

Lifetime Achievement Award



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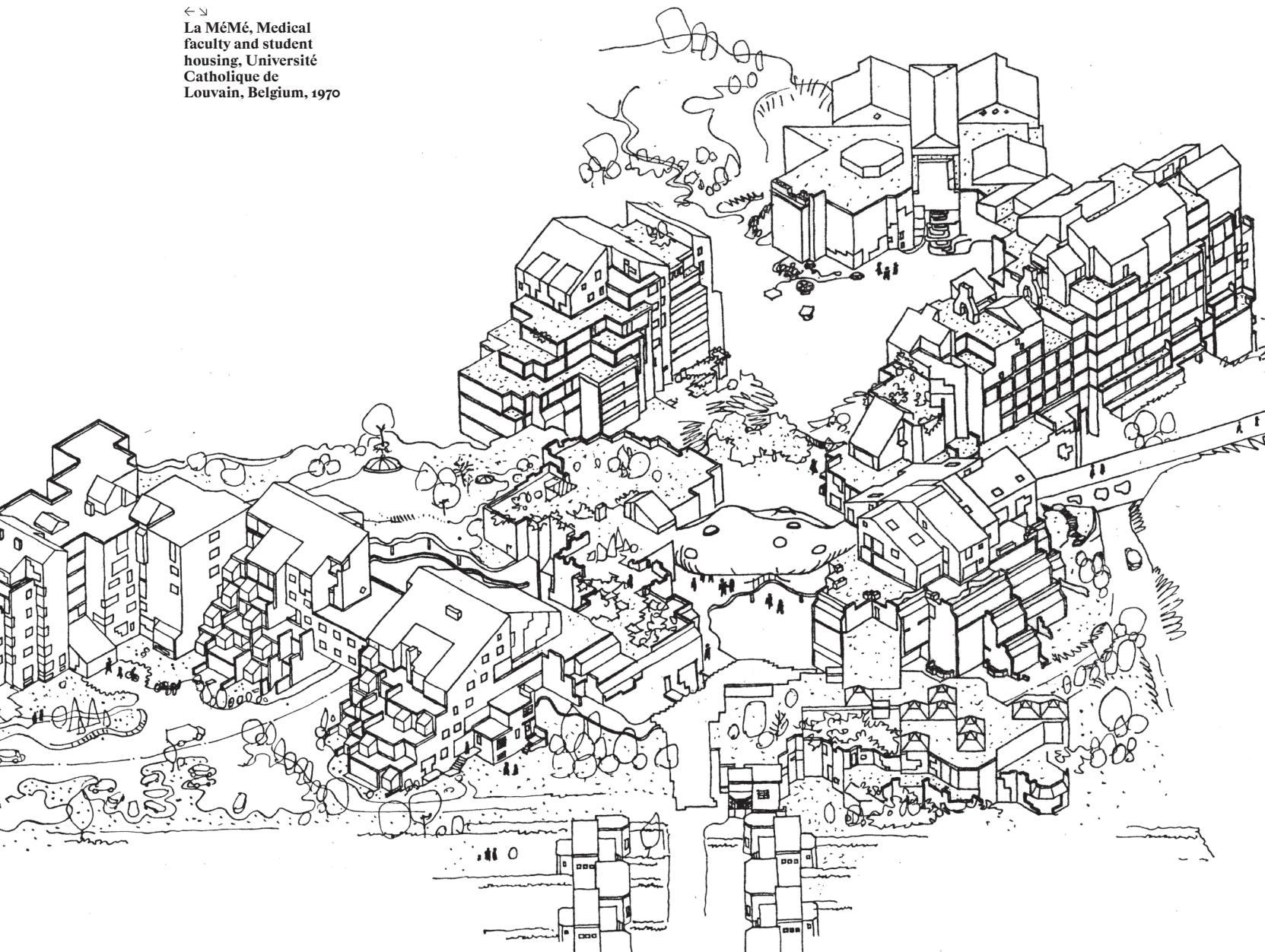


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Élodie Degavre

As Simone Kroll says, 'it's the story of a career', before adding, 'well, career is a mighty big word!' This sums up the achievements and values of the Simone and Lucien Kroll architecture and urban planning studio: a considerable body of work (more than 100 projects between 1955 and 2008), relentless commitment, and sincere modesty. But let there be no mistake. Systematically drawn to complex situations, conflicts to be resolved and causes to be defended, Simone and Lucien Kroll never chose the easy path. Connected to contemporary realities, concerned about the world as it is evolving, they prove themselves to be, at the age of 94, more anti-establishment and anarchist than ever. The Lifetime Achievement Award of the Brussels Architecture Prize puts the spotlight on these pioneers of participation and ecology, and thus rewards the long, difficult but happy career of this extraordinary couple of designers.

