



Lacaton & Vassal, Maison Latapie, Floirac, France, 1993. © Philippe Ruault. All images courtesy the author.

# The Five Points Of Lacaton & Vassal

In today's hypermediated and global field, after the dissolution of the architectural canon – when it is never obvious who knows what or where that knowledge comes from – it is difficult to trace influence or claim originality. In part by design (the intellectual project of dismantling the canon<sup>1</sup>), and in part by historical circumstance (the practical impossibilities of defining and disseminating a canon), originality and influence are no longer useful terms of evaluation. In their place, the concept of the paradigmatic offers a well-established framework for critical engagement with design.<sup>2</sup> While the claim that a practice is paradigmatic may conjure suspect notions of greatness – “look, here's a significant figure in history” – it is actually modest. It has no causal implications; it is not a claim that a practice is, or was, the first (or best) to do something or that they have had any particular effect on what others do. In this context, the term *paradigmatic* describes work that is *typical* of a given phenomenon rather than *exceptional*. It directs us toward work that offers the clearest lens through which to view the field, meaning that the decision to make a practice the subject of discourse is not about the importance of that practice itself, but rather the importance of those aspects of the wider field that the work of the practice brings into focus.

The work of Paris-based, Pritzker Prize-winner Lacaton & Vassal displays material features and programmatic aspirations that are increasingly evident in American architecture schools, especially in the design of housing. Pedagogy and housing are my primary concerns, here, for two reasons: 1) the sensibilities and critical interests that permeate schools today are shaping the skills and ambitions of future practices and their perspectives on the societies they will operate in, and 2) given its fundamental role in developing the physical and social environments, and therefore in potentially ameliorating the crises of climate change and social inequity, the design of housing has new urgency. In the US, the design of mass housing as a tool for social and urban reform appears, after the ideological caesura of American formalism (circa 1968–2008), to be returning to the central position

1. One effect of this project, led by the increasingly professionalized field of architectural history, is that the responsibility for sharing knowledge of buildings potentially useful to the practice of design largely falls on architects, who are generally not equipped with the methods or afforded the time necessary to engage in proper historical research. If the ethical obligation of the historian is to uncover factual evidence of the production and use of the built environment, the architect is consigned (or liberated?) to tell instrumental stories about the idiosyncratic catalog of buildings they have encountered. 2. A useful reference is Preston Scott Cohen's essay “Successive Architecture,” in *Log 32* (Fall 2014). He uses three paradigmatic examples of the organization of vertical buildings, the John Hancock Tower in Boston by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners (1976), John Portman's Hyatt hotels, and OMA's competition entry for the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe (1989), to analyze ways the medium of architecture has come to be defined by the “technical support” of successive stacked floors.

it has typically occupied since the early 19th century, when it emerged as a product of and a critical response to industrialization and urbanization.

Lacaton & Vassal could be used as shorthand for the increasingly ascetic vibe of contemporary design: a pervasive sensibility that privileges geometric and tectonic economy, whether as a stylistic affection or the architectural expression of an ethical commitment. Some students producing work of this kind may have no particular knowledge of Lacaton & Vassal, but may be immersed in images with an air of “Lacaton & Vassal” on social media feeds or connoisseurial blogs such as *Atlas of Places* or *OfHouses*. You, like me, might see Lacaton & Vassal in the omnipresent concrete and steel frames, milky polycarbonate, operable glass walls, corrugated siding, thermal curtains, exposed infrastructure – the deadpan grayishness of it all – or you might see something else. Many practices deploy similarly generic spatial and material strategies that render their projects (almost) indistinguishable. If there is a unifying aesthetic tendency today, it appears to be toward self-effacement.

However, these qualities are reiterated across Lacaton & Vassal’s work in an unusual manner. I can think of no other practice that appears so committed to repetition – the closest historical analog that comes to mind is the postwar work of Mies van der Rohe. A new Lacaton & Vassal project is rarely an occasion to propose a different spatial diagram or aesthetic expression. Rather, each project, particularly for housing, instantiates a totalizing design system. This consistency of intention, as well as the demonstrable plausibility of its execution, makes Lacaton & Vassal’s work especially useful as a model of architectural design. By model, I mean a set of architectural principles so clearly expressed in architectural form that it simultaneously establishes two possibilities: 1) it can serve as a framework for analysis of the field, and 2) it can serve as a building type to be reproduced *in* the field.

A historical example of such a model, which Lacaton & Vassal cite,<sup>3</sup> is Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation. Upon completion of the first Unité in Marseille, in 1952, it was widely and unselfconsciously reproduced by Le Corbusier and by others.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the young members of the London City Council Architects’ Department, then the largest architectural agency in the world, designed numerous unités throughout the 1950s for London’s housing estates. Though we tend to associate the impulse toward originality with modernism – versus the repetition of classical and vernacular

3. See the persistent use of maisonette units in Lacaton & Vassal’s designs for housing, or the discussion of pilotis and roof decks in Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal’s essay “free space,” in *Lacaton & Vassal: Free Space, Transformation, Habiter* (Madrid: Fundación ICO/Puente Editores, 2021), the catalog of the practice’s 2021–22 retrospective exhibition of the same name at the Museo ICO in Madrid.

