

## LOW-COST COUNCIL HOUSING - the invention of social housing

### Discovering the domestic and social architecture of the 13th arr.

In Paris in the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution triggered such an influx that the working classes suffered from overcrowding and epidemics due to their unsanitary dwellings.

In 1889, thanks to new legislation provisions, low-cost housing provided an answer to these issues, after the first social experiments that attempted to fix them (from the utopian ideal of the “palais social” such as the Cité Napoléon (housing estate) built in 1851, up until the “cités ouvrières”).

Between 1888 and 1935, continuing the tradition of the first working-class housing estates, benevolent organisations and the Public Offices of Low-Cost Housing (OPHBM) of the City of Paris created remarkable housing units combining programmatic, architectural and urban ingenuity.

Predominantly built in brick and ranging from neo-regionalism to more modern and Art Deco styles, the quality of their architectural design gave the dwellings for the most disadvantaged a new respectability. This was a new architectural style that then asserted itself as bearer of a social, hygienist and normative project.

The growing need for housing saw these buildings occupy several entire blocks, to the point that a decision was made around 1920 to devote 25% of the land freed up by the demolition of the walls of Thiers, to the housing developments.

Pioneers of the large housing estates of the post-war era, the low-cost dwellings were part of the transformation initiated under the Second Empire of an ancient Paris that became a modern metropolis at the turn of the twentieth century.

1

(13ème) 137, boulevard de l'Hôpital  
1922-1926 Public contracting authority  
Architects Charlet and Perrin  
**“Comb tooth” buildings**

The low-cost housing units built between 1922 and 1926 by J. Charlet and F. Perrin showed, through their scale, the new urban dimension of operations and the emergence of new issues. In addition to producing a picturesque architecture, their neo-regionalist aesthetics fragmented the façades of this very large complex which took up an entire block. The exuberant decor split up the buildings thanks to multiple detachments. The plan was arranged on both sides of a monumental axis designed like a garden, perpendicular to Boulevard de l'Hôpital where the main entrance is located. In addition to the shops on the ground floor, and like the low-cost dwellings inspired by support from the Rothschild foundation, the public services included a children's day-care centre and even a mortuary.

2

(13ème) 157, rue du Château-des-Rentiers  
1929 Public contracting authority  
Architects Mercié and Bernard

**“Comb tooth” buildings** Later on than the above examples, the complex of 95 dwellings built by Mercié and Bernard were a significant example of how a model could be adapted. Like the philanthropic projects of the beginning of the century, the entrance is marked by an enormous passageway giving access to communal areas before reaching the housing units. However, it is distinguished by a rigorous composition and an Art Deco style that is found in the design of the bay windows, the sgraffito decoration of the coping, and also on the awnings at the entrance of the building. Not yet mature, the identity of the low-cost housing units built and foreshadowed more radical aesthetics. The combination of brick (standard parts of the façade) with concrete and rubble stone – provided by the dismantled walls of Thiers - gave the complex a look that was both modern and rustic.

3

(13ème)  
42-44, rue du Château-des-Rentiers  
1913 Public contracting authority  
Architect Jean Rous

### **Building with street-side courtyard**

A contemporary of the first low-cost dwellings created by the City of Paris, this unit, built by Jean Rous for Public Welfare, was characterised by its unique urban style. Constructed on strips of fragmented land where there were once vegetable growing plots, the two parts of the building were arranged around a public road that ran through the plot. Thus combining the open courtyard plan with that of the stepped buildings, the architect proposed a homogeneous urban sequence with – like the working-class housing estates – a repetition of the same building but with individualised entrances. The façades are a simple and neat design with various floral patterns in enamelled sandstone that bring a picturesque touch to the roofing and balconies located in the extension of the bow windows.

4

(13ème) 116-118, rue de Tolbiac  
1927 Public contracting authority  
Architects Prudon and Contresti

### **Open-courtyard building**

This complex of low-cost dwellings was built at the initiative of the City of Paris by architects Prudon and Contresti. Like the buildings resulting from the competition launched in 1905 by the Rothschild foundation, the attention paid to the façade, the overhanging roofs and other scenic effects, were part of a general trend of neat finishing by the benevolent organisations. The entrance is marked by a monumental door embellished with a decorative ceramic pattern, the plan was organised in the now classic style of an open courtyard. Larger than those in the private buildings in Paris, the entrances provided lighting and ventilation and also various functions external to the housing. It became a community space in itself and therefore benefitted from special treatment.

