Auguste Perret and Le Havre. Utopias and compromises of a reconstruction
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Forty-five years after the first plans were drawn up, the reconstrucrion of Le Havre appears somewhat of an enigma to us, a strange solution to a problem whose terms have been mislaid ... What are we to think today of a reconstruction that was regarded as exemplary in its day: exemplary for the coherence of its architectute; exemplary too for the new way of handling land that it attempted to introduce? The urban work of Perret and his disciples has become part of history in such an ambiguous fashion that it is very hard to tell today just what lesson to draw from the experience.... What was at stake? What, in hindsight, are its successes and its failures? Where, at the close of the eighties, have the certainties about urban planning, the urban, and urbanity gone that would stillpermit us to express our approval or condemnation?
In 1956 Pierre Dalloz, who has never tried to conceal his enthusiasm for Perret's architecture declared that the new city of Le Havre, whose definitive appearance was beginning to emerge, was "the greatest success of the French reconstruction." This opinion, which he thought to be unanimous, did not prevent him from expressing his surprise at the rigor of the grand layouts proposed by Perret: "one believed that so much simple grandeur was long gone in this country. And yet Perret, having to reconstruct a modern city, rediscovers in the most natural way in the world the spirit of the 'king's buildings,' and works out the layout of a sort of Versailles of housing, without the least concern for compromise or gratification."1
A few years later, at the time of the first critical reassessments of modern architecture, these same characteristics on which Dalloz placed such a high value became, in the view of Leonardo Benevolo, the stigmata of an outmoded way of thinking, too ready to turn problems considered specific to city planning inta architecture. Perret had treated Le Havre like a vast program of architecture, as well as keeping the more monumental buildings for himself: "Whatever scale he was working on, he always conceived the program as if it were a project of architecture, in which the whole is govemed by the same criteria of symmetry, order, and proportion as hold for the individual parts. In this way the architect seeks to exercise control over the creation of a new urban ensemble by treating it as if it were a single project .... According to Benevolo, what Perret lacked in Le Havre was a true-"methodology of city planning" that would have permitted him to spread the different decisions required by the multiple scales of urban development over space and time.2
A fairly similar criticism was expressed by Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co in their general history of *Contemporary Architecture*, but they combined their analysis with a symbolic dimension that attempted to interpret Perret's attitude: "The balance between technological academicism and formal academicism attained by Perret in the thirties preserves the neo-Cartesian method of the French master from any outburst of subjectivity. It is precisely this assurance, based on an Olympian, timeless serenity, an a *spirit of geometry* ... that allows Perret's language to tackle, as a unitary ideal monument to his own dream of a new classical age, the plan for the reconstruction of Le Havre ..." At the head of a large, perfectly organized Studio, Perret extended to the scale of city in his "*language withoud words*, without temporality, inalterable ..."3
These different criticisms clearly underline the essential theoretical aspects of the reconstruction of Le Havre, from the classical ideal of unity of language to the utopia of an unbroken transition between architecture and urban space. However one would be tempted, at the end of the eighties and afterthree decades of experiences of every kind, to be thankful that Perret did not have at his disposal that "methodology of city planning" of which Benevolo speaks, and that he had been able to give a sense, even an anachronistic one, to the "language without words" alluded to by Tafuri and Dal Co ... But this would be to jump the gun and to underestimate the reality of the contradictions that actually weighed an the reconstruction of Le Havre. It is to an analysis of

these contradictions that we wish to dedicate this short article, in an attempt to throw light on the fundamental choices made by or forced an Perret's studio.

