

## Jean Renaudie

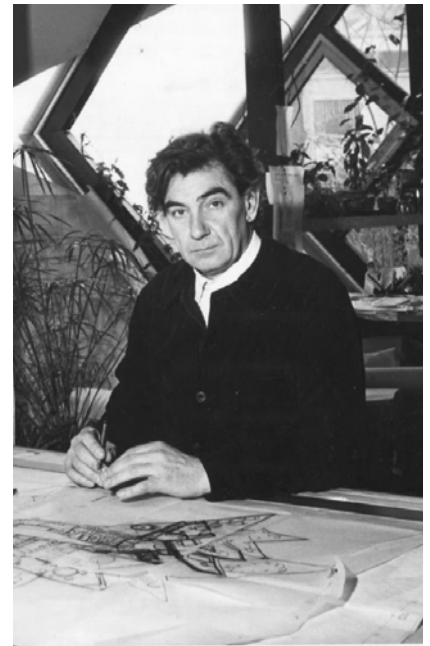


The concrete mountains overflowing with greenery at Jeanne Hachette, Ivry-sur-Seine.

This issue of Local Heroes is a short introduction to the complex intellectual and building legacy of Jean Renaudie. In his structures, the seemingly incidental stacking of different unique housing units and the numerous overgrown terraces – in which the colour of the vegetation and the grey of the concrete define the representation – create an intriguing aesthetic. This uniqueness made him famous, but this fame never stretched further than the borders of France. In that sense: he was a true Local Hero.

Around the time I found out about Jean Renaudie I was especially interested in Dutch structuralism, which mainly involved the intellectual legacies of Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, Piet Blom, Herman Haan and Joop van Stigt. The inspiration they found in Mali's Dogon villages appealed to me. I discovered Renaudie for the first time in a picture

of the Voltaire square at Ivry-sur-Seine near Paris. I saw his work there being closer to Dogon villages than anything produced by the Dutch structuralists. Further research on the architect made me even more enthusiastic. These complex structures with their sharp angles could be completely penetrated: external stairs lead up to almost the highest floor, the buildings form bridges over crossing roads, pedestrian areas and shops are divided over several floors and go underneath or over the building. The profoundly modernist towers around which the Renaudie buildings wrap themselves in the Ivry-sur-Seine project, indicate that this architect was truly unique for his time.



Jean Renaudie (1925–1981).

During my study at the Technical University in Delft I wrote a history thesis about Jean Renaudie. For this research I conducted several interviews with former colleagues and working partners of Jean Renaudie, including his former wife Renée Gailhoustet and his son Serge Renaudie. I've also visited most of his projects and seen the interior of many apartments. For this article, I will first give a brief introduction to the life of Jean Renaudie, before discussing some of his major projects – including the Danielle-Casanova and Jeanne Hachette projects in Ivry-sur-Seine and his project for Givors' city centre. I will conclude with a chapter about the theory behind Jean Renaudie's profoundly unique architecture.

My first meeting with Jean Renaudie:  
Voltaire square, Ivry-sur-Seine.





### Introducing Jean Renaudie

Jean Renaudie was born on the 8th of June 1925 in La Meize, the rural region of Limousin. At age 18 Renaudie arrives in Paris to study at the Beaux-Arts school to become a painter. Later, in 1945, his interest switches towards architecture. Renaudie joins the Communist party at the University. This small group of people will prove to be very important for the rest of his professional life.

In 1956, while working and studying for Michel Ecochard, he comes into contact with Pierre Riboulet, Gerard Thurnauer and Jean-Louis Véret, with whom he later founds L'Atelier de Montrouge in November 1958. In close collaboration they work on a multitude of projects in which they combine modernist style elements with regional motifs. This period was of great influence in the intellectual, theoretical and architectural formation of Jean Renaudie. More on the interesting legacy of L'Atelier de Montrouge can be found in the excellent book *L'Atelier de Montrouge: La modernité à l'œuvre (1958–1981)* by Catherine Blain.

During April through July 1968 Jean Renaudie's world would turn upside down. First, an internal conflict arises within L'Atelier de Montrouge between Jean Renaudie and the other three partners. They have a fundamentally different opinion on how to approach their biggest commission yet: a design for the new town of Le Vaudreuil for 150,000 inhabitants. This disagreement is spurred by a difference in theoretical foundation (which was of essential importance to each of the partners). In the end, L'Atelier de Montrouge delivered three different concepts to the judging commission. Secondly, the already existing tensions within the office are stressed further when the civil unrests of *Les Événements* arrive in May 1968. The political differences of the L'Atelier de Montrouge partners come to the surface. Jean Renaudie's opinion, being a life-time communist, clashes with the other members of L'Atelier de Montrouge. Thirdly, Renaudie parts from his partner, Renée Gailhoustet, to live with Nina Schuch who is one of the drafts(wo)man with whom he works. As a result, Jean Renaudie leaves both his office and his home in a space of three months.

After leaving his home and his office it seemed like Renaudie's entire life was in decline, however nothing could



L'Atelier de Montrouge team.



Logement EDF, Ivry-sur-Seine.

The events of May 1968 in France were an unstable period of civil unrest characterised by demonstrations, strikes and the occupation of universities and factories across France. The unrest disappeared as fast as it arrived, but the cultural, social and moral effects were felt in France for decades to come. The events started with protests at the Sorbonne University in Paris, the place where all L'Atelier de Montrouge members had their architectural education.

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be further from the truth. Renaudie accepted this situation as a fresh start and in the period that followed he created his most exemplary works. In July 1968, Renaudie starts his own architectural practice, the Agence Jean Renaudie.

Right after the student protests of May 1968 a fresh wind was blowing through France and finally new and daring ideas were taken in consideration. At the same time his former wife, co-communist and architect Renée Gailhoustet, was struggling with a commission she got for the new city centre of Ivry-sur-Seine. This municipality was a so-called 'banlieue rouge' – a deeply communist municipality – that was badly in need of a renovation of their city centre. In fact, the municipality wanted to replace the entire city centre for a new plan. For Gailhoustet, it was difficult to establish a good relationship with the municipality of Ivry. To strengthen this relationship, she approaches the well regarded and more experienced Jean Renaudie for a collaboration.

