Beyond the Périphérique : Examining the failures of the built environment in the downfall of the Parisian suburbs

Paris is a city firmly detached from its surroundings. Beyond its ring road lies a 'not Paris', a parallel universe which exists in limbo, beyond the administrative boundaries of the city but part of its conurbation. Far from the idyllic American suburbia, the reality of the French Banlieues (or suburbs) is one of vast concrete housing complexes (known as cités) hosting poverty, crime and racial inequality. Although forcefully removed from the Parisian sphere of influence, the cités exist as scars of the failed modernist utopia, Paris would like to forget. The architectural dogma of Le Corbusier paired with governmental constraints resulted in a built environment that failed and continues to fail to this day, the residents who find themselves in these beton-brut poverty traps. To examine the failings of the Banlieues, is to examine the lack of oversight that the architects and the government displayed in conjunction with inequalities that have persisted since the downfall of the banlieues some 50 years ago.

Construction of the 4000s housing estate, Courneuve Paris circa 1957 (Archives municipales de La Courneuve). The piles of prefabricated concrete panels facilitated the rapid construction of sprawling housing estates.

Through decades of shockingly poor planning, design, management and policy, the banlieues have become areas of relegation, poverty and segregation. Categorised by a high percentage immigrant population along with low public spending and unemployment, the seeds of failure were sown some 60 years ago when the utopian promise of the hi rise began to fall through. After the ravages of World War Two, France was in deficit of 3 million residences. To address the dire housing situation, the government unleased beton-brut (raw concrete) modernism, a new radical modus operandi. This new style of building vast tours (hi-rises) and barres (long horizontal units) led to the creation of huge grouped clusters of buildings know as les grandes ensembles or habitation a at a rate of 300,000 habitation à loyer modéré units (social housing, HLM for short) per year from 1953-73 (Bergatini, 2013). The rate and scale of construction was unparalleled as the government experimented with this new type of architecture that went hand in hand with their desire to build big, quick and cheap. The shortcomings of these complexes were numerous, the architects were often blinded by a desire to determine a new Corbusierist future of uniformity and modernity

whilst ignoring elements that were actually necessary for habitation. For example, in 1968 only 41% of HLM units had individual toilet facilities. Regardless, these vast complexes were beacons of modernity for the displaced middle classes, who flocked in droves to these concrete suburbs. The initial buzz of the grandes ensembles quickly faded as the reality of the impracticality of their design became evident to residents. Transport links to commercial centres were almost non-existent and public services such as schools, medical centres and leisure facilities were severely lacking. In 1960, there were 29 lycées (secondary schools) in central Paris, yet the banlieues, with twice the population had less than half that. Furthermore, the number of day centres per child under 3 was and still is six times lower than the national average (Institute Montaigne, 2023). Those who had the means to, left, leaving vacant units to be filled by first generation immigrants whom the government forcefully relocated from bidonvilles (shanty towns in and around Paris). Along with being in an unfamiliar environment, the new residents of the Grandes Ensembles inherited the problems that the first residents so quickly fled from, without the social support or economic means to do anything about it.

'It's hard to think of a worse physical context for the successful integration of millions of incomers. The banlieues may as well have been designed as ghettoes.' -Peter Franklin

One of the famous wide angle shots from the film 'La Haine' dir. Mathieu Kassowitz 1995. A gritty masterpiece that presented an introspective, unfiltered look into life in Parisian Banlieues, tackling the topics of racism, poverty and police brutality. The raw , visceral nature of the film peaked my interest in the French Banlieues and can be considered as the inspiration for this essay.

'We are products of our environment,' is none truer than in the cités of Paris. A clear distinction must be made between the French word 'cité' and its English homophone 'city' ; one refers to the large, dynamic urban settlements found globally, whereas the other is used to refer to the sprawling, drowsy, housing estates that were once beacons of modernity found around Paris and other major French cities. The building blocks, quite literally, of each cite are the aforementioned Grandes Ensembles. Initially the shape of each building was dictated

by the axis movements of a crane (le chemin de grue), allowing for rapid assembly. However the rectangular form was abstracted over time to create shapes of varying obscurity. Some assume the typical Vertical Block form such as the Balzac tower block situated within the 4000 housing estate, whereas others assume unconventional shapes such as circular 'Arenes de Picasso' or Angular 'Cité du Parc'.

