

Metamorphosis, or to make the best of what is already there

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The following paper faithfully reproduces the *lectio magistralis* that the two Prizker prize-winning architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal gave on 15 September 2023 in the classrooms of the Department of Architecture of the Università degli Studi Roma Tre, at the end of the immersive workshop *Lacaton & Vassal @ TMB Salaria: Reuse and new life cycle for the former TMB Salaria area*, which aimed to rethink the large waste treatment plant, decommissioned a few years ago. By presenting a review of their most significant projects, Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal reconstructed, in words and images, their distinctive approach to design, respectful of what already exists and of those who already live there, but without ever renouncing the ambition, and the responsibility, of being able to generate and accompany a radical transformation of the existing, a metamorphosis.

Keywords: *Urban regeneration*, *Sustainability*, *Adaptive reuse*

Metamorfosi, o fare bene con quello che c'è

Il testo qui proposto restituisce fedelmente la *lectio magistralis* che i due architetti premio Prizker Anne Lacaton e Jean-Philippe Vassal hanno tenuto il 15 settembre 2023 nelle aule del dipartimento di Architettura dell'Università degli Studi Roma Tre, a conclusione del workshop immersivo *Lacaton & Vassal @ TMB Salaria: Riuso e nuovo ciclo di vita per l'area dell'ex TMB Salaria*, che si proponeva di ripensare il grande impianto di trattamento dei rifiuti, dismesso da qualche anno.

Tramite una rassegna dei loro progetti più significativi, Anne Lacaton e Jean Philippe Vassal hanno ricostruito, con parole e immagini, il loro approccio distintivo alla progettazione, rispettoso dell'esistente, di ciò che già c'è e di chi già abita, senza però mai rinunciare all'ambizione, e alla responsabilità, di saper generare e accompagnare una trasformazione radicale dell'esistente, una metamorfosi.

Parole chiave: *rigenerazione urbana*, *sostenibilità*, *riuso adattivo*

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The question of waste has become, nowadays, a major issue. It's a very difficult yet, at the same time, very interesting question. Personally, we have never worked on waste recycling projects. However, we are concerned by this subject as architects and of course as citizens, obviously all of us because each of us has to deal with waste: in our kitchen, in our building, on the street and finally at the city scale.

We know how to dispose a waste at a domestic scale but certainly we don't imagine enough the huge infrastructure which is behind and the complex process of waste treatment and recycling.

Therefore, it is very important in an architecture school to think and research on these essential questions.

What we will discuss with you, precisely because we have no projects on the issue of recycling, is, more generally, transformation. Because we think it is the same issue: we have to transform. It can be the transformation of trash, the transformation of waste, the transformation of houses, villas, landscapes, or cities. In all fields, transformation is today the only way.

In this strategy of transformation, we support the word *metamorphosis*. This means that what is totally rejected by everyone can and must become the best. And it's a miracle, the one we want to achieve as architects, and that is exactly why we have to ask this question: how can we take a situation from the worst to the best?

Metamorphosis defines a radical change but from an existing situation. It's a change of form, structure, or substance into something different that you don't recognize afterward.

It is a process of transformation, an ambitious one. It is not about changing appearances. In architecture, metamorphosis means transforming an existing situation that is judged, in appearance, to be inadequate, obsolete, degraded, unloved – a situation that appears to have no quality – into a new, exceptional place. So, transformation always starts from the existing.

For us, it is really very important to pay attention to the existing, to see the value of what we hold, because an existing place always has value. It is important to see it and, furthermore, to learn to see it.

To work with the existing means dealing with everything already there: everything is important. There is no selection; it's everything. To invent or reinvent with what we have in our hands, to transform with minimal material, with economy, intelligence, kindness. To do more with less.

We already have a lot on our hands – a lot of constructions, roads, landscapes – and we have to make the best use of it. It's an economy of energy, money, which is very favorable to doing just the essential. The "essential" is what we always keep in mind when we are doing projects. The important is the attitude and strategy in thinking and realizing projects. The projects we will present develop our attitude about transformations through the project and our approach to the existing. Always close to the subject, close to the situation. It's what we call *from inside out*, which means having our feet on the ground, inside, to really see the scale of things.



Fig. 1 - Maison – Cap ferret, credit Philippe Ruault

To build with the existing

The first project has everything to do with building upon the existing. Twenty-five years ago, friends asked us to build a holiday house in a wonderful place by the seaside, on a plot that had never been built in the forest, along the sea. This family really wanted to have a house here, but they were very concerned about changing the atmosphere of the site too radically: a forest on the sand dunes where they, as children, used to build cabanes in the trees during vacations.