The argument of coherence

Tue circumstances under which the Atelier de la Reconstruction du Havre was formed have remained fairly obscure to this day owing to the absence of written documentation in the Perret archives of the CNAM. However, thanks to the accounts of the main protagonists and to a set of dated documents (preserved in the archives of Théo Sardnal), we have been able to reconstruct the chronology of the formation of this team. From examination of the various sources it appears that, contrary to what was previously thought, it was not Auguste Perret who, commissioned by the government to reconstruct Le Havre, brought together the architects of the future reconstruction. It was, in fact, two of bis disciples, Jacques Guilbert, former student at the Atelier du Palais de Bois (1923-1928), and Pierre Edouard Lambert, one of his admirers from the outset, who, as far back as the spring of 1944, had had the idea of forming a cohesive group under the leadership of Perret.5 After consulting a number of colleagues, all formet pupils of Perret, they turned to their master to ask him to accept the direction of a team of reconstruction.6 Their argurnent was simple: it was an obvious alternative to the untidy policy of the Commissariat la Reconstruction which handed out jobs to "people at random ...." Given the extent of the destruction, it was necessary to form groups of architects "moved by a common spirit." Perret's pupils "who have received a special teaching" had to organize themselves to undertake "a work of very great interest"7 under the direction of their master. Things remained at a standstill for several months, undoubtedly as a result of the great events under way at the time (tne Normandy landing, the Liberation of Paris), only to get moving again at the end of the summer of 1944. A manifesto was drawn up (1 September 1944) and an association formed (6 December 1944) under the title of the Union pour l' Architecture.8 This association, whose purpose was "to apply, defend, and propagate the principles of the Great Architectural Tradition as they have been formulated by Auguste Perret," was in fact the fust version of the Le Havre Atelier. An active core (J. Guilbert, P.E. Lambert, A. LeDonné, T. Sardnal, P. Vago, G. Lagneau, and A. Hermant) got in tauch with the Ministry. Two meetings were held (one on 20 November 1944 with Cassan, the other on 26 December 1944 with Croizé) leading, at the beginning of 1945, to the presentation of a proposal to the Minister for the formation of an Atelier de Reconstruction Auguste Perret.9 This group was to include sixty architects. A few weeks passed and, on 1 February 1945, Jacques Guilbert was able to announce to bis friends that the Minister, Raoul Dautry, had decided to place the"reconstruction of Le Havre"10 in Perret's hands.

A receptacle space

The choice of Le Havre for such an exem-plary experience was far from haphazard. Owing to the strategic location of its harbor, the city bad been bombed regularly during the second world war, and had just been subjected, on 5 September 1944, to the most murderous raid that France had ever seen: 12,500 buildings were destroyed, leaving 80,000 people homeless. On the 150 hectares of the devastated zone, there was not a single building that could be salvaged (with the exception of two churches, Notre Dame and Saint François). The whole of the center and the port area bad been reduced to rubble in the space of a few hours, to the point where it was described as a true *tabula rasa.*11 It was, it seems, the extreme gravity of the situation that led Dautry to give responsibility for reconstruction of the city to Perret: Le Havre, the "ocean port" through which foreigners discovered France, was the most badly devastated city in the country, and the one where, owing to the scale of the destruction, anything was possible. The demonstrative intent of the Perret atelier, which insisted on the need for a coherent approach to reconstruction, seemed ideally suited to the tragic *tabula rasa* of Le Havre. lt is interesting to note that the first evidence of this demonstrative intent (Guilbert's letter to Perret dated 4 May 1944) was written four months prior to the bombardment that reduced the town to ashes: the key words in it were "coherence" and "common spirit." It was inevitable, once such an atelier had

been set up, that one of France's major cities would be marked with the stamp of "structural dassicism." The fact that the choice fell on Le Havre, a city that even before its destruction posed serious problems of city planning and centrality, made the task very difficult for the Perret Studio, making the gaps in his overall approach stand out more than they would have clone elsewhere. Neither Perret, nor his studio, nor without doubt the majority of French architects, were prepared for handling such difficulties. The manifesto drawn up in the spring of 1944 by the group that, only a few months later, was to form the core of the Atelier du Havre, had nothing to say about city planning. It confined itself to commenting on the rationalistic aphorisms of Perret which codified, for architectural purposes, the relationships between construction, space, and language .... The coherence claimed by the group for the future reconstruction team was based around a set of architectural principles. This corresponded in fact to the establishment of a school, which bad been forming gradually over the course of the two previous decades, and which, all of a sudden, faced with the scale of the tasks that awaited it, became aware of itself. This highly unusual situation conferred on the site of the experiment the *strange status of a receptacle*; at the time urban space was regarded as a location available for *compatible buildings*, compatible because they were the product of a tendency that had already amply tested its typologies and language.

