

# ARCHITECTURAL ADVICE TO MAINTAIN A PRIVATE POPULAR HERITAGE: THE CASE OF THE MICHELIN ESTATE HOUSING OF LA PLAINE, CLERMONT-FERRAND, FRANCE

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## INTRODUCTION

We're looking at La Plaine housing estate in Clermont-Ferrand, built by the Michelin company for its workers. Like the company's other housing estates, la cité Michelin de la Plaine has a long history of preservation by the public authorities, which has not yet been achieved. This conference is the result of an investigation into the urban rules and the exceptional practice of the consulting architect, who, by reinventing the legislative framework, offers an architectural dimension to these ordinary buildings and to their inhabitants.

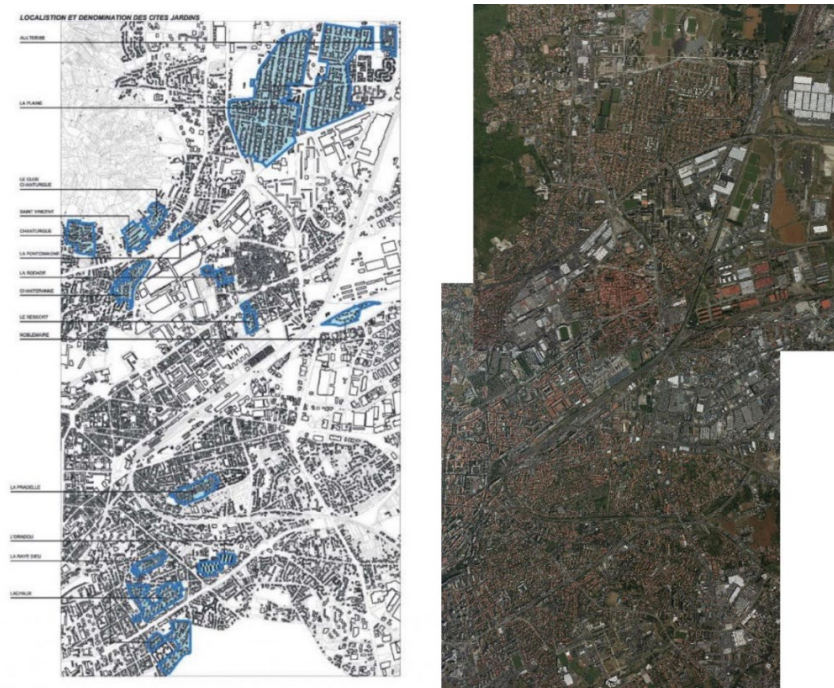


Figure 10. Michelin estates in the city of Clermont-Ferrand © extract from the PLU of the city ; IGN aerial views.

### Our multidisciplinary team to understand this popular heritage

Michelin is a tyre factory, well known in France. The company began its activity at the end of the nineteenth century, and given its enormous need for manpower, and the absence of public social structures at the time, it also built the necessary homes, houses with gardens, three thousand for example between the twenties and the forties, and it continued after the Second World War. These dwellings are grouped into neighbourhoods (figure 1). At the end of the nineteen-eighties, the company sold these estates to private individuals or social landlords, without any specifications, with the exception of la cité du Ressort for engineers, which is included in the perimeter of an Historic Monument. We quickly realised the importance of looking at these housing estates, not because of the exceptional nature of their architecture, but because of their importance in today's urban fabric (despite the many demolitions), the fact that they continue to house a variety of populations, and the very different ways in which they have evolved from one estate to another, depending on their status. We are studying them with an interdisciplinary team. We use in situ investigation methods<sup>1</sup> with a landscape designer, an illustrating architect, a botanist, a zoologist and a sound artist. We have opted for a variety of ways of offering the results of our research so as to reach a wide audience (podcasts, exhibition, book). We're looking at several cités Michelin, some in Clermont-Ferrand, others in neighbouring towns; until the second world war, no architect designed these estates, but the company's design office did; after that, they were designed by the architect Daniel Michelin.