4. The same could be said of Mies van der Rohe’s first major postwar project, the Lakeshore Drive Apartments in Chicago (1951), designed and completed in parallel to the Unité, and representing an almost perfect conceptual inversion of it.

C. G. Weald and Colin St. John Wilson,  
for the London County Council  
Architects Department, Bentham Road  
estate, Vaine House (center), Granard  
House (right), 1959.



types – modernism was more a project of articulating, disseminating, and reproducing models of architecture that were deemed aesthetically coherent and fit for their purpose – in other words, of substituting modern types and orders for classical ones.

While the *Unité* was a model for reproduction in the field, it is also a model for analysis *of* the field. For example, we could propose a “five points” of the *Unité* (with very different implications from the “five points” of *Vers une Architecture*<sup>5</sup>): 1) a slab building on pilotis, 2) interlocked stacks of maisonnette units, 3) a roof garden and a mid-level *rue commerçante* that together transform the typical program of housing into a social condenser, 4) a facade of brise-soleils *and* balconies that indexes the internal structure of the building, 5) béton-brut concrete that indexes the process of its construction. We could then trace the deviations from these points in the English *unités*: 1) slabs on pilotis, but often with entirely different relationships to their urban contexts, 2) stacks of maisonnette units, but not interlocked, and with conventional interior layouts, 3) no roof garden or commercial and recreational programs, only housing, 4) brise-soleils, balconies, *and* outdoor access decks, indexing different internal structures, 5) tectonically legible construction, sometimes of reinforced concrete, but not rough cast or “sculpturally” formed, and often combined with other materials and finishes. Through these deviations, different norms of lifestyle and life safety as well as different constraints on land use and construction become evident. We could, of course, trace the *Unité* itself backward, against, for example, the well-known influence of

5. Because the *Unité* has neither a “free plan” nor a “free facade,” it therefore suggests an entirely different model of architecture, in which the exterior expression, programmatic organization, and physical structure of a building are coconstitutive, rather than liberated from (or autonomous from) one another.

6. Reading the Unité as a Hegelian synthesis of a socialist model and a capitalist model – in other words, as the “architecture” of the postwar social democratic consensus that holds “revolution” at bay.

7. See *Lacaton & Vassal: Free Space, Transformation, Habiter*.

8. The initial project was completed in 2001. The architects completed a subsequent expansion in 2014.

9. As borne out by a number of influential contemporary practices, the architectural possibilities absorbed by conceptual artists in the 1960s and '70s, who worked on the architectural space of the institution itself, have been absorbed and redeployed by architects in service of those artists. These feedbacks take myriad forms, which might best be understood, following Mark Linder's suggestion (see *Nothing Less than Literal: Architecture after Minimalism*, published by MIT in 2007, and “Literal: There's No Denying It” in *Log 5*), as forms of literalness: Lacaton & Vassal's literal expression of the found conditions of the site: Herzog & de Meuron's literal expression of symbolic content on architectural surfaces, and the rather less convincing, at scale, attempts by Diller Scofidio + Renfro to render architecture a literally interactive or performative machine. One might also note that no program is more forgiving of doing nothing than that of the contemporary art museum, which, like the art it houses, can take any form – or even no form at all.

the Narkomfin Building (1930) by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignati Milinis (or even the ocean liner),<sup>6</sup> but we could also enter into a more nebulous field of references in which the goal is not to say who did it first (or best), but rather how what was done can serve as a useful measure of what we are doing now. Stare long enough at one of the British unités against the backdrop of its postwar housing estate, and the primacy of Le Corbusier comes into question. Aren't these modest, repetitive apartment blocks simply manifestations of modern architecture writ large, of which the Unité in Marseille was only a single (well-publicized) example? In this context, the value of the Unité is not in its originary genius but in the analytic framework for the wider architecture field that it offers us.

### Lacaton & Vassal, Three Ways

Today, one might articulate the “five points” of Lacaton & Vassal and then trace those points in the work of contemporary practices that display related qualities. But before proceeding to the points, we must select a specific architectural model that can be derived from Lacaton & Vassal's work. I offer three possible models, from the most general to the most specific.

