

## Jean Renaudie (1925 – 1981), Paris

Local Heroes #16  
Jean Renaudie  
1925 - 1981

By:  
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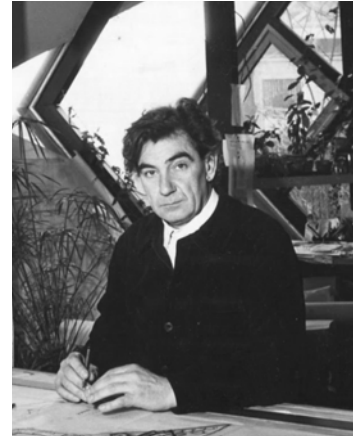
Editor:  
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This Local Heroes issue will be a short introduction into the complex intellectual and built legacy of Jean Renaudie. In his structures, the seemingly incidental stacking of different unique housing units and the numerous overgrown terraces, in which the color of the vegetation and the grey of the concrete define the representation, create an intriguing aesthetic (0.1). This uniqueness gave him a lot of fame but this fame never reached out further than the borders of France. He was in that sense: a true Local Hero.

Around the time I found out about Jean Renaudie I was especially interested in Dutch structuralism; mainly the intellectual legacy of Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, Piet Blom, Herman Haan and Joop van Stigt. The reference they found in the Malinese 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; what I saw came closer to the Dogon villages than any of the Dutch structuralists had ever been (0.2). 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.

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, among others his son, Serge Renaudie, and former wife, Renée Gailhoustet. I've also visited most of his projects and seen the interior of many apartments. I will first give a brief introduction in the life of Jean Renaudie. Then I will discuss some of his major projects; among them the Danielle-Casanova and Jeanne Hachette projects in Ivry-sur-Seine and his project for the city center of Givors. I will conclude with a chapter regarding the theory that underlies Jean Renaudie's profoundly different architecture.



Jean Renaudie



0.1 The concrete mountains overflow with greenery of Jeanne Hachette, Ivry-sur-Seine



0.2 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 the age of eighteen 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 of 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 V  ret, with whom he will later form L'Atelier de Montrouge. It was founded in November 1958 (1.1). In a close collaboration they work on a multitude of projects in which they combine modernistic style elements with regionalistic motives (1.2). 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 modernit   a l'oeuvre (1958-1981)' by Catherine Blain.

In the months between April and 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 (1.3). Secondly, the already existing tensions within the office are stressed when the civil unrests of Les   v  nements arrive in May 1968.<sup>1</sup> 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, Ren  e Gailhoustet, to live with Nina Schuch; one of the drafts(wo)man with whom he works. Within only three months Jean Renaudie leaves his office and his home.

After leaving his home and his office it seemed like Renaudie's entire life was in decline, however nothing could be further from the truth. Renaudie accepted this situation as a clean sheet and in the period to come he created his most exemplaric 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



1.1 L'Atelier de Montrouge team



1.2 Logement EDF, Ivry-sur-Seine

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<sup>1</sup> The events of May 1968 in France were an unstable period of civil unrest characterized by demonstrations, strikes and the occupation of universities and factories across France. The unrest disappeared as fast as it came up, but the cultural, social and moral effects of it 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 enjoyed their architectural education.





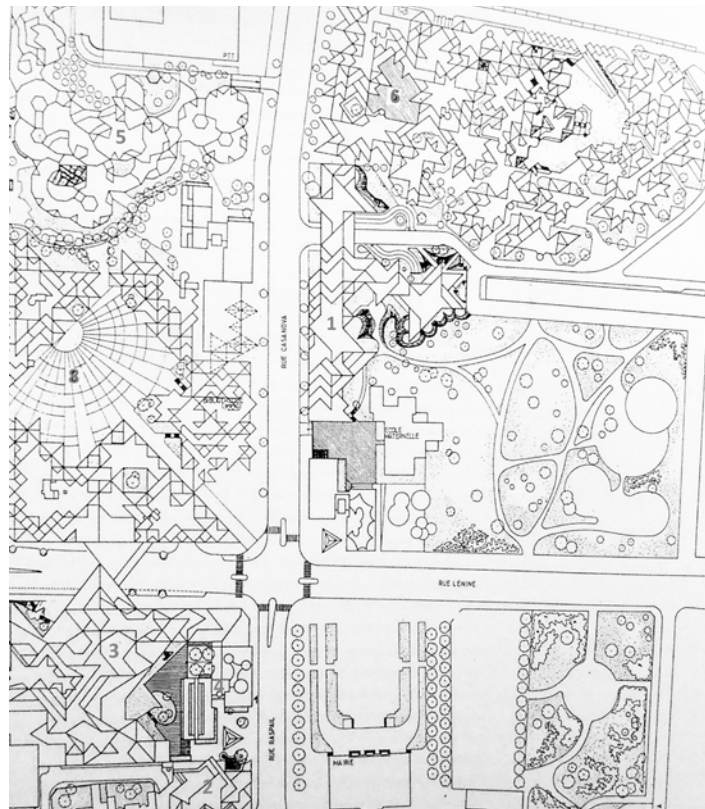
and daring ideas were taken in consideration. At the same time his former wife, co-communist and architect Renée Gailhoustet was struggling with a commission she got for the new city center of Ivry-sur-Seine. The municipality of Ivry-sur-Seine was a so-called 'banlieu rouge', or a profound communist municipality, that was badly in need of a renovation of their city center. The municipality wanted to replace the entire city center for a new plan. For Gailhoustet it was difficult to establish a good relationship with the municipality of Ivry. To strengthen this relation she approaches the more experienced and the well-regarded Jean Renaudie for a co-operation.

