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Negociating Public Space

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Summary

A little over ten years ago, a French architect, Alain Sarfati, was asked to design a hundred and fifty flats on a small plot of land situated on Boulevard Lobau, near the centre of Nancy in France. The architecture of the buildings was hailed by the local press as a new approach, heralding quality in social housing; but the inhabitants did not seem to agree. They showed distrust and aloofness and were suspicious about the space between buildings. Having been given an opportunity to monitor the changes taking place among the newcomers during the first two-and-a-half years of their residency, we waited patiently and observed the course of events. Things started changing in a rather unexpected manner after two or three months. We could thus observe how a new residential culture was developing and how, at the same time, the inhabitants were creating a public space within a social housing neighbourhood. Later on, the process of creating such a shared urban culture became the basis for another city planning project in Méréville.

Résumé

Il y a environ dix ans un architecte français, Alain Sarfati, fut mandaté pour un projet de 150 logements sur un site urbain près du centre de Nancy en France. L'architecture de ces habitations fut saluée par la presse locale en tant que nouvelle approche de qualité pour le logement social. Mais les habitants ne semblaient pas partager ce point de vue. Ils se montraient méfiants et distants entr'eux et étaient suspicieux des espaces entre les logements. Ayant eu la possibilité de suivre les changements qui intervenaient pendant les deux premières années de leur résidence, nous avons patiemment attendu et suivi le cours des événements. Après deux à trois mois la situation a commencé à changer de façon insoupçonnée. Nous avons ainsi pu observer comment une nouvelle culture résidentielle s'est développée et comment, en parallèle, un espace public a été engendré par les habitants dans ce quartier de logements sociaux. Par la suite, le développement d'une telle culture urbaine partagée devint la base d'un autre projet de planification urbaine à Méréville.

> Men kulturen är inte en mystisk kraft i våra liv eller i historien. Den skapas och vidareförs av människor mitt i vardagen. Vi är inte bara traditionsbärare utan även kulturbyggare, som ständigt gör nya erfarenheter, förändrar och omskapar vår kultur och skriver egen historia.
>
> David Gaunt och Orvar Löfgren (1991)

In the very first pages of a delightful book exposing the myths of Swedish everyday life, Orvar Löfgren underlines how difficult it is to discuss ones' own culture. One, as a result, cannot be simply empirical because one lacks awareness of his own

culture: one may find it useful to adopt a rather theoretical approach in order to attack such problems.

1. A chance encounter

A little more than ten years ago, a french architect, Alain Sarfati, was asked to design a hundred and fifty flats on a small plot of land on Boulevard Lobau next to the centre of Nancy in France. The builder was the local social housing company. It was well known at the time that social housing was generally suffering from a very bad image in Nancy (Palmade, 1981). Sarfati requested our help just after his plan for buildings and flats was officially accepted. Building was to proceed according to these plans, yet we both believed it was possible to improve on the design of the exterior space of this residential neighbourhood, which comprised five three-story buildings on a one hectare plot of land between a row of four stories houses along an avenue, and a canal. This resulted in a number of proposals for changes in the plan to improve the open spaces between the buildings. These proposals were driven by three main concerns:

- Allowing the group of inhabitants to develop individual or group use of different parts of the open spaces (bowling ground, roller skate track, sand pit, picnic table, browsing along in a garden, cooking on a barbecue ...), as if it were a private garden community;
- Creating a sense of intimacy in a place which nevertheless feels as if it is a part of the city, through providing special attention to thresholds and limits so that people would feel close to one another in an open neighbourhood;
- Opening pleasant entrances from the city side and paths crossing towards the canal so that neighbouring inhabitants would feel enticed to walk through this area.

It was hoped that newcomers to this housing area would revise their views about public housing and would start enjoying a better life. It was a real disappointment to discover that they did perceive a number of cues but they maintained a deep distrust of any social housing, including this one. The architecture of the buildings was hailed by local press as a new approach, heralding quality in social housing ; but the inhabitants did not seem to share this point of view. As it turns out, the ministry for housing had convinced a somewhat reluctant housing company manager to let us monitor changes among the newcomers during their first two-and-a-half-years. We waited patiently and observed the course of events. Things started changing after two or three months, and underwent a totally unsuspected development.

