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The Grand Ensemble of Orly-Choisy-le-Roi: the Construction, Deconstruction and Reconstruction of a Neighbourhood

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Caterina Quaglio

Introduction

- 1 This article is based on research developed within the “Ph.D. in Architecture. History and Project” of the Politecnico of Turin on the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy-le Roi,¹ with the aim of interrogating, through an in-depth investigation of a specific place, the way in which the “perimeters” of a neighbourhood are negotiated, narrated and transformed in the course of its history.
- 2 The *quartiers* are a key term in French political, public and technical vocabulary, associated over time with changing and sensitive imageries and meanings. In order to address the multiple interpretations related to this notion, the research work moved across different geographies and temporalities to follow the process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of the Grand Ensemble neighbourhood(s) — understood in both a physical and political-rhetorical sense — through the perspective of local actors and practices.
- 3 In this regard, the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy is an emblematic case study for both the perceived ordinariness of its urban and architectural layout, and for the extraordinariness — compared, for example, to other similar European contexts — of its regeneration. The Grand Ensemble’s 5,400 units house almost 60 % of the city’s inhabitants.² Its renovation is publicly known as the story of a project of exceptional

size, ambition and farsightedness, which developed in parallel to Gaston Viens' administration's 40 years of leadership, but which also conceals a constellation³ of actors and relationships much wider than the municipal boundaries. Overall, the history of Orly's Grand Ensemble therefore offers a representative cross-section of the local application of the *politique de la Ville* in France, and the questions it has raised in the national and European public and professional debate.⁴ In this context, the perimeters of neighbourhoods emerge as the temporary and instrumental outcome of a stratification, resulting from the intersection of different perspectives. The underlying assumption is that questioning the concept of neighbourhood means first acknowledging its multiplicity and ambiguity. To this end, keeping the political narrative of national programmes in the background, the article brings their implementation in a specific place and time into the foreground.

- 4 After briefly outlining some key steps in the notion of neighbourhood's evolution within the *politique de la Ville* in relation to existing studies on the subject, the text develops an in-depth analysis of three main phases in the history of the construction and regeneration of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy. In doing so, the aim is to highlight not only the differences, but also the main elements of continuity among them. Indeed, if the boundaries between these phases are extremely imprecise and blurred, even in retrospect, they mingle in the plot of an uninterrupted and entangled history in the local narrative.
- 5 The first section describes the construction of the Grand Ensemble. On the one hand, the unitary character of the neighbourhood in this phase, built in response to a profound housing emergency, originates more by default than by intention, as a consequence of its striking difference and indifference to the pre-existing urban fabric and borders. On the other hand, internal subdivisions emerge from the construction works themselves, which are at the origins of the co-existence of many "neighbourhoods" within the Grand Ensemble, that are distinct not only in terms of time and building systems, but also in the way they are experienced by residents.
- 6 The second phase corresponds to the *réhabilitation* of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy between the 1970s and 1990s. Because of the size of the Grand Ensemble and its disproportion with respect to the *ancien village*, the *politique de la ville* in Orly really took on the character of a policy of and for the whole city. In those years, the Grand Ensemble became a fundamental piece of a long-term project which, working on different scales, was aimed at the ultimate goal of "creating the city".
- 7 The third phase retraces the subsequent process of institutionalisation of the *politique de la ville* and its evolution and revision up until the 2000s, with the Agence nationale de la rénovation urbaine (ANRU)⁵ programmes. In these years, the transformation of the Grand Ensemble took new directions. It gives evidence, in particular, to the progressive legitimisation of projects aimed at a deep fragmentation and re-perimetering of neighbourhoods that calls into question the very notion of *grand ensemble*. However, in Orly, this process has taken the form of a "slow transition",⁶ also characterised by many elements of continuity.

Building the Background: Neighbourhood policies and geographies

- 8 Numerous studies in the field of historiography and sociological research have critically addressed the social and political construct of “neighbourhood” throughout the last century of French urban policy. This literature provides the essential background for this research. Indeed, the history of a neighbourhood is necessarily intertwined with the ways in which *the* neighbourhoods are interpreted and perimtered by policies and tools operating on a much larger scale.
- 9 In the Post-War-decades, public housing neighbourhoods became a pillar of the new Welfare State, progressively affirming themselves as places designated to responding to collective needs and opposing the rampant housing crisis. With the large-scale launch of the “*grands ensembles* policy”, “between 1953 and 1973, the number of social housing units in France increased from less than 500,000 to more than 3 million.”⁷ The “modernist urban vision inspired by Le Corbusier Athens Charter” and the idea that large housing estates could become “a promising opportunity for social diversity”⁸ framed this wave of production urbanistically and socially.
- 10 Over this period, peripheral *grands ensembles* were therefore presented as the solution, rather than the object of a policy of “*rénovation urbaine*”, motivated by the poor state of apartments in the “*ville ancienne*”.⁹ In the Parisian *banlieue*, this idea grew politically alongside the rise of the French Communist Party. In practice, however, the geography of new neighbourhoods responded primarily to the urbanistic and fiscal criteria defining building areas and construction requirements.¹⁰ As a consequence, projects from the same years could generate very different outcomes. The construction of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy began significantly shortly before the December 31, 1958 decree “*relatif aux zones à urbaniser en priorité*” (ZUP), which sanctioned much stricter procedures and rules concerning land use and service provision.¹¹
- 11 During the 1970s and 1980s, the perception of French *grands ensembles* progressively shifted from the urban materialisation of a political ideal to the urban manifestation of social exclusion and the breakdown of public power. In 1973, within the same year, two decrees sanctioned both “the end of new large housing projects of more than 500 units and the promotion of more tenure-mix in housing developments to avoid segregation.”¹²
- 12 Encompassing the social, administrative, professional and political spheres, Sylvie Tissot offers a lucid socio-historical reconstruction of the way in which “neighbourhoods” were gradually imposed as a “category of public action” throughout the last decades of the 20th century,¹³ becoming a reference for the identification of both the causes of an urban problem and the means of responding to it. This conceptual redefinition went hand in hand with the transition from the redistributive and sectoral-based policies of the “*État providence*” to a policy “of proximity”, which territorialised the social issue by transferring it to the neighbourhoods.¹⁴
- 13 Formed in 1981, with François Mitterrand’s election as president, The Commission Nationale pour le Développement social des quartiers (CNDSQ), formalised these principles into an operational device, inaugurating the long process of institutionalisation of the *politique de la Ville* and culminating in the establishment of a new ministry *à la ville* on December 21, 1990.¹⁵ The DSQ programme explicitly targeted

neighbourhoods¹⁶ as “the space of possibilities”.¹⁷ The “focus was on the neighbourhood, the micro-local, as a relevant framework for finding solutions adapted to the specificities of each territory.”¹⁸ The physical “*réhabilitation*” of neighbourhoods was seen as the “trigger for a change”,¹⁹ which was understood to also be social and economic. Although on the intentional policy level it was essentially a positive reading of the neighbourhoods, they progressively turned into a national “problem”, as the outcome of a process of territorial issues’ generalisation and quantification based on statistical indicators. Until the 2000s, however, in terms of material outcomes, “neither the overall urban design of these large housing estates nor the concentration of poverty changed very much.”²⁰

