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# The Perret Tower of Amiens

## *A useless skyscraper, a French high-rise mortgage*

In analysing unpublished archival material, this article questions the history of conflict around the Perret Tower, from its inclusion in the first drafts of the Amiens reconstruction plan in 1942 until its inauguration eighteen years later. Imagined as the dominant symbolic element of the urban design around the reconstructed station, the tower block had to face up to the principle of reality from the start of the project, with questions about its ultimate function as well as its cost effectiveness. The staggering lack of response to these fundamental issues did not prevent the building work commencing, which was finally halted for lack of a client, in a context of escalating costs despite careful monitoring by the departmental services of the Ministry of Reconstruction.

The reception of Perret's as yet unfinished work was seen in a different light depending on whether it was observed in Amiens or from Paris, on the benches of the National Assembly or in the offices of the Court of Auditors. The tower block was finally bought in 1959 by the architect François Spoerry – who, for the occasion, became a property developer – and the tower block, which was still a concrete shell, was converted into housing and offices. Thus ended a controversy by which the impetus for the construction of high-rise buildings in France was linked to the fate of the Amiens skyscraper and its futility.

### Introduction

The Perret Tower (fig. 1) has been a feature in the Amiens urban landscape since 1952 and is unusual in officially bearing the name of its architect, which is rare in France. This honour, granted to Auguste Perret during his lifetime (1874–1954), was also something of a smokescreen: placed at the end of the prestigious list of achievements of one of the masters of French architecture, the building underwent a long and difficult genesis, eighteen years between the first sketch and the inauguration. Built with no programme other than its symbolic value, the tower block was for a long time characterised by its lack of purpose. Branded with the aura of the architect, jealously guarded by his followers, its reception was complex, commented on in art history anthologies and in the local press.

Léo Noyer-Duplaix  
and Hugo Massire

▼ Fig. 1.  
The Perret Tower from  
the Boulevard de Belfort,  
postcard, 1960s (© DR).



Designed during the Vichy regime, which was long forgotten in the recesses of the history of art<sup>1</sup>, and then neglected by the specialized press<sup>2</sup> after the Liberation, the Perret Tower was already a thing of the past when its construction was completed and the technical innovations praised at the beginning of the work already seeming outdated. Whether scholarly or popular, the critical fortune of the tower block was linked to that of the reconstruction of Amiens considered as a whole. Often qualified as pragmatic<sup>3</sup> or sensible<sup>4</sup>, the Amiens project did not have the irrefutable character of the reconstructions of Le Havre or Maubeuge; the Perret Tower floated above a large construction site that was difficult to qualify for architectural historians<sup>5</sup>, until it became the “emblem”<sup>6</sup> of the Picardy city’s revival. The paradox is twofold: while historiographically obscuring the rest of the reconstruction of Amiens<sup>7</sup>, the tower block nevertheless occupies a secondary place in Auguste Perret’s anthologies<sup>8</sup>, with the new Picardy railway station and above all, the reconstruction of Le Havre, focusing all the attention.

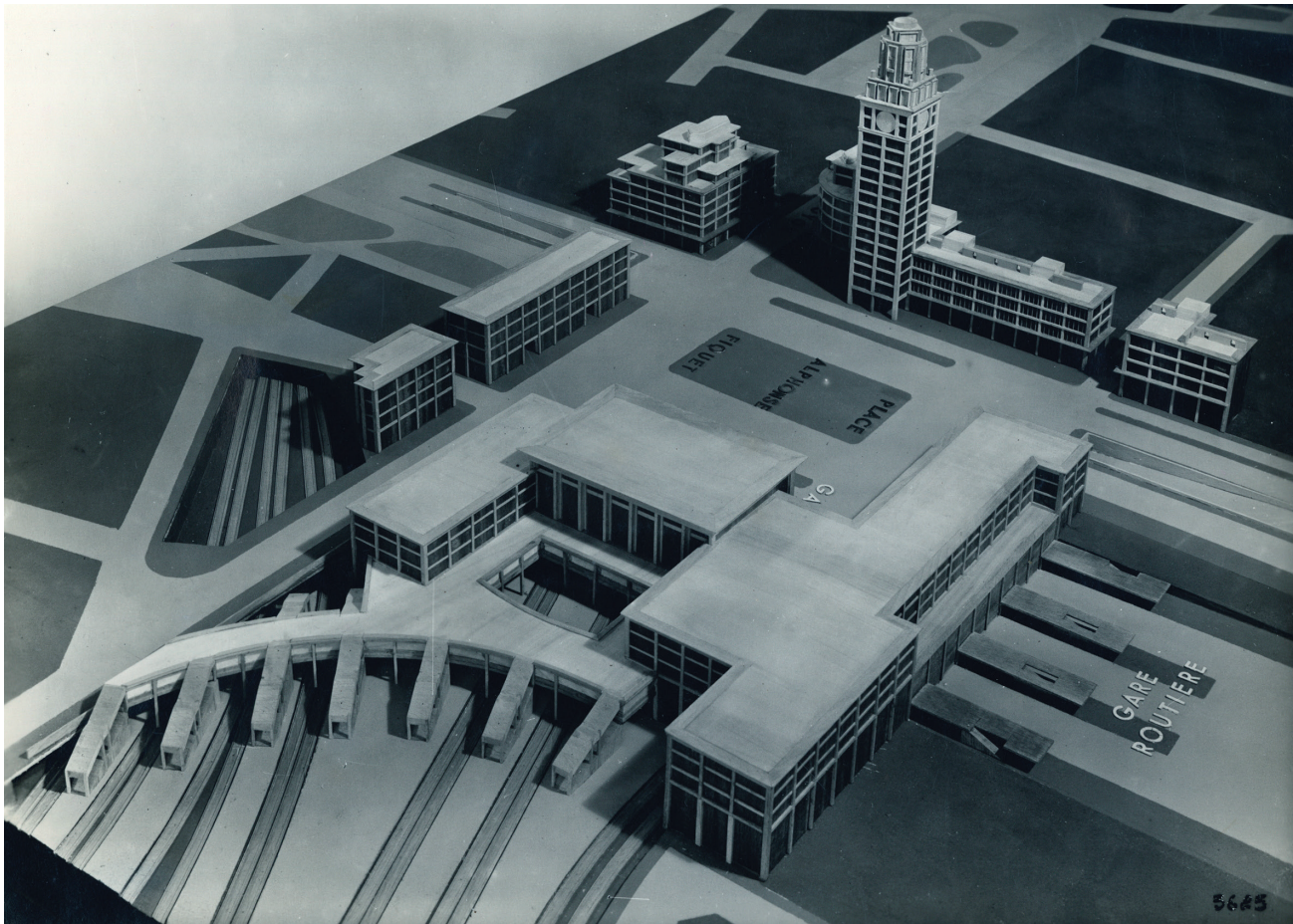
Opinions on the Perret Tower vary according to the paradigms. Leonardo Benevolo thus perceives a regression towards mannerism in Perret’s work in Amiens, the search for monumentality was, in his opinion, far removed from the trend of the time<sup>9</sup>. As for Karla Britton, she sees in the tower block a forerunner of the town hall of Le Havre, inscribed in a genealogy of high rises monopolized by Perret’s religious buildings. Her verdict is harsh: “The tower block ended up being built in a series of stacked solid elements and the summit remained unfinished. This chaotic beginning led to a clumsy, heavy building [...]”<sup>10</sup>

Gilles Ragot proposed a different approach with the demonstration that “architectural considerations, and the fame of an architect, sometimes prevail over the logic of reconstruction and the value for use”<sup>11</sup>, and that the merit of the Perret archives lies more in the texts than in the numerous graphic documents. Finally, Joseph Abram, in 1997<sup>12</sup>, gave the most precise analysis of the history of the Perret Tower by examining its paradoxes and contradictions in the archival documents of the architect kept by the IFA, *Institut français d’architecture* (French Institute of Architecture).

