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# Architecture and Daily Life: The Revitalization of a French Neighborhood

Tony Schuman

The city of Roubaix, situated in northern France near Lille, is an unlikely candidate for notable accomplishments in architecture and urban design. An archetypal industrial city, it developed rapidly as a textile center during the latter half of the nineteenth century and declined just as precipitously after World War II as changes in technology and the international mobility of capital rendered the existing production apparatus obsolete and superfluous. Left behind in the wake of massive industrial flight was an extremely poor, largely immigrant population, and a deteriorating physical environment.[1] The Alma-Gare district, subject of the present case study, was a classical case of a neighborhood ripe for the sort of slum clearance/urban renewal programs that uproot the existing populace to make way for the better-paid workers of the growing white-collar service sector.

But the citizens of Alma-Gare refused to be shunted aside in the name of progress. United by their common predicament at home and in the workplace, they organized to stop the "bulldozer renovations." Through a community workshop called the Atelier Populaire d'Urbanisme, they insisted on their right to remain in the community and to shape the revitalization efforts in support of the rich social relationships that had developed despite the grime and the poverty. Assisted by a group of planners under contract to an experimental government program, they prepared a counterplan calling for rehabilitation and new construction, including much needed social service facilities. They won the right to be part of the municipal working group that made policy for the area. And, together with a Belgian architect of their own choosing, they elaborated a building program and set of design considerations for the first phase of new construction—380 units of housing as well as a school, child care and elderly centers, and various retail and community facilities.

The revitalization of the Alma-Gare district is the result of the collaboration between socially concerned professionals and an articulate and well-organized community. As such, it offers significant insights into the successful practice of community design, which may be seen as combining three principal elements: a programmatic concern with daily needs, a procedural concern with citizen participation, and a formal concern with promoting social interaction and community identity. With respect to program and process, Alma-Gare is noteworthy for pushing both elements to higher levels than generally obtain in instances of low-income communities fighting for public (or, as the French say, "social") housing. The project may prove to be most provocative, however, in terms of architectural form for the architects are explicitly concerned not only with the social usage of physical space but with its social meaning as well. In this regard, Alma-Gare presents an important contribution to the emerging discourse on an elusive question—the relationship between built form and social consciousness.

## Background

*The Physical Fabric.* The historic urban fabric consists of traditional urban blocks of one and one-half to three acres defined by a continuous band of modest brick row houses of two to four stories. The distinctive feature of Roubaix and its neighboring cities of Lille and Tourcoing is that, to accommodate the influx of rural immigrants in the late nineteenth century, a second band of housing was built in the *interior* of the blocks in the form of one- to two-story buildings lining a narrow *courée*, or small courtyard, entered through an alleyway in the perimeter buildings. These buildings provided only a minimum level of shelter and no conveniences, sanitation took the form of an outhouse in the courtyard, and the sole source of water was an outdoor spigot.

*The Social Fabric.* If the *courées* were unsatisfactory in a physical sense, they did promote a strong and vital social web. Physical proximity, the intimacy of shared facilities, and the monthly contributions toward the single-metered water bill conspired to create unity in adversity. While the local labor unions did not play a direct role in the community struggle, France's long tradition of working class organizing was the fundamental underpinning of the process through which a parallel set of neighborhood-based "unions" addressed quality-of-life issues such as health and housing. The community solidarity nurtured by these organizations had an important effect on the physical fabric itself, as cafés and small shops replaced the ground-floor apartments in the street-front buildings at the entrances to the *courées*. These small businesses played an indispensable role as forums for discussion, sources of information, and bases for mobilization.

*Urban Renewal.* Although the French government projected the demolition of the *courées* as early as 1963, the funds to begin work in Alma-Gare were not allocated until ten years later. At this point, the residents of the district became alarmed about just what sort of renovation the government had in mind. They were aware that the dominant economic logic of urban renewal envisioned the transformation of the housing stock to reflect the shift in the economic base:

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the disappearance of "proletarian" lodgings to make way for the salaried employees of the growing tertiary sector of white-collar workers. They had observed the renovation of a similar neighboring community, where low-income workers were isolated in large projects lacking the rich variety of social spaces that palliated life in Alma-Gare. They also noted that the former inhabitants of the neighborhood rarely wound up in the new housing, having been shunted off into projects or into other decaying districts not yet slated for renewal. The social implications of this mode of revitalization were clear: "The base of the social pyramid will be closed up in collective housing designed to stifle collective life; commercial concentration will cause the disappearance of all the bases of meeting and popular mobilization."[2] Further, they were justly suspicious of a renewal process in which the budget for demolition was approved, but funds for reconstruction not yet secured.