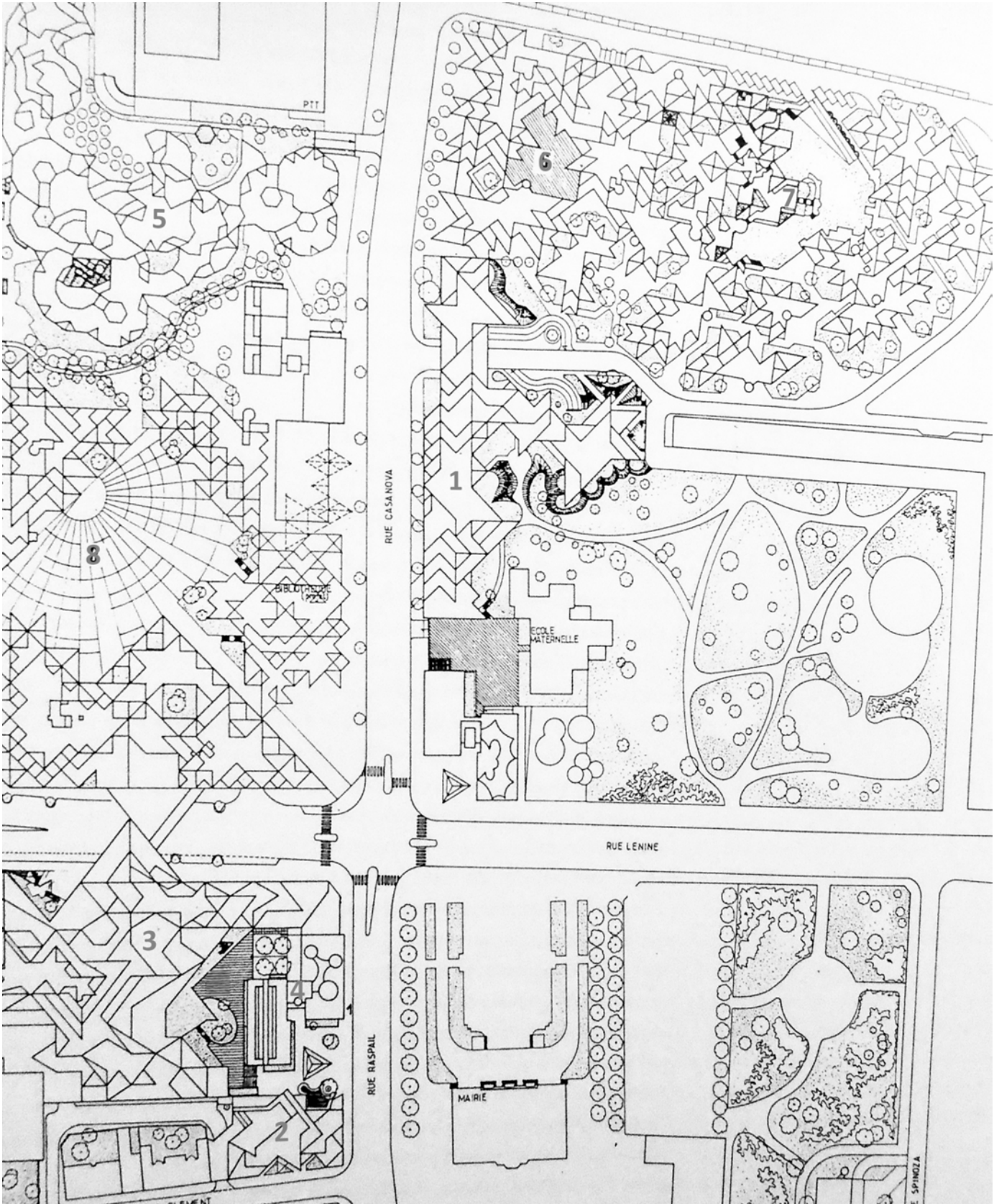
Renaudie understood that the municipality, being communist and in that sense avant-garde, wanted an alternative for *les grands ensembles* after the events of May 1968. To persuade the municipality of his alternative, Renaudie presented his plan of Le Vaudreuil to the municipality. This appealed to them, not because they could understand the highly theoretical drawings but because they understood it was something extremely different than the monotonous *grands ensembles*. Before Renaudie joined the Ivry-sur-Seine project, Renée Gailhoustet already had designed several high-rise towers inspired by the duplex-style of the Unité de Habitation. Around these towers Renaudie designed a new masterplan for the lower parts of the development. This plan was however not a masterplan in the classical sense. It was more a development scheme (as was Le Vaudreuil). It was to be developed over a longer period of time, so that every new building could optimally relate to the newly created context.



A Jean Renaudie sketch for Le Vaudreuil.



Development scheme  
for Ivry-sur-Seine.



# Featured projects

Click [here](#) for an interactive map

Ivry-sur-Seine, Paris:



# Featured projects

Click [here](#) for an interactive map

Givors:





## Danielle Casanova

Ivry-sur-Seine (1972)

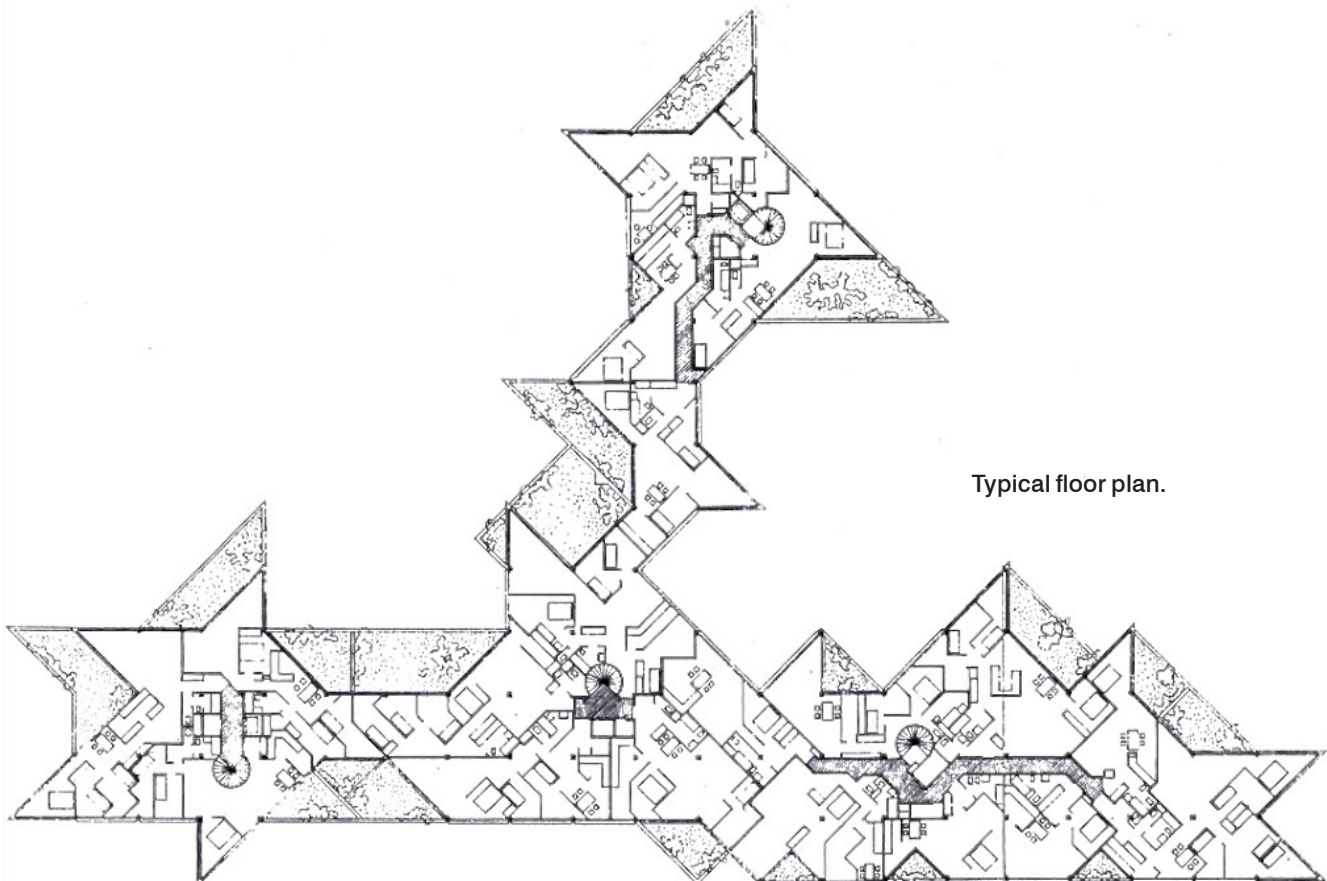
The first realised project that begins showing Renaudie's later approach is the Danielle Casanova project in Ivry-sur-Seine, completed in 1972. The Casanova project consists of several shops adjacent to the Avenue Danielle Casanova and 82 apartments on the higher floors. Compared to later projects, the Casanova project is the most straightforward in terms of its main form. It is built on a 5 x 5 meter grid and almost all external and internal corners are restricted to angles of 45 or 90 degrees. From the street side it even looks relatively dull because the mountain shape visible in his later projects is not yet present. The most unusual aspect of the Casanova project is the treatment of the façade, which has a fragmented pattern composed of triangular shapes – an approach he would never return to. These expressive gestures create a fragmented façade with some interesting details such as small children-height windows and splayed columns on the ground floor. Some other aspects of the Casanova project will however feature in future projects: the placement along the street, the covered walkway, the ground-floor



Danielle Casanova from the street.



Danielle Casanova's terraced backside.



Typical floor plan.





Decorative triangular expression in street-side façade. Note the miniscule triangular 'children' windows.

shops, the recessional build up, the use of visible concrete and, of course, the terraces and sharp angles. Also, the fact that the Casanova project forms a sort of bridge over a small perpendicular street is also introduced in several other projects.

