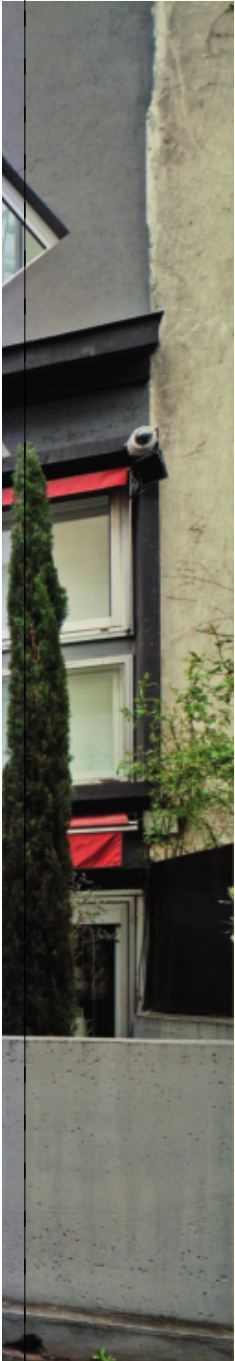


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Claude Parent



From the outside, the small grey villa located in a side street in the west of Paris, near the Bois de Boulogne, looks almost like any other ordinary house from the 1960s. Only the strangely tilted windows discernible beyond the thin, rigidly upright cypress trees hint at the fact that, inside, things may be a little different from what's in neighbouring houses. The villa was once Claude Parent's house; it's where his family lived. His daughter has written a wonderful account of life inside this building, where the architect born in 1923 wanted to start a revolution. It was impossible, for instance, to put any furniture anywhere: hardly any of the floors were level.

The house was an experiment that Parent conducted to find out what happens when you remove from a house your starting point as a draughtsman, i.e. level floors, level foundations, and then everything you normally associate with a living environment, i.e. the doors, the corridors and, above all, the furniture.

The Parent family had almost no furniture; in fact, most items of furniture had been banned from the house, and so the family lived on inclined ramps laid with a dark carpet. They ate in a reclining position; there were triangular table-like objects so you could at least put a cup down while you were lounging about; other than that, anything that might conceivably be considered as furniture disappeared completely from the living room.

Recessed into the angles, and invisible to visitors, were soft cushioned islands you could sink into, like nests. Parent's daughter describes how baffled her girlfriends' parents were whenever they called in the evening to pick up their children and had to enter the house; how they were knocked off balance; how they would search in vain for a chair to steady themselves; and how they would then collapse onto the inclined floor, as if it was a swamp made of velvet: "You would lie on plateaus and in caves [...] and visitors would often shriek in horror whenever they stepped

onto one of those soft spots”, wrote Chloé Parent. The children were thrilled by this life *à l’oblique*, as it were. And Claude Parent hoped for a revolution: that social relations, the dynamics between people, would change in favour of something wilder, better, more exciting and less formal if only you could pull the level floor from under their feet and the rigid chairs from under their behinds. His wild world of ramps was modelled on the spirit of the Roman feast; his ideal was not the formalised dinner seated at high-backed wooden chairs after which diners would retire to the comfort of a seating area, but rather a wild, lounging disarray. There is an old photograph of him from the late 1960s, seated on one of his inclines, with a long beard and long hair, like a disciple: a prophet of the new vision of home living without furniture.

Back then, when he was the darling of the Parisian habitation utopians and disseminated his *Architecture principe* with his friend Paul Virilio, he already had a successful career as an architect behind him. It was Claude Parent who, in the 1950s, brought the Californian modernism of Richard Neutra and Craig Ellwood to France. He built the sort of villas that would be lampooned in Jacques Tati’s film *Mon Oncle*: ultra-modern glassy symbols of the future, like the Maison G, which he completed outside Paris in 1952 with his colleague Ionel Schein, or the house for the artist André Bloc. Together with Yves Klein, he invented a pneumatic rocket and, without him, a car that looked like an insect with wheels instead of legs. If all these experiments had a common trait, it was a deep-seated unrest, a desire to inject new momentum into the status quo, to upset and disrupt.