*Organizing*. The organizing effort at Alma-Gare began in 1962 when the Association Populaire Familiale (APF) called a meeting attended by 60 families to press for building repairs from private landlords. The base of the APF (which subsequently affiliated with the national Confédération Syndicale du Cadre de Vie, CSCV) did not rest in the traditional left political parties but in activists of the Catholic left, whose roots in the community can be traced to the opening of a Mission Ouvrière in 1958. This absence of ties either to the labor unions or political parties opened the door to a wider degree of popular participation in the community at large, and of women in particular. As Marie-Agnès Leman, an early leader of the APF, observed, "Alma-Gare is like a bus: people get on and off. People kept coming up with ideas, and different people participated at different moments."[3]

In 1974, as community momentum accelerated, the CSCV established a "peoples' planning workshop," the Atelier Populaire d'Urbanisme (APU), as a focal point for neighborhood organizing. Under the slogan "on agit, on réfléchit, on construit" ("we act, we reflect, we build"), the APU-CSCV mobilized around one central proposition: "For us, a successful renovation is first of all to protect the inhabitants . . . to preserve and develop the social life; that is to say, the ensemble of relationships which bind the inhabitants and which constitute the richness of the district."[4]

The first phase of their activity, from 1974–1976, was a defensive campaign. Their immediate goals were to enlarge the base, create local credibility in the community and with the authorities, to protect the physical fabric, and to galvanize the population. Their tactics ranged from disruption and demonstrations to delegations and meetings. Their issues were building repairs, sealing of derelict

1 **Existing "*courée*"** (small court), Roubaix, France.

All photographs are by the author unless otherwise noted.

structures, rent strikes to protest inadequate services, and negotiations with the city to prevent water cutoffs in the *courée* fountains. Then, moving beyond defensive measures and street rallies to stop the "bulldozer renovation," they began to formulate an alternative plan.

## Planning

A visit to Paris in 1976 brought critical technical assistance through the agency of Plan Construction, an experimental program within the Ministry of "Equipement" (since reorganized as the Ministry of Housing and Planning). Plan Construction was created in 1971 to conduct research and experimentation in areas of cost effectiveness, new technology (principally for energy-efficient design), and "quality of life" issues, with an emphasis on public participation. In November of 1976, in support of the latter goal, Plan Construction signed a research contract with a collective of architects, planners, and sociologists known as ABAC to work with the APU in defining a program for the revitalization of the Alma-Gare district.[5] The selection of ABAC was an appropriate one, as several of the collective's members had participated in earlier socioeconomic studies of Alma-Gare, and they shared a number of premises with the APU: an urban outlook supporting the use-value of space over its exchange value; a belief in applied social research; and a cooperative work practice that sees technical expertise as a resource to be modified through discussion with local residents, rather than as a weapon to dominate that discussion. ABAC defines the process as follows:

> What we wish to underline in the elaboration of the Master Plan is this: the participation of the residents in the meetings of the technicians transformed the work process by imposing a certain manner of conceiving urban life. The technical power retreated before the vigor with which the inhabitants advanced their objectives: the dominant logic of the Master Plan is that of the APU.[6]

The APU understood clearly the significance of the collaboration with ABAC. A special issue of their newspaper, *L'Atelier*, noted with enthusiasm:

> It is the first time in France that such a contract was signed by the Minister. It favors a new urbanistic proposition. No more secrets or projects established behind closed doors, or unilateral decisions affecting the destiny of the citizenry. Each citizen has, henceforth, the possibility to express an opinion, to participate in the creation of the neighborhood. This should permit us to return housing to its true position, which is not to individualize people but to support communal life at the family level as well as the larger social level. Housing is no longer an end in itself but a means to better living.[7]

*A Strategy*. The fruit of this collaboration was the publication in March 1977 of an annotated neighborhood map (*carte-affiche*) that combined a phased strategy for physical restructuring with social goals. The poster-map proclaimed a three-point program:

> WE WANT:
> 1. To remain in the neighborhood.
> 2. To keep our streets and a portion of the existing buildings which will be *rehabilitated*. We will only keep the street-front buildings, not the *courées* (except one or two).
> 3. In the space cleared through demolition, we want housing, services (post office, child care, medical clinic, etc.), collective facilities (schools, sports, etc.), retail shops and work spaces (studios, artisan workshops. . . .)[8]

The strategy espoused by ABAC-APU was to revitalize the community incrementally, starting with rehabilitation and improvements to the public spaces and facilities around the two existing social housing projects that defined the northern and southern poles of the neighborhood. This emphasis on immediate action represented a reversal of traditional urban planning practice. ABAC explains the importance of this approach: "The short-term has priority—it cannot be side-stepped by invoking hypothetical long-term plans. It is this reversal in the way of approaching urban planning which invites collective work with the inhabitants."[9]

For example, in supporting the idea of rehabilitation and on-site relocation, the Master Plan opposed construction of a major transverse road. The vision of the future neighborhood was based on a series of microimprovements based, in turn, on the use value of urban space, rather than the sort of large-scale redevelopment engendered by demolitions and major road construction. The latter approach, which gives priority to the exchange value of the land, might have increased land values, but it would have done so at the expense of the viability of neighborhood life.