Renaudie understood that the municipality, being communist and in that sense avant-garde, wanted an alternative for les grands ensembles after the hustles of May 1968. To persuade the municipality of his alternative for les grands ensembles 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 its classical sense, it was more a development scheme (like was Le Vaudreuil) (1.4). It was to be developed over a longer period of time, so that every new building could optimally relate to the newly created context



1.3 A Jean Renaudie sketch for Le Vaudreuil

1.4 Development scheme of Ivry-sur-Seine



## Danielle-Casanova, Ivry-sur-Seine (1972)

The first realized project that shows Renaudies latter approach is the Danielle Casanova project in Ivry-sur-Seine, completed in 1972 (2.1/2.2). The Casanova project consists of several shops adjacent to the Avenue Danielle Casanova and 82 apartments on the higher floors. The Casanova project is, in comparison to latter projects, the most straightforward project regarding its main form. It is built on a 5 x 5 meter grid and almost all external and internal corners are restricted to 45 or 90 degree angles (2.3). From the street side it even looks relatively dull because the mountain shape visible in his latter projects is not yet present. The most unusual aspect of the Casanova project is the treatment of the façade; this is the first and only project that has a fragmented pattern composed of triangular shapes in the façade (2.4). These expressive gestures create a fragmented facade with some interesting details like small children height windows and splayed columns on the ground floor. Some other aspects of the Casanova project will feature also in the coming projects: the placement along the street, the covered walkway, the shops on the ground floor, 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 introduced in several other projects.

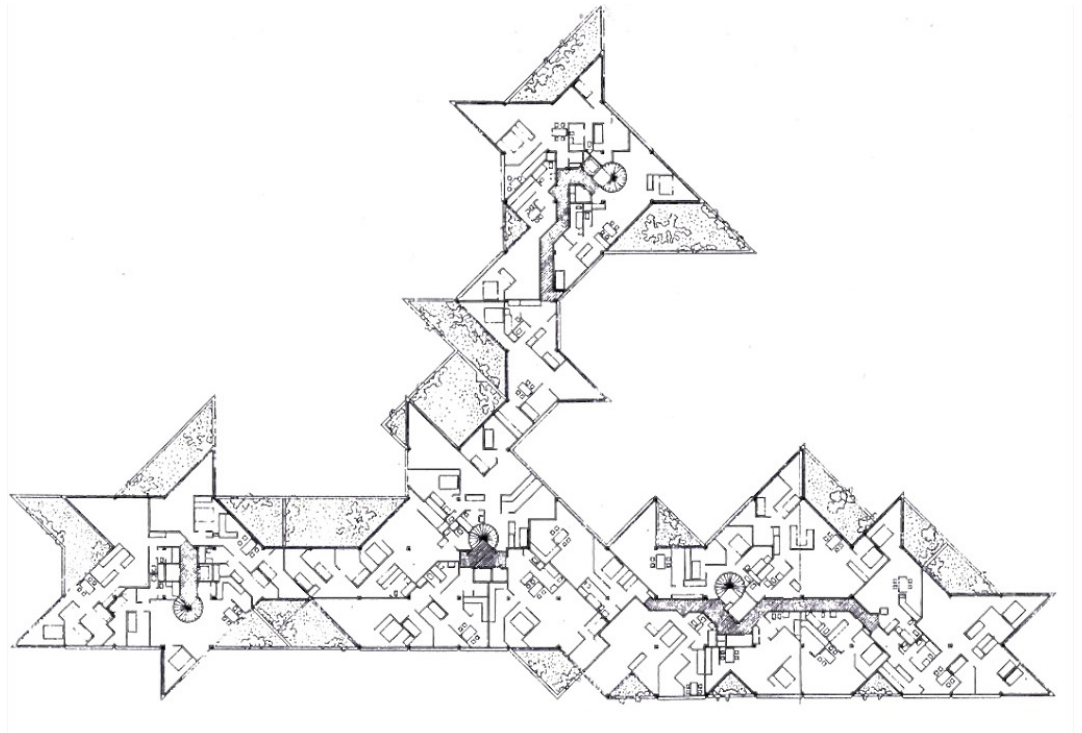


2.1 Danielle Casanova from the street



2.2 Danielle Casanova's terraced backside

### 2.3 Typical floor plan



2.4 Decorative triangular expression in street side façade. Notice the miniscule triangular 'children' windows.





## Jeanne Hachette, Ivry-sur-Seine (1975)

In 1975 Renaudie completes two more projects in Ivry-sur-Seine; the Jeanne Hachette complex and the much smaller Jean-Baptiste Clément project adjacent to it. Both have great similarities in urban placement, external appearance, detailing and internal configuration of apartments. Jeanne Hachette is probably the most complex building Renaudie designed, it includes a large commercial center with shops, restaurants, cinemas, offices and a car park underneath, on top of this commercial plateau the 40 apartments are placed in mountain like crops (2.5). The construction grid used for Jeanne Hachette is defined by the grid used for parking of 7,5 x 4,5 meters. The angles of the building are no longer confined to 45 or 90 degree angles as in Casanova, resulting in much more complex proportioning of 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 on which it also has the entrances to some shops along the covered walkway. The commercial center that is situated on the ground and first floor is accessible from a multitude of entrances on different floors (2.6). A part of the commercial center and the offices are situated in a two story part that forms a sort of bridge over the street and connects it to the buildings on the other side (which were only to be 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 (2.7). The facades 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.



2.5 Jeanne Hachette in-between the Raspail towers



2.6 Commercial centre below Jeanne Hachette

2.7 Jeanne Hachette from street level





2.8 Jeanne Hachette 'tranche 1' during construction (1973)







2.9 Jeanne Hachette's  
urban jungle





### Jean-Baptiste-Clement, Ivry-sur-Seine (1975)

The J-BC project is one of the smaller “mountains” Jean Renaudie designed. It was designed simultaneously with the much larger Jeanne Hachette project adjacent to it (2.10). The J-BC complex is interesting for further examination because it is, like Jeanne Hachette, a sort of intermediate stage in the development of Renaudie's oeuvre between the first build 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 J-BC project is located in the northeast corner of the Ivry-sur-Seine center project. The J-BC complex stands on a visually quite prominent location (2.11), it is clearly visible 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 center. On all sides the building is surrounded by public space. On the northwest side the complex stands side by side with an existing housing project, 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 Baptiste Clement 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 J-BC facing the pedestrian area and the Rue Raspail have a covered sidewalk that protects the pedestrian from the weather elements.