1. In their 2021 retrospective exhibition at the Museo ICO in Madrid, “Lacaton & Vassal – Free Space, Transformation, Habiter,”<sup>7</sup> the architects define their work by three design principles. These do not describe a specific architectural form. Rather, they describe broadly applicable imperatives: 1) transform, *never demolish*, and, whether in a new or adapted building, use a minimum of material that precludes extraneous decorative assemblies, 2) leverage these zero-degree material assemblies and *undemolished* buildings to produce more space than is required without exceeding the budget, delivering unprogrammed (free) space for free, and 3) through this material economy and spatial generosity, design buildings that are adaptable to changing and diverse users and lifestyles – to being “lived in.” These principles are clearly distilled in the Palais de Tokyo,<sup>8</sup> the practice's first major commission. According to the architects' narrative, almost nothing was done to transform the existing space of a previous museum into the new museum, which has subsequently shown the capacity to continually adapt to the shifting scales, media, social activities, and economic models that characterize contemporary art.<sup>9</sup>

2. Echoing the self-aggrandizing and orientaling narrative structures of modernism, Lacaton & Vassal begin

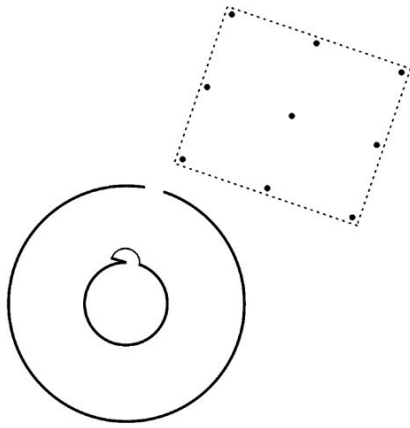
their story with the construction of a “primitive hut” in Niamey, Niger (1984), where, as young architects working in the former French colony, they claim to have discovered for themselves the archetypal form of the twinned enclosures of house and garden, built expeditiously with the materials at hand. This model of a building is then fully elaborated in Maison Latapie (1993), where the two-story interior volume of the house is doubled with the addition of a double-height winter garden. The whole is minimally articulated in plan, executed in cheap materials, and finished with manually operated panels, shutters, and curtains. Lacaton & Vassal have subsequently, and relentlessly, reiterated this diagram across various scales, contexts and programs, from Tour Bois le Prêtre (2011) to the FRAC Dunkerque (2015): take (or make) a building, add a winter garden. The principles of “free space” and *habiter* are given specific form by conjoining a loft-like interior and a winter garden.<sup>10</sup> The former is sometimes an existing building that was *not demolished*, while the latter is generally new construction.

10. There are variations: put a building in a winter garden – Maison d’habitation économique (1992) – put a building around a winter garden – Maison Floquet (1999).  
11. See, for instance, the “balcony strategy” at the center of the multiyear research project “Scalable Solutions for the New York City Housing Authority,” by Peterson Rich Office, recently shown in the exhibition “Architecture Now: New York, New Publics” at the Museum of Modern Art (2023), or the “facade extension” study included in the Columbia GSAPP Housing Lab’s 2020 report “(Re)Coding Walk-Ups,” which explicitly adopts Lacaton & Vassal’s Bordeaux project as a model to be applied to tenement buildings in New York City.

3. A third possible model is a collaborative one, first articulated in the *PLUS* manifesto (coauthored with Frédéric Druot in 2004) and most fully realized in the transformation of 530 dwellings in Bordeaux (completed in 2017, again with Druot, as well as Christophe Hutin). Self-supporting stacks of winter gardens and balconies (free space) are appended to the elevations of existing housing blocks (never demolish), transforming the aesthetics, programmatic possibilities, and climates of those housing blocks (*habiter*). To the Latapie model of the conjoined building/garden, one can add the following definition: the adaptation of an existing social housing block for the purpose of housing; in other words, *never demolish social housing* (and, by dint of the specificities of the construction method, never displace residents). This model is distilled to a precise set of instructions: open up the facade of any past-its-prime housing block that has a bit of empty, unloved space in front of it (that is, all of them), and lay up an approximately three-meter-wide stack of structurally independent slabs, glazed on both sides, next to it. This model has become a benchmark against which any project aiming to adapt housing is measured,<sup>11</sup> as both housing and building adaptation take increasing precedence in American design culture.

### The Points

While the first prospective model – Palais de Tokyo – can be almost anything, and the third – Bordeaux – can only



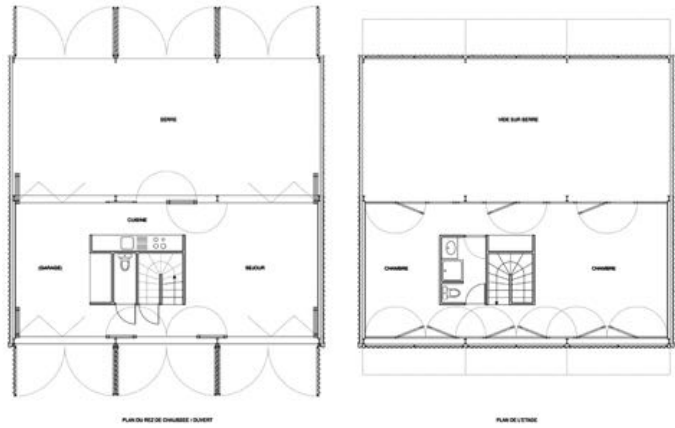
Lacaton & Vassal, Paillote, Niame, Niger, 1984. Plan of a straw-mat hut and covered "hangar."

