

| From Tony Garnier to the Urban Museum: the birth of a cultural housing project

by *Alain Chenevez*

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Introduction

The Tony Garnier Urban Museum constitutes an unusual, monumental outdoor cultural structure. It is a residential housing estate first of all designated as ‘Habitations à Loyer Modéré’ (HLM), low-income housing. Located in the working-class neighbourhood known as the ‘Etats Unis’ in the eighth district of Lyon, it is open to tourist visits¹ because of the presence of twenty-five mural paintings on a surface area of more than 5,500 m². Nineteen of these paintings pay tribute to the pioneer of modern urbanism: Tony Garnier. They are complemented by six additional international representations of ideal public housing.

Built by the architect Tony Garnier (1869–1948) between 1920 and 1933, the working-class neighbourhood of the ‘Etats Unis’ in Lyon is the birthplace of an original experiment in promoting urban culture, initially piloted by local residents. The first stage in the creation of the Urban Museum was the renovation, in 1985, of buildings by Greater Lyon’s Public Office of Development

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and Construction OPAC). Then, in 1988, on the initiative of the residents, artists from the *Cité de la Création*² designed and executed an aesthetic composition on the gabled walls of the neighbourhood. This work of art marked the birth of the Urban Museum even though it took ten years of effort to materialize.

The museum received awards from UNESCO in 1991 for its exemplary cultural action, and from the Tourism Trophies in 2002. It was recognized for its public interest and labelled 'Twentieth-Century Heritage' in 2003 by the French Government and has continued to develop rapidly.³ This working-class project for a museum site in an urban zone was not achieved without incidents or controversies. It is the fruit of collective citizen action and the struggle for its permanence continues today. What were the stages and stakes and procedures and who were the actors? Let us retrace this history to be passed on to future generations.

The history of a cultural conversion

The foundation of the Tony Garnier housing estate, the site of the Urban Museum, dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The city of Lyon, in the Rhône-Alpes region, at the confluence of the Rhône and the Saône rivers, is a city with a commercial tradition that has experienced intense industrial growth since the mid-nineteenth century. Workers' dwellings in the city centre were often slums with problems of hygiene and insalubrity. The mayor of the city, Edouard Herriot, decided to launch massive development projects in order to attract new industries and to house workers on a vast plain south-east of the city. The architect Tony

Garnier, a native of Lyon, who is considered today as one of the precursors of modern town planning,⁴ was chosen to direct the projects.

Eager to solve the problem of working-class accommodation, Tony Garnier proposed constructing the first public housing in France, 'Habitations Bon Marché' (HBM), in a new neighbourhood and according to an innovative approach: the neighbourhood was not to be isolated. On the contrary, it should welcome numerous social activities in a harmonious and verdant environment. The plan was to cater for 12,000 inhabitants. Construction began in 1920 and ended in 1934. Following the inauguration, many families moved in.

The Tony Garnier buildings were never subsequently repaired and in the 1980s the ensemble was slowly deteriorating. An ironic anecdote illustrates the situation: the film crew working on the adaptation of M. Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, was looking for an urban site which resembled the Prague Ghetto during the 1930s: the Tony Garnier housing estate displayed the state of decrepitude that was being sought. This episode encouraged the residents, among others, to set up a tenants' committee in order to obtain the renovation of their accommodation from the owners, the OPAC of Greater Lyon: 'Renovation occurred because we asked for it . . . we fought to obtain it. We had to assert ourselves' recalls Lily Eigeldinger, then President of the tenants' committee and 'kingpin' for the mobilization of the neighbourhood. That was in 1983 and the date marked the birth of collective action by the residents who, after twenty years of commitment and struggle, achieved the

total transformation of the image of the neighbourhood. At the same time, and in order to accelerate the renovation that was dragging on, a cultural and heritage project was born in 1987, following a meeting with the mural artists of the Cité de la Création.