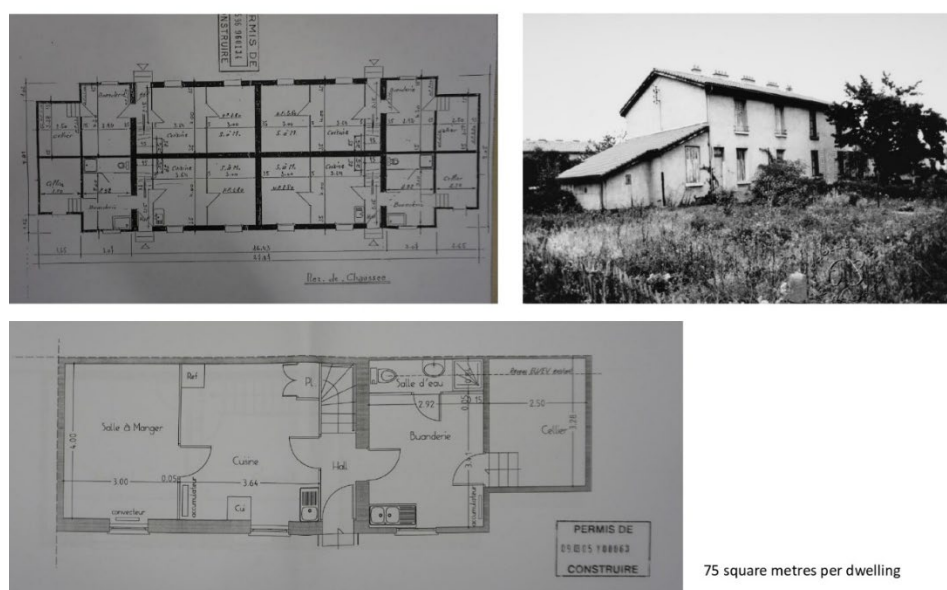


Figure 11. The original type of house with its garden © Clermont-Ferrand municipal archives.

### Our point of view

In France, the word "patrimoine/patrimony", which is widely used, refers to conservation policies inherited from the nineteenth century and has very little to do with social housing.<sup>2</sup> We need to take a step back to think of the Michelin estates as "patrimony", and to do this, we draw on the contributions of anthropology. To the aesthetic aspect, we add a social approach.<sup>3</sup> And because these houses have no specific architectural value, reflecting more the constructional banality of their period; their specificity lies more in the types of buildings and mass plans. We think also the notion of 'patrimony' in the Anthropocene,<sup>4</sup> to propose that it should open up to the living beings, and be more linked to 'safeguarding': that is to say not protecting in order to render it inalterable, but rather keeping alive

something fragile that would otherwise die. So we're looking at the architecture, but also at the residents, their gardening and building maintenance practices.

### **Plaine housing estate as densely populated area where popular culture is expressed**

La Plaine is Michelin's largest neighbourhood, with one thousand two hundred homes built in the mid-twenties. It is located close to the factories. A master plan with housing, schools, church and shops. A sanatorium was built ten years later, which now houses our architecture school. When Michelin sold it, one hundred and fifty houses have been bought by a social landlord, l'OPAC. The original house is a unit made up of four sub-units; small interior areas -seventy-five square metres- (figure 2), but large garden areas (up to four hundred square metres). This neighborhood is still one of the few to house a modest homeowner population, Michelin retirees, young households, families from Portuguese, Turkish and North African communities, and one of the few not to be gentrified;<sup>5</sup> we can consider that this is a private housing estate but with social dimensions. The extensions show the adaptations required by the evolution of comfort: the inhabitants add a bathroom, a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom for each child, a garage. Houses are getting bigger and gardens are getting smaller... Today, it appears to be a permissive housing district, allowing popular culture to express itself. La Plaine is being transformed by self-build processes. There are very few architects working for individual popular housing because it's not profitable, and not obligatory below a certain surface, and finally it's not part of French culture, the builders have taken the place. Building permit documents reveal here sketchy drawings, decorations and expressions taken from the culture of the inhabitants, sometimes masons. Here we see one of the issues. The original house is narrow, and when the extension is parallel: the more you extend, the worse become the relations with the neighbours (figure 3).



