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CITÉ LES LONGS SILLONS AND ITS DOUBLE: A UTOPIC REPORT FROM OBLIQUITY

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ABSTRACT

This article constructs a utopic journey into the oblique mixed-use housing development, *Cité Les Longs Sillons* (1986) in the outer Parisian commune of Ivry-sur-Seine, crossing borders between its urban ‘reality’ and a fictional other. Its aim is to highlight the significance of the legacy of oblique architectures and their vulnerability: as the social and political consensus of their moment of foundation fades; as their maintenance increasingly reflects the economics of crisis; as they transition from confident propositions of urban futurity to enclave artefacts of a radical past. The article is the result of collaborative fieldwork, including performance through improvised movement, different modes of photography, and sound recordings. These diverse techniques are interwoven through a narrative and descriptive account of the site — which includes encounters with both ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ characters — constructing a speculative discourse of the site as a quasi-fictional utopic portrait; reconfiguring the *Cité* as a stage for representational spatial play.

PRELUDE: UTOPIC (DIS) ORIENTATIONS

Have you ever known a place that, although intricately woven into the fabric of the city, seems like a space apart? One that is delimited to a discernible plot and boundary, yet can seem endless? One that seems like a gateway to a new city but does not extend beyond the gateway?

The spatial paradoxes of *Cité Les Longs Sillons* are echoed within its name. It translates as the City of the Long Furrows, a reference to previous land use as the site on which it was built was an intensively cultivated agricultural area of linear plots and a vital food source for the city to the north. On the 'long furrows', an oblique fractal architecture was established; a radical proposition for a new city of density, resistant to urban zoning. In returning to this site and others of the oblique and 'combinatory' method of design, we witness the aftermath of a radical moment of architectural and urban experimentation in which certain elements still thrive, some maintain a tenuous presence — their programmatic intentions having withered over time — whilst some have been drastically altered, suppressed, or eradicated.¹

Les Longs Sillons is a long, thin, dense city block which merges, abuts, and breaks through (with care and critical rupture in equal measure) to the nineteenth-century street scape at multiple points. Its ninety-six apartments remain exclusively within the category of rented social housing with communal, studio, and commercial spaces interspersed across the public spaces of the ground floor. An architectural and constructional system of the late-modern period, it is of a pragmatic material ethos. Its core project, its social and architectonic impulse, is the oblique spatialisation of public and domestic realms to which the aesthetics of its materiality are ultimately subservient. It is sometimes categorised as a 'brutalist'

architecture but does not represent adherence to any purist application of the term. It is assembled through a sensitive material honesty but not through any fastidious commitment to an 'as-found' aesthetic. Its surfaces do not overtly express material process; there is no lingering sense of the handmade nor the indexical trace from the time of construction characteristic of the immediate post-war era.

Now nearly forty years after completion, *Les Longs Sillons* is in varying states of repair subject to a piece-meal maintenance programme by local authorities (partial, aborted, restarted, and rarely in dialogue with the still-resident architect). Wear and decay intervene ambiguously here between the ambitions of form and material surface. It is not that blemishes and patina sit badly with this architecture. (We are not met with the banal disjunction of what once had the pretension to appear futuristic but now appears tarnished and tawdry.) Rather the accumulation of the signifiers of neglect generate a more complex play of temporal categories, a disorientation of temporal coordinates.

¹ Iwona Buczkowska's *Cité Les Longs Sillons* continued strategies of 'combinatory' urbanism of anti-zoning and dense connectivity through 'oblique' spatial design first developed in the work of Jean Renaudie, Renée Gailhoustet, and Nina Schuch from the late 1960s. See: Irenée Scalbert, *A Right to Difference: The Architecture of Jean Renaudie* (Architectural Association Publications, 2004), pp. 11–21. (See also the explanatory endnote.)



Figure 1. 'With care and critical rupture', Cité Les Longs Sillons, western sector (2022). Photo: Robin Wilson/Photolanguage



These aging, increasingly neglected, propositional spaces of oblique complexity enter into a kind of purgatory of the present as if caught in a long and indefinite duration of present time through which the building travels in an expectation of a future that appears increasingly remote and improbable. Or yet more complex, there is a bifurcation of 'futures': the future orientation of present time that has become doubtful or compromised; and/or the sense that the building has arrived at a state in which the radical future has already come and gone, has now faded from view, and is no longer within our collective power

to recuperate. Acts of restoration in such spaces and within this temporal bind are complex. The equipment of temporary works, scaffolding and fencing, can itself have an ambiguous sense of agency as the support structures of both history and futurity.²

The building could be said to bear its blemishes with an indifference; they are neither integral to its material image nor alien to it. One might say that the building 'deflects' the gaze from the material signifiers of age to the dynamic spatial play of the oblique, or to the speculative spatial promenade

² This description of material processes and temporal categories at *Les Longs Sillons* in part responds to the thinking of Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow who developed a similar formulation of temporal indeterminacy in response to the signifiers of architectural weathering. See: Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (MIT Press, 1993), p. 112.

Figure 2. Cité Les Longs Cité Les Longs Sillons, eastern sector (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



and transverse interplay of its public spaces. It could be said to 'translate' them, making them the abstract 'subtexts' of its spatial experimentation.