It took us quite a long time to start understanding that a new residential culture was developing, and that it proceeded alongside the creation by these inhabitants of a public space within a social housing neighbourhood.

2. A tentative definition of culture

These words beg for definition. First, let us try and define culture as carefully as possible. There are at least two reasons why we find it difficult to describe and study our own culture: first, we find it difficult to outline implicit models that frame our

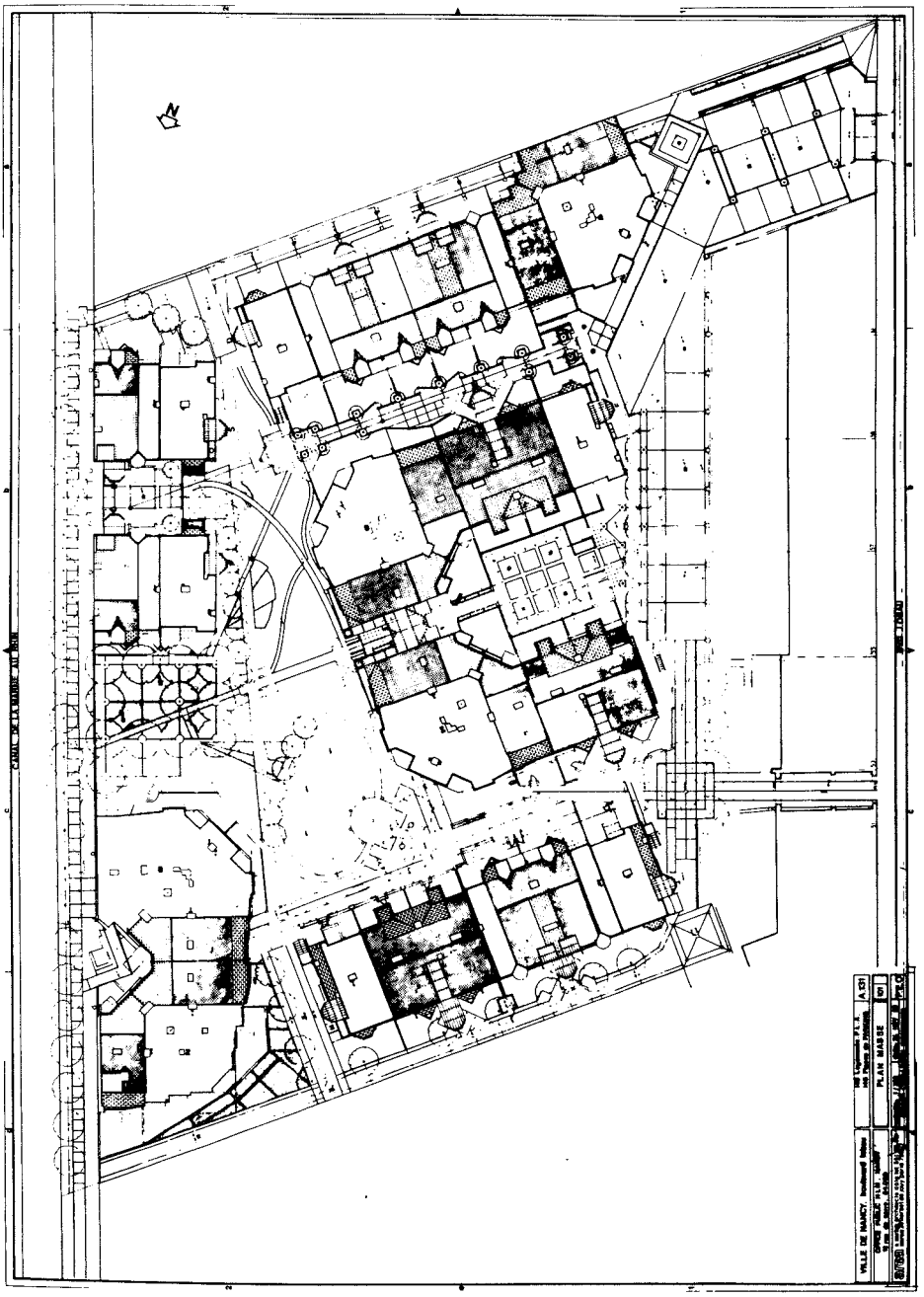

Fig. 1 Flats on Boulevard Lobau, Nancy. Alain Sarfati, architect, for OPHLM, Nancy. General plan.

Les logements du Boulevard Lobau à Nancy. Alain Sarfati, architecte; maître d'ouvrage OPHLM de Nancy. Plan masse.

daily activities simply because we are not aware of them and because we take them in practice for granted. Second, we may share a number of different cultures: French culture, middle class culture, male middle age culture. Actually, culture refers to collective identity. It calls attention to the embedding of individuals into a number of social groups. In order to unravel such limits it may be worthwhile to approach them from a dynamic perspective. We propose to focus upon the relationships between groups and individuals that result in cultural change.

There is a fundamental dissymmetry between groups and individuals, because individuals constantly enter into new group cultures that pre-existed their own awareness of them: that is, they develop new capacities or abilities to cope with already existing cultures. Through the acquisition of a new culture, they broaden their possibilities for action and meaning-making. Actually, even their most creative acts depend upon some unrecognized models or beliefs that are bestowed upon them by some acquired culture. But on the other hand, cultures cannot act by themselves and their changes reflect some collective shifts in individual action. Actually, culture is born in the world by "intentional" group endeavours, if intentional is taken in the sense used by mental state theories.[1]