Parent was already a wealthy modernist by the time he discovered the Second World War bunkers constructed in the sand dunes along the Atlantic coast during his excursions with Paul Virilio. The philosopher Virilio was a childhood friend who had acted as an intermediary for his first building contract, a renovation project at the Lourdes pilgrimage site. Over time these Atlantic bunkers had begun to subside and sink into the sand, literally undermined by the severe winter weather. Together, the architect and the philosopher crawled into these slanted ruins. As the story goes, they then apparently found themselves in rooms where notions of “ceiling”, “wall” or “floor” were meaningless. The dark, slant-



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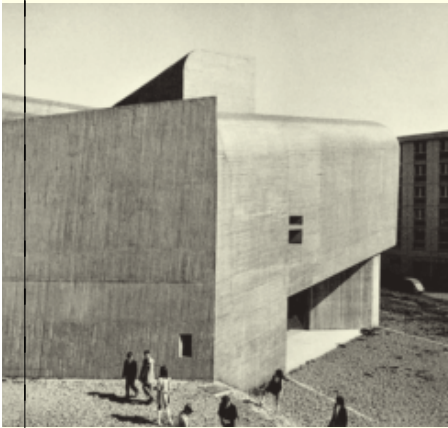


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- 1 Claude Parent in his living room in Paris, c. 1970
- 2 Claude Parent, *Vivre à l’oblique*, book cover, 1970/2004
- 3 Claude Parent, draft for a living space with reclining seats, undated
- 4 Claude Parent, Église de Sainte-Bernadette du Banlay, Nevers, 1963–1966
- 5 Paul Virilio and Claude Parent in their *Architecture Principe* jeep, 2000



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ing room created a sense of dizziness not even the most turbulent Baroque church could achieve. Parent changed his style. With Virilio he co-authored a pamphlet entitled *Vivre à l'oblique*. In 1966 he built the Church of Sainte-Bernadette du Banlay; with its sloping floors and thick brutalist concrete walls, it is certainly reminiscent of a bunker. He was also a strong advocate of life without furniture. With Virilio, he drove around Paris in a jeep with the words *Architecture Principe* inscribed on it: two Allies joined in the battle to liberate us all from an orderly furnished life.

“Just think how boring our homes are”, he told us the first time we visited him in his small apartment in Neuilly, where he was living after selling his villa. “The children sit around the playroom. The man of the house sits around on his inherited sofa. We’re completely over-furnished. Why can’t we adopt a more playful, freer approach to space? Why can’t moving around that space also mean climbing, lying, sliding?”

Around 1970, when he transformed the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale into a slanting, sloping landscape, Claude Parent was widely regarded as the visionary of a new lifestyle culture, as someone who was pioneering the implementation of the philosophical idea of deconstructivism into building practice – by deconstructing the very concepts in which architecture had been conceived and, indeed, conceptualised, disassembling them, and then reassembling them. A “floor” could now also be “furniture”; a notion of spatial thinking emerged that went beyond 90° angles. And Parent did not restrict to home interiors his idea of a society rendered more dynamic, less hierarchical by the oblique. For the Plateau Beaubourg competition in 1970, he tried to use oblique lines to remodel the urban landscape, the public space, too; in 1971 he drew up his plans for La Colline, an entire town comprised of oblique surfaces; in 1973 he published his tract entitled *Habitat oblique*.

So why is it that Parent remained forgotten for so long? Why did it take an exhibition in Paris for a wider audience to rediscover him, at a time when he was well into his eighties? Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he didn’t just make friends among his anti-capitalist fellow campaigners when he turned up in one of his luxury sports cars (preferably a Lamborghini or a yellow Maserati), sporting a pair of yellow bell-bottoms and a pair of narrow white leather shoes (as his student Jean



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Nouvel once said, “no one is ever going to outbid Claude Parent in an elegance contest”). Two contracts he took on in the 1970s represented a fall from grace for which the architecture scene never forgave him. One was the design for the buildings of the Goulet-Turpin supermarket chain owned by his wife’s family, who had opened France’s first supermarket in 1948 as well as the country’s first self-service stores. In the 1960s they were leaders in the construction of so-called hypermarkets based on the American model. Parent designed these supermarkets as a sort of Atlantic Wall of consumerism in the hope that consumers would extrapolate from the quality of the iconic concrete architecture to the quality of the products themselves – a miscalculation, as it soon transpired. The rivalry of the Carrefour hypermarkets with their architecture-free concept carried the day. They had opted from the outset for vast cost-effective hangars with large logos and a pragmatic low-cost visual aesthetic that held the promise of affordable prices, first and foremost. Euromarché took over the hypermarkets of the Goulet-Turpin chain in 1979.