Ever since the announcement of Raoul Dautry's decision, Jacques Guilbert had been holding further consultations with a view to setting up a partnership entitled Atelier de Reconstruction du Havre, Agence d'Architecture. Out of these cane a new list of twenty-four names: Bellet, Bouin, Branche, Brelet, Caen, Castaldi, Dubouillon, Feuillebois, Guilbert, Heaume, Hermant, Imbert, Kaeppelin, Lagneau, Lambert, Le Donné, Lotte, Persitz, Poirrier, Robquin, Sardnal, Tougart, Toumant, and Vigneron.12 Curiously the name of Pierre Vago, who had played a very active role in the formation of the Perret group, does not figure in this list. The reason was simple and definitely premonitory; at the very first work meeting, Pierre Vago got wind of the esthetic twist that the reconstruction of Le Havre was going to take and preferred to walk out: "We met in Rue Raynouard. Perret brought out the plans of his unhappy competition for the Porte Maillot and told us: 'This is what we are going to do .... ' I asked 'we are going to do that, in 1945?' and one of the architects present answered me with an air of servility that I found disgusting, 'Yes, it's very good.' So I went away and left the Le Havre group .... »13 This anecdote is highly significant. There is nothing particularly surprising, given the strictly architectural character of the consensus that united the Perret group, about the fact that the first reaction of the "master," faced with the problem of Le Havre, was to dust off his grand urban projects.

The competition for the Porte Maillot (1931), like the one for the Palace of the Soviets (1931) or the one for the development of the Chaillot hill (1933), was a perfect expression of Perret's approach to city space. Beyond a certain scale, Perret broke up the scheme into a number of identifiable elements that were distributed around the space to which Perret wished to give a monumental character. Even when Perret was working on the largest scale (with bis modell of "city-towers" or even bis "Champs Elysées on the Left Bank"14 for the 1937 exhibition), he relied on the existing city which he attempted to complete, to contain, or to rearrange. Of course, the *tabula rasa* of Le Havre made this type of intervention impossible and called for a methodology that Perret had not yet practiced. Does this mean that the Perret studio set to work on Le Havre without any regard for city planning? We do not think so. Rather it appears that this type of problem was foreign to structural dassicism and that it was imposed from the outside without any kind of check, leaving the door open to all sorts of compromise.

Alternative plans

This is not the place to analyze the way in which the Perret studio was received in Le Havre and the multitude of conflicts that broke out between it and the different partners in the process of reconstruction, such as the municipality, the victims' associations, or even local architects. For a more complete historical view, we refer the reader to two excellent studies: the one by Claude Soucy comparing the reconstruction of the centers of Caen and Le Havre (1970)15 and the one

by Martine Liotard (1987) recounting in a well-documented manner the tebirth of this city between 1940 and 1965.16

Rather we intend to take a look at the architectural and urban themes that Perret' s team attempted to tackle. It was during the summet of 1945 that the Atelier du Havre set to work, embarking on a process of joint research to draw up the general plan of the city. A sort of internal competition was organized on the basis ot a certain number of common ideas, concerning for example respect for the axes of the old city or the relative size of blocks. Perhaps it ought to be recalled here that Le Havre (a city created by Francis I in 1517) had already benefited from a rational plan in the sixteenth century (for the St. François extension designed in 1541 by the Sienese architect Bellamarto), that the city bad first begun to expand in the eighteenth century, owing to the opening up of its port to commerce, and then in a more chaotic manner under the pressure of the industrial revolution. It was at this time that the major axes were built which were to serve as a starting point for the Perret studio: the Avenue Foch, the Boulevard de Strasbourg, and the Boulevard François Ier. The attitude of the Atelier de Reconstruction toward old layouts was fairly conservative. Of the ten draft plans known to us,17 only one makes radical changes to the existing major axes: this was a proposal by José Imbert who had no compunction about eliminating the Avenue Foch, the Boulevard François Ier, and the Rue de Paris. Here Imbert seems to have directly addressed the question of centrality, laying out two grids around the Place Gambetta, one parallel to the commercial docks, the other parallel to the line of the former Boulevard François Ier (eliminated). Given a circular shape, the Place Gambetta plays the role of a swivel joint between the two grids and, together with the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, transformed into an esplanade, forms the new center of Le Havre. This solution has the merit of defining a clear relationship to the Boulevard de Strasbourg and the Rue Thiers, the traditional center of working-class commerce. The quarters of Perrey, St. Vincent, and Foch around the Place Gambetta are treated as a homogeneous whole sheltered from winds off the sea and provided with two fine sea fronts to the south and the west. The regular blocks are made up of comb- or U-shaped buildings and the visible bierarchy of streets gives pride of place to the Boulevard de Strasbourg and the Rue Thiers. The highly determined character of Imbert's scheme would have allowed the contradictions of the old plan of Le Havre to be resolved in a masterly fashion.