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La MéMé, Medical
faculty and student
housing, Université
Catholique de
Louvain, Belgium, 1970



I would be lying if I said that I was drawing an objective portrait here. One does not emerge unmoved from four years of filming alongside Simone and Lucien Kroll, moments of rare familiarity inevitably leaving their mark on me.² Indeed, anyone who crosses their path cannot remain indifferent, neither to the acuity of their words, nor to the beauty of the place they live in, nor to their caustic personality, a blend of biting humour, admirable generosity, disconcerting cynicism and complex humanist and anarchist ideas. It is an aura that must be tamed before it can be enjoyed. One can assume that their cheeky side has played tricks on them, as the list of their unfinished projects perhaps shows. They rarely made concessions, as Paul Davies suggests in *The Architectural Review*: 'Nobody stuck to his guns longer and tighter than Kroll.'³

Born in 1927, Lucien Kroll, who graduated from La Cambre, first practised his profession alongside Charles Vandenhove. When he met Simone Pelosse in Lyon in 1956, he was already an established architect, and Simone was a well-known local figure. Having become a potter after some time at the Arts et Métiers school in Paris, she was politically active in the preservation of her neighbourhood and was the facilitator of Lyon's intellectual network. Gaston Bachelard, Célestin

Freinet, Bocuse and even Le Corbusier, whom she sat at her table alongside her neighbours, were all in contact with her. Simone's contribution to the work of the studio has finally been recognized: her work as a colourist and gardener was first highlighted at the Chaumont-sur-Loire festival in 1992, where she created a vegetable garden in her name, and then in the exhibition *Tout est paysage*, produced by the Cité de l'architecture & du patrimoine in Paris (shown in Brussels in 2016) and subtitled *Simone et Lucien Kroll*. But her intellectual contributions are still largely underestimated – her culture is infinite, her knowledge of nature encyclopedic – as is her indispensable role in bringing people together in the studio.

The Kroll studio was very active between 1970 and 1990. During this time when architecture was being questioned, the designated enemy was modernism and its functionalist deviances: 'Architecture cannot be rational! A locomotive, yes. But a house, no! The house possesses a warm echo, it is not a machine. That's what Le Corbusier said, but what did he know!'⁴ Out of the ashes of that world, an architecture should arise that would be as close as possible to the inhabitants, an objective the Kroll couple would devote their lives to. What came out of this battle – which some would describe as naive

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Alma Métro station,
Woluwe-Saint-
Lambert (Brussels),
Belgium, 1979



or caricatured, Strauven going so far as to call it 'architectural exorcism' and Jenks 'totalitarianism'⁵ – are projects that were unprecedented for their time and were characterized by profound transdisciplinarity. The Kroll studio is almost exclusively interested in the most mundane and intimate aspects of architecture: housing, which they necessarily envisage as collective and participatory. 'No inhabitants, no plans'⁶: Simone and Lucien consult, bring together, immerse themselves in neighbourhoods, rely on the expertise of psychologists, sociologists, ethnologists and avant-garde pedagogues to develop their participative methods. Davies emphasizes their proximity to the thinkers of their time: 'in negating his authority as an expert and subverting the mode of production, Kroll probably got as close to the work of social theorists Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord as it might be possible for an architect to get'. After having built their own collective housing in Auderghem, then failing to go to the next level with COABITA, a project of several hundred housing units designed with Marc Wolff, they saw their most emblematic building emerge: La Mémé, in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert. In this building that houses 300 students, Simone and Lucien implemented a long-term participation process and sought to include future uses in