The present contribution<sup>13</sup> proposes to pursue this approach by comparing the different timeframes for the reception of the Perret Tower, notably in the local press, with the fascinating complexity of its chronology, especially from the start of the building work onwards. The use of unpublished archives from the former Departmental office of the Ministry of Reconstruction and Town Planning reveals a complex interplay of actors, where the rationality of function is overlooked for the requirements of efficiency and frugality that were the basis of architectural practice in the post-war years. As the result of contradictory intentions, the Perret Tower was torn between its status as a monument symbolizing the revival of the Picardy city, as a skyscraper pioneering the technical prowess of post-war France, and as a residential building with practical concerns. It was the impossibility of reconciling these objectives that led a disillusioned Eugène Claudius-Petit to declare in 1959: “I do not regret having allowed the

1. Gérard Monnier thus does not mention the Perret Tower in his *Histoire critique de l’architecture en France, 1918-1950* [Paris, Philippe Sers, 1990]. René Jullian, in his *Histoire de l’architecture en France de 1889 à nos jours* [Paris, Philippe Sers, 1984, p. 180-181] dated – unconsciously? – the beginning of the studies at 1947. The tower block is also absent from the *Guide d’architecture contemporaine en France* by Dominique Amoureux [Paris, A.A./Technic-Union] the first edition of which appeared in 1972, only twelve years after the inauguration.
2. The n° 9 issue of 1946 of *l’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* (p. 16-17) presented on two pages the Perret project for Amiens, concentrating specifically on the station.
3. Joseph ABRAM (under the direction of Gérard MONNIER), *L’Architecture moderne en France*, t. 2, *Du chaos à la croissance*, Paris, Picard, 1999, p. 29.
4. Anatole KOPP, Frédérique BOUCHER and Danièle PAULY, *L’Architecture de la reconstruction en France*, Paris, Editions du Moniteur, 1982, p. 111.
5. Simon TEXIER, “Amiens, la naissance du style reconstruction”, *AMC*, n° 240, March 2015, p. 61-68.
6. Joseph ABRAM, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
7. Even in recent publications, see Gilles PLUM, *L’architecture de la reconstruction*. Paris, N. Chaudun, 2011, p. 132-136.
8. See Peter COLLINS, *Splendeur du béton: les prédécesseurs et l’œuvre d’Auguste Perret*, Paris, Hazan 1995, and Karla BRITTON, *Auguste Perret*, Paris, Phaidon, 2007. The same remark applies to the publication by Marcel Zahar – which dates the beginning of the studies for the Perret Tower at 1940! – *D’une doctrine d’architecture, Auguste Perret* [Paris, Vincent & Fréal] published in 1959.
9. Leonardo BENEVOLO, *Histoire de l’architecture moderne*, t. 3, *Les conflits et l’après-guerre*, Paris, Dunod, 1999, p. 217.
10. Karla BRITTON, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
11. Maurice CULOT, David PEYCERÉ and Gilles RAGOT (eds), *Les frères Perret. L’œuvre complète*, Paris, Institut Français d’Architecture/Norma, 2000, p. 293.
12. See: Emmanuel DOUTRIAUX and Frank VERMANDEL (eds), *Le nord de la France, laboratoire de la ville, trois reconstructions: Amiens, Dunkerque, Maubeuge*, Lille, Espace Croisé, 1997, p. 43-46.
13. We would like to thank Jacques Banderier, Director of the Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea of the Somme, Antoine Paoletti, National Architect of French Buildings and head of the UDAP of the Somme, as well as Aurélien André, Archivist of the Diocese of Amiens and Secretary of the Société des Antiquaires de Picardie.





construction of this tower block [...]. But it is illogical from A to Z. It should have been built without a function; that would have been more sensible than to have wanted to turn it into a residential building.”<sup>14</sup>

## An act of pride renewed throughout history

### Arbitrary beginnings

The story of what was once the tallest skyscraper in Western Europe – in a city of 90,000 inhabitants – began in the drama of war. The fire that devastated the Picardy city in May 1940 reached as far as the SNCF railway station and the outskirts. With the aim of making Amiens the gateway to the North of France, the young architect Pierre Dufau<sup>15</sup> who had devised the reconstruction plan, planned to provide the city with a series of orderly squares. In their size and architectural discipline, they were to elevate Amiens to the rank of regional capital. Located on either side of the

▲ Fig. 2. View of the model of the first development project of the Place Alphonse-Fiquet, autumn 1942 (Centre of 20<sup>th</sup> century Architecture archives, Pierre Dufau inventory, 066 lfa 700-5; © SIAF/Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine/20<sup>th</sup> century Architecture archives).

14. Letter from Eugène Claudius-Petit to Pierre Dalloz, dated 27 April 1959, cited in Benoît POUVREAU, *Un politique en architecture: Eugène Claudius-Petit, 1907-1989*, Paris, Editions du Moniteur, 2004, p. 138.

15. Hugo MASSIRE, *Pierre Dufau architecte (1908-1985), un libéral discipliné: parcours, postures, produits*, doctoral thesis in art history, under the direction of Jean-Baptiste Minnaert, University of Tours François-Rabelais, 2017.



first ring of boulevards, the whole of Alphonse-Fiquet Square was entrusted to Auguste Perret in June 1942. This ambitious project included housing, shops, bus and train station and was the first Reconstruction commission – well before Le Havre – given to the leading innovator of the school of structural classicism.<sup>16</sup>

The global development plan for the station square was presented by Auguste Perret to the architectural section of the CNR, *Conseil national de la reconstruction* (National Council for Reconstruction) on 29 September 1942. Covering a perimeter slightly larger than the one finally implemented, it already had a 20-storey tower block on its western flank that looked like a bell tower (fig. 2). This building did not replace a similar war damaged building and seemed to have been designed at the architect's sole initiative, although Auguste Perret had been spurred on by the desire for an emblematic building expressed by the CTRI, *Commissariat technique à la reconstruction immobilière* (Technical Commission for Building Reconstruction), directed by André Muffang.