But blemishes — stain, dust, grime, algal growth, scuff, smudge, bleaching, rot, graffiti — gather as telling marks of an accumulating 'distance' from a revolutionary point of origin. On certain days, from certain vantages, at the fading of certain voices, through a transition of light, the future orientation of its 'present' quiesces, becomes immobile, intimates the possibility of reversal, and *Les Longs Sillons* can

seem like a monument to its futurity. Whilst its apartments and their aerial garden plots are inhabited and valued, the complex public spaces of its ground plane and its points of intersection with the wider city take on the aspect of a stage set vacated by the players for whom they were designed. Those who do pass through have the air of having arrived there by accident. The 'present' of occupation is tentative; people appear uncertain if they should be there at all...

Figure 3. Inside the western sector (2022).
Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage



Figure 4. 'The purgatory of the present': surfaces in the mid sector (2025). Photo: Robin Wilson/Photolanguage.

RAGE AND THE GIFT

We entered via a passageway into the eastern sector of the complex. It was a part of the *Cité* that was then suffering most from neglect with its communal benches fragmenting, paving in disrepair, and its ground floor workshops and studios largely abandoned.³

Our intention was to record systematically along its length from east to west. But soon after beginning the documentation a young man arrived from the same passage and angrily remonstrated at our presence, claiming he had business there that would be compromised and that we should leave immediately. We explained that we too had business to conduct and that we would not interfere with his.⁴ A sudden storm surge of noise ensued, a violent combination of the vocal and the percussive, the likes of which had not been heard since the days of Artaud.⁵ This was followed by an uncertain duration of chanted exhortations directed at our removal — a mantra of expulsion — as if an external power was being invoked or appealed to: ‘*Sortez, sortez, bougez. Cassez-vous d’la*’. As the verbal assault continued, a bifurcation occurred within the young man’s voice: the emergence of a secondary voice that was lighter, as if uttered by a distant female double, joining the refrain in perfect synchrony, and yet chanting, by contrast, in a condition of meditative calm.⁶

We stood our ground, fearing the worst, but at this point in the confrontation a young woman appeared from the spaces deeper within the complex behind us, who talked gently and confidently to the young man in words we did not hear. Still protesting but his rage tempered, the young man backed away, taking up a position at the entrance of the passageway before disappearing out of sight. We thanked the young woman, who said no thanks were necessary, as she was simply doing her job, for she was the ‘*gardienne*’ of the *Cité*. In her opinion the young man had no right to attempt to dominate the use of the



Clip 1. Iain Chambers, ‘*Cité Les Longs Sillons*’ (2022-23), sonic composition. © Iain Chambers.

space for it was to be kept in common. She added however that we would need to leave promptly as the young man would likely return ‘*avec des amis*’ who would not be so interested in our wellbeing.

We explained our project to the young woman and that we had travelled from London to achieve it. This seemed to make little impression on her, but she paused for thought and recommended a ‘detour’, that we exit the *Cité* through another gateway and relocate via the main street to the western sector to take our photographs there. ‘In the west’, she explained, ‘the architect maintains order and legitimate transactions take place’. We agreed to the detour, thinking this a decent compromise. But as we renewed our thanks, the *gardienne* interjected, another thought seemingly having come to mind: ‘*Bougez pas, attendez*. Wait a minute... if you need photos, I have found some that are no longer needed here’.

3 The site visit that generated this article took place in May 2022. A largely cosmetic restoration of the painted surfaces of the eastern part of the complex began in late 2023.

4 We do not know if the young man was local or exactly what his business was in the space, but in a later conversation with a resident of the *Cité* it was explained to us that the eastern part of complex is regularly used by drug dealers travelling to the site via the nearby orbital autoroute, the *Periphérique*. The purpose of including the young man within the narrative is to register the impact of his vocal intervention within our experience of the space, without which the *gardienne* would not have appeared.

5 The poet, actor, and artist Antonin Artaud spent his final years in a convalescence clinic in Ivry-sur-Seine (1946-48) less than a kilometre to the south east of *Les Longs Sillons*. Artaud’s radio recordings of *To Have Done With the Judgement of God* are well known for their vocal ferocity. Stephen Barber recounts: ‘a recording session was held on 16 January 1948, at which Artaud performed long screams, cries and percussive beatings’. Stephen Barber, *Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs* (Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 152.

6 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. by Victor Corti, rev. edn (Calder, 1993), p. 94.



Figure 5. The passage; a 'bifurcation' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 6. The studio of the campaign organisation (2022). Photo: Robin Wilson/Photolanguage.

The *gardienne* opened the door to a derelict studio that looked as if it had once been the premises of a campaign organisation with leaflets strewn across the floor and boxes in an uncertain state, impossible to tell whether they were in the process of being emptied or filled. She went to the front of the space where there were two small tables pushed together amidst the debris and returned with a dusty, black, cardboard box file. ‘There... I have done your job for you’, she said, opening the box to reveal a pile of negatives, some bare and unprotected, some in plastic sleeves. ‘Stereographic photographs, I believe. Of here, *Les Sillons*. You can have them, for all they’re worth. Who can view such things these days anyway? And besides who would wish to see this place in stereo? It is sufficiently three-dimensional already, if you ask me.’⁷

We agreed to take the negatives and considered them an excellent compensation for having been turfed out of the eastern sector. The young woman seemed particularly pleased at our acceptance

of the gift and somewhat surprised. Indeed, it seemed as if it had lifted a burden from her and her mood brightened considerably. She said that she would now accompany us to the western sector, to ensure we arrived there safely.

