

# Gears of Utopia – On the “plateaux” of the Ecole de Nantes by Lacaton & Vassal

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Fig. 1 Interior view of the Nantes school of architecture

1 About architecture and power, see Michel Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir* (Gallimard 1975).

2 Le Corbusier designed the Dom-ino project in 1914 to offer a solution for rapid reconstruction of destroyed regions. He envisioned two concrete slabs resting on pillars and linked by a staircase. In his vision, people would freely complete the skeleton with architectural solution of their choosing. The goal was double, to offer maximum flexibility but also to maintain a coherence beyond individual choices.

3 San Rocco #8, *What's wrong with the primitive hut*, multiple authors, Milan, 2013.

4 J. Stanley Mathews, *From Agit-Prop To Free Space: the architecture of Cedric Price* (Black Dog Pub Ltd 2007).

5 Fernando Márquez Cecilia and Richard C Levene, *Lacaton And Vassal, 1993/2015* (El Croquis 2015).

Thinking about the relationships between clients, users and architects really comes down to examining the «relations de pouvoir<sup>1</sup>» that takes place between those three entities. Of course, in some cases, the wills of the three might align for the best or for the worse. But those scenarios do not provide interesting case studies for this paper as we are unable to distinguish the strategies of the different players and therefore question them. The Ecole de Nantes by Lacaton & Vassal provides us with a more intriguing example. A client (the French ministry for culture that run the schools of architecture) chooses an architect (Lacaton & Vassal) who offers a project destined to enable its users (teachers and students) to inhabit it more intensely or rather differently. To do so, architects created, among many other architectural features, large spaces called “plateaux” which could be described as large slabs of concrete that stand between the actual program (classrooms, library, etc.) and the polycarbonate façades. These “plateaux” were destined from the beginning to host what could not happen in the defined areas of the program. Visiting the building today, five years after its opening, raises a few questions. What could we learn from Nantes to make it the prototype of an ongoing suite of buildings and not an isolated burst of optimism?

**Life is the show, architecture is its stage. An architect's fantasy.**

Architects have for a long time understood their ability to forge systems that would influence the way life happened inside them. This consciousness for their power culminated with a hardcore modernism that proclaimed it could infant a new man. The Dom-ino system<sup>2</sup> might be the paroxysmal and yet strangely the most minimalist example of such systems. By updating the idea of the primitive hut<sup>3</sup>, it concentrated its means to provide a skeleton for life. The fascination it has inspired since, probably draws its intensity from the openness of interpretation it allows. Indeed, while the world discovered the conceptual danger of an almighty environment, architects also envisioned strategies to put their power to the service of a progressivist view. They believed in their ability to create genuinely new spatial systems as well as in new emancipated ways of life. Fascination and trust in technology nourished a series of emblematic projects of which Cedric Price's fun palace might be the most influential.<sup>4</sup> Lacaton & Vassal have many times cited their admiration for its poetry and radicalness. Their project for Nantes, although often described as austere and low-tech, openly places itself in the footsteps of this high-tech and joyful chef d'oeuvre.<sup>5</sup> But where Price's fantasy sadly stayed on paper, Lacaton & Vassal actually brought their machine to the real world, with all its complexity. When visiting

the School today and discussing with its users, one can only witness the acuity of the initial ambition. Invention and appropriation appears to be everywhere: from the pink trailers that host a café to the badminton classes but also with the exhibitions, the concerts the final reviews, etc.

Students and professors have integrated this mute space in their everyday life and praise its many qualities: proportions, light, views. Nevertheless, the “plateaux” are now threatened to become a caricature of themselves. The school administration controls ever more closely what can and cannot happen in these structures, limiting its use to more classical appropriation scenarios. Furthermore, the space is now being rented to host external events for clients in search of a creative “décor”. This driftage reminds us the risk that many innovative social and spatial structures face once the image of their freedom becomes more important than their actual freedom.

**Imagining the contemporary agora. The strategies of Lacaton & Vassal to create «espaces capables».**

The idea of public space as the centre of democracy is deeply rooted in our cultural history. So many projects try to refer to it, or invoke it that we have reached a point where it has become a completely washed out concept, rendered hollow by its ubiquity. An intense life has become mandatory for any projects. Perspectives of crowded piazzas with happy children are now everywhere, from malls to museums they only contribute to emphasising the loss of influence of architecture. Should great empty spaces be the only alternative? Should architects abandon their ideal to meaningful configurations of space? Lacaton & Vassal’s work is a powerful antidote to those who think that flexibility and intensity are only neoliberal values. Making Cedric’s price statement their own, they reaffirm the idea that space can empower people rather than constrain them while providing new solutions regarding its implementation. Indeed the silent and powerful structure in Nantes drives its force not only from the high tech’s. Taking clues from architects who decided to counter the modernist dictate by reconnecting to permanent

