

The Maison du Peuple in Clichy: how a historical monument is scorned

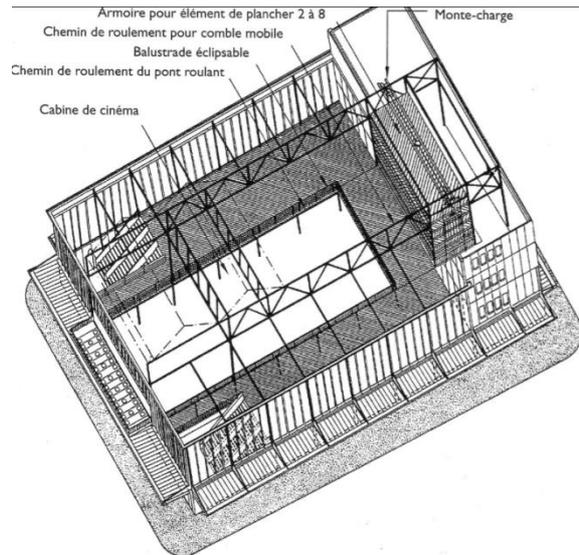
The current outrageous project rising above the Maison du Peuple in Clichy overwhelms - irrespective of the rules and basic regulations governing historical monuments - an iconic heritage building of international importance with its cutting-edge programme and pioneering implementation. Is the insatiable appetite of property speculation above the law in the context of the Grand Paris scheme?



III. 1. 1:33 scale model, in open position, presented at the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine. Painted Plexiglas and resin. Design: Sylvain Le Stum, 2002-2004.

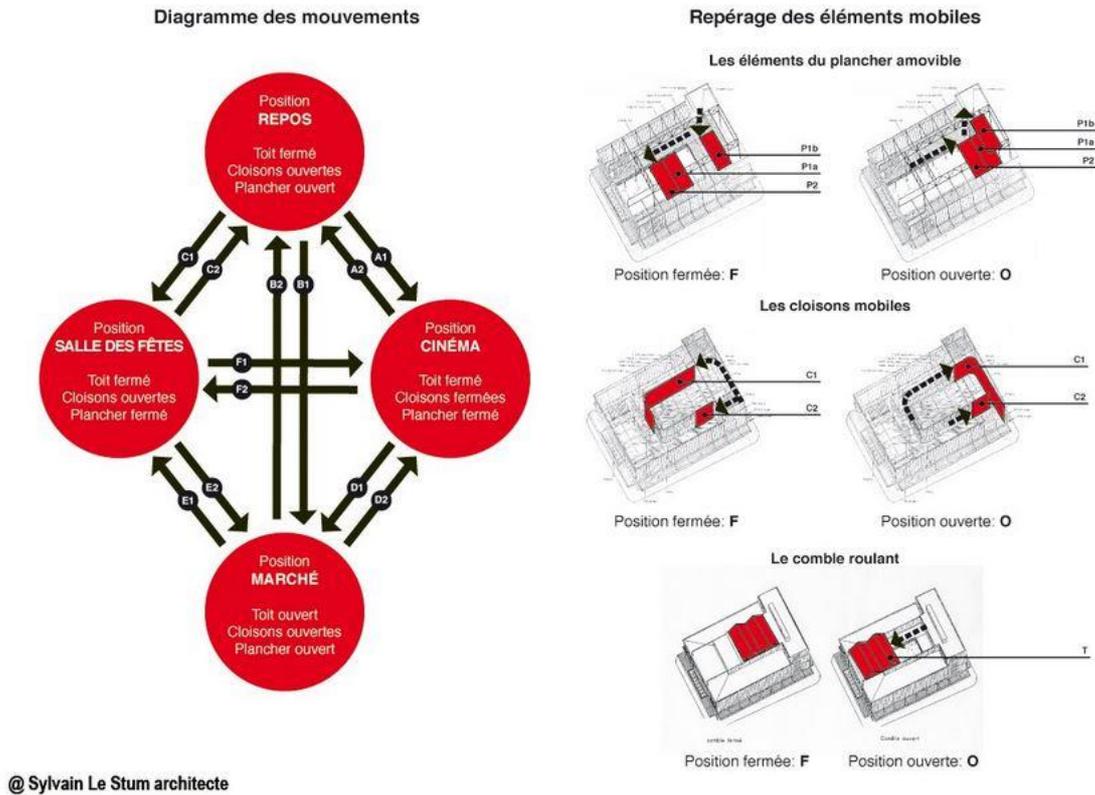
A pioneering programme and cutting-edge implementation

The history of the Maison du Peuple in Clichy is closely linked to the role played notably by the socialist and communist parties of the "Red Belt" under the Popular Front government in France. It was built (1935-1939) following a competition organized by the Communist mayor Charles Auffray for the rooftop of the open-air market.