We saw nothing further of the young man nor his ‘friends’, who seemed territorially wedded to the east, and yet cries of ‘sortez, sortez’ continued to reach us. Although unsure if they were lingering echoes from the time of encounter or the mantra renewed, the weight of their menace nevertheless persisted. By way of distraction, and in this time of detour, we commented on the many modulations of form across the length of the *Cité* whilst also asking questions of the *gardienne*. We transcribe a part of the exchange below.

⁷ ‘Any one may do a casual act of good nature, but a continuation of them shews it is a part of the temperature [...]’ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (Penguin Classics, 1986), pp. 74–75.

CONVERSATION WITH THE GARDIENNE, CITÉ LES LONGS SILLONS

GARDIENNE: "I applied for the guardianship of Sillons a few months ago. I was assured that I had the position."

RESEARCHER: "By whom?"

GARDIENNE: "The committee. There were artists, artisans, teachers, philosophers, veterans of the rues Pierre et Marie Curie and Gay Lussac.⁸ They were kind, encouraging. They talked of things such as intuition and of seeing things for what they are and how important it is to 'understand the measure of things'.⁹ They said I would be a part of the community and act for the community and that my work could start immediately. But I have not seen nor heard from them since.

They said that I could take possession of the lodge of the 'gardien', but it is under preparation... of a kind. Whenever I go to check on progress, it seems to be getting just a little more dilapidated each time."

RESEARCHER: "What do you do in your role as 'gardienne'? Is it like being a concierge from the days of glass atriums, mailboxes, and private gardens?"

GARDIENNE: "On the contrary, I am not a gate-keeper. One cannot be static in this place nor impose an order... I navigate, I climb, I test, I explore, I demonstrate, I measure, I am the *gardienne*."

RESEARCHER: "A sort of caretaker then?"

GARDIENNE: "I do take care, yes. When you climb like I do... I take care when the building gets... complex. I take care not to get lost."

RESEARCHER: "I mean, you do odd jobs, handywork... a *bricoleuse*?"

GARDIENNE: "Certainly, I am attentive to the movements of the errant body, to strays, the lost ball. I propose the inventive navigation of obstacles."¹⁰

⁸ The roads *Pierre et Marie Curie* and *Gay Lussac* were among those at the epicentre of events of the May 1968 students and workers' uprisings and fall within parts of the campus of the Sorbonne University. We are unsure if the 'committee' and the previous occupants of the studio are in any way related but we are aware that veterans of May '68 live in the nearby Ivry-sur-Seine town centre.

⁹ 'Understanding the Measure of Things' is the title of an interdisciplinary work by artist/architect collaboration Warren & Mosley. It consists of a photograph of a hand holding a model of a house within an urban scene, appearing to occupy the site of its future construction.

¹⁰ Claude-Lévi Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 10.

Seemingly frustrated with the tardiness of our comprehension, the *gardienne* proceeded to move across frames, tracing the angles of the building with her limbs in a form of gestural mimicry. She took great care in how her hands found ‘points of purchase’ to support her journey through oblique volumes,¹¹ pausing to observe herself at times in the dark grimy mirror surfaces of the building’s apertures where, ‘suspended between two possible objects of contemplation’, she seemed to find a twin.¹²

RESEARCHER: “Have you received instructions? How do you know what to do? How do you know when your work is done... and when you might go home each evening?”

GARDIENNE: “I might ask the same of you! The building determines my work. It is what comes to hand. It sets the distances and the speeds at which I must travel... For now, I have taken temporary lodging in the office of the architect. I sleep amongst the models there.”

She pointed to a corner window, where wooden models were gathering dust.

“...Models of this building and models of others. I would like to be *gardienne* of those other places too.”

RESEARCHER: “Your appointment has inspired you then?”

GARDIENNE: “My ambitions, like my movements, are not entirely determined by me.”

RESEARCHER: “Do you talk with the architect?”

GARDIENNE: “Rarely, do our paths cross. But she moves well about this place and sometimes I follow her.”

RESEARCHER: “Do you think she would talk to us?”