figures and reaffirming the inner logic of architecture, Lacaton & Vassal uses their controlled architectural vocabulary to produce spatial quality. This attitude is not meant to detach architecture from its political context but rather to allow life to happen on its own, as if architecture offered an antidote to its own power. It also ensures that all means focus on creating the best possible space. This approach has been recently described as a “style de l’absence” by Jacques Lucan in reference to Roland Barthes and the “degré zero de l’écriture”<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, Lacaton & Vassal’s work is sometimes presented as a non-architectural, or rather as an architecture that focuses mostly on peripheral strategies (cost, climate, etc.) and on a simple research for maximum space efficiency. Yet, when visiting their buildings, and particularly Nantes, one can only agree with critics<sup>7</sup> who describe it as a powerful architecture in the complete understanding of the word. The school and particularly the plateaux offer strong statements regarding tectonics, space and materiality. In Nantes, Lacaton & Vassal achieved an architecture that welcomes new uses but does not dictate them. This also implied that the potential for social inventions is left to the users. Spaces could have stayed empty and lifeless without interfering with the core functions of the school. This is a risk the architects are willing to take to leave things open. In Nantes, they gave (almost) no clue on to what should happen. No big signs to tell you how much fun you are supposed to have, no fancy furniture to position a resting area, no flashy colours to instigate a playful atmosphere. Those initiatives and choices were left to the users. This confidence in the community’s ability to invent is what sets apart those plateaux from a “googletopia”<sup>8</sup>. But for reality to live up to the radical expectations of the project, users must be able to grasp opportunities and explore concrete ways to appropriate space.

**Architectural Coevolution. Inventing social frameworks to enable new spaces. And vice versa.**

Coevolution refers to a concept of natural science first described by Charles Darwin that postulates that plants and insects have evolved in a continuous «va et vient».

6 Jacques Lucan, *Précisions Sur Un État Présent De L’architecture* (Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes 2015). p.247

7 Iñaki Ábalos in Anne Lacaton and Jean Vassal, *Lacaton & Vassal* (Gustavo Gili 2011). p.4

8 Google has been among the first companies to communicate about its offices, praising the added value of a fun and flexible workplace. Yet many people have questioned this strategy, arguing that this joyful atmosphere was first and foremost a tool to intensify workload.

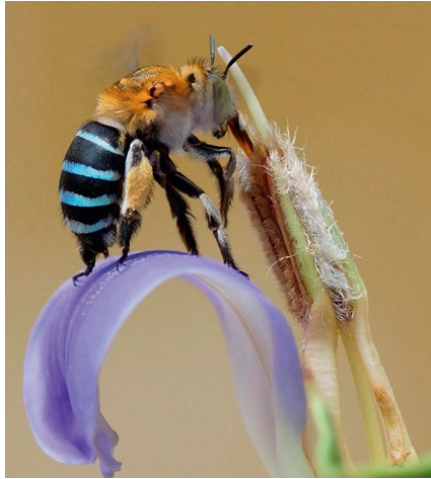


Fig. 2 Example of coevolution

According to this theory, evolution from one of the entities oriented the other to develop structures (pistils, trunks, etc.) that worked in close relationship with the other. The idea that sustains this theory is that iterative adaptation is more efficient to reach a complex system of interaction than a siloed development. One could postulate that architecture and social structures are the same. Taking the examples of Swiss cooperatives like *kraftwerk*, one can see that the amazing typology architects developed were made possible because groups of inhabitants invented over time a framework to update what community life meant today. If architects had acted alone by inventing everything from the ground up, failure would have probably been right around the corner. Looking at the world and its current state, one can only hope that architects will continue to reflect upon the relationships between their creations and the life it welcomes. This evolution will be even more fruitful if concrete examples, good or bad, nourish their reflection. The intense life inside the Nantes School shows us that the desire for new ways of inhabiting our daily surroundings is still vivid and full of poetical and political potential. But it also shows us the perils that inevitably threaten those bubbles of liberty. For other contemporary fun palaces to see light, users should maintain a certain level of control over their destiny. To help them do so, architects must finely tune their building to provide opportunities and desire. A lesson from Nantes is that a strong yet open form is a first step in this direction.

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Fig. 1 Photo Marine Mallédan

Fig. 2 Wikipedia, *Amegilla Cingulata* On *Acanthus Illicifolius*' [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bee) accessed 4 December 2015 under CC license 4.0.