As Joseph Abram<sup>17</sup> and Gilles Ragot<sup>18</sup> pointed out, the very principle of the tower block, as well as its programme, were not discussed with the CNR; only the architect Pierre Paquet observed that it should not compete with the cathedral. Auguste Perret replied to Mayor Pierre Rollin, who was worried about the cost, that he “believed that he could confirm that this tower block would, because of its location and interior layout, be exclusively reserved for business and that, consequently, its construction would be profitable.”<sup>19</sup> The exchanges focused – as would be ascertained during the following meetings – on the railway station, the SNCF voicing its opposition to the layout retained by the architect, thus gradually reducing the initial strength of the project. Auguste Perret benefited nevertheless from the unanimous support of the other members of the CNR, with Pierre Dufau giving support for the project whenever his opinion was sought.

The Liberation and the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Planning (MRU) replacing the CTRI had little impact on the Amiens reconstruction plan, which had been declared of public utility on 23 June 1943. Auguste Perret, commissioned by the minister Raoul Dautry with the development of Le Havre, was also confirmed in his responsibilities in Amiens. The studies for the tower block appear to have resumed only at the beginning of 1948, when the reconstruction of the city centre was already well under way, and construction of the DE block which covered the western flank of the Place Alphonse-Fiquet, was announced. The three-storey buildings to be built according to Auguste Perret's master plan, were to surround the tower block; as the foundations for the latter could not be built subsequently, a plenary meeting held at the MRU's Somme regional office on 14 April 1948, concluded that the initial project should be pursued and even supported it enthusiastically.

### The unattainable quest for rational use

The construction of the tower block was entrusted to the ASR, *Association syndicale de reconstruction* (Reconstruction Union Association), as part of the pre-funded buildings scheme following the decree of 8 September 1945: apartments were to be installed there and then sold to disaster victims in exchange for their war damage claims. This residential vocation broke with the initial vocation of commercial or tertiary units, as well as with the ideas of the architect who himself declared in 1945:

“As a young man, I advocated for tower blocks. I have since changed my mind. When you live on the 12<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> floor, you feel exalted at first, then overwhelmed by loneliness. You'll get bored to death. Man needs to keep his feet on the ground. That's why I won't build housing blocks with more than four stories. This is the right scale. Tower blocks are suitable for offices.”<sup>20</sup>

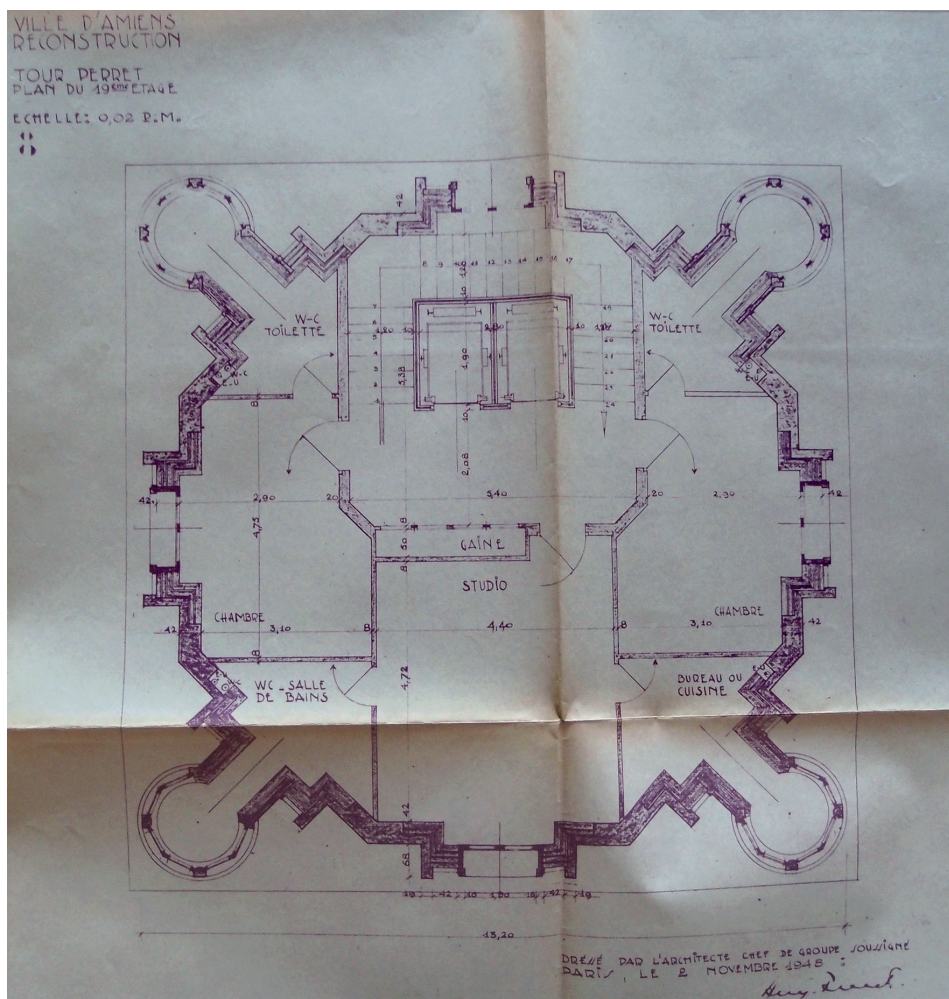
16. Hugo MASSIRE, *Pierre Dufau architecte (1908-1985), un libéral discipliné: parcours, postures, produits*, doctoral thesis in art history, under the direction of Jean-Baptiste Minnaert, University of Tours François-Rabelais, 2017.

17. Jean-Louis COHEN, Joseph ABRAM and Guy LAMBERT, *Encyclopédie Perret*, Paris, Monum/Editions du Patrimoine/Editions du Moniteur, 2002, p. 237-239.

18. Maurice CULOT, David PEYCERÉ and Gilles RAGOT, *op. cit.*, p. 287-295.

19. Typescript “Minutes of the meetings of the Architecture department of the CNR”, 29 September 1942 (Amiens Municipal Archives; 3D2 6).

20. Interview with Auguste Perret in *Les nouvelles littéraires* of 19 July 1945, quoted in Christophe LAURENT, Guy LAMBERT and Joseph ABRAM, *Auguste Perret, anthologie des écrits, conférences et entretiens*, Paris, Editions du Moniteur, 2002, p. 426.



The Perret Tower of Amiens

◀ Fig. 3. Plan of the 19<sup>th</sup> floor of the Perret Tower, 2 November 1948. Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea of the Somme, file on the unlisted Perret Tower (© Archives of the Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea of the Somme).