- 14 At the end of the 1990s, the idea that the *politique de la Ville* failed to prevent the widening gap between the “*quartiers sensibles*” and other territories became increasingly prominent in the national debate.²¹ Firstly, physical rehabilitation was not sufficient in reversing the *grands ensembles*’ marginalization and stigmatization.²² Secondly, the neighbourhood was not an appropriate scale of intervention to address socio-economic challenges.²³
- 15 The Programme national de rénovation urbaine (PNRU), launched by the minister “*de la Ville*” Jean-Louis Borloo in 2003,²⁴ is often presented as a moment of rupture with the previous “neighbourhood policy”.²⁵ The emphasis was no longer on treating “problem neighbourhoods”, but on transforming them both socially and in their urban and tenure structure, with a programme that could count on unprecedented human and financial resources. The creation of the Agence nationale de la rénovation urbaine (ANRU), set up as a “one-stop shop” for urban policy implementation,²⁶ bears witness to the political and financial objectives underpinning the programme’s construction: administrative simplification, centralisation of financial contributions, establishment of “remote” government devices inspired by a neo-liberal approach to land management, and mobilisation and empowerment of local authorities in project development, against — according to Epstein²⁷ — an actual re-centralisation in the elaboration of priorities and strategies.
- 16 Operationally, the PNRU prioritised urban renovation and housing tenure diversification over social initiatives, with the aim of increasing social and functional *mixity* and fostering the “urban ‘*banalisation*’ of the *grands ensembles*”,²⁸ as a means of integrating them into the ordinary city. New tools were deployed to support social-mixing through the major urban transformation of large housing projects. “[T]he political assumption was that demolition would ‘de-concentrate’ poverty while mixed tenure would de-stigmatise social housing by attracting middle-class groups.”²⁹ Specific attention was also paid to local empowerment, understood as a strategy not only for local growth, but also for investment consolidation.³⁰
- 17 These objectives were reaffirmed and extended ten years later by the Lamy law.³¹ The new policy also accentuated the dependence on private funding by (i) reducing the financial means of local authorities and HLM offices — while devolving larger responsibilities —; (ii) tightening the rules on the relocation of new social housing, which should have been built not only outside of large housing estates, but in areas with less than 25 % of social housing; and (iii) providing fiscal incentives for private developers within the perimeter of large housing estates.³²
- 18 After almost twenty years, the results of the 2000s *rénovation* and *renouvellement* programmes in terms of poverty concentration, housing affordability and quality of

living environment remains highly controversial amongst academics and officials.³³ Overall, the projects have triggered privatisation, fragmentation and rescaling processes that profoundly challenged the social and physical environment of neighbourhoods. By analysing the individual residential trajectories in several case studies – including Orly –, however, Lelévrier and Melic argue that, firstly, “poverty and ethnic concentration have not disappeared, and micro-fragmentation between different social levels has become more pronounced”; and, secondly, “housing estates continue to play an important role in providing affordable housing and residential opportunities for local residents.”³⁴

- 19 The continuous process of reviewing and reconfiguring the priorities of the *politique de la Ville* is reflected over the years, also in the geographies of the programmes. As a matter of fact, by contractually delimiting neighbourhoods, the “priority geographies” of the *politique de la Ville* functioned as a “continuous factory of territories”.³⁵ The main instruments for the territorial identification of priority neighbourhoods between the 1980s and 2000s were the *zones urbaines sensibles* (ZUS), *zones de redynamisation urbaine* (ZRU), *grands projets de ville* (GPV), *opérations de renouvellement urbain* (ORU). Between 1996 and 2014, a dual system was introduced: “a regulatory geography that generates fiscal or automatic advantages (the one defined by the ZUS [*zones urbaines sensibles*]) and a contractual geography that generates credits (the one of the Cucs [*contrats urbains de cohésion sociale*]),” which have replaced the *contrats de ville* since 2007.³⁶ In 2012, the Cour des comptes formally denounced the excessive complexity of the *politique de la ville*’s zoning system, pointing out how “the current priority geography, which is too dispersed and too complex, does not allow for a precise targeting of interventions on the most vulnerable territories.”³⁷ The goal therefore became to intervene more radically in fewer neighbourhoods, identified through criteria that were intended to be as objective and explicit as possible. Consequently, in parallel with the launch of the Nouveau Programme national de renouvellement urbain (NPNRU), the *Quartiers prioritaires de la politique de la Ville* (QPV) were introduced on January 1, 2015. They were determined based on the single criterion of income,³⁸ on an undifferentiated grid of 200 by 200 metres – corresponding to the statistical data reference –, with the exception of a “margin band” to be added or subtracted in agreement with local authorities in order to adapt the perimeter of intervention to the specific conditions of the territory.³⁹ “This new approach represents a turning point from previous approaches, as it does not include explicit reference to building form, or to housing issues.”⁴⁰
- 20 Furthermore, parallel to the launch of the NPNRU, the Parisian *banlieue* underwent an administrative and urban reconfiguration related to the creation of the “Métropole du Grand Paris”,⁴¹ resulting in the repartition of 130 municipalities into twelve inter-municipal *établissements publics territoriaux* (EPTs), identified by the Prefects and not always easy for municipalities to integrate into the pre-existing administrative structures.⁴²

Research Methodology

- 21 Moving from the dimension of policies to their actual implementation in Orly, the article retraces the evolution of the notion of neighbourhood by assuming a site specific and local perspective at the “micro” dimension of the *Grand Ensemble*.⁴³

Consequently, the focus will be put on (i) the perimeters construed and described by local actors, in order to identify priority areas of intervention within the framework defined by national policies; (ii) the perimeters resulting from the physical transformation of the Grand Ensemble, also in relation to the organisation of construction sites and works; and (iii) the perimeters perceived and experienced by the inhabitants. In doing so, the work complements the existing literature by extending the “gaze” to ordinary moments and to the “*habiter*” as a key dimension to understanding neighbourhoods; i.e., according to Allen and Bonetti⁴⁴, questioning how “the relationship of the inhabitants to their environment and the social relations they entertain are mediated by spatial forms, management practices and institutional action.” This means returning each neighbourhood to its specific history and context. In doing so, the text highlights the discrepancies in time and meaning that become manifest, both within local imaginaries and in the material space of the Grand Ensemble.

