

Participative retrofit of the « îlot 13 » area in Geneva

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ABSTRACT: Housing some 600 people, the îlot 13 buildings stand in the urban area right behind Geneva's main station. Supposed to be completely torn down and reconstructed in the 1960's, they launched a large political and urbanistic debate instead. Beyond the simple question of maintaining the constructed structure, the inhabitants were claiming a type of architectural intervention that would be based on their consultation and active participation in both decision-making and execution. Whereas primary focus was on preserving the existing social and economic structure and sustained experimentation of local democracy, care was also given to ecological rehabilitation processes. After constitution of several inhabitant cooperatives and a set of real estate operations supported by the local government, the experiment turned out to be possible through a step-by-step approach, with special attention paid to the inhabitants' effective needs, resulting in interesting architectural solutions and affordable rents, as well as low-cost renewable energy production.

Keywords: participative democracy, low-cost housing, ecological rehabilitation

1. INTRODUCTION

The so called « îlot 13 » is a block of buildings situated right behind Geneva's railway station, at the south-east periphery of the « Grottes » neighborhood.

Although the facades that are visible from the railway station don't show it, a remarkable urban realization with an exceptional habitability and social environment is to be found hidden behind them. When entering the courtyard one discovers a blend of recent, old and ancient buildings co-existing within a complex oasis of semi-public pathways, gardens, paved yards, shelters, and open spaces.

Not at all a stroke of chance, this astonishing architectural patchwork is the result of a long history, the history of what an urban community may become when the inhabitants decide to get involved.

2. BEHIND THE RAILWAY STATION

2.1 From the origins up to 1970

The Grottes neighborhood developed out of a tissue of rural suburbs, in the context of the railway and station construction which took place in the 19th century. Already at the beginning of the 20th century it started to be considered by urban planners, investors and other economic decision-makers as unhealthy and unsuitable for the imperatives of density, mobility and modernity of a growing city. Placed under high demographic pressure, it was doomed to integral destruction.

2.2 The initial urban project (1975)

In the 70's, the whole district is caught up in an urban renewal process which strives to take advantage of the extremely strategic situation of the

neighborhoods around the station and the center of the city.

In 1975 the new urban project foresees a rather monstrous operation, which would literally clean out all traces of the historic urban tissue. All existing constructions would be torn down and replaced by an orthogonal set of high modern "American" style buildings, completed with a pedestrian platform 5 m above ground level that was supposed to free up ground zero for increased mobility of cars and other mechanized transportation. The huge post office which stands next to the railway station is the only remaining evidence of this excessive project: the ticket desks which are situated 5 m above ground level are nowadays accessible only by way of two imposing exterior escalators that had to be added to the initial project, so as to compensate for the absence of the projected platform.

2.3 Popular resistance

However, as the imminent demolitions are drawing nearer and as both private and public owners neglect keeping up of building, inhabitants and users get organized so as to save their neighborhood.

The resistance starts by squatting abandoned buildings and establishing a network that integrates associations for the protection of inhabitants and tenants, political parties and jurists, as well as authorities for the protection of architectural and cultural heritage.

An extremely tense housing market, together with new resistance movements that grew out of the 60's and were especially popular among younger people, helps the movement gain support from Geneva's population. In 1977, a referendum against the official demolition project gains immediate success and forces the authorities to backtrack. The paradigm which had up to now been underlying all the politics of

city development is profoundly shaken up, the inhabitants having democratically invited themselves to the decision-makers table.

2.4 Revision of the urban project (1980-1990)

By this time the urban planners agree to preserve the preexisting urban tissue as a base for development, while maintaining that many of the buildings are unhealthy and unsuitable for the plans of a more commercial and lucrative use of such a strategic urban area.

The entire Grottes neighborhood thus gets transformed by a series of retrofits, but also of demolition/reconstructions (in particular so as to enlarge rue de la Servette, a big avenue which enters the city center). Even though the changes are progressive, these important transformations do induce a significant change of population, so that the initial resistance slowly vanishes. The specific soul of the Grottes neighborhood doesn't completely disappear, but for many the victory bears a taste of incompleteness.

From now on, the popular project will be adopted by the urban planners and other experts as a guideline, nevertheless evacuating as soon as possible any form of participative impulse.