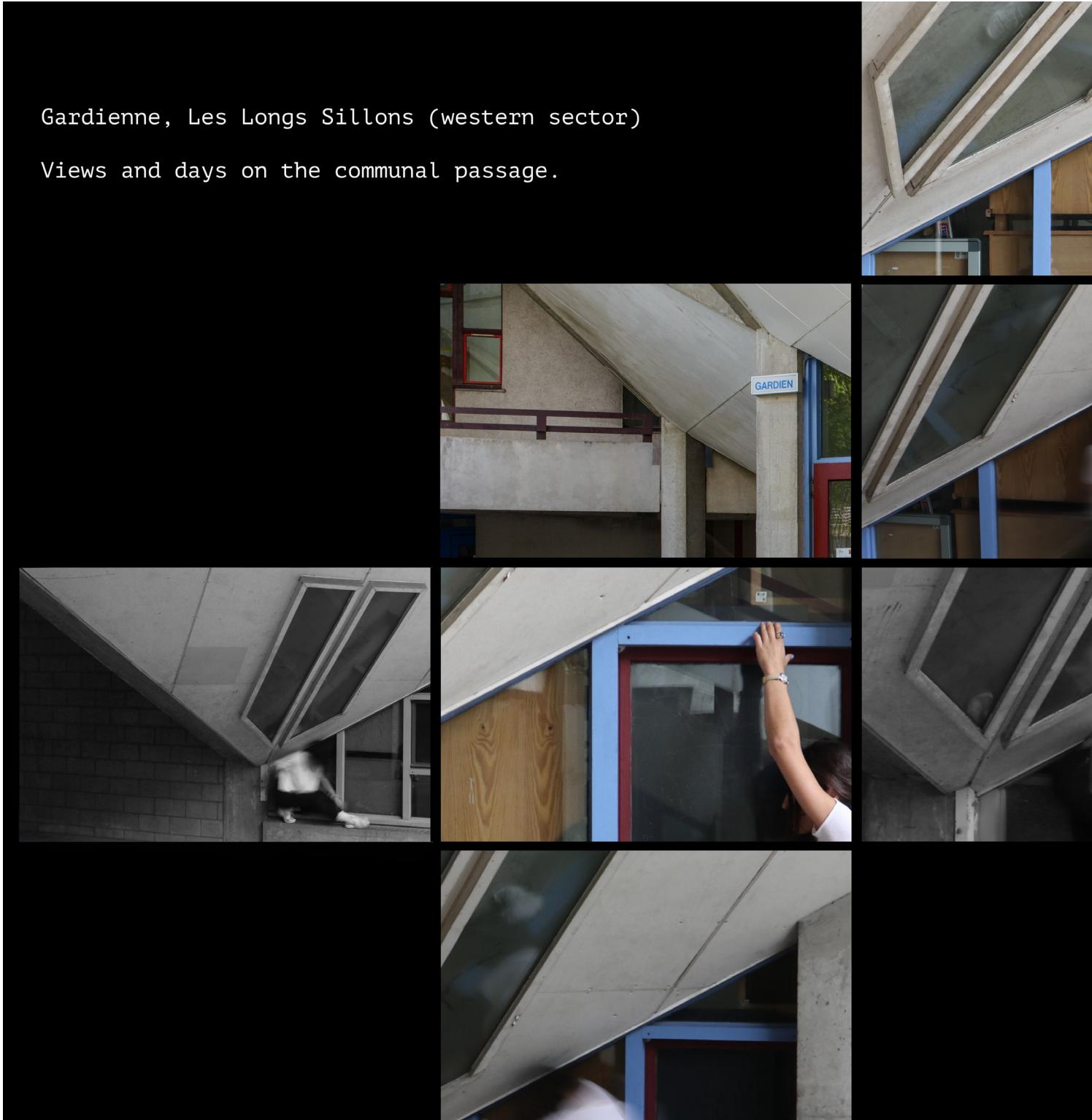
GARDIENNE: “She may but you would do well to make your questions more pertinent.”

¹¹ ‘Points of Purchase’ is the title of another work by Warren & Mosley (2003–07) involving a series of domestic appropriations of the crevices and seams of the architecture and infrastructure of public space.

¹² Craig Owens, ‘Photography en abyme’, *October*, 5 (1978), pp. 73–88. Owens responds here to the work of Victorian photographer Lady Clementina Hawarden and her depiction of figures simultaneously on the thresholds of windows and caught in mirror reflection, positing, as he writes, a ‘self-reflexive’, ‘structural tension within the medium — between photography as extrovert, a view onto a material world, and the photograph as a self-enclosed image of its own process’. *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

Gardienne, Les Longs Sillons (western sector)

Views and days on the communal passage.