This is to say that we are proposing to make use of a narrow definition of culture. Rather than use the word culture to describe any particular way of life we mean only that *a group culture is a set of mental preconditions to a capacity for mutual understanding between members of a group about any issue that belongs to the group's own realm of action.*

Thus, we are defining culture as an attribute of a group of individuals, tied to its specific domain of involvement and to mutual communication between its members rather than to a particular behaviour or to a set of values. It implies that if a group at a given time of its history changes its realm of action or its membership the conditions or objects of internal communication may be altered. Culture in this sense is obviously the outcome of social processes.

2. Developing a new residential culture

The inhabitants were coming from a variety of social housing neighbourhoods in Nancy and they all shared a number of prejudices about life in public housing that they had picked along a variety of different experiences. They expected their neighbours to be ill-behaved and anomic. They were certain that the less they talked to them the better. They also knew for certain that the housing company would not care for them as individuals but would rather deal with them bureaucratically, give them standardized living conditions and exploit them as much as it could. This set of preconceptions allowed each of them to make sense of their neighbours' behaviours in public housing. They showed distrust and aloofness, which allowed mutual reinforcement of these pre-

1 Searle (1983): Intentionality is a property of some mental states and events. "Intentionality is directedness; intending to do something is just one kind of intentionality among others" (p. 3). "Here are a few examples of states that can be intentional states: belief, fear, hope, desire, love, aversion, liking, disliking, doubting, wondering whether, joy, elation, depression, anxiety, pride, remorse, sorrow, grief, guilt"... (p. 4), as well as perception (ch. 2), action (ch. 3), or speech (ch. 7). ... "every *intentional state* consists of an *intentional content* in a *psychological mode*. Where that content is a whole proposition and where there is direction of fit, the intentional content determines the *conditions of satisfaction*" (p. 12).

conceptions. This had set in motion the diffusion of a pervasive public housing culture.