III. 2. Axonometric view showing the market in activity. Taken from *Faces*, n° 4243, Autumn-Winter, 1998.

The winning team included the architects Eugène Beaudoin and Marcel Lods (with the involvement of André Sive from 1937 onwards) assisted by the engineer and the manufacturer Jean Prouvé. The final programme went further than the initial commission and was ground breaking and complex. The building, designed with the residents of Clichy in mind, housed everyday public activities as well as cultural and associative components under one roof, giving a monumental and spectacular aspect to the versatile building. With its central location, it symbolised the modern city of the Popular Front. The use of moveable elements meant that the interior could be changed and meet the requirements of the programme, based on a covered market open in the day. In the evenings, week-ends and bank holidays, a hall with capacity of 2000 could host festivities and political meetings and become, with a system of retractable panels, a 500-seat cinema and theatre and at the back, offices were made available for local companies and trade-unions. On the ground floor, the market could take place "in the open air", thanks to the panels and retractable floor on the first floor and the folding roof of the reception hall, designed by Bodiansky. The transformation of the market into reception hall took less than three quarters of an hour and the changeover to cinema in less than five minutes.

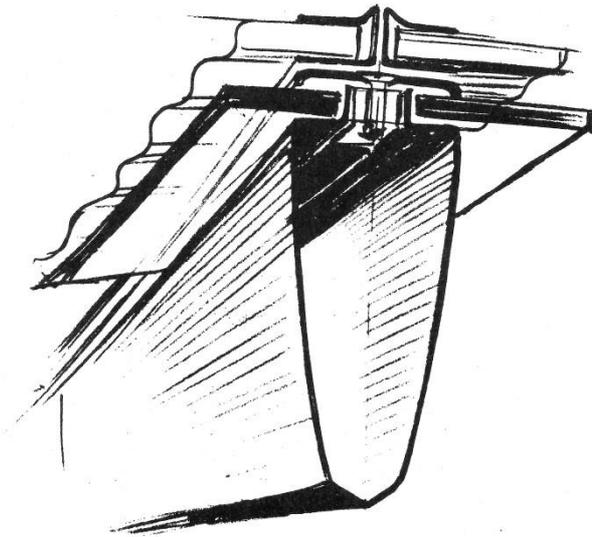


(fig.1, fig.2 and fig.3).

III. 3. Plan of the automation principle. Sylvain Le Stum. 2001-2004

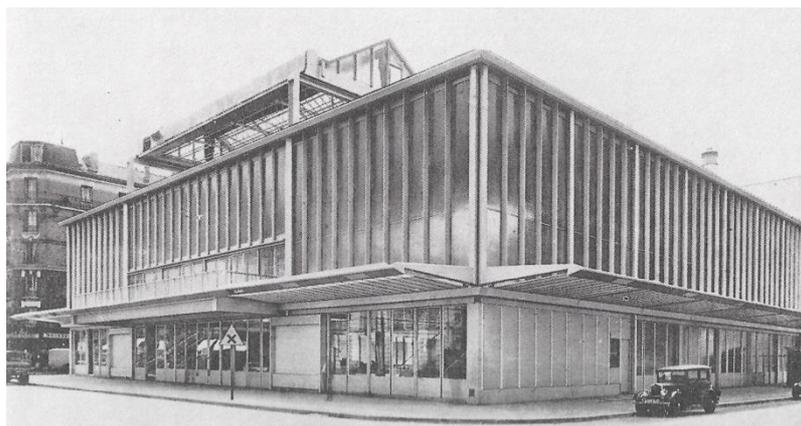
This cutting-edge building is a masterpiece of functionalist programming. To be totally transformable, it required detailed architectural organisation and established new complex mechanisms that had never been used until then in public buildings. As such, it was a precursor of the research to be carried out after 1950 on multi-purpose facilities.

In the construction phase, there was an extensive use of industrial techniques. The architectural use of steel and folded metal plate was the first example of pre-fabricated curtain walls: all of these elements were drawn, designed and factory-manufactured by Jean Prouvé (fig.4). The non-supporting walls were simply suspended from the structure. The facade panels consisted of two slightly curved sheeting, maintained by springs and containing insulation.



III. 4. Cross section of a facade stiffener with double-glazing: armoured glass, vacuum and reinforced Rhodoid. Drawing Jean Prouvé, 1938-1939.