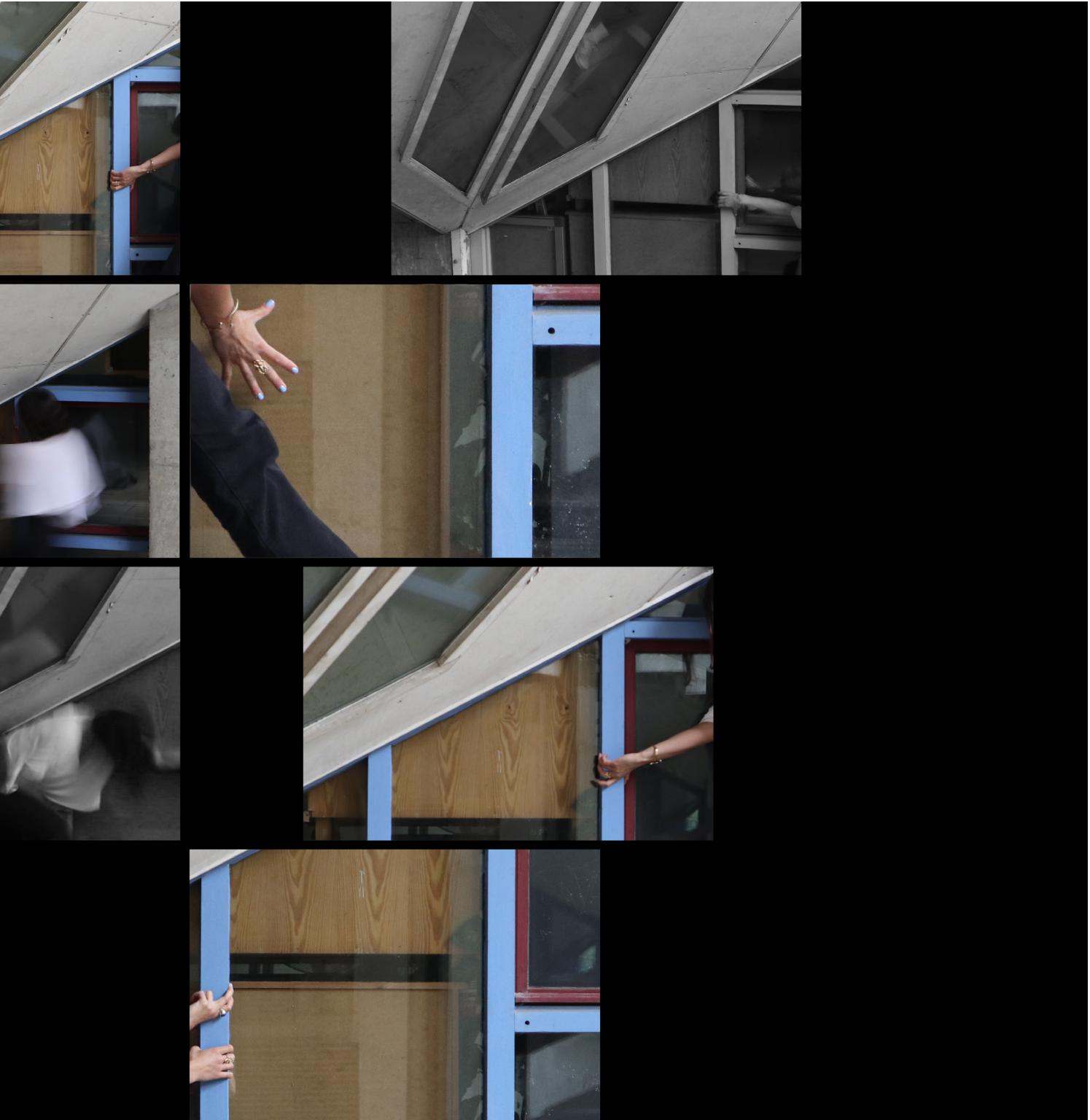


Figure 7. *Gardienne, Les Longs Sillons* (2022-23). Nigel Green & Robin Wilson (Photolanguage) with Flavie Caroukis.

Oblique mirror travel.

(Topics and utopias of a movement sequence.)





Figure 8. Oblique Mirror Travel (2022-23). Nigel Green & Robin Wilson (Photolanguage) with Flavie Caroukis.

A GESTURAL PURVIEW

The range of territories and responsibilities of the *gardienne* seemed quite unformed, and presumably subject to future instruction. Yet she seemed to identify most with a certain enclave of the western sector; a station from which to define a gestural purview or which, quite simply, required more 'care'.

From here, the *gardienne* had assumed the role of an exploratory spatial guide or pilot, a performative delegate of the architectural frame, a relational connector figure of the oblique; a figure of thresholds and margins, charged (by the 'committee') with the solo reanimation of quiescent space until more communal solutions could be found.¹³ Her movements primarily concerned spaces of the ground plane shaped by the incline of oblique volumes as they break from the first floor and descend to reach their nadir (inverted apex) at a point just above the ground plane of the public space.

These spaces of spectacular obliquity cascade the volume of the first floor down to create irregular spaces of opportunity on the ground floor: spatial splinters; hybrid wall/floors; disturbing vertical demarcations. Within the interiors, wooden scaffolding structures have been assembled to exploit this interplay, to take up the 'spatial gift' shared between floors.¹⁴ From the exterior these generate a strong sculptural performance, a deep faceting of public space, exploiting the latent volumes formed by the oblique rotation of the complex's structural grid. They slice across the frames of the ground-floor fenestration in a theatrical encounter between oblique and orthogonal plains — the *mise-en-scène* of the productive interference and differentiation of geometric orders. At their lowest point these volumes compress the space between their underside and the ground to little more than a metre, tempting the body to playfully engage and test its scale in relation to the building. This dramatic descent of

space from the first-floor slab also gives rise to the impression that the ground has risen as if subject to the upward pressure of a subterranean programme.

The inwardly inclined volumes present (in effect) an inverted mirroring of the oblique ascent of the roofscape above and, like them, have apertures (Fig. 11). Whilst the upper roof apertures open extruded eyes to the 'zenith light', those of the nether inclines can only gather the permanent shade of the inner courtyards of the public spaces.¹⁵ Indeed, within the ground floor interiors they are often ignored, submerged beneath a scaffolding structure. They could thus be understood as 'rhetorical' or representational devices, the primary purpose of which is to reinforce or foreground the analogous relationship with the roofscape, enunciating more emphatically the surreal inversion they perform. Perhaps then, the inverted apertures of the inclines are best defined less as fenestration than as mirrors themselves: flawed insidious mirror surfaces capturing obscure, oblique, askance reflection; presenting an abstract awareness (the building's own vigilance) to passage through the channels of public circulation; and to passage through architectural time.

Possessing such ambiguous apertures, the interior courtyards have themselves the aspect of 'rooms' and in this, the public spaces of *Les Longs Sillons* tempt a certain spatial conflation between interior and exterior. This is reinforced by the way the principal spaces of the ground plane — studios, meeting spaces, and a crèche — project angled bays of glazing into public space, offering a sequential opening up of the communal programme to the gaze. This does not constitute a loss of distinction between interior and exterior (more characteristic of post-modern spatial experiences of the mall or lobby) but more of a self-conscious rethinking and making-complex of the scheme of localised spatial emplacement within and across the thresholds of public, civic, professional, and private realms.

¹³ The notion of 'delegate' here draws on the work of Louis Marin and his discussion of deictic and enunciative figures within painting and cartographic art. For example, see: Louis Marin, 'The City in its Map and Portrait', in *On Representation: Louis Marin*, ed. by Werner Hamacher and David E. Welbery and trans. by Catherine Porter, (Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 202–18, p. 211.