*Politics*. With solidarity between the inhabitants through the APU, and the planner-technicians of ABAC

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**2 *Carte-affiche***, Schematic Master Plan for Alma-Gare.

firmly established, the question remained of securing cooperation from the municipal authorities and departmental agencies. Despite a consensus that Alma-Gare was in desperate need of renovation, and the existence of a budget for demolition, little had been accomplished by 1977. Even the presence of a socialist government in Roubaix had not accelerated the process, as the elected officials favored the original plan to rebuild Alma-Gare for the white-collar workers of the growing tertiary sector of the local economy, which was represented principally by the giant mail-order house La Redoute, headquartered in a converted textile factory. Following the election of a new socialist government (Union de la Gauche) in March 1977, a Working Group (Groupe de Travail) was established for Alma-Gare, including the APU. Even here, the APU zealously guarded its political autonomy, rejecting the politics of the veto in favor of relying on the power of its organized constituency.[10] Freed from formal political allegiances, the decisive voice of the APU in the Working Group meant that citizen participation had become a political reality. As the former Mayor of Roubaix observed, "This operation is now cited as an example, not only in France but also in Europe, for the way in which elected officials, technicians, and inhabitants establish in common development and infrastructural plans."[11]

While the establishment of the Working Group meant that the redevelopment project could at last get untracked, the level of imagination required at the various agencies to assure the quality of the project remained problematic. Despite the presence of devoted professionals, notably Pierre Lemonier, chief planner of the SAEN (Société d'Aménagement et d'Equipement du Nord), the agencies were burdened with years of bureaucratic routine. As Xavier Benoist, an economic planner with SAEN, explains, the constant pressure from the APU broke through the lethargy:

> The social technicians—teachers, organizers, day-care and senior-care personnel, the social housing office—have both their own logic and that of their respective institutions. The technicians often have a much more positive position than their institutions. This is why the conflictual stage of development in Alma-Gare was so important: conflict makes innovation.[12]

*Program.* With the commitment of housing subsidies from the central government, the APU was ready to move beyond the schematic master plan of the *carte-affiche* to a building program for Opération Fort Frasez—the first phase of the

reconstruction: 378 units of housing plus community services and facilities on a cleared site of 3.8 hectares (8.3 acres) at the southern end of the district. In addition to the mixed-use program, the APU was careful to specify a variety of housing-unit sizes that reflected not only the remaining population of Alma-Gare but also the general demographic profile of the region, so that incoming families could be integrated into the community from the outset. The design program emphasized a range of public and semi-public spaces that would acknowledge and support the cultural heritage of the neighborhood in both its physical and social dimensions. For the housing design itself, the APU demanded a break with the traditional slab/tower projects with their long corridors and dark stairwells. They sought an architecture that would be compatible with the local patrimony of street-accessed row housing.

## Design

*Process.* Armed with design criteria as well as a building program, the APU was ready to select an architect. To aid in this decision, bus trips were organized to visit housing projects in France, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Bologna. Different people went on each trip, including immigrants of North African origin as well as those of French and Belgian ancestry—with an emphasis on participation by elderly inhabitants. Because the APU published photographs and annotated commentary on each visit in *L'Atelier*, the community at large had access to a wide repertoire of architectural solutions.

The housing that most impressed the Alma-Gare inhabitants was Les Venelles, a courtyard scheme with gallery access in the Woluwé-St. Pierre neighborhood of nearby Brussels. Designed by the AUSI partnership in Brussels, this project was appreciated for its emphasis on space-facilitating social interaction. At the request of the APU, the Planning Director of Roubaix and the head of the local social housing office (the Office Publique d'Habitation à Loyer Modéré, OPHLM) met with the Belgian architects and engaged them officially for the first phase development in the spring of 1977. During the following year, the architects traveled to weekly meetings in Roubaix with the Equipe Permanente Opérationelle for Alma-Gare, headed by Lemonier and including the APU, the Mayor's office, and the OPHLM. As both the inhabitants and the public agencies were anxious to move the project along, the community participated through its representation on the Equipe Permanente, where most of the discussion focused on overall site massing and the disposition of exterior space.

The culmination of this process was an intense work period between the architects and the inhabitants in late spring 1978. The APU organized a dozen evening meetings where the architects presented axonometric sketches, unit plans, and designs for the exterior courts and gardens. In June a 50-page dossier was published defining the design ideas elaborated by the architects in consultation with the APU. A preliminary construction permit was issued, working drawings prepared, and, in February 1979, construction began.

*Form.* In approaching the formal aspects of building design, the architects were principally concerned that the design have relevance for the users, as they stated in the preamble to the dossier:

> The notes that follow do not concern, for us, esthetics but *meaning*. The integration in an old urban site and the plan for reciprocal strengthening of the old by the new presuppose that there be a common vocabulary between the two. What is important is not esthetics but the fact that the new construction have meaning in relationship to the environment. The whole restructuring plan for Alma-Gare stresses continuity as the fundamental line of conduct (maintaining the population in place and their participation in development in one of the modes of this continuity); the architecture must express and strengthen this continuity at its own level, leading to the search for an urban vocabulary which refers to common understanding, which permits a continual frame of reference.[13]

According to Michel Benoit, a partner in AUSI, the focus of the architectural work was at the scale of "micro urbanism." The architects quickly established rules for the unit types, based on their long experience with social-housing design-parameters, and spent most of their time trying to analyze and understand the existing urban environment. They sought to create an "urban alphabet" that would establish the *maximum* number of design constraints in order to prevent formalist control of the design process.[14] To this end, the architects undertook a systematic study of the existing urban fabric: the blocks, streets, squares, and *courées*; and of the morphology of the housing stock: roofs and façades, bay structure, brick detailing, etc. The result of their efforts is an architecture that is recognizably "Roubaisian" and incorporates distinctive new elements in a harmonious fashion.

