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HOUSING RELOADED

International committee for
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of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the
modern movement

Journal 54 / 2016/01



- 02 **The European Large Scale Heritage**
— BY ANA TOSTÓES AND ZARA FERREIRA



- 04 INTRODUCTION

**Housing Reloaded Collective.
Housing in Europe, 1945–2015**

— BY FRANZ GRAF AND GIULIA MARINO



ESSAYS

- 10 **Georges Addor's Housing Complexes:
an Observatory on the Conservation
of "Large-Scale" Heritage**
— BY GIULIA MARINO

- 16 **The Miremont-le-Crêt: Preserving
a Geneva Post-War Modern Icon**
— BY PATRÍCIA VENDRELL DUARTE

- 22 **The Cité de l'Etoile, Bobigny,
1956–1963, Georges Candilis,
Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods Architects**
— BY RICHARD KLEIN

- 28 **The Controversial History of the
"Steel and Glass" by Lods, Depondt
and Beauclair. The GEAI Housing Estate
La Grand'Mare in Rouen (1968–2016)**
— BY GIULIA MARINO

- 36 **"EH, Evolutionary Building"
Prototype Housing at Solomeo by R. Piano
& P. Rice Engineers and Architects
with Gruppo Isovibro Perugia:
Architectural Study and Guidelines
for Conservation and Reuse**
— BY CARLO NOZZA

- 44 **Reloaded *Corviale*,
a City with a Single Building (1973–84).
Mario Fiorentino Architect, Rome**
— BY ROSALIA VITTORINI

- 52 **Preserving Portuguese
Modern Movement Housing.
Rehabilitation and Conservation Practises
in *Bloco das Águas Livres*
as a Prominent Example**
— BY CATARINA TELES

- 60 **The Marseille *Unité d'Habitation*
after Le Corbusier: Or the Chronicle
of a Permanent Construction Site**
— BY YVAN DELEMONTEY

- 66 **Willy Van Der Meeren's *Ieder Zijn Huis*:
Saving a Fragile Giant**
— BY MAURIZIO COHEN

- 72 **Postwar Residential Housing Landscapes
in France: A Retro-Prospective Approach**
— BY BERNADETTE BLANCHON



DOCUMENTATION ISSUES

- 78 **Restoration of the *Cercle de L'Ermitage*
in Epesses, Switzerland**
— BY JEAN-CHRISTOPHE DUNANT

- 82 **André Wogenscky and Marta Pan's
House Workshop: Thoughts
on Conservation and Museography**
— BY AUDREY AULUS

- 86 NEWS

- 90 BOOK REVIEWS



- 96 APPENDIX



Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, *Cité de l'Étoile*, France, 1954–1963. © Richard Klein, 2010.

The Cité de l'Etoile, Bobigny, 1956–1963, Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods Architects

BY RICHARD KLEIN

The *Cité de l'Etoile*, in Bobigny, design by Candilis Josic and Woods (1954–1963) is one of the housing estates, results of the French national competition named *opération Million*. Commissioned by Emmaüs, the 737 homes are a kind of synthesis of the experiments of Candilis in Morocco and the city planning thinking of the team. The demolition planned in 2008 has been avoided and the *Cité de l'Etoile* has been labelled 20th century heritage. The rehabilitation project brings to light the contradictions of an highly conflicting situation. Between blind demolition and a well-thought out project of restoration the question of the safeguard of collective social housing complex of the second half of the 20th century is still waiting solutions.

In a recent interview, the former Director of Heritage at the French Ministry of Culture and Communication remembered having been traumatized by the *Cité de l'Etoile* affair in Bobigny:

Whereas the property owner wanted to demolish the housing complex, the Minister of Culture registered the building on the statutory list but he was confronted with the anger of the residents. Tired of living in the dilapidated conditions of what was originally emergency housing, they wanted new accommodation and felt as if they had been taken hostage by the protection measure¹.