So we observed the site very carefully. We inventoried, we classified, we counted. We counted the number of pine trees, we looked at the sand dune and its relation with water, at the fragility of the soil, and we evaluated the age of the trees with specialists.

In the end, we thought that, given the high natural quality of the site, the most important thing was to ensure that the place afterward would not be worse than before, but better.

So the first decision was to build the house inside the forest without cutting trees and without damaging the sand floor. In order to do that, we raised the construction above the ground with small steel elements, micropiles planted in the sand for the foundations without any links. Minimum interventions were made without any intention of creating a scenographic effect, but simply to add a new element, a kind of gentle cohabitation between architecture and the forest. The plans were adapted because of the trees, not the other way around, and this created an interesting merge between nature and construction that, in a way, puts architecture back in its place, not as a demonstration, but as a delicate integration into a fantastic place.

It is very interesting to notice for this project that the land has such a great value that the house, in comparison, costs almost nothing. So, the house can disappear, it can be replaced by something else, and that probably wouldn't change the cost of the place. An ephemeral presence that allows to live there but does not modify durably the natural site.

We believe it is very positive when architecture is put back on the right level in a project.

Building with existing is a very broad and urgent issue. It has been a research topic for us for more than 20 years, and in particular, we have dealt with it by working on the large housing complexes built in the French suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s.



Fig. 2 - PLUS – Les grands ensembles de logements, credit Druot, Lacaton & Vassal

Cities, and countries more generally, do not seem to know exactly what to do to renew and improve the quality of life in these places.

What can be done with these housing blocks: transform, reuse, redevelop, extend life, reinvent, do more with less, and involve the inhabitants. Our involvement began in the early 2000s, when a vast urban renewal program was decided upon by the government in France, based on the massive demolition of more than 200,000 housing blocks to be replaced one by one. The cost of this transformation was absolutely enormous; at the time, we were talking about 165,000 euros per home demolished and rebuilt. In addition to the cost of demolition and reconstruction, demolition forces inhabitants to change neighborhoods and leave their homes. It was obvious for us that demolition is not the right solution in many aspects.

We started a study together with a friend, Frédéric Druot, to see what would be possible instead of demolition. In fact, it was unbelievable to us to think that buildings less than fifty years old were so run-down that the only solution could be to eliminate and rebuild.

After this study, which is entitled *PLUS – Les grands ensembles de logements – Territoires d'exception*, we came to the conclusion that by transforming, rather than demolishing, we could provide excellent new housing at a cost of 55,000 euros per dwelling.

In contrast to the government's plan, which clearly is first a view of maps and master plans, we decided to approach it from the inside, from the inhabited space, wondering what the possible problems were with these buildings. And first of all, it became obvious to us that it was not a problem of structure neither of solidity, but of obsolete living conditions inside: apartments that were too small, old facilities, and so on. They were largely built in the 1960s and 1970s, in haste and in large numbers, often without much regard for the quality of living.

By looking at the problem from the inside, precisely, we saw that it was possible to create a radical transformation with simple operations: often just extending a window or creating a balcony can improve the quality of life.

So we studied the structure, but also how to transform some spaces for new uses, such as replacing the ground floor with new janitors, common spaces, or offices on the first level, which are not the most attractive for housing, or creating play areas for children, or garden. From this research, we concluded that in all the cases studied, it was possible to make an intervention of transformation, different for each case because it was adaptable to different contexts, but efficient, respectful of existence, and at the same time, potentially radical. And it could be done on occupied site, without removing inhabitants. We also demonstrated that the cost of these transformation was about three or two times less than the demolition and rebuilt. While often it is stated that renovation is much more expensive than demolition and rebuilt and this is often used as an argument for demolishing.

Despite this research work, it took us a long time to convince some municipalities to adopt this approach in their territory. At one point, we had the opportunity to respond to a competition



Fig. 3 - Transformation de 530 logements, bâtiments G, H, I, quartier du Grand Parc_Bordeaux, credit Philippe Ruault

for three blocks of 530 dwellings in the city of Bordeaux. These were large housing expansions from the 1970s, very close to the city center and now well-integrated into the city with a streetcar and transportation facilities. However, the blocks maintained their original situation, so they needed intervention. Even for these three buildings, the city had decided on demolition and reconstruction, which is both a lengthy and expensive process, considering the relocation of 530 dwelling units. Eventually, the director of the social housing company of the City of Bordeaux convinced the mayor that demolition was not the right solution, but to keep the buildings and start a process of transformation.

Once again, from the inside out, we observed, discussed, and went through all these 530 different situations, which were the real value of the place because, as is often the case, the residents had given their homes a value that was lacking on the outside. After this visit, we proposed two things.