2.10 Jean-Baptiste Clément as seen from the Raspail tower

2.11 Jean-Baptiste Clément from the street side





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 when they are intersected by a double height room; here Renaudie placed a large full height but expressively fragmented window (2.12/2.13). The horizontal bands are also continued when they meet the terraces; here 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; it contrasts with the rest of the building by articulating its vertical direction.

2.12 Apartment J: terrace view towards the apartment



2.13 Apartment J: view through the void, unto the garden terrace, into the city



J-BC consists of shops on the ground floor and eleven apartments spread out over the five floors above, nine of the apartments are duplex-style and the other two are single floor apartments of which one occupies the entire top floor as a pent-house. The entire construction of the J-BC 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 of Jeanne Hachette, which is in turn 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 stabilizing elements are the elevator shaft, the circular main stairway shaft and the four installation shafts. The floors are, where necessary for load bearing or stabilizing purposes, supported by additional concrete beams.

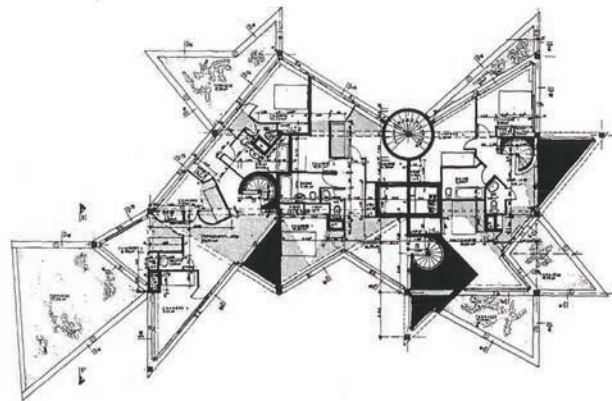
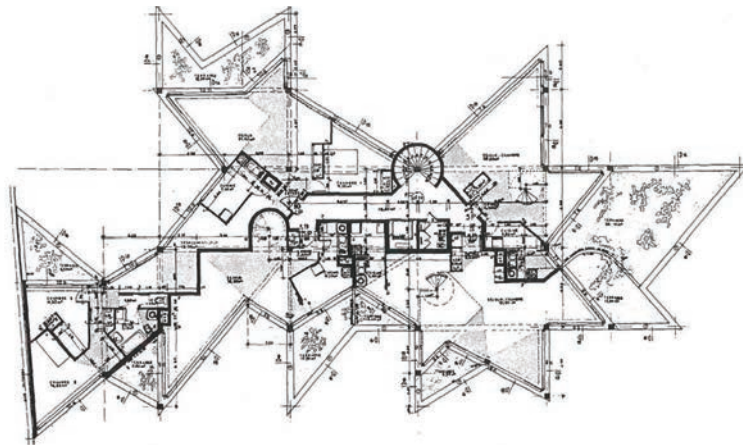
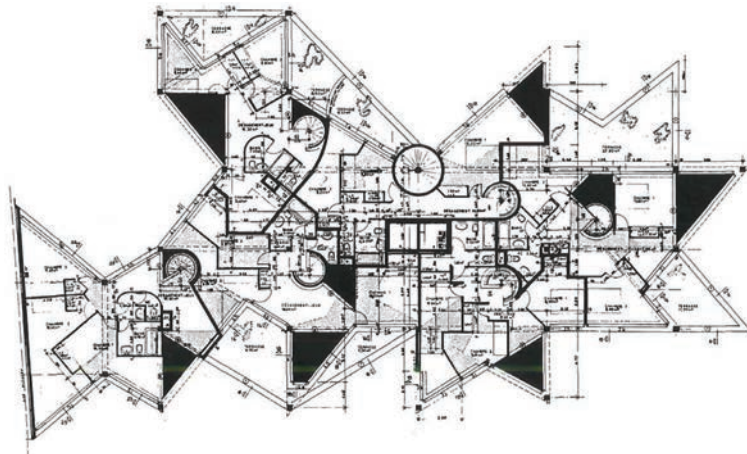
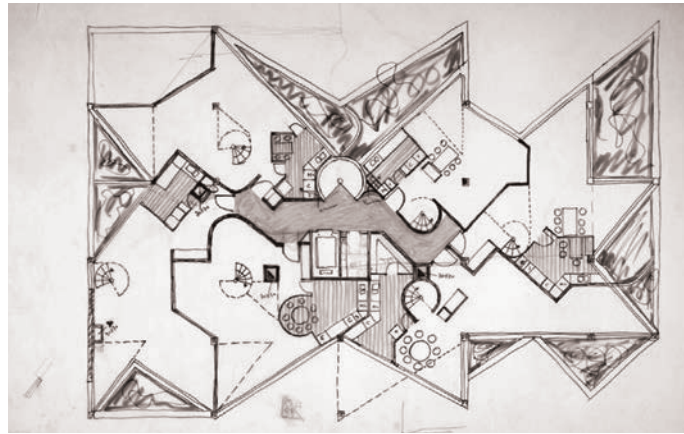
The internal circulation of the J-BC building consists of one main staircase and one elevator, which make the corridors that are situated on the first, the third and the fifth floor accessible. The apartments can all be entered from one of these corridors (2.15). The corridors are painted in bright primary colors (yellow, red, blue) and are overall quite dark. Only the main staircase has small and high placed windows. All of the apartments in J-BC are radically different and their unconventional shapes are tightly connected; they stick into, under and over each other (2.14/2.16). The apartments vary in size from 143m<sup>2</sup> to 77m<sup>2</sup> with an average of 108m<sup>2</sup> and all have access to multiple terraces varying in size; from a miniscule 2m<sup>2</sup> to a park-like 30m<sup>2</sup>. On average, 23 percent of the total floor space is occupied by the terrace, which is approximately 32m<sup>2</sup> of terrace per apartment.