A second proposal by the same architect approached the question of centrality in a different way. lt retained the Foch-Strasbourg axis, got rid of the Boulevard François Ier, and displaced the Rue de Paris, which became a monumental route leading from the Place de l'Hötel de Ville to a semicircular plaza created to the south in the direction of the sea. A secondary, perpendicular axis serves as an esplanade linking the commercial harbor and the theater square. The choice of a single grid parallel to the commercial harbor meant sacrificing the continuity of construction along the sea front. This proposal is fairly close to those put forward by Le Donné, who also extends the Place Gambetta to form an esplanade toward the west, and by Lambert who gives this axis a monumental character. But both of them keep the Rue de Paris in its original location and work with much larger blocks than Imbert's. This last characteristic combined with the use of a single grid entails setting the buildings quite far back from the coast. Two remarkable projects are worth singling out: those of Jacques Guilbert and André Hermant. The two schemes are antithetical: Guilbert's is grandiose, Hermant' s sets out to be functional. One makes use of a subtle play of scale, the other puts the typologies of the modern movement to work.

Guilbert's proposal is undoubtedly one of the most original: unlike the other architects in the group, Guilbert retains the old layouts and accepts a variety of grids which evoke those of the vanished quarters. But he gives order to this multiplicity by overlaying it with a system of eight cross-shaped towers that run across the city from one side to another of the commercial harbor. This dual system has numerous advantages: it is simple and complex, it is flexible, but it remains perfectly legible; the multiplicity of grids mak.es it possible to follow the coastline and to treat the city as a port (by sticking closely to its topography). The set of eight towen; gives a grandiose

allure to the reconstruction while drawing attention to the commercial harbor, one of the most beautiful areas of Le Havre.
The scheme proposed by André Hermant makes a radical break with the old city. Tue notion of the block has vanished completely. The area to be reconstructed is filled with a typology of cusped buildings close to the researches carried out by Le Corbusier. This very airy system changes orientation to reconstitute the main boulevards and the sea front. Hermant was perfectly cognizant of the reflections of the modern movement on the subject of city planning. In 1947, he would publish a very exhaustive assessment of modern experiences with "residential fabrics" in "Technique et Architecture," seeking to comprehend the relationships between the typologies of habitat and the urban forms that they engender.18 The plan proposed by Heaume introduces an interesting innovation. It makes a distinction amongst ordered architecture, disciplined architecture, and free architecture and distributes the effect of monumentality around the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville and the commercial harbor and along the Rue de Paris and the southern sea front. Free architecture is used everywhere else.19
As can be seen, in spite of the lack: of previous collective reflection, the proposals of the Le Havre team are potentially very rich. They seem to divide into two tendencies, a more imaginative one comprising Guilbert, Imbert, and Hermant's projects, and another more conservative one with those of Le Donné, Lambert, Lagneau, and Heaume. It is this second tendency that inspired the project selected by Perret.20 At the end of this first phase, a joint study was carried out by Le Donné, Imbert, Lagneau, and Hermant. This study, in which we find the widening of Avenue Foch, a rough draft of the Porte Océane, and emphasis placed on the Rue de Paris, is fairly similar to the definitive project.21