Even if the French heritage administration was in all likelihood shaken by the very paradoxical situation of this large urban housing complex during 2010, one might hope that serious lessons were learnt from the experience. The history of the *Cité de l'Etoile* — which in fact had never been emergency housing — is indeed an instructive example for all those who are involved in the understanding and safeguarding of 20th century architecture.

The Bobigny project emerged within the context of the housing crisis of 1954 and 1955. Even if Georges Candilis has recounted the way in which he thinks he influenced Abbé Pierre² in the decision to build permanent housing³, the very negative reaction to the Emmaüs emergency housing estates probably explains why the Emmaüs Organization for Low Cost Housing decided to build more long-lasting dwellings. The *Million*⁴ consultation was at the origin of the association between Georges Candilis, Guy Brunache and the engineer Henri Piot joined by Alexis Josic and Shadrach Woods and their proposal was mainly based on a cellular plan and its assembly (Figure 01). The basic dwelling was composed of two transversal spaces of

varying widths. The first, 3 metres wide, included the living room and the parents' bedroom, the second of 2.40m accommodated the kitchen, the bathroom and the children's bedroom. The living room served as an entrance and led to the kitchen and the bedrooms via a landing. The bathroom situated between the kitchen and the children's bedroom was a throughway. The position of the bay windows aligned with the corridors enabled one to get a glimpse of the outside. The groups of apartments were brought together with vertical circulation spaces and the team proposed several variations by multiplying the possibilities and the variety of layouts⁵. From this point of view, the *Cité de l'Etoile* in Bobigny is thus not only the most accomplished building project in the Paris region resulting from the *Million* competition, but even more, it happens to be the only completed example today⁶ (Figure 02).

This direct link with the *Million* competition does not, however, explain the very unusual nature of the scheme.

The Bobigny housing complex combined dwellings facing East-West designed for the competition, and other dwellings orientated North-South where the ground floor was vacant and, under the porticos, provided play spaces and passage ways protected from the rain and the sun. The ground floors left free contribute towards the fluidity of the whole by creating views across the site.

A long-term project

The construction of Bobigny is also unusual as regards the time-scale. Even if it was one of the first works launched following the competition phase, the length of time needed to finalize the project meant it was one of the last to be completed. The consequences of this time-scale are two-fold: the variations endured during the project's program provide an understanding of the constant objectives of the architects.

But the doctrinal context of the project changed between the moment of the elaboration of the project and the time of its completion. Georges Candilis and his team imagined the design of the Bobigny project in 1955 as a response to the *Million* competition, but the administrative phase for planning permission and resulting modifications lasted from 1956 to 1960. The building work took place between the end of 1957 to the middle of 1963⁷. More than eight years had passed since the *Million* competition (Figure 03).

Throughout the development of the project, and despite the instability of the overall program, the architects tried to maintain the presence of facilities which were to ensure the immediate extensions of the dwellings: school, shops, medico-social center, green spaces. What is specific in the different versions of the site plans is to maintain, in spite of the changes, the quality of the relationship between the empty spaces and the built spaces. The last version of the plan in which dwellings replace facilities that had not been built is particularly indicative of the desire to qualify the external spaces and the urban character of the project (Figure 06).

Bernard Huet has underlined the quality⁸ of the operations led by the Candilis, Josic and Woods team, Joseph Abram points out how the research to find a contemporary equivalent to the secular structure of the neighborhood was at the heart of the Bobigny, Blanc-Mesnil and Bagnols-sur-Cèze⁹ complexes, and both insist on the search for continuity and hierarchy demonstrated in the team's projects. The attention given to empty and green spaces confirmed the idea that the quality of urban design of the *Cité de l'Etoile* was extremely unusual, that the care for detail was taken further than for other complexes and that the form of the site plan resulted from a regular dialog between the design of the dwellings and that of the urban spaces. The children's playground, the main subject of the photo-reportage by Véra Cardot and Pierre Joly, adds a supplementary element to this observation. The Candilis, Josic and Woods team made the presence of children an essential element of their program. Each block of apartments has a play space placed within sight of the mothers; even from their apartment. Each play feature used left-over elements from the building site (breeze blocks, plumbing pipes) in order to build climbing walls, mazes and sand pits (Figure 04).