¹⁵ Iwona Buczkowska, *Breathing Spaces* (L'Arca Edizioni, 1999), p. 12.

¹⁴ The interiors within the inverted inclines are described by architect Iwona Buczkowska as 'spatial gifts' as they are not included in the calculation of the spaces' rentable value (being deemed by the local authority as 'unusable'). Iwona Buczkowska, interview with the author, 21 May 2022.



Figure 9. Inverted inclines; 'a corner where wooden models were gathering dust' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 10. 'Spatial splinters' (mise-en-scène) (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 11. The roofscape (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 12. 'An abstract awareness (the building's own vigilance) to passage through architectural time' (2025). Photo: Robin Wilson/Photolanguage.



Figure 13. 'Opening up of the communal programme to the gaze' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.

A space of inverted roofs and of fenestration opening views down onto the ground plane and gathering shade. A site of mirror-play where orthogonal and oblique spaces collide and of a disturbed datum of the ground that seems to be rising up the building. These are utopic spaces; spatial figures of indeterminacy. They configure the 'real' — the continuum of actualised places and structures — through the neutralising discourse of the no-place, 'neither here nor there'.¹⁶ Symptom-like, they announce, in the abstract play of their spatial transgressions — as, to borrow the words of Raji Vallury, 'the *figuring instance* of a [...] desire, force or impulse' — a late-modernist project of social transformation.¹⁷ They reaffirm, through the spatial project of obliquity, an impulse toward relational and connective, urban, habitational *difference*, here and now.

The *gardienne* traverses utopic space; finds ways to articulate these fragments of non-lieu; uses things at hand to make her corporeal response to spatial puzzles, the 'aporias' of the utopian impulse made concrete.¹⁸ When she left the western sector, we had only our abject notes to refer to; our vain attempts to record a time of effulgence, like sparks burning out into the night sky.

'FOUND' PHOTOGRAPHS (THE BLACK BOX FILE OF *LES SILLONS*)

Found photographs can appear like a gift of providence; photographic referents liberated from their original authorship and archive, at large in the world eager for the investment and conjectures of new readings, new subjectivities, and collaborations. If not returned to the archive or institution, the connotative potential of the image can remain unfixed: the order and hierarchy of importance of its referents at play; a field of utopic possibilities. The found photographs reproduced here were (as recounted above), strictly

speaking, a gift — found by another but transferred to us as willing surrogates of the find. In deciding to disseminate, in moving them from the circumstances of the find to the media page and into the hands of editors, we risk the return of a frame of representation bearing institutional agendas and conditions of visibility. However we also consider this an onward sharing of the gift of the *gardienne* and a further lightening of her burden as the contents (selective) of the box file are shared and viewed by new eyes.

After returning to London we had the negatives printed and discovered them to be of an unconventional format of stereoscopic view, one which did not seem to correspond to a simple doubling of the image but which also produced a more complex set of lenticular subdivisions and displacements. Perhaps the images had been taken on a broken lens; perhaps on a unique, improvised, homemade device. The negatives in protective sleeves were marked with labels bearing the name of an organisation: 'CCAS — Comité Communal d'Action Spatiale'.¹⁹

An article by F. E. Wright from 1924 elucidates how improvisation has long been a part of stereoscopic photography's application in the field. Wright encourages the use of stereo photography within geological field work documentation to more accurately record and 'tell clearly the story of the field relations between certain geological features' with regards to relational distances and scale.²⁰ In order to bypass the expense and impracticalities of the use of specialist equipment, Wright provides the calculations through which to achieve stereoscopic view with a conventional camera positioned sequentially at two 'camera stations'.²¹ However the images from *Les Longs Sillons* are of another order of spatial 'story-telling' altogether; less concerned with the production of the effect of three-dimensional view (as the *gardienne* herself had intimated) and seemingly more invested in the

¹⁶ Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. by Robert A. Vollrath, 2nd edn (Humanities Press International, 1990), p. 263.

¹⁷ Raji Vallury, 'The Potentiality of the Utopian Literary Imagination', *Paragraph*, 39.3 (2016), pp. 287–304 (p. 293).

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse', *Diacritics*, 7.2 (1977) pp. 2–21 (p. 11).

¹⁹ Desktop research on the *Comité Communal d'Action Spatiale* reveals an abundance of information on an institution with which it shares an acronym: the *Centre Communal d'Action Sociale*. This latter is a decentred state agency operating at commune level, coordinating social and medical assistance for vulnerable citizens. However a number of minor references to a *Comité Communal d'Action Spatiale* occur in the print archive of ENSDAD (*École Nationale Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs*) relating to the output of the *Atelier Populaire* (the graphic arm of the May '68 student uprising). It is specifically referenced in relation to a poster advertising a discussion event at 9 p.m. on Tuesday, 18 June 1968. The poster, like the later stereo images, operates through a discursive strategy of doubling. It declares: "Non aux bidon villes. Non aux villes-bidons. L'urbanisme est un acte politique



Figure 14. 'I am attentive to the movements of the errant body, to strays, the lost ball' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 15. Kinaesthetic 'topics of uneasiness' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.

creation of a range of aleatory effects, of experimental doubling, distortion, and transposition, in which duplication itself is just a starting point.