The inhabitants and the artists of the Cité de la Création decided to create an outdoor cultural itinerary by proposing mural paintings on the gabled walls of the buildings, on the theme of the 'industrial city': the major work of the architect Tony Garnier. At the origin of the project was the simple and cleverly formulated idea of Eddie Gilles-Di Pierno, the current president of the local committee, *'this project's mission will be to obtain funding for the renovation of the neighbourhood by setting up a cultural and heritage project rather than to setting fire to cars'*. It was an ambitious project which would take ten years, from 1988 to 1997, for completion, as some people deemed that a working-class housing estate would not be suitable for this sort of undertaking.

Conditions for cultural transformation

The goal of renovating a public housing estate may seem, initially, rather ordinary. Ultimately, it was an ambitious project, in many ways exemplary, which was carried out: 1,568 dwellings occupied by more than 4,000 people were renovated on a single site; 30,000 m² of public space, including the creation of courtyards and landscaped streets, was developed; a Multimedia Services Information Centre, intended to strengthen the link between inhabitants and public services (the post office, telephone company, public utilities, etc.), was created and, in 1992, a 'Tony Garnier Urban

Museum Association' was established and managed by the tenants. The latter's missions, as indicated by Article 1 of its Statutes, include: (a) managing and promoting the Tony Garnier Urban Museum, dedicated to the architect, a native of Lyon and builder of low-cost housing, 'Habitations à Bon Marché' in the 'Etats Unis' district (Lyon 8th); (b) developing studies on Tony Garnier and his work, ensuring the dissemination as well as promotion, and (c) developing research on the renovation and development of remarkable neighbourhoods or architecture, and the procedures for involving the inhabitants in these processes.

This working-class initiative invented, within a neighbourhood, an innovative concept that linked culture and housing, putting forward as a principle that the inhabitants must play an active role in programming and implementing operations for improving their neighbourhood. Taking into account the value of the human factor is as important as redefining the environment. The identity of the Tony Garnier Urban Museum rests on this particularity, which intimately links artefacts of urban art with a cultural project. It is essential for understanding the frame of mind that guides the way it is run and leads it to encourage the active participation of its inhabitants in the development of its activities.

Many incidental and structural reasons can help us understand the success of the project. First of all, the sociological factors. Located far from the centre of Lyon, the Tony Garnier housing estate remained a 'village' for a long time. The inhabitants had known each other for years and shared a common culture, formed in their

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working-class origins, political militancy, years of resistance during the war and the isolation of the neighbourhood until 1959. This sociological and geographical situation probably facilitated the

neighbourhoods zone, in 1986, secured the necessary funding for the renovation of the neighbourhood from the state, region, department and City of Lyon: 43 million French francs over



23. The Cité Tony Garnier: Lyon, France.

phenomenon of mobilization which was structured according to emotional and community relationships.

Political factors also underpinned the cultural conversion of the neighbourhood. Public funds, allocated within the framework of municipal policy and the attribution of supplementary public resources for the benefit of so-called 'sensitive' areas, had a decisive effect. The inscription of the 'Etats Unis' neighbourhood in a social development of

thirteen years, out of which 2 million French francs for public space and only 1.2 million French francs for the production of mural paintings.

Recognition by UNESCO in 1991 opened the door to the production of six international painted walls and gave the project an international scope, while also establishing its legitimacy at local level. Finally, for a project characterized by not being part of an administrative framework, the action and involvement of exceptional women and

men (inhabitants, artists, journalists, directors, OPAC, civil servants or politicians) were determining factors. Inhabitants and artists knew how to rally all the actors of the project to their views and to make the initiative known by mobilizing strong media support. No negative effects, however, were felt as regards the mobility of populations. The Urban Museum is the result of structured collective action, involving different actors with often diverging interests that were none the less united in developing the project. It was an organized process, structured by political and historical events, but with operations occasionally similar to militant activity such as publicizing, gaining members, obtaining a minimum consensus for funding and mobilizing symbolic and collective recognition, etc. These efforts resulted in the elaboration of a development project, the organization of cultural activities, the dissemination of an 'identity' by the residents, and the implementation and management of a team of professional, salaried workers.