5

(13ème) 207, rue de Tolbiac  
1913-1922 Public contracting authority  
Architect Georges Vaudoyer

### **Closed-courtyard building**

This group of 102 dwellings was built in 1913 by George Vaudoyer, directly linked to the measures taken by the City of Paris in favour of more modest housing following the Rousselle report on the housing crisis and the provisions likely to develop the construction of the low-cost housing in Paris (1911). The complex has the same stylistic design as that on Rue Vergniaud; a building in alignment with the street, with a front punctuated with bay-windows and polychrome material. The entrance is a large passageway that gives access to a paved and tree-lined courtyard – this was made possible by the increase in the size of the operation. The stairwells, remarkable for their natural light, have a balcony and show the level of sophistication of the hygienist research at that time.

6

(13ème) 72, rue de la Colonie

1911 Private contracting authority

Architect Georges Vaudoyer

## Open-courtyard building

Built just before the First World War at the initiative of Princess Singer de Polignac, this complex of 64 dwellings was part of the latest philanthropic low-cost housing projects. Designed as a “horticultural estate”, the unit consists of two buildings on the street – linked by an entrance porch way on the ground floor – of two wings and two pavilions which close off the courtyard and form the transition towards the allotments. The latter, which disappeared in the 1960s, were replaced with facilities such as a garage, sheds, baths, a washroom and drying room. The construction included five different types of housing and was part of Georges Vaudoyer’s social production. Despite the disappearance of the gardens, the interiors are still in place and it is very likely one of the most authentic examples of pre-war low-cost dwellings.

7

(13ème) 24, rue Brillat-Savarin

1913-1924 Public contracting authority

Architects A. Arfvidson, J. Bassompierre and P. de Rutté

## Detached buildings

This complex comprising 320 dwellings was built on the basis of a “comb tooth” design following the hygienist principles of that era. The buildings were arranged on either side of a central road connecting the Rue Brillat-Savarin and the Rue Fontaine Mulard with, at each end, two buildings with access gates. The façades facing the street and the courtyard all bear the same design; red brick, structured by rows of double height balconies, inserted level with the attic in a semicircular arch and adorned with coloured sgraffito patterns. This group of low-cost dwellings installed within the “red belt” (Parisian working-class suburbs), was a remarkable milestone in the history of social housing in Paris.

8

(13ème) 90, rue Vergniaud

1905 Private contracting authority

Architects Georges Vaudoyer and Louis Chevallier

## Closed-courtyard building

This building, built by George Vaudoyer and Louis Chevallier, bears a simple and neat design and is composed of 69 dwellings. A rental property with a closed off courtyard, its styling is specific to the pre-war low-cost housing: overhanging roofs, bow windows and polychrome materials with no particular detail at the entrance. The building shows the developments that took place at the turn of the twentieth century through the use of brick: originally used on the façades to reproduce old styles of decor, over time brick came to be used on the façades to form a decor on its own merits. An economical material, brick was a necessity for this new project and contributed fully, regardless of the era, to the identity of the low-cost dwellings.

9

(13ème) 1-3, rue Henri-Becque

1913-1922 Public contracting authority

Architects Albenque and Gonnot

## Separate buildings

This complex of 93 dwellings was the prototype developed by the City of Paris for the most modest habitats. It met a very precise list of specifications based on the multiplication of community spaces and was intended for

serial construction. Reduced to a strict minimum in terms of surface area, the dwellings were all identical, but were accompanied by a large number of facilities. There were baths, a washroom, driers, sheds for bicycles and pushchairs and a variety of shops, which for the most part have disappeared. The open courtyard building design here is taken to the extreme: organised around three courtyards, the complex consists of four separate buildings unified by the base of their ground floor with a single entry strengthening the community dimension of the site. The sandstone base appeared here for the first time and met one of the recurring requirements of the low-cost housing project: avoiding any reference to existing typologies of barracks or housing estates.

10

(13ème) Porte d'Orléans  
134-136 boulevard Brune / 101-117 boulevard Jourdan  
1932 Public contracting authority  
Architects A. Pouthier, Nicod and Molinié

### **Buildings forming a block**

Constructed on either side of Place du 25 Août 1944 by the Public Housing Agency of the City of Paris (RIVP), the many buildings located at Porte d'Orléans were in fact created as part of one single project. Linked to the transformation of the former fortifications, its size and its architectural expression reflect the desire to give this Porte the stature of a city entrance. Here there is a different range of low-cost housing based on the standards of bourgeois-style buildings: average-cost housing. Their aesthetic qualities differed from the precious style of the earlier versions of low-cost housing, although they did not have the radical character of the modern movement. The dividing up of the blocks offset the monumental character of the operation, but the urban façade with its succession of bow windows with workshops above, reflected the city scale.