*The Generator.* The architectural *parti* is a four-story perimeter-block housing-scheme that follows

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3 **Les Venelles**, Brussels, Belgium, AUSI partnership.

the existing street grid and introduces new modes of access and a welter of transitional spaces. The larger of two superblocks is subdivided by a pedestrian street that leads to a public square in which are situated the major public facilities: an "open" primary school, a child-care center, and services for the elderly. The square is sited close to the existing Magasins Généraux housing project in order to link it to the new construction. Pedestrian walkways lead from the square to the old neighborhood to the south and to a continuation of the new construction to the north. The ground floor of the complex fronting the Rue d'Alma, the district's main thoroughfare, is lined with commercial spaces. The entry to the pedestrian walkway is off this street and is marked by a large glass-roofed court that is announced by a glass gable with bright red metal mullions.

The pedestrian street itself is the major social path within the complex, lined on both sides by community facilities and workshops such as the Atelier Cuisine. The Atelier Cuisine, or "kitchen workshop," is literally the heart of the community. It emerged during the early days of popular mobilization, when food was served after long meetings, and developed into a small enterprise with two chefs and one apprentice. In addition to the Atelier, the pedestrian street is home to community meeting rooms and a series of organizations developed by the APU to provide both employment and a role in project management for the inhabitants. The employment-generating nature of these organizations—the Atelier, a printing shop called Alma-G'Art (pun intended), the project management office known as the Régie Technique—is of critical importance, representing as it does a direct effort by the inhabitants to contribute to the solution of the labor question. Their location along the pedestrian street that forms the social spine of the complex is equally important because of the visibility it gives to the workplace as part of the daily environment: it serves to dignify and demystify the production process.

*Access.* Open stairs off the pedestrian street lead up one flight on the south side to a raised, hard-surface court situated above a partially-below-grade two-story parking garage. This raised court reproduces the social collector function of the *courées*, but in more generous dimensions. The court is accessible also through a series of bridges crossing the pedestrian street and issuing from a continuous gallery (*coursive*) linking all the upper-level units. Weaving throughout the complex, sometimes on the street side and sometimes

facing the interior courtyards, the gallery serves two functions: it breaks down the inside/outside barriers between the new construction and the old neighborhood, and it provides direct entry to the individual units in the manner of the traditional street-front row housing. The units themselves, arranged mostly in a four-story, duplex-over-duplex form, reinforce the double inside/outside orientation: the ground-floor units have entries on the public streets as well as small outdoor patios which form a transitional zone between the apartment and the public open space.

*Unit Plans.* Although the design emphasized the exterior spaces, considerable attention was given to producing a wide choice in unit plans within four basic apartment types. Consistent throughout the unit designs is the provision of through ventilation (via the open gallery access system) and the inclusion of one important room ("la belle pièce") in each unit. The latter concern reflects both the emphasis in northern France on interior life (for climatic reasons), and the North African cultural practice of having a ceremonial room within which to receive the father. Beyond these common elements, the basic type undergoes over 70 different modifications through manipulation of three elements: the taking over of a small bedroom to enlarge the "belle pièce," the choice of an eating corner in the kitchen or a small, separate dining room, and the enlargement of the main room by eliminating a large closet. In addition, the size of the second-floor landing in the duplex units can be enlarged by borrowing space from an adjacent bedroom. The variation in unit plans is multiplied by the choice of location within the complex: on the upper court, along the open galleries, or ground-floor units with private gardens. In the last instance, the architects provided several garden units with greenhouse extensions to suggest to future inhabitants possibilities of expansion.

Of the 380 units, 100 are small studio or one-bedroom units. Eighty of these are reserved for the elderly, interspersed throughout the complex; and 20 are intended for use by single men, principally members of the North African immigrant labor force. Additionally, 20 of the larger family units were designed to facilitate possible subdivision into smaller units.

*Building.* The construction system combines economies of industrialized production with traditional hand-set masonry. The concrete bearing walls and floor slabs are prefabricated, while the street façades employ brick arches and decorative motifs. In deference to the historic fabric, the buildings are cut at 45° angles at the corners. Within the vocabulary of Roubaisian masonry work, the window bay system is respected on the street façades while the important public spaces on the street and square are differentiated by means of large-scale arches and masonry openings. The units themselves are differentiated front and back, with more traditional treatment on the street and larger, more modern windows opening onto the interior courts and gardens. Similarly, the mansard roofs are made of traditional tile, but are punctuated with generous windows to brighten the upper-floor units. Along the street façades projecting balconies break the flat building line, providing both a sheltered entry area and collecting spaces at the access points along the upper-level gallery. These balconies are semienclosed with glass in a red-metal frame. Along with the extensive use of glass at the entry to the pedestrian street and in the public buildings surrounding the square, they constitute a major new design element in the neighborhood, heralding the important points of arrival and the procession of public spaces.