- 22 To this end, the interpretative tools offered by microhistory, transnational history and ethnographic research have provided the methodological background for the construction of an object of study “whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation.”⁴⁵ The hypothesis underlying the work is that a close observation of the city’s construction and regeneration processes, through careful attention to their implementation in a specific place, can shed new light on non-formal mechanisms that, while playing a decisive role in the development and outcome of projects, have too often remained in the background, becoming the “spies”⁴⁶ of more complex phenomena that are otherwise difficult to access entirely.
- 23 Operationally, the empirical research first benefited from its favourable chronological positioning, which made it possible to access an articulated corpus of oral and written sources, and to observe the evolution of policies, programmes and projects in the long-term. More specifically,⁴⁷ the perspectives offered by public and technical publications and presentations produced by public authorities, project drawings and a wide range of in-depth interviews were combined to reconstruct the threads of a composite and choral narrative.⁴⁸

Biography of (a) Neighbourhood(s) and its Perimeters

Grand Ensemble and 7 îlots: the Negation of Perimeters

- 24 Until the 19th century, Orly was a small village of about 700 inhabitants. During the 20th century, the city underwent a major transformation as a result of successive waves of massive urbanisation. The 1940s were characterised by the rapid growth of *pavillonnaire* suburbs; but it was with the construction of the Grand Ensemble of Orly-Choisy-le-Roi, in the post-war period, that the metamorphosis of the city became evident. Between 1956 and 1964, a total of 5,392 new housing units were built, almost entirely as social rental housing. Erected on a plot owned by the Ville de Paris and originally intended for the construction of a gasometer, the *Grand Ensemble* was completely indifferent to municipal boundaries and to the concerns expressed by local communities.⁴⁹ During the post-war demographic and economic boom, known in

France as the *Trentes Glorieuses*, this large land reserve outside the Ville indeed became a precious resource in responding to the housing emergency of Paris' overpopulated urban centre.

- 25 The new-born Grand Ensemble was therefore completely alien to the old borough. The “two Orlys” were not only geographically distant, but also physically separated by large infrastructures, and socially divided by profound economic and demographic differences. Furthermore, in spite of the number of dwellings built, the area almost totally lacked services and adequately urbanised public spaces. Paradoxically, this insufficiency was also made possible by the fact that Orly-Choisy was not formally identified as a *grand ensemble*.

Très vite la prise en compte du grand ensemble s'est imposée comme totalement prioritaire [...].

Très vite aussi nous sommes-nous trouvés devant une double difficulté :

1/ Cette masse urbaine ignorait les limites de la ville : Orly/Choisy était une création artificielle.

2/ De ce fait mais de plus par une “astuce” de la plus grande mauvaise foi, l'Office interdépartemental de la région parisienne, constructeur puis “gestionnaire” de l'ensemble l'avait découpé en plusieurs opérations dont chacune était inférieure au nombre de logements le désignant officiellement comme GRAND ENSEMBLE : la règle était formelle, pas de grand ensemble, pas d'obligation de construire les équipements induits par la masse de population nouvelle, d'où pas de financement, tout à la charge de la ville !⁵⁰

- 26 While the logic was unitary from the point of view of political objectives, the Grand Ensemble's division into several areas during the construction phase⁵¹ resulted in “neighbourhoods” that differed from many viewpoints: such as type of financing, expected lifetime, location and proximity to services, urban and architectural morphology, housing density, construction techniques, and tenants' economic and social situation. They ranged from the high-rises of the South and East Gaziers, where young and large working-class families were housed in quality accommodation, to the “*très économiques*” five-storey buildings of the “*cit  Million*”.⁵² But the variety of realities contained in the perimeters of the Grand Ensemble were even greater. A *cit  de transit* and two *cit s d'urgence* were built in 1956, at the heart of the future Grand Ensemble, with the aim of temporarily housing Parisian residents displaced during the *renovation* of the city centre.⁵³ Although not formally part of it, because of their origins and explicitly temporary condition — at least in their original intentions —, they were progressively surrounded and incorporated into the Grand Ensemble being constructed, and began to be considered an integral part of it.

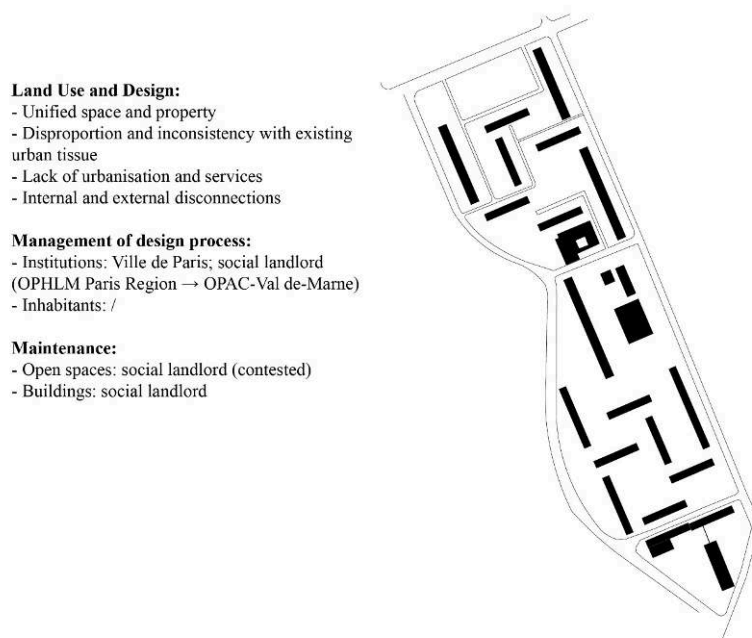
Figure 1. Aerial View of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy-le-Roi, Aviateurs Neighbourhood, c. 1972



Photothèque municipale d'Orly ; © Archives municipales d'Orly

- 27 An “internal social division” based on “inequalities in rent and [housing] quality”⁵⁴ has therefore been a characteristic feature of the Grand Ensemble of Orly since the start. Orly’s inhabitants soon began to acknowledge and experience the neighbourhoods — more than the entire Grand Ensemble — as their reference space, not only for daily living, but also for asserting their claims before the municipality or the social landlord.⁵⁵ However, the superficial understanding of these differences led public and political opinion to equate projects of very different qualities and intentions, contributing to the dramatic stigmatisation of the Parisian *banlieue* during the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout its history, the Grand Ensemble has often been perceived and treated as a substantially homogeneous and problematic unit, losing all the complexity embedded in both its physical environment and in the multiple geographies resulting from the way different spaces have been used, narrated and transformed over the years.
- 28 The example of the East Gaziers — also known as the Navigateurs — is particularly representative in this regard. From the point of view of construction, the East Gaziers constitutes a homogeneous unit which extends to the South Gaziers, developed by the same architect, Jacques Henri-Labourdette, with similar urban and architectural features. However, from the perspective of those living in the neighbourhood, the Navigateurs is divided in half by the municipal boundary separating Orly and Choisy-le-Roi. Consequently, the neighbourhood actually houses two different cities within its borders, with different rules and interlocutors.⁵⁶
- 29 The contextual conditions underlying each construction process are therefore crucial in order to capture how the Grand Ensemble’s neighbourhoods, designed by top-down policies indifferent to the local context, gain very different consistency at the local level.