The *Cité de l'Etoile* issues

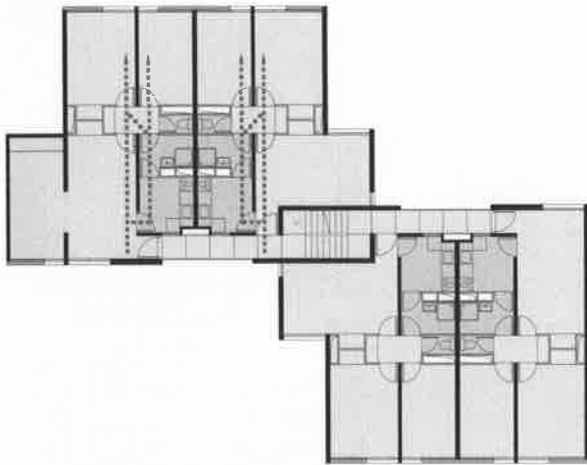
The projects of the Candilis Josic and Woods team dating from the middle of the 1950s are generally considered in light of their own texts in the edition *Candilis, Josic, Woods, A Decade of Architecture and Urban Design* published in 1968¹⁰, in which the *Cité de l'Etoile* illustrated their ideas on themes which feature in their production at the end of the 1960s, in the continuity of the debates of the group Team 10 which emerged clearly during the 10th *International Congress of Modern Architecture* (CIAM) in 1956 in Dubrovnik then at the 11th CIAM in Otterlo in 1959. The *Cité de l'Etoile* is chosen for the demonstration it provided at all levels from the scale of the site plan to the project as a whole, to the plans of the apartments as well as the plans for the play areas or the role of the stair wells.

But ten years after its construction, the *Cité de l'Etoile* also illustrated for its designers new precepts and new situations. Numerous historians have maintained that the *Cité de l'Etoile* anticipated the principles advanced by the architects themselves by neglecting to re-establish the initial doctrinal context when the complex was actually built. It was much more coherent to associate the Bobigny project with the 9th CIAM congress of 1953 and to the Doorn manifesto (1954) which replaced the functional hierarchy of the Athens Charter by the hierarchy of human associations rather, than to read in it anticipation of the subsequent theories of the team. The Moroccan experience of Georges Candilis presented at the 9th CIAM in Aix-en-Provence on the theme of the housing charter and mass dwellings is therefore essential as much from a theoretical to design point of view. The French housing crisis in the winter of 1954 and the situation of the most vulnerable created a transferable situation for experimentation in housing beyond metropolitan France. The *Cité de l'Etoile* therefore inherited the Moroccan experiments but also Algerian and Tunisian experiments¹¹ that we now know included the most stimulating attempts of the acculturation of modernity¹². This link can be seen very clearly in the design of the projects realized by the team between 1955 and 1963. In Bobigny, as in the team's other projects, the design, the composition, the chromatic contrasts, and the polychromatic aspects all have their importance. The way the built and empty spaces fit together defines the composition of the different façades. The combination of the horizontal openings (bedrooms, bathroom, kitchen), horizontal bars with low glass windows (living rooms), small colorful tiltable windows are elements of the design that resonated in contemporary abstract art (Figure 05). The volumes are also treated as an abstract composition and stairwells, passageways and balconies, as well as the tower, combine the abstract composition of the in-fills with the visualization of the load-bearing structure. These principles of composition are reinforced by the use of contrasts and polychromatic effects. The black used for the joinery participates in creating this contrasting effect between in-filled parts and glazed panels, just as different shades of grey for the solid sections of the façades and the gables, and the dark red marking the volume of the stairwells or the colored sequence of the little wooden infill openings. This contrast, which is no longer visible today, was indispensable for the perception of the overall design quality.