## Jeanne Hachette

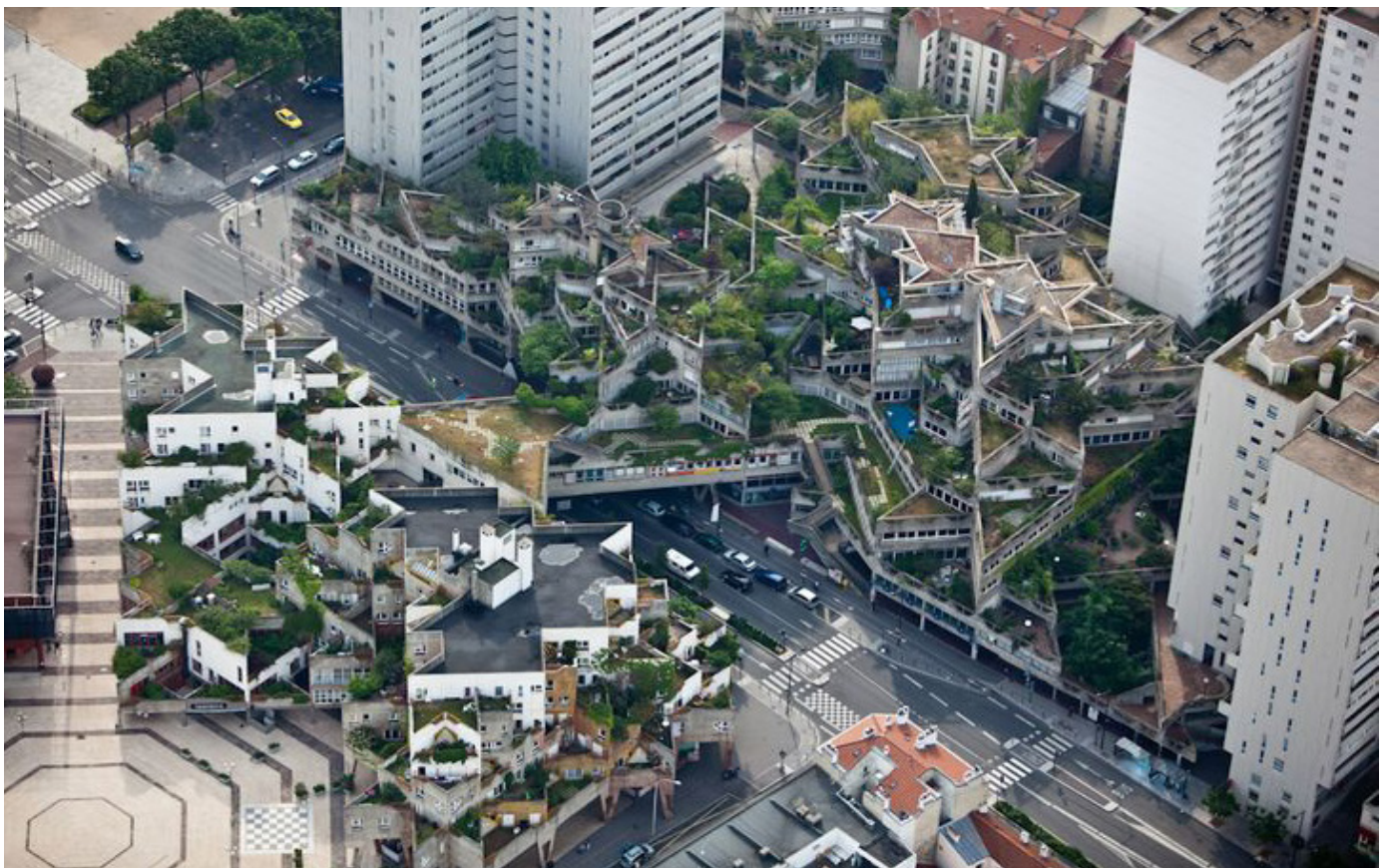
Ivry-sur-Seine (1975)

In 1975 Renaudie completes two more projects in Ivry-sur-Seine: the Jeanne Hachette complex and the adjacent and much smaller Jean-Baptiste Clément project. Both share great similarities in terms of urban placement, external appearance, detailing and internal configuration of apartments. Jeanne Hachette is probably the most complex building Renaudie designed, with its large commercial centre of shops, restaurants, cinemas, offices and a car park underneath – along with the 40 apartments that sit mountain-like atop this commercial plateau. The construction grid used for Jeanne Hachette is defined by the parking grid of 7.5 x 4.5 meters. The angles of the building are no longer confined to 45- or 90-degree angles as with Casanova, which results in much more complex proportions for the apartments. Another innovation Renaudie applied was the introduction of the duplex (two-story) apartment, in which he created voids over the living rooms and in which he could achieve an even more varied orientation of the apartments. The Jeanne Hachette complex is situated along the Avenue George Gosnat



Commercial centre below Jeanne Hachette.

Jeanne Hachette in between the Raspail towers.





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on which it also has the entrances to some shops along the covered walkway. The commercial centre that is situated on the ground and first floor is accessible from a multitude of entrances on different floors. A part of the commercial centre and the offices are situated in a two-story section that forms a sort of bridge over the street and connects it to the buildings on the other side (which were only completed in 1985). Other aspects introduced in the Jeanne Hachette complex are the public stairs and routes that lead all the way up to the 5th floor, and the visible cylindrical forms of the large staircases leading to the apartments. The façades of the building are dominated by horizontal bands of concrete and glass; these bands are only interrupted when they meet a double height room. More expressive forms are found in the balustrade of the terraces where the triangular forms reappear.

Jeanne Hachette from street level.





Jeanne Hachette *'tranche 1'*  
during construction (1973)  
and as urban jungle (2020).





## Jean-Baptiste Clément

Ivry-sur-Seine (1975)

The JBC project is one of the smaller 'mountains' Jean Renaudie designed. It was designed simultaneously with the much larger Jeanne Hachette project adjacent to it. The JBC complex is interesting for further examination because it is, like Jeanne Hachette, a sort of intermediate stage in the development of Renaudie's œuvre between his first built project Casanova, and his magnum opus Givors. It also covers all Renaudie's ideals but it is still quite comprehensible because of its size.

The JBC project is located in the northeast corner of the Ivry-sur-Seine centre project. The JBC complex stands on a rather visually prominent location. It can be clearly seen from the market square and it finishes the 'wrap' that the Jean Hachette complex makes around the Raspail tower, while leaving some distance resulting in a pedestrian area and the entrance towards the Jean Hachette commercial centre. The building is surrounded on all sides by public space. On the northwest side the complex stands side-by-side with an existing housing project, and at the point these two meet a small alley goes underneath the building. The shops on the ground floor have their main entrances towards the connecting roads (Rue Jean Baptise Clément



Jean-Baptiste Clément as seen from the Raspail tower.



Jean-Baptiste Clément from the street side.

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and Rue Raspail). The entrance to the apartments and the rear entrances of the shops are situated along the pedestrian area. The sides of the JBC facing the pedestrian area and the Rue Raspail have a covered sidewalk that protects the pedestrian from the weather.

The external appearance of the project is dominated by the sharp shapes of the raw concrete and the overgrowing greenery from the terraces. The concrete façade consists of horizontal bands, one for each floor, folding around the entire building. Almost the entire surface between these two horizontal bands is glazed. The only place where the horizontal bands are interrupted is where they are intersected by a double height room – where Renaudie placed a large full height but expressively fragmented window. The horizontal bands are also continued when they meet the terraces, where



Apartment J: terrace view towards the apartment.

Renaudie placed a concrete balustrade on top of the horizontal bands. This balustrade consists of an additional horizontal upper band that is put in place by triangular shapes and is left open in between. This openness of the balustrade makes the greenery on the terraces more visible from the street and gives the plants the opportunity to grow outside their terrace. An additional element of the complex is the cylindrical main staircase facing the pedestrian area, which contrasts with the rest of the building by articulating its vertical direction.



Apartment J: view through the void, to the garden terrace and into the city.



JBC consists of shops on the ground floor and 11 apartments spread out over the five floors above. Nine of the apartments being duplex-style and the other two are single-floor apartments with one occupying the entire top floor as a penthouse. The entire construction of the JBC is made out of cast concrete. The building stands on a surprisingly rigid orthogonal grid of 7.5 x 4.5 meters, which is the same as the construction grid at Jeanne Hachette, which in turn was derived from the necessary construction grid for the parking below. Where necessary, small alterations to this grid are made. Each grid point has a concrete column with a square dimension of 300 x 300 mm. Other load-bearing and stabilising elements are the elevator shaft, the circular main stairway shaft and the four installation shafts. The floors are, where necessary for load bearing or stabilising purposes, supported by additional concrete beams.