2.14 Apartment arrangement of Jean-Baptiste Clément

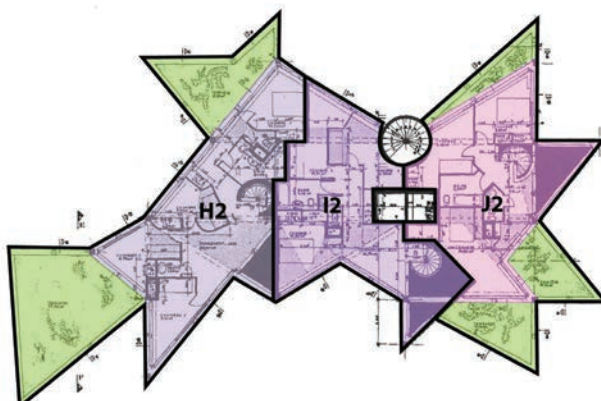
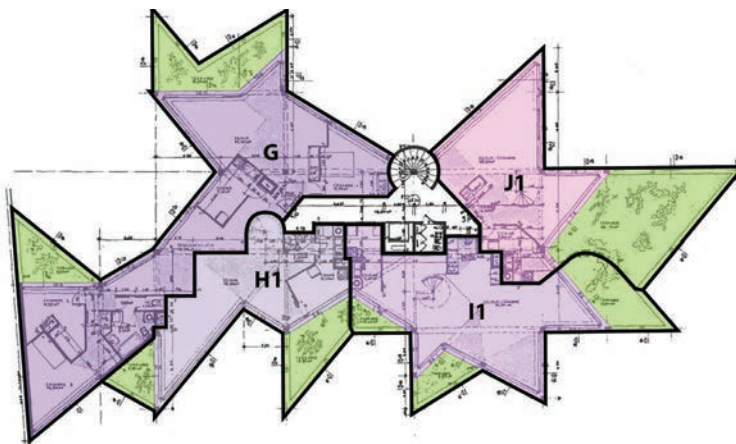
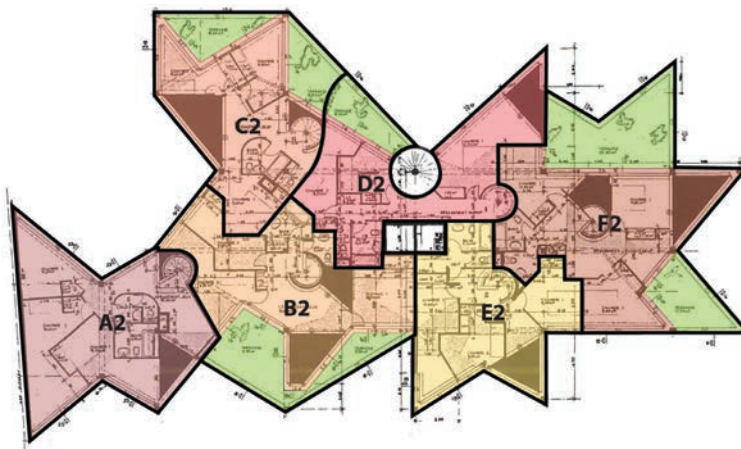
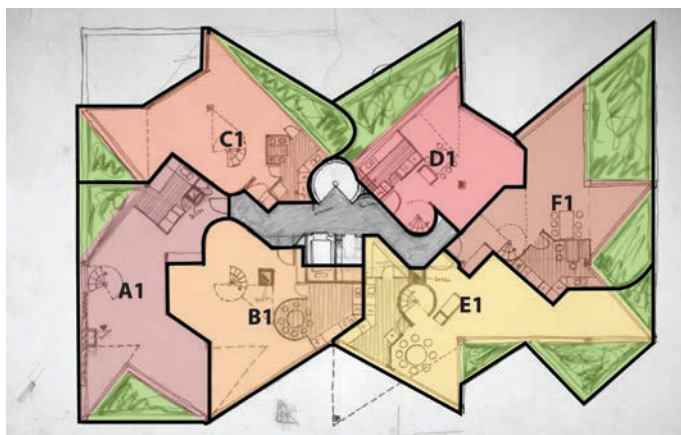




2.15 Floor plans of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th floor of Jean-Baptiste Clément



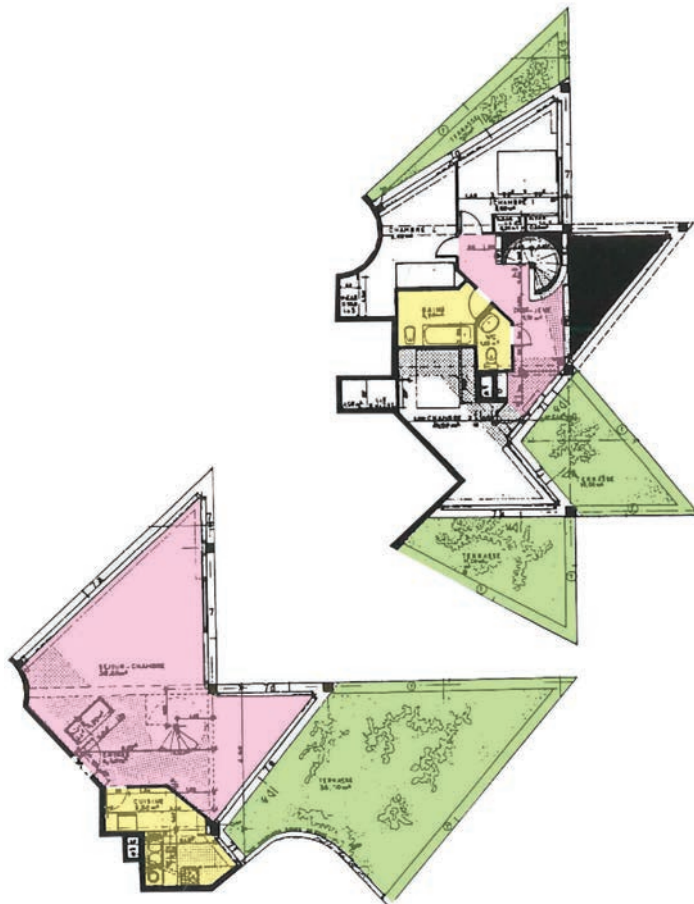
2.16 Apartments indicated in the Floor plans of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th floor of Jean-Baptiste Clément