be itself, the Latapie model is an architectural system amenable to both analytic clarity and rigorous reproduction in a variety of contexts, as borne out by its repetition in Lacaton & Vassal's own work. Nearly every housing project the firm has realized, regardless of its scale, morphology, or construction status, satisfies the conditions of this model. As is the case for the model of the Unité, these conditions can be articulated as five points – five architectural propositions that define a possible architecture, from the scale of the building to the scale of the detail. Each of these points embeds legible social content in the material form of architecture; satisfaction of the points, therefore, requires formal rigor and practical engagement with social and material realities. In other words, adhering to the five points of the Lacaton & Vassal model that is described below constitutes an explicitly ethical undertaking in which architectural form is subservient to (which is not to say reducible to) a coherent system of values.

*Point 1 (Building): The reproduction (or adaptation) of modern building types.* The Lacaton & Vassal model refuses fantastical urban alternatives that trade in the economy of spectacle and novelty, as well as the reconstitution of traditional urban contexts. It proposes slab blocks, terraced apartments, point towers, and light industrial structures – the perpetuation of the modern city through the reproduction of extant housing types characteristic of modern architecture. Unsentimental about "place," it relates to its site through pilotis, parking, and chain-link fences. When used to adapt, rather than reproduce, modern building types, the model shows that the abject building stock of the postwar welfare state can be revitalized, renewing the promise of the program of universal housing while offering an indictment of the sprawling and extractive logic of capitalism (*Stop Construction!*<sup>12</sup>). It suggests that it is still possible to dream the modernist dream of a different architecture for a different society without demanding a new city – an ambition that architects have been trained for a half-century to see as a failure. That shattered dream of modern architecture is instead revealed to be more vital than ever, precisely because the modern city has already been built (otherwise it could not have failed). The modern city is there, in the postwar housing estates and elsewhere, waiting to be recovered, embodied energy and all. Rather than demanding yet another new architecture, the first point of the model suggests that we can recover our old (new) architecture, reaffirming the possibility of an alternative society that lies dormant in our cities,

12. See the ongoing multimedia initiative "A Moratorium on New Construction," organized by Charlotte Malterre-Barthes (<https://stopconstruction.cargo.site/>) and including Arno Brandhuber, whose work is discussed below.

Lacaton & Vassal, Maison Latapie, Floirac, France, 1993. First- and second-floor plans.



and that we have heretofore attempted to repress through stigmatization and neglect.

*Point 2 (Unit): The conventional aggregation of generic unit types.* In whatever morphology meets the scale of a given project, the model does not reinvent the generic housing unit or the conventions of its aggregation. Units are distributed from vertical cores in a manner that conforms to ordinary measures of efficiency (the ratio of individuated space – leasable space, in market terms – to common space). Bedrooms and bathrooms are distributed in a typical manner, off living spaces, allowing for individual privacy and normative family structures. Living spaces with open kitchens, sometimes double-height, tend toward the loft-like, but not unusually so. Units therefore make no exceptional demands on their occupants’ patterns of use. This is distinct from other models of contemporary housing, in which the basic structure of the unit or the aggregation of units (or both) is redefined to promote alternatives to normative structures of occupation, including micro-units (nArchitects, Carmel Place), units without typical spatial or programmatic hierarchy (MAIO, 110 Rooms), or buildings without clearly defined units at all (Dogma, Communal Villa).

*Point 3 (Threshold): The provision of deep, occupiable thresholds between interior and exterior.* If both the building and the unit are conventional in their basic organization, the threshold as “winter garden” introduces the most distinctive spatial device of the model. At the scale of the unit, the expanded threshold between interior and exterior introduces a “new” semiconditioned space to the typical unit. It is this excess relative to a conventional unit that most clearly separates the work of Lacaton & Vassal from the general production of housing, offering a specific spatial surplus and framework



for programmatic flexibility. However, this feature is also, in a sense, entirely ordinary. In the absence of bylaws to the contrary, almost any residential building with balconies will eventually see some of those transformed into winter gardens – all-season extensions of the interior space of the unit. Lacaton & Vassal simply applies this feature uniformly and preemptively, with a clearly defined relationship to the typical interior of each unit, thereby establishing a spatial equity across units and a consistent image of the collective at the scale of the building. In the most refined instances, this point includes the lamination of balcony, winter garden, living space, and, in many cases, a bedroom with a sliding partition in a single continuum of space running the depth of the unit.