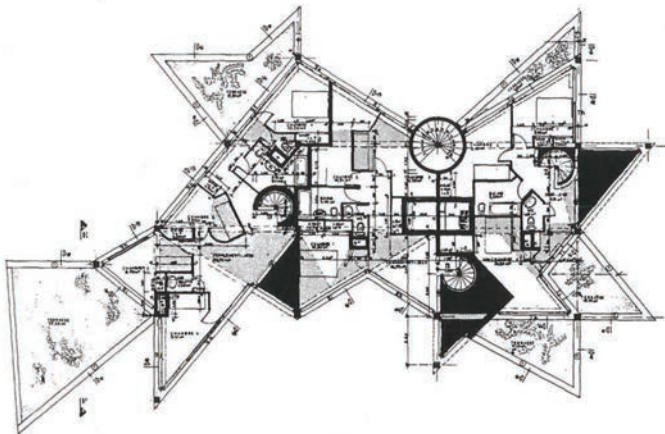
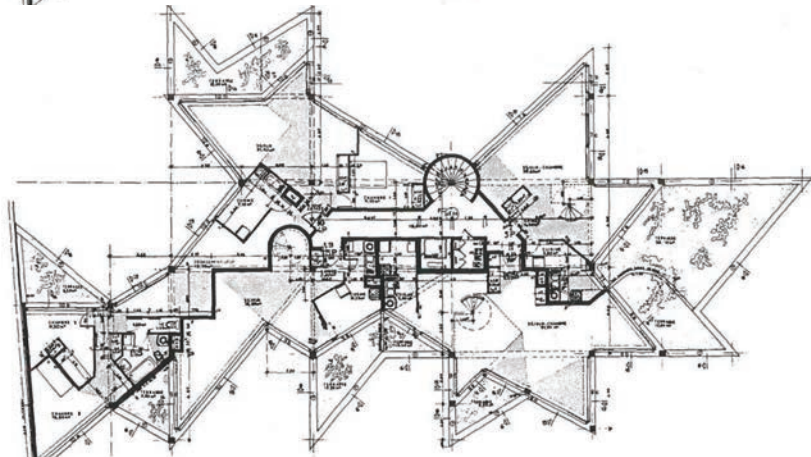
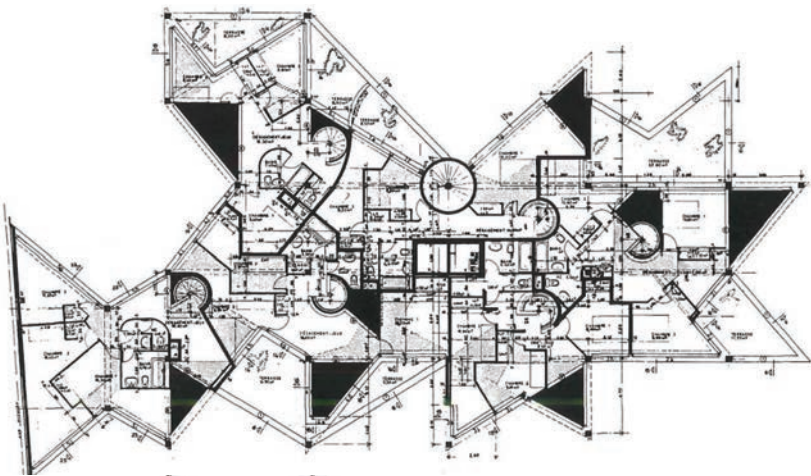
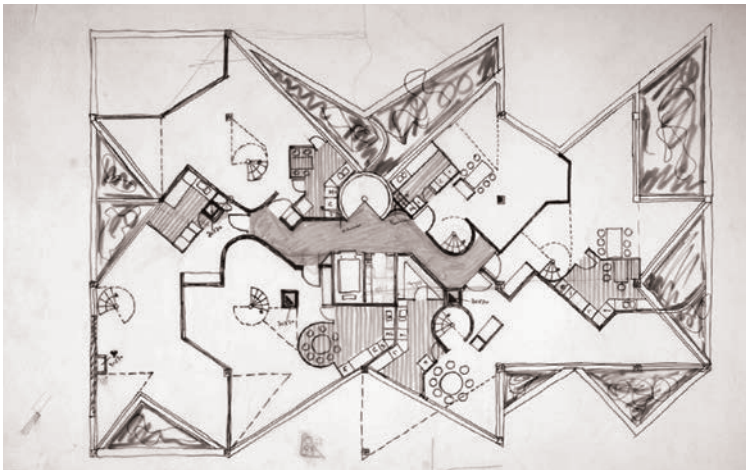
The internal circulation of the JBC building consists of one main staircase and one elevator, which make the corridors that are situated on the first, the third and the fifth floor accessible. The apartments can all be entered from one of these corridors. The corridors are painted in bright primary colours (yellow, red, blue) and are overall quite dark. Only the main staircase has small and high placed windows. All of the apartments in JBC are radically different and their unconventional shapes are tightly connected – they stick into, under and over each other. The apartments vary in size from 143 m<sup>2</sup> to 77 m<sup>2</sup> with an average of 108 m<sup>2</sup>. And all have access to multiple terraces varying in size from a miniscule 2 m<sup>2</sup> to a park-like 30 m<sup>2</sup>. On average, 23% of the total floor space is occupied by the terrace, which is approximately 32 m<sup>2</sup> of terrace per apartment.

Apartment arrangement  
at Jean-Baptiste Clément.



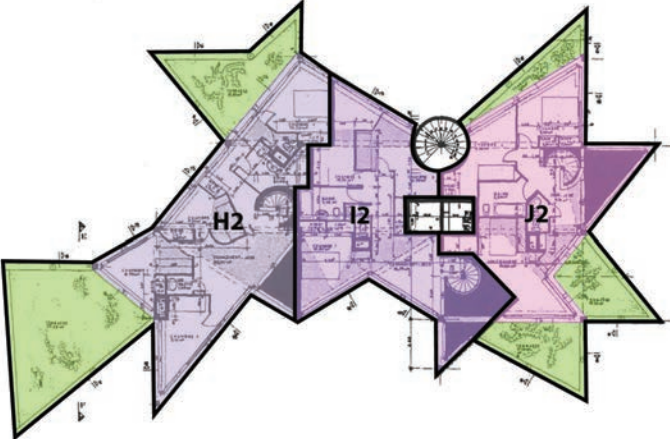
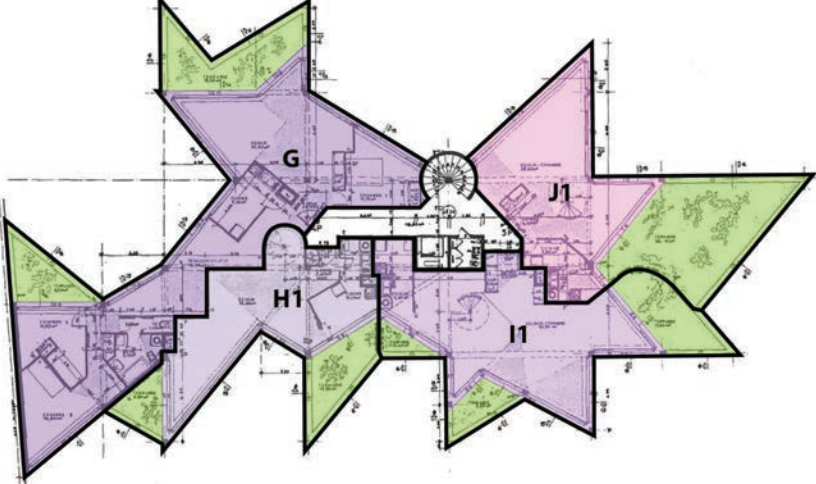
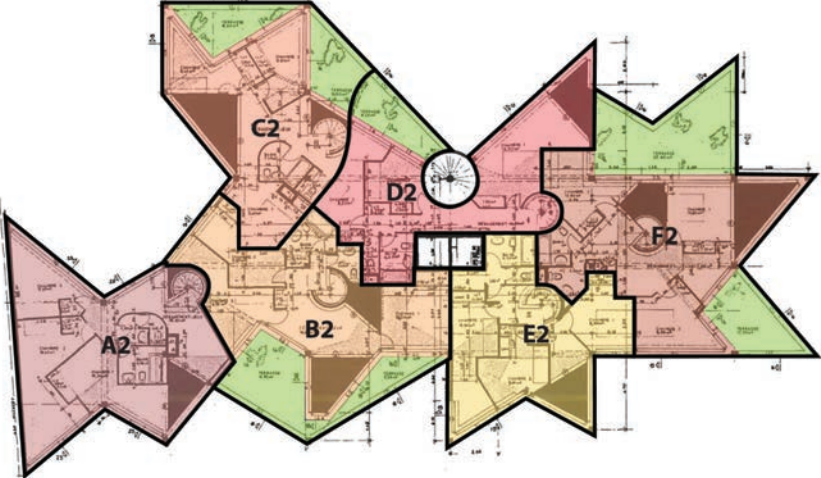
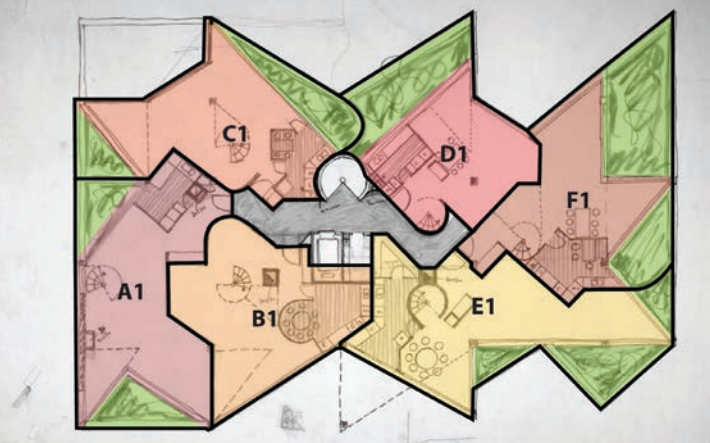


