

Renée Gailhoustet



Renée Gailhoustet in her home in Le Liécat, Ivry-sur-Seine (photo by Valerie Sadoun).

Renée Gailhoustet (1929–2023) is an unknown to many. But this needs to change: she was a pioneering architect with over 2000 homes to her credit. Her most famous work is the Parisian district of Ivry-sur-Seine, where hybrid residential buildings seem to grow into the city like green rocks. Gailhoustet was active as an architect and urban planner during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In this post-Corbusier France, she was able to realise special social architecture and urban development projects in an activist manner and where human connection was central. This dedication to the social aspects of architecture and urban planning finally granted her international recognition at age 92 with the winning of the prestigious Royal Academy award – a prize created to highlight undervalued contributions to architecture.

In this piece I want you to get know who she was, why she did what she did, and why you should visit her projects in Paris as soon as possible. I was originally introduced

to her work via my brother Anton Zoetmulder who researched her collaborator, Jean Renaudie. It impressed me how during the 1970s, a challenging time to be a female professional, Renée Gailhoustet was able to make these extraordinary changes to the urban texture as she generated a full portfolio of experimental housing. This inspired me to visit most of her projects in Paris during the spring and summer of 2022.

This piece begins with a short biography and an explanation of Gailhoustet’s vision. It also summarizes her major projects around Paris, which you can choose to visit yourself. I then describe the development of her broad architectural work by diving into the buildings she realized in Ivry-sur-Seine. I do this by subdividing her work into different typologies – from block type to 3D structuralism. I conclude by giving personal descriptions of some of the apartments in her Liégat projects, which hopefully gives further insight into the diverse and exceptional qualities of her housing plans. Certainly, these projects illustrate her all-round engagement:



Building site of Le Liégat.

“Renée Gailhoustet is a militant architect. The creation of her office in 1964 corresponded to the full deployment of a public policy of mass housing in building large housing estates. [...] From the beginning, without ever claiming the originality of her status – because few women were self-employed, especially in the 1960s – she was committed to this issue, taking a stand against the problems of her time. To portray her, it is necessary to underline a major personality trait of her: her strong personal convictions opened the way to proposals in the field of architecture and urban planning that were of exceptional quality when compared to the current production of social housing.

Renée Gailhoustet and Jean Renaudie are about a being-urbanism and not a mass one. [...] Every interaction between the living-being and its environment is part of existence, and if this interaction is rich in emotions and ideas, why shouldn’t the habitat express this? For them, anything that depersonalises is unacceptable and encourages the ‘bad-life’...”

Biography

1929	Born in Oran, Algeria
1947	Arrival in Paris to study philosophy
1952–1961	École des Beaux-Arts, where she studied architecture under Marcel Lods, André Hermant and Henri Trezzini
1952	Meets architect Jean Renaudie who she has a relationship with until 1968
1962	Works at the firm of Roland Dubrelle, and starts working on the renovation of Ivry-sur-Seine
1964	Founds her own firm and rejects the idea that neighbourhoods should be compartmentalised in terms of function
1973–1975	Teaches at École Spéciale d'Architecture
1999	Closes her firm
2023	Passes away at age 93 in her home in Liégat, Paris

Recognition

2017	Commander of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres
2018	Medal of Honor of the l'Académie d'Architecture (the French Order of Architects)
2019	Berlin Art Prize (Großer Kunstpreis Berlin)
2022	Royal Academy of Arts, Architecture Prize
2022	Grand National Prize of Architecture (GPNA, a prize awarded by the French Ministry of Culture)
2022	Raspail tower added to the 'Historical Monuments' list by the French Ministry of Culture

Born in Algeria, Gailhoustet moved to Paris in 1947 to study philosophy but eventually chose to study architecture at École des Beaux-Arts. Although she never explained this move, I think she felt she could bring multiple layers of society together through architecture. And this idea seeps throughout her work. This attitude also likely inspired her to join the French Communist Party and always fight against large construction projects led by private developers. She was against the Ville Radieuse – Le Corbusier's 'Radiant City' – because this theoretical model lacked human scale. This idea of cell-as-home being a product of capitalist industrialisation is still something we recognise in the field today. And we can be inspired by how she flawlessly translated her activist leanings into her built oeuvre. It would seem her philosophical studies had a huge impact how she thought about scale and social interactions. Her work can be seen as a synthesis between philosophical convictions and her obvious design skills.

ABC by Renée

It's very interesting to begin understanding her thought processes, as they are found in her alphabet in the poetically-titled book *La politesse des maison – Renée Gailhoustet, architecte* by Bénédicte Chaljub. Key elements from this alphabet range from 'Action & Anthropology', 'Inherited Heritage' and 'Architectural Mechanisms'. If you want to learn more about this alphabet, I highly recommend this book. While written in French, it's still quite easy to follow.

“Here I attach some of the concerns shared by architects and inhabitants in alphabetical order [...] Housing is not a product, as developers and technocrats want us to believe. All inhabitants can enrich this vocabulary and engage in a conversation with the architects – those craftsmen of difficult matter: space.”



ABC by Renée Gailhoustet.

Projects in Paris

[Click here](#) for an interactive map



Urban plans

📍 Ivry-sur-Seine (with Jean Renaudie), 1963–1984: 600 social housing units, 60 apartments, daycare, medical centre, library, hotel and commercial program.

📍 Valenton, Val-de-Marne, 1963–1968: Transformation city centre, nowadays not visible anymore.

La Maladerie, Aubervillier, 1975–1985: 600 social housing units, 51 housing units, senior centre, artist ateliers, offices, commercial space, daycare and social & cultural centre.

ZAC Basilique, Saint-Denis, 1977–1986: 1600 social housing units, offices, commercial spaces and parking.

Architecture

📍 Aubervilliers
La Maladerie, 1975–1984.

Tranche 1: 140 social housing units, senior centre, artist ateliers and offices.

Tranche 2 and 3: 51 housing units and commercial spaces. 200 social housing units, 8 artist ateliers and offices.

Tranche 5: 78 social housing units, 12 artists ateliers, school and daycare.

Tranches 7 and 8: 206 housing units, 16 artist ateliers and social & cultural centre.

📍 Saint-Denis

Îlot 8, 1981: 185 social housing units and commercial spaces.

📍 Av. du Président-Wilson

Zac Montjoie, 1992: renovation industrial storages into offices space, ateliers and parking.