Figure 2. Project of Construction, Navigateurs Neighbourhood, Spatial and Procedural Analysis



Caterina Quaglio's drawing

Créer la Ville: Opening up perimeters

- 30 With the Grand Ensemble's construction completed, the *mairie* of Orly was administering a city four times more populous than before in the span of just a few years, divided by municipal boundaries, infrastructures and a lack of urbanisation. Moreover, the lack of clarity with regard to responsibilities for the management and maintenance of the Grand Ensemble's open and built spaces rapidly caused resident dissatisfaction to grow, along with stigmatisation. In the mid-1960s, the administration of the newly elected mayor, Gaston Viens, launched a long-term city development and regeneration plan aimed at "*Créer la Ville*" by integrating the "New Orly" of the Grand Ensemble and the "old urban centre".

Premières années de "vaches maigres" nous travaillions avec des "bouts de ficelles" disions-nous encore : l'urgence dans la pauvreté nous a fait dans cette première phase nous attaquer à créer pour la ville une IMAGE FORTE, lui donner des limites "à l'échelle" de l'unité communale, unité politique et humaine : la modestie de nos moyens nous a obligés à des actions modestes mais efficaces, susceptible de la différencier dans la masse de la banlieue.⁵⁷

- 31 To achieve this result, Viens could rely on at least two favourable circumstances: the presence of the airport,⁵⁸ which ensured an influx of resources and means that was difficult to access for other municipalities in the Parisian *banlieue*; and a particularly favourable and stable political contingency.⁵⁹ Consequently, Orly soon became a testing ground for the first initiatives of the *politique de la ville*, developed some years later.

C'est ainsi qu'en 1965, alors que le Grand Ensemble HLM de 4,748 logements venait d'être construit, le maire élu était un locataire des cités et une majorité des

conseillers étaient des habitants du Grand Ensemble. C'est important de le souligner pour comprendre pourquoi cette ville plus que d'autres villes avant d'autres villes, a pris en charge ses cités.⁶⁰

- 32 From the 1970s, the perimeters resulting from the way the Grand Ensemble was locally inhabited and administered intersected with those drawn for the identification of priority intervention areas for its *réhabilitation*. On March 3, 1977, the first Plan Banlieue led to the signing of 53 contracts between national authorities, cities and HLM bodies under the Habitat et vie sociale (HVS)⁶¹ procedure, which laid the foundations of what was to become the *politique de la Ville*⁶² in France. One of them foresaw the rehabilitation of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy-le-Roi. However, the final approval of the dossier jointly proposed by the cities of Orly and Choisy was considerably delayed by the vetoes risen by the Val-de-Marne department and the Île-de-France region, due to conflict created by the introduction of the Aides personnalisée au logement (APL) between Gaston Viens and his own party – the Parti communiste français.⁶³
- 33 In the meantime, with the spread of riots in the French *banlieues*, the new policies *de la Ville* took on even greater centrality and urgency. Between 1981 and 1982, the HVS procedure was progressively flanked and replaced by the Commission nationale pour le développement social des quartiers (CNDSQ). During its first year of work, the CNDSQ identified sixteen national *îlots sensibles* in which they were to test the new measures by setting up local operational structures. On this occasion, the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy became an emblematic example of the volatility of the criteria used in the selection of *sensitive areas*. Temporarily excluded from the ordinary selection procedure at the departmental level, it was in fact indicated by the Commission itself as one of the 16 *îlots sensibles* of national relevance – also in view of the “maturity” of the dossier produced by the municipalities.⁶⁴ The very definition of *îlot*⁶⁵ conceals an implicit ambiguity from a bureaucratic and terminological point of view. Indeed, it does not correspond to the entire area of the Grand Ensemble, but rather to that of the different “neighbourhoods” or *cités* that it comprises. Actually, the first indication of a priority area identified three *îlots sensibles* – namely Gaziers Est, Gaziers Sud and La Cuve – but the national selection overlapped with it, extending the perimeter to the whole Grand Ensemble.
- 34 In this context, the stipulation of a “*Contrat global de réhabilitation*” provided Orly with the tools and resources to implement the process started with the HVS procedure, with an intervention that aimed to be innovative in method and extraordinary in scope.

Entre temps les premiers financements spécifiques destinés aux grands quartiers de banlieue étaient mis en place par le gouvernement. L'Office interdépartemental, toujours maître du jeu, utilise cette manne, malgré l'opposition de la ville, pour réaliser les “grosses réparations” négligées jusqu'ici. Ce ne sera qu'avec la dévolution de ce patrimoine à l'Office départemental, futur Opac du Val de Marne, qu'enfin la ville et ses architectes pourront amorcer un vrai projet. Deux types d'actions s'engagent :

1/ ANIMER les “Quartiers”. [...]

2/ “Réhabiliter”. Là encore un choix s'est imposé: pas de démolitions spectaculaire, brutales, traumatisantes pour les habitants. Elles arriveront plus tard, avec un projet plus mûr. À cette époque (années 1980/1990), l'implication forte de l'OPAC a été très utile. [...]

MAIS SURTOUT SOULIGNONS QUE LE PROJET URBAIN DONT IL EST ICI QUESTION NE S'EST PAS CANTONNÉ AU PERIMÈTRE DU “GRAND ENSEMBLE” MAIS A PRIS EN COMPTE DES LE DÉPART LA TOTALITÉ DU TERRITOIRE D'ORLY. [...] DE CE FAIT, A PU SE PROLONGER AU-DELÀ DE NOTRE PRÉSENCE.⁶⁶

- 35 This long-term project developed over a very long period of time, in a continuous oscillation between a unitary vision and contingent opportunity. It took shape in a multitude of interventions operating at different scales, all contributing to the common objective of “remaking the city from pieces that are not.”⁶⁷ Firstly, several highly symbolic planning and landscaping operations were promoted to reinforce the connection between the Grand Ensemble and the “old Orly”: from the standardisation of the signage system; to the creation of public parks and services of common interest in the space separating the two parts of the city, including the new *mairie*, strongly desired by Viens to be placed right in the middle between the “two Orlys”.
- 36 In parallel with urban-scale projects, a total of 4,300 dwellings were refurbished or modified to make the residential offer of the Grand Ensemble more varied and better distributed. To do that, the administrations of Orly and Choisy decided to simultaneously intervene on all the “neighbourhoods” of the Grand Ensemble, during each of the four *tranches de travaux* in which the programme was organised. This choice, although very costly in terms of duration and management of the construction sites, aimed to avoid any dissatisfaction among the residents of different neighbourhoods and to leave space for progressive refinements of the project. “A specific operational device was put in place for this purpose”: three teams were created, “each responsible for a neighbourhood as a way to respect their diversity,”⁶⁸ but all were under the coordination of the architects Jean and Maria Deroche, who oversaw the transformation of Orly as *architectes conseils* throughout the entire 44 years of Mayor Viens’ term in office.
- 37 In addition, a profound restructuring of the Grand Ensemble’s outdoor space was carried out. The functional delimitation of open spaces and the realisation of flexible structures that could freely be used by residents were developed in parallel to some key actions unrelated to the physical transformation: (i) the transfer of the Grand Ensemble’s ownership and management to the departmental social landlord, which was much closer to local needs and dynamics; (ii) the involvement of the inhabitants in all stages of the process; (iii) the clarification of responsibilities in the maintenance of open and built spaces.