3. ILOT 13

3.1 Administrative omission turns into laboratory

For different reasons, administrative as well as real-estate driven, the îlot 13 bloc, located at the south-east periphery of the neighborhood, escapes these changes for ten years. Around 1985 things deteriorate here too. Decision-makers claim to have learned from the past, but they actually propose a hygienist project based on the interest of investors : demolition of an important number of buildings – in particular of a low-rise and centrally situated building used as a autonomous cultural center – clean peripheral alignment of the new buildings, and thorough cleaning out of the interior court yards, all to make room for construction of an underground parking structure.

At that time, one half of îlot 13 belongs to the Municipality, the other half to private owners, whose sole reason for having acquired several parcels had been the financial profit to be earned from future demolition / reconstructions, so that maintenance had been neglected for decades and buildings had deteriorated over time.

At the same time, the housing crisis in Geneva is the same as 15 years before (and as 20 years later!).

Bis repetita: everything is in place for a repeat performance of the Grottes play, now in a more modern and modest version.

The inhabitants however have integrated the lessons from the past. After occupying the abandoned buildings they obtain short-term housing permits and rapidly set up a support network. The municipal project gets its first reversal by the decision of the State authorities to oppose the destruction of two decrepit but remarkable buildings : number 24 of rue de Montbrillant and 15-15bis of rue des Gares, whose

location in the middle of the courtyard impedes the official tabula rasa project.

Strengthened by the previous Grottes experience, the inhabitant association clearly defends an associative position, with the goals of maintaining preexistent diversities on an architectural as well as on a social level, enhanced participative decision-making, and increased ecological awareness. These actions imply that inhabitants are occupying a new role : instead of merely blocking inadequate projects, they become genuine actors in the urban renewal process.

Although not quite happy about it (except for one rare and very enthusiastic political leader) the Municipality and the private owners enter into dialogue with the inhabitants, but try by all means to save the basics of the initial project (massive destruction of the courtyard and of certain buildings) as well as to limit as much as possible the self-management ideas which start to grow.

3.2 European contest (1991)

So as to legitimize the slightly modified official urban project (no destruction of the two buildings which are protected by the commission of cultural heritage), the Municipality submits the îlot 13 as a subject of the international architecture contest European 91. The program is clear : destruction of an important number of buildings, clean peripheral alignment of the new tissue and integral cleaning out of the interior court yards, for construction of an underground parking structure.

In agreement with the independent organizing committee, the inhabitant association however manages to submit a modified design, which proposes to preserve several historically significant buildings and structures in the periphery as well as in the center of the block, to suppress the parking structure, and to emphasize more participative and ecological approaches in the urban renewal process.

Most of the submitted projects finally are based on the alternative program of the inhabitants, including the winning project by Atelier 89, an architecture team from Geneva. This project specifically integrates the pre-existing urban tissue, but also takes measures so as to keep up with the municipal guidelines for densification : the plan includes on the one hand a new housing building which prolongs the building alignment of the rue de Montbrillant, without entirely closing the block, and on the other hand a low deeply penetrating volume, with a transversal passageway across the courtyard. The latter building is to be realized by a cooperative for housing of persons under professional or academic training (CIGUE), with the ground level dedicated to artisanal workshops.

Ultimately, only one building will have to be torn down, whereas 15-15bis rue des Gares and 24 rue de Montbrillant, as well as the autonomous cultural center and most of the shelters and other pre-existing structures of the courtyard are maintained. Finally, no underground parking structure is built !



Figure 1: Views of îlot 13.



Figure 2: Urban evolution of flot 13 before retrofit.

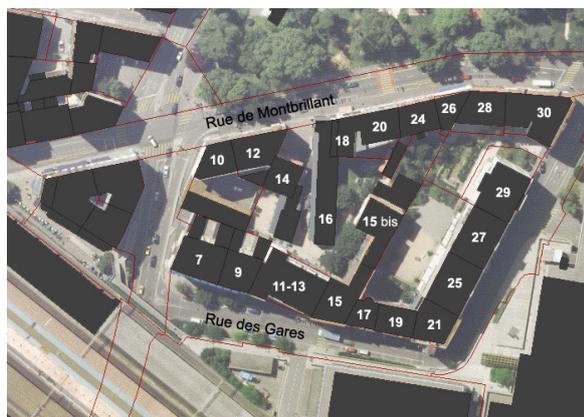
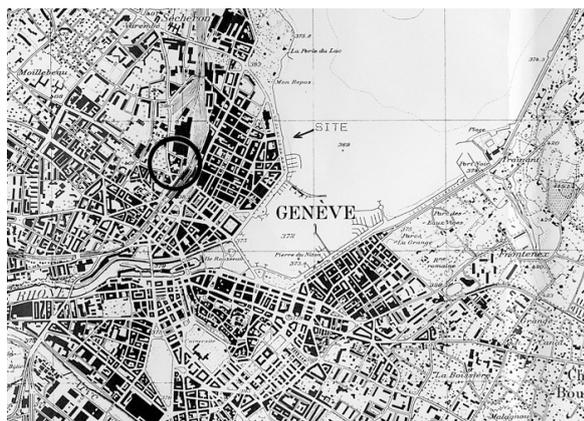


Figure 3: Left : geographic situation; Right / top : real-estate situation in terms of public ownership (hatched area); Right / bottom : land leases (hatched area).



