

Georges Addor's Housing Complexes: an Observatory on the Conservation of "Large-Scale" Heritage

BY GIULIA MARINO

The timeliness of swiss architect Georges Addor's oeuvre is indeed vast and heterogeneous. Illuminated by a few successful operations, which should be showcased as such, the picture is, however, highly nuanced, since many questionable conversions have hurriedly followed each other in recent years. The broader reflections on the methods and techniques of preservation of the contemporary heritage that emerge from the current relevance of Georges Addor's work appear to be decisive; extended to a broader production, they deserve to be addressed without delay.

The Genevan architect Georges Addor (1920–1982) had a brilliant career. In the space of fifteen years, he produced a series of outstanding works, testifying to his wholehearted commitment to the most significant trends in international architecture. Collective housing occupies an exceptional place in his oeuvre, which, without ever confining itself to mere imitation, consciously embodied the postulates of modern architecture, with a particular concern for extremely accurate material execution.¹

Apart from its heritage value, undeniably remarkable, but for which recognition is still relatively recent, the timeliness of Georges Addor's work also proves a privileged observatory on the preservation of 20th century heritage. The inventory of this *corpus* raises profound questions about the instruments for the preservation of architecture from the postwar period, which are capable of adapting to both large-scale developments and to its constructional specifics, inseparable from the burgeoning construction industry. At the same time, the output of the Genevan architect gives a clear idea of the multiple facets of the current practise of design in existing buildings, which in western Switzerland and Europe is still little concerned with the concept of material authenticity. The broader reflections on the methods and techniques of preservation of contemporary heritage that emerge from the current relevance of Georges Addor's work appear to be decisive; extended to a broader production, they deserve to be addressed without delay.

From innovation to persistence. Urban forms

The panorama of works affecting Georges Addor's oeuvre is indeed vast and heterogeneous. Restoration projects that respect their original material substance contrast with more or less faithful critical reconstructions, even creative reinterpretations; likewise, far more frequently, major renovations in which the imperative of energy improvements

— legitimate and now recognized as unavoidable — have become a pretext for giving a building a new identity have become common. Illuminated by a few successful operations, which should be showcased as such, the picture is, however, highly nuanced, since many questionable conversions have hurriedly followed each other in recent years.

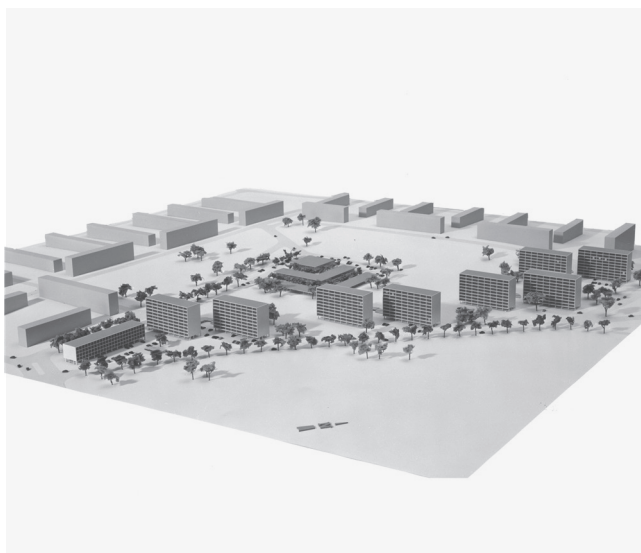
The case of collective housing, especially the housing projects which we are going to dwell on in this paper, is particularly significant in this respect. If, on the one hand, the urban forms, fortunately preserved in most cases, can still be appreciated today, the issue of their architectural qualities is far more controversial, notably with regard to the envelopes of buildings.

Clearly, the persistence of the urban forms of the complexes built by Georges Addor and his architects primarily reflects the intelligence and foresight embodied in the original design. Whether it was a matter of the strictest application of the postulates of the Athens Charter, as in the satellite precinct of Meyrin (1960–64), experimenting with the principles — certainly innovative — of “linear urbanism” in the city of Lignon (1963–71), or the scholarly reinterpretation of the “open square” in the very fine upmarket residential complex at Bude (1958–62), the arrangement of the volumes is perfectly calibrated. This is also true of their relation with the community facilities, which were designed at the same time, and the landscaping by Walter Brugger, which is undeniably very rich.

This equilibrium in the drafting of the plan has been a compelling argument to counter proposals for “qualified and differentiated densification with new buildings”² of the major complexes in Geneva, naively put forward as a solution to the housing crisis, which now seems endemic. In this way the project for a third tower block in Lignon, “a twenty-story building, aligned with the tallest tower, to be erected on the shopping center”³, was rapidly discarded



Georges Addor, Jacques Bolliger, Louis Payot, Meyrin Parc Satellite Precinct, Geneva, 1960-1964, Meyrin © Addor & Julliard Archives, Geneva.