📍 Ivry-sur-Seine

Tour Raspail, A, 1968: 96 social housing units with semi-duplex, 6 artists ateliers, sculpture atelier, commercial space and garden terrace.

Tour Lenine, F, 1970: 105 social housing units with duplex, meeting space, commercial space and garden terrace.

Spinoza, 1972: 79 social housing units with duplex, children daycare with library, medical centre and painting artist spaces.

Kiosques, 1970.

Tour Casanova, D, 1973: 123 social housing units with duplex, 3 artist ateliers, senior centre, commercial space and garden terrace.

Tour Jean-Hachette, R 1975: 106 social housing units with duplex, 7 artist ateliers, senior centre, commercial space and garden terrace.

Le Liegat, 1982: 136 social housing units, 25 artist ateliers, underground parking and commercial space.

Ensemble Marat, 1985: 85 social housing units, 57 housing units, 3 artist ateliers, supermarket and commercial space.

📍 Villejuif

Zac Paul-Bert, 1981: 34 social housing units, office of social security and parking.

📍 Gentilly

Zac Gentilly, 1993: 80 housing units, 2 artist ateliers, supermarket, commercial spaces and parking.

Ivry-sur-Seine has it all

Immediately after graduating, she started her first major project: the renovation of the Ivry-sur-Seine district. This would turn into a major long-term assignment (1968–1982) in which you can see her grow as an architect. Hence, it's the perfect spot to visit if you want to get to know her work. For this neighborhood she designed the urban plan as well as several buildings. She started this project working for Roland Dubrulle's firm, but then had the opportunity to start a company and continue the project on her own.



Top: Urban plan Ivry-sur-Seine, 1962–1968, as developed with Roland Dubrulle (Scan from book *Renée Gailhoustet, une poétique du logement* by Bénédicte Chaljub. Original from photo archive Municipales d'Ivry-sur-Seine).

Left: Urban plan Ivry-sur-Seine after 1968 (from Center Pompidou, CNAC-MNAM, Gaston F. Bergeret).

All her unique building typologies can be found at Ivry-sur-Seine. You can witness how she transitioned away from functionalist urbanism due to her opposition of reproducible typologies, and moved towards a typology of pyramidal buildings. According to Gailhoustet, a housing block had to bring together a diversity of housing typologies. In her urban planning, she focused on flowing space where you can feel a connection between home, street, neighborhood and city. This fluid transition between the private and the public was not common in the context of French architecture but aligned closely with many Dutch experimental houses (such as the *Koepeltjeswoningen* in Nuenen).

She worked with split-levels, patios, various apartment sizes and integrated green areas. She promoted mixed-use in her designs by intersecting functions and making space for multi-generational living – she always made room for families, seniors and singles.



Koepeltjeswoningen, Nuenen (1970), Benno Stegeman.

The resulting housing breathes an atmosphere of social well-being, with the public space seemingly begging for spontaneous occupation – as we see here in this video by rapper GTA who grew up in these buildings.



Gailhoustet did admit the inspiration behind her designs was often quite intuitive – and regularly inspired by her travels – such as the hanging house of Cuenca, Mont-Saint-Michel, or the courtyard houses by Jørn Utzon.

Left: Video still from Rapper ‘Fresh-GTA’ on Place Voltaire with left Le Liégat, and tower Casanova in the background. [Watch the video here.](#)

Right: Video still from Rapper ‘Fresh-GTA’ in inner courtyard of Le Liégat. [Watch the video here.](#)



Mont-Saint-Michel.



Hanging houses of Cuenca.