*Point 4 (Envelope): The modulation of the envelope (climate) through layers of low-tech, individuated systems.* The winter garden allows the occupant to modulate the interior climate of the unit by shifting the lines of enclosure – in other words, the extents of the occupiable threshold described in point three – through varying permutations of light, insulation, ventilation, and precipitation. This modulation is achieved, and therefore aesthetically articulated, through layers of operable surfaces: sliding glass and polycarbonate panels, operable windows, and curtains and shades that filter light, block light, and reflect heat. The smooth, thin unitized surface of the curtain wall is transformed into a *curtained* wall, a thick, heterogeneous envelope made with layers of standardized parts in constant flux. Among the features of the model, none might be more of the zeitgeist than the interplay of curtains (and blinds and awnings) and curtain walls. This synthesis of two seemingly opposed archetypes – the seriality of the Maison Dom-Ino (the mass scale of modern housing) and the layered and materially diverse tectonics of the primitive hut (the idiosyncrasies of the traditional home) – is a low-tech answer to modernism's dependence on energy-intensive climate control, and the impervious and anonymous building envelopes that this dependence produced.

*Point 5 (Detail): The direct expression of standard building structures, finishes, and technical systems.* Details are expressed through a zero-degree aesthetic, in which the architecture appears to be the accumulation of the simplest requirements for structure, envelope, infrastructure, appliances, and any necessary finishes. The curtains and glass and polycarbonate panels in point four belong to a suite of typical elements that comprise the visible surfaces of the model, including: primed drywall on metal studs; concrete walls, floors, and columns



Lacaton & Vassal with Frédéric Druot and Christophe Hutin architecture, Transformation of 530 Dwellings, Bordeaux, France, 2016. Photo: Philippe Ruault.

(existing or new); wide-flange steel framing; steel decking; corrugated roofing and siding; and glass or steel railings. Almost without exception, these materials have a standard finish that, while varying in opacity, reflectivity, and rigidity, falls within a narrow chromatic range, from white to medium-gray. This grayish unity of the architecture in and across projects is accomplished through a direct use of materials that are, in contrast to other models of aesthetic purity, heterogeneous enough to adapt to change. The lack of distinctive or custom finishes encourages continual modification by individual occupants, while simultaneously asserting a coherent image through a persistent tectonic legibility. The filmic arrays of photographs of these spaces in their “lived-in” condition, which Lacaton & Vassal use to present their work, are a clear rejoinder to the abstractions and affectations of the kind of project documentation that is celebrated by and disseminated throughout the field. The polemic of such images is not that the architecture is good enough to stand up to the accumulated shit of people’s lives; rather, it is that the architecture is good precisely because it welcomes and makes space for people and their possessions – that this evidence of actually lived lives improves the architecture.

# The Five Points of Lacaton & Vassal

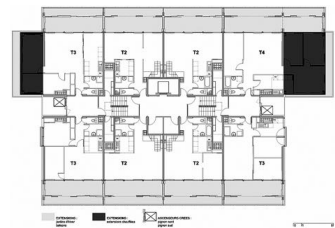
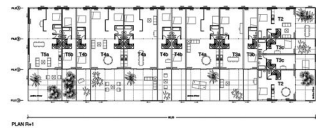
Lacaton & Vassal, Cité manifeste, Mulhouse, 2005.

Lacaton & Vassal with Frédéric Druot, Transformation de la Tour Bois Le Prêtre, Paris, 2011.

Point 1 (Building):  
The reproduction (or adaptation) of modern building types.



Point 2 (Unit):  
The conventional aggregation of generic unit types.



Point 3 (Threshold):  
The provision of deep, occupiable thresholds between interior and exterior.



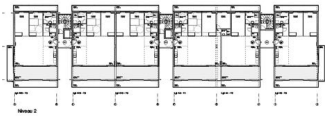
Point 4 (Envelope):  
The modulation of the envelope (climate) through layers of low-tech, individuated systems.



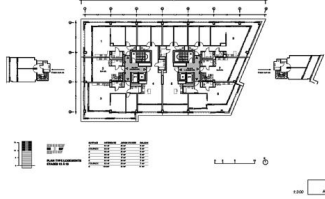
Point 5 (Detail):  
The direct expression of standard building structures, finishes and technical systems.



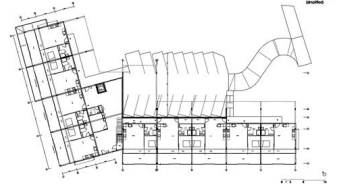
Lacaton & Vassal, 96 logements,  
Chalon-sur-Saône / Prés-Saint-Jean,  
2016.



Lacaton & Vassal, Immeuble de  
logements et bureaux, Halte Ceva,  
Chêne-Bourg, Genève, 2020.



Lacaton & Vassal, 18 logements,  
Rixheim, 2021.



