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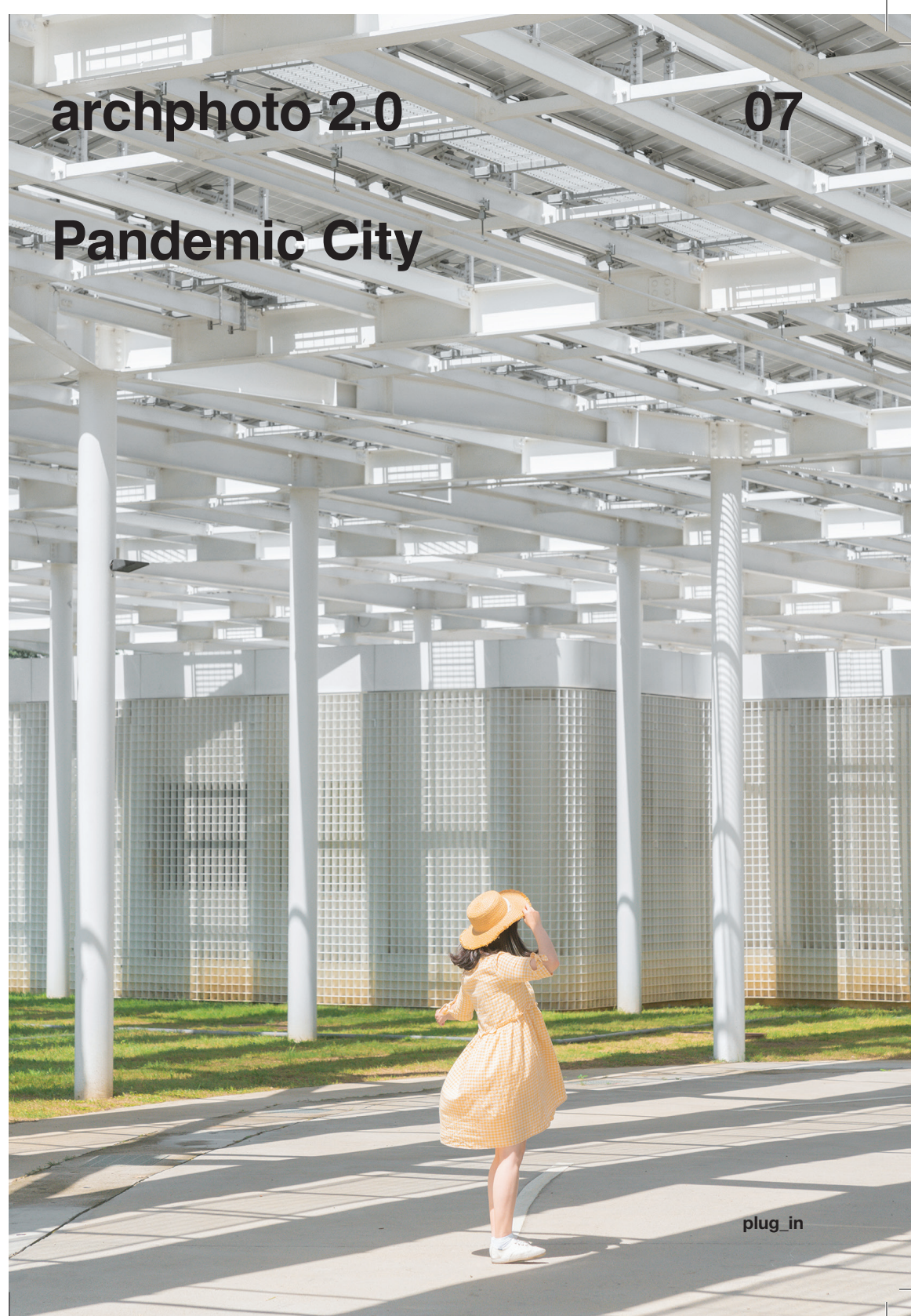
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A new public normality. Lacaton & Vassal quantitative generosity and the (post-)pandemic city

Antonio Lavarello



“Quantity is quality”
(Generally attributed to Iosif Stalin)

During the 2020 spring lockdown Ivan Blasi, a Catalan architect and former Docomomo International Secretary General, posted on his Facebook wall some pictures of a social housing renovation project by French firm Lacaton & Vassal.¹ The project was awarded with the 2019 European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award, of which Blasi himself is Coordinator; he accompanied these pictures with a short text related to the Covid-19 health emergency (emphasis added):

“Not many years ago, the people living in these social housing apartments (more than 4,000 of them) in Grand Parc Bordeaux, had 45m² for a bedroom, a living room, kitchen and bathroom. No crossed ventilation and no balcony.

