire young unemployed locals to work as apprentices on the construction site or to hold discussions with the future occupants of the artisans' zone, which was planned for a nearby site.

In any case, we were able to avoid an official project, and were able to model the project to the landscape and to the way the locals live. It is no longer a project estranged from the village, and consequently the new dwellers might be more quickly welcome. I took a nonmyopic student a kilometer away from the houses, and facing the new construction I asked him to count the units. He could not even find them.

Obviously, when one talks to different people, one creates architecture of the same family but different and nonrepetitive. The studies for these architectures are more trying, yet the computer program we wrote helped us to draw them. Unlike what most people would think, these tools can help in the participation process. Except for arm wrestling with the *Maître de l'Ouvrage*, this kind of job can be easy and enjoyable. It doesn't cost much to pass a few evenings in a beautiful landscape with exceptionally hospitable people. But for this first time, one should have serious sociologists. Why is this never done?

The answer is political. What counts is either one's image

of society or what is dictated by the object. For a half-century, architects have been trying to "Taylorize" the object (and nowadays, to dress it in "post-Modern" style). When ethnology is paramount, it is crucial to live inside the social network and to build emphatically an architecture that, rather than inhibiting social practices old and new, becomes the means for their realization. That is the eternally tough choice between the aesthetic and the ethnological.

**Translated by
Anne Fougeron**

NOTES

- 1 *Habitations à Loyers Modérés*, subsidized moderate income housing.
- 2 The French organizational system requires that authorities or institutions appeal to the state organs that are charged with managing their operations. These organs, sometimes huge and always authoritarian, have built hundreds of thousands of low-income housing units throughout the French countryside. Only rarely are they concerned with, or even informed about, architecture.
- 3 *Office Public d'Aménagement et de Construction*, Public Office for Planning and Construction, which is the *Maître de l'Ouvrage* (supervising agency) for this project. The OPAC is a powerful and irritating agency responsible for a large number of HLMs.