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; they all have the same spiral staircase leading to a spacious hallway on the higher floor (the hallway for playing) which gives access to the bathroom, the toilet and the bedrooms (2.17). The bedrooms almost all have a fixed place for the bed, indicated in the plans, and build-in storage somewhere nearby. The amount of square meters of the rooms on the higher floor are overall quite equal; the bathroom is always relatively orthogonal and quite small between 5-6m<sup>2</sup>, the bedrooms are also small for present-day standards; all between 8-14m<sup>2</sup>. Also the size of the kitchen on the lower floor seems like a fixed entity, measuring between 7-8m<sup>2</sup>. Besides these few shared features the apartments mostly stand out for being completely different on more than one place. 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.

2.17 Apartment J floor plans

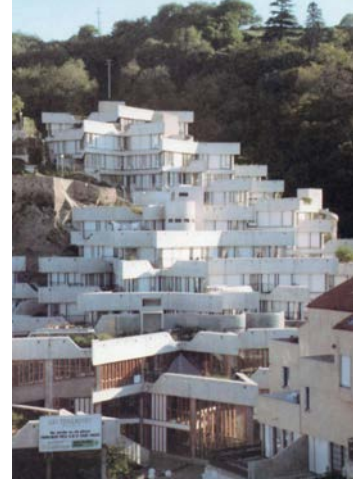


## Givors (1980)

The next big housing complex that Renaudie creates is the new center for Givors, completed in 1980 (2.18). This is the biggest project he has realized and it fulfills his dream, present in Le Vaudreuil, to build upon the slopes of hills (2.19). Givors or les étoiles (the stars) is mostly seen as Renaudie's Magnum Opus, because of its complex, though clear, forms and the simple facade 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 (2.20). 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 that is situated in the hills above (2.22). In this project Renaudie greatly simplifies the external appearance of the building, almost all expressive shapes are removed. The only thing remaining is the horizontal concrete bands that wrap around the entire building, 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 (2.21).

