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Renée Gailhoustet



The suburb of Ivry-sur-Seine looks pretty much like many other suburbs in the Paris *banlieue*: at its centre a few squat unostentatious townhouses dating from the late 19th century, the ground floors taken up by bars with pinball machines and Chinese fast-food restaurants; adjoining them, as if startled out of a deep slumber, a couple of very old houses from a time when this area was still a village – and behind them, looming ominously like geometric storm clouds, the endless stacks of residential units, the *bidonvilles*, the *HLMs*, France's very own brand of grid-based social housing projects which, if anything, have merely aggravated the social problems that already exist in these suburbs. But there's also something else in Ivry-sur-Seine: a sort of hilly landscape of grassed or planted concrete terraces that extends right across a shopping street visibly inspired by the Paris arcades of the 19th century. The ground floor of these residential pyramids comprises small libraries and kindergartens, with alleyways and walkways branching out from the public spaces. There are no streets; instead, there are small squares and paths of the kind you might find in a mediaeval mountain village. Children play on green terraces linked by stairways. Cars disappear underground into multi-storey car parks. Each apartment is different; each has its own roof terrace, more like a hanging garden where people can chat with their neighbours over the fence, just as they would in a rural setting.

These housing complexes with names like Jeanne-Hachette, Casanova, and Le Liégar were built between 1971 and 1986, and they represent the most resolute contemporary critique ever levelled in France at conventional post-war mass housing schemes. Ivry-sur-Seine was certainly revolutionary. Unlike the rent-controlled *HLM* towers next door, where neighbours crammed into residential hutches can observe one another only from a distance across buffer zones of greenery, here, for the price of a social housing apartment, each worker has his or her own 50 m² garden on their doorstep, connected by stairways to the other gardens.

Everything the modern city had done away with – the juxtaposition of places to work and places to live, spaces where children could play without risk, communal areas that create a sense of neighbourhood community, small shops – was there once again, but this time in a stacked form.

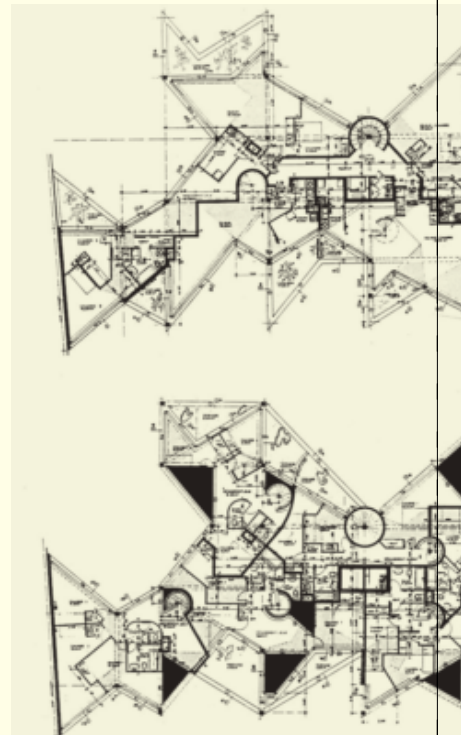
One of the architects of this “counter-city”, Jean Renaudie, achieved world acclaim with his green residential pyramids; he is widely regarded as a key visionary in post-1968 urban planning. The architect Renée Gailhoustet, the woman who commissioned him and designed the other complex, does not even figure on any of the (already very short) lists of French women architects of the 20th century. And yet she ranks among the most influential exponents of a critical modernity. The fact that the specialist literature only ever mentions Renaudie is also due to a history of architecture in which, prior to the emergence of Zaha Hadid, women architects were nearly always listed either as spouses (Alison Smithson) or as contributors (Charlotte Perriand) of famous (male) architects. So in those instances where she is mentioned at all, Gailhoustet is listed either as Renaudie’s wife or as his collaborator. Yet she was neither.