The definitive plan
On 26 September 1945, Perret presented his studio's project to theMunicipal Council: a grid parallel to the commercial docks extends throughout the city, filling the urban space with square blocks of 100 meters on a side (with tbe exception of the St. François quarter that retains its original grid). The Place Gambetta, Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, Avenue Foch, and Porte Océane have almost found their definitive form. The Boulevard François Ier, the Rue de Paris, and the southern sea front still have to evolve further.
It was at this same session on 26 September that Perret tried to impose a principle that he considered revolutionary: raising the routes carrying traffic 3.50 m above the natural ground level. In his view this solution, suggested by the abnormal proximity of the underground water table, offered a large number of advantages (easy access to urban mains and drains, traffic on two levels, garages, cellars, warehouses, etc.).
However this proposal was rejected by the municipal council on the grounds of its excessively high cost and it was not supported by the Ministry of Reconstruction (which gave rise to a certain amount of disappointment in the Perret studio).22 Today it seems obvious that this solution was not technically justified and, one might ask whether Perret had not derived it unconsciously from his project for the Mobilier National, as a spectacular means of unifying the city. One may wonder, however, about its effect on the ancient monuments stripped of their context and on the view over the commercial harbor from the raised banks.
This idea should be seen in relation to another strange initiative, that of laying out the whole city on a grid with a standard unit of 6.24 m. What might seem justified for the constructed elements makes no sense for the interstitial spaces unless one is counting on the hidden virtues of the grid to unify a "rhythm," a"cadence" on the scale of the city .... 23 Two other fairly badly articulated grids appear in the definitive scheme for Le Havre. One, parallel to the commercial harbor, seems to have obtained unanimous support quite quickly. The other, parallel to the old blocks of the Perrey quarter, bad been imposed on the architects by the city councillors in order to emphasize the Boulevard François Ier. It is to this second grid that the southern sea front is linked, undoubtedly to permit a better relationship with the topography of the coast. A series of poorly controlled effects results from this duality: the first grid abuts against the Perrey quarter,

creating a sawtooth effect that detracts from the perception of the Boulevard François Ier. To the south it connects up very badly with the sea front, giving rise to a series of illegible residual spaces.

Generally speaking, this plan is veriy conservative. It rigidified the triangle of the Avenue Foch, Boulevard François Ier, and Rue de Paris by giving them an excessively monumental character, without seriously tackling the question of the center. Compared with the proposals of Guilbert and Imbert it appears at once rigid and opportunistic and seems to lack rigor. But in the tense situation of the reconstruction of Le Havre there is nothing to show that the population would have been prepared to accept entirely new layouts, effacing the memory of the old city. This is what would have been permitted by the techniques of restructuring of which Jacques Tournant was the specialist in France. A member of the Atelier du Havre since 1945, Tournant was not really involved until 1947 (owing to bis engagement in the reconstruction of Beauvais), but by this date the general lines had already been fixed.24

As one passes through the streets of Le Havre today, one is struck by a series of contradictory impressions: the three operations of the monumental triangle (the Place de l'Hötel de Ville, the Porte Océane, the Front de Mer Sud),25 the Rue de Paris with its galleries (which openly imitate the model of the Rue de Rivoli), the edges of the commercial harbor, the Avenue Foch, and so on – all these are indisputable architectural successes. Many monuments, taken in isolation, are of an exceptional architectural quality that at times verges on the sublime: St. Joseph, Perret and Tournant' s Hôtel de Ville, Lambert's Ecole des Filles, Poirrier's Hôtel Normandie, Lagneau's Musée des Beaux Arts, the École de Commerce, the savings bank, and a large number of residential buildings.26 Yet this architecture, as it does not receive sufficient support from the design of the urban spaces, is unable to express all the refined urbanity with which it is imbued. One gets the feeling that out of a desire for grandeur too much emphasis has been laid on the empty spaces of the avenues and squares, distending fabrics whose blocks had already been made less dense?27 Old Le Havre made up for its imbalances by the picturesque character of its streets and by its extraordinary density. As new Le Havre did not know how, or was unable, to modify these structures, it brought in order and hygiene by reducing the density, thereby reinforcing the existing imbalances. Contrary to appearances, Perret's project was not sufficiently determined. Too respectful of history, and too open to compromise, it was unable to recreate a coherent city. It is likely that in a less difficult urban setting, the complex formal apparatus of structural classicism would have produced more convincing results. Structural dassicism has, in a way, missed its appointment with the city ..., and the whole project resembles that "Porte Océane" waiting for the liners that are never going to arrive.28