Floor plans of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floor of Jean-Baptiste Clément.

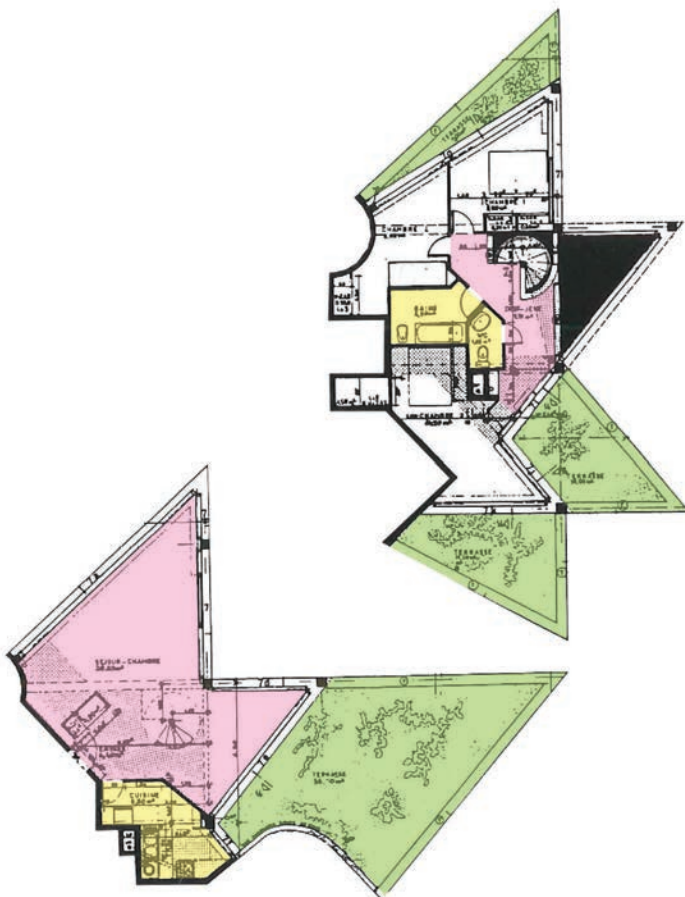




Apartments indicated in the floor plans of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floors of Jean-Baptiste Clément.



The different apartments have several things in common: they are all duplex-style; the lower floor always contains a kitchen, a living room and at least one terrace; and they all have the same spiral staircase leading to a spacious hallway (for play) on the higher floor which gives access to the bathroom, the toilet and the bedrooms. The bedrooms almost all have a fixed place for the bed, indicated in the plans, and built-in storage somewhere nearby. The number of square meters of the rooms on the higher floor are overall quite equal. The bathroom is always relatively orthogonal and quite small between 5 and 6 m<sup>2</sup>. The bedrooms are also small for present-day standards: all between 8 and 14 m<sup>2</sup>. Also, the size of the kitchen on the lower floor seems like a fixed entity, measuring between 7 and 8 m<sup>2</sup>. Besides these few shared features, the apartments mostly stand out for being completely different on several levels. These differences are mostly notable in the shape, size and orientation of the apartment and are usually manifested in the living room and its relation towards the terraces, the void and the hallway above. These differences are so extensive that they are able to change the entire atmosphere and character of the apartment.



Apartment J floor plans.



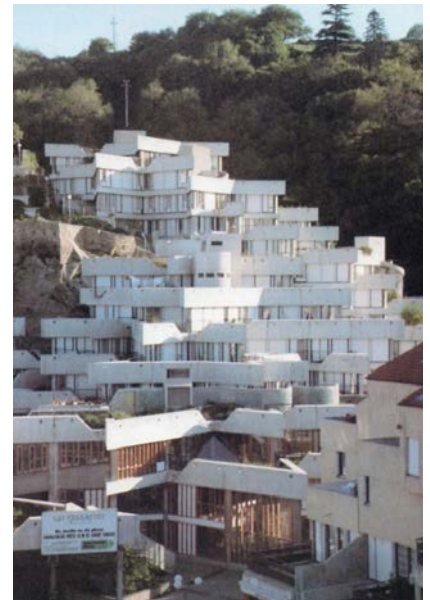
# Givors

(1980)

The next big housing complex that Renaudie creates is the new centre for Givors. Completed in 1980, this is the biggest project he realised and fulfils his dream, present in Le Vaudreuil, to build upon the slopes of hills. Givors, or Les Etoiles ('the stars') is generally seen as Renaudie's magnum opus, because of its complex but clear forms and the simple façade that seems to strengthen the importance of the plans. The geometry of the plans is simplified in comparison to Jeanne Hachette and is again, like in Casanova, almost entirely confined to 45- or 90-degree angles. The nine blocks of Givors are built up like small mountains and seem to melt together into one continuous building. This building wraps itself around the hills, over streets and around squares. The ground floor adjacent to the market square is occupied by shops and along one of the internal streets a theatre is positioned, the rest of the lower floors and all upper floors are occupied by 270 apartments. Public stairs and routes through the entire complex lead up to the castle situated in the hills above. In this project Renaudie greatly simplifies the external



Givors as seen from the street.



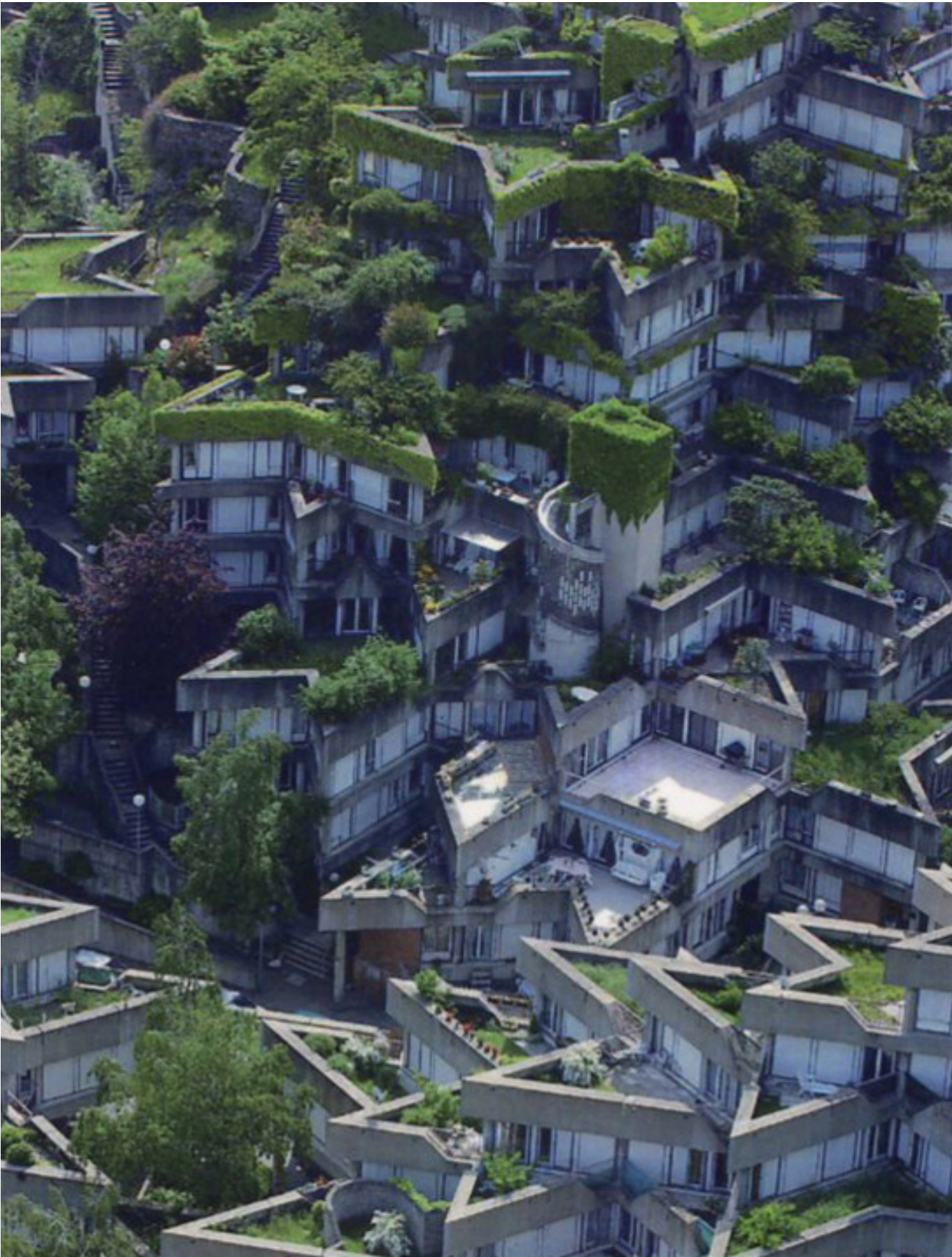
Givors is built upon the slopes.