Figure 4: Participative construction of solar absorbers (credit: I. Meister, Geneva).

3.3 From 1995 to present, participative and ecological urban renewal

Following this contest, the inhabitant association of îlot 13 is confirmed in its ambition and forces the authorities to put in place, on certain parcels and buildings, either associative housing leases (a housing lease on an entire building, in favor of an association which assumes its management), or land leases for housing cooperatives (which assume financing responsibility of the building's retrofit / construction as well as its management over 99 years). It is therefore necessary to put pressure on certain land speculators so that they give up their parcel or building (at a very good price for them), or exchange them (at very good conditions) against other real estate goods or parcels in less strategic zones.

In retrospect it is obvious that the nature and proportion of public and private owners has been a key factor in the renewal of the îlot 13 as we know it today.

The result of the contest served as the base of a territorial compromise acceptable to all. Despite that the result did not totally satisfy everybody, it allowed a renewal of the îlot 13 on innovative bases, the power relationship having changed between the private owners and the inhabitants. Finally, the îlot 13 area nowadays includes (Fig. 3):

- Two newly-constructed housing cooperatives (25 and 27 rue des Gares / land lease with the Municipality).
- A housing cooperative in a retrofitted building (15-15bis rue des Gares / land lease with the Municipality).
- An associative lease on a new building (20 rue de Montbrillant / associative lease with the State).
- An associative lease on a retrofitted building (24 rue de Montbrillant / associative lease with the State).
- A cooperative for housing of persons under professional or academic training (CIGUE) in a new building (16-18 rue de Montbrillant / land lease with the Municipality).
- An autonomous cultural center, retrofitted jointly by the Municipality and the inhabitant association, which assumes its management (14 rue de Montbrillant / land lease with the Municipality).
- Three retrofitted locative buildings belonging to the Municipality (12, 28 and 30 rue de Montbrillant).
- Three locative buildings currently undergoing retrofit, belonging to the Municipality (17, 19 and 21 rue des Gares).
- A private retrofitted locative building (26 rue de Montbrillant).
- Two private locative buildings, without need of retrofit (7 and 9 rue des Gares).
- Two new private locative buildings (11-13 and 29 rue des Gares).
- The courtyard, almost exclusively in hands of the Municipality and managed by the inhabitant association.

4. PARTICIPATIVE RETROFIT

4.1 Collective know-how and think-how

The retrofits of 24 rue de Montbrillant and 15-15bis rue des Gares, as well as of the autonomous cultural center and several structures of the courtyard were realized with a very active participation of the inhabitants and users, in the form of a large and real experience of self-management.

The latter process extended from setting up and administrating several associative structures up to maintenance and management of buildings, including :

- Collective elaboration of the architectural projects, amongst which choice of comfort standards inferior to those commonly used in a rich country such as Switzerland (in particular concerning the level of interior furnishings), or decision to have a common room in each building, allowing to host friends, organize meetings, or have parties.
- Gathering of necessary funds by way of a saving system organized over several years and obtaining of capital by way of mortgage loans.
- Organization and supervision of retrofit / construction work with a large participation of inhabitants and users.

All of this required a close collaboration between professionals and amateurs, at all levels, including invention of new ways of conceiving work. In this framework, craftsmen living or working in Grottes (plumbers, locksmiths, carpenters, painters, heating engineers) merged in a working cooperative named « Casa Nostra », which took in hand an important part of the retrofit. By way of its statutes, Casa Nostra explicitly stipulates employment and basic training of inhabitants, as well as at cost billing : no benefit on material, which is sold to the client at the same price as it is being bought (including transfer of price reductions), as well as transparent billing of working hours.