Elimination to historical Ghetto

Major transformations to the *Cité de l'Etoile* took place from the beginning of the 1980s up until just recently. These successive transformations have little by little effaced certain of its architectural and urban qualities, even making some of them invisible. From the 1980s onwards, as with other social housing projects, the *Cité de l'Etoile* was confronted with other factors linked to aging and the threat of obsolescence in a changed ideological context: post World War II architecture was treated with contempt and condescension. The transformations, the new, insipid color scheme, and the changes to the joinery erased this sophisticated and delicate design harmony.

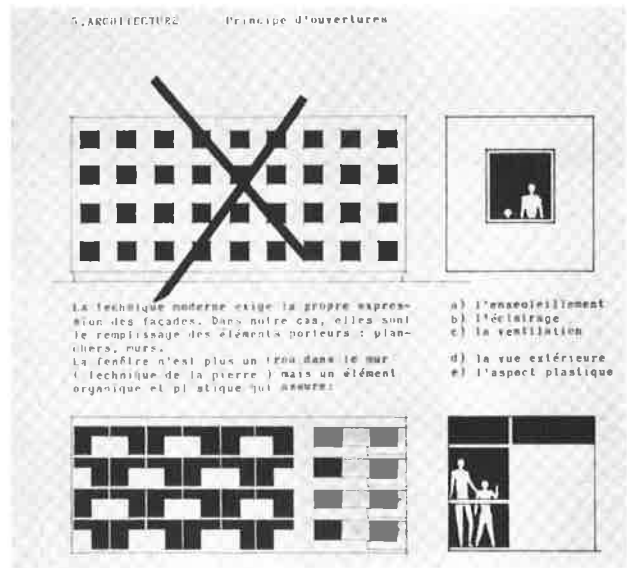
01 Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, *Cité de l'Etoile*, Bobigny, France, 1954 - 1963. Layout of the plan of housing for the *Million* competition. © Richard Klein (Dir.), *La Cité de l'Etoile à Bobigny, Candilis, Josic & Woods*, Paris, Créaphis 2014, 132, Archives Josic.



The difference between the original images regularly published of the *Cité de l'Etoile* and the transformations of its material reality from the 1980s onwards, partly explains the difference between the consideration of some and the disregard of others. The images of the estate circulated by those who wished to underline its value were taken from the original iconography dating soon after the buildings were completed. The positive reception in specialized circles continues and is based on the circulation of photographs of the original state of the housing complex whereas those who discredit it are based on the images of the degradation of its sanitary state. But, the partisans as well as the opponents share one thing in common: their lack of knowledge of how the project was brought about.

The most dramatic transformation phase of the *Cité de l'Etoile* is linked to the procedures implemented by the National Agency for Urban Renovation (ANRU) that corresponded in France to a wave of programmed destruction of social housing complexes. From May 2003 onwards, the destruction of the *Cité de l'Etoile* was envisaged. The future of the housing estate was the subject of an agreement written in December 2007 as part of the urban development program of the City of Bobigny and the ANRU, the text of which stipulated with a certain cynicism that “the renovation projects and new constructions respect the initial project”. But the global demolition permit for 178 dwellings, filed by Emmaüs on 10 February 2010 was rejected by the French State Architect for Heritage Buildings who considered that the proposed restructuring implied the loss of a major heritage element of the city. The Minister of Culture and Communication decided to give the building listed status on 21 April 2010. From then onwards, the case of the *Cité de l'Etoile* has fed the heritage chronicle at an unprecedented level of conflict. The property owners financed the making of a video clip called *Historical Ghetto* which denounced the Ministry of Culture's decision by underlin-

02 Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, *Cité de l'Etoile*, France, 1954 - 1963. Design principles of the façade for the *Million* competition. © Jürgen Joedicke, *Candilis Josic Woods: A Decade of Architecture and Urban Design*, Stuttgart, Karl Krämer Verlag, 1968, 38.



