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FR9.40.16 Planning the Built Environment

TH3.10.16 Vertical Urbanisms and the Regulatory Production of "Urban Volumes" - Panel 2

The « immeuble de belle hauteur », new feature of verticalization in France ?

The case of Lyon

This presentation explores the renewed interest for residential towers by developers and local authorities in France in the last 5 years. Indeed, if recent work framed by the project Skyline featured a return of towers in urban strategies across Europe these last 30 years (M.Appert, 2012), this presentation deals essentially with the case of residential towers, more numerous and paradoxically less explored than office towers, usually described as emblems of economic capitalism (C.Didelon 2010, S.Graham, 2015). Faced with environmental challenges, cities in France like in many other countries have chosen to limit their land consumption by enabling denser developments on already developed land (E.Glaeser, 2011). In this process, high-rise buildings have first been banished from possible architectural solutions but have recently been reconsidered and form part of new developments. Indeed, towers are mainly located in pericentral and/or brownfields sites where they are assigned the role of beacons of regeneration (M.Appert, 2016).

With 97 projects now proposed or approved in French cities, residential towers take a specific form with a lot of projects averaging in height 50m. High-rises have thus massing similarities from one place to another, a standard for high-rise building even labelled « immeuble de belle hauteur » by some developers, media and local authority in the case of Lyon, France.

Introduced in 1971 to reduce security risks for taller structures, a 50m (from the street to the last occupable floor) height threshold labelled IGH was intended to provide clearer prerequisites for the construction, operation and maintenance of habitable buildings of more than 50m. Today, the legislation seems to work as a constraint as 90% of the residential towers proposed or under construction have a maximum height of around 50m. But at the same time and more paradoxically, the height threshold seems to secure a new emerging vertical housing market by clarifying the rules and enabling a large number of developers to undertake the risk of building tall. The risk is relative to the French context characterized by a continuing « residential stigma » (P.Gilbert, 2012) associated mostly with what is considered social failures of the Modernist era.

This presentation shows that this regulation based on a threshold of height, though limiting the building envelope, secure a « clearer planning environment » for developers and local authorities. However, the housing units have to be sold and the respect of IGH regulation does not represent a convincing argument for potential buyers. Thus, in spite of the production of residential towers morphologically similar to the Modernist ones in terms of height, the use of new branding terminologies sets a « new » innovative and attractive typology of residential towers, and favors appropriation by all stakeholders.

This presentation will be the opportunity to introduce some of the results concerning the return of residential towers in France and inquire a misunderstood process through a 3 parts development :

1 - Framed by the IGH legislation at national scale, we show that residential high-rises are shaped by project scale governance involving collaborations between municipalities and developers, that find in the legislation, a risk reduced planning environment.

From « managerialism to entrepreneurialism » (D.Harvey, 1989), the emergence of injunctions such as sustainable development, historical heritage protection, densification, defined new fields of competition between cities from now on economically interdependent. Henceforth autonomous and skillful at a local scale (G.Pinson, 2010), cities started to be governed horizontally, supporting co-operations between public and private actors (P.Le Galès, 1995), and mainly developers when concerning the delivery of housing (J.Pollard, 2011). Therefore, while these privileged relations led in France to low buildings organized in « îlots ouverts » (C.De Portzamparc, 2010), some more vertical responses appeared, framed by the IGH legislation.

2. Project governance and the IGH legislation help managing developers costs and housing pipelines, but also local authorities in regenerating more quickly physically and symbolically specific areas in a context of tensed real estate housing markets.

“Symbolic places” in the urban landscape (J.Monnet, 1998) built on a logic of niche urban marketing (M.Appert & C.Montès, 2015) residential towers even lowered by the IGH legislation, represent a double opportunity for developers and public authorities. Targeting economical profit through urban development, the developers fit in return the local authorities purpose regarding the production of a dense prestigious and emblematic quality housing, accompanied by public spaces and facilities, guaranteeing eventually to the city « a branding image » (E.Goetz et S.Clarke 1993).

3 - New branding terminologies such as the “immeuble de belle hauteur” reflects what developers think is acceptable, attractive and sellable in terms of social representations of high-rises.

Describing a move from « Prisons to *Penthouses* », Lauren Costello (2005) shows in Melbourne a type of vertical housing presenting high social standards, characterized by Steven Graham (2015) under the gesture of the « Starchitects » as a « *Luxurification of the skies* ». From the « machines à habiter » (Le Corbusier, 1925) of the Modernism era to innovative commodities, accompanied by a large choice of services and symbolizing the emergence of a « Global Lifestyle » (R.Fincher, 2007). While the word « tower » seems to remind what is considered as past modernist failures, new attractive and aesthetic branding terminologies can be regarded as part of the process of innovation by favoring a social appropriation (S.Moscovici, 1976), leading eventually to the selling of high-rise housing units.

These hypotheses, tested during interviews with both developers and the Metropolitan Authority, lead towards a maximization of the built envelope through « low height towers». Verticalization is thus more progressive in terms of height, contrary to past radical gesture of the Modernist era, making it more acceptable at least for municipalities, a sort of phasing or gradual verticalization process in a difficult wider socio-cultural environment.

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