*Figure 12. An example of a possible extension © Clermont-Ferrand municipal archives.*

### The public services' gradual awareness of densification, 2000-2015

Until 2015, there were no specific regulations, but the general urban rules relating to low-density residential areas, with a land-use coefficient of zero point five (figure 4). There are some very big extensions, sometimes two storeys high and running parallel, which obliterate the original house. Sometimes, changing the windows format and shutter accentuates this phenomenon. In the nineteen ninety's, two housing estates belonging to a social landlord were carefully renovated with an overall approach. The Oradou was redesigned by a team of architects working with a landscape architect. The project involved increasing the number of types, extending some, building garages and restoring overall coherence through landscaping work in the public spaces and private gardens. We hypothesise that it is the borderline cases of extension of La Plaine at the same time as the cautious renovation of these other estates that are leading to a gradual awakening of the authorities. For exemple, in 2001, the social landlord OPAC is working with an architect on a solution for building perpendicular to the existing structure, which is repeated on several plots (an interest here for the architect); so not to impact on the neighbour behind and seems fairly rational for the distribution, but takes away twenty-five square metres of garden and obscures the existing façade. The same year, a project of an important densification of the plot with the OPAC and the same architect; this resulted in the construction of a second house with garage (81 rue Verlaine). And it is clearly stated in the report by the public services that "the project completely distorts the Michelin housing estates; it does not fit with the existing context, even though it complies with the Land Use Plan". The city and the State initially issued unfavourable opinions, to accept it later on the grounds that only one family would be living, parents in a house and children as a couple in the other house. This extension has now been built.



Figure 13. Views of several extensions, 2024 © Bénédicte Chaljub.

### **From "cités Michelin" to "cités-jardins Michelin " (from 2016): a change of status and measures to protect the buildings and urban morphologies**

Ten years later, the city began to change its approach, and the urban rules reflected it: the Michelin housing estates were now presented as a characteristic historical heritage". Clermont-Ferrand commissioned a Parisian architectural firm to draw up the new Metropolitan Local Planning Scheme. Yves Bories has already studied workers' housing in the north of France, and has a sociological background; he will then be the city's consultant architect for six years. The aim of these new rules is to take care of heritage and landscapes, and limit land artificialisation. Michelin housing estates now have the status of "garden cities"; they have "characteristic urban forms and constitute breathing spaces in the urban fabric that should be preserved"; and "are the subject of particular attention with regard to their heritage dimension". The new regulations call for garden areas to be maintained and be visible: in fact, "extensions are limited to a floor area of forty square metres per plot". The new rules are conservative and the original morphology of each garden city becomes a "reference model". The regulations are based on heritage criteria, even if the Michelin garden-cities are not protected as Historic Monuments. Urban regulations refer to the original elements at different scales, and not removing them; sometimes it is even a question of reproducing them: this is the case for the urban composition, the character of the buildings, the volumes, the materials and openings, the colours for all the closing elements (shutters, gates, fences); the replacement of windows must be the subject of a special study, etc. And where this is not possible, the aim is to respect what already exists and integrate the new elements into the composition of the façade. This approach is followed by the creation in Clermont-Ferrand of an heritage department focusing on twentieth-century buildings and the Michelin estates are included in the content of the Pays d'art et d'histoire label application. At the same time, the inventory department of the Region began a mapped and informed census of existing Michelin estates, with a dedicated researcher-architect and historian, on which we relied.<sup>6</sup>