However, this assertion was only valid for solid high-rise buildings which guaranteed the rental return, otherwise they were compromised by the passing on of the costs due to the refurbishing required for high-rise buildings. Would the slim Amiens tower block have been able to attract, as Pierre Dufau<sup>21</sup> also maintained, businessmen needing to organize meetings just in front of the station? Three years later, a principle of reality prevailed: economic activity was picking up at a very slow pace and housing appeared to be the only credible solution. In March 1948, Auguste Perret wrote about his forthcoming work with the conciseness verging on casualness that characterized the last years of his life:<sup>22</sup>

“A lot of nonsense has been written about that housing block. I designed 24 floors in Amiens because these northern areas have bell towers. Instead of my tower only serving to support a clock and bells, it will be inhabited, that’s all. Twenty floors of housing, 4 of utilities, 104 metres high. It’s a belfry, and that’s all.”<sup>23</sup>

Initiated in arbitrary fashion, the project was thrown into a futile race towards an economic equilibrium and the satisfaction of the means and needs of the people of Amiens. The small volumes immediately posed problems for interior layouts: as early as the summer of 1948, Yves Cazaux, Departmental delegate for Reconstruction, thus

21. Alain TROGNEUX, *Amiens, années 50: de la Libération à la V<sup>e</sup> République*, Amiens, Encrage, 1997, p. 82.

22. Christophe LAURENT, Guy LAMBERT and Joseph ABRAM, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

23. Interview with Auguste Perret in *Carrefour* of 9 March 1948, quoted in Christophe LAURENT, Guy LAMBERT and Joseph ABRAM, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

considered the arrangements envisaged for the apartments as “rather questionable”<sup>24</sup>: no bathroom was planned in the apartments occupying half a level and the protrusions on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor would be difficult to put to rational use (fig. 3). Yves Cazaux politely asked Auguste Perret to change his plans, while assuring him that he had “greatly admired [...] the admirable architectural layout of the tower block.”<sup>25</sup>

If the price of the apartments worried Yves Cazaux, since only eight victims of war damage had applied, the Departmental delegate also worried about the upper floors which were not intended for housing: how to finance these premises which, he wrote, “we do not, for the moment, have the slightest idea if they are to be offices, restaurants, a hotel, or what?”<sup>26</sup> The senior civil servant also called on his department to be particularly vigilant with regard to foreseeable difficulties.<sup>27</sup>

However certain these were, and although the point of no return regarding the start of the building work had not yet been reached, all the participants seemed to be hiding behind the anticipated repercussions in terms of image, or behind the precedence of a decision that could no longer be debated. To the chief architect of Historical Monuments, André Sallé, who requested that the project be communicated in March 1949 – the Perret Tower being situated on the edge of the 500-metre radius of the cathedral – Yves Cazaux pointed out that the decision had been taken in September 1942 by the CNR and validated by professional and moral authorities such as René Perchet and Pierre Paquet. Auguste Perret’s personality and prestige undoubtedly had a strong influence on the pursuit of a project which, if it had been designed by a lower-profile architect, would already have been abandoned. The freedom of tone adopted by the maestro in his dealings with the MRU Departmental delegation is astonishing, when, regarding the opinion of the Departmental security commission which was extremely confident about his project, he noted: “[...] as regards the fire escape, I have never understood the need for it, but I agreed to its planning, I hope it will not be built.”<sup>28</sup>

The main structural work was, moreover, attributed on 20 May 1949 to the group formed by the Perret Brothers’ company, associated with the Bouvet company located in Arras. In these times of galloping inflation, its cost of 93 million francs already exceeded the architect’s estimate of 90 million francs for the entire project a year earlier, in October 1947. The infrastructure work which began on 1 June was complicated by the nature of the foundations. Yves Cazaux’s activism had made it possible to finance a building, the actual purpose of which was unknown at a time when several thousand families in Amiens were living in precarious conditions. The support of Minister René Coty, then of Eugène Claudius-Petit – who exempted the Perret Tower from needing planning permission on 24 June 1950, in application of the decree of 25 July 1949 on the building of structures of an experimental nature – as well as the favourable reception of politicians and the media in Amiens further allowed the scale of the difficulties to be concealed. The report drawn up in May 1950 by Yves Cazaux<sup>29</sup> was nevertheless explicit about the extent of the problem of financing the building. The overall construction cost was only 45% guaranteed, the delegate concluding that “the construction of the Perret Tower cannot be monitored and completed without significant incidents.”<sup>30</sup>

This alarming observation prompted a swift reaction from the MRU, which decided to completely supersede the ASR and the war damage victims in financing of the tower block. The crown layer, which Perret thought would be used by a public administration department, was also redefined during 1950. Although the overall height varied only slightly, the number of floors increased to 30, with the tower block acquiring its final silhouette where the last 10 levels twist in an upward movement. Francesco Dal Co and Manfredo Tafuri saw here a link to German Expressionism

24. “Internal memo n° 72” of the Departmental delegate for Reconstruction Yves Cazaux, 7 August 1948 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

25. Letter from Yves Cazaux to Auguste Perret, dated 10 August 1948 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

26. *Ibidem*.

27. “The construction of the Perret Tower is an important and very delicate matter that should be supervised with great caution [...] the controversies that are likely to arise must not be fuelled by the weaknesses, prevarication or impotence of our administration” (“Internal memo n° 72”, quote note 24).

28. Letter from Auguste Perret to Yves Cazaux, dated 6 September 1949 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

29. Report from Yves Cazaux to the Minister of Reconstruction and Urban planning on the financing of the Perret Tower, 4 May 1950 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

30. *Ibidem*.





Cette photographie prend maintenant un caractère de symbole. La Tour Perret semble solidement accrochée à un puissant engin de levage. Mais le fil, auquel elle est suspendue, paraît bien ténu. Résistera-t-il ?  
That is the question.

◀ Fig. 4.  
"40 HLM apartments in the Perret Tower",  
*Le Courrier Picard*,  
30 January 1958 (© Archives of the Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea of the Somme).



with the principle of “independent and superimposed geometric solids”.<sup>31</sup> No doubt encouraged by the Director of Architecture Pierre Dalloz – a friend and former student of Perret – this development was not conducive to a rationalisation of use. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> floors were thus uninhabitable because of their insufficient ceiling height and the presence of soffits. Beyond the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor, only a spiral staircase served the premises that they had hoped would be allocated to television facilities. Further down, each floor offered only 150 square metres of living space, the current floor plan taken up by the vertical circulation – two lifts and two staircases – required by the height of the building.

As no occupants had been found in the spring of 1951, the structural work was completed on the lower levels without further finishing work. It was agreed in the summer that the MRU would not make any commitment regarding the latter, in order to allow the transfer price of the entire Perret Tower to be established as quickly as possible. The construction site was quietly shut down in the spring of 1952 (fig. 4). With his health deteriorating, on 8 October 1953, Auguste Perret authorised his assistant Georges Brochard to sign any document relating to the tower that bore his name. He passed away on 25 February 1954: the tribute paid by former minister Eugène Claudius-Petit, during a fierce parliamentary debate in January 1955, showed the strength of the tower’s reputation for the almost supernatural aura of its author, which justified the defiance of the economic uncertainties of his time:

“It would be indecent for the French Parliament to judge [Auguste Perret’s] last work in a grossly utilitarian manner. Personally, I did not take the liberty of judging it, and although I was tempted to have certain reservations, I believed I had the right and the duty to authorize him to carry out his project [...]. I will be told that he would have been better building something else. I am delighted that Perret was able, before his death, to carry out this project. [...] Let us allow those who carry the flame of art to realize their works. If we don’t always understand them, let us have the humility to think that maybe it’s our fault.”<sup>32</sup>

## “Has the Perret Tower been abandoned?” – the ups and downs of the highest concrete carcass in Europe

### The fiasco of a tower block without a purpose

The plans and then the building of the Perret Tower were well received. The repute of its architect and the technical characteristics which were considered spectacular at the time allowed the building to benefit from an excellent reception, at least until the completion of its framework. Thus, in an article dated 23 May 1950 entitled “Master Auguste Perret, architect of the tower block, presided yesterday over the birth of the tallest skyscraper in Europe”, *Le Courrier Picard* underlined: “When it is finished, light, elegant, fine, placed as a sentinel at the forefront of French construction, attracting foreign visitors, this tower by Master Perret will be the pride of the people of Amiens and Picardy, who would have been disconcerted if it had been built elsewhere.” In 1951, the construction of the tower block resonated nationwide; the press – following the example of *L’Yonne Républicaine*<sup>33</sup>, *L’Est Eclair*<sup>34</sup> or *Le Rouergue Républicain*<sup>35</sup> – listed its architectural and technical characteristics and noted that the building marked the advent of a new typology in France, the skyscraper. Amiens, the Picardy capital, would soon hold the record for this type of building in Western Europe.