4.2 Compression of costs

By way of a very consequent volunteer workforce which accumulated thousands of hours, as well as targeted investments, these participative retrofits allowed to compress costs to less than half of the cost of classic retrofits, while offering a very clear improvement of the pre-existing habitability and comfort. As an example, retrofit of the 15-15bis rue des Gares (which several experts had declared to be too deteriorated) managed to be done for some 175 Euros/m³, including total refecton of the roofs, installation of a central heating system, change/refecton of windows, and new distribution of electricity, water and sewage.

Reflection and discussion on the pertinence of investments occurred at every stage, the choices being made within the framework of the available financial resources, at the meeting point between the know-how of the craftsmen and the desires of the inhabitants. At posteriori a certain number of choices may of course be questionable, which is also the case in the majority of classic retrofits. On the whole, the different realizations nevertheless appear as a

remarkable blend of innovation and common sense – which is not necessarily the case of classic retrofits, as for example in the initial projects of the experts.

4.3 Ecology

Within the framework of the available financial resources, particular attention was given to using earth-friendly materials and recycled resources, as well as to careful collecting and recycling of scrap materials.

The genuine ecological approach of such a proceeding however is situated in the proper recycling of the constructed structures. Of course the benefit in terms of embodied energy savings barely compensates the important thermal losses inherent to a constructive substance of another period, since the interventions to the building envelope were mostly limited to updating the windows to meet current standards and thermal insulation of roofs, but not of facades. However, the safeguard of the constructed cultural heritage went along with the stabilization of the population. By refusing to consider the territory and the built environment as a mere merchandise, the îlot 13 project hence also fought the urban dislocation which results from outrageous real estate speculation and explosive housing prices, usually driving citizens to choose their residence not in function of pragmatic criteria such as the proximity of working and housing, or of housing and spare-time activities – features which still nowadays strongly characterize the population of îlot 13 – but rather in function of the only available affordable housing.

Besides the particular attention given to recycling of the built substance and stabilization of population, the retrofit of the îlot 13 also was characterized by a pilot project of self-constructed thermal solar systems, which by now has spread throughout the Swiss territory and generated a 10% growth of installations at the national level. The technique is of simple design and allows users to obtain supplies from local material resellers. It has been tested by the national solar homologation center and is being propagated by a non-lucrative association (www.sebasol.ch) which provides dimensioning, logistics, technical supervision and quality control. The labor is provided of the clients themselves (about 50 h + 10 h/m²) for a reduced financial investment (about 1500 Euros + 320 Euros/m², including hydraulic circuit, storage tank and punctual intervention of craftsmen).

Persons interested by such a project receive a practical and intensive training for construction and maintenance of the system: manufacturing of the solar absorbers (bending of copper tubes and soldering on selective plates), construction of an integration frame in the roof, setting up and connection of the absorbers, installation of the solar glasses, setting up and soldering of the hydraulic circuit and joining to the storage tank. People not wishing to provide the labor themselves also have the option to get the same system ready-to-use, by way of specifically trained craftsmen who use at cost billing.

4.3 Social dimension

From a social standpoint, the entire îlot 13 adventure has provided much information as well as community-building opportunities. Focusing energy on a collective project has forced individuals to learn to get along, as well as to make compromises. The resulting social life makes îlot 13 into a village within the city. People know one another better than in other neighborhoods, which encourages exchanges and services as well as collective management of urban problems. Although this can't entirely prevent conflicts, it goes a long way toward facilitating their resolution.

5. CONCLUSION

Beginning with a few irreducible renters, followed by some resolute occupiers, the îlot 13 population has joined individual strengths to become a united community and to create collective know-how and think-how that allowed to save buildings from demolition, to construct / retrofit at accessible prices thanks to the inhabitants' participation in the choice of architectural elements as well as in the workforce, and to obtain participative management of communal spaces.

It is truly a globally different experience of inhabiting the city that has been attempted, and to a large extent achieved, by a group of stubborn inhabitants: to provide for one's housing and immediate environment, as well as for one's place in the city, with all that that implies socially, urbanistically, and economically, while eliminating the speculative market's economic control over housing conditions. With a success that was never granted, and which makes it all the more remarkable.

Although this experiment could not be reproduced elsewhere exactly in the same form, its major lesson is in opening doors to possibilities of such realizations, what is also demonstrated by similar developments in other cities, such as at the Dreieck in Zurich, or parts of Kreuzberg in Berlin. All of these examples show what can be achieved when a motivated population is entrusted with the future of its habitat. They are also attempts in realizing direct democracy, a way of collectively getting implied in one's destiny, as much as ever possible. This explains why it is foremost a struggle between the affected population and the reigning political or economic power structures.