Figure 3. Grand Ensemble Open Space Refurbishment, *Kiosques* of the Cachin Park, c. 1990



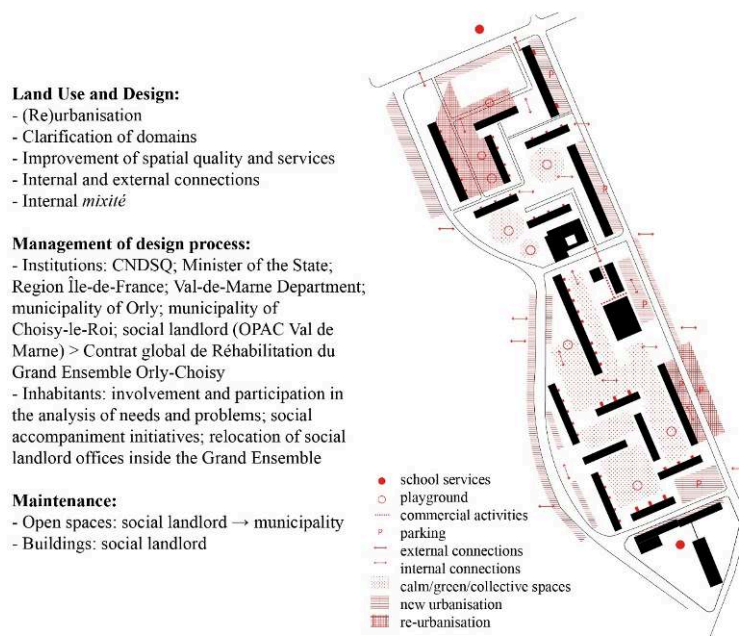
Photothèque municipale d'Orly; © Archives municipales d'Orly

- 38 Overall, the *réhabilitation* project developed between the 1960s and the 1990s did not structurally alter the Grand Ensemble's layout. It was rather aimed at bringing out its quality and improving its functionalities, relating the transformation of the physical space to un-material strategic processes.

Prior to renewal, Orly's population was already diverse, containing a large number of medium-sized apartments. The local strategy pursued by both the municipality and the social housing corporation promoted social mixing by offering improved public services and opportunities for existing residents to upgrade their residences. This encouraged them to remain in the neighbourhood even if other options were accessible to them.⁶⁹

- 39 So, while acknowledging its slipperiness, the project recognised and reinforced the internal subdivision of the Grand Ensemble into "homogeneous areas that constitute real neighbourhoods."⁷⁰

Figure 4. Réhabilitation Project under the DSQ, Navigateurs Neighbourhood, Spatial and Procedural Analysis



Caterina Quaglio's drawing

Harmoniser la Ville: The Fragmentation of Perimeters

- 40 At first, the process of extension and institutionalisation of the *politique de la Ville*, which ignited the political and professional debate during the 1990s, was almost imperceptible in Orly among the general continuity of the construction sites and political and technical staff. In this sense, the renovation of the Calmette neighbourhood in the early 1990s represented an exception, anticipating demolition and reconstruction as well as the return to block urbanism as key tools for urban regeneration.⁷¹
- 41 In the second half of the 1990s, the city entered a delicate period of generational and political transition, during which the flow of public regeneration programmes was interrupted for the first time. In this context, the launch of a *marché de définition*⁷² — emblematically promoted and managed by the social landlord rather than the municipality —, laid the foundations for Orly's candidacy at the new national programmes in the 2000s, and also for the emergence of new professional and political figures. Frédéric Winter, for example, having first worked for the Val-de-Marne OPAC and then for the Orly municipality, coordinated the regeneration of the Grand Ensemble at the local level for a long period of time afterwards.
- 42 In the following years, the local narrative progressively approached and merged with the one that was emerging at the national level. According to the municipality of Orly, the so called “Borloo” law marked “a turning point of national significance”.⁷³ More practically, however, from the point of view of the city's long-term urban development,

the programme simply provided “[s]tate resources to extend the urban integration project for these districts.”⁷⁴

43 On February 23, 2005, the first agreement for the *rénovation urbaine* of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy was signed.⁷⁵ Resumed in 2015 under a new convention formed by the NPNRU, the project was aimed, on the one hand, at bridging the divide between the Grand Ensemble and the rest of the city; and on the other, to diversify the residential offer from the perspective of a radical renewal and socio-economic rebalancing.⁷⁶

44 The *rénovation* programmes of the 2000s provided administrations with the tools to definitively overcome the city of the *grands ensembles*, intended not only as an architectural and urban form, but also as a managerial and social model.

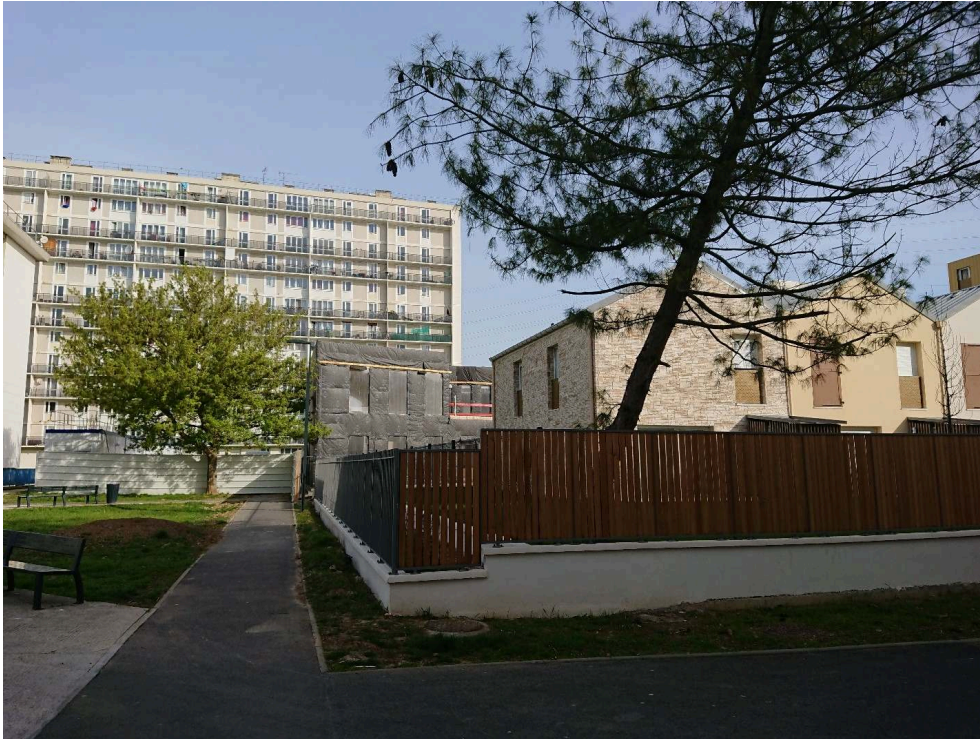
A l’instar des cités-jardins qui pouvaient mêler harmonieusement et sans fracture, habitat individuel et collectif, il apparaît possible aujourd’hui de juxtaposer, après restructurations démolitions ou reconstructions, des habitats de statut différents dans ces ensembles en parcellisant davantage leur territoire, en les résidentialisant, de telle sorte que l’on recrée un espace plus privatif, plus réduit, aux échelles d’appropriation et d’investissement possibles des résidents.⁷⁷