Situation plan of Givors.



45-degree angled terraces  
of Givors as seen from above.





Horizontal bands of the balustrades define the expression.



appearance of the building with almost all expressive shapes removed. The only thing remaining is the horizontal concrete bands that wrap around the entire building, with almost all space in between is glazed. The horizontality, and therefore the expression of the plans, is in Givors much more evident. Renaudie abandons the duplex-style apartment and he removes almost any other expressive forms (like the balustrade in Jeanne Hachette). Therefore the horizontal band is never interrupted and becomes the main element of expression.

It is quite clear that Renaudie's architecture differs tremendously from anything realised before or after him. His style can be seen as a merging of modernist aesthetic principles and a free interpretation of structuralist theories. Since his architecture was so different, Renaudie had to build a strong theoretical framework to support his inventions.

One of the first things that will strike anyone when experiencing Renaudie's work is the sheer complexity of the architecture. In analysing Renaudie's architecture it becomes clear that this complexity is not merely an external expression or form freedom. Complexity is in fact an integral feature of every layer in the architecture.

Renaudie was very critical towards the free-market economy and modern urbanism. He believed modern urbanism failed because with its simplistic segregation of functions. Under influence of the Charter of Athens, urbanism could never recreate the complex organism that is the city. According to Renaudie, a city is a complex and living organism that exhibits an infinite number of functions. He explains this by relating the city to the structuralist understanding of the biological cell: "(...) the city is composed of a number of simple elements which, in combination, create a complex whole whose significance outstrips that of the isolated functions." (Scalbert, April 2004, p. 23). The city evolves over time, like the cell, resulting in the birth and disappearance of functions. This adaptability should be taken into account when designing the structure for a city. Renaudie's definition of architecture therefore goes beyond the seductive purposes of Corbusier's definition. According to Renaudie: "Architecture is the physical form which envelops people's lives in all the complexity of their relations with their environment". In this sense architecture should follow the form of the complex human behaviour in space in order to construct the complex organism that is the city. And thus, architecture must be urbanism, and if that is so, architecture must be complexity. Complexity is an inseparable part of human life and therefore also of architecture.

Clearly, Renaudie's ideology was, sometimes quite literally, influenced by structuralism. Although structuralist ideas were very influential in the human sciences, they were

**"The city is composed of a number of simple elements which, in combination, create a complex whole whose significance outstrips that of the isolated functions."**

© Scalbert, April 2004, p. 23

**"Architecture is the physical form which envelops people's lives in all the complexity of their relations with their environment"**

© Jean Renaudie



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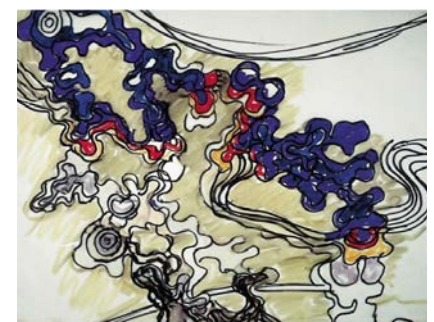
more difficult (and slow) to realise in architecture – mainly because complexity was something opposed to the way the French free-market economy and building industry was functioning during the 1970s. All of Renaudie’s housing complexes were built for municipalities, and all of them were communist. This nepotism helped Renaudie to obtain commissions. But it also gave him the opportunity to convince the like-minded municipalities, that were also critical towards capitalism and the free-market economy, of his architectural ideas. Renaudie’s first commission after his departure from L’Atelier de Montrouge was made possible because of recommendations from Renée Gailhoustet, a co-communist. Subsequent commissions were still quite difficult to obtain, especially since the first completed projects, Casanova and Jeanne Hachette, were so unconventional – as well as overbudget, on an average of 70%. Regardless of these difficulties, the work was still attractive to municipalities that were in search for an alternative to the *grands ensembles*.

On one hand, Renaudie’s dream was to recreate the forms of the Earth and nature because these were, according to Renaudie, the forms of human activity. On the other hand, he was restricted by the structural and economical possibilities of capitalism. Renaudie understood that he should find a process of designing that could mimic the slowness of evolution and at the same time conform to the restrictions presented to him by structure (and economics). As a result, Renaudie developed a very particular design method to transform his theory into practice – with sketching being the main driver to imitate evolution.

In this design process, Renaudie starts with drawing circular forms because he understood that: “any form, however random, if completely rotated on its centre of gravity, eventually describes a sphere at its extremities” (Critchlow, 1969, p. 119; Scalbert, April 2004). This concept gave Renaudie a certain freedom to start with. Preserved sketches show that Renaudie starts with an almost random arrangement of curving sketches in order to get grip on the site and its geography. These forms are never meant as an actual building form, but as mere guidelines for something to come – something that can take place inside or outside the circular form. When satisfied, Renaudie sets forward by dividing the circular sketches with (quasi-random) straight lines.

**“Any form, however random, if completely rotated on its centre of gravity, eventually describes a sphere at its extremities”**

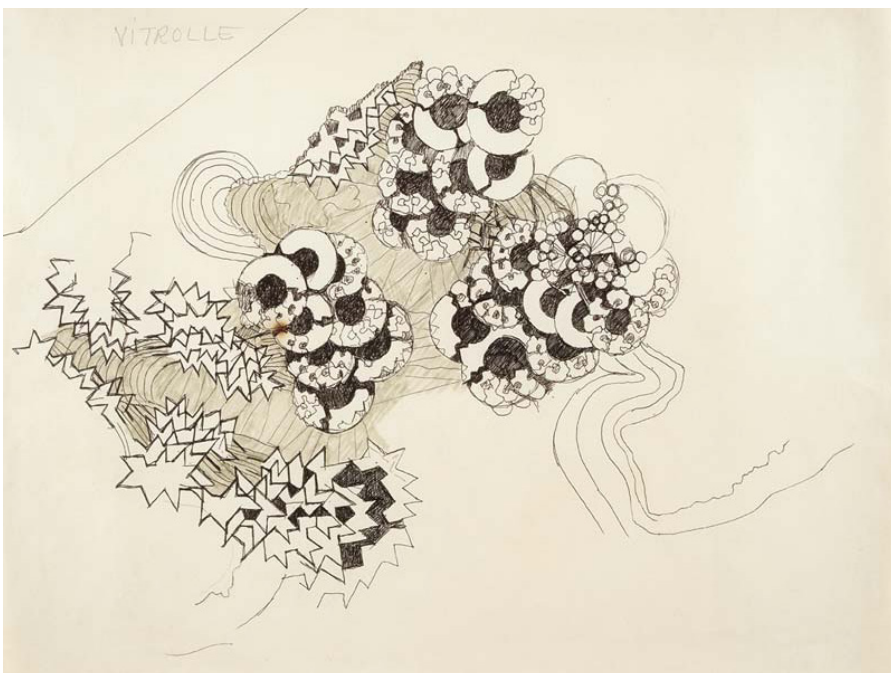
© Critchlow, 1969, p. 119; Scalbert, April 2004



Free organic and circular sketches.