13. For instance, Dogma and Boltshauser recently collaborated on a competition entry for cooperative housing in Basel (2022).

## Five More Architects

The following elaborates the Lacaton & Vassal model and possible deviations from it, using it as a comparative framework for the analysis of designs for housing by five contemporary practices. It makes no claim that these practices have any particular influence on one another (though they may<sup>13</sup>), nor that any one of them is particularly influential in the American context (though each likely is, in one way or another). All are based in Western Europe, which remains a locus of American interest, not only because of deeply entrenched networks of exchange or our problematic inheritance and continued privileging of its histories, but also because the architectural and social institutions of Western Europe appear to have maintained a more or less unbroken tradition of fostering the design and construction of high-quality social and cooperative housing, thereby suggesting alternatives to the political economy of architecture in the US, in which the capacities of architects are so profoundly limited. The act of describing and comparing the work of these practices is intended to establish a conceptual map of architectural possibilities. Given sufficient time and space, many more examples could be added to such a map, filling in and expanding its territory – this list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive.

Across this work, one finds the repetition of varying conceptual strategies central to modern architecture: from an anti-aesthetic commitment to the expression of functional and contextual constraints, to the attempt to develop geometrically idealized and universal organizational systems, to the transposition of compositional strategies in two-dimensional media such as painting to building. The work on housing developed by each of these practices nearly meets the criteria of the points described above but ultimately diverges in crucial ways. In the interest of brevity, each practice is analyzed mainly in terms of the point where this divergence from the Lacaton & Vassal model is most pronounced, thereby clarifying the definition and stakes of that model and suggesting alternatives to it.

1. (*Building*). Berlin-based b+ (formerly Brandlhuber) has developed an applied theory of the adaptation of existing structures and exploitation of regulatory and financial structures. Whereas Lacaton & Vassal tends to adapt buildings to serve their original functions in new ways – adapting housing as *housing* and reclaiming distressed assets on behalf of the state – b+ tends to adapt buildings to serve new functions:

adapting industrial buildings as *houses* and reclaiming distressed assets on behalf of individuals. And while Lacaton & Vassal plays the traditional role of architect in service to a client, b+ often plays the role of architect *and* client. The general result of the intersection of these two factors in b+'s work is that: 1) in contradistinction to Lacaton & Vassal's free space, which augments conventional patterns of use, the interior spaces of b+'s work are overscaled and under-articulated in a manner that resists conventional use, and 2) compared to Lacaton & Vassal's reproduction of conventional modern types and generic finishes, b+'s projects are typologically distorted and idiosyncratically detailed. While Lacaton & Vassal seeks to advance the institutions of the social democratic state through a universal form of modern architecture, b+ is far more anarchic, finding loopholes in the structures of capitalism that allow for both resistance and profit. b+ therefore occupies a distinct terrain, between those architects who continuously produce experimental follies for their own edification and use (for example, Ensemble Studio, Smiljan Radic) and those who "surf" the regulatory and financial structures of the capitalist city in a manner that produces, through a perverted literalism of regulation and efficiency, manifestations of modernism's most unusual formal desires (for example, OMA).

2. (*Unit*). Over the past two decades, Brussels-based Dogma has put forward a sustained theoretical critique of housing and the city, manifested in both texts and design projects. Whereas Lacaton & Vassal's theory is largely articulated through commissioned building projects, Dogma works primarily through self-generated or institutionally sponsored research projects. Lacaton & Vassal proposes conventional relationships between building and site (the urban scale), between common circulation areas and individuated units (the building scale), and between common living areas and individuated rooms (the unit scale). Dogma often proposes disjunctive building types and develops the interiors of those buildings through open fields of common, unprogrammed space punctuated by occupiable cores or walls that contain building infrastructure and/or individuated sleeping cells. It is revealing of the political conditions governing contemporary housing that both the anarcho-capitalist project of b+ and the social-democratic project of Lacaton & Vassal have proven feasible, while the collectivist project of Dogma, generally instantiated in the requirement that large groups of occupants share spaces typically understood to be the private

domain of the individual or family unit, has not. The politics governing such plans exist outside of the politics that govern construction. Dogma's theoretical project is an antipodal model to that of Lacaton & Vassal, the product of a practice that demands a radical reordering of the internal structure and life of the building and, concomitantly, a de facto refusal to build in the presently existing conditions.