This culture enabled public housing inhabitants at Boulevard Lobau in Nancy to make sense of their new abode. They looked at some outstanding aspects of the architecture as an effort to cheat them. They ignored the fact that all the flats were different and each one assumed that despite obvious differences from the outside, all flats were identical inside and that they were forced to live standardized lives in standardized housing. Beside, they assumed that none of the renters would ever cater for the private gardens on the ground floor and that all the partitioning and the private fences would be destroyed by unruly children from other families.

But events turned out differently. A few dwellers who were living on the second floor looked with envy from their balcony down towards the little private garden with rose-trees trellised along the walls by the housing company before inhabitants had moved in. They decided to have their own flower-pots hanging down from the railing of they balcony. Renters on the ground floor responded by sowing and planting their little gardens. And, children kept to the lanes when racing to their own very little playground, a mock canal that could be used for roller skating, and a lawn where to play ball without ever disturbing the gardens or destroying any fence. People started exchanging a few words in the narrow paths and tiny places about the unexpected daintiness of the neighbourhood.

3. Developing a sense of public space

A slowly growing process of internal communication was set into motion. Step by step, the no man's land between the buildings grew into a public space, that is *a space where all inhabitants felt equally free to behave within the limits defined by a mutually granted local culture.*

How can we further define this public space?

Such a public space is not to be confused with the physical space between the buildings. Physical space is a necessary prerequisite. It is not sufficient for the public space to come into being. Actually, it was born over time through the development of new meanings for collective life in the neighbourhood. Such meanings were made understandable and possible to share with others because a totally new housing culture was evolving: as inhabitants started looking at their neighbours as clean and decent people with a sense of responsibility, they developed shared norms of behaviour, they managed to discuss things according to various rituals, and grew convinced that because they were sharing some common experiences (attending meetings, passing aesthetic judgments on the homes, choosing topics to discuss with urban neighbours or with the public housing company) they could support each other's individual development and express their own differences.

This culture evolved from the communication process that had sprung in the garden and the alleyways but it engulfed the whole of their home experience. It seems that a definite step was taken when they discovered that only one other flat in the complex of 150 matched theirs in plan and view. At a momentous meeting they decided to swap flats without asking permission from the housing company in order to help inhabitants who complained about too small a kitchen to make an exchange with those who complained about too small a living room. This was history in the making: they asserted their own right to make their own free adjustments. It was a big thrill. In