In March 1952, after the thirtieth and last floor had been cast, the French flag was raised at the top<sup>36</sup>. More than the symbol of the rebirth of a regional capital ravaged by hostilities, the skyscraper was of national importance and had to be at the forefront of French and European construction. On 31 July 1952, in “Amiens, the symbolism of the Perret Tower”, *Le Courrier Picard* described the building as an “extraordinary achievement”, and stressed: “And yet what concerns have been provoked by this tower block, which today we can say has been admired everywhere – except at home – and has won us the envy of larger cities, eager to own a flagship of this kind.”

31. Francesco DAL CO and Manfredo TAFURI, *Architecture contemporaine*, Paris, Gallimard/Electa, 1991, p. 298.

32. “Lively debate in the Assembly on the Perret Tower”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 27 January 1955.

33. “New Architecture”, *L’Yonne Républicaine*, 30 March 1951.

34. “A skyscraper in France”, *L’Est Eclair*, 19 November 1951.

35. “Europe’s tallest skyscraper to be built in Amiens”, *Rouergue Républicain*, 17 June 1951.

36. “The flag was raised yesterday morning at the top of the Perret Tower”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 26 March 1952.



◀ Fig. 5.  
The concrete carcass  
of the Perret Tower from  
the station, postcard, 1950s  
(© DR).

However, designed without a precise programme, supported by exceptional state funding and located in a city accustomed to individual housing, the Perret Tower became a desperately empty concrete carcass once the shell was completed in 1952 (fig. 5). This fiasco led to a gradual change in its reception, with the press – especially the local press – reporting over eight years on the setbacks of its lack of function.

In 1951, when the MRU took over the project, the Amiens Chamber of Commerce entered into negotiations to buy the building for 70 million francs<sup>37</sup>. However, after careful consideration, it gave up in March 1953, considering that the operation was not profitable because of the running costs. At the same time, the SNCF and SIMCA – which was planning to set up a factory in Amiens – were approached, without success. In July 1953, in its annual report, the Court of Auditors criticized the Amiens skyscraper. The financial court questioned the lack of function of the building in view of its cost – estimated at 225 million francs – and noted, with regard to the experimental credits granted: “In fact, it would not appear that the processes employed for the construction of the Tower presented, in any way, a new approach compared to the building techniques currently used. It is undisputed, however, that the construction of a building which is to be the tallest dwelling in Europe poses various specific problems.”<sup>38</sup> On 4 August 1953, a decree enabled the creation of an inter-ministerial consultative commission presided over by a State Councillor, René Martin. Charged with examining the proposals for allocation, it examined the one submitted on 4 June 1953 by a group of war disaster victims led by André Van Wynendaele. On 19 January 1955, it considered this project to be “speculative”. At the same time, on 6 January 1955, the commission received a request from the Departmental council to acquire the building in order to install the Departmental

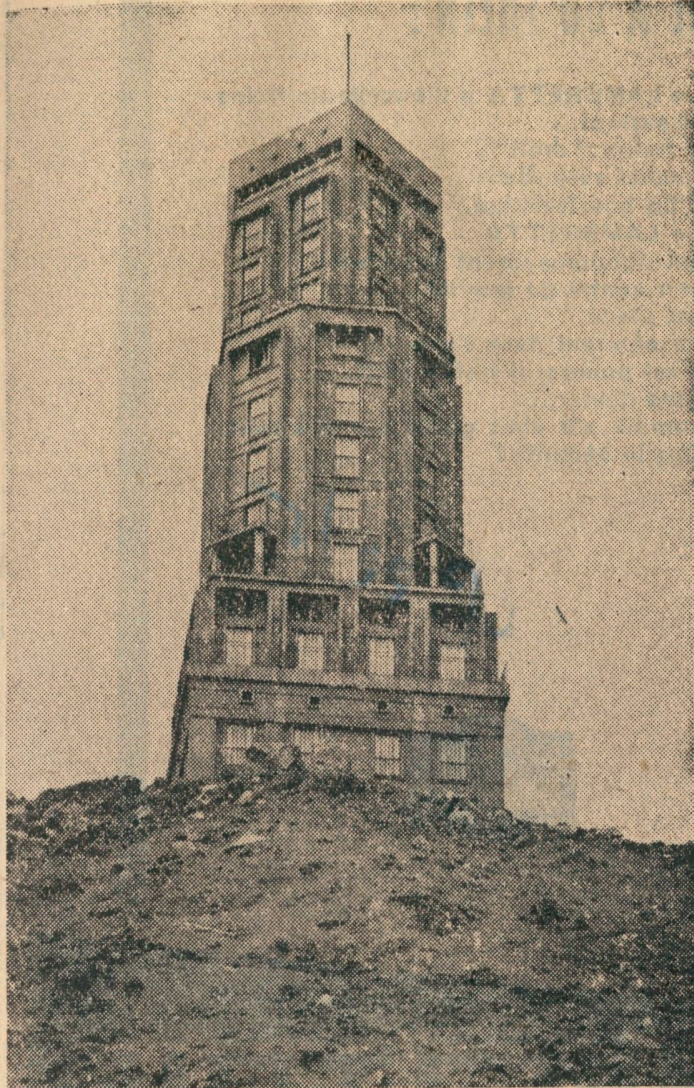
37. The various aborted projects for the Perret Tower were summarized in two typescript notes kept by the DDTM of the Somme (file on the Perret Tower; [unlisted]): note from the Chief Engineer, Director of Departmental Works to the Director of Construction, 18 December 1958; “Note on the Perret Tower” from the Division of Economic Studies and Markets to the attention of the Minister, non-dated.

38. “The Perret Tower, the administrative, financial and technical aspects of its construction, severely criticised in the Court of Auditors’ annual report”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 22 July 1953.



Extrait du " Courrier Picard "  
du 22 MAI 1957

## La Tour Perret est-elle enterrée ?



**C**ETTE photo prise sous un angle original, à partir du chantier de la Gare du Nord à Amiens, pourrait faire croire que la Tour Perret est sur le point d'être engloutie par une gigantesque convulsion de l'écorce terrestre.

Il n'en est rien encore, fort heureusement pour tout le monde.

C'est plutôt dans un maquis que la Tour Perret a sombré. Un maquis singulièrement touffu et obscur, bien que ses ramures soient invisibles place Alphonse-Fiquet.