First, to carry out the transformation without displacing the inhabitants, allowing all residents to remain in place during the process. Secondly, to improve the quality of the building in terms of space and energy efficiency by insulating and changing facades. But how to achieve both objectives? How to renovate without major internal works? The solution we identified was to

not change the typology but to enhance it by making a generous extension to the outside. This addition would provide more space, solve the narrowness of some areas such as the bathroom or the kitchen, but it also provides a kind of air brace, light, and of course, serves as a scaffold for basic works in the building.

A four-by-four-meter self-supporting extension was then placed on the *façade* for each apartment, providing each dwelling with a winter garden, a large *loggia*.

This strategy stemmed from the observation that families were very attached to the existing houses, which were like small museums to us, so precious that we preferred not to touch them but to proceed with an extension that would give them something more. Thus, we focused on doing the necessary work while preserving the existing value.

We also created a prototype to show the inhabitants the process, as their approval was needed for such a significant neighborhood project. The prototype became a kind of “project house,” where residents could meet and discuss with the owner, architects, and neighbors.

Work began with the commitment that facade changes for each apartment would last a maximum of two days, during which there would be a vacant apartment where residents could have lunch and then return each evening to their apartment. This methodology, though complex, was well-planned and proved effective in our case.

It's important to note that this was social rental housing. Throughout the project, there were discussions between the Tenants Association and the ownership agency regarding subsequent costs. The result was that there was no rent increase after construction. The cost of the transformation was about 55,000 euros per apartment, while the city had estimated the demolition and reconstruction at over 160,000 euros per apartment.

Residents participated in the project, facing enthusiasms and conflicts, but overall in a positive atmosphere among all participants, including contractors, the owner, the design team, architects, and residents. All in all, we can say that this transformation has been hugely beneficial in all aspects.

To not build or to build almost not

What to do when the existing is already sufficient? In the late '90s, the Bordeaux City Council Commission was tasked with beautifying some squares around the city. In particular, we were invited in 1996 to propose a project for the redevelopment of Place Léon Aucoc, a typical urban area framed by trees and benches. We studied, discussed with the inhabitants, and, above all, observed this public space for a long time by visiting it at different times. After three months, we returned to the municipality stating that the square was beautiful as it was, charming, and our project was to do nothing and simply take care of it by cleaning and maintaining it. This project was accepted and implemented accordingly.

Sometimes, the designer's decision may be not to build at all, or to build almost nothing but the bare minimum. We can see this in the case of the Palais De Tokyo project in Paris.



Fig. 4 - Place Léon Aucoc, Bordeaux, credit Lacaton & Vassal

Built in the 1930s for the Universal Exposition, it hosted contemporary art until the 1940s/50s when the Centre Pompidou was built. Since then, it has been occupied in different ways, but after some work on a project that was never realized, it was left completely empty and semi-demolished; the interior floors were open, partitions were removed, etc.

In the early 2000s, a project emerged to create a small space for artistic creation with a minimal budget: for the first phase, there was 3,000,000 euros for 10,000 square meters. The goal was to maintain the charm, quality, and strength of some spaces and to trust that artists would come and bring their artwork to truly fill the space. So it was a matter of addressing minimal aspects such as the structural integrity, air exchange, lighting for the night, connections, and some repairs, but essentially leaving it almost as it was. The project was completed within budget in 2002, and ten years later, there was further investment of 15 million euros, making it one of the largest art centers in the world today, totaling 30,000 square meters for artists and the public, without having done almost anything.

In this space, everything happens. All it takes is to recognize its potential, its beauty, and to allow artists and visitors to use the space freely.



Fig. 5 - Palais de Tokyo_site de creation contemporaine, Paris, credit Lacaton & Vassal

And it works: for more than twenty years, there has been an incredible number of visitors, artists, and exhibitions. It offers various kinds of spaces, long spaces, high spaces, from dark to light-filled, catering to music, dance, and sightseeing.

All achieved with a simple action: taking the space and offering freedom.

Do not build but build double

Do not build, but build double, is another kind of strategy we want to talk. This is the case with the Frac in Dunkerque. The Frac is a contemporary art center that houses and exhibits works by young artists. The design competition in which we participated involved the transformation of an old disused building, one of the last traces of the very rich shipbuilding activity in the port of Dunkirk, now disappeared.

It is a very large building, the Halle AP2, 30 meters high and 25x80 meters long, originally used to repair large ships, and called precisely because of its size “the cathedral”.

As is often the case with such abandoned industrial buildings, the plan was to install within this capacity a large amount of art spaces: 10,000 square meters of storage, exhibition spaces, and services for at least four floors.