Lacaton & Vassal, Christophe Hutin Architecture and Frédéricruot transformed 530 similar apartments, avoiding their demolition and adding, in some cases, up to 40 new square meters. [...]

Imagine, in these times of quarantine, the importance of having such a space, fully ventilated, with much more light and allowing a totally different relationship with your neighbours.”

This declination of *quantitative generosity* as an instrument capable of improving the quality of housing is recognizable in many other works by Lacaton & Vassal, both in the renovation of existing residential buildings and in newly designed buildings. Besides the already mentioned intervention in Grand Parc Bordeaux, we can remember just a few examples: the first project showing this strategy, namely the fourteen houses of the Cité manifest in Mulhouse (2005), the redevelopment of the Tour Bois Le Prêtre (2011), built along the ring road of Paris in the early Sixties, and the fifty-nine dwellings at the Neppert gardens in Mulhouse (2015). Each of these buildings – and many others similar works by L&V – provide housing of surfaces much larger than required by standards, with additional and intermediate spaces, that expand the range of uses, as well as improving the internal microclimate and energy efficiency.

The *quantitative generosity* is combined by L&V with a sort of *qualitative indifference*, in terms of the architectural language. In particular, in the new buildings the aesthetic result could be briefly defined as *car parking+greenhouse*, an anonymous base available to be completed with the picturesque variety of stylistic interpretations proposed by the inhabitants, an evident sign of the potential inherent in those extra square meters. The generosity in terms of space is obtained also thanks to the extreme simplicity of the materials and construction techniques, which allows a saving on the budget: it can be read as a materialist version of the “less is more” by Mies.

As Ivan Blasi pointed out, the advantages of this approach to housing are evident to anyone who has spent some weeks locked at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic (a considerable percentage of the world population); relatively large and free domestic spaces offer the possibility of reorganizing one’s daily life facing the forced overlap of work and family, or they allow for physical or creative activities that help cope with solitary confinement. However, it might be even more interesting to pay attention to the similar strategy applied by L&V in the design of public buildings. More spacious homes may indeed help us deal with other *private emergencies*, but what it seems we really need is a *new public normality*.

One of the most relevant problems after the first phase of the pandemic has been the full recovery of a key asset for civil life such as school and university education, with the return to face-to-face teaching. In Italy, the public discussion on this issue has focused, with surreal tones, on the use of benches on wheels, neglecting the fact that the real problem was not *how to move the desks*, but *where to place them*, within schools that in many cases were already overcrowded. The new School of Architecture of Nantes (2009) designed by Lacaton & Vassal tells us that a possible answer already exists; it consists of a gesture of naive radicality but probably effective: simply to give *more space* to schools. In this case the construction of the double of the surface requested by the competition brief produced a surplus of space, available for uses freely established



Lacaton & Vassal
Palais de Tokyo, 2002-2012
Photograph by
Antonio Lavarello



Lacaton & Vassal
Palais de Tokyo, 2002-2012
Photograph by
Antonio Lavarello



Lacaton & Vassal
School of architecture of
Nantes, 2009
Photograph by
Antonio Lavarello

by the users, such as the floors load-bearing capacity, superior to that usually adopted and combined with the double height of most of the common areas, allows students to build models in 1:1 scale or to modify space with adjoined partitions. The large continuous ramp (similar to that of a car parking) which connects all floors widens the freedom of movement within the building, whilst the ground floor is available to public activities. Architecture is an indifferent device able to host those differences arising from temporary uses. 'To host' means to be well equipped in order to *contain and support as many things, actions, people as possible* and, with respect with the creative function of the building, to be a neutral palimpsest that does not influence the activities which take place inside. In this sense the mix of *generosity* and *indifference* we already mentioned acts as a prerequisite for artistic creativity and a breeding ground for culture, but in a post-pandemic perspective it can be seen as the aesthetic and functional openness to unexpected uses and needs dictated by the emergency. On the top of the building there is a large *toit-terrace*, which concludes the long *promenade architecturale* of the external ramp with a spectacular view of Nantes; the presence of a generous outdoor space can constitute a further useful feature for a school in the age of social distancing. Indeed, as recently suggested by the Italian architect and scholar Sara Marini, there is an "urgency [...] to build new alliances with the exterior, which should be seen not just as a horizon to be framed but as a living and changeable material with which to coexist".² Marini presented as meaningful examples as significant examples of these 'alliances' the exhibition *Against Sun and Dust*, curated by Cornelia Mattiacci and Alessandra Castelbarco Albani (august-october 2020) and set up in the park and in some rooms left open of Villa Imperiale in Pesaro, and the floating cinema *Unknown Waters* realized in Venice by Edoardo Aruta and Paolo Rosso (Microclima) during the summer of 2020. Precisely the reopening of museums, theaters and other cultural activities which involve the presence of many people indoors has been – and still is – another matter of debate within the second phase of the pandemic, especially in Italy. Also in this case Lacaton & Vassal approach to the design

of public buildings reveals some interesting possibilities.