The metal substructure facilitated, on the four facades and on the deck of the terrace, the wide windows that give the building its exceptional luminosity via a lateral and zenithal lighting system. The double-glazed panels of the two components of the retractable roof provided an opening of almost 300m². The natural light is also reflected in the sheets of corrugated rhodoid. The transparent ceiling of this mobile roof also benefits from the reflection of the artificial light of the projectors placed on the surrounding posts.



III. 5. Overview with roof in open position. From *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, n°5, 1939.

The Maison du Peuple is a pioneering example of prefabricated and industrialised building techniques, acknowledged and widely hailed at the time by all the specialist media (**fig.5**) and featured in all the French and international publications on the history of architecture. Regarded as

an undeniable milestone in the history of modern architecture, it is a "perfect example of harmony between modernity and modernisation" (Jean-Louis Cohen, inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, 21 May 2014) and a source of inspiration for key buildings such as the Pompidou Centre.

The restoration campaign by Hervé Baptiste: long and unfinished

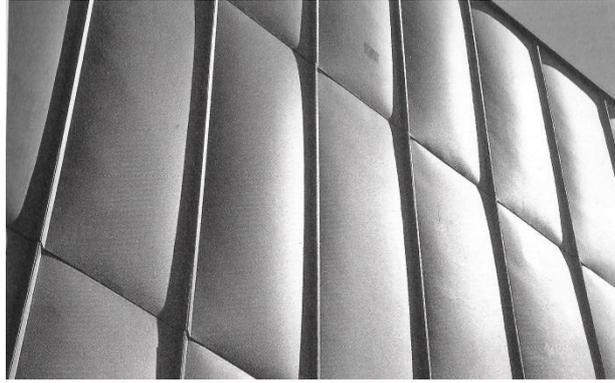
For almost half a century the building was forgotten and considered a disgrace: it gradually deteriorated, the facades and the metal infrastructure were left to rust, the zenithal lighting removed, the retractable floor covered with concrete, the window frames replaced with aluminium... and for want of maintenance, the heating, ventilation and lighting were dramatically altered. Recognised for its exceptional qualities by the Culture Minister Jack Lang, the building was listed on 30th December 1984 indicating a promising new policy for 20th century heritage sites. But it was almost a decade before restoration work began in 1995, after preliminary studies carried out by Hervé Baptiste, chief heritage architect and the Historical Monuments department. Restoring buildings with steel frames and curtain walls was a new field for the Historical Monuments department. The restoration work took ten years and followed a classic phasing of the various stages: from the outside shell, to prevent the entry of rainwater in the building, to the interior spaces. The restoration did not follow the specific construction logic of the building, associating supporting structure, shells, divisions and distribution. The large glass façades were restored with substitute materials giving a mirror effect that did not conform to the original whereas the prefabricated panels of the office facades and the peripheral canopies were "faithfully" restored or rendered (**fig. 6 et fig. 7**).



III. 6. Overview, office side, before the restoration of the facades. Condition in 1990.

After the removal of asbestos, the restoration campaign of the building revealed an exterior shell relatively conform to the original. Inside, only certain moveable elements were restored: the sliding roof and mobile partitions, but not the retractable floor, one of the key elements to the understanding of this "machine". The interior renovation project was not completed either, in the absence of agreement with the owner as to the function of the upper floors, which are still unused today.

The different programmes that had been considered (congress centre, sub post-office, multipurpose hall, library, archive centre, etc.) were systematically abandoned since they were not compatible with the existing building. Indeed, the aim was to find a function that would highlight or at least conserve the distinctive aspects of the building and its versatility. The building was considered an unpretentious local amenity but rejected by the majority of the members of the community. The residents did not share the esteem for this heritage building and the municipal ambitions of the Popular Front no longer matched the preoccupations of the Clichy residents of the 21st Century. The graft carried out on the "historical monument" in 1983 was rejected by the majority of the population. The city, deeply in debt, refused to give its share to finance the end of the restoration. Lacking the necessary funding for its renovation, the site has been dormant until now, with the exception of the Lorraine market based on the ground floor.



III 7. Detail of the facade panels of the offices, after restoration. Condition in 1998.

The project by Ricciotti: the construction of an "urban signal" on a historical monument



III. 8. The Duval / Ricciotti, LBA, Holzweg, Pierre Dufour ACMH project. Axial section of the Maison du Peuple zone. October 2017

In 2016, the call for proposals "Inventing the Grand Paris metropolis" was finally an opportunity for the city to be rid of the white elephant Maison du Peuple, an incongruous object in the neo-liberal municipal policy led by the mayor-entrepreneur, Rémi Muzeau. "For over thirty years, the city has been looking for partners and projects for this outstanding building. For us, "Inventing the Grand Paris metropolis" was a fantastic opportunity", said the mayor. The project would benefit from the impact of a prestigious local programme corresponding to the current aspirations of the metropolitan population... and at the same time, reduce the municipal budget: the operation is funded, is it not, largely by a property group.