Fig. 6 - FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, Dunkerque, credit Philippe Ruault

Entering the old building, the space was fascinating and something immediately questioned us. How is it possible to build inside such a space and maintain its quality? We had the feeling that building inside, filling the space would lose definitely this outstanding volume. We decided in a moment that we could not lose the void because the void has such intense quality that it must be protected. The word cathedral used by the workers was absolutely right: it is a cathedral and it must be treated with proper respect. How to maintain the capacity of this emptiness and how to preserve the memory of this emptiness?

In the end, we changed our minds and decided, instead of building inside, to create a double building, a kind of twin structure in which we would house the program required by the competition, allowing the existing building to remain as it is.

The project consists of a collaborative relationship between the two volumes, one filled with the new program and the other still filled with the memory of the activity that once took place there. It was also much cheaper to build on the outside of the building than on the inside, as the existing structure presented many technical challenges in creating new foundations for additional floors. We then left the possibility of filling the gap from time to time with a variety of uses. It could be for a concert, sporting events, or giant art installations. This was complemented by a new

building with a system of passages and corridors, services, new exhibition halls, and a rooftop from which you can see the sea and the harbor.

Preserving the void, then, doubling the existing to create maximum capacity, and, most importantly, fostering a very interesting relationship between two spaces.

Do not demolish, transform and densify

The last project we want to discuss allows us to address the issue of applying our attitude to a larger scale. Again, this means not demolishing, but transforming and densifying.

We conducted a study for the city of Bordeaux on the question: where are we going to build the 50,000 new houses that the city needs in the next ten years? It was a matter of thinking about new master plans, new locations, new areas, places to be demolished or reoccupied.

In response, we proposed a completely different approach. We started with the existing, asking what the planned 50,000 housing units mean. 50,000 housing units also mean 55,000 hectares of existing nature, 55,000 hectares of already well-served land. It means roads, streets, water, and energy networks that already exist: there are already 160,000 existing collective housing units, 80,000 existing single housing units in Bordeaux and the region. 50,000 new dwellings mean hundreds of viable situations that we can precisely identify one after another. The land is vast, welcoming, and nature is easily accessible. It is diverse in its characteristics, from thick to clear, simulated to hidden, offering contrasts and variety. It is sufficiently irrigated, drained, furrowed, crossed, served, powered, and organized. It's just sufficiently capable.

It's all about how to generate inside existing organizations, in connection with its systems, with its roots. Without new master plans and impulsive visionary urban schemes, without the need to cut or demolish, without breaking up, dismantling, or resetting, without causing disturbance. Transform existing, weaker, and less valued housing, and by doing so, build 50, 100, 150 thousand new, spacious, bright, generous, and durable homes simultaneously. Spend less to achieve more. Never demolish. But what does demolition mean and what does transformation mean? It means 52% less safety costs of works between demolition and transformation, 74% less energy consumption between demolition and reconstruction, and transformation. It means 56% less public facility cost savings.

What to do then? Create new housing and services. Never cut trees. Allow for air and fluidity. Provide space and luminosity. Through precise urban planning, with careful consideration for each case, focusing on organizations, differences, people, trees, and biodiversity. With the precision of urban economy, rooted in each dwelling, each garden. Liberate urban rights and usage, keep in good repair. Be attentive to special qualities and their abilities. Facilitate private initiatives. Entrust the management of public areas to private initiatives.

Open up the view, enhance the pleasure of dwelling, simply from within living areas, with delicacy. Remove window sills, open up to the garden, offer access to the garden. Provide more space, more natural light, more fluidity, and reduce energy consumption by adding generous winter gardens or balconies to every dwelling and every family.