An aerial photograph of 'Les Arenes de Picasso' (540 units) designed by Spanish-French architect Manuel Nunez Yanowsky. (Nunez 1985)

The capacity and density requirements of units took priority, disregarding the scale of these buildings, leading to vast constructions that literally swallowed their inhabitants within labyrinth-like corridors and alleys. Once the posterchild for postwar modernism, these Parisian concretopias have fallen victim to the very thing that set them apart, their architecture. Imposing, unfriendly, soulless design has led the inhabitants to echo the buildings they found themselves in. Their failure came from the fundamental principles that informed their construction, the functionalist style. Although there is no unified doctrine as such, functionalism rose to prominence in the post-war period, the perfect anti-thesis to art deco and other pre-war decorative styles. It abandoned the cornices, columns, archways and other embellishments of yore to pursue simple, rational construction. But humans are inherently irrational creatures; they love beautiful, decorative things regardless of their practicality and so placing them in a sanitised environment is oppressive and saps the soul. By removing unnecessary aspects of construction, the Grande Ensembles feel like dormitories rather than homes, the uniformity of the units more akin to prisons or office buildings. Constructions purely designed for utility, not for normal human habitation, 'a machine for living', as coined by architect Le Corbusier. Looking beyond the scale of each individual building, the blocks are arranged in introverted clusters around poor quality open spaces leading to a sense of entrapment. Perhaps as Le Corbusier desired, so called unnecessary human interactions were stifled by an absence of meaningful social space.

A lack of direct involvement from Le Corbusier did not prevent his radical thinking from informing the construction of many of the banlieues. The Franco Swiss architect has become synonymous with modernist architecture, primarily the subset of functionalism. Functionalism is a utilitarian approach to building, the embodiment of function over form, a building is simply a unit of habitation. Sanctified amongst the international community for his physical love letters to concrete, Le Corbusier's unrealised concepts are often overlooked. Le Corbusier's highly developed plans for urban renewal betray the disquieting undertones of his work. 'Ville contemporaine' could be considered a manifesto to authoritarian architecture, when state and the architect are one in the same as they are in the banlieues. The plan suggested the razing of the cultural centre of Paris, to be replaced by social housing for the proletariat, segregated from the 60 storey bourgeoisie inhabited skyscrapers by parkland. Randomness was Corbusier's bête noire as he sought to homogenise all needs, facilities and services into single units, the precursor to the 15 minute city. The extent to which these plans were developed was troubling for many of Le Corbusier's peers. He sought an architectural cleansing, rationalising the built environment and feudalizing society once more, under the roof of modern authoritarianism. Evidently, Corbusierist thinkings trickled down onto the pages of the banlieue's authors. They were disciples of modernist principles, who materialised some of Corbusier's dream in the 3 million council properties constructed during the Trente Glorieuses (A post war period of economic growth across France 1945-75). The writings of Le Corbusier in conjunction with his physical creations (such as the Unite d'Habitation Marseilles) were so prolific that, although not in direct involvement, the power of association was enough for his thinking to permeate through banlieue design. The themes of car centric infrastructure, social stratification and uniformity present across the majority of banlieues can be accredited at least in part to Le Corbusier, in conjunction with the accompanying social problems. Le Corbusier's dream came to fruition, not in Paris as intended but rather on its peripheries.

An Aerial Photograph of the notorious La Grande Borgne housing estate designed by Emille Aillaud (©Alex Maclean 2010)