45 The projects of the Aviateurs and Pierre-au-Prêtre neighbourhoods are, in different ways, emblematic of this new approach. Given the profound difference of the two neighbourhoods in terms of morphology, location and social composition, demolition-reconstruction interventions prevailed in the Aviateurs and in the *résidentialisation*⁷⁸ of Pierre-au-Prêtre. Both projects, however, opened the way to a “micro-fragmentation into small residences”⁷⁹ under the banner of a “return to block urbanism” and the “mutability of plots”.⁸⁰ Overall, the still-ongoing *renouveau* projects of the 2000s produced a “major morphological change in the urban fabric of the Grand Ensemble”⁸¹ and a profound rethinking of the scale and notion of neighbourhood.

Là où les démolitions et les reconstructions sont massives et cumulatives dans le temps, il y a bien un changement morphologique important, amenant à la disparition des tours et des barres et à une microfragmentation en petites résidences. Physiquement, les grands ensembles de Meaux, d’Orly, de La Courneuve, n’ont plus du tout la même apparence, la même visibilité dans l’espace urbain. [...]. “Ça fait moins cité,” “c’est plus à taille humaine,” entend-on fréquemment lors des entretiens.⁸²

46 In synthesis, as Lelévrier and Melic point out, “after 40 years of urban renewal processes, it can be said that the ‘large housing estate’ no longer exists as an urban form.”⁸³.

Figure 5. Navigateurs Neighbourhood during Renovation, 2019



Caterina Quaglio's photograph

- 47 It is probably too early to tell the impact these phenomena will have on the social and urban structure of each Orly neighbourhoods. However, many elements of continuity persist when observing the ongoing transformation from an inside perspective. Firstly, in Orly, the complex work of inhabitants' relocation has assumed the form of a "slow transition", often characterised by local residential trajectories.⁸⁴ The concentration of poverty and ethnic groups has not disappeared, "but rather has been reconcentrated into other sub-sectors."⁸⁵ Furthermore, the inhabitants still demonstrate a strong sense of belonging with respect to the original neighbourhoods of the Grand Ensemble, which manifests in the criticism and concern for the disruptiveness of the transformations underway. Finally, the public narrative promoted by local authorities and practitioners emphasises the continuity with a long and almost uninterrupted history of urban development.
- 48 Indeed, this trend of social permanence in the housing estate "aligns with local strategies of municipalities and social housing corporations" of maintaining "an already existing social diversity by encouraging local, upper working-class people from inside the housing estate to take a step upwards in their housing careers and to remain in the neighbourhoods, rather than leaving."⁸⁶ Consequently, from the perspective of the Orly administration, the NPNRU marks the entry into the "time 3" of a parabola that began 50 years earlier.

Il s'agit moins dorénavant de "créer la ville", puisque cette étape du projet - "le temps 1" - est aujourd'hui accomplie. Le "temps 2" s'était attaché à diluer les blocs constitués du grand ensemble pour commencer à les fondre dans le tissu urbain général de la ville. Il faut engager maintenant les opérations d'aménagement qui matérialisent le "temps 3" du projet de ville. Celui-ci vise à "harmoniser" toute la

ville, à lui donner une plus grande cohérence sociale et urbaine et de permettre à ses habitants de mieux vivre et de se reconnaître dans toute la ville.⁸⁷

Figure 6. *Renouvellement* Project under the NPNRU, Navigateurs Neighbourhood, Spatial and Procedural Analysis

Land Use and Design:

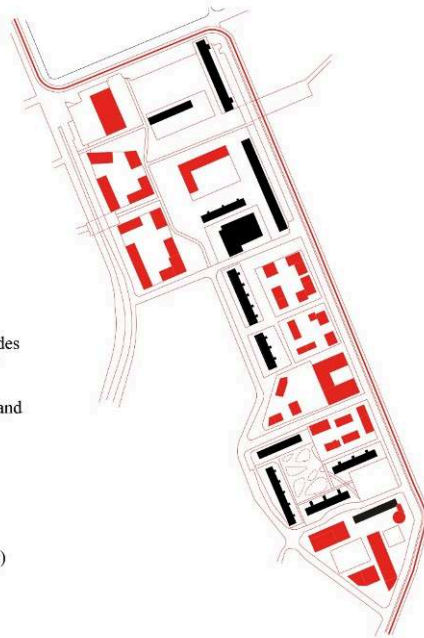
- Privatisation
- Fragmentation
- Résidentialisation
- Differentiation
- Internal and external *mixité*

Management of design process:

- Institutions: ANRU; Agence National de l'Habitat; EPT Grand Orly Seine Bavière; Municipality of Orly; Municipality of Choisy-le-Roi; social landlord (OPAC → Valophis Habitat → Valophis group); Caisse des Dépôts; Val de Marne Department > NPNRU protocol
- Inhabitants: participation to design process and local empowerment > Conceils Citoyens / Ateliers Urbains

Maintenance:

- Open spaces: entreprise d'Insertion (HEP) (Choisy-le-Roi) / Municipality of Orly
- Buildings: social landlord (Valophis Habitat)



Caterina Quaglio's drawing

Conclusions

- 49 Reconstructing the history of the Grand Ensemble allows us to reflect on the notion of neighbourhood from a perspective that brings to the fore local representations and housing practices, while keeping national policies in the background. Following the uninterrupted construction and deconstruction process with regard to the neighbourhoods' perimeters and meanings, some implications emerge that are often overlooked in the history of the French *banlieue*.
- 50 What first comes out is the indeterminacy and fluidity implicit in the very scale and definition of *grand ensemble* neighbourhoods, commonly associated with an image of inert stillness, standardization and unitariness as a consequence of the alleged inflexibility of the modern urban fabric. According to needs and opportunities, Orly's Grand Ensemble has been recounted in its homogeneity or diversity, in its deficiencies or potential, and as one place or as many. Documents and outlooks offered by different actors overlap and influence each other, in a continuous work of representation and redefinition of perimeters conceived in a temporary, instrumental and plural way.
- 51 Another element that stands out is the temporal and geographical discrepancy that emerges between the political plane of official documents and the local history and perception. While the three phases analysed in the research recall the official

periodization of the *politique de la Ville*, they do not fully reflect it. Indeed, the extraordinary political and professional stability of Orly has allowed to systematize and redirect targeted resources over time, becoming a long-term local strategy that transcends the chronological boundaries of the *politique de la Ville*.