Ironically, it was women first and foremost who made Ivry-sur-Seine one of the most interesting locations for French modernism. The suburb was part of Paris’s so-called “red belt”. In 1929 the communists, who were in power in Ivry, had fielded a woman candidate, Marie Lefèvre, in protest at the fact that, in France, women were not allowed to take part in political life; the election was promptly annulled by the *préfecture*. After the Second World War, women architects fought hard for gender equality, particularly in Paris; in 1963 the female architect Solange d’Herbez de la Tour organised the first international congress of women architects in Paris. In Ivry-sur-Seine it was the head of the social housing department, Raymonde Lалуque, who early on deplored the bleakness of the grey, post-war social housing schemes and called for a new, genuinely social architecture that provided spaces for social encounters – and who also secured the funding to achieve that aim.

And it was against a political backdrop that embraced the experimental that she appointed the young architect Renée Gailhoustet to sit on the Ivry-sur-Seine development committee.



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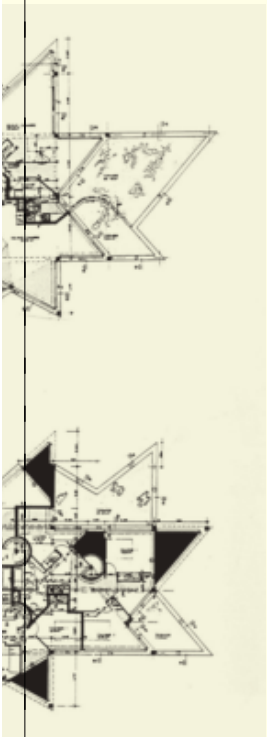
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Renée Gailhoustet



Renée Gailhoustet was not originally from Paris. She was born in Oran, Algeria, in 1929, under French colonial rule. Her father worked for the *L'Écho d'Oran* newspaper. After the war she moved to Paris to study philosophy and literature. She joined the communists and became involved in the street battles between the Left and the Poujadists, of whom the founder of France's far-right-wing Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was also a member. As Gailhoustet now recalls, she had her nose broken in one particular brawl with these *tueurs*. It was the politicisation of those years in particular and the desire to – literally – build a new society that prompted Gailhoustet to study architecture in 1952. Alongside her studies she worked in the offices of Marcel Lods, André Hermant, and Henri Trezzini, who were among the few offices to employ women as designers. It was at Lods that she met the young architect Jean Renaudie, who, like her, was a communist. She began an affair with him that would last until 1968 and had two children with him. It may well be due mainly to the prudishness of architecture historians at that time that, for that reason only, she is listed as Renaudie's wife or (more shamefully) as his partner. Apparently, it was beyond the imagination of – exclusively male – architecture journalists of the day that an independent woman who ran her own architects' office could have a wild love affair with another architect and have two children with him, yet remain entirely autonomous and continue with her own design work.

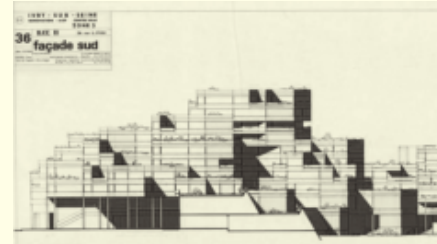
Even today, the official website of the FRAC Centre states that her buildings reflect just how heavily influenced she was by Renaudie. And yet she was the one who designed something entirely idiosyncratic, well outside Renaudie's ambit. Gailhoustet had studied under Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods, the architects of Team 10, who were among the fiercest critics of any separation of the functions of living and working in modern-day cities. In 1964 she opened her own offices and began designing residential complexes for many of the communist-governed *banlieues* in Paris. It was as an associate of Roland Dubrulle that she came to Ivry-sur-Seine for the first time in 1962. In 1969 she became chief architect and lead urban designer at Ivry, commissioning her former lover Jean Renaudie, among others.