La Grande Borgne can be considered a case study of how the built environment has failed an entire community and created one of the most turbulent, disadvantaged neighbourhoods in France. Unemployment sits at a staggering 22%, nearly triple the national average. The serpentine cité is fenced by 3 major roads that both contain and ostracize those within. Aillaud intended for the city to move away from the monotonous slabs of the original Grandes Ensembles and be altogether more organic. Unfortunately, the problems of the hi rise were simply translated horizontally. Clusters are inward facing and claustrophobic, separated by 'liberated ground' that is no more than parched earth. Sculpture and art work attempt to lift the spirits of residents, but unfortunately paint does not fix deep rooted societal and spatial problems. A universal issue throughout the banlieues is that due to the uniformity of units, there is no semblance of a local property ladder, those who want an upgrade move out do so leaving those with no choice behind. Many of the cites, such as La Grande Borne fall victim to gigantism, that is to say they are of a scale that is both dehumanising and unsustainable. Many are small cities in their own right , density and population wise, but without any semblance of neighbourhood (La Grande Borne pushes 30,000 inhabitants). Perhaps the crux of the issue is that when the cités were constructed, the authorities forced physical neighbourhoods onto the environment in the form of clustered towers, however a successful neighbourhood is one that is both physically and socially coherent. One cannot dictate a neighbourhood, it is something organic that develops with time, but the authorities tried to quarter up commercial, educational and residential areas into separate sectors. The image provide of La Grande Borne demonstrates this, there is no evidence of commercial activity, or anything other than the blank monotonous facades of its buildings. Consequently, the cités organs are detached. Due to the continuous length of units, La Grande Borne is more akin to a labyrinth than a housing project; it is closed off, secretive, and conceals the anti-social activities that occur within its confines. Its design means it is simply impossible to police effectively, residents are by themselves as there is no active police station within the cité. La Grande Borne is an archipelago of isolation, an architectural failure to be blunt.

The concept of the Hi-rise implies proximity to a city centre, however all the Parisian cités are firmly located en banlieue, that is to say, beyond the threshold that is considered Paris. The physical seperator is the Périphérique , an 8 lane ring road that encircles Paris, leaving 'not Paris' in its wake. Coincidentally opened in 1973, the year of the international oil crisis, by Georges Pompidou, the new ring road essentially sealed the fate of the banlieues as zones of relegation, alienating the suburbs to an even greater degree. Rather than facilitating connections for the disadvantaged , the Périphérique ruthlessly severed them. It is inherently inhospitable to pedestrians and often is often recessed into the ground like a modern day moat or elevated above ground. As journalist, Justin Tribillion, noted, the Périphérique plunges underground in the more affluent neighbourhoods of Vinciennes and Bolougne but remains omnipresent in the poorer suburbs of Seine St Denis. A constant visual reminder of the detachment from Paris the banlieuesards feel. As well as the metaphorical and physical division the road creates, the economic division is tangible too, best shown by housing prices. Cross the Périphérique from the 19e arrondisment into Auberbvillieurs (literally either side of the Périphérique) and the average cost per square metre of 8200 euros halves (www.meilleursagents.com).

Regardless of this concrete belt, the mere geographical distance from central Paris to even the most central cités is significant. It is crucial to note Paris is a highly centralised city. There is a distinctive lack of so called concentric towns that serve as localised centres orbiting the Parisian nucleus. Thus, there is a reliance on central Paris to provide employment. However, for residents inhabiting a banlieue beyond the Périphérique threshold, the commute into Paris can be a significant barrier to employment. Distances