- 52 Moreover, in the local individual and collective memory, the evolving geographies of neighbourhoods do not succeed one another, but rather they stratify and sediment. Today, in spite of the physical, functional and proprietary fragmentation of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy, its “neighbourhoods” continue to be firmly present in local representation as a reference of both public action and living practices. This brings to light the coexistence of different ways of perceiving time and duration in the neighbourhoods’ history.
- 53 Finally, intangible factors — e.g. management and maintenance of common or public spaces — appear to be much more influential than physical form when it comes to the appreciation of neighbourhoods as inhabited places. In the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy, within the perimeter of the same neighbourhood, the inhabitants have generated very different relationships with their environment depending on, for example, the social landlord’s proximity and commitment.
- 54 In conclusion, relying on the local dimension as a key observation lens, this article questions the role of neighbourhoods as a central yet ambiguous scale in processes of the public city’s construction and regeneration. In doing so, it introduces a structural problematisation of the object of study, which suggests the need to further multiply and diversify the angles of observation as a key in addressing both the history and prospects of a neighbourhood in its multidimensionality.

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NOTES

1. The work was developed across France, Italy and Scotland, but this article focuses only on the French case study.
2. Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, “Impoverishment and Social Fragmentation in Housing Estates of the Paris Region, France”, in Daniel Baldwin Hess, Tiit Tammaru, Maarten van Ham (éd.), *Housing Estates in Europe*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2018, p. 315.
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14. See also: Philippe Estèbe, *L’Usage des quartiers: action publique et géographie dans la politique de la ville, 1982-1999*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2004. The author concludes that the experimental elements introduced by a territorial model of intervention clashed with administrative inertia, political uncertainties and tactics of local authorities, which limited the actual innovative outcomes of this approach.
15. According to Philippe Estèbe (*op. cit.*), the mobilisation of an increasing number of institutional actors paradoxically corresponded to a substantial loss of adherence to an effectively shared strategy.
16. Despite the rhetoric of innovation accompanying the launch of the first programmes, this approach appears to be in continuity with previous urban policies in many regards. See: Sylvie Tissot, *op. cit.*; Albert Lévy, “De l’îlot insalubre au quartier sensible: permanence et continuité dans les politiques urbaines”, in Gérard Baudin, Philippe Genestier (éd.), *op. cit.*, p. 31-47.
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23. Maurice Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
24. “Loi n° 2003-710 du 1^{er} août 2003 d’orientation et de programmation pour la ville et la rénovation urbaine”.
25. Studying the network of stakeholders and the discourse that animated the École de la rénovation urbaine for the training of urban renewal project managers, Claire Carriou and Yankel Fijalkow show how it embodies an ideological composite rather than an actual context of rupture. See: Claire Carriou, Yankel Fijalkow, “L’École de la rénovation urbaine : un nouveau bricolage idéologique?”, *Métropolitiques*, 2018, [on line] [<https://metropolitiques.eu/L-Ecole-de-la-renovation-urbaine.html>], last access 27.09.2022.
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31. “Loi n° 2014-173 du 21 février 2014 de programmation pour la ville et la cohésion urbaine”. It introduces the Nouveau Programme de renouvellement urbain (NPNRU).
32. Christine Lelévrier, *op. cit.*, 2021.
33. E.g.: Barbara Allen, Michel Bonetti, *L’Habiter, un impensé de la politique de la ville : pour un renouvellement du sens de l’action*, La Tour d’Aigues, Éditions de l’Aube, 2018; Marie-Hélène Bacqué, “De la recherche à l’expertise et à l’engagement. Retour sur une mission sur la participation dans la politique de la ville”, *Sociologie*, 6, 4, 2015, p. 401-416; Renaud Epstein, *op. cit.*; Claire Lévy-Vroelant, “Contradictory Narratives on French Social Housing: Looking Back and Looking Forward”, *Housing Studies*, 29, 4, 2014, p. 485-500.
34. Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 313.
35. Philippe Estèbe, *op. cit.*
36. SIG ville, “Les Quartiers prioritaires de la politique de la ville (2014-2020)”, [on line] [<https://sig.ville.gouv.fr/page/198/les-quartiers-prioritaires-de-la-politique-de-la-ville-2014-2020>], last access 23.12.2019.
37. SIG ville, *op. cit.*, translated by the author.
38. The list of priority neighbourhoods is obtained by cross-referencing the income level of an area with the average value of the agglomeration in which it is located and of metropolitan France on the whole.
39. Delphine Jacquier, personal interview, 29.03.2019.
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45. George. E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 1995, p. 95-117, p. 102.
46. Carlo Ginzburg, *Miti, emblemi, spie: morfologia e storia*, Torino, G. Einaudi, 1986.
47. Sandra Parvu, Alice Sotgia, “L’Histoire en projet. La part du récit dans la construction et la rénovation de la cité des 4000 à La Courneuve”, *Lieux Communs*, 15, 2012, p. 46-67.
48. See the extensive list of archives and interviews in the Bibliography.
49. The decree of December 31, 1958, entrusts the prefects with the identification of land for new urbanisation, essentially excluding the municipalities from the decision-making process. Vd. Danièle Voldman, *op. cit.*, p. 47-62, p. 56.
50. Jean Deroche, “Notre histoire d’Orly”, personal email, 28.04.2019.
51. L.E.N. or Cité Million; Gazières (Aviateurs and Navigateurs); Pierre-au-Prêtre, LoPoFa; Les Tillules; Nouvelet; Faisanderie. The number of these areas changes according to the criteria used for counting them — construction phase, urban-architectural similarities, geographical proximity, etc.
52. The L.E.N. became known as the “Cité Million” because of the method of financing used for their construction, which allocated one million francs for each dwelling.
53. Élise Derrien, *La Réhabilitation du grand ensemble d’Orly-Choisy-le-Roi : un laboratoire de la politique de la ville ? (1965-1993)*, mémoire de master 2 en histoire des sociétés occidentales contemporaines, Paris, université Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne.
54. Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 323.
55. Élise Derrien, *op. cit.*
56. The renouvellement projects currently underway suggest an increasing separation between the two parts of the neighbourhood, both in terms of urban planning and management.
57. Jean Deroche, “Notre histoire d’Orly”, personal email, 28.04.2019.