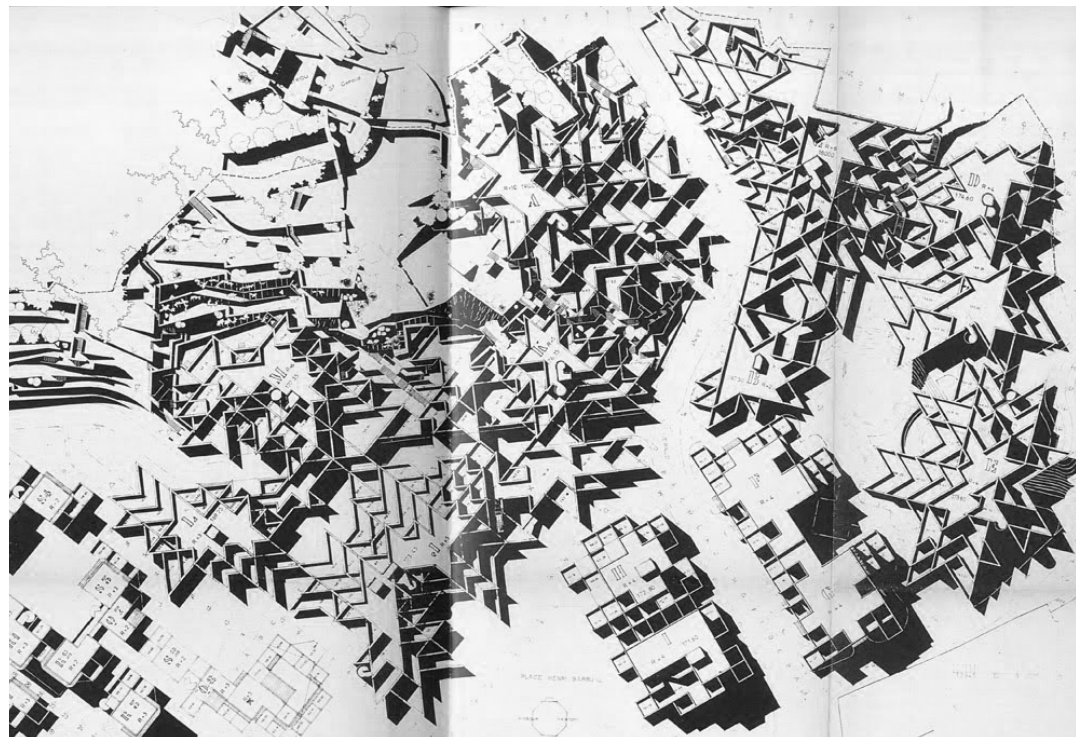


2.18 Givors as seen from the street



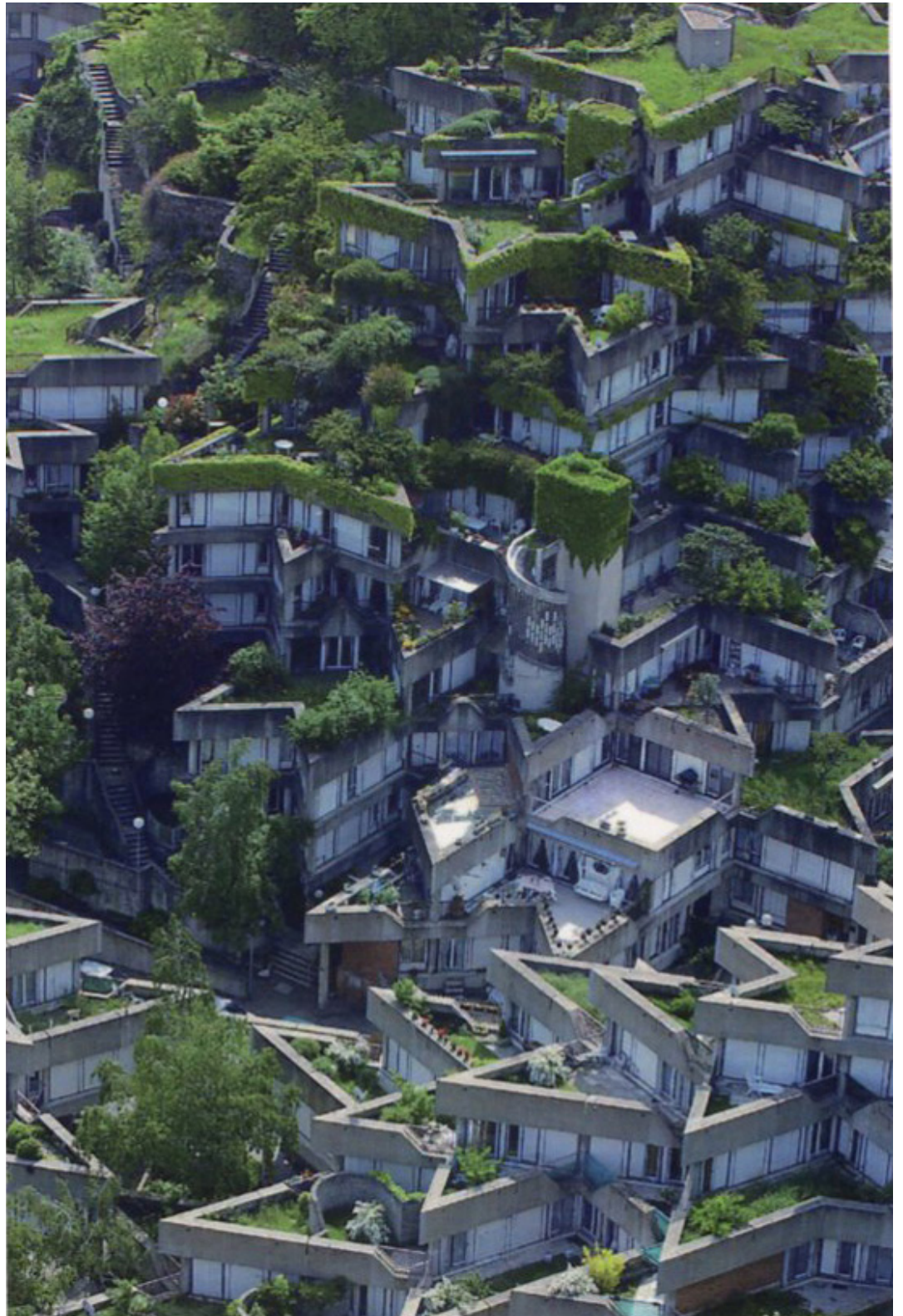
2.19 Givors built upon the slopes

2.20 Situation plan of Givors





2.21 45 degrees angled  
terraces of Givors as  
seen from above







2.22 Horizontal bands of  
the balustrades define  
the expression





## Understanding Jean Renaudie

It is quite clear that Renaudie's architecture differs tremendously from anything realized 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 analyzing Renaudie's architecture it becomes clear that this complexity is not merely an external expression or form freedom, complexity is an integral feature of every layer in the architecture.

Renaudie was very critical towards the free-market economy and modern urbanism. Modern urbanism failed because with its simplistic segregation of functions, under influence of the Charter of Athens, it could never recreate the complex organism that is the city. According to Renaudie, a city is a complex and living organism that inhibits an infinite amount 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 signification outstrips that of the isolated functions." (Scalbert, April 2004, p. 23). The city evolves overtime, 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 and goes as follows: "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 behavior 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 thus 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 more difficult (and slow) to realize in architecture, mainly because complexity was something directly opposed to the way the French free-market economy and building industry was functioning during the 70's. 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, who were also critical towards capitalism and the free-market economy, of his architectural ideas. The first commission that Renaudie ensured after his departure from L'Atelier de Montrouge was made possible because of recommendations from Renée Gailhoustet, a co-commu-



nist. Subsequent commissions were still quite difficult to obtain, especially since the first build projects, Casanova and Jeanne Hachette, were so unconventional and the projects were systematically over budget; on average by 70 percent. Regardless of these difficulties the work was still attractive to municipalities that were in search for an alternative to the grands ensembles.

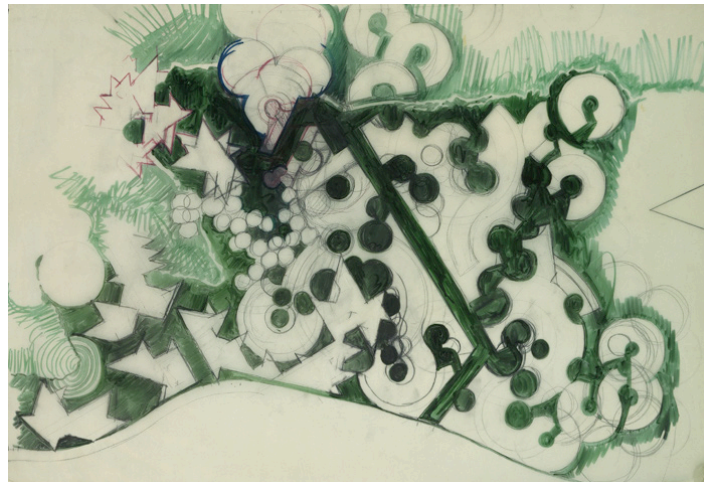
On the one hand Renaudie's dream was to recreate the forms of the earth and of nature because these were, according to Renaudie, the forms of human activity. On the other hand he was restricted by the structural and economical possibilities of capitalism. Renaudie understood that he should find a process of designing that could mimic the slowness of evolution and at the mean time conforms to the restrictions presented to him by structure (and economics). Renaudie developed a very particular design method to transform his theory into practice, in which sketching is 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 center 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 tissue in order to get grip on the site and its geography (3.1). These forms are never meant as an actual building form, they are merely guidelines for something to come; something that can take place inside or outside the circular form. When satisfied, Renaudie sets on to divide the circular tissue with (quasi-random) straight lines. Later in the process he continues creating more concrete shapes in more detailed drawings that could be actual building plans (3.2).