Un grave litige oppose, on le sait, depuis des mois, sinon des années, l'Etat à une Société Immobilière qui semblait avoir acquis quelque droit à la propriété du « gratte-ciel ».

C'est donc dans le maquis de la procédure qu'erre présentement la Tour, laquelle n'appartient plus ni à l'Etat, ni à un propriétaire, mais seulement au domaine... juridique.

Des années passeront sans doute avant que de hautes instances statuent définitivement sur le droit à la propriété du bâtiment.

Notre photo est donc d'actualité. La Tour Perret paraît bien être enterrée, et pour longtemps.

Mais qui a été le fossoyeur ?

► Fig. 6.  
"Is Perret Tower dead?",  
Le Courrier Picard, 22  
May 1957. Archives of the  
Delegation of the Ministry  
of Reconstruction and Town  
Planning for the Somme,  
collection of press clippings,  
1078W 11 (© Departmental  
Archives of the Somme).



Archives in the tower block. However, despite a favourable opinion from the commission, the council did not follow through with its proposal.

The local press commented on this lack of function. In its edition of 23 February 1954, in an article titled “The Perret tower... skyscraper”, *Le Courrier Picard* underlined: “The Perret Tower in Amiens is a taboo subject which it is advisable to talk about as little as possible. One day we will have to be told to whom and in what way it will be sold...” In January 1955, the regional daily devoted an article to the fierce debate on the Perret Tower which took place at the National Assembly, during discussions on the Reconstruction budget<sup>39</sup>. Pierre Garet, deputy councillor for the Somme county, questioned the Minister: “It is regrettable that in a town where a housing crisis is raging and where the war disaster victims are still waiting for their houses to be rebuilt, a 30-storey building remains useless.”<sup>40</sup> At that time, the housing situation in Amiens was tragic. In March 1955, *Le Courrier Picard* devoted a column to it called “7,000 Amiennois without a roof”. An article in this series – “From ‘skyscraper’ to slum, the Amiens housing crisis”, published on 25 March of the same year – compared the living conditions of the victims with the futility of the Perret Tower.

Also in 1955, in a long article titled “The Perret Tower was offered for fifty million to the Department council of the Somme which did not want it!”<sup>41</sup>, the regional daily paper revelled in the thwarted installation of the Departmental Archives, arguing that the project was not feasible from the outset. The Department had in fact already committed large sums of money to install the Archives in a building on rue Gauthier-de-Rumilly. The article even reported the bitter words of the departmental councillor and former Mayor of Amiens Maurice Vast: “Hang on, it is possible that the State will soon offer the Tower to the Department for one symbolic franc...”<sup>42</sup> In June 1955, the regional paper recalled that the Department’s offer “strongly resembled an act of desperation”<sup>43</sup> and solutions for the future of the building were being sought. Listing the design problems – limited capacity per floor, vertical circulation and poor fluid distribution – the Picardy paper proposed to “cut” the tower block in half. In this design, the bottom would be reserved for housing, while the top would remain empty, with a purely decorative function: “In other words, and to use an image, let’s split the Tower and keep only what is usable, and let’s discard the surplus.”<sup>44</sup> The article concluded: “This would, moreover, demonstrate that this prestigious high rise experiment – so criticised on a practical level – would finally serve a purpose...”<sup>45</sup> Should the use of the Perret Tower mean the denial of its primary characteristic, namely its great height? Although the structural work had been completed three years previously, the skyscraper, which was supposed to symbolize, like a belfry of modernity, the rebirth of a martyred city, remained perfectly useless. Gradually, it became the object of shame and taunting.

On 8 June 1955, the inter-ministerial commission was informed of a proposal by Michel Hochart who, through the specially created SCI property developers – “Société civile immobilière de la tour Perret”, wanted to buy the skyscraper in order to install housing, as well as a hotel on the first 7 floors. The sum of 53 million francs – payable over two years in war damages – was put forward. In January 1956, Michel Hochart’s proposal became obsolete. On the one hand, it had aroused strong protest from Amiens hoteliers who feared too much competition, but above all, for the State, the SCI had not given sufficient guarantees. The nightmare of the Perret Tower then became a legal battle. Michel Hochart summoned the Ministry and the Department of Estates to the civil court, which passed a judgement of incompetency on 3 October 1956, which was confirmed on appeal on 3 December 1958. While the “affair” of the property developers Société civile immobilière de la tour Perret continued in court, the commission had to examine the offer of Jacques Hebertot, director of the eponymous Parisian theatre, in August 1956. The latter wanted to transform the Perret Tower into an international drama centre, each floor to be assigned to a country. His project was described as “random”.<sup>46</sup> In August 1957, a proposal was made by a

39. “Fierce debate in the Assembly about the Perret Tower”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 27 January 1955.

40. *Ibidem*.

41. *Le Courrier Picard*, 29 April 1955.

42. *Ibidem*.

43. H. R., “Should the Perret Tower be cut in half (symbolically) to make it habitable?”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 2 June 1955.

44. *Ibidem*.

45. *Ibid.*

46. “Memo on the Perret Tower” by the Economic and Market Studies department, quoted note 37.

“builder” named Galliano who, as a note to the Minister pointed out, gave no guarantees and seemed to be an “illuminated advertising firm”.<sup>47</sup>

The failure of the transaction with Michel Hochart was synonymous with the stalemate of the Perret Tower. On 22 May 1957, *Le Courrier Picard* ran the headline “Has the Perret Tower been buried?” (fig. 6). The short article recounted the conflict that had been going on for months between the State and the property developers and concluded: “The Perret tower seems to be well buried, and for a long time. But who dug the grave?” Rather than the function of the edifice, its cost gradually became the heart of the controversy. In January 1956, René Dary published two long articles in *Libération* devoted to the ups and downs of the Amiens skyscraper<sup>48</sup>. Commenting on its cost, in the belief that the building was “a test rig intended on the one hand to measure the advantages of vertical over horizontal construction and on the other hand the superiority of concrete<sup>49</sup>”, the author underlined the role played by the former Minister in the project: “The Minister of Reconstruction and Urban Planning, Mr Claudius-Petit, who was responsible for this stunning achievement and who, since then, his constituents have sent to what we hope will be a definitive retirement, has had to face questions. His defence was weak: ‘I, a simple minister,’ he admitted, ‘could refuse nothing to a personality like Mr Perret.’”<sup>50</sup>

In this calamitous reception, a few articles stood out. First of all, because of the local desire to promote the rebirth of Amiens from a touristic point of view and to include the Perret Tower. On Monday 3 June 1957, the concrete carcass was lit up by the EDF electricity board, while a concert, described as “the highest in Europe” was given from the top floors. Organized by the tourist office “Friends of Amiens”, this event was an attempt to erase the problems of the skyscraper by placing its technical characteristics and its visual quality<sup>51</sup> in the foreground. But it was above all the national press which, at times far from the reality of the local housing situation, defended the skyscraper<sup>52</sup>, despite its lack of use. In “Thirty symbolic floors” published in *Le Figaro* on 1 February 1955, Georges Ravon noted that “The Auguste Perret Tower, shunned by the Picards just as the Cité radieuse was by the Provençals, will first of all symbolize the invincible mistrust of our compatriots in customized proposals. But, by raising its thirty floors of dusty documents above the slums, it will above all be the overwhelming symbol of a civilization where daring techniques are enslaved by paperwork”. In *Le Figaro littéraire*, Pierre Mazars also noted a few months later, “admired and imitated abroad, in France the skyscraper of the great architect is a victim of administrative U-turns”.<sup>53</sup> In *Le Monde*, André Chastel did not hesitate to associate the Amiens skyscraper with the Eiffel Tower: “Perhaps we were thinking too big when we wanted to endow a small provincial city with a building that was not to its scale; but we could have hoped not to find such retrograde reactions from all quarters, like those of so many citizens of 1889 in front of the Eiffel Tower.”<sup>54</sup>