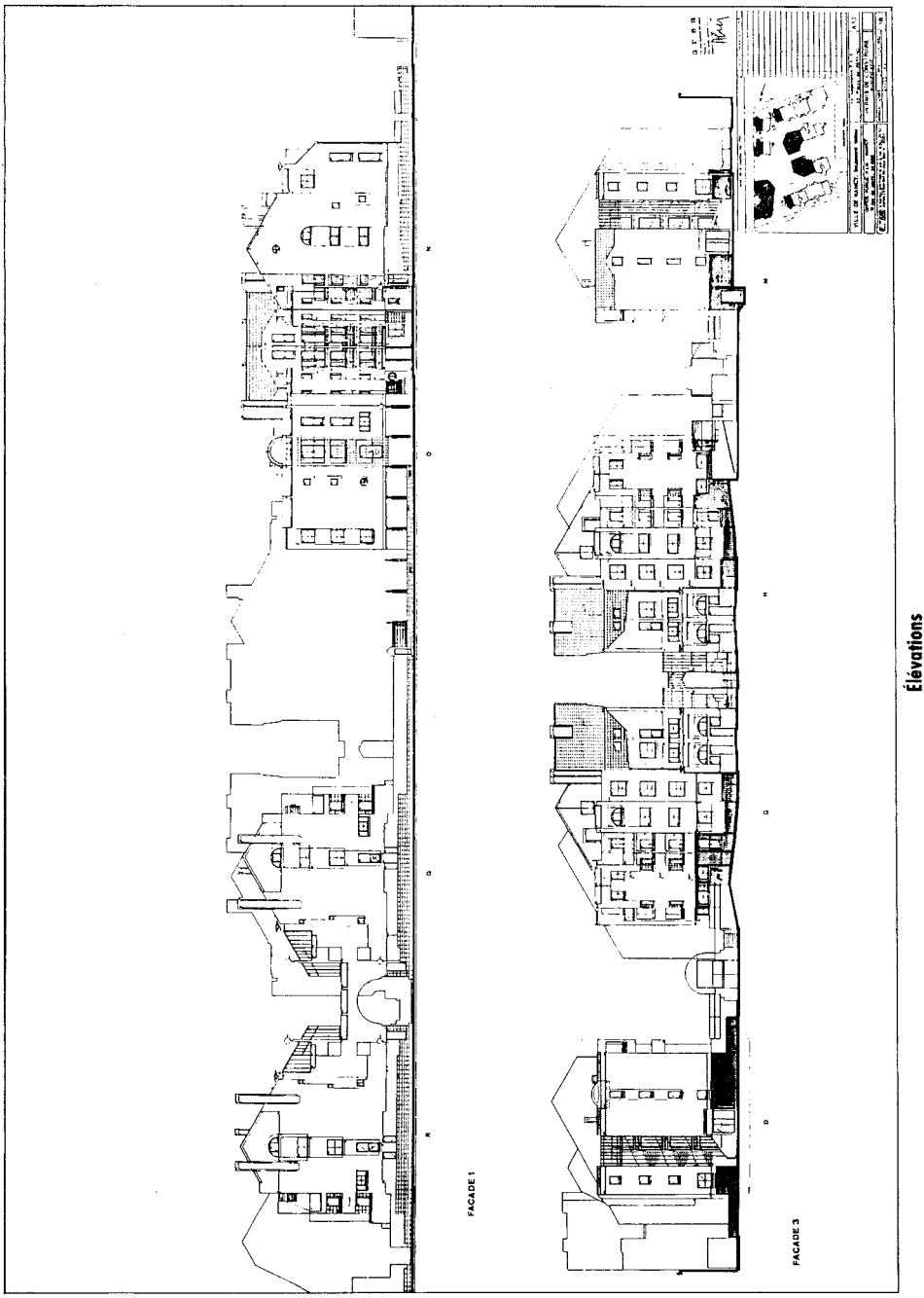

Fig. 2 Flats on Boulevard Lobau, Nancy. Alain Sarfati, architect, for OPHLM, Nancy. Part of the elevations.

Les logements du Boulevard Lobau à Nancy. Alain Sarfati, architecte; maître d'ouvrage OPHLM de Nancy. Partie des élévations.

any event, it made each of them happy with his small kitchen or wee living room, and no-one moved. But the group grew tighter. They even started discussing with the housing company to get further improvements of the trees and plants in their public garden, and started exploring their capacities for group behaviour.

They had formed an association whose chairman at another momentous meeting asked them to reflect upon their housing conditions. They agreed with him that it looked like a bourgeois neighbourhood, and that bourgeois inhabitants would enclose such a place and would not allow any trespassers if it were their own property. They also agreed that they were not a bourgeois group, and did not wish to emulate bourgeois behaviour. Henceforth they followed his proposal to invite social gathering and public events to take place there. They gave their neighbourhood the name "Village Lobau" in order to express how closely knit together they felt, and they started inviting elderly people from poorer homes in the neighbourhood, offering kindergarten teachers to bring their pupils at recess hours in their common garden instead of keeping them always in a dreary school-yard, and mounting all sorts of exhibitions there during week-ends.

This time of great excitement has lasted several years, after which it gradually faded until internal strife broke it down. Inhabitants retired to their own flats. Common activities grew to a halt and chats between neighbours became more private and scattered in time. A new housing culture has been establishing itself but we have not been able to document it.

Village Lobau no longer is the same public space since it no longer affords the same free interplay between various social groups. If we try to unravel the reasons behind its development in the first place we are tempted to offer the following assumption.

Public space grew out of the development of a residential culture, allowing and promoting autonomous pursuit of social intercourse with other groups by a self conscious group of inhabitants.

Why then, should such a specific residential culture have evolved there?