3.1 Free circular tissue sketch

3.2 Circular tissue become urban lay-out





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. (3.3/3.4). Renaudie starts drawing grids over his sketches in multiple orientations. The size of these grids were mostly, like in Ivry-sur-Seine, determined by the parking below the buildings (3.5). 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 (3.6).

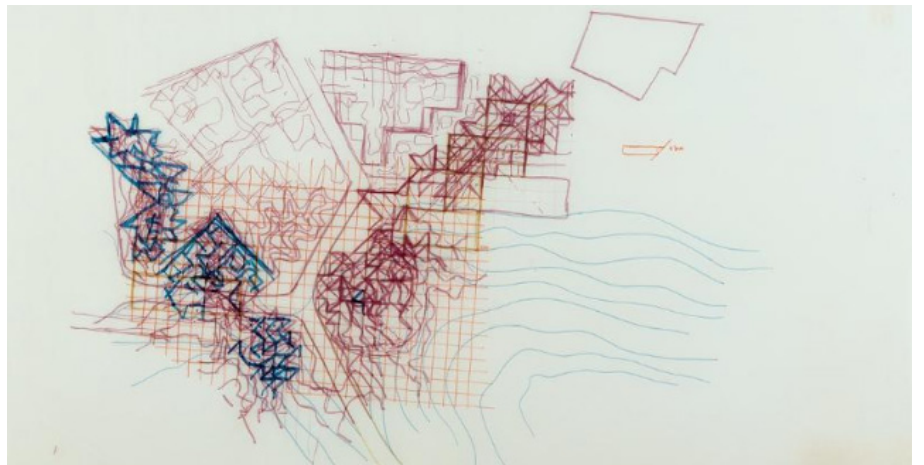
### 3.3 Urban lay-out becomes building forms



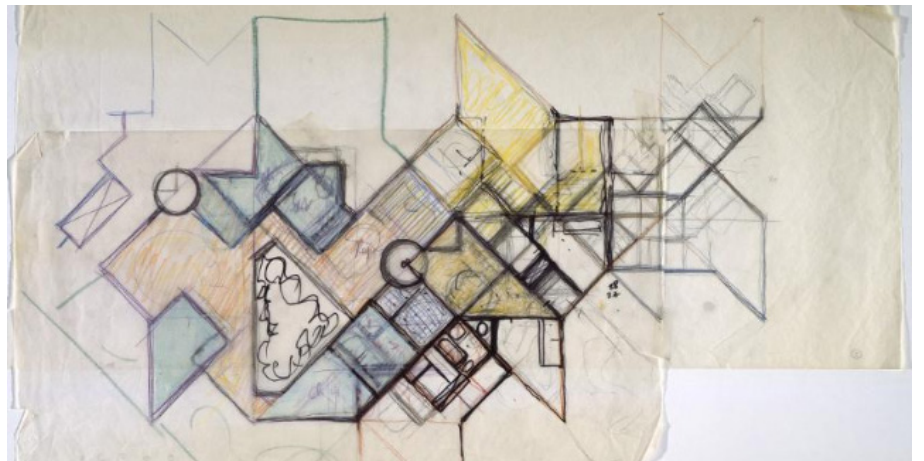
3.4 Building forms are divided into apartment forms



3.5 Building forms are appropriated for construction grid



3.6 Apartments are individually appropriated



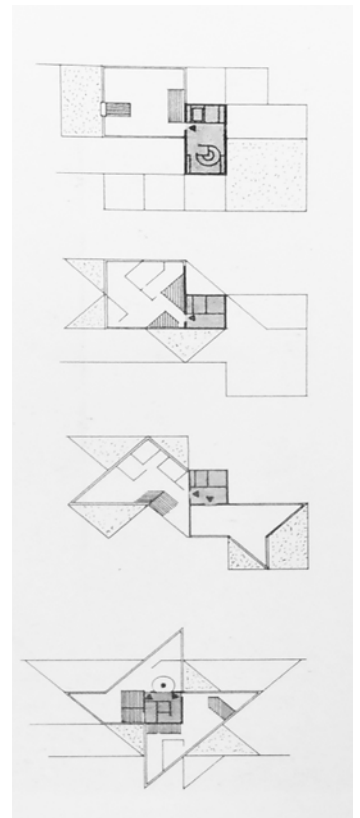


In the designing of the apartments, he sought for qualitative criteria like; light, views, flexibility and spaciousness. Also here the diagonal was a faithful servant; through the diagonal the space seemed larger, more light could enter the room and multiple views and orientations became possible (3.7). 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, it seems to stand as a reminder of the center 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 kind, on the contrary; these differences appear to be so random that they can hardly be justified by any means. The diversity of apartments (and offices and shops) in the architecture of Renaudie is especially interesting because it is something not so apparent in other structuralist architecture.

For Renaudie each and every person is an unique individual. He was fiercely opposed to any regulation that marginalized a person to an average. Renaudie found it the task of the architect to first construct things mentally, in contrast to the standardized 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 Renaudie wanted, by taking into account the abstract content, to let the inhabitants and passerbies become actors interacting with the architecture.<sup>1</sup> Key to this was the unexpected; created through discovery, complexity and diversity.