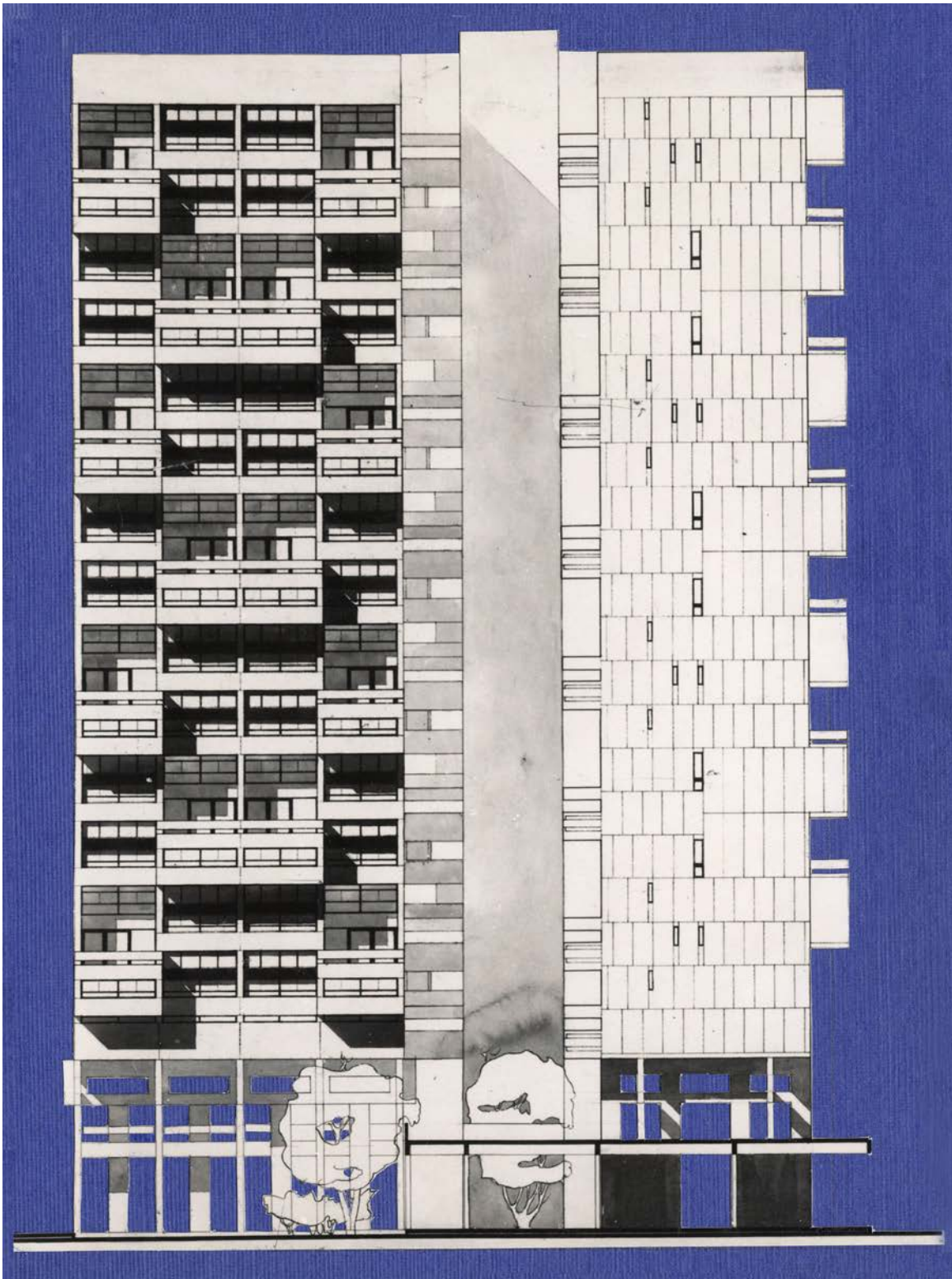


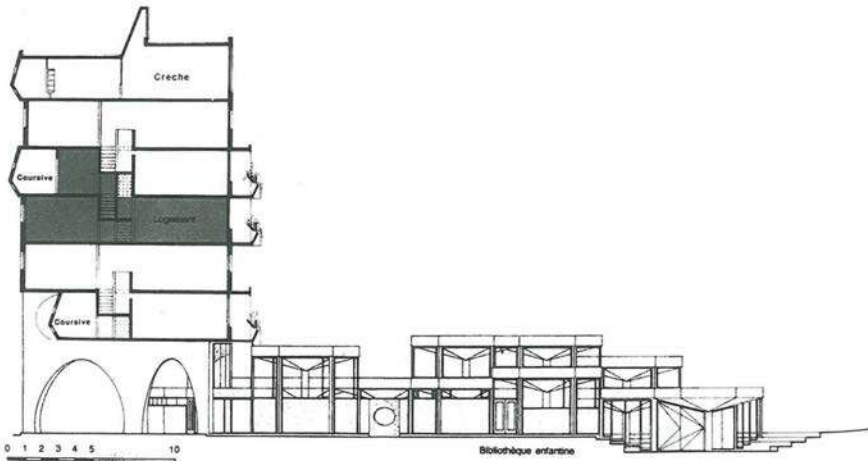
Courtyard houses by Jørn Utzon.

Recognizing Typologies

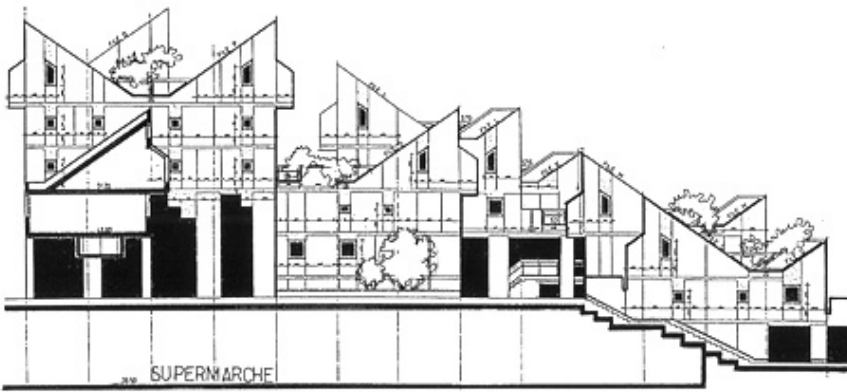
I want to introduce a few of her exemplary typologies. Recognizing these will make you understand the differences and growth in her work (though some examples include multiple typologies).

Block: Raspail (tour A) 1963–1968,
Tour Lénine (tour F) 1966–1970,
Tour Casanova (tour D) 1971–1973,
Tour Jean-Hachette (tour R)
1972–1975.

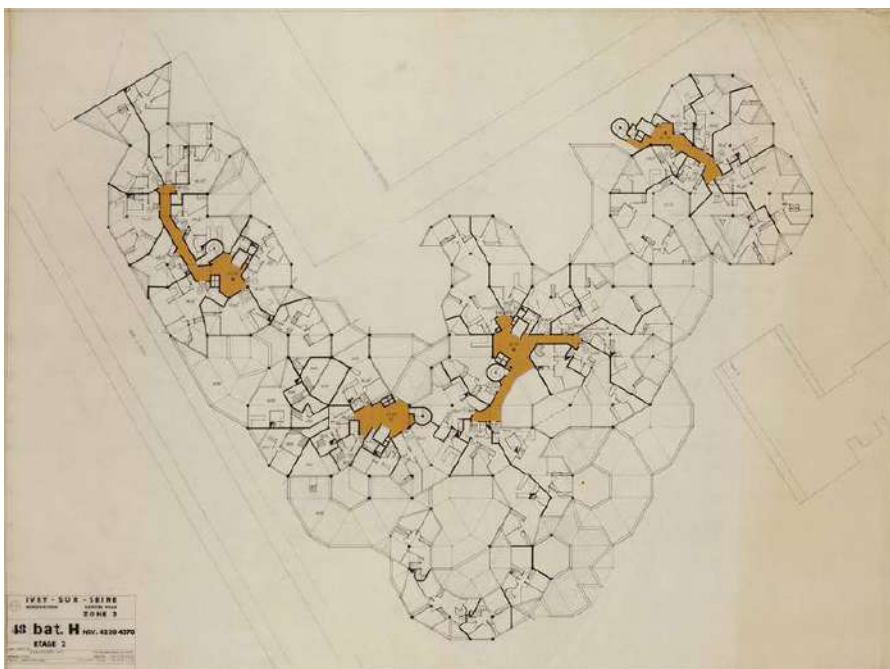




Block in transition: Spinoza
(1966–1973).



Section type: Ensemble Marat
(1971–1986), Zac Paul-Bert
(1978–1981), Tranche 8 (1980–1985).



3D structuralist: Le Liégat
(1971–1982), Maladerie (1976–1977).

Block type: Raspail (1963–1975)

Her first buildings consist of tall rectangular blocks with semi-duplexes. She repeated this functional building type several times: Raspail (tour A), 1963–1968; Lénine (tour F), 1966–1970; Casanova (tour D), 1971–1973; Jean-Hachette (tour R), 1972–1975.