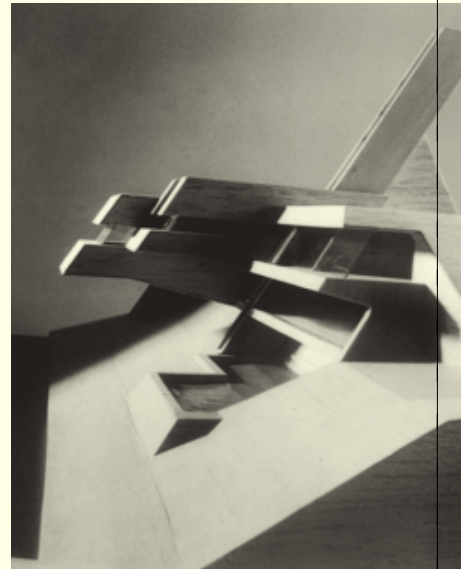
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For a left-wing architectural scene, Parent’s decision to design the Cattenom and Chooz nuclear power plants was even more unpardonable. “No-one at the time was thinking about nuclear waste or about the hazards; it was simply a wonderful new technology”, said Parent when we asked him about it. After the nuclear power plants it all went quiet around Claude Parent.

He closed his offices in the mid-1970s. Thereafter, his main influence on a new generation of architects like Jean Nouvel was as a professor. In 1991 he did design the Théâtre Silvia Monfort in the 15th *arrondissement* of Paris, a building moderately Japonist in style. But with the exception of the gallery that winds its way around the hat-like roof, there is little there to evoke the “theory of the oblique”.

Parent worked for developers, sold his house (whose new owners promptly ripped out all its ramps), and moved into two apartments in Neuilly where he installed what remained of his “oblique world”. There the greatest extravagance was a free-standing bathtub and an equally free-standing toilet – so whenever a guest needed to use the toilet, Parent and the other guests would patiently wait outside in front of the door.

It is only in the last few years that we have come to realise how important and revolutionary his thinking was, and still is, for a new archi-



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- 6 Claude Parent, French pavilion at the Art Biennale, Venice, 1970
- 7 Claude Parent, model of a house on a slope, undated
- 8 Claude Parent, G.E.M. superstore, Reims-Tinqueux, France, 1970

ecture that goes beyond conventional notions, categories and ideas that otherwise determine construction. Ninety-nine per cent of all architects are commissioned to build four-storey houses, stacking four boxes roughly four by three metres on top of one another and then connecting them with staircases. But often the propositional speech act of “four floors” only means that a house or building cannot exceed a maximum height of some 18 metres. With his ramps Parent demonstrated what happens when an architect deconstructs the notion of the “building floor” or “storey” – as Sou Fujimoto did, someone who in his ability to break down the conceptual categories of architecture is arguably a follower of Parent. At his *NA* house in Tokyo, Fujimoto managed to incorporate more than 20 levels linked by small staircases consisting of two to three steps each, instead of four storeys roughly the same size. As a result, the family life of the building’s occupants is organised in a completely different way. Here work on the concept preceded work on the form; the freedom of design resided in the ability to lever out and reformulate an unquestioned category regarded as a given. Just as Parent built his ramps, the Japanese SANAA offices in Lausanne also built an entire university campus as a sort of dune landscape consisting of oblique floors, a breach with convention designed to extend to the teaching and the learning – that, too, a form of architecture that would have been inconceivable without a “theory of the oblique”. Claude Parent died in Neuilly-sur-Seine on 27 February 2016, a day after the celebrations marking his 93rd birthday.



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9 Claude Parent, drafts for a nuclear power plant, 1975

10 Parent with his family and his yellow Maserati, early 1970s