In short, who was responsible for the Amiens fiasco? Was it the administration that financed an extraordinary building with exceptional funds, without taking into account the reality on the ground of a city ruined by war? Auguste Perret – too often cleared of liability – the inviolable master of French architecture, who indulged in an architectural and technical gesture, without seriously considering its function? The Amiens war victims who, in line with local preference for individual housing, abandoned the tower block in its construction phase for traditional buildings delivered at the same time?<sup>55</sup> And, more broadly, the recalcitrant “provincials”, accused, according

47. *Ibidem*.

48. René DARY, “The avatars of the ‘Perret candle’, the skyscraper of Amiens ‘waste of credits camouflaged as an experiment’ was sold for 45 million when it had cost 465 million”, *Libération*, 19 January 1956; “The avatars of the ‘Perret candle’, before giving up, will the Faure government dare scrap the gigantic building in order to transform it into a ‘tourist landing stage?’”, *Libération*, 20 January 1956.

49. *Ibidem*.

50. *Ibid*.

51. “The Perret Tower to be illuminated on the occasion of the ‘the highest concert in Europe’ presented on Monday by the ‘ESSI’ in Amiens”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 31 May 1957.

52. An admirer of Auguste Perret, Bernard Champigneulle, was more circumspect, however, than other confreres by questioning the rationality of the project before the scandal broke out, in *Le Figaro littéraire* of 16 June 1951: “A building is not a poem, nor a painting; it must respond to a precise material or spiritual destination. [...] However, it is not entirely clear what this desire to pile up offices and dwellings when there is so much land available might respond to.”

53. Pierre MAZARS, “The ‘Perret Tower’ in Amiens is not a mistake”, *Le Figaro littéraire*, 15 October 1955.

54. André CHASTEL, “Amiens is enriched and hindered by Gallo-Roman thermal baths and a modern tower block”, *Le Monde*, 28 April 1955.

55. “In any case, the local population, which was very attached to the design of individual housing in single-storey houses, found it difficult



to caricatural Parisianism, of not appreciating such an architectural masterpiece? In any case, the fate of the Perret Tower gradually jeopardized high-rise buildings in France.

### “Alleviating the situation”: the Spoerry project

In 1957, two projects considered valid were submitted to the inter-ministerial commission. The first one was submitted by the Amiens HLM Public Office for Low-Rent Housing on 25 October with plans for the completion of the building entrusted to the architect Jacques K. Sagharian.<sup>56</sup> As the State had become the reversionary owner, it was in charge of some of the finishing works (fluids, circulation and double glazing), while the Public Office had to fit out 40 dwellings, but only up to the 24<sup>th</sup> floor, leaving the upper levels without any defined use<sup>57</sup>. This project required an exemption from the conditions for allocation of low-rent housing because of the operating costs, but had the advantage, thanks to the long-term lease, of “not revealing to public opinion the imbalance between the conditions of transfer and the actual cost of the work”.<sup>58</sup> On 4 December 1957, an offer was made by François Spoerry (1912–1999), through his property finance company Financement Immobilier Spoerry (FIS) based in Mulhouse. Offering to buy the concrete carcass for 55 million francs – payable in war damages – the architect envisaged a mixed project (offices and housing) that would be “profitable”.<sup>59</sup> On 21 February 1958, the inter-ministerial commission examined the two projects<sup>60</sup>, as well as a proposal to transfer the building to the City of Amiens. François Spoerry came to the defence of his proposal to develop the entire tower block, two-thirds of which was to be used for offices and one-third for housing, knowing that the fact that the State was to bear the costs for certain works (fluids and vertical circulation) which would lead to a reduction of 10 million francs in the purchase price. After discussions, the members of the commission voted equally for both projects. Considering that the Mulhouse proposal was more advantageous financially for the State, the chairman of the commission decided in its favour, barring the case of reservations from the Minister. In February 1959, the Perret Tower was sold to François Spoerry.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time as the negotiations with the Mulhouse company, the Minister asked his office for information on the financial possibility of the State completing the tower block in order to sell it in co-ownership to war damage compensation claimants. However, as the deputy director of reconstruction groups indicated to the chief war damage officer: “The Finance Administration is formally opposed to considering new methods of transferring the Tower. In the first place, it refuses to put a penny more into a matter that it considers deplorable in every respect. Furthermore, it has no confidence in the Departmental director or in the Municipality of Amiens.”<sup>62</sup>

On 16 April 1959, *Le Courrier Picard* ran the headline “The Perret Tower has been sold!” A month later, the Picard newspaper related the “presentation” that François Spoerry had just given in Amiens in the Godbert salons<sup>63</sup>. The architect first justified the interest of a Mulhouse company in a building in Amiens: “We came,” he basically said, “to try to remove the obstacle that the Perret Tower places on all the tower block construction projects in

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to accept to live in such a construction, so the Ministry of Reconstruction and Town Planning was obliged to renounce the use of the building for residential purposes”. In “The Perret Tower, the administrative, financial and technical aspects of its construction severely criticised in the Court of Auditors’ annual report”, quoted note 38.

56. Typescript: “Perret Tower, apartment design”, study for the Low-Rent Housing Office HLM by the architect Jacques K. Sagharian, August 1957 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

57. Perret Tower description, letter from the head engineer, Director of departmental services to the director of the Public Low-Rent Housing Office HLM of Amiens, 6 November 1957 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

58. Typescript: “Memo on the Perret Tower” from the Economic and Market Studies department, quoted note 37.

59. Letter from François Spoerry to the director of departmental services, Under-secretary of State to Reconstruction and Housing, 4 December 1957 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

60. Minutes of the meeting of the inter-ministerial commission in charge of examining the conditions of transfer of the experimental building known as the Perret Tower in Amiens, 21 February 1958. (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

61. Sale of the Perret Tower to François-Henry Spoerry, 3 February 1959 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

62. Letter of 19 February 1959 (Archives of the Somme Departmental Directorate of Territories and the Sea; unlisted file on the Perret Tower).

63. H. R., “The Perret Tower, whose fate remained undecided for seven years, is to be made habitable in fifteen years”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 17 April 1959.