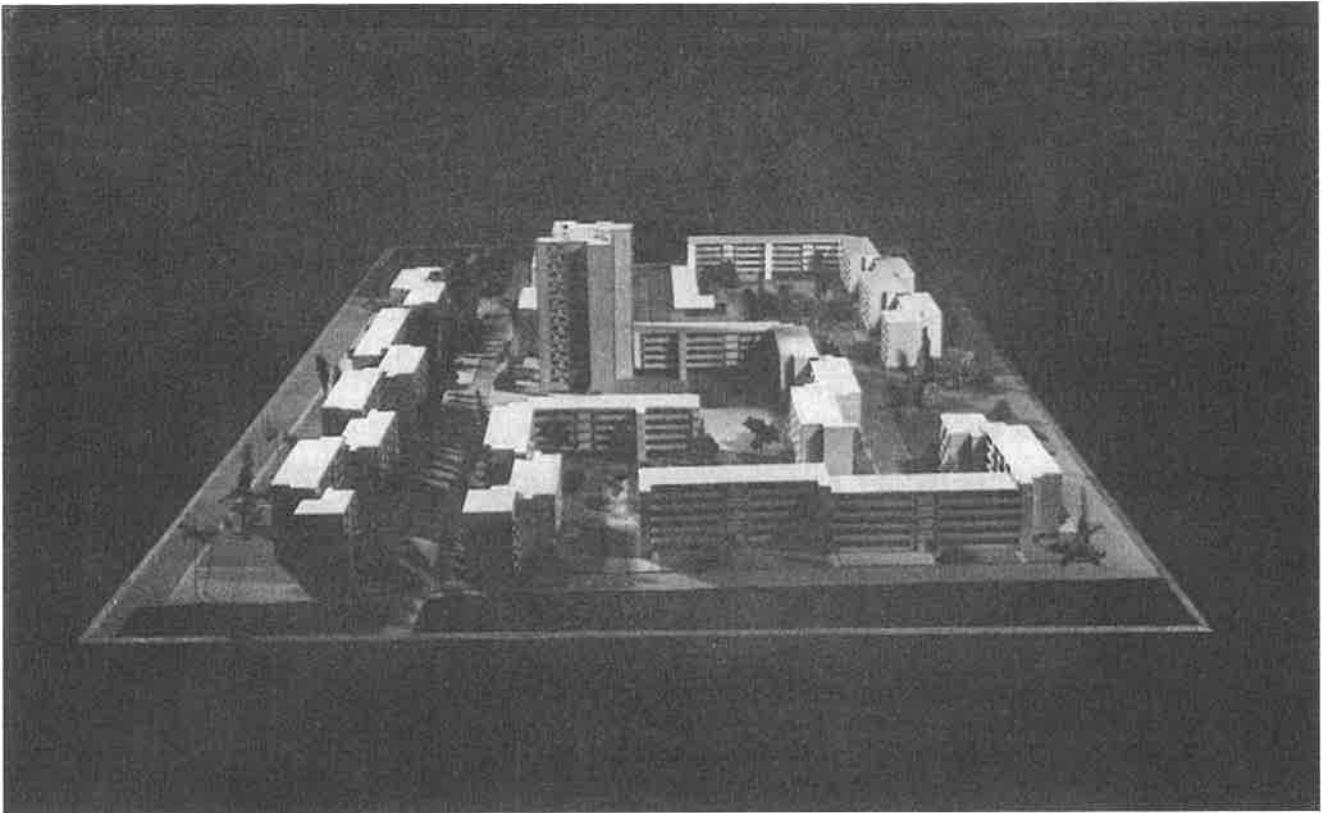
ing the material degradation of the urban complex (Figure 07). The Ministry ordered an historical expert analysis³ to determine the heritage value of the complex and to inspire a project that was more respectful of the initial qualities of the *Cité de l'Etoile*. A new feasibility study was commissioned from the Ellipse practise who, having presented its conclusions at the end of 2010 was, after another consultation, charged to carry out the restructuring project.