The future of the Urban Museum

This collective achievement of working-class enhancement has succeeded in changing the image of the 'Etats Unis' neighbourhood, not only in the minds of the people who live there, but also in the minds of the inhabitants of the Lyon conurbation as a whole. The neighbourhood has remained working-class and is occupied today by modest families that provide a link with an eventful history and past struggles.

Volunteers, administrators and employees of the association have worked over the past years

on a project to ensure a better reception for the 20,000 annual visitors. The museum is equipped with communication tools, the first fruit of a formalized policy of publicity and communication.⁵ During the first semester of 2004, this new stage also began work to develop and improve the museum premises. The goal is to make visiting the Tony Garnier Urban Museum a must in the suburbs of Lyon, by concentrating on the following focuses:

1. The enhancement of the whole of Lyon's heritage, through its inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List and the implementation of a general inventory of the most remarkable elements of architecture; the creation of guided tours and computerized reference information on Tony Garnier.
2. The organization of exhibitions, in connection with the cultural sites of the region.
3. The implementation of a project in common with the sites which are called on to constitute a network of 'associated museum centres'. The Urban Museum would be one of the key components of this network, by addressing the architecture and heritage of the twentieth century and working as a laboratory for urban policies.

However, with the beginning of this new stage, the museum has had difficulty in maintaining its means of existence. City funding has become rare. While intended to be ad hoc, such funding in fact assisted the first phase of the project. In order to continue its cultural and social



24. The Cité Idéale de Russie: Lyon, France.

action in the long term, the museum must operate with regular subventions. Like many modest or medium-sized institutions, the Urban Museum suffers from the disengagement of the state and a reduction in public assistance in France, as well as the return of a traditional policy that favours large sites.

This unfavourable conjunction is compounded by the difficulty of the Tony Garnier Urban Museum to develop its own resources through the sale of related services and products, a difficult option to implement on a site which is open in an urban milieu and is of considerable social significance. Visitors can stroll through the neighbourhood, take advantage of the garden courtyards, contemplate the mural paintings and consult the descriptions which are available in the streets without passing through the welcome and exhibition centre. This limits the possibilities of the association to develop its own resources.

Conclusion

As the result of exemplary collective action and support from many government organizations, the Urban Museum is a first-rate example of working-class architectural and urban heritage. It is a cultural housing estate which has been declared of public interest and has received recognition and support from UNESCO. It is an emblematic space of working-class culture, its architecture, housing, commitment, initiative and its resolve to produce added value in cultural and heritage symbolic terms. With its twenty-five monumental paintings, this exceptional itinerary claims art and culture as an essential right. The painted walls represent the memory of the inhabitants and an exemplary endeavour for the democratization of culture and heritage.

| NOTES

1. The second largest conurbation in France with 1,300,000 inhabitants.

2. Founded in 1978, the Cité de la Création enterprise is a group of artists which has one of several goals 'to embellish' urban space. They create murals, frescos, decorations or urban objects within public or private space. These creations are meant to reveal, mark and/or ornament the environment. The Cité de la Création is internationally renowned today; it has signed more than 350 works in several cities in France but also in Barcelona, Mexico City, Leipzig, Lisbon, Vienna, Jerusalem and Quebec City, of which its principal examples are in Lyon, such as the Mur des Canuts, the Fresque des Lyonnais, the Bibliothèque de la Cité, the Théâtre des Charpennes, etc., as well as the twenty-five frescos which make up the Tony Garnier housing estate.

3. Today, the museum also comprises five employees, an exhibition room of more than 300 m², a reception centre and shop, an apartment to visit that faithfully re-creates the atmosphere of the 1930s, audio-guides and many cultural projects.

4. In reference to the publication of his book on the industrial city published in 1904.

5. New graphic chart, promotional advertisements and Internet site:
<http://www.museurbaintonygarnier.com/>.



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25. The Great Inca Route rises distinctly from valleys to austere heights in the Andes mountain range.