From organic and circular sketches to urban lay-out...



Urban lay-out becomes building forms.

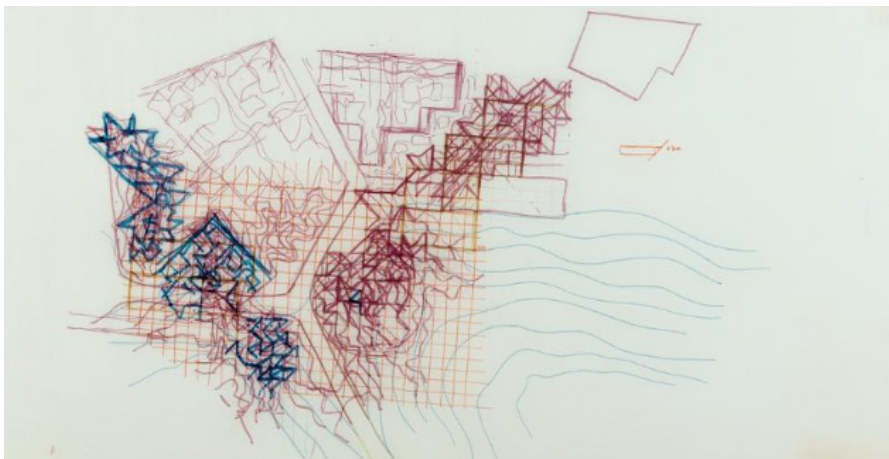
Later in the process he continues creating more concrete shapes in more detailed drawings that could actually be building plans.

When Renaudie continues by drawing the preliminary shapes of the apartments and the access routes towards them, he is still very much using the circular geometry he envisaged at the beginning of the process. After these preliminary sketches for the apartment outlines, Renaudie puts layers of tracing paper on top of each other – one for each floor. He then continues appropriating the outlines of the apartment plans and the internal configuration.





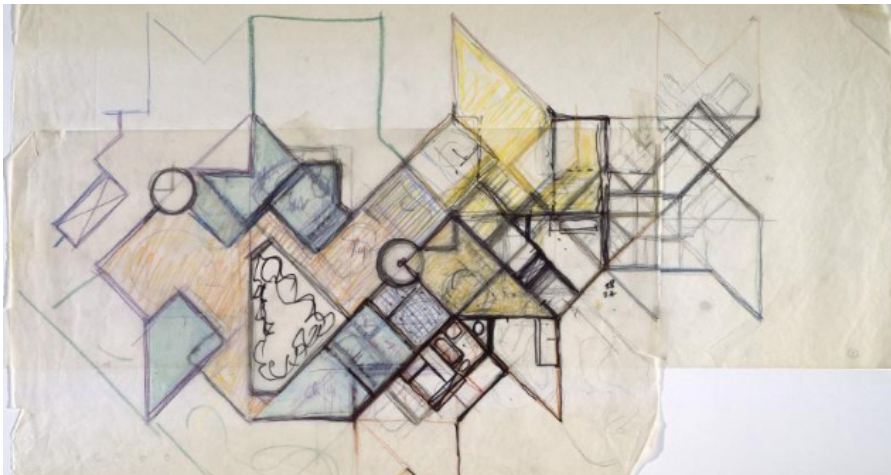
Building forms are divided into apartment forms.



Building forms are appropriated for the construction grid.

Renaudie starts drawing grids over his sketches in multiple orientations. The size of these grids was mostly, like in Ivry-sur-Seine, determined by the parking below the buildings. After the grids were determined, Renaudie adjusted the outlines of the building plans and the apartment plans in order to make them congruent with the structural grid. This appropriating to structure is specified by the use of the diagonal. Although the structural grid was very rigid, the diagonal gave Renaudie a quasi-unlimited freedom to create the diversity and complexity he envisaged in his theory and his preceding design drawings. Once the outlines of the building and the apartments were finished, he continued by developing the plans of the separate apartments in more detail.

In the designing of the apartments, he sought for qualitative criteria such as light, views, flexibility and spaciousness. Also here the diagonal was a faithful servant: through the

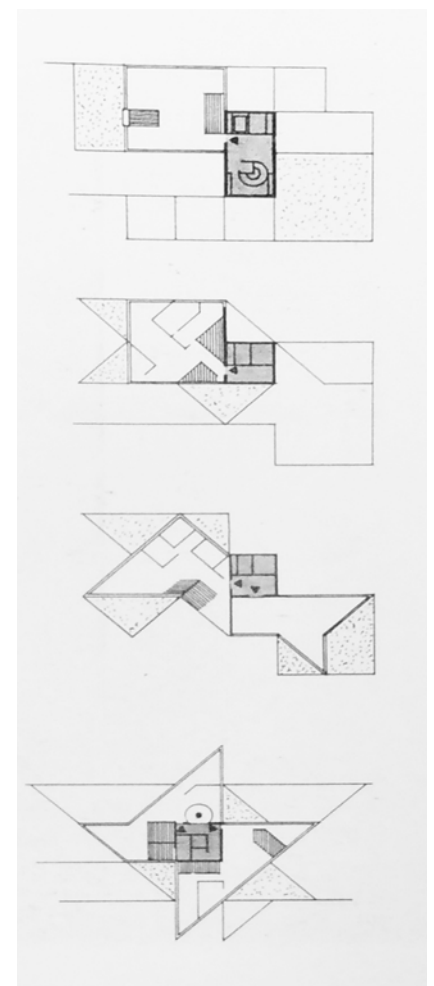


Apartments are taken on individually.

diagonal the space seemed larger, more light could enter the room, and multiple views and orientations became possible. As anyone can imagine, this was hugely time consuming because not only was every apartment different but also every alteration Renaudie made to the outlines of the apartments had effect on the adjacent apartments. When the design was finished, the only thing that reminded of the previous circular geometry is the (mostly centrally placed) circular main staircase, which seems to stand as a reminder of the centre of gravity around which the form, when rotated, would once again become a circle.

The differences between the apartments are clearly not of a mere sales-promotional nature. On the contrary, these differences appear to be so random that they can hardly be justified by any means. The diversity of apartments (as well as the offices and shops) in Renaudie's architecture is especially interesting because it's less apparent in other structuralist architecture.

For Renaudie, each and every person is a unique individual. He was fiercely opposed to any regulation that marginalised a person to an average. Renaudie believed the task of the architect is to first construct things mentally, in contrast to the standardised apartment. In order to let your imagination and your dreams flourish freely, there can be no restrictions, no established norms, no recipes and no standard criteria (J. Renaudie, 1976). This continuous reinterpreting is something clearly present in Renaudie's design process. Mostly the reinterpretations are not based on the purely functional or quantifiable aspects. Instead they are influenced by something Renaudie calls the 'abstract content' of architecture.



The diagonal is introduced into the apartment lay-out.



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Renaudie wanted, by taking into account the abstract content, to let the inhabitants and passersby to become actors interacting with the architecture.\* Key to this approach was the unexpected – created through discovery, complexity and diversity.

\* Abstract content: “(...) experiencing pleasure and being able to act freely in space” (Scalbert, April 2004, p. 53).

Renaudie designed the interiors of the apartments so they consist of a seemingly definitive part and another part which is open to interpretation. When looking at the separate apartments we can distinguish, what Renaudie calls, the definitive parts. For example, the kitchen and bathroom are all well-defined, closed and small. In addition, almost all the bedrooms have a fixed place for the bed. The open parts are virtually everything in between the definitive parts: the open and large living rooms, the so-called hallway for playing and of course the terraces. And indeed, it's precisely in these parts the differences between the apartments are most obvious. According to Renaudie, the diversity of the interior, created by the open parts, gives the inhabitants the freedom and encouragement to respond to, and appropriate, the space in their own way.