Saving appearances

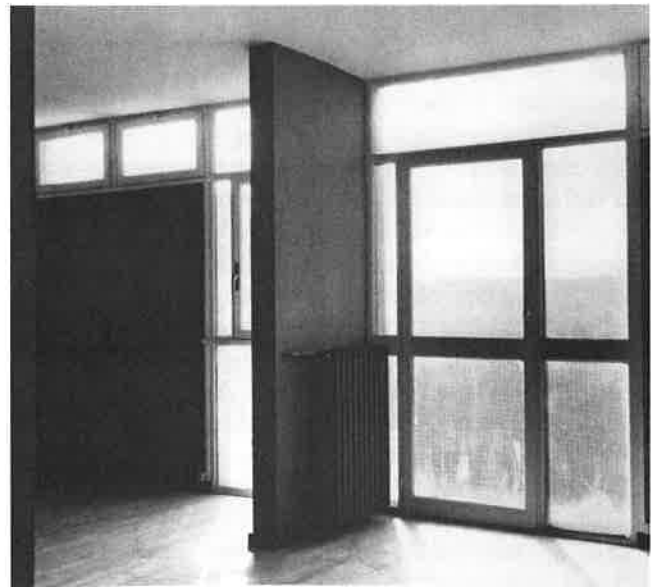
The project currently is aiming for a result which takes the architectural heritage more into account whilst ensuring the physical but also the social longevity of the *Cité de l'Etoile*. From a formal point of view, the project aims to get as close to the initial layout and proportions of the façades, which means renewing the wood features and insulating from inside.

The restructuring of the apartments includes new interior partitions in order to provide more comfortable surfaces within the apartments. In spite of its considerable efforts, some demolition cannot be avoided, to comply with the logic at work under the auspices of the operations of the National Agency for Urban Renovation (ANRU).

The property owner and the project management team have just published a brochure presenting the future renovation project of the *Cité de l'Etoile*⁴. The rather vulgar advertising nature of the publication does not reflect the level of the work accomplished by the architects in charge of the project. As very often in such circumstances⁵, the reader won't find any images of the original beauty of the *Cité de l'Etoile*. The way the color scheme has been treated is significant of the situation. The original polychromatic aspect was of particular importance, contributing an art value to the Star housing complex and now helps to make its historic value legible. This character of the operation is attested by a very thorough stratigraphic study carried out at the end

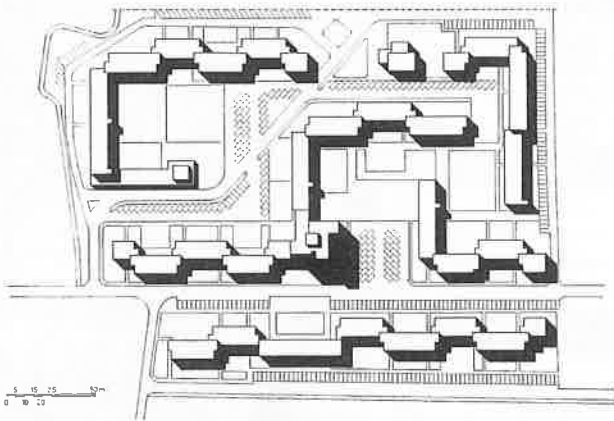


04 Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, *Cité de l'Etoile*, Bobigny, France, 1954-1963. The *Cité de l'Etoile* and one of the children's playground. © Jürgen Joedicke, *Candilis Josic Woods: A Decade of Architecture and Urban Design*, Stuttgart, Karl Krämer Verlag, 1968, 85.



05 Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, *Cité de l'Etoile*, Bobigny, France, 1954-1963. Inside one flat. © Jürgen Joedicke, *Candilis Josic Woods: A Decade of Architecture and Urban Design*, Stuttgart, Karl Krämer Verlag, 1968, 39.

06 Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, *Cité de l'Etoile*, Bobigny, France, 1954–1963, Plan. © Ionel Schein, *Paris Construit, Guide de l'Architecture Contemporaine*, Paris, coll. Environnement, 1970.



07 Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, *Cité de l'Etoile*, Bobigny, France, 1954–1963, Poster, invitation for the filming of the video clip "Ghetto Historique". © Richard Klein, 2010.