One may suggest several reasons, but it would be impossible to establish that they are sufficient. First, upon their arrival people felt a strong support and an appreciation of their own new living conditions expressed by many outsiders such as newspeople, architects, visitors, their families, and our two social observers. The overall living conditions were satisfactory and outside support allowed them a sense of self-respect. This allowed each inhabitant to develop favourable judgments toward and positive feelings with respect to the place. Chance encounters were likely to occur in the streets. But they were not very numerous, actually probably much less frequent than the forced interaction that occurred in the lobbies or elevators in the high-rise residential building they might have lived in before.

Despite lots of opportunities for neighbourly interaction, public housing culture led everyone to keep his breath to cool his porridge and to look absent minded in front of others. One may wonder, there, why they engaged at all in any significant discussion at Boulevard Lobau. English people might have discussed the weather. But they could not, because Lorraine barely has climate and it is not bad enough that you would care discussing it. It is probably a sense of bewilderment at the architecture and landscape that triggered an internal communication process. They could not make sense of the visual appearance of the place by themselves, despite the fact they deeply felt it had

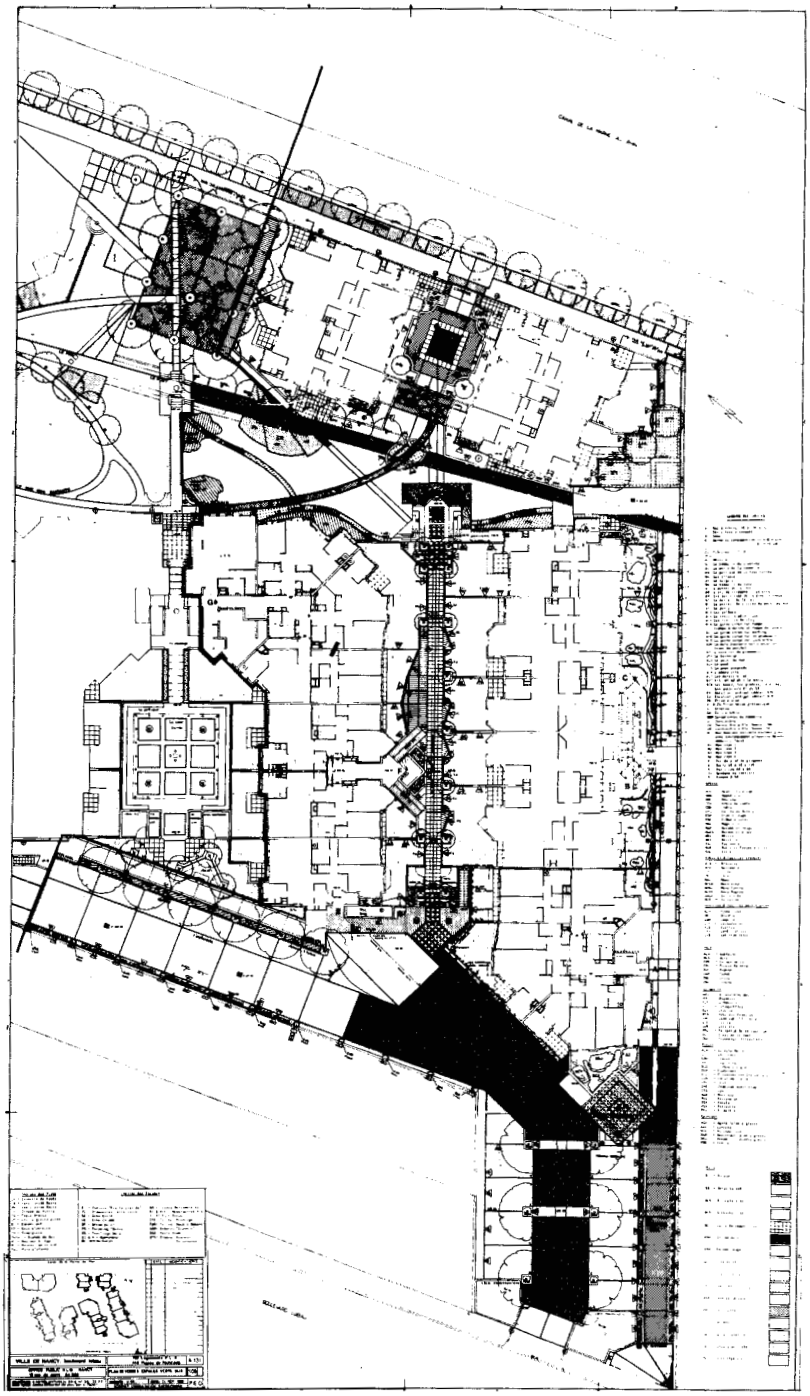

Fig. 3 Flats on Boulevard Lobau, Nancy. Alain Sarfati, architect, for OPHLM, Nancy. Ground floor (south part) with private gardens and collective spaces.

Les logements du Boulevard Lobau à Nancy. Alain Sarfati, architecte; maître d'ouvrage OPHLM de Nancy. Plan du rez-de-chaussée (partie sud) avec jardins privés et espaces communs.

been meant for some group use or collective enjoyment, and they responded to their intuition by devising together with their neighbours a common meaning for many visual cues on the façades and in the gardens. They literally made sense as a group out of their common environment.

Then they moved on to produce a sense of a common good. This is something we cannot explain. It certainly helped them to embark upon many collective actions and to interact creatively with their social environment, including the public housing company and the city-hall. It reinforced their housing culture. But this was weakly institutionalized (it was never supported by the housing company for instance) and exposed to the short-spanned life of utopias. They entertained great expectations with respect to local town planning policy that never came true. May be they failed to stir a sense of reciprocity among the groups and institutions to which they turned to make village Lobau into a public space.