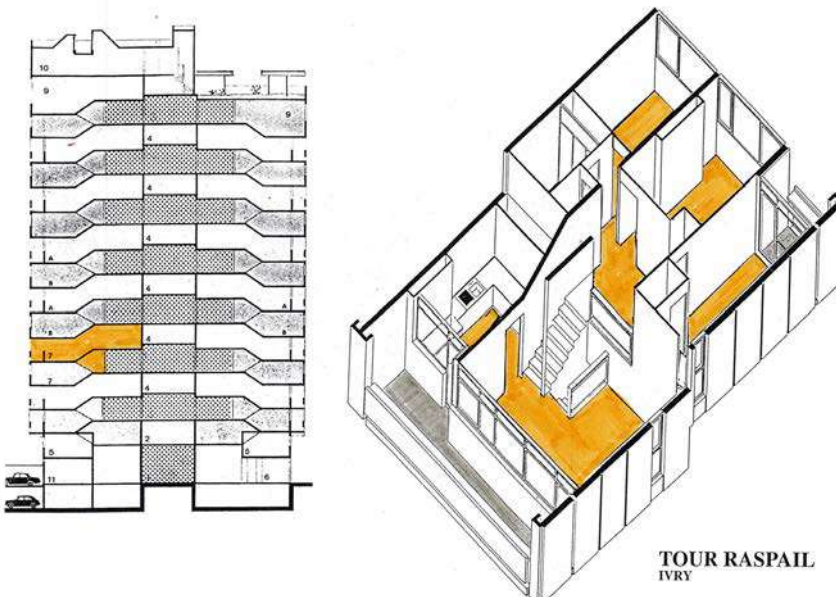
It's worth noting that her alignment with communism is readily apparent in how she named many of her buildings. And it's also worth noting: she lived in Raspail until 1982.

In the first drawings for Ivry-Sur-Seine she drew more of these towers, but only four were realised for the final neighborhood. It shows her development towards different type of expression in her architecture. I believe these four towers actually gave structure to her other, freer, typologies.

From the outside, these semi-duplex typologies are not that visible (although from certain angles on Place Voltaire, you might spot the double-level artist spaces). Also, you can see in the section drawing two alternating tunnel constructions, with one level giving you access to the first floor, and the other level giving you access to the second floor – while also always being in connection with the living room and outside space. This tunnel principle seems an efficient way to create a feeling of space in an otherwise compact plan.



Old photo with on the left
Danielle-Casanova building
by Jean Renaudie.



The tunnel principle: creating
a feeling of space.

These buildings are around 16 floors high and made of concrete – her material of choice for most of her projects. The entrance is on the side and there are shops or cafés in the plinth. The top floor has a communal space, with an additional tower as an artist studio. I find these roofs remarkably fun – they remind me of the rounded roof in the Sculpture Garden that Carlo Scarpa designed for the Venice Biennale in 1952. Featuring magnificent views, these roof terraces are also used by residents for social gatherings, such as BBQs and birthday parties.

Roof terrace on top of tour Raspail.



Block in transition: Spinoza as testing ground (1966–1973)

The Cité Spinoza (1966–1973) was a place for experiment, and can be seen as a transition typology between block-type and section-type.



Plint interior Spinoza.



The Cité Spinoza (photo by Stefano Perego).



More colourfull plint (photo from book *Renée Gailhoustet une poétic du logement* by Bénédicte Chaljub).

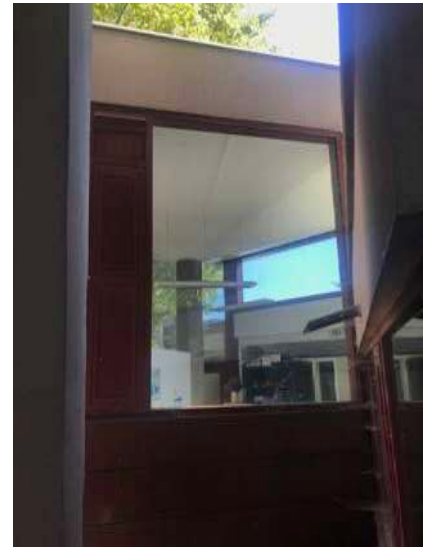
In contrast to Raspail and Lenin, this was a residential complex with a striking multi-purposed plinth. It's a design which exhibits the influence of post-Corbusier times. The transitions from street to living space flow smoothly in her residential block designs. The circular concrete openings are gratefully used as goals by a group of footballing boys. Seniors sit on the blocks around the corner to watch the children playing and to wave at passers-by. It's a beautiful outdoor entrance that also functions as an urban interior. It's a public residential space that does not dictate how you should use it, but rather creates space for all possibilities. In short: it's a place for everyone. Gailhoustet expressed it as 'the pleasure of living as a cultural act'.

The whole structure is made of concrete with blue painted accents. However, residents say it used to be more colorful – as seen in the photo on the previous page. Sadly, maintenance is easier when you only have to buy one pot of paint.

The 79 social housing apartments are connected by a floating concrete hallway, which looks like something from a spaceship and makes the movement of the building visible. The houses have integrated planters on the balconies. The building's plinth houses public social functions, including a creche, library, doctor's practice and social welfare office.

The one-story social welfare office is located on the ground floor and grows in hexagonal shapes from the apartment. This work, along with the doctor's office, is particularly interesting because you see some 'tests' of different hexagonal construction typologies which she would later use for the "mountains" of Liégat. If you look closely, you can even distinguish two types of construction: one with the end points of the hexagon, and the other where the hexagon is held from a central column.

Two construction types using a hexagonal plan setup. Top: central, bottom: corners.