Designated in October 2017, the winning team, led by the Duval property group, brought together the architect Rudy Ricciotti associated with Lba + Holzweg Architectes. It planned, next to the future station of the n° 14 line, the construction of a 96 metre tower in concrete, built to the back of and

above the Maison du Peuple, a listed Historical Monument. This tower is to be balanced over the far edge of the building and "hangs over the public space" (**fig.8, fig.9** and **fig.10**). Designed with high performance energy-efficient materials, with an exoskeleton concrete façade in fibre-reinforced concrete, it is to house a restaurant and a 100-room 4 star hotel and above that, a hundred or so luxurious apartments with panoramic views. (**fig.8, fig.9** and **fig.10**).



III. 9. The Duval/Ricciotti project. Model presented for the exhibition of the winning projects in the competition "Inventing the Grand Paris metropolis", Pavillon de l'Arsenal, 30 Nov. 2017 - 4 March 2018.

The current regulation of 21 m velum roof is easily avoided by revising the local town planning scheme and classifying the area as an urban zone mandated to accommodate "contemporary architecture clusters", specifically in areas at the entrance of cities and which allow the current authorised height to be multiplied by almost four!

With the wave of a magic wand, this amendment will transform this neighbourhood that had until then been classified as *inner-city* to a "city entrance" in order to benefit from exceptions regarding rules and regulations concerning height! Better still, this amendment intends to have us believe that the mass of this immense tower of almost 100 metres high will have no incidence on the environment: no drop shadow neither on the housing around nor on the luminous Maison du Peuple with its zenithal lighting!

The "modernity" of the Maison du Peuple of the 20th century fits discreetly into the urban fabric of the city by respecting the template of the surrounding buildings. This modesty is insignificant in the face of that of the towers of the 21st century, showcases and emblems of the new liberal globalisation, which give a much more positive image for the Grand Paris Metropolis and the

residents of Clichy. According to the designers, the new tower, a proud urban beacon, "will communicate with that of the Batignolles Judicial Precinct situated at the Porte de Clichy" (sic).



III. 10. The Duval/Ricciotti project. 3D perspective drawing giving the impression of a tower leaning and not above the Maison du Peuple. October 2017

Finally, to make a good impression, the team also partnered with the talents of the Historical Monuments architect, Jacques Moulin, the "advocate" of the new tower of the basilica of Saint Denis and the new "restorer" of the Maison du Peuple. The latter boasts an ambitious programme, driven by the Duval group that centres on 'fashionable recipes': food and culture. The ground floor will be devoted to a "*fooding* and utilities" hub with the food market geared towards small producers, a 600 m² space with shops and long tables which will be operated by a well-known chef, an upmarket grocery store, a restaurant and amenities: child minding facilities, book shop, wine shop and baker, *co-working* spaces. On the first floor allocated to culture - exhibition, project and concert spaces are planned - but also a space for the presentation of the permanent collections of the Musée national d'art moderne-Centre de création industrielle of the Georges-Pompidou Centre. The mobile elements will therefore be put back into use in order to totally restore the versatility of the space. At this stage in the project, there is no talk of the problem of the necessary primary restoration of the foundations nor the creation of several levels of underground parking which might weaken the historical monument.

Has the thundering Ricciotti, well-known for being a great opponent of all types of norms (see his pamphlets on High Quality Environmental standards, for example), succumbed to the neo-capitalist

torments of real estate? The position of the architect is ambiguous: some time defendant of heritage buildings (for example, the Corderie site in Marseille) and associated with a chief architect of historical monuments, has he forgotten the elementary constraints of a historical monument? Will the Ministry of Culture, which for several years has taken on the figure of the silent majority on numerous cases linked to the Heritage of the 20th century, summon up the courage to prevent the next massacre of an outstanding heritage building of international renown, topped by a pretentious beacon-tower, itself an alibi for the restoration? Will the Ministry remain unmoved by the blackmail wielded by the private investors who run to the aid of the State and the local councils to restore abandoned heritage sites and buildings, today the Maison du Peuple in Clichy, tomorrow Suresnes Open air school or the Nanterre School of Architecture?

Bernard Toulier, General Heritage Honorary Curator, Administrator of Sites & Monuments.

The record of the **public enquiry** is on line. You may post your observations up until **4 May 2018** on the following Internet site:

I would like to thank for their collaboration the architects Leyla Beloucif and Caroline Bauer, assistant lecturer at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et de Paysage de Lille and Docomomo France.

Original text in French translated by Amanda Crabtree.