4. Negotiating beyond planning public space

A few years ago Sarfati, the architect of boulevard Lobau, and E. Daniel-Lacombe, another architect who was also well aware of the development of this local culture, won first price for a city planning contest in Méréville, a small residential commune engulfed in the Paris suburban sprawl that wanted to graduate into a local urban centre. Their proposal was aimed at developing a public building scheme along the former main street and its immediate surroundings, while improving the local taxbase. This was possible due to the building up of a series of office buildings around a thruway exchange intersection at the outskirts of the commune. The model for this development infuriated local inhabitants, who rallied against this project and demanded its dismissal at a town-meeting with the architects.

The gathering was unruly and many people were strident. A. Sarfati and E. Daniel-Lacombe realized that they had addressed the commune officials' concerns about changes in the city economic base but had failed to provide the local residents a vision for a new public space. They suggested that the project they had designed be forgotten and that a new one be devised with people from the commune.

It was clear from the meeting that many people wanted to be heard, that they all shared a strong interest in the improvement of whatever public space there was in the commune, that they had very different interests vested in possible changes, and that there was no common project they would all of them agree upon.

Recalling the discussions about Boulevard Lobau at Nancy, A. Sarfati and E. Daniel-Lacombe saw the lack of a common urban culture as the main issue. Its absence prevented any possibility of a dependable mutual understanding between various interest groups of citizens in the commune that would allow in the long run public investment to be geared to the creation of new public spaces on different sites interconnected within the city limits. Yet, there was a local council and a strong mayor with a firm majority. One might have believed that he was the man to mediate between conflicting values and to provide the architect with acceptable goals to the majority of local citizen. But this was not the case, simply because local democracy had been predicated upon a strong working class culture that was totally alien to urban space problems. The mayor had the legitimacy to act by himself on a large number of problems because he shared a common culture with his constituency, but felt totally

uncertain when he had to move into urban development. There was no common urban space culture shared by his constituency.