Section type:
Marat, Zac Paul-Bert, Tranche 8

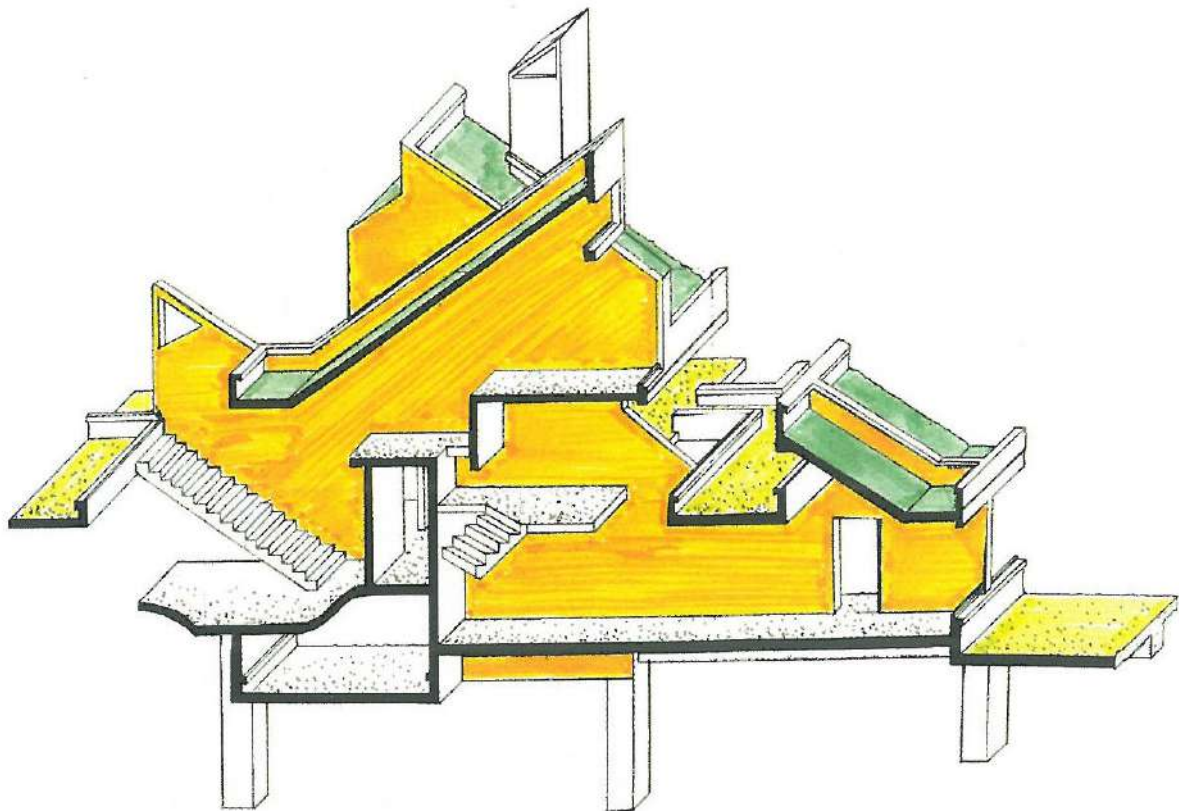


Ensamble Marat.

Marat in Ivry-sur-Seine is a dense urban block with mixed functions. It is built on top of a big shopping center, it covers a street and subway station and the housing program has an interesting section with patio's, rooftop gardens, split-levels and spiky skylights. In the oeuvre of Gailhoustet it feels like an intermediate phase shifting from the 'block type' with split levels towards her later more complex '3D structuralist type'.

Gailhoustet's plan was to try a more structuralist typology while staying within the concrete building grid. I'm not sure if it worked since from the outside, it feels very closed. And while the plans look interesting, it's unclear if they are used in the way the architect intended. In Google Earth you can see that most patios are tiled and full of trash. I did find pictures of a fun decorated apartment that reminded me of a playful split-level "tiny house" apartment.

A short cycle ride away, in the municipality of Villejuif, you will find a better example of this same typology. The ZAC Paul-Bert is a more stand-alone project in which it is easier to recognize the qualities of the section typology. And an even more perfect example is Tranche 8 in the north of Paris in Aubervilliers. If you want to visit them, these are great to combine with Maladerie (a big Liéogat) and her urban plan for Saint-Denis.



Ensemble Marat section drawing, drawing by Renée Gailhoustet.

Today Marat is renovated with whitewash, easy-to-maintain tiles and hipster plants. I suspect the complex went from being social housing to becoming commercial housing – something Gailhoustet fought against and that also continues to threaten her other projects. As unique designs, the housing is sadly hard to fit inside the Excel maintenance sheet of the community workers. Luckily there is a group of head-strong residents (including the son of Gailhoustet and Renaudie, Serge Renaudie) out to keep her vision alive.



Interior of an apartment in Ensemble Marat (photos by Gaston Bergeret).

3D Structuralist: Le Liégat in Ivry, La Maladerie in Aubervilliers, Saint Denis

The orthogonal structure of her urban planning changes when Renée Gailhoustet starts collaborating with Jean Renaudie (1968). While this is around the same time the couple split up, they keep working together until his early and tragic death in 1981. Together, they work on their own designs that have similar qualities: rocky building volumes overgrown with greenery that bring urban development and architecture together. In terms of complexity and freedom, this new series of projects transcend the buildings of Dutch structuralists such as Herman Hertzberger and Aldo van Eyck. The first buildings in this typology are made by Jean Renaudie, Jeanne Heachette, Danielle Casanova and Jean-Baptiste Clément. It could be said that Renaudie heavily influenced Gailhoustet since after his first mountain projects, her designs also changed radically. But at the same time, it could perhaps be said the well-spoken Gailhoustet gave the often-hard-headed Renaudie the opportunity to explore his designs. (You can read more about his work in another edition of Local Heroes written by Anton Zoetmulder).



Not convinced why you should go to Ivry-sur-Seine? [Watch this film](#) 'L'art de faire la ville: Renée Gailhoustet, Architecte Urbaniste', by Christian Merlhiot – and emerge yourself in the life of Gailhoustet's concrete jungle. This film shows Le Liégat and Maladerie.

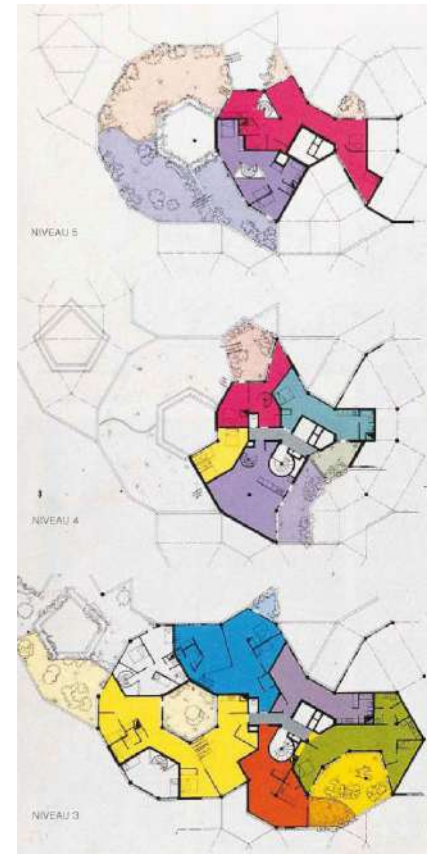


Le Liégat.