### **In practice: architectural advice to maintain modest heritage, buildings and inhabitants.**

Extensions are limited to forty square metres. This size corresponds to a maximum budget for a modest family today. Yves Bories' mission<sup>7</sup> is to support those families; he takes time for it, and his position is very rare in France, because popular individual housing estates are not subject to architectural contingencies. He says too that he is "trying to minimise the deterioration". Reading his comments, we can confirm that there is no doctrine, but a position that adapts to situations and evolves. The characteristics of the existing buildings are maintained, certain modifications are tolerated, such as the widening of certain windows, in the living room for example, and the installation of roller shutters, while maintaining the original casement shutters. Here, a volume with a roof terrace, the coating is not finished. The architect supports the applicants to formulate an architectural solution which makes it possible to distinguish between new and existing buildings - implicitly in line with the Venice Charter for protected buildings : the aim is to establish a different aesthetic for the additions and to make each visible: differences in the colour of rendering or cladding materials, then in the shape of the roofs and even the volumes. The consulting architect's comments and notes reveal a desire to disseminate both the methods used and the results achieved. The idea is to establish "working habits" with the relay people who draw up the plans for building permits for their neighbours, families, Turkish, Algerian, Moroccan and Portuguese communities. These habits perpetuate the architectural ambition. For example, one of those persons tells us that "Mr Bories forces us to work in a way that reinforces the aesthetics". Another described a "collaborative education phase". His attitude is one of negotiation, case by case, far from an imposed top-down project. He is also seeking to build a "benchmark" of modern architecture because he knows how an

extension can influence on the neighbourhood. We see here the difference between permit document and the reality: the original casement shutters have disappeared (figure 5).



Figure 14. An extension carried out under the supervision of Y. Bories © Clermont-Ferrand municipal archives/ B. Chaljub

## CONCLUSION

Negotiations take a very long time; very few cases are successful. Out of almost seventy contacts in six years, only a few applications have received autorisation. The height of the fence is also a subject; it is normally regulated at a maximum of one metre of opacity, but this height is often greater, reflecting changes in society (individualism, cultural differences when the fence acts as a privacy screen). We're quite worried because Yves Bories has completed his assignment. He has been replaced by a landscape architect, reflecting the paradigm shift (the importance of plants in urban design recommendations) and the city no longer wishes to renew these advice meetings for individual housing. Some of the residents who are still linked to Michelin history ask to maintain the identity of these garden cities; in the same time, we are still seeing large-scale undeclared constructions, which are complicating sales and the work of notaries; here, density is being asserted with illegal solutions. In the Tase garden city in Lyon for example, maintaining the heritage requires the involvement of public authorities as well as the participation of residents' associations. Will La Plaine be able to take this step? We hope that our mediation activities can lead the authorities to maintain this link with the communities in one way or another...

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Interviews with stakeholders, in particular Clermont Métropole's heritage and urban planning departments, and the consultant architect from 2016 to 2024, as well as with residents; architectural surveys, but also gardens photographs, wildlife surveys and field recording.

<sup>2</sup> We refer to Mérimée, the Ministry of Culture's official website for listing protected buildings:

<https://www.culture.gouv.fr/espace-documentation/Bases-de-donnees/Fiches-bases-de-donnees/Merimee-une-base-de-donnees-du-patrimoine-monumental-francais-de-la-Prehistoire-a-nos-jours>

<sup>3</sup> Like, for example, the researchers who worked on working-class housing estates in St Etienne and Lyon in the 2000s : Duchêne F, Langumier J., Morel-Journel C., Cités ouvrières et patrimonialisation: d'un modèle à ses multiples transformations, in *Espaces et sociétés*, 2013, n°152-153.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Louis Tornatore, « Patrimoine vivant et contributions citoyennes. Penser le patrimoine « devant » l'Anthropocène », In Situ [En ligne], 33 | 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Nora Semmoud, « Les mutations socio-spatiales d'une ancienne cité ouvrière Michelin (La Plaine à Clermont-Ferrand) » [en ligne], in « Cahiers de géographie du Québec », Département de géographie de l'Université Laval, 2008, 52 (146).

<sup>6</sup> <https://patrimoine.auvergnerhonealpes.fr/dossier/IA63002617>

<sup>7</sup> We had a long meeting with the consultant architect, Yves Bories, in 2023 and have been in contact with him ever since.

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