58. Originally created as a military airport and converted into civil in 1945, the Orly Airport received more than 6 million travellers a year in the 1960s, and was one of the most visited monuments in France (Pascale Blin, *Orly ou la chronique d'une ville en mouvement*, Paris, Éditions de l'Épure, 2001).
59. Gaston Viens served as mayor when the Parti communiste français achieved the greatest consensus in the so-called *ceinture rouge* of Parisian *banlieues*, a condition that secured him broad and stable political support. He was mayor of Orly from 1965 to 2009. He also served as president of the General Council of the Val-de-Marne Department between 1967 and 1970 and, between 1983 and 1988, as president of the OPAC of Val-de-Marne, which succeeded the OPHLM of the Paris Region as owner and landlord of the Grand Ensemble.
60. Gaston Viens, from: Blin, *op. cit.*, p. 3. Viens lived in a flat in the Cité des Aviateurs from 1961 to 1976.
61. The national Habitat et vie sociale (HVS) procedure was officially launched in February 1973. A restricted, inter-ministerial working group was set up to coordinate the actions of a complex system of public and private actors with the aim of making the cités “more human”. In the same year, the Circulaire Guichard sanctioned, at least officially, the end of the policy of *grand ensembles*, favouring a shift of attention and resources to the social dimension of the housing emergency. See: Thibault Tellier, “Humaniser le béton ou les politiques publiques au service de l’humanisation de la ville: L’exemple de la politique de la ville à ses origines, 1975-1985”, *Histoire urbaine*, 48, 1, 2017; Olivier Guichard, “Circulaire du 21 mars 1973. Relative aux formes d’urbanisation dites “grands ensembles” et à la lutte contre la ségrégation sociale par l’habitat”, *Journal officiel de la République française*, Paris, Ministère de l’Équipement et de l’Aménagement du territoire, 1973.
62. Annie Fourcaut underlines the relativity of the definition of the origins of the *politique de la Ville*: Annie Fourcaut, “Les Habits neufs des politiques de la ville depuis 1980”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 64, 1999, p. 113-119.
63. Derrien, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
64. Reunion on the *îlot sensible* Orly-Choisy (Élise Derrien, *op. cit.*, p. 121).
65. The îlot was the basic geographical unit for demographic statistics in France until the 1999 census. The perimeters of the îlots were defined by the Insee (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques) in agreement with the municipalities. While in the case of the îlots located in “dense urban areas” the unit often corresponded to a block, those located in peripheral areas were delimited by roads or other physical barriers.
66. Jean Deroche, “Notre histoire d’Orly”, personal email, 28.04.2019.
67. Jean Deroche, “Tenter de refaire la ville à partir de morceaux qui n’en sont pas”, *Techniques et architecture*, 307, 1975, p. 62-63.
68. *Ibid.*, translated by the author.
69. Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 333.
70. ORGECO, *Dossier-Cadre. 1^e tranche de travaux*, Orly-Choisy-le-Roi, 1982, retrieved from Archives départementales du Val-de-Marne, p. 9, translated by the author.
71. Amandine Riault, personal interview, 26.04.2018. The Calmette was not part of the Grand Ensemble but the project set an important precedent for the interventions developed in the following years in Orly’s cités.
72. Délégation interministérielle à la Ville, *Marchés de définition. Une démarche de projet urbain*, Direction générale de l’Urbanisme, de l’Habitat et de la Construction.
73. Ville d’Orly, Groupe Valophis, *Orly. Bilan du Projet de Rénovation urbaine*, Conseil municipal 23.02.2017, [on line] [<https://www.mairie-orly.fr/Cadre-de-vie/Developpement-urbain/Projets-Urbains/Racine-Saules/Le-premier-projet-de-renovation-urbaine-bilan>], last access 14.04.2022.
74. *Ibid.*

75. OPAC Val-de-Marne, Ville d'Orly, *Convention partenariale pour la mise en œuvre du projet de renouvellement urbain du Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy*, 2005.
76. "From 1976 to 2013, nine buildings containing 1631 housing units were replaced by a mix of social (800) and private (633) housing units" (Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 330). In the first phase of the PRU, 53 % of households in the Aviateurs and 40 % in the Pierre-au-Prêtre left the neighbourhood (Ville d'Orly, Groupe Valophis, *op. cit.*).
77. Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 330.
78. See: Émilie Oddos, Géraldine Geoffroy (éd.), *La résidentialisation en questions*, Lyon, Certu, 2007; Philippe Panerai, *Résidentialisation ?*, Rosny-sous-Bois, Éditions Boa, 2022.
79. Christine Lelévrier, Christophe Noyé, "La Fin des grands ensembles ?", in Jacques Donzelot (éd.), *À quoi sert la rénovation urbaine ?*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2012, p. 185-218, p. 215.
80. OPAC Val-de-Marne, Ville d'Orly, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
81. Christine Lelévrier, Christophe Noyé, *op. cit.*, p. 215.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 323.
84. "In Orly, 98.5 % of those who were relocated remained in the same municipality, and 50 % within the same sub-sector of the housing estate." (Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 332). The impact of residential mobility on the integrity of neighbourhoods has long been a subject of debate in the scientific community, see in particular: part II - "Le quartier, un lieu investi", in Jean-Yves Authier, Marie-Hélène Bacqué, France Guérin-Pace (éd.), *Le Quartier: enjeux scientifiques, actions politiques et pratiques sociales*, Paris, La Découverte, 2007, p. 101-176.
85. Christine Lelévrier, Talia Melic, *op. cit.*, p. 335.
86. *Ibid.*
87. Ville d'Orly, Ville de Choisy-le-Roi, EPT Grand-Orly Seine Bièvre, *Protocole de préfiguration des projets de renouvellement de urbain de Choisy-le-Roi et d'Orly*, p. 9-10.

ABSTRACTS

How is the scale and perimeter of a neighbourhood defined? Shifting the attention from the policy dimension to their actual implementation in a specific place, the article questions the evolution of the notion of neighbourhood by retracing the history of the Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy-le-Roi, from its construction to the successive redevelopment programmes carried out almost uninterruptedly until today. Throughout this time, the neighbourhoods of the Grand Ensemble have been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed both in the physical environment and in local narratives and imaginaries. Consequently, relying on the local dimension as a lens to address broader phenomena, the text highlights not only the discrepancies in time and meaning characterizing different phases and approaches, but also the elements of continuity that become manifest at the "micro" scale of the Grand Ensemble.

Comment définir l'échelle et le périmètre d'un quartier ? Déplaçant le regard de la dimension des politiques à leur mise en œuvre effective dans un lieu spécifique, l'article interroge l'évolution de la notion de quartier en retraçant l'histoire du Grand Ensemble Orly-Choisy-le-Roi depuis sa construction jusqu'aux programmes de développement successifs poursuivis de manière quasi ininterrompue jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Au cours de cette période, les quartiers du Grand Ensemble

ont été construits, déconstruits et reconstruits tant dans l'environnement physique que dans les récits et imaginaires locaux. Par conséquent, en s'appuyant sur la dimension locale pour aborder des phénomènes plus larges, le texte permet de mettre en évidence non seulement les décalages de temps et de sens qui caractérisent les différentes phases et approches, mais aussi les éléments de continuité qui se manifestent à l'échelle "micro" du Grand Ensemble.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Quartier, Périmètres, Politique de la Ville, Rénovation, Grands Ensembles

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