an open form of construction. An ecological project long before its time, inscribing architecture in the complexity of social and urban fabrics, and already including the notion of reversibility of construction, so essential today. According to Patrick Bouchain: 'It is the first democratic expression of an architectural commission. La Mémé defines what participatory architecture can be, totally transformable and adaptable, as social architecture must be.'⁷ La Mémé and its site – the Alma metro station and two other buildings – are the scene of Lucien Kroll's final battle on Belgian soil. His expulsion from the Order of Architects was almost a fatal blow. Tenacious, the Krolls bounced back, and their career unfolded elsewhere: 'I am a suitcase architect: people pick me up, people drop me off, and I work.'⁸ This was followed by housing projects in France – Marne-la-Vallée, Cergy-Pontoise, renovation of low-cost housing in Montbéliard, etc. – and in the Netherlands, as well as a few experiments further afield, in Germany, Italy and even Rwanda.

Paradoxically, although it is abroad that Simone and Lucien gained recognition, it is La Mémé that still draws the most attention. Francis Strauven demonstrated his circumspection when he described the roof as 'showing permanent

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School don Milani,
Faenza, Italy, 1997



signs of post-hurricane damage'. He conceded, however, that the building would go down in history: for him it was a 'ruin under construction ... which at the same time seals, with disconcerting irony, a break in the history of contemporary architecture'. Critics have never been kind to the projects of the Kroll studio, and this has given birth to a fascinating literature full of detailed arguments and attempts at analysis. It is as if the Kroll projects, despite the controversy, possessed this virtue: that of producing a high-quality debate. Lucien Kroll encouraged criticism and never took it personally. In fact, it mattered little to him: 'How people will inhabit an architecture is infinitely more important than knowing what it looks like'.⁹ Of La Mémé, he remembers: 'I was told: it's a bloody mess. But of course it's a mess, that was its virtue!'¹⁰ But critics agree on one point: 'There is a Kroll style', an architectural style that Davies defines as follows: 'more circumstantially wonky than demonstratively expressive, rich in quirky material, variety and detail, not so much intended to shout of the author's creativity, but of process rather than product'.

What can our profession learn from this obstacle course? By radically demanding that architects mute their expertise in order to listen more closely, Simone and Lucien Kroll are telling us that we must keep questioning our role. By creating designs that are anything but complacent, they invite us to delve on the process rather than on the finished result. By reinventing construction methods, they remind us that the architect has a specific power, that of his or her imagination: a powerful weapon by which to improve the quality of our

living spaces. In short, the legacy of the Krolls may be this: a profound redefinition of our profession. Lucien once told me: 'Architects are armed romantics. They have a power, that of their project. Meaning and beauty, that's their job. Not technique. Nor finance, either. But poetry. There are a lot of architects who make money, and they do it as well as possible – I'm not criticizing. But that doesn't mean anything. And then there are those who dream. And fragments of those dreams are legible in their buildings.'¹¹ ▲ ■ ●

- 1 Simone Kroll in conversation with the author, 6 March 2020.
- 2 The documentary film *La vie en kit*, directed by Élodie Degavre, was shot between January 2017 and May 2021.
- 3 The quotes from Paul Davies are taken from: Paul Davies, 'Lucien Kroll (1927-) Simone Kroll (1928-)', *Belgium / the Architectural Review* 1454 (September 2018).
- 4 Lucien Kroll in conversation with the author, 13 June 2019.
- 5 The quotes from Francis Strauven are taken from: Francis Strauven, 'De anarchitectuur van Lucien Kroll', *Wonen TA/BK* 12 (1976): 4–10.
- 6 Lucien and Simone Kroll, *Soixante et une architectures manifestes* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2015), 29.
- 7 'Exposition au Lieu Unique (Nantes): Simone et Lucien Kroll, architectes utopistes', *Ouest-France*, 25 September 2013.
- 8 'Lucien Kroll, architecte', *Portrait*, RTBF, 27 March 1985.
- 9 'Lucien Kroll, architecte', *Portrait*, RTBF, 27 March 1985.
- 10 Lucien Kroll, in conversation with the author, 13 June 2019.
- 11 Lucien Kroll in conversation with the author, 14 February 2020.

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Quartier
Admiraalsplein,

Dordrecht,
The Netherlands, 1998



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