This typology would prove to become her most well-known, and she created several projects in this fashion, such as Le Liégat in Ivry-sur-Seine, where she lived until her death at age 93 in 2023 – shortly after my own visit.

And certainly, the residential building Le Liégat (1981) located behind Place Voltaire is an excellent example of this new building vision. The building has a hexagonal orientated concrete structure with horizontally wrapped windows and is overgrown with lush plants. It holds a variety of 136 social houses. The plinth held art studios which have now mostly been sold as houses. And underneath the whole building, there's a massive underground parking lot. The building can be visited on foot or by bicycle at street level. Small open green patios with social functions connect the various entrances on the ground floor. Spacious green terraces in connection with the houses are created on the different levels. It is striking how green and pleasant the atmosphere is. From the first floor I can see residents talking to visitors at street level. Meanwhile, a painting lesson is taking place in a patio further on. While the floor plans sometimes look quite complex, the walkthrough is surprisingly intuitive in real life.

As mentioned above, Gailhoustet described “living as an expression of culture”. I found this quote inspiring and was curious how this expression found expression in her buildings. Also, as an interior architect, I am mostly interested in how the plans we make end up being used in real life by different people – in particular when it comes to such unique plans with big differences in terms of size, set-up and outside space. Of course, as interior architects we can create the most beautiful spaces, but real life can be messy and a house should serve its inhabitants. It should make them feel safe, be welcoming, express their culture and be flexible enough that they can invent their own domestic existence. In the case of Gailhoustet, she achieved these goals by accentuating visual diagonals, avoiding corridors and playing with levels.



Plans of Le Liégat.



Le Liégat.

The architecture through the eyes of Le Liégat's habitants

By looking through the eyes and lives of the inhabitants, architects learn the most. It's wonderful when the dwellers feel inspired to live a more social and collective life. And in the summer of 2022, I visited Le Liégat and had the chance to meet its residents and viewed many apartments. The spatial qualities of these homes made me fall in love with this beautiful building.

A Caretaker named Smile

I'll begin with the person who became key for my research since he made it possible for me to experience this act of living in real time. His name is Tatif, nicknamed Smile. He is *le gardien*, the building's caretaker and also a freelance photographer. He's a happy and laidback guy who was born in Iran, and has already worked 25 years in Gailhoustet buildings – 10 in Spinoza and the last 15 for Le Liégat. He's obviously been very important in helping retain the unique atmosphere of these buildings. He knows everyone and he connected me to the people who opened their homes to me. When I first met him, he was immediately enthusiastic about my desire to study Renée Gailhoustet and her work. He even brought me straight to her home. Unfortunately, she was too sick to speak to me. Instead, I got to know the building through the eyes of Le Liégat's inhabitants – all of whom, in their way, carried the spirit of the Renée Gailhoustet I was reading about.



Tatif and Elise.

He also knew all the technical difficulties of the building, which is always interesting. He showed me several empty apartments, some of which have been empty for many months. He told me the municipality has difficulty renting them out because the plans don't fit the 'system' since they are all unique and difficult to fit into any standardized administration system.

He also shared many other, more fun, facts. For instance, when old residents move out, the apartment is renovated to the initial plan as designed by Renée Gailhoustet – cleaning the canvas for the new resident to paint their own reality.

“The grid is made up of a hexagon of three-and-a-half meters, around which triangles of seven meters and rectangles of three-and-a-half by seven meters converge. The interest is in the seven meters that open the space. [...] The columns are placed on a large slab, which illustrates the way how it is possible to free up huge floor areas with large spans. The column-slab grid offers freedom and great variety in dwellings' division, which does not work, except in the façade, on the constructive grid. The ideal solution, theoretically and technically, is to have a division system completely independent of the structure. This is the logic of the free plan (Le Corbusier). [...] Free plan means freedom, change of crossings, opposite to the current fashion. The bracing is regulated with some walls, but also with the lift shafts and staircases. [...] Except the columns, the only fixed points are the sheath. It is better if they are as internal as possible, as the building rises like a pyramid.”

Tatif also taught me about one of the striking features of the building: the windows. Compared to the other terraced-shaped houses in the neighborhood, these are very colorful. The frames are blue, the panels green and the movable parts are red. The initial habitants could choose where they wanted which part. In other words, Gailhoustet designed a rhythm for participation – a subtle way to let habitants create a sense of ownership of the building. I really see this approach as a viable option for today's high-density housing projects – where with every new renovation, the inhabitants can choose anew.



Apartment with playful stairs to children's bedrooms.

I asked Tatif why he thinks Le Liégat is such a successful project. He believes it's because all the varying plans very much suit the inhabitants – since they come from all over the world. And all these different plans and apartments actually work to bring them together. And it's true, I met people from all over during my time there. He also noted crime rates are relatively low for this area, and he believes this is because of the social connection people feel.

Watching the sun through her orchids

A super sweet lady from Myanmar has lived here for over 25 years. It's where her daughter grew up. Her small but spacious-feeling apartment is unique with its three small terrasses divided over two levels. One faces the morning sun, the second the afternoon sun, and the last the evening sun. As you can see in the picture, the step onto the terrace is quite high. Current trends dictate that the terrace floor should be flush with the living room floor. But actually, the lowered living room just improves the views of the plants.

She obviously loves her fluid home. The spaces are rather narrow, but because they flow into each other, it creates a unique and connected space. Every nook and corner are filled with the most beautiful pink orchids and green cacti. This green and pink atmosphere flows over into the oleanders on her terrasses, and creates a connection between the interior and the outside space. The stairs with its framed balustrade work perfectly to bring her plant love to the next level – literally. The apartment might be tiny but the connection of the spaces with each other and the outside space makes it all feel truly grand.



Flower balcony 1 out of 3 with Casanova tour in the background.

Plant oasis livingroom (landscape).