In Renaudie's writing, the 'abstract content' of architecture comes to life most vividly in the terraces. Here the abstract content are things such as the experience to see a plant grow, to watch it rain from your flat, to be able to stand in front of your apartment and to see the blackbirds arrive in the morning. These experiences are the things that really matter in daily life and the terraces make them possible. Another reason for the terrace is a social motive, such as tending the garden with your family, or interacting with the neighbours on the terrace below. In addition, the terraces visually connect the flats with each other, with the environment and with the city.

The goal of Renaudie's buildings is to present a form that can exhibit the complexity of the relations between people and their environment. However, there is one thing which won't become apparent through theory: it is the actual functioning of Renaudie's buildings. Are Renaudie's buildings, indeed, able to exhibit the complexity of human life? How is it to live in such an awkwardly-shaped apartment?

I have visited Ivry-sur-Seine several times in different seasons and I have had enough chance to experience every

Interior of an apartment in Jean-Baptiste Clément flooded with light.



nook and cranny. Ascending the building, using the outside stairs, is a real experience and the views are indeed nice. However, these stairs seem to go nowhere (unlike at Givors, where they lead to the castle). Inside Jeanne Hachette I found a commercial centre that was semi-thriving and semi-abandoned and overall looked a bit outdated and under-maintained. A lot of people seemed to be using the commercial centre as a shortcut to the metro that protected them from the weather, and in which they could simultaneously do their daily groceries. Accordingly, almost all shops along this route were occupied.

What's very agreeable about walking around the entire Ivry-sur-Seine city centre, is how you are almost always covered by arcades and buildings. This immediately gives a sort of intimate atmosphere in which you are always





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in contact with the surrounding buildings. In addition, due to the penetrability of all the blocks, you can each time choose how you want to walk. If it's raining you can go through the commercial centre; if you are in a hurry, you follow the road; and if it's sunny you cross the square. You truly have a freedom of choice. While walking around, I discovered countless unexpected places and all with their own unique atmosphere – such as a large square, a flower garden, a park, a schoolyard, a *jeu de boules* track, some surrealistic stair arrangements, a fountain and various small pavilions.\* But you also come across less inviting places, such as dark corners and passages lacking windows or social control. Most inhabitants however claim that they have never felt unsafe in their neighbourhood. They have none of the problems some of the other banlieues surrounding Paris deal with. They like the diversity the neighbourhood has to offer and with everything within reach: food stores, clothing stores, pharmacy, schools, library, greenery. It feels a bit like a village in a big town.

Most of the passers-by dislike the expression of the architecture – with the raw concrete mainly given the blame. Some think the buildings look quite messy overall. But people are more positive about the abundant greenery and the fact that it's one-of-a-kind. The inhabitants themselves are overall more positive: they love their apartments and the atmosphere of the neighbourhood and they 'got used to' the concrete. Another positive remark by the inhabitants goes out to the fact that the internal circulation towards the apartments is grouped for around ten apartments. This means there is no anonymity when entering 'your' building. You know everybody and you greet everybody.

Each and every apartment in Renaudie's buildings is different. To get a good overall view of the different possibilities, I tried to see as many as possible. The first thing that should be said is that in real life the apartments don't feel as awkward or difficult as the plans might suggest. Overall, most of the inhabitants loved their large and varied living spaces, their terraces and the uniqueness of their apartment. One inhabitant said: "Here I am at home, not in the same framework. Not everyone has the same apartment. And this is a pleasure to explore. It's also a pleasure that we don't all live in a uniformity – like with architects from a certain time who wanted everyone to live like a number. No, we are not

\* In the middle of Cité du Parc (1982), finished after Renaudie's death, the truly innovative Einstein school is hidden in the middle of the neighbourhood. The school has open classrooms, expressive skylights, a maze of terraces on top and a sunken schoolyard.

**"Here I am at home, not in the same framework. Not everyone has the same apartment. And this is a pleasure to explore. It's also a pleasure that we don't all live in a uniformity – like with architects from a certain time who wanted everyone to live like a number. No, we are not numbers here!"**

© Knapp, 1979



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numbers here!” (Knapp, 1979). The sharp angles are mostly not seen as a functional limitation and the inhabitants seem to appropriate them each in their own way, mostly with plants, sculptures or small furniture. In comparison, the research by Lugassy on the Casanova building shows that the inhabitants, when they had just moved into the building, found the angles very difficult to appropriate and saw them as wasted space. Later, however, they seemed to acknowledge the value of them. Because of the large glazed parts and the sharp angles, most apartments are flooded with light and give generous views in multiple directions – for most inhabitants this was one of the main reasons to buy the apartment. A shortcoming of these windows is of course privacy: people living in the other apartments can easily look in. But this is more of a problem in the winter when the plants on the terraces have lost their leaves, than in the summer when all the greenery distorts the views. Interesting to note about the living rooms is that, because of their generous size and odd lay-out, all inhabitants seem to have divided their living room in separate parts. Mostly the sharp angles, the centrally placed staircase and the void seem to help determine these places but without suggesting a determined function.

One of the main reasons to buy one of these apartments is the possibility of having a garden terrace in such an urbanised area near Paris. For the inhabitants, the terrace’s purpose is twofold: it’s not only an extra outside room, but it also changes the feeling inside the apartment. As one inhabitant said: “It is a pleasure to be surrounded by greenery instead of by the city when you return home.” Depending on the size, the location in the apartment and the orientation towards the sun, the terraces are appropriated in fairly different manners. In all the interviews I did and read, the terraces seem to be the eminent place in the apartment that is able to facilitate the ‘abstract content’ of living. In other words, it makes the inhabitants feel free and gives them the possibility to day-dream and to feel pleasure in life. “To be at the tip of the terrace, it’s a bit like the guy who is on his boat. It’s good: there is no one and it feels a bit like being in the countryside. It feels like a lodge. You are in the countryside *and* in the city.” (Buffard, 1992)

**“It is a pleasure to be surrounded by greenery instead of by the city when you return home.”**

⊙ An inhabitant

**“To be at the tip of the terrace, it’s a bit like the guy who is on his boat. It’s good: there is no one and it feels a bit like being in the countryside. It feels like a lodge. You are in the countryside *and* in the city.”**

⊙ Buffard, 1992





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### Conclusion

In a short period of time, between 1968 and 1981, Jean Renaudie created a consistent œuvre built around a solid theoretical foundation. Through architecture, Renaudie developed a framework for the complexity and diversity that is inherent to human life. Restricted by the limits of construction and economics, he mimicked the slowness of evolution in his design process and adapted his designs to the constructional logic of that time. In this, the diagonal was a faithful servant in delivering both complexity in urbanism and diversity in the apartments – while at the mean time adhering to a rigid construction grid.

And even now, in a time the raw concrete became unfashionable and associated with social distress, these sharp-edged mountains with their overflowing greenery, seem to be working. So, next time you visit Paris, forget about the Champs Elysée and the Rue Mouffetard. If you want to see real Parisian life, take subway 7 all the way till the end and find yourself in the realised utopia of Ivry-sur-Seine. You'll be amazed!

- Jean Renaudie is born on 8 June.

1958–1968

- L'Atelier de Montrouge

1968–1981

- Agence Jean Renaudie:

1972

- Ecole des Plant in Cergy-Pontoise (Des Plants Oranges, Cergy)
- Danielle Casanova (Avenue Danielle Casanova, Ivry-sur-Seine)

1973

- First part of Jeanne Hachette (Avenue Georges Gosnat, Ivry-sur-Seine)

1975

- Second part of Jeanne Hachette (Avenue Georges Gosnat, Ivry-sur-Seine)
- Jean-Baptiste Clément (Rue Jean-Baptiste Clément, Ivry-sur-Seine)

1978

- Receives Grand Prix National d'Architecture

1980

- Renovation of city centre of Givors (Place Henri Barbusse, Givors)



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Chronology of projects after Jean Renaudie's passing

1981

- Jean Renaudie dies on 13 October.

1981–1985

- The Atelier Jean Renaudie is founded to complete the projects initiated before Renaudie's death

1981

- ZAC Courghain (Grand-Synthe, demolished)

1982

- Einstein school (Allée du Parc, Ivry-sur Seine)

1983

- Cité du Parc (Allée du Parc, Ivry-sur-Seine)

1985

- ZAC Saint-Martin-d'Herès (Avenue du 8 Mai 1945, Saint-Martin-d'Herès)
- ZAC Villetaneuse (Rue Roger Salengro, Villetaneuse)
- La Courneuve (Allée Georges Braque, Aubervilliers)

1985

- Îlot Voltaire (Avenue Georges Gosnat, Ivry sur-Seine)

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