Renaudie designed the interiors of the apartments so that 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, additionally 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, precisely in these parts the differences between the apartments are most pertinent. According to Renaudie the diversity of the interior, created by the open parts, gives the inhabitants the freedom to respond and encourages them to appropriate the space in their own way.



3.7 The diagonal is introduced into the apartment lay-out

<sup>1</sup> Abstract content: "(...) experiencing pleasure and being able to act freely in space"(Scalbert, April 2004, p. 53)



In Renaudies writing, the 'abstract content' of architecture comes to life most vividly in the terraces. Here the abstract content are things like; the experience to see a plant grow, to be able to see it rain in 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; like taking care of the garden with your family and meeting the neighbors 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 Renaudies buildings is to present a form that can inhibit 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 Renaudies buildings. Are Renaudies buildings, indeed, able to inhibit the complexity of human life? How is it then to live in such an awkwardly shaped apartment?

I have visited Ivry-sur-Seine several times in different seasons and I had enough chance to experience every nook and cranny of it. The going up the building, using the outside stairs, is a real experience and the views are surely nice, however these stairs seem to go to nowhere (unlike at Givors, where they lead to the castle). Inside Jeanne-Hachette I found a commercial center 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 center as a shortcut towards the metro that protected them from the weather elements and in which they could simultaneously do their daily groceries. Accordingly almost all shops along this route were occupied.

Very agreeable about walking around the entire Ivry-sur-Seine city center, is that you are almost always covered by arcades and buildings. This immediately gives a sort of intimate atmosphere in which you are always in contact with the buildings surrounding you. Additionally, because of the penetrability of all the blocks, you can each time choose how you want to walk this time. If it's raining you go through the commercial center, if you are in a hurry you follow the road and if the sun is shining you cross the square; you truly have a sort of freedom of choice. While walking around, I discovered countless unexpected places all with their own unique atmosphere; a large square, a flower garden, a park, a schoolyard, a jeux de boules track, some surrealistic stair arrangements, a fountain and small pavilions.<sup>2</sup> But also less inviting places; like dark corners and passages lacking windows or social control. Most of the inhabitants however claim that they never have felt unsafe in their neighborhood; they have none of the problems some of the other banlieus surrounding Paris had to deal with. They like the diversity the neighborhood has to

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<sup>2</sup> In the middle of Cité du Parc (1982), finished after Renaudies death, the truly innovative Einstein school is hidden in the middle of the neighborhood. The school has open classrooms, expressive skylights, a maze of terraces on top and a sunken schoolyard.





3.8 Ivry-sur-Seine merged into the city



offer; everything is in reach; food stores, clothing stores, the pharmacy, schools, library, greenery, it feels a bit like a village in a big town.

Most of the passerby's dislike the expression of the architecture; mostly the raw concrete is to blame. Some others thought they look overall quite messy. More positive are they about the abundant greenery and the fact that this is something one-of-a-kind. The inhabitants themselves are overall more positive; they love their apartments and the atmosphere of the neighborhood 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 per circa ten apartments; this means there is no anonymity when entering 'your' building. You know everybody and you greet everybody.

Each and every apartment in Renaudies buildings is different. To get a good overall view of the different possibilities of these apartments I tried seeing 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. Making one inhabitant say: "Here I am at home, not in the same framework. Not every one of all is the same apartment. It is a pleasure to discover, and it is also a pleasure that we don't live in a uniformity, like architects from a certain time, were everyone lives like a number, no, we are not 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 opposition, 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 of the apartments are flood 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. This is more problematic in winter, when the plants on the terraces have lost their leaves, than in summer, when the greenery distorts the views. Interesting to note about the living rooms is that, because of their generous size and weird 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 commending a determined function.







3.9 Interior of an apartment of Jean-Baptiste Clément flooded with light



One of the main reasons to buy one of these apartments is the possibility of having a garden terrace in such an urbanized area near Paris. For the inhabitants the terraces purpose is twofold; it obviously is an extra outside room but at the mean time it also changes the feeling inside the apartment, making one inhabitant say: "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 were appropriated in fairly different manner. 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; it makes the inhabitants feel free, gives them the possibility to dream away and to feel pleasure in life: "to be at the tip of the terrace: it is a bit like the guy who is on his boat. It's good, there is no one; it feels a bit like being on the countryside. It feels like a lodge. You are on the countryside and in the city." (Buffard, 1992, p. 59)

### 3.10 Ivry-sur-Seine





## Conclusion

In a short period of time, between 1968 and 1981, Jean Renaudie has created a consistent oeuvre 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, 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 Elysee and the Rue Mouffetard, if you want to see the real Parisian life, take subway 7 all the way till the end and find yourself in the realized utopia of Ivry-sur-Seine. You'll be amazed!

Anton Zoetmulder, 2018



## Chronology & Projects

1925	Jean Renaudie is born on June 8th
1958 -1968	L'Atelier de Montrouge
1968-1981	Agence Jean Renaudie
1972	Ecole des Plant in Cergy-Pontoise (Des Plants Oranges, Cergy),
1972	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)
1975	Jean-Baptiste Clément (Rue Jean Baptiste Clément, Ivry-sur-Seine)
1978	Receives Grand Prix National d'Architecture
1980	Renovation of city center of Givors (Place Henri Barbusse, Givors),
1981	Jean Renaudie deceases on October 13th
1981-1985	The Atelier Jean Renaudie is founded to complete the projects initiated before Renaudies 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)
1985	ZAC Villetaneuse (Rue Roger Salengro, Villetaneuse)
1985	La Courneuve (Allée Georges Braque, Aubervilliers)
1985	Îlot Voltaire (Avenue Georges Gosnat, Ivry sur-Seine)





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<https://goo.gl/maps/fSw4BZ-D67Rx>