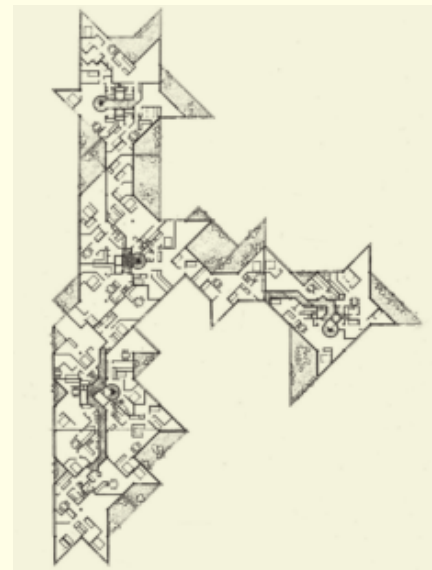
- 1 Renée Gailhoustet (right) and Jean Renaudie (left) at a public information meeting on the development of Ivry-Sur-Seine
- 2 Renée Gailhoustet, floor plan for Le Liégat, undated

He had worked for Auguste Perret and Marcel Lods and, together with friends employed by Le Corbusier and Jean Prouvé, had founded the Atelier de Montrouge, which was named after the site of Montrouge, but was also metaphorically a “red hill” in the architecture of its day. The Atelier built kindergartens and designed stadiums, all its draft designs being a critique of the non-sensory, coldly rationalistic mass accommodation generated by post-war modernity and a capitalism that organised everything solely according to efficiency criteria. After May 1968 Renaudie fell out with his friends over political issues and founded his own practice. He and Gailhoustet worked on models influenced by the terraced buildings that Moshe Safdie had built for the World Exposition in Montreal in 1967. Ultimately, Renaudie built terraced apartments over the top of a shopping street at the Centre Jeanne-Hachette, with the terraces in front of the housing units actually part of the public space. They are all connected by stairways, and residents climbing up and down past the other apartments along pathways and high plateaus, as one might on a mountainside. Renaudie accepted that people’s privacy inside their glazed apartments might be somewhat compromised as a result; as the aim ultimately was to achieve a new form of collectiveness.

It has been claimed time and again that Renée Gailhoustet adopted the stepped terrace principle from Renaudie for her housing complex at Le Liégat. But when you visit the architect in her apartment (she still lives on site), you quickly realise that her building complex is also a critique, a counter-model to Renaudie’s radically more public façade area. Renaudie built his public space over the top of his residential pyramid, like a green envelope. By contrast, Gailhoustet developed a system where rectangular oblongs are built onto a basic hexagonal shape. The shape is then offset and stacked in such a way as to create up to ten storeys with projecting gardens and maisonette flats. Here public life does not take place in front of the terrace door, as it did with Renaudie, but on the ground floor, where Gailhoustet built an elaborate tangle of alleyways, small squares, and loggias. Incorporated therein are workshops and shops and communal areas that have the grand, opulent ceiling height of old Paris shops and lots of space for kindergartens and birthday celebrations.



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- 3 Renée Gailhoustet, view of Le Liégat, undated
- 4 Renée Gailhoustet, floor plan for Le Liégat, undated
- 5 Renée Gailhoustet, Le Liégat under construction, undated



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A stage on a small, half-covered square provides a space for performances, small concerts or political debates. Life together as a community is played out in these spaces. The apartments are private. With Gailhoustet, the gardens – up to 50 m² in size and now overgrown like a jungle – are more like additions to the apartment’s secluded space, extensions of the intimate sphere into an outside space that is shielded; small garden gates open onto ladders and steps that, with the neighbours’ agreement, allow one to enter their gardens and inner courtyards. “With my design”, explains Gailhoustet, “the terraces are more intimate; sometimes they even become part of the apartment, like a patio. There are no façades opposite. What I tried to do is create a flowing space by twisting very simple shapes that connect to a hexagon. The apartments are not boxes that are simply juxtaposed. For me, it was not about achieving a purely right-angled space; everyone here has a garden at the back, as they would do out in the country, one that communicates with the other gardens. It’s also an architecture designed with children in mind: no cars, no streets, just paths and squares.”