TOURNAGE DU CLIP GHETTO HISTORIQUE



VENDREDI 16 JUILLET 2010
A 12H00 DEVANT LA MAIRIE ANNEXE EPSTEIL
APPEL A TOUT LES HABITANTS

of 2014 that confirmed the nature and the importance of the initial colors. Whereas the instruments of a possible restitution have been made available, the choices that are emerging are different. If the basic concept of the initial contrasts seems to have guided the authors of the current project, the addition of current "trendy" colors shows that they wanted to stamp the exterior with their own trademark rather than remain modest.

The restructuring of the *Cité de l'Etoile* will not yet be the example that many were expecting. Having escaped an unprecedented heritage conflict, this complex will have to be satisfied with an outcome that must once more be considered as an intermediate solution from a heritage point of view. It's a no doubt indispensable phase enable to the transition from the blind demolition of the previous stages to a well-thought out project of restoration of a collective social housing complex of the second half of the 20th century. ■

Notes

- 1 Philippe Bélaval, former Director of Heritage is currently Chairman of the Centre for National Monuments, was interviewed in the *VMF* journal n°264, November 2015, 5.
- 2 The priest known as Abbé Pierre, founder of Emmaüs, was the author of the radio appeal launched on 1st February 1954 following the death of a child.
- 3 Georges Candilis, *Bâtir la Vie, Un Architecte Témoin de Son Temps*, Paris, Stock, 1977, 202–203.
- 4 In 1955, the French government launched the *Million* operation which aimed to offer a new type of economical apartment with 3 rooms plus kitchen and bathroom for a cost of 1 million Francs.
- 5 For Candilis, Josic and Woods, the *Million* competition is at the origin of about twenty schemes ordered in three years and built mostly in the Paris region.
- 6 Compared with the devastating effects on different schemes resulting from the *Million* competition and designed by the team, the *Cité de l'Etoile* in Bobigny is an exception: buildings lifted, the addition of

roofs, outside lifts, façades smoothed, etc., have in most cases rendered these schemes unrecognizable.

- 7 The modifications of the site plan from 1958 onwards was to lead to a readjustment phase even while the building was being constructed. The first dwellings were completed in 1960. The apartment tower was completed in December 1962, and in July 1963, only final finishing stages remained to be completed.
- 8 Bernard Huet, G. Candilis, A. Josic, S. Woods — "Le mariage de la Casbah et du Meccano", *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, No. 177, January/February 1975, 44–45.
- 9 Joseph Abram, *L'Architecture Moderne en France — T2, Du chaos à la croissance, 1940–1966*, Paris, Picard, 1999, 109–110.
- 10 Jürgen Joedicke, *Candilis Josic Woods: A Decade of Architecture and Urban Design/ Ein Jahrzehnt Architektur und Stadtplanung/ Une Décennie d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme*, Stuttgart, Karl Krämer Verlag, 1968.
- 11 On this subject, Richard Klein, "The experience of the slum, Roland Simounet and the CIAM-Alger group", in Jean-Lucien Bonillo, Claude Massu & Daniel Pinson (dir.), *La Modernité Critique, Based on the CIAM 9 of Aix-en-Provence — 1953*, Marseille, Imbernon, 2006, 207–217.
- 12 Joseph Abram, *Modern Architecture in France — T2, From Chaos to Growth, 1940–1966*, Paris, Picard, 1999, 109.
- 13 Richard Klein, *Cité de l'Etoile in Bobigny, Historical Expertise*, ensap de Lille, Lacth, 2010, study for the Ministry of Culture and Communication. This expert analysis was published in part in Richard Klein (Dir.), *La Cité de l'Etoile à Bobigny, Candilis, Josic & Woods*, Paris, Créaphis, 2014.
- 14 Emmaüs Habitat — Ellipse Architecture, *Histoire d'Etoile*, Paris, Archibooks, 2015.
- 15 To take a well-known French example, the images of the restructuring (2002–2008) of the *Bois-Le-Prêtre* tower in Paris by the Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal team almost never show the initial design and state of the tower (1959–1961, Raymond Lopez architect).

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