3. (*Threshold*). The Barcelona-based practice Lacol is a cooperative that develops projects through cooperative arrangements with future occupants, and is therefore embedded in the specificities of a place and a constituency. Where Lacaton & Vassal appears indifferent to place, Lacol's projects are integrated into the urban conditions of perimeter blocks, with industrial finishes complemented by contextual signifiers such as repetitive punched windows and doors and colorful exterior trim and shades.<sup>14</sup> More fundamentally, where the Lacaton & Vassal model minimizes the shared core and maximizes the space of the individual unit through the addition of the winter garden, Lacol inverts this relationship. Conventional vertical cores are expanded into atriums lined with open decks that make the movements of individual occupants visible to the collective. Spaces that might otherwise be housing units are set aside for collective functions – any movement to or from individual units involves passing by or through these spaces, and the collective use of these spaces is assumed in the definition of individual units. The expanded threshold in Lacol's work is thus oriented toward the interior environment and its delimited collective of occupants, rather than the exterior environment. This expanded threshold – between the front door of the building and the front door of the unit – introduces an additional programmatic dimension to housing that requires the physical participation of residents, complementing their economic participation in the project and continually reproducing the cooperative to which they belong.

4. (*Envelope*). While one might assume the spatial and material qualities of Bruther's work to be derivative of Lacaton & Vassal (both are Paris-based practices, of successive generations), the younger practice operates between the zero-degree material and spatial expression of Lacaton & Vassal and something like the high-tech work of Jean Nouvel. Each surface, particularly of the building envelope, becomes a subject for unusual expression. Their work displays technical virtuosity that advances beyond the hyper-articulation of earlier high-tech practices, or the reductive abstraction of

14. An increasingly common feature of Dogma's work as well.

15. We have shifted from the figural excesses of Bernd and Hilla Becher's infrastructural elevations to the deadpan blankness of Lewis Baltz's light industrial landscapes.

16. The composition of the elevational image vis-à-vis photography is analogous to the ways in which the idiosyncratic plan geometries of Bruther's projects are clearly designed to be appreciated as graphic compositions in their own right.

17. "More pleasant in manner than powerful in deed." Banham used these terms to dismiss the polished work of most postwar modernists when theorizing the Smithsons' calls for a "New Brutalism" in the early 1950s. Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism," *Architectural Review* (December 1955): 354–58.

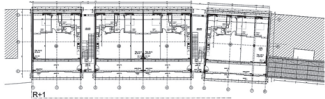
corporate modernism, and toward a more subtle and episodic quality. Like many of their contemporaries, Bruther appears to have internalized the often collaborative feedback between architectural design and art photography,<sup>15</sup> wherein precisely calibrated spatial idiosyncrasies and material differences – the sort of conditions that might have previously arisen over time through mundane transformations in the urban environment and then been disseminated as images by photographers of that environment – now appear to be conceived, from the outset, as photographic images.<sup>16</sup> As in the work of Lacaton & Vassal, the climatological properties of the envelope are articulated through layers of performative, often individually operable, systems. However, these systems are imbued with an ironic detachment that plays up their qualities as *objet d'art*: roll-down awnings mounted to the exterior of an impeccably detailed curtain wall, interior curtains cut 18 inches above the floor. Other elements appear equally considered: chromed HVAC risers, outboard staircases rotated off the structural grid, a careful distribution of colorful tile or powder-coated steel. Photographs of completed Bruther buildings are at times indistinguishable from the hyperreal renderings of proposed Bruther buildings that are executed by ArtefactoryLab (whose website is an atlas of related European practices). The articulation of the elements in Bruther's buildings produces a smoothness that resists the lived-in quality that Lacaton & Vassal appears to embrace. Even when built, Bruther's work is represented with the evacuated affect of a rendering or an art photograph, suggesting a slight distaste for occupation and an attitude that, to paraphrase Reyner Banham, is rather more *sauviter in modo* than *fortiter in re*.<sup>17</sup>

5. (*Detail*). Zurich-based Boltshauser's H1 High-Rise – an unbuilt project in the suburbs of Zurich – comes closest among these examples to satisfying the five points of the Lacaton & Vassal model: 1) it is a rectilinear point tower for an anodyne site at the edge of the city, 2) it is composed of a mix of conventional units distributed off a conventional elevator core (albeit sprinkled with some common rooms), 3) each unit has a deep, room-like balcony, 4) the interior climate is modulated by these balconies, along with brise-soleils, operable glass panels, and full-height curtains, and 5) the building clearly expresses its structure and technical systems. On this last point, however, there is a substantive difference. Despite a commitment to passive climate control and the reuse of buildings, Lacaton & Vassal continues,

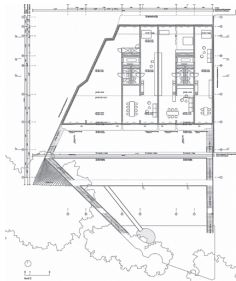


## And Five More Architects

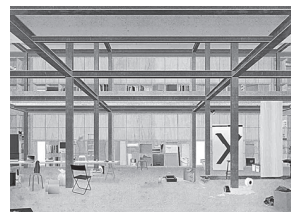
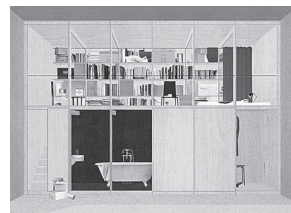
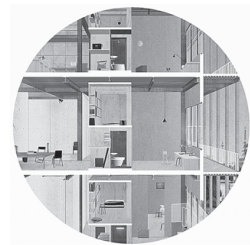
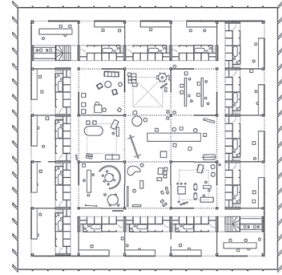
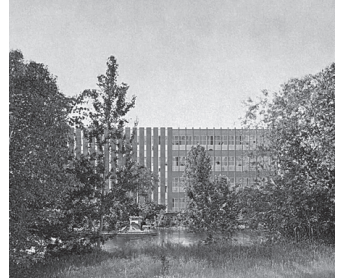
Lacaton & Vassal, 59 logements, jardins Neppert, Mulhouse, 2015



b+ with Emde, Burlon, Muck Petzet Architekten, Terrassenhaus Berlin / Lobe Block, Berlin, 2018



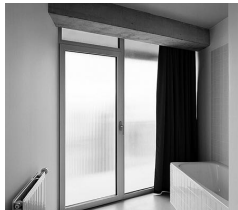
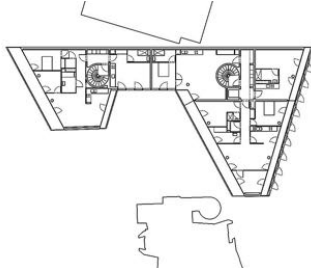
Dogma with Realism Working Group, Communal Villa, 2015



Lacol, La Borda Habitatge Cooperatiu, Barcelona, 2018



Bruther, Pelleport Social Housing, Paris, 2017



Boltshauser Architekten, Hochhaus H1 Zwhatt-Areal, Regensburg, 2023



18. A material that is also frequently specified by Lacol and, in recent years, Dogma.

especially when working at larger scales, to specify reinforced concrete and steel rather than carbon-sequestering materials such as mass timber or, for the adventurous, rammed earth – the material with which Boltshauser has made its name. Unlike a “real” Lacaton & Vassal project, the diagram proposed by Boltshauser is a hybrid structure: a concrete foundation and core that support mass timber framing, with the whole building clad in photovoltaic cells.<sup>18</sup> The concrete is to be rose-tinted, the exterior finish of the wood a rich salmon, and the photovoltaic cells colored to match. As rendered by Artefactory, these material differences in structure and cladding not only promise “greater comfort” and energy efficiency, they also move the architecture toward an entirely different scenographic quality: a monochromatic pinkish palette drawn from the recesses of the 1970s, set off by the contrasting greens of painted steel trim and endless potted entourage, the project cast in the perpetual glow of the sunset (or is it the sunrise?) of modernism.

### The Lacaton & Vassal of It All

What appears today to be most useful, and perhaps also most seductive, about the work of Lacaton & Vassal – indeed, of each of these firms – is that it strips the veneer of novelty from contemporary architecture. It relieves us of the burden of perpetually searching for new expressions, and of the presumption that the architecture of the present is anything other than modern architecture: repetitive configurations of generic structural framing, adorned with varying cladding systems and occasional geometric flourishes. The aesthetic effect of a Lacaton & Vassal project is essentially that of a conventional building *before* the application of the architectural finishes, which is when most contemporary buildings tend to be most aesthetically coherent. By laying bare the internal structure of housing (or any program), with the facade and internal finishes reduced to indices of construction, climate control, and function, the work of Lacaton & Vassal refocuses our attention on the fundamental questions of how space is apportioned and delimited within a building and of what materials and technical systems are required to define that space. These questions, which reflect the social structures that produce, and emerge within, a building, and the material costs of construction and use, are as vital as they have ever been. So long as the world continues to be built according to the basic parameters of modern architecture, it will be incumbent upon us to examine practices that reveal

the persistence of those models and the potentials for their transformation. If there is a genius in the work of Lacaton & Vassal, a particularly insidious idea that might infect the field, it is that it suggests any building has the potential to become a “Lacaton & Vassal” building, and that such a building might answer our most pressing imperative: to house the most people, in the highest quality, using the least carbon – and therefore be worth repeating, without anxiety, ad infinitum.

### **Epilogue: Five Points for the Future**

1. Pilotis to lift the building above the absorptive green surface of the floodplain.
2. Social Condenser to foster collective processes of mutual aid, political autonomy, and emancipation from domestic labor, particularly in times of crisis.
3. Maisonettes to support diverse types of relationships and activities within units.
4. Balconies, Brise-Soleils, and (Solar) Chimneys to passively manage the climate of the interior.
5. Direct Expression of (Carbon-Storing) Construction and Building Systems to minimize embodied energy and to maximize the capacity for adaptation.