In order to get to work on local projects the architects felt the urge to reach a clear understanding of the different citizens' groups relationships to urban space. They asked the citizens to form a working group, including representatives from the main interest groups. However, instead of engaging them into urban design, they started exploring as explicitly as they could all the local issues that called actual land-use in the commune into question. Of course some of these problems conflicted with one another and it took some time in order for the various members of the working group to negotiate a common agreement on the urban problems to be attacked. They then divided the group into smaller units according to the various development areas the working group had defined and started exploring several draft proposals for each problem, deliberately avoiding any conscious effort to choose one of them.

This process lasted for almost one year. The architects met on the average a group of citizen every second week during a long session into the night. A difficult process was going on: members of the working groups were developing both a common understanding of local problems and a common language. This was not a smooth growing process. To the contrary, after each breakthrough, one could expect a few people to regress in their understanding of the work and to express more or less violently their fears of being cheated by the architects.

The most commonly expressed fear was that the architects would, at some future point in the intimate relationship, manage to sneak in their former plans and rob the group of all its efforts. It never lasted more than one evening session however, and some sense of the common good insofar as public space is concerned evolved gradually.

There was a rub though. Deciding upon urban plans is the responsibility of local authorities. But the elected officials had not been active members of the working group and they did not fully understand that it was a local urban culture rather than a plan that was in progress.

In order to pull them into this process of collective negotiation, the architects devised three altogether different comprehensive proposals from the analytical work they had made in each working group, which was rather easy because they had kept working at alternative proposals in each group. These three proposals were submitted to the elected officials before any further development would proceed within the working groups.

Each of these proposals was solving a number of problems set by the working groups but they were far from being the same. Instead of suggesting cunningly a compromise that every body would prefer, the architects were producing conditions for debate. The elected officials were divided upon the choice they should make and decided to consult some influential members of their constituency. Thus they learnt for themselves some features of the new urban culture in the making in their commune, and they offered their own compromise wrought out of a collage of the three proposals.

This preliminary scheme had a twofold legitimacy: it grew out of the will of local citizens sharing an ability to communicate, despite their contradictory interests, and it was upheld by political authorities. This made further developments and refinements of the plan desirable and possible for the working groups. Eventually, after several months of work on proposals traveling back and forth between the working

groups and the elected officials, a plan was officially approved and registered. Its presentation to the population was a success for the mayor.

This does not ensure that the newly created urban space will be immediately acknowledged as a public space by all inhabitants. We could even assume that this will not be the case since it has been negotiated by only a small number of persons sharing some of the different articulated urban cultures in the commune. One might fear that such a process would lead to rejection again by all the inhabitants who did not take part in the process. Yet one must remember that all the negotiation process has been made public and that it has ensured that each cultural group would be cared for in several ways in each newly built site. This means that on each site the various stakeholders may find the place supportive for them. Of course, one might fear that some group may be tempted to get a broader share of the pie and would try to discourage others groups. This is not to be excluded. Yet each site already has a legitimate claim to becoming a public space because its creation has been democratically supported. The spaces do not have precise meanings. However, this very existence provides evidence that discussion and negotiation can result in a common culture. Some should succeed and others may fail. This calls for a prolonged survey.

5. A note on public space and democracy

Urban planning seems to be a source of unending dilemmas for public authorities: either they take a conservative stance and they are blamed for allowing inefficient use of public space and public utilities, or they take a progressive stance, make bold choices, and they are blamed for misrepresenting public interest.

Both criticism miss the point. Despite all political rhetorics, elected officials cannot create a public space anywhere, unless there is an urban culture that has been negotiated among all stakeholders in that particular place. Yet such a negotiation may not reach into long-standing social practices unless its practical consequences are endorsed by the institutional powers whom they concern, as we have learnt from the Boulevard Lobau case.

Thus, the development of an urban culture that would be conducive to a lively public space proceeds between the risks of being drowned in new social conflicts and the failure of institutional powers to acknowledge them. We cannot evade the fact that cultural development has strong political implications and that political democracy is predicated upon opinion rather than upon culture. Thus the continuous development of public space relies upon the design of new negotiation processes within the frame of existing political institutions.

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