France.”<sup>64</sup> Described by François Spoerry as a “deplorable example of lack of function”, the Amiens concrete carcass was in fact hindering the project to build the Tour de l’Europe – a 25-storey building that Spoerry himself was building in Mulhouse: “So, this prohibition, which Spoerry said was a pretext based on the example of Amiens, was becoming an obstacle to the construction of high-rise buildings everywhere. That’s why we came to Amiens.”<sup>65</sup> Admitting that he could not “work a miracle with the Perret Tower”, the architect stressed: “The mistake of public opinion, which has been very critical of the Perret Tower, was not to recognise that the cost price of a prototype – whether it is an airplane, a car or a special building – is much higher than its selling price.”<sup>66</sup>

François Spoerry created a subsidiary of his company in Amiens, which he entrusted to Philippe Lenglet. It was responsible for the refurbishing and management of the skyscraper which, according to the terms of the 15 million franc sale, was to be completed within 15 months. The project manager estimated the work would cost 140 million francs – available through war damage compensation: completion of the shell, fitting out the secondary work, including new vertical circulation systems – with “high-speed and electronically controlled lifts” – fire-fighting equipment, etc. The project included the development of offices in the lower part of the building – from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> floor – and four-room apartments per level for the rest of the square section. The subsequent octagonal section was intended to accommodate 1- and 2-room apartments, while the top of the skyscraper was to be used for tourism, including a project for a scientific showcase museum.

During the summer of 1959, the future of the Perret Tower, now in the hands of François Spoerry, became clearer. The development plans were entrusted to the architect Pierre Herdhebut (1902-?). On 2 July, *Le Courrier Picard* devoted an article to the future destination of the skyscraper. Entitled “19 apartments, 15 offices, a restaurant and a museum in the Perret Tower”, the article confirmed the mixed use and emphasised the tourism aspect, with a project for a restaurant on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor at the top of the square section, a museum “a sort of replica of the famous ‘Atomium’ of the Brussels Exhibition” on the upper floors and an observation platform at the top. The article concluded: “In about a year’s time, the Tower will receive its first residents, its first visitors. And its 108 windows will light up the evenings of Amiens from above, finally justifying the famous name, the ‘lighthouse of Picardy’, once conferred by a Minister of Reconstruction, to Auguste Perret’s daring high-rise.” Eight years after the completion of the structural work, the Amiens tower block finally had a purpose. One year later, the work was completed. In an article entitled “The whole of Amiens inaugurated the Perret Tower ready to receive its occupants”, *Le Courrier Picard* noted on 25 July 1960: “The acquisition of the Perret Tower by the development company ‘Financement Immobilier Spoerry’ had put an end to the sly smiles and silenced recriminations and criticisms; there was no more talk of ‘grandiose uselessness’ because – it was obvious – the work of completion was well underway and with the greatest desire to achieve a convincing result.” The national press commented only briefly on the inauguration, as per *Le Monde*, which soberly enumerated both the technical characteristics and the setbacks of the “experimental building”.<sup>67</sup>

During the 1960s, the Perret Tower became part of the Amiens urban landscape. It even appeared on a few postcards, like a modern belfry alongside the Circus and Notre-Dame Cathedral (fig. 7). But the tourism venture – less ambitious than the initial projects – ceased at the beginning of the 1970s,<sup>68</sup> mainly due to the difficulties of exploiting a summit that was too thin. And if the building was recognised very early on at national level and listed, with façades and roof, as a Historical Monument on 29 October 1975,<sup>69</sup> it finally corresponded at local level to simply an ordinary and little-commented-upon monument. Its technical characteristics and its record as the tallest tower block in Western Europe should have given this “experimental building” much better recognition, both locally and nationally. But when it was completed, more time was given over to the chronicles of the fiasco of its impossible functionality. Then the skyscraper became a striking but paradoxically anonymous feature of the Amiens urban landscape (fig. 8). The fate of the Perret Tower of Amiens was, in short, thwarted.

64. *Ibidem*.

65. *Ibid*.

66. *Ibid*.

67. “The Perret Tower in Amiens will be ‘inaugurated’ on Saturday nine years after being built”, *Le Monde*, 23 July 1960.

68. “The Perret Tower will be closed to the public”, *Le Courrier Picard*, 6 August 1974.

69. The architectural ensemble of the Place Alphonse-Fiquet – station and residential buildings – was listed on 4 March 2003.





◀ Fig. 7.  
The cathedral, the Perret Tower, the water front market, the René-Goblet square and the train station, postcard, late 1950s (© DR).

▼ Fig. 8.  
The Perret Tower in 1997 from the station (photographers: Thierry Lefébure and Irwin Leullier © Hauts-de-France Region – General Inventory © Ministry of Culture – General Inventory © AGIR-Pic).









## Conclusion

In the 1980s, the facades of the tower block had become dirty and needed to be restored. Attention was once again focused on the unloved and forgotten skyscraper of Amiens. In November 1991, in *Le Messager de Picardie*, an article entitled “Will the Perret Tower get a face lift?” pointed out that “the people of Amiens think the tower block is too grey and dirty” and that the Mayor, Gilles de Robien, “says that it will not be easy to solve the problem, but that solutions exist.”<sup>70</sup> In 1996, Gilles de Robien did not hesitate to refer to “the Perret space” as “a relatively questionable symbol of the time”.<sup>71</sup> During this period, the local press once again devoted articles to the building, recalling its complex history. The idea that the top of the building was still not finished due to the absence of a clock, became widespread.

In 1998, the City of Amiens acquired the top four floors of the skyscraper. In 1999, the council organized an architectural competition to renovate the Perret Tower as part of a wider urban renewal project in the station area. It was led by Claude Vasconi (1940–2009), while Thierry Van de Wyngaert (1953–) was in charge of the tower block. In association with François Migeon, for the light he designed a surmounting “hourglass”. Seven metres high and 6 metres wide, this device consists of reactive glass that becomes increasingly transparent from morning to midday and then opaque from midday to evening. At night, plays of light bring this “luminous clock” to life. The renovation work on the tower block – which raised its height to 110 meters – was also the opportunity for a vast façade restoration project (fig. 9). This recent history of the Perret Tower has yet to be written.

Does Thierry Van de Wyngaert’s intervention constitute a distortion of Perret’s architecture? The press pointed out that the architect sought to “complete”<sup>72</sup> a building that was, therefore, incomplete. This historical distortion was used to justify a renovation campaign that caused little controversy, the transformation of the station square by Claude Vasconi being commented on much more. Only a few architects and historians – such as Joseph Abram – unsuccessfully defended the integrity of the tower block. In 2005, the restored city centre of Le Havre was registered on the World Heritage List by Unesco. In the same year, the new Perret Tower in Amiens with its hourglass window, was “completed”.

## Biographical notes

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70. “Will the Perret Tower get a face lift?”, *Le Messager de Picardie*, 6 November 1991.

71. “Plaisir d’architecture”, interview with Gilles de Robien of 3 May 1996, in Jean-Yves ANDRIEUX and Frédéric SEITZ, *Pratiques architecturales et enjeux politiques: France 1945-1995*, Paris, Picard, 1998, p. 177.

72. Frédéric EDELMANN, “Signed Auguste Perret, Amiens train station gets a major overhaul”, *Le Monde*, 9 June 2008.

◀ Fig. 9.  
The Perret Tower in 2005, during the renovation campaign (photographer: Thierry Lefébure  
© Hauts-de-France Region – General Inventory).