Common to each image is their subdivision by the inner frame of the stereoscopic lens. Each image has a central zone where a more standard duplication of the scene takes place and which is separated by a black vertical band. However, beyond these, at the margins more extreme distortions and abstractions take place, enigmatic channels of space with their own, diverse, architectural ‘topics of uneasiness’.²² The fringe elements of the fractured scenes, the rogue wings of space imported from an unspecified distance beyond the expected limits of the image, can themselves appear to have volume, cylindrical, transparent containers of urban fragments, like vials or architectural test tubes.

Douglas Klahr describes stereoscopy as ‘an outlier among visual media because of its image’s inherent instability’.²³ Viewing, he explains, is ‘an active endeavour’ in response to the stereoscope’s ‘kinaesthetic demands’. Klahr is referring here to the experience of the image as viewed through the stereoscopic viewer. Kinaesthetic components come into play ‘since the receding planes of depth cannot be in focus simultaneously’ and therefore that ‘objects are neither localized over a surface nor fixed in focus within the scene’. It is, he continues, an optical ‘netherworld’ and one that ‘cannot be observed or measured by any person or instrument external to the viewer’.²⁴

Attempting to view the images from the box file stereoscopically allows for a 3D effect within the central territories of the image but does not reconcile the effects at the margins. These cannot be viewed simultaneously but one must make a choice as to which marginal detail to bring into play and they remain as rogue elements imported abstractly from a distance with the lacunae of intervening spaces remaining an irresolvable implication on vision. One has a choice, of

course, to *not* engage the specialised viewing apparatus. A range of options are open to the ill-equipped viewer, including going cross-eyed until one sees three images and then trying to concentrate on the middle one (otherwise known as ‘free viewing’).²⁵ (The ‘kinaesthetic’ certainly intervenes when using this technique.) The simplest option is to dispense with the spectacle of 3D altogether and view the performance of the image with unaltered eyesight, in the ‘raw’ state as found, which we have come to believe was as much their intended condition of viewing as any other.

The vertical black band at the centre of each image equates to the central blind spot of the stereoscopic lens. This is consistently present but also variable in its thickness, an unstable void at the core of the image, both generative and destructive — the origin of the photographic referent and its abyssal site of disappearance. The black void also appears as the central component of a more elaborate lenticular frame that divides the four principal parts of the image into its core and peripheral zones. The thickness and density of this frame is again inconsistent across the archive. In some, the central duplication is divided by both the dense central band and bordered, top and bottom, by an equally impenetrable framework of internal darkness. In others, the top and bottom borders are subject to subtle effects of translucence and reflection which the central black void in vision bleeds into. In these examples, one has a greater impression of viewing out from the shallow depth of an inner volume — as if trapped within the inner architectonics of a lenticular room or vessel — onto Klahr’s ‘optical netherworld’.

One image captures and distorts a structure that would seem to provide a not-implausible external manifestation of such a vessel: a metal frame and glass structure, an elaborate intensely angular bay or aerial viewing turret; a suitable vantage point from which to view new worlds (Fig. 16). This form possesses a certain technological nostalgia like the prow of an

au service du peuple”. The poster is illustrated with two petrol cans. One has been customised into a stove with a vent in the top. The other has the grid of an anonymous, modern, high-rise block superimposed upon it, presumably as a critique of zoned, orthogonal, post-war urbanism. The text thus develops a double meaning for bidon ville and can be translated as: “No to shanty towns. No to tin-can towns. Urbanism is an act in service of the people”.

²⁰ F. E. Wright, ‘Stereoscopic Photography in Geological Fieldwork’, *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences*, 14.3 (1924), pp. 63–72 (p. 63).

²¹ Ibid., p. 72.

²² Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Hurd, 1876), p. 21.

²³ Douglas M. Klahr, ‘Stereoscopic Architectural Photography and Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology’, *ZARCH*, 9 (2017), pp. 84–105 (p. 104).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

²⁵ ‘Viewing Stereoscopic Images’, The Stereoscopic Society, n.d. <<http://www.stereoscopicsociety.org.uk/WordPress/resources-2/viewing-stereoscopic-images/>> [accessed 10 February 2024].



Figure 16. The speculative nose can; 'an alien order of space' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 17. 'An instinctive evasion of representational rupture' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 18. 'The ambush' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.



Figure 19. The planter: 'What if?' (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.

exploratory or militaristic craft from the novels of Jules Verne or H. G. Wells. The stereo viewer has spliced its forward-most structure — a sharply pointed nose-can which progresses speculatively through a thicket of foliage — and compressed it back onto the body of the bay, truncating it into a hostile spike reminiscent of a medieval *Morgenstern* (the Morning Star). The frame, onto which the prow has been cut and spliced, contains a complexity of inner frames, bars of structural reinforcement, strange apparatus giving onto ambiguous subdivisions of recessional depth. A vast interior in miniature, an alien order of space. Such are the abstractions and transformations of the *CCAS*'s viewing and reimaging technique that a view onto the play den of the communal crèche transforms it into some paranoid vessel of otherworldly conquest.

Figures appear infrequently, caught in the folds and splices of this reprocessing of space, emerging or disappearing from the violent lenticular seams that tear at the fabric of the building and reorder it. Rarely does a figure survive the transposition into full duplication, one half of their stereoscopic selves disappearing into a spatial redaction. A pale cat stalks along the top of a wall on the border between the central zone of duplication and the left-hand vial of warped space (Fig. 17). A section of the wall on which it moves has been torn and extracted. Its muscles are poised to carry it beyond the encroachment of the dangerous seam behind it, as if in an instinctive evasion of representational rupture.