01 Georges Addor, Jacques Bolliger, Louis Payot, Meyrin Parc Satellite Precinct, Geneva, 1960–1964. © Addor & Julliard Archives, Geneva.



02 Georges Addor, Jacques Bolliger, Louis Payot, Meyrin Parc Satellite Precinct, Geneva, 1960–1964. © Addor & Julliard Archives, Geneva.

so as not to disrupt its remarkable organization and, above all, the functioning of the whole, in which the housing was deliberately laid out at the edge of the site so as to leave a large space free for the park with facilities. At Meyrin, too, one notes the coherence of these pioneering operations, which discourages any temptation to fill in the gaps between the buildings or to increase the height of the buildings. Finally, the case of Bude is emblematic: during discussions about the desirability of attributing heritage status to this upmarket residential complex, the findings of the studies of the possible potential for building on the site concluded that “there exists no real scope for inserting a new building”⁴. This finding not only reflects the remarkable character of the whole, but is above all a direct result of the very detailed condominium regulation developed by Addor & Julliard themselves, prohibiting any further construction within its precinct, through a series of draconian provisions intended to preserve its intrinsic qualities.

Site plan and “integrated protection”. A nuanced equilibrium

On this latter point, these three developments were recently the subject of a protective measure which “pays homage to the approach of its designers” and attests definitively to its heritage value. The listing of the “site plans” of Lignon and Meyrin Parc, respectively in 2009 and 2013, as well as of Bude, now under way⁵, is extremely significant and takes us to the heart of the issue of the identification of the most appropriate instruments for the specific protection of 20th century heritage. More prescriptive than a simple “label” for raising awareness⁶, but legally less binding than listing or “entry in the inventory”, the site plan first of all makes it possible to safeguard the architectural unity and coherence of housing estates, including their landscaping, whose contribution is generally and mistakenly neglected. Furthermore, in some cases, this measure could act as an

excellent instrument of “integrated protection”, thanks to the simultaneous adoption of an operational measure making it possible to precisely define the framework for future interventions, those which should be encouraged and those which should be firmly proscribed.

Conducted parallel with the procedure for the adoption of the site plan, the applied academic research proposed and developed by the Laboratory of Techniques and Preservation of Modern Architecture (TSAM) at the EPFL on the building envelopes of the Lignon housing estate adopts this approach. It constitutes an indisputable regulatory framework, the result of a careful weighing of interests between safeguarding the heritage values and the imperatives for energy improvement. The detailed specifications for the restoration of Lignon that emerge from this complex and multidisciplinary process, validated beforehand by the competent authorities and attached to the site map, thus set clear limits to future operations. Any intervention must hereafter preserve the materiality of the outer layer of the original curtain wall — prefabricated glass and aluminum panels attached to a wooden frame — so preserving the remarkable architectural unity of the whole in its integrity⁷.

If the operative guidelines developed for Lignon can be considered a success, the experience of the satellite precinct of Meyrin appears more problematic. Contrary to the recommendations for Lignon that were formulated in advance, the façades being at the time very close to their original state, the prescriptions of the TSAM laboratory for Meyrin intervened in a context that already appears extensively compromised. At the time of the adoption of the site plan, the high-rise buildings in Meyrin had suffered the most diverse alterations, generally to be classified as “major renovations”. The original wood-aluminum panels — a true prototype of those at Lignon — had been greatly altered (for example, by installing external slatted blinds), or clearly replaced. As for the new modules proposed to



03 Georges Addor, Jacques Bolliger, Dominique Julliard, Louis Payot, Lignon Satellite Precinct, Geneva, 1963–1971. © Addor & Julliard Archives, Geneva.



04 Georges Addor, Jacques Bolliger, Dominique Julliard, Louis Payot, Lignon Satellite Precinct, Geneva, 1963–1971 © Ph. C. Merlini, 2010.

evoke the geometry and materials of the original façades, without actually having the same refinement, they can be seen as a true attack on the architectural and technical qualities of the whole, comparable to such regrettable (and largely useless) measures as the external insulation of the fine gables with exposed concrete retaining the pattern of the formwork⁸.