Architect Benoit places special emphasis on the use of traditional construction technology, speaking with great passion of the savoir faire of the northern construction workers, especially the masons. He defends the decision to make the façades out of hand-set masonry on three levels: economic, social, and construction quality. The required skill and evident craft embodied in the work increased its value to the masons and their families; children came to watch the work in progress. The workers were well-motivated as a result, and worked harder and faster—even putting in overtime without bonus pay to finish particular sections. Their attitude helped allay fears about the cost of such labor-intensive construction. With arches integral with the walls, there was no need for steel or concrete lintels; nor was there need for separate finishing trades as in the case of prefabricated wall sections. The resulting economies were so significant, according to Benoit, that the builder is now using only brick construction of this sort.[15]

## Form and Consciousness

The key to understanding the impact of the new construction in assisting the process of social change lies in the architects' emphasis on the urban character of the new district, their concern with integrating the housing into the existing neighborhood. The significance of this gesture may be appreciated by comparison with two earlier projects that bear certain similarities to Alma-Gare—Michiel Brinkman's

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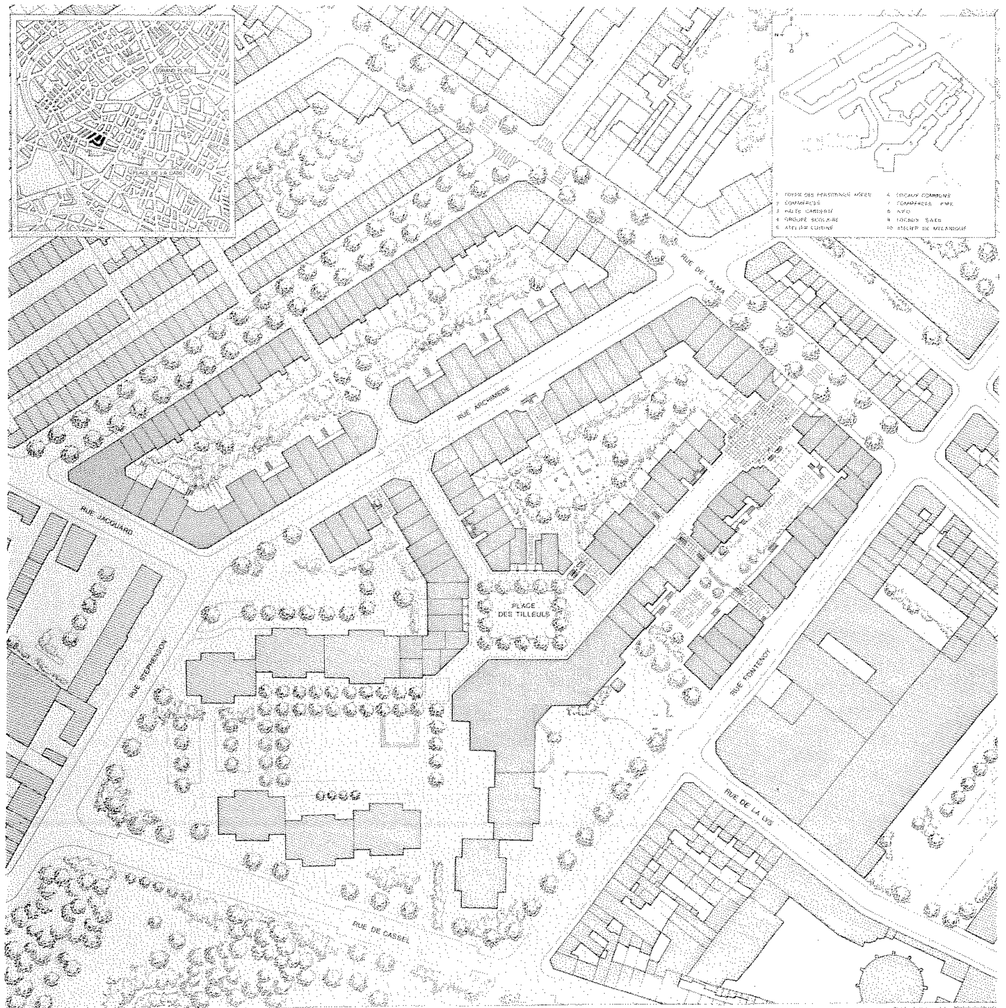