The redevelopment of the Palais de Tokyo (2002-2012) left the monumental building from the Thirties almost *naked*; this strategy was supported on one hand by the difficulty to define through traditional categories a space for artistic contemporary creation, on the other hand by the suggestive impact of the pre-existing architecture. A part from the technological adaptations, the interventions were minimal and the partitions of the large original spaces were reduced as much as possible: main concepts are freedom in time and space and openness to new unexpected re-writings.³ Lacaton & Vassal considered the new Palais de Tokyo as the object of a long, non-predictable process of re-appropriation. It is possible to imagine that this flexibility, due to a *programmatic incompleteness*, could be useful in order to reorganize temporary and permanent exhibitions and other events with uses compatible with health safety, as well as the *great void* of the old industrial building of the FRAC (Fond régional d'art contemporain) of Nord-Pas de Calais (Dunkerque, 2013). Here the combination of aesthetic neutrality and space generosity has been used as a key to deal with the restoration of a building coming from the city's shipbuilding past. The pre-existing shed has been doubled, generating a sort of clone, *indifferent* to the problem of creating a new form. While the internal volume of the new building is fragmented by the complexity of the functional program, the old building has been left completely blank, preserving the original character but also keeping an adequate space for large installations and events or, one might wonder these days, for a temporary rethinking of the cultural center during a pandemic.⁴

The public buildings designed by Lacaton & Vassal resemble *inhabited infrastructures*, like the car parking/School of architecture in Nantes, the shipbuilding shed/art center in Dunkerque, the hangar/Polyvalent Theater of Lille (2013), with its mobile partitions, curtains and facilities.⁵ If the pressures exerted by emergencies on architectural culture often end up generating utopian visions – let's think of the effects of the XIX century city hygiene problems on the urban prefigurations produced by the Modern Movement –,

therefore one could possibly fantasize that the pandemic will push in the direction of a *city-infrastructure* that, among other things, responds effectively to the demand for buildings in which public activities can be deployed safely; a kind of pragmatic (and depoliticized) version of the continuous and pervasive artificiality imagined by Superstudio or Archizoom in the 70s.

After all, the sort of *mannerism* produced on the current architectural imaginary by the combination of Lacaton & Vassal influence and the post-2008 budget constraints, consisting in the rapid multiplication of projects – but also, by now, of built works – of public buildings characterized by the austerity of infrastructures and industrial plants, and designed by architects such as Bruther, Muto and NP2F from France, V+, Ouest and Baukunst from Belgium, or Buchner Bründler from Switzerland (just to mention a few), can perhaps be read as a small, prophetic, anticipation of such an urban utopia.

What we can hope is that – whatever the architectural form – schools, universities, public offices, hospitals, cemeteries, cultural and recreational centers, theaters, libraries, religious buildings, sports facilities *generously* equipped with *large and free spaces* can constitute the *hardware* on which to rethink and reorganize a new way to attend lessons, meet, gather, demonstrate, celebrate, play, take an *aperitivo*, cry and laugh *together* instead of alone or through the screen of a computer.

1. This article has been written between in the second half of 2020 and the first months of 2021. It develops in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, some critical reflections about the work of Lacaton & Vassal that I previously formulated, and I published or presented on several occasions. On March 16, 2021, L&V received the 2021 Pritzker Architecture Prize. I am therefore very happy that what I have written may sound like a tribute – not planned – to this victory. In the announcement of the award and in the motivations expressed by the jury there is no explicit reference to a "post-pandemic" architecture. Yet, I like to think that perhaps, among the reasons that led to this choice, there is also the feeling that the combination of generosity and flexibility developed by L&V could help us to live in the world that awaits us.

2. *Domus 1052* (December 2020).

3. Karine Dana compared the architecture of the French firm to a *screenplay*, able to generate and retain a plurality of stories without completely defining them. Karine Dana, *On Lacaton & Vassal: an attempt a voiceover*. Published in: 'Lacaton & Vassal, Recent work', 2G, nr. 60 (2012), 17-24.

4. Maybe it's possible to find in the FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais a reference to the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern restored by Herzog & De Meuron (1995-2000).

5. A sort of Cedric Price's Fun Palace without the rhetoric of mechanization, or, closer to a direct cultural genealogy, a reference to the Maison du Peuple in Clichy by Jean Prouvé.