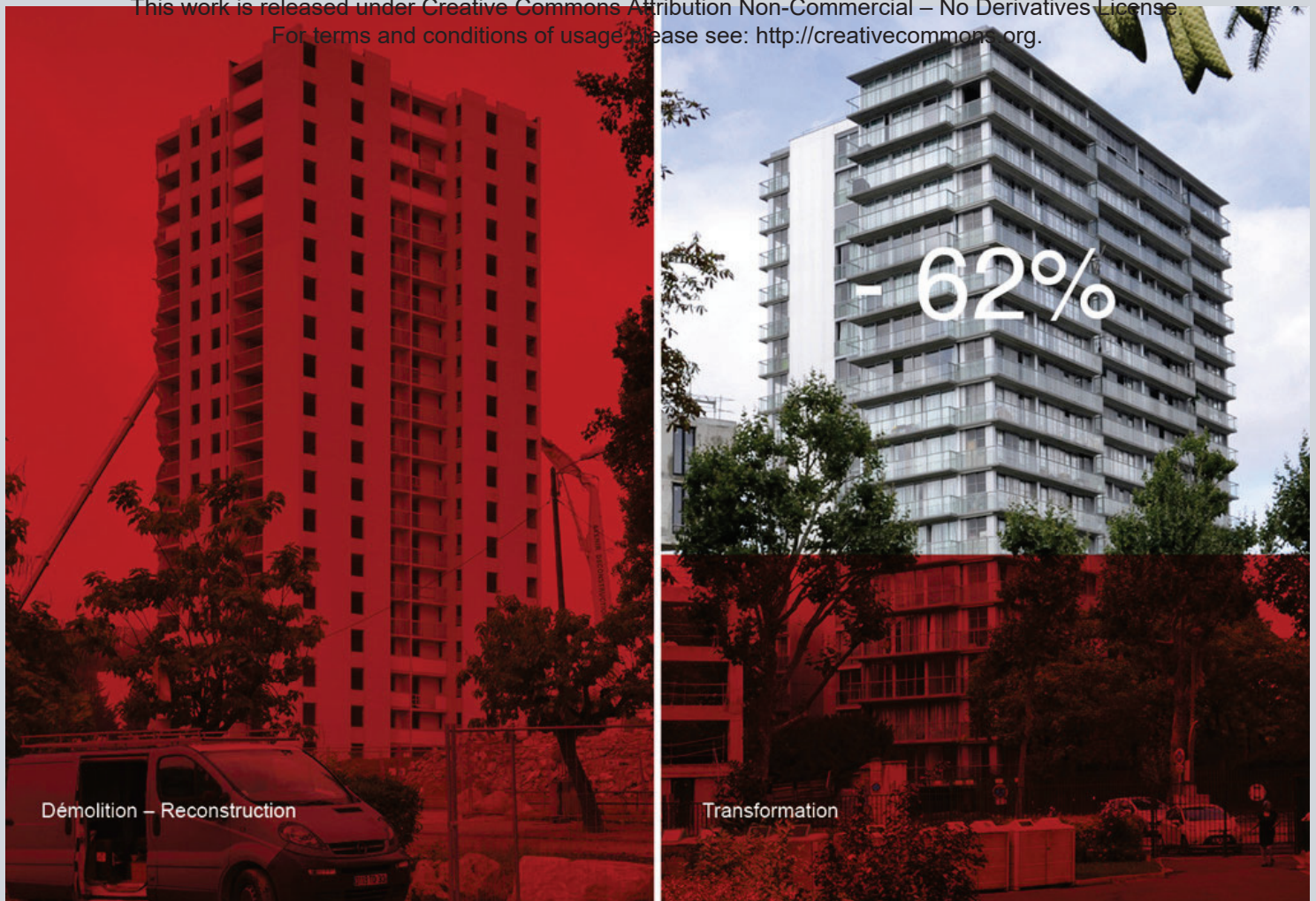


Fig. 7 - 50,000 logements nouveaux, Bordeaux, credit Druto, Hutin, Lacaton & Vassal

On the same serviced land, create new dwellings without consuming new territories. Gradually take over the dimensions, metamorphosing them, seeking wonder.

Offer a variety of ways to live. Rental options. Property acquisition options. Enjoy exceptional geography. Enjoy freedom of use, like in a villa. Enjoy fluid and generous spaces. Enjoy a large, genuine garden. Enjoy the outstanding view from the rooftops. Enjoy canopies without sacrificing them. Enjoy the charm of small housing, with large private/intimate spaces. Enjoy oversized spaces. Extend, add, restore, mix, optimize, superimpose, do or do not.

It's all about metamorphosis.

EXTRA Lab / LMPU

Lacaton&Vassal @ TMB Salario. Riuso e nuovo ciclo di vita per l'area dell'ex TMB Salario

Workshop di Anne Lacaton e Jean-Philippe Vassal

Docenti referenti: Francesco Careri, Maria Pone

Con il contributo dei docenti della LMPU: Daniele Calisi, Giovanni Caudo, Maria Grazia Cianci, Fabrizio Finucci, Stefano Gabriele, Francesca Geremia, Davide Lavorato, Annalisa Metta, Ilaria Montella, Anna Laura Palazzo, Marco Ranzato

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Fig. 1 - L'Area Archeologica Centrale di Roma e le tre città: romana, papale, moderna. Rielaborazione grafica della Carta fisica del suolo di Roma nei primi tempi della fondazione della città, di G.B. Brocchi, 1820, della Nuova pianta di Roma di G.B. Nolli, 1748.