Le Liégat consists of 140 rent-controlled council-owned flats. The rent is EUR 800 for an apartment comprising two storeys, five rooms, and a paradise garden with views of the city. There is plenty of space here for a large family to live, but also for a flat-share or a group of the elderly.

Gailhoustet’s housing complexes are an example of a government-funded house-building policy that creates space for other lifestyles beyond that of the classic nuclear family. It does not delegate the task to private developers, who usually build homogeneous middle-class dwellings – while speculating on increases in house prices as a result of their property ownership. Gailhoustet’s Lenin Tower (1963–1968) (given the names, there is no mistaking which party had been in power since the 1920s) demonstrated how shops and studios could be incorporated into a housing complex; her Spinoza Ensemble (1966–1973) had a children’s library, a kindergarten, and a venue for young workers to meet and talk. Gailhoustet also gave some thought to the role of cultural output within the urban space. In her “housing mounds” in Aubervilliers, i.e. the Maladrerie district (1975–1986), she incorporated 40 artists’ studios. It meant there was always someone there working at the

housing complex during the day and that children could come and go as they pleased. In the meantime, the complex could certainly do with a facelift: while some of it looks quite run down, there is also something quite mediaeval about the brutalism of the architecture, the concrete now looking like an ancient overgrown stone.

Of all the housing experiments to emerge in the 1960s and then subsequently be abandoned, the high-density, urban terraced construction developed by the likes of Safdie, Gailhoustet, and Renaudie is the most interesting. Firstly, because it still serves as a model for a new collective urban architecture that provides space for other ways of life and alternative lifestyles and social rituals. Secondly, because it shows, especially in the case of Le Liégat, how French politics between 1962 and 1973 enabled radical reinventions of urban building and living.

Two bursts of modernisation have propelled France forward as a nation since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958: the first was technological and infrastructural, under the presidents de Gaulle and Pompidou; the second was socio-cultural, after 1981, when the socialist François Mitterrand became president. When France lost her colonies, there was an enormous influx of both colonial Frenchmen and women as well as Algerians and Moroccans to mainland France. Indeed, France found itself in a strange state vascillating between depression (due to the loss of global significance) and euphoria (due to growing domestic demand). It was during these decades that the TGV was invented, that Robert Opron and Paco Rabanne designed France's signature aesthetic for the Moon Age, with turbo Citroëns and sequined dresses. Emerging alongside these hastening dreams of Gaullist modernism were revolutionary new forms of mass housing in architecture as an alternative concept to the rationalist tower blocks of the *bidonvilles*. They included the terraced apartment buildings of Ivry, which were aimed at a radical democratisation of what had previously been elitist pleasures. The roof terrace buildings of Ivry are also a late legacy of the utopian Charles Fourier, who gained fame in the early 19th century with his proposal to house the working classes not in dingy little houses, as was the case in Germany and Britain, but in a replica of the Palace of Versailles, where 1,600 workers could live as wildly and as carefree as only the aristocracy



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Renée Gailhoustet

had done previously. There would be indolence and orgies for all, plus childcare, community restaurants and washhouses (so women could also go out to work rather than attend to the household) – and a large hall with a jungle in which it was always summer.

France's modernity: it was, on the one hand, the (somewhat Gaullist) enthusiasm for high-speed trains, fast Citroëns, and an early brilliant form of the Internet, the so-called *Minitel*, the development of which had been commissioned by President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in the 1970s; it came online in 1982 and provided millions of French people with access to electronic information services. On the other hand, it was the democratisation of education and housing, experimental housing, the promotion of popular culture by the socialists following their election victory in 1981.

After Mitterrand at the latest, these expansive dreams of French modernity gave way to an obsession with security and comfort. Though run down and mossy, the large-scale housing experiment of Le Liégat can now be seen as a shining beacon for new ways of thinking about society and communal living.

6 Renée Gailhoustet, site plan for Le Liégat, undated

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