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↻ Chapter 11 ↻

# Marseille as Privatopia

*The Collapsing City, the Gated City*

ELISABETH DORIER

Translated by Hilary S. Handin

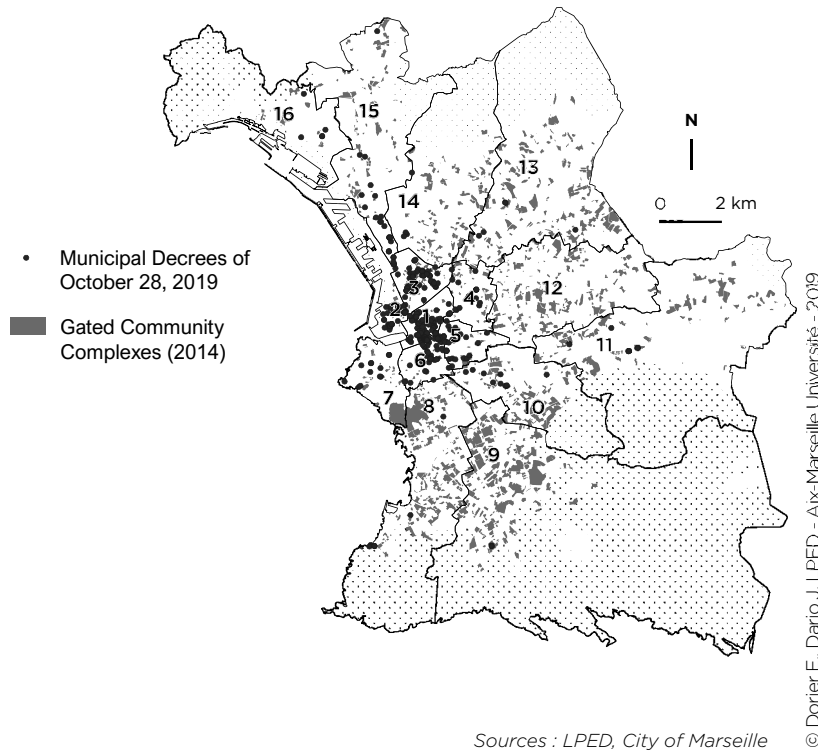
Marseille is changing at high speed . . . for better or worse? Its image is flattering: a jovial, sunny city that speaks with a typical southern accent, a Mediterranean atmosphere only a three-hour train ride from Paris, a creative Mediterranean melting pot that attracts artists and students. An intense territorial marketing campaign extols the quality of life fostered by the coastline and the exceptional protected natural spaces that surround the city (rocky inlets and Provençal hills). An assessment of its evolution can nevertheless present cause for concern. Marseille has long tolerated significant inequalities and a veritable dualism:<sup>1</sup> working-class neighborhoods (in the center and the north) and bourgeois and upper middle-class neighborhoods (along the beaches and hills) have confronted each other under the sun without actually seeing each other.

For the past twenty-five years, against a backdrop of significantly increasing real estate prices<sup>2</sup> and the rise of tourism, wide-spread property speculation has accentuated developmental sprawl toward the coastline and natural areas while buildings in the working-class city center have consistently deteriorated. Marseille has become more and more unequal and fragmented: whereas vast, centrifugal residential suburbs are being divided into closed streets and fenced-off condominiums (*copropriétés*), the impoverished center is collapsing.<sup>3</sup> This model of uncoordinated evolution results from a little-regulated, rentier urban fabric. Customary and well-studied south of the Mediterranean,<sup>4</sup> this model is rare and more disconcerting within large French towns.