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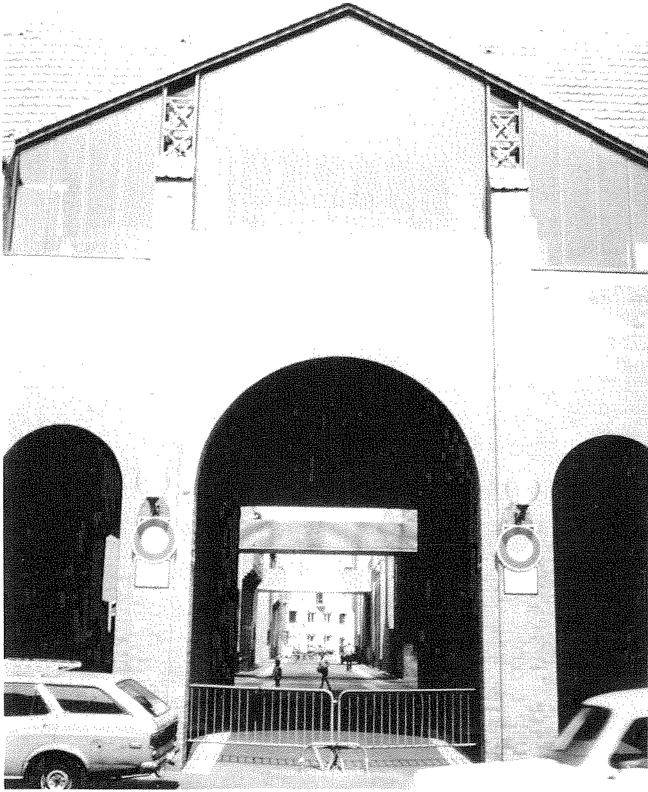
**4 Aerial View**, Alma-Gare district, Roubaix, France. (Courtesy of Editions de l'Atelier d'Art Urbain).

**5 Site Plan**, Alma-Gare (Courtesy of AUSI A&P, architects).



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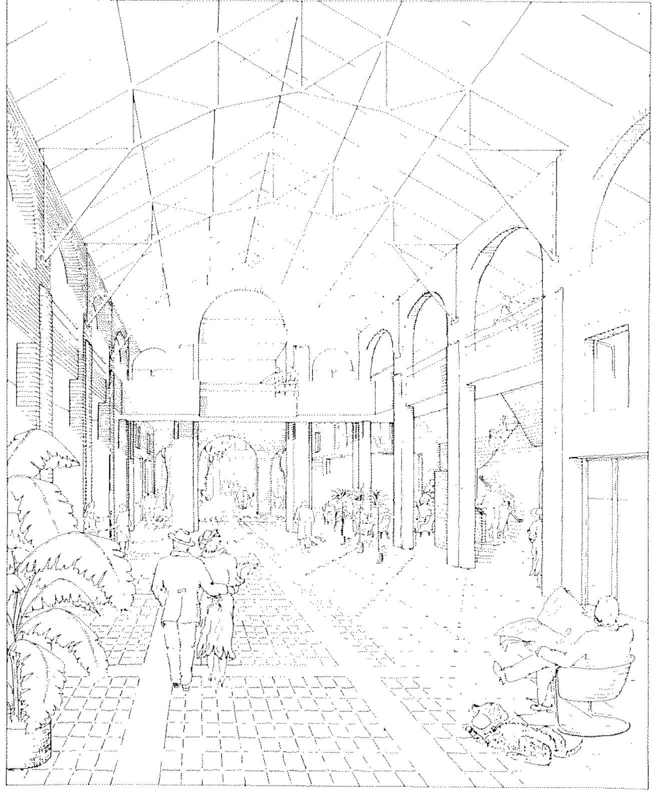

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**6 Rue d'Alma Elevation**, entry to pedestrian street.

**7 Glass Covered Court**, architect's rendering (Courtesy of AUSI A&P, architects).

**8 Glass Covered Court**.

9

perimeter housing block in Spangen (Rotterdam), and Charles Fourier's utopian phalanstery proposal.

*Precedents.* Brinkman's housing at Spangen introduced the open gallery access system into the perimeter block/interior court format, with the gallery serving as a delivery route for merchants' carts as well as providing access to the upper-level duplex units. While Alma-Gare shares with Spangen the social intensity of the interior court life, it opens up the housing to the surrounding community in two significant ways: the ground-floor units at Alma-Gare have direct outside entries on the public streets, and the galleries alternate between street and court orientations, whereas at Spangen all unit access is from within the courtyard, and the galleries are virtually all contained on the interior as well. The project as a whole, moreover, is penetrated by streets and walkways that link the complex to the surrounding community, while Spangen stands as a monolithic superblock with periodic arched entryways.

The reference to Fourier's theories is suggested by the glass-covered entry to the pedestrian street, which recalls the sky-lit courtyards of the *familistère* housing block at Guise, the principal built exemplar of Fourier's theories. While the glass courtyard at Guise represents a modification of Fourier's original proposal for linear "galleries of association," the intention remains the same—to promote social interaction and harmony through a merging of public and private realms (the dwelling unit and the collective social space), an intention clearly shared at Alma-Gare, albeit in more casual form.

*Symbols.* In symbolic terms, however, the most critical point of comparison with Fourier's proposal is what is *not* shared; namely, Fourier's desire to elevate and ennoble his working-class occupants by placing them in a palatial structure modeled after Versailles. Although none of Fourier's followers undertook such a construction at a grand scale, two recent projects in French New Towns by Ricardo Bofill offer an astonishingly literal interpretation of Fourier's formal vision—Versailles for the People at Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines and the Spaces of Abraxas at Marne-la-Vallée. "Daily life should not be banalized," Bofill explains, "but exalted to become rich and meaningful."[16] In the Abraxas project, Bofill argues further that this self-contained housing complex can be construed in paradigmatic urban terms:

> The urban design of our era will take the structure, if not the dimension, of the historical city into account. It will, however, invert the symbolic values.