1. P. Dalloz, La Reconstruction de la ville du Havre, Technique et Architecture 3, Paris 1956.
2. L. Benevolo, Storia dell'architettura Moderna, vol. III, Dunod, Paris 1979, pp. 214-217.
3. M. Tafuri, F. Dal Co, Architettura contemporanea, Milan 1976.
4. We have been able to consult T. Sardnal, A. Le Donné, P.E. Lambert, all of whom are now deceased, as well as P. Vago, J. Tournant, G. Lagneau, and A. Heaume.
5. Cf. the interview with P.E. Lambert published in our research papers: Perret et l'école du Classicisme Structurel, vol. II, SRA, Nancy 1985, pp. 80-83.
6. The letter is dated 4 May 1944 (Sardnal Archive).
7. This evokes many "totally destroyed cities."
8. Manifesto containing Perret's aphorisms (Sardnal Archive).
9. Document, Sardnal Archive.
10. Guilbert invited the recipients to compile an information sheet in view of the actual organization of the Atelier.
11. Cf. the photograpbs published in "Voice Le Havre," Le Havre 1963, and "Le Havre Ville Neuve" (undated).
12. Almost the whole of the group would actually be involved in the construction of Le Havre.

13. Cf. the interview with P. Vago in Perret et l'Ecole du Classicisme Structurel, op. cit., pp. 93 and 98.
14 Cf. E. De Thubert, L'esposition de 1937: fille de Jaire, La construction moderne, 3 June 1934.
15. C. Soucy, Contribution à une sociologie des centres urbains: Reconstruction et dé veloppement. Les centres de Caen et du Havre, Publications de Recherches Urbaines. Ministre de l'Equipement et du Logement, Paris 1970.
16. M. Liotard, 1940-1965: la Renaissance du Havre, doctoral thesis, La Sorbonne, PW 1987.
17 Cf. La Reconstruction du Havre, Technique et Architecture, 7-8, Paris 1946, pp. 333-343.
18. A. Hermant, Tissus Residentiels, Technique et Architecture, 7-8, Paris 1947, pp. 335-381.
19. Cf. Le Havre, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 7-8, Paris, September 1946, pp. 46-47.
20. Cf. L 'Atelier de Reconstruction du Havre, Art Recent 1, Paris 1946, pp. 31-35.
21. Cf. Le Havre, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 7-8, Paris Septembre 1946, op. cit.
22. P. Dalloz, La Reconstruction du Havre, Technique et Architecture 5, Paris 1960, pp. 70-77.
23. Cf. La Reconstruction du Havre, Technique et Architecture, vol. VI, 7-8, Paris 1946, pp. 334.
24. See J. Toumant, Le Financement et l'Economie de la Reconstruction, Technique et Architecture, vol. VI, 7-8, Paris 1947, pp. 386-390, and L'Exemple du Havre, Technique et Architecture, 1-2, Paris 1951, pp. 34-39.
25. For the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville see Le Havre Libre of 24 April 1948 and 26 April 1950, Le Havre Eclair of 28 April 1950 and 17 July 1948, Paris Normandie of 2 June 1948 and 10 September 1952, and Le Havre of 26 April 1950. For the Front de Mer Sud see Technique et Architecture, 3-4, Paris 1951, pp. 46-48, and Technique et Architecture, n 11-12, Paris 1953, pp. 88-94. For the Porte Océane see Technique et Architecture 7-8, Paris 1946, p. 343, Technique et Architecture 9- 10, Paris 1951, p. 57, and Technique et Architecture 11-12, Paris 1952, p. 46.
26. For example the ones designed by Lagneau, Loisel, Feuillebois, Hermant, Persitz, etc., in the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, by Brelec and Dubouillon, on the Avenue Foch, or again by Lambert on the Front de Mer Sud.
27. In the old Le Havre a few blocks had a density of over 1,500 inhabitants per hectare, while in the new Le Havre the density is lower than 700 inhabitants per hectare, and this has considerable influence on the liveliness of the center.
28. However a new ballance could be found for the center in accordance with the different requirements of density.