Despite late modifications, and even though the density of the complex distanced it from the hygienic ideologies of pre-war low-cost housing projects, Albert Pouthier created a remarkable "urban creation" on the fringes of Paris and Montrouge..

11

(14ème) Cité d'Enfer  
249, boulevard Raspail / 1-20, Passage d'Enfer  
vers 1855 Private contracting authority  
Architect Pigeory

### **Cité ouvrière**

La Cité d'Enfer, also known as La Cité de M. Cazeaux, is one of the few examples of working-class housing estates in Paris. Its construction corresponded to the implementation of the 1852 decree relating to the improvement of housing for the workingclass and was part of one of many trials carried out under the Second Empire. This was the first time that grants had been awarded to developers – bankers, owners, contractors and architects, who usually gave their name to the estate – and also the first time that the state had intervened in the construction by imposing a list of very precise specifications. A contemporary of the Cité Napoléon (1849-1851), d'Enfer also marked the introduction of a new typology and a switch from the barracks model to that of the working-class estate. Located in less urbanised areas and soon annexed to the city, these operations were characterised by low density and the rationality of aesthetics that sought to blend into the anonymity of Parisian buildings.

## **THE "FORTIF" LOW-COST HOUSING**

With the Strauss law of 1906, municipalities and departments had the opportunity to take part in the construction of lowcost dwellings. Further to the Bonnevey Act of 1912, "the government has not only the right but the duty to intervene." The creation of public offices for municipal and departmental low-cost housing, inspired by European examples, was to help address the housing crisis. It was in this context that the fortifications of 1841 were sold in 1912 to the City of Paris setting aside 25% of the surface area for the construction of low-cost and averagecost housing. The belt was supposed to be an area of exemplary projects

and serve as a model, especially in the composition of the city's entrances, accompanying the expansion plan resulting from the Cornudet law (1919). The first low-cost housing unit on the belt was built by the OPHBM (Public Offices of Low Cost Housing) in the 18th arrondissement (1923), while RIV P (Public Housing Agency of the City of Paris) took over average-cost housing at the Porte d'Orléans (1923).

The law of 13 July 1928 required Paris to step up its construction efforts. With a lack of available land in the centre, the City of Paris transferred its efforts onto the land bearing the former fortifications, "les fortif". A program of 20,000 dwellings was decided upon by the municipal council on July 7, 1930, with the developments carried out in the south of Paris between Porte de Vanves and Porte de Châtillon..

## GLOSSARY

**Palais social** : Architectural complex inspired by theories of communitarian housing as imagined by some of the pioneers of socialism (e.g. Charles Fourier and his phalanstery, which inspired the "Familistère de Godin" (an industrial and residential community) in Guise).

**Cité ouvrière** : Private housing estate project for the construction of dwellings specifically designed for the working-class.

**Hygienic ideologies** : A set of movements and theories whose practical application in town planning and architecture proposes, amongst others, solutions to health issues resulting from the effects of industrialisation in the 19th Century via new spatial arrangements that took into account air circulation and the orientation of the sun.

**Neo-regionalism** : A picturesque, historicist style inspired by the architectural identity idealised by regions.

**Building with street-side courtyard** : During the interwar period, layout plan characterised by the inner courtyard being positioned on the street, corresponding to the hygienic ideologies of providing maximum air circulation and light inside the blocks.

**Attic floor** : The coping of a building, separated from the rest of the building by a ridge, and of smaller proportions than the lower levels. This is often the top floor set back from a building.

**Sgraffito** : Decoration technique used to produce a drawing by scratching into the top layer of clear plaster, revealing a sub layer usually of dark stucco.

### SEE ALSO :

- The first working-class housing experiments : Cité Napoléon, 58-60, Rue Rochechouart (9th arr.)
- The "Cités ouvrières" on Rue Moinon and Rue Sainte-Marthe (10th arr.)
- The low-cost housing complex on Boulevard Ney (18th arr.), the 1st low-cost dwellings constructed on the belt in 1923

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