**9 Atelier Cuisine**, Alma-Gare.

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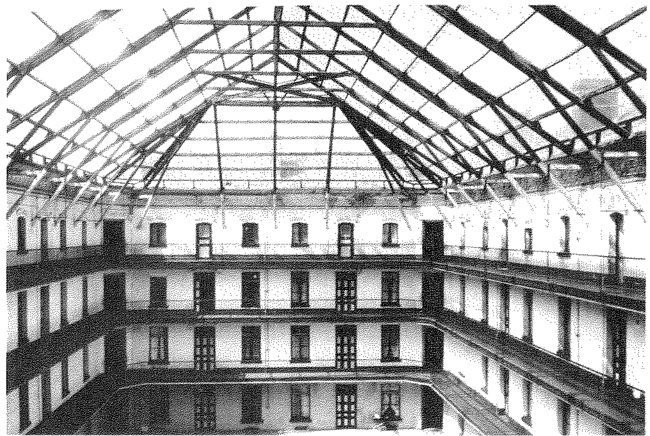

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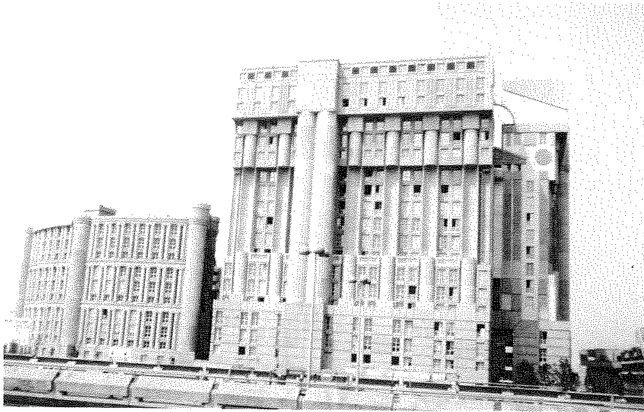
**10 Street Elevation**, Rue Archimède, Alma-Gare.

**11 Spangen Housing**, Rotterdam; Michiel Brinkman, architect, 1921.

**12 Familistère at Guise**; J. B. Godin, 1869.



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> Everyday life will take the center of the stage, while the public edifice and facility will recede into the background.[17]

This monumental public housing project, comprising nearly 600 units arranged in a semicircular 9-story "Roman Theater" separated from a 19-story "Palace" by a 7-story "Triumphal Arch," shares a fundamental goal with Alma-Gare—the empowerment of the French working class. But it pursues this goal through a radically different approach. Bofill's work presents a powerful visual icon as an abstraction of power, intended to transform the consciousness of the residents and spur them to greater cultural and political activity. His work relies on the perceptual clarity of the formal associations with monumentality to confer status and self-esteem on the occupants of his housing. The civic scale of the complex, which looms as an urban fragment on the horizon, suggests that the present form of the city is not an appropriate arena for political action. Instead, the housing complex itself is offered as a model of the city as it used to be and might be again under future worker control.

Where visual form is the point of reference for Bofill, Alma-Gare relies on the experience of daily life to convey its meaning. The symbolism of this micro-urban architecture cannot be captured in a photograph but can only be grasped incrementally, over time, through tactile, immediate activity. The architecture of Alma-Gare invites involvement, and suggests that the city can only be appropriated directly by living in it. The successful struggle of the tenants to remain in place is a first step toward this empowerment, and the architecture acknowledges this victory. This is why its departure from the closed superblock Spangen scheme (or the closed monumental complex by Bofill) is of paramount importance: it suggests that the realm of the working class cannot be contained within the block interior but extends into the municipal realm.

*Intentions.* The architects of Alma-Gare and Abraxas are playing for high stakes, and their relative success in the long run will be difficult to measure; their political intentions require an evaluation that goes beyond traditional indices such as levels of maintenance and the appropriation of the project space itself to broader questions of cultural and political enfranchisement and deeper psychological issues of self-esteem. It is not too soon, however, to signal certain problematic aspects of Bofill's approach. Primary among these is his reliance on an accurate reading of the intended symbolism on which the whole scheme is

**13 Spaces of Abraxas**, Marne-la-Vallée; Ricardo Bofill, architect, 1983.

pegged; if the tenants miss the point, the scheme falls apart. Because the design of the units is subordinated to the precision of the formal image, there is no exploitation of design elements to contribute toward the process of empowerment by encouraging spontaneous neighboring and social organization among the residents.

Alma-Gare, on the other hand, is already halfway there. By any conventional criteria, the architects have been successful in their attempt to produce a built environment that encourages social interaction. The public and semipublic spaces—the galleries, courts, pedestrian street, and public square—are well-used. Sociologist Albert Mollet of Plan Construction, who has followed the project closely since its inception, speaks of the "spirit of place" that has developed there. He is particularly impressed by the increasing involvement in neighborhood affairs of people who have changed from onlookers to participants.[18] This progressive incorporation of the inhabitants into the continuing process of community revitalization is an important goal of socially motivated design, and a first step toward empowerment.