Despite the preservation of some (rare) façades in the original state, the example of Meyrin is paradigmatic by the range of changes that have been made there. Likewise, its recent history embodying the difficulties of the process of protection of modern heritage, often dictated by emergency criteria or belated intervention. At Bude, for example, no fewer than *seven* prototype glazed sections have been submitted in recent years to the approval of the canton's heritage authorities, pending adoption of the site plan. Some more respectful solutions, in which the existing woodwork — in excellent condition — is simply adapted to accommodate new insulating glass, were discarded in favour of full replacement of the remarkable original wooden window frames with far more banal models. With legal protection expected in the coming months, the existing envelopes and splendid entrance halls will therefore already have undergone a major and irreversible alteration.

Conservation versus upgrading to standard?

Since it is a whole complex, therefore designed in keeping with the concept of repetition, the current relevance of the Meyrin satellite precinct is striking: the juxtaposition of the most disparate interventions — in some cases on the scale of a single building, belonging to several owners — permanently damages our understanding of the ensemble. This alarming observation applies to much of Georges Addor's work, which has been affected since the 1990s by extensive, in some cases very extensive, renovations. A true hallmark of the Addor & Julliard office, the production that made use of

the constructive type of lightweight envelopes — unusually in collective housing, and even mass housing — appears in this context particularly under strain. Embodied in many variants — panels or grids — all confused programs — from the luxury *Hôtel Intercontinental* (1960–1964) to the “hostel” for the deprived in the *Hôtel de l'Ancre* (1956–1959) — curtain walls have proved to be a “particularly sensitive part” of Addor's heritage and, more generally, that of post-war buildings.⁹ Their connotation as the true emblem of international architectural modernity, assigned to them in the 1950s and 60s, seems to have been rejected by extensive interventions, motivated both by demands for “upgrading” (essentially for better energy efficiency) and more prosaically for updating their image. The high technology of the original glass and aluminium envelopes — “quality materials and proven by experience”¹⁰ — further enhanced by often flawless execution, has been systematically undermined.

Because of the constructional specificity of contemporary heritage, its technological obsolescence is indeed considered *a priori*, and not always justifiably, as rapid and very marked, even inevitable, becoming the principal pretext for radical intervention. The great themes of 20th century architecture — from industrialised construction to lightness as a true paradigm of modernity — are both arguments used to decree their historical value and the reasons for major renovations. Despite a generally reassuring diagnosis that could have justified limited intervention simply to extend the first life cycle of the existing elements, Georges Addor's work has been subjected to substantial alterations.

In this logic, the thermal behaviour of the buildings' envelopes is particularly affected, as shown in the examples of Meyrin and Bude. Although operations such as Lignon or the very fine restoration of the administrative building of the Tavano factory (1955–1957) have shown that a balance between the arguments for conservation and improvements to consumption requirements is possible

05 Georges Addor, Jean-Jacques Honegger, Budé Housing Estate, Geneva, 1958–1962. © Addor & Julliard Archives, Geneva.



06 Georges Addor, Jean-Jacques Honegger, Budé Housing Estate, Geneva, 1958–1962. © Ph. C. Merlini, 2010.



07 Georges Addor architect, Malagnou-Cité, Geneva, 1954–1957. © Addor & Julliard Archives, Geneva.



08 Georges Addor, Low-rent buildings at Cayla, Geneva, 1953–1955. © Addor & Julliard Archives, Geneva.

with limited measures, appropriately studied — often more economical and without necessarily requiring exceptions to the standards in force — the sterile conflict which opposes the needs of energy to those of heritage is rarely resolved in favor of the latter. When having to deal with increasingly stringent limits on consumption, replacement or even “repackaging” becomes a conditioned reflex, perhaps a questionable exaggeration, and this is done in the absence of any prior analysis of the building.

The regrettable conversion of the set of low-rent buildings at Cayla (1953–1955), one of the office's exceptional achievements, which benefited from a very favorable international reception at the time, is in this respect very striking and alas, sadly representative. The campaign for the “energy renovation” of the envelopes conducted under the aegis of the Confederation proposed to preserve the architectural features of the buildings, while significantly improving their energy specifications. Intended to be “visible only at a second glance”¹¹, the operation actually consisted of a regrettable change, namely the trivialization of this iconic object, due to the external insulation, replacement of windows and glazed surfaces, and a somewhat fanciful colour layout.