Since 2018, a major crisis has highlighted the striking deterioration of housing in the working-class city center. The collapse of two buildings near the Vieux Port caused eight deaths and necessitated the urgent, preventative evacuation of more than six hundred old buildings labeled “at risk” (see fig. 11.1). The harsh methods of the first residential evacuations generated fears of potential opportunist strategies for evicting the lowest-income populations out of the city center, which would situate Marseille within the classic evolution of gentrification.<sup>5</sup>

The tragedy led to strong mobilization around the issue of unfit housing, provoking the creation of activist groups that criticized municipal management (see Berroir’s chapter in this volume). The state interfered directly, as much to manage the humanitarian emergency as to organize the old city center’s renewal over the following fifteen years. How did we arrive at such a situation and at the state’s emergency interventionism in the second-largest French metropolitan center? Official discourse

### Unsafe housing and gated communities in Marseille



**Figure 11.1.** The Collapsing City, the Gated City. © Dorier and Dario.

evokes the inevitable industrial and socioeconomic decline of the past fifty years.<sup>6</sup> But our research shows instead the effects of a local political system of “passive government” instituted several decades ago. It simultaneously stimulated private owners’ income—both from rental units (*rente locative*) in the underprivileged, central neighborhoods and from land (*rente foncière*) in the well-to-do peripheral areas—and the enclosure of private residences in wealthy suburbs. This crisis contributed to the defeat of the incumbent mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin and his team, in power for twenty-five years. Since June 2020, Marseille has been led by an alliance of elected officials from left-wing and environmentalist parties, which has the challenge of developing a consensual urban renewal program for Marseille’s central neighborhoods that respects their working-class character. Faced with the significant stakes of real estate and property pressures, can the options now at hand change the course of the evolution in progress?

### Social Inequalities and Housing

Marseille is one of the largest municipalities in France (it has twice the surface area of Paris). It encompasses 863,310 residents within its city limits (46 percent of residents of the wider metropolitan area, hereafter referred to as the Métropole).<sup>7</sup> Inequalities are particularly strong, with a median difference in income from one to fifteen between the wealthiest 10 percent and the most underprivileged.<sup>8</sup> A difference in scale of this magnitude is unusual in a city that is not a major international metropolis.<sup>9</sup> With a dense working-class sector from the center to the north and wealthier sectors to the south and on the outskirts, social segregation exists even within city limits. The center has remained predominantly working class despite the beginnings of gentrification encouraged by successive municipal administrations.<sup>10</sup>

### The Spread of Wealthy Residential Spaces

The middle- and upper-class bastions stretch south the length of the coastline toward the Parc national des Calanques and to the east and its hilly natural spaces. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie abandoned its buildings in the old city center and set to establish itself toward the south.<sup>11</sup> In the twentieth century, its heirs subdivided their leisure estates and agricultural lands (*bastides*) into condominiums settled by the middle classes. A veritable “white flight” permanently transformed the old city center into a space welcoming migrants and