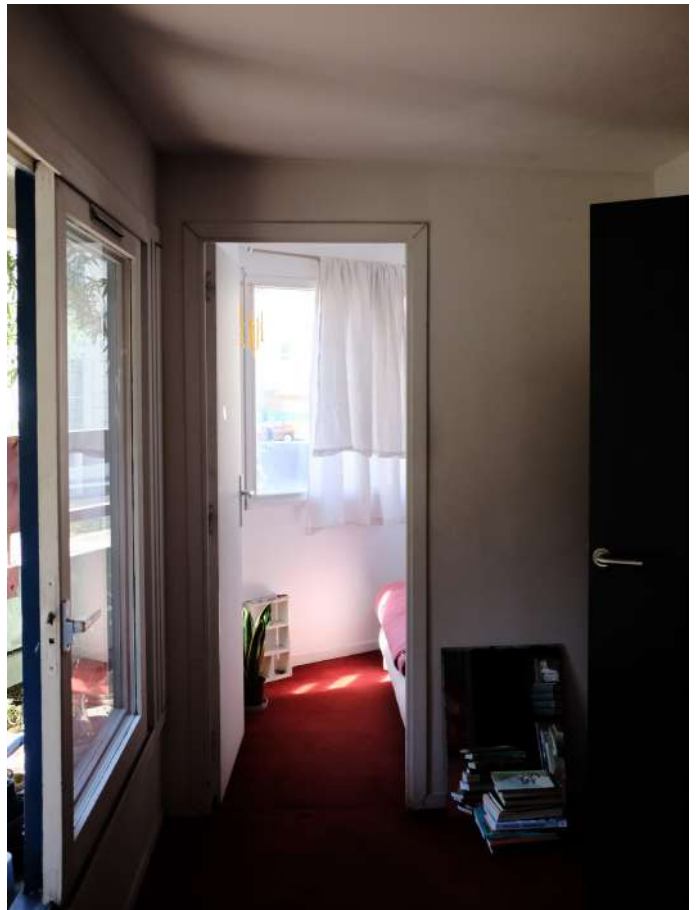


Living hallways

This atelier is the home of a couple who moved here only a year ago. They came here on purpose since they already loved Gailhoustet's buildings. The house consists of an entrance on street level with a living and kitchen downstairs, and small bedrooms upstairs. The lady's favorite spot is the space in between the rooms. She uses it as a space to work and read. As I've already observed elsewhere, the hallways are not like traditional functional hallways. They are real spaces on their own which are connected to other spaces.

One of my favorite moments happened in this home when I felt both the intimacy and the public fluidity Gailhoustet was trying to achieve. One side of the kitchen faces the street, the other side the public patio. While walking with Tatif through the patio, a resident saw us from the kitchen, opened his window above the sink and we stood there talking for a while – I was experiencing Gailhoustet's concept of evoking spontaneous social relationships. For those of us who design homes, we should keep such moments more in mind as we work.

Meeting in the courtyard; living in the hallway.



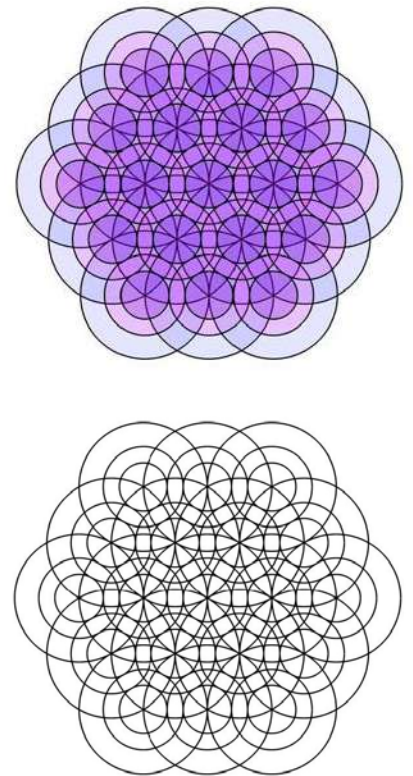
One grid-inspired resident

Another resident, Wolfram, made a series of drawings inspired by the column grid of the building and made some interesting discoveries. He summarized it nicely:

“As a physicist with a love for crystals, I wanted to understand the geometry of Le Liégat – the place where I live. The plan is all based on squares and triangles: some form hexagons, and these are surrounded by larger and larger dodecagons. When I drew these shapes as rings made of circles, I saw that the principle was very simple: center points forming a honeycomb pattern send out circle waves. Once the waves reach the neighbor points, you get the shape that underlies Le Liégat. The same waves, with larger wavelengths, yield a pattern that is almost the plan of La Maladerie in Aubervilliers. Isn't this beautiful? You will think I'm a nerd. You are right.”

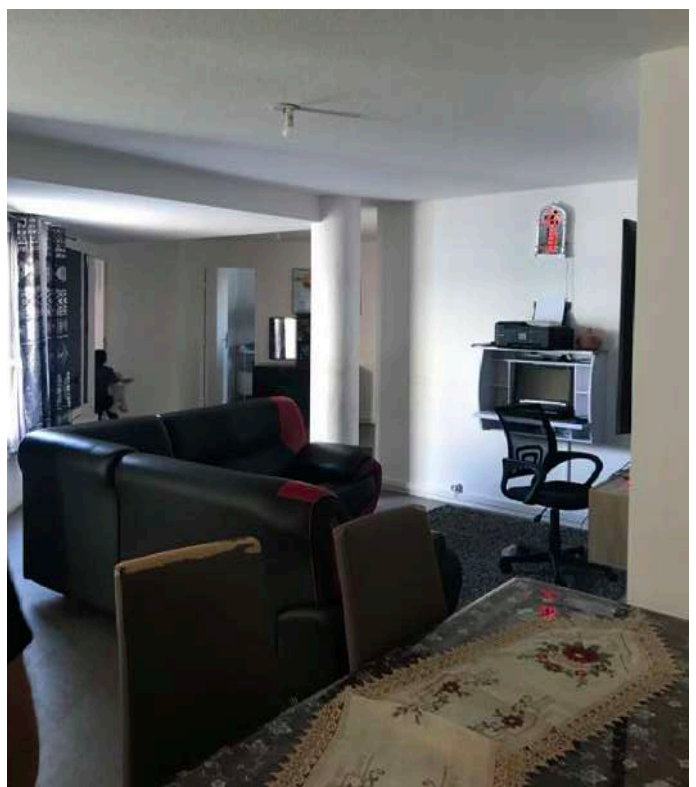
Patio-embracing family

On one of the highest floors, a large family lives with six young children. Their home is wrapped around a hexagonal private patio, which gives the large space an intimate feeling. The various functions are interconnected, yet each have their own space.



Drawings by resident Wolfram Liebmeister inspired on the construction grid of Le Liégat.

Potentially beautiful terrace which is not visible from the apartment; living room with corners and nooks.