range from circa 25km for the most distant such as Les Ulis or Les Bergeries to 5km for the most central, but many lie between 10 to 15 km away, certainly out of what 'proper' Parisians would call Paris. This geographical distance creates a sociopolitical disconnect that only serves to further ostracise the vulnerable communities that inhabit les Grandes Ensembles. Stuck in a no man's land, devoid of economic opportunities, a commute into Paris is necessary but the legacy of poor transport infrastructure has persisted.
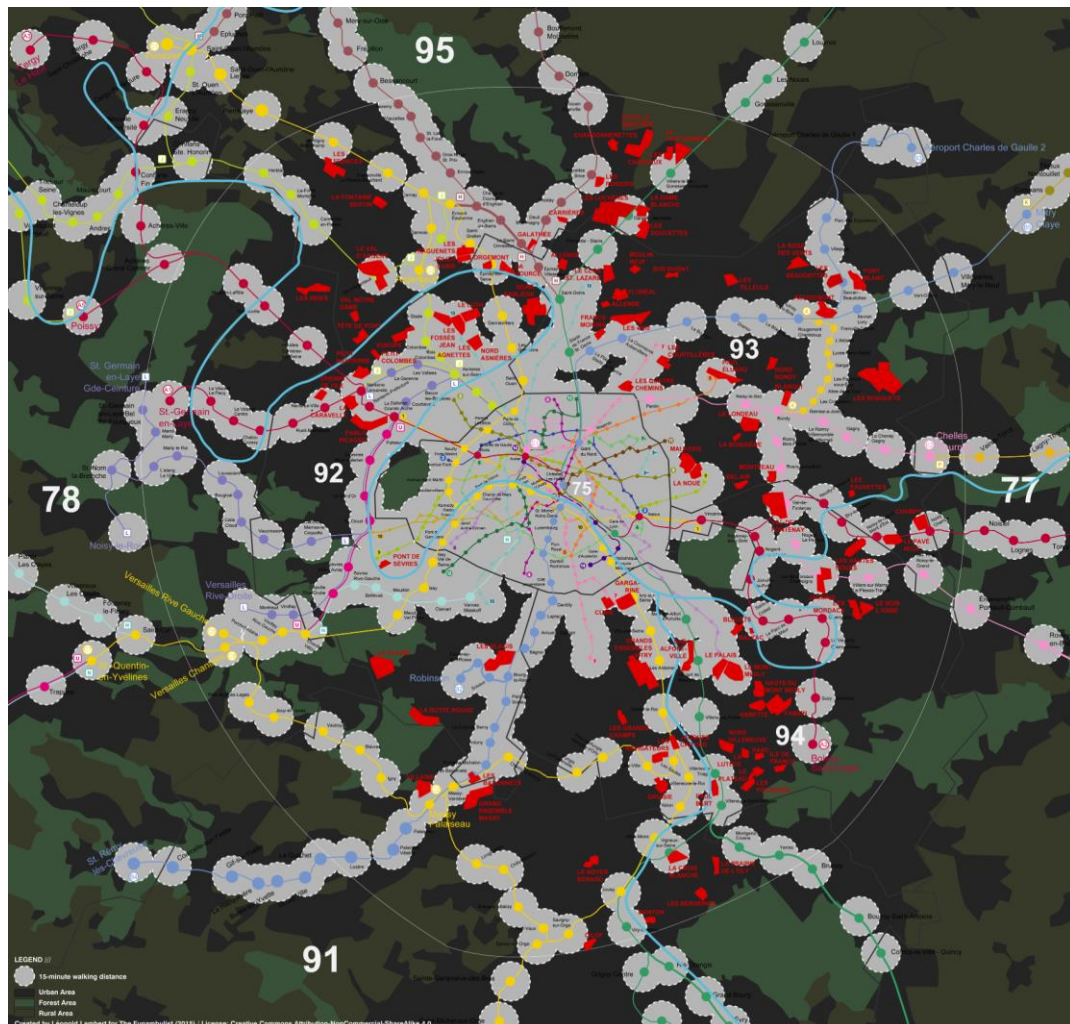
Journalist Leopold Lampert (2015) , illustrated the spatial inequalities by way of the map above, showing transport stations with a 15 minute walkable radius around each, overlayed with the cités. Many cités are beyond the 15 minute threshold, such as Les Bosquets and La Butte Rouge pushing the public transport towards inaccessibility and thus routes to employment become voyages rather than commutes. A plus-one-hour commute has become normalised, but when it is reliant upon at least 3 transfers the journey becomes arduous and susceptible to delays and strikes. A resident of the cité Les Bosquets who commutes to a restaurant in Nation would have to use 3 different methods of transport to cover the 1hr 10min commute, whereas a resident of Santeny (an affluent area) can reach Nation in under 50 minutes with 1 change despite being geographically twice the distance away.

The now defunct Congres International d'Architecture Mondiale, advocated for a built environment that fulfilled the four functions of human settlement: work, play, transport and housing. There is a distinct lack of the first three and an abundance of the fourth across the banlieues which has led to the establishment of communities filled with diversity in an

environment that is distinctly authoritarian and dehumanising. The question arises, were the banlieues designed for an ideal case scenario that never was to manifest? A subservient, homogenous population of workers united under a concrete roof. What was once the forefront of contemporary design theory is now regarded as dystopian and dysfunctional. The very physical landscape of the banlieues and indeed Paris has created an exclusion zone that divides and keeps separate the Parisian heart from its limbs.

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