We speculate that the apparatus used, or perhaps also created by, the *CCAS* is something of the order of a combinatory or re-combinatory imaging device: a means to put the building back into the state of 'process/project'; to activate an architectural 'kinaesthetic' through the image; the conditions of a creative and experimental building site or *chantier* (to use the more expansive French term). One might go further and suggest that this method of architectural photography puts the elements of the building into contestation,

into conflict for spatial dominance, unleashing forces of narcissism and paranoia into the midst of the accomplished scheme of surfaces and structures. They depict a brutal time of reordering, of the building elements turned cannibalistic, colliding, and consuming each other. In certain zones, the building dissolves and fades into ghostly trace and residue; in others it grows new limbs, new spatial organs. These are extreme, critical, architectural photographs: crisis images. But we also surmise them to be propositional: the image as a mutinous design tool; agent of a re-combinatory architectural image-making, towards a *next step*.

A theme of the circular staircase dominates as if this batch of stereos was specifically directed at the augmentation of circulatory routes to project the already expressive sequence of staircases and landing walkways toward yet more exuberant, meandering and/or abrupt, communal connections. Circular stairwells double and overlap, creating in some images luxuriously wide yet treacherous vessels of ascent with some threatening to bifurcate into double helixes. Other stairwells shrink, contract, dissolve, and hide behind pillars, as if preparing to set an ambush (Fig. 18). In one, the doubling of a nearby pillar and the bringing of a second, now a third, into greater proximity generates a new 'scaffolding' support for an extruded first-floor walkway which proceeds to kink out and across the extended courtyard space to deposit a withered stairwell on its far side, one which would appear more disposed to sucking the occupiers of this space up into its vortex rather than providing a solid sequence of treads (Fig. 19).

In another, we view as if through the exit of a tunnel, the structural opening of which merges seamlessly with the dark frame of the apparatus to the left (Fig. 19). The scene it captures beyond is of a relatively 'stable' doubling of a frontal view of the façade of ground- and first-floor apartments, a small tree in a planter incongruously occupying the foreground. However, to the right of the façade, a stairwell has

slipped into vision, subject to a collapse/fold of space at the margins, and collided into the right-hand side of the façade, its bottom-most treads now giving directly onto a ground-floor window frame. A question is asked through the lenticular ‘kinaesthetic’: *what if* the communal stairwell now wraps/coils around the corner of the building, becoming the private spiral facility, the ascending balcony, to a *single* apartment?

In a further instance of such kinaesthetic enquiry, a spiral staircase to the right-hand side of the central zone of duplication disappears into a rupture-seam at the fourth tread of its ascent where it speculates fusion with one of the inverted inclines of the western sector (Fig. 20). The action suggested here would seem to be that of impacting a first-floor landing into the midpoint of the surface of the wall/floor — opening its interior to communal encounter — and to channel the incline down yet further, rotating its inverted apex into the spiral of the stair where it would presumably connect with subterranean depths (actual or imagined).

CONCLUSION

Within the temporal, spatial, and performative paradoxes of *Cité Les Longs Sillons*, it is difficult to decide whether one should conclusively address latent questions of the structure or of the phantom: the manifest or the implied; its limits or its limitlessness; its history or its fictions. However, one pressing and concrete conundrum dominates from our short time within the *Cité*: why was the *gardienne* so ready to pass the stereo images of the complex over to us? Why were they ‘no longer needed here’? Why would giving them to us bring a lessening of her burden? Did she simply perceive them to be an affront to the architecture to which she had become a *gardienne* and possible source of discontent to the architect? Did she perceive them to be the now-redundant speculations of the departed activists, representing an unwanted ideological burden of the past upon the present? Did she perceive them, in some convoluted way, to be the product of a rival to her employment and an alternative to her spatial

project? Or, like the young man who vocally protested our presence in the eastern sector, did they represent for her an unacceptable attempt to dominate the spatial story of this space, to go an ideological step too far and that in the interests of neutrality, she felt duty bound to find a gentle way to expel them too?

EXPLANATORY NOTE

The *Cité Les Longs Sillons* was completed by Iwona Buczkowska in 1986. The development was influenced by the earlier architecture and urbanism of Jean Renaudie, Renée Gailhoustet, and Nina Schuch for the town centre reconstruction of Ivry-sur-Seine (1968–1987) but was developed independently of their offices. It is an enclave of urban obliquity at a midpoint between the *Porte d’Ivry* and the *Mairie d’Ivry*. Buczkowska was a friend of Gailhoustet and remained in contact until Gailhoustet’s death in 2023. The completion date of *Les Longs Sillons* was contemporaneous with Gailhoustet’s developments in the north of Paris, of the *Cité de la Maladrerie*, Aubervilliers, and îlot 8 of the Saint-Denis Basilique Urban Development Zone. Like Gailhoustet, Buczkowska has remained resident within her own architecture and her office occupies a studio space at the western end of the complex. As of June 2025, large sections of the *Cité* remain without repair. This has meant that some of the upper apartments are no longer habitable.

The work presented here developed as the result of initial fieldwork undertaken for the collaborative project, ‘Parisian Brutalism: As Found and Performed’. The full research team for this wider project were architect and performance artist Flavie Caroukis, sound artist and composer Iain Chambers, artist Nigel Green, the artist/architect collaboration Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley, and writer and artist Robin Wilson, and was part supported by the Bartlett School of Architecture.



Figure 20. Rotation of an inverted apex (2022). Photo: Nigel Green/Photolanguage.

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