Given the many changes that the Addor heritage has been subjected to in recent years, the attention of the heritage bodies primarily focuses on three major works whose qualities can still be appreciated today and which, for that reason, have benefited from the highest assessment in the Census [*Recensement de l'œuvre*] conducted by the TSAM laboratory¹²: the complex of the Battelle Institute, the Malagnou City apartment building and the envelopes of the Hôtel de l'Ancre (with the exception of the ground floor, already extensively altered). For “these objects of outstanding value, their inclusion is requested in the inventory of monuments or the adoption of a site plan”¹³. This would be probably very useful, marking a new legitimization of the heritage value of Georges Addor's work. Now, at a time when the headquarters of the Federal Customs Administration in Bern is being subjected to careful conservation, enhancing the materials and original finishes¹⁴, and where the beautiful restoration of the Untermoos school in Zurich has become a model to be followed¹⁵, we have the means to meet the challenge. Protection of these few works by Addor should therefore be complemented by interventions that are worthy of the task in buildings where the designer's every gesture was clearly subordinated to the intrinsic qualities of the building. Interventions respectful of these last major records of a major achievement would be the only recognition, belated but richly deserved, of an outstanding oeuvre that has been somewhat mistreated over the years. ■

Notes

- 1 See Franz Graf (ed.), Mélanie Delaune Perrin, Giulia Marino, *Addor Architecte*, Genève, MétisPresses, 2015.
- 2 Blaise Sahy, *Le Projet de Renouvellement Urbain Durable à l'échelle des Quartiers. La transformation des Cités Meyrin et Onex à Genève*, Les Cahiers du Développement Urbain Durable, No. 4, June 2007, 81–102.
- 3 Christian Bernet, “Une troisième tour au Lignon: l'occasion ratée”, *Tribune de Genève*, 30 June 2009.
- 4 Bruno Marchand, Antonio Martin Prieto, *Ensemble de Budé, Étude de Faisabilité pour l'implantation d'un Nouvel Immeuble*, Genève, État de

- Genève-Office du patrimoine et des sites, Ville de Genève-Service d'urbanisme, 2009.
- 5 The site plan of the Budé complex is currently passing through the last phase of the procedure, including a written response to objections.
- 6 The “label xx” introduced in France in 1999, can be cited as a measure for raising awareness of the cultural values of modern and contemporary heritage. Note that the attribution of the label does not entail any legal constraint concerning the preservation of the buildings.
- 7 Franz Graf, Giulia Marino, *La Cité du Lignon 1963–1971. Étude architecturale et stratégies d'intervention*, coll. Patrimoine et Architecture, Infolio, 2012. See likewise: Franz Graf, Giulia Marino, “Modern and Green: Heritage, Energy, Economy”, Barcelona, *Docomomo Journal*, No. 44, autumn 2011, special issue “Modern and Sustainable”, 32–39.
- 8 EPFL-TSAM, Franz Graf, Giulia Marino, *La Cité Meyrin à Genève. Étude d'Amélioration Thermique des Enveloppes*, appendix to the site plan No. 29484–526, Office du patrimoine et des sites — DCTI, Service de l'Énergie — DU, Commune de Meyrin, 2010.
- 9 On the issue of preserving the curtain wall envelopes and the evolution of restoration practises, see Franz Graf, Giulia Marino, “Pour un observatoire du patrimoine moderne et contemporain. De l'histoire matérielle du bâti à l'histoire matérielle du projet de sauvegarde”, *Revue de l'Art*, Vol.186, No. 4, 2014, 31–35.
- 10 Note that Addor & Julliard systematically presented the choice of durable materials as one of the office's strengths, to the point where it became a guarantee of profitability for developers. Addor & Julliard, Meyrin Parc, description, undated Archive Bolliger.
- 11 KLM, “Intervenir au niveau de la façade est délicat”, Berne, *Energiea-Bulletin de l'Office fédéral de l'énergie* — OFEN, No. 4, 2010, 12–13.
- 12 Franz Graf, Mélanie Delaune Perrin, Giulia Marino, *L'œuvre de Georges Addor architecte (1920–1982): inventaire, évaluation qualitative, recommandations*, Genève, Office du patrimoine et des sites de la République et canton de Genève — DCTI, 2009–2013.
- 13 République et canton de Genève, Commission des monuments, de la nature et des sites, sous-commission monuments et antiquités, *Recensement de l'œuvre de Georges Addor (1920–1982)*, 20 novembre 2013.
- 14 Verwaltungsgebäude der Oberzolldirektion, Bern, Gret et Hans Reinhard, Walter Stückeli, architects, 1951–53; restoration by AAP Atelier für Architektur und Planung. Note that this exemplary operation, currently under way, includes “derestoration” of the unfortunate alterations dating from the 1970s and 80s with the aim of recovering the coherence of the whole.
- 15 The Untermoos schools in Zurich (Eduardo Del Fabro architect, 1954–1955) and Feldli in St. Gallen (E. Del Fabro architect, 1957) — both protected — have recently been the subject of significant energy efficiency improvements (the Feldli school even received the Minergie label). The excellent results in terms of annual consumption have been attained through local restoration measures applied to the original large windows, whose frames have been retained.

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