By concentrating on familiar imagery and the existing urban tissue, the architects of Alma-Gare have assured the legibility of their formal intentions—the neighborhood is the icon. This concentration, of course, is in direct response to the expressed wishes of the inhabitants to preserve the social qualities of an environment that had nurtured their organizing efforts despite the physical deterioration.

In program, process, and form, Alma-Gare offers a model for socially responsible design. While the ultimate impact of the new quarter on the neighborhood (and city) as a whole remains to be seen, it is not too soon to salute the very real accomplishments of Alma-Gare. Not the least of these is the reintegration of architecture into the totality of daily life. The dialectic between designers and users provided a mutual education in both the dynamics of urban revitalization and the role of design therein. The community itself offers a succinct summary:

> If the APU discovers architecture and the importance of the quality of space in daily life, it must also inscribe this discovery within a global understanding of urban problems.[19]

NOTES

1 Of the 5,000 people in the Alma-Gare district in 1965, virtually all were extremely poor. Forty-three percent of the population was retired or unemployed, and 70 percent of the employed were low-wage manual workers, mostly in the few remaining textile mills. Nearly half the people were foreign-born: 25 percent were North African (predominantly single males) and 45 percent were of Latin origin (mostly households with children, principally Portuguese). Data from "La Participation Conflictuelle des Habitants du quartier Alma-Gare, à Roubaix," by Georges Gontcharoff, *Correspondance Municipale* nos. 182–183, Paris, November/December 1977. An additional useful reference is Pierre Lemonier, "La Concertation Produit le Nouveau Quartier," in *Quand les habitants prennent la parole*, a collective work directed by Albert Mollet (Paris: Ministère de l'Urbanisme et du Logement, 1981). All translations from the French are by the author.

2 Gontcharoff, "La Participation Conflictuelle," p. 47.

3 Interview with Marie-Agnès Leman, director of CSCV for Roubaix, July 12, 1983.

4 Gontcharoff, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

5 It is not unusual in France for an office to go by an anonymous set of initials rather than the names of the principals. The Belgian office that designed the housing at Alma-Gare follows a similar practice.

6 Daniel Bourdon, Dominique Girard, Raul Pastrana, of the group ABAC, "L'Assistance Technique à l'Atelier Populaire d'Urbanisme: Nouvelles Pratiques Urbaines," unpublished manuscript.

7 Cited in Gontcharoff, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

8 ABAC, *carte-affiche*, March 1977. Print from the architects.

9 Bourdon, Girard, Pastrana, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

10 This autonomy and the failure of the socialists to court the Alma-Gare constituency more enthusiastically, came home to roost in the midterm elections of 1983, when the government of Roubaix went to the center-right parties. Although only 10 percent of the Alma-Gare vote went to the right, its refusal to support the socialist slate reflected its political independence.

11 Gontcharoff, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

12 Interview with Xavier Benoist, economic planner with SAEN, Roubaix, July 12, 1983.
The SAEN (Société d'Aménagement et d'Equipement du Nord) is the agency responsible for overall redevelopment projects. Through an eminent-domain process, they purchased the houses in Alma-Gare from their private owners. The purchase price in this case was based on the value of the land less the cost of demolition. Where 70 percent or more of the existing structures were deemed deteriorated, the entire block was purchased for demolition; if 30 percent or more were in good condition and rehabilitation feasible, a portion of the block was left standing. The

SAEN determines both the purchase price of the land and the number of new units to be built. The SAEN then resells the land to the developer, in this case the local social (public) housing agency, the Office Publique de l'Habitat à Loyer Modéré (OPHLM). The resale price to the OPHLM is based on the eventual cost of new construction in the context of available government subsidies. This same economic analysis is used to determine the necessary density, expressed as a "c.o.s." (coefficient d'occupation du sol), equivalent to a floor-area ratio. The government subsidies to the local housing agency include both a brick-and-mortar construction subsidy, similar to the now defunct Section 236 low-interest federal mortgages in the United States, and a rent subsidy program called APL (aide personnalisée au logement) paid directly to the developer to reduce the tenant's rent to a maximum of 10 percent of gross family income. In the case of unemployed tenants, this subsidy can, in effect, produce a "negative rent" by covering the entire rent plus a stipend for utilities as well.

13 Quoted in *Roubaix Alma-Gare: Lutte Urbaine et Architecture* (Brussels: Editions de l'Atelier d'Art Urbain, 1982), p. 55. This book was published in conjunction with an exhibit at the Institut Français d'Architecture in Paris.

14 Interview with Michel Benoit, partner at AUSI A&P, Brussels, Belgium, July 14, 1983. AUSI, the firm name, stands for "architecture, urbanisme, sciences humaines, et ingénierie," reflecting the inter-disciplinary practice of the office.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Quoted by Barry Bergdoll, "Subsidized Doric," *Progressive Architecture*, October 1982, p. 74.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Interview with Albert Mollet, chief sociologist at Plan Construction, Paris, July 5, 1983. Plan Construction is an experimental program established in 1971 at the Ministère de l'Equipement. Mollet's office paid for the initial planning work by ABAC and has documented this and other participatory projects. See end note #1 above.

19 CSCV-APU, quoted in *Roubaix Alma-Gare: Lutte Urbaine et Architecture*, p. 14.