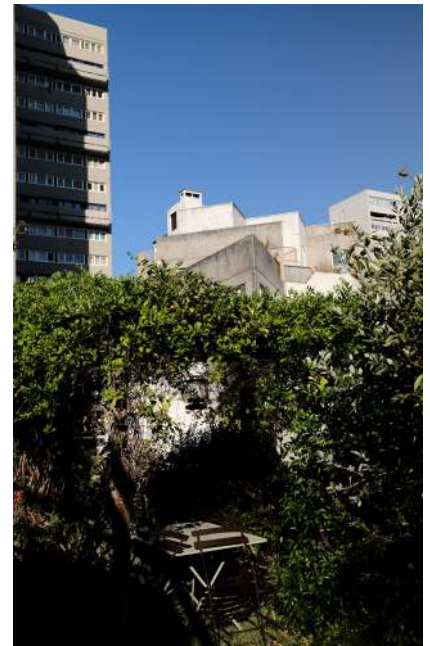
“We didn’t put a door between the living room and the entrance, so that there would always have visual continuity. We wanted to create a fluidity in the interior spaces and break/twist corridors.”

What surprised me most about this apartment was the gorgeous roof terrace which was not being used at all – the residents feared that their children could fall off. Funny enough in her book, Gailhoustet once referred to unusable spaces like this roof terrace. She said she learned from Le Liégat that these spaces are unused because they cannot be seen from the general living space. Since this large terrace was connected to one of the smaller bedrooms, the parents could not easily keep track of their kids playing there.

“You should never draw a terrace that the inhabitants would not see because they would not use it. This was true of the one below the children’s room (in Le Liégat project), abandoned by the inhabitants for ten years but invaded by thousands of birds.”

Rural France with urban views

I am assuming this is exactly what Gailhoustet had in mind when she imagined people living here: the three floors of spaces flowing like water. And when I visited here, I never noticed going through any doors – while they were definitely there. The ground level is connected to a communal patio. A tiny balcony pokes inward between the kitchen and the



Garden in the city.



Rural France with city views.



Hallway master bedroom.

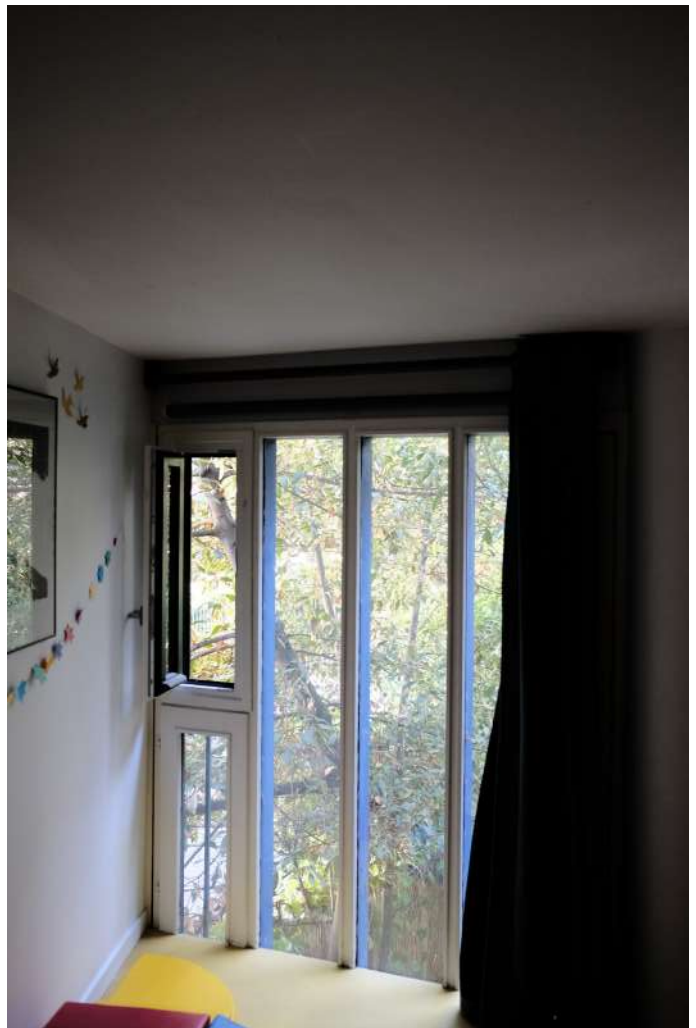
living area. Hallways don't exist in this home; the parents' bedroom is in between the children's rooms. Next to that, they have an amazing balcony that makes you feel as if you are in rural France – but then with Parisian city views. Surely, this is the best of two worlds?

This family has been living here for 25-plus years. Their children grew up here and had part-time jobs in the Communist book store downstairs. They are all super passionate about the building and are actively protecting the interests of Renée Gailhoustet and the other residents of the building.

They tell me that the municipality wants to sell the social-ly-subsidized parts of the buildings and make changes that are not good for the building's legacy – due to problems with the green balconies. But the green balconies are only a problem if they are unmaintained, so she has set up a terrace gardening program. She teaches other residents about growing their own food and flowers. The Italian husband shares some insights on Gailhoustet's personality. He says he's very impressed with her strong vocabulary – that she's a well-spoken and focussed person, even in her old age. I imagine she could also connect different worlds not only through design but also through conversation.

Banana living with attached garden

The title says it all. The plan is shaped like a banana split-level. Downstairs, there's the living and kitchen with the inner circle of the banana connected to a garden. Cut the banana straight through the middle and you have half a second level with two bedrooms and a bathroom. The crawling baby's favourite place was the spot where the low windows allow him to look into the garden and the birds. Every house should have such a window.



Left: wrapped plan with column as middle point.
Right: favorite spot of the tiniest resident to look at birds in the garden.

Lessons from Gailhoustet

Renée Gailhoustet worked in a hybrid way to effortlessly mix her expertise in urbanism, architecture and interior design. She did not attribute strict functions to the public spaces in her buildings. She created space for the beauty of surprise – where anything can happen. She turned social housing into a verb: social living. She achieved this by applying a variety of housing typologies, communal functions and leaving space for the unexpected. As a result, residents make the place their own.

At a time when we in the Netherlands are often led by hard technical requirements early in the design process, it is important to remember to leave room for the soft and sometimes intangible aspects such as social interaction, intuition and the unexpected. Hopefully Gailhoustet can remind us of this – as an inspiration to approach design challenges in both an integrated yet less restricted way.



Le Liégat.

Bibliography

All quotes are from *La politesse des maison – Renée Gailhoustet, architecte* by Bénédicte Chaljub.

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