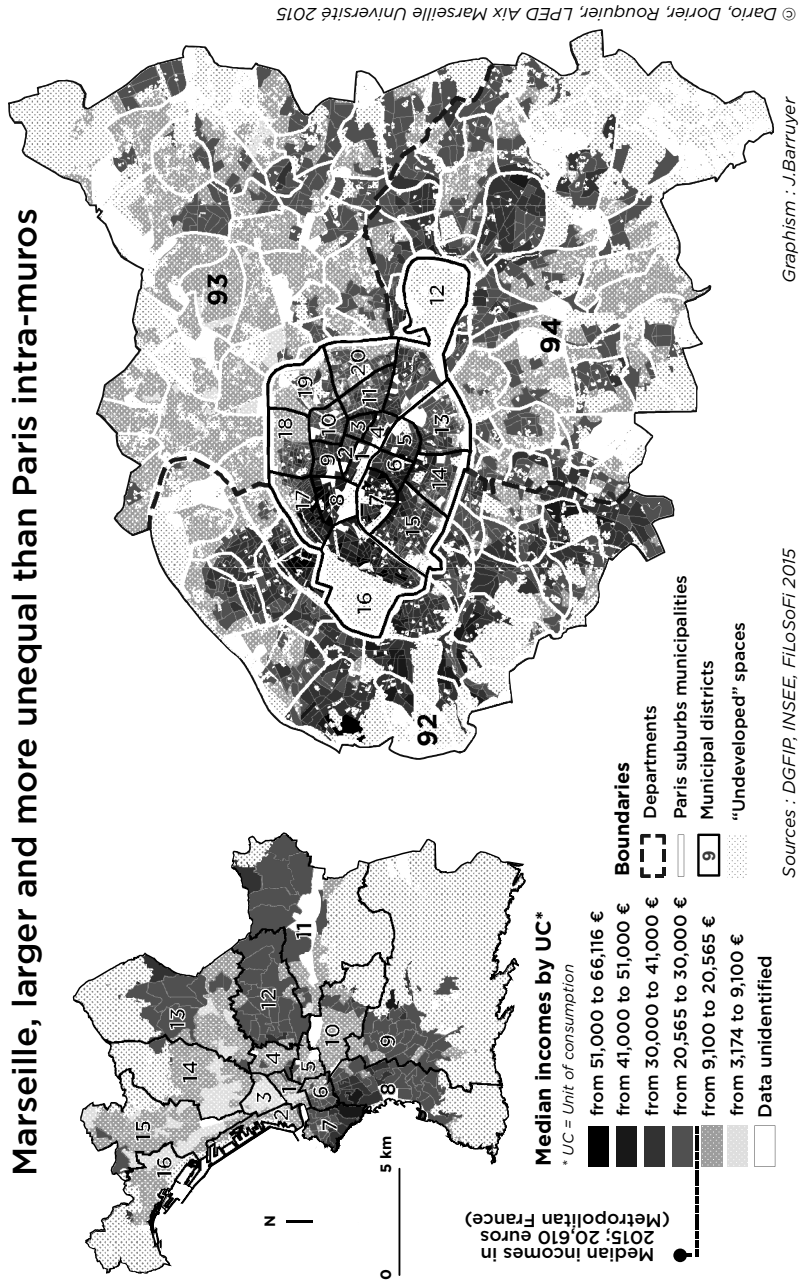
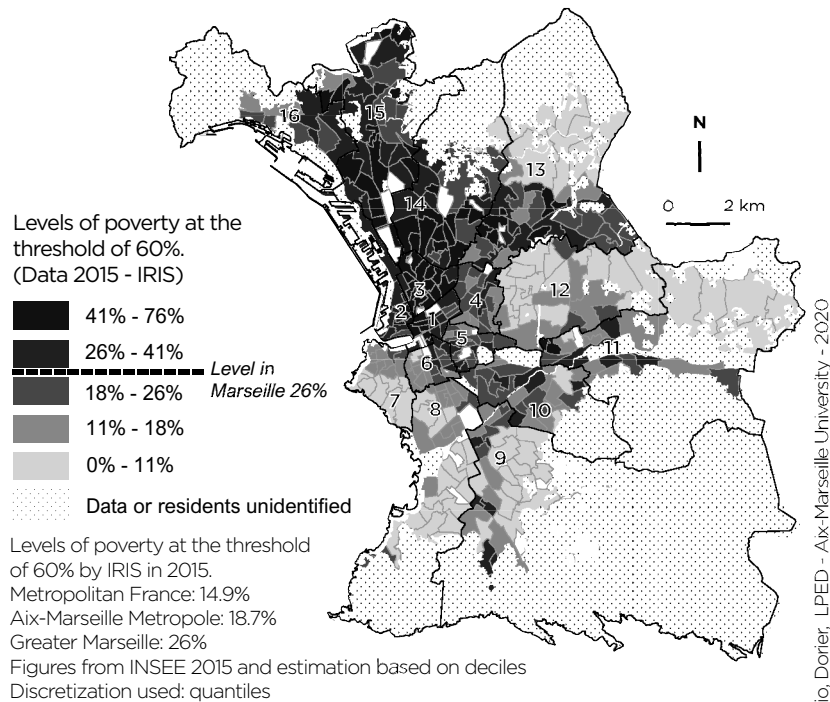


Figure 11.2. Marseille, larger and more unequal than Paris intra-muros. © Dario and Dorier.

working-class tenants. With both apartment buildings surrounded by gardens and widespread individual housing, the