

it, converted it, added to it. What did they add? Their needs. They created distinctions, whose significance is analysed in this book. They introduced personal qualities. They built a differentiated social cluster.

Philippe Boudon's subtle analysis of the distinctions, of the 'topical' qualities, introduced, or rather *produced*, by the Pessac occupants in what was originally an undifferentiated urban setting has helped to further urban studies. It may well be that he has carried them further even than he realizes, for he has drawn attention to different *levels* of reality and different *levels* of thought. In his enquiry he illustrates, or perhaps I should say demonstrates, the existence of three distinct levels.

(a) First there is the *theoretical level*, at which theory tends to merge with ideology or, to be more precise, is not usually sufficiently distinguished from ideology. This is the level at which our architects and town planners operate. They deal with empirical problems by reference to town-planning ideologies. And they do so with or without the approval of the public institutions and political organizations, but always at their level, a procedure that is not without its risks. These ideological dangers are discussed by Philippe Boudon in the light of Le Corbusier's experiment and the 'social requirements' formulated by Henry Frugès for the Pessac project.

(b) Then there is the *practical level*, at which ideological considerations are supplemented by other, quite different factors. Here the architect exercises his mind and his will, bringing them to bear on the practical needs of the future occupants. Some of these needs are clearly recognized, others are not. And so Le Corbusier's architectural practice is seen to be more hesitant, more flexible and more vital than his architectural theory. But both ideological and theoretical considerations are forced to give way in the face of reality.

(c) Finally, there is the *town-planning level*, at which a certain way of life, a certain style (or absence of style) makes itself felt. The social activities of individual occupants and groups of occupants, which have been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the different groupings within the district, are seen for what they are. At this level we find a specific topology, a concrete rationality that is more impressive and more complex than abstract rationality.

In his study Philippe Boudon analyses the relationship between architecture and town planning and also considers the *practical ramifications* of urban design (a form of enquiry which is almost completely new and which has virtually been inaugurated by him). He introduces material that casts a new light on the problems posed by town planning and will help us to form a general assessment covering all aspects of this discipline, which is the only profitable way of tackling and perhaps solving these problems.

Henri Lefèbvre

‘You know, it is always
life that is right and the
architect who is wrong . . .’
Le Corbusier

Introduction

‘If you cross the Landes by rail you will find yourself completely captivated, a few minutes out of Bordeaux, by the sight of a strange village. About a hundred houses with sober, massive and rectilinear forms, painted brown, white or pale green, arrest the traveller’s attention and excite his curiosity. But the train passes quickly . . . I was so impressed by this unexpected view that the next day, when I was returning by the same route, I stopped off at Bordeaux to visit this unusual settlement, whose architecture proved to be every bit as novel and bold as I had imagined. There I was able to observe a new style, a completely new and, in my opinion, successful conception of what a modern house ought to be: a “machine to live in” . . .’

That is how the ‘Quartiers Modernes Frugès’, which were built in Pessac by Le Corbusier, appeared to a journalist on the staff of the magazine *Mon chez moi* in 1926.

After forty years, of course, one would expect the district to look different, but that it could have changed so much appears quite incredible. It seems that everybody has now converted his ‘machine to live in’ into a ‘chez soi’ . . . Not only have the colours disappeared in the vast majority of cases but the ‘wide windows’ have been made narrower, the patios have been enclosed, many of the original terraces have been roofed over, the empty spaces beneath the stilts have been blocked off, and the great crop of sheds that has sprung up, much to the detriment of the architecture, helps to create a general impression of dilapidation. This impression is sufficiently pronounced for the visitor to feel that, in addition to the normal processes of ageing, there has also been a real

conflict between what the architect intended and what the occupants wanted.

In this conflict the architect considered himself to be in the wrong: 'You know, it is always life that is right and the architect who is wrong . . .', Le Corbusier once said when speaking of Pessac. And, in point of fact, one's initial reaction is to conclude that this project actually was an architectural failure. But to speak of failure in this sense would be to assume that architecture is immutable and that architects are capable of satisfying their clients' deepest habitational needs. In fact, the mere definition of these needs, which are still obscure, would presuppose that they were capable of existing independently of any living context, which is hardly likely. However, it seemed that, far from isolating illusory general truths, a study in depth – carried out within a clearly defined and limited context – of the motivations which had persuaded the residents of Pessac to convert their houses to such an extent would be able to cast light on specific aspects of 'living' and clarify the relationship between the architect's original conception and the residents' reactions. And so we carried out an enquiry at Pessac in which we recorded any alterations that had been made to the buildings and also interviewed many of the occupants.

In instituting this enquiry I was not trying to prove any particular thesis but rather to draw attention to the problems involved, open up new paths of investigation, clarify a number of new conceptions and – since enquiries of this kind are still something of a rarity – to test rather than employ a method. There was no certainty, when I embarked on my enquiry, that I would obtain a definite result. And, in fact, it turned out – as I had expected – that no peremptory conclusions could be drawn. But I had the definite impression that the 'Quartiers Modernes Frugès' – or the Q.M.F. as I shall frequently be calling them in the chapters that follow – were an architectural and social experiment that had developed naturally and freely and was likely to prove a fertile source of ideas. Although it is not possible to draw any direct analogies (fortunately living is far too complex a phenomenon for it to be reduced to a system of simple co-ordinates) and although it is unlikely that we shall ever possess a precise formula for living (a neat list of human needs that could be catered for in our homes), it remains none the less true that both the way in which we live and the homes we live in are products of the human mind and as such are subject to constant modification. From this it follows that they cannot be defined in terms of past achievements. But they can be illuminated by experiment, and it is the lessons learned from the Pessac experiment that I have tried to convey.

M. Frugès, the industrialist who provided the financial backing for the project, insisted that the whole new district should be regarded as a *laboratory*, in which Le Corbusier would be able to 'put his

theories into practice and carry them to their most extreme conclusions’.

Since laboratories exist not merely for putting theories into practice – although only too frequently this constitutes the full extent of architectural activity in this sphere – but also for testing those theories under controlled conditions, it seemed to me that the Q.M.F. offered a unique opportunity of pursuing an enquiry into the ecology of dwellings, which would place the work of one of our greatest modern architects in juxtaposition to the suburban style of architecture apparently favoured by the majority of the occupants who made modifications to their homes.

The need to study the problem from a sociological as well as an architectural point of view prompted me to seek the help of sociologists:¹ although it was very tempting for me, as an architect, to rush in with my own explanation of what had happened at Pessac, the temptation had to be resisted; for I was primarily interested in discovering what the occupants thought about it, and it would have been a pity to have projected my own *architectural* ideas into a study which was being carried out for the express purpose of illuminating the disparity of view between the architect and the householders. On the other hand, I felt that the study should be conducted by an architect since he would be better equipped to describe and demonstrate the various problems of spatial organization. Above all, it was imperative that the person who interpreted the alterations should be able to ‘read’ them correctly. This called for a basic knowledge of the kind of problems posed by spatial, structural and – in a general way – architectural requirements, with which only architects are accustomed to deal, the general public tending to be unversed in such matters. I also felt that, by adopting this procedure, I would be able to correlate the different material that I would be receiving, thus presenting a collective interpretation.

Finally, it should be pointed out that this study is not concerned solely with Le Corbusier. True, his personality and his architecture are by no means unappreciable factors and, in fact, constitute one important aspect of the problem, the other consisting of the occupants’ reactions to his architecture. In this particular case the architecture was anything but impersonal; as for the residents of Pessac, they are quite distinct from the residents of any other region or country. But, although this study is essentially local and circumscribed, I hope that it will none the less help to throw light on the more general phenomenon of the conflict between the original intentions of the architect, as expressed in his buildings, and the reactions of the people who live in them.

As far as Pessac is concerned, we shall act on the assumption that such a conflict has taken place.

¹ I wish to thank Raymond and Monique Fichelet, who organized the group discussion and also obtained the valuable services of Claude Nedelec, who collaborated on the interviews.

In addition to the interpretations which I have advanced, the material presented in this book may very well suggest other interpretations to the reader. As I have already pointed out, my principal object has been to report a particular experiment, in which habitational, architectural and urban factors interacted on a small and intimate scale. Consequently, where I have felt that the verbatim reproduction of original material might prove of interest to the reader I have not hesitated to adopt this course. On many occasions it has seemed to me that press articles, printed texts and interviews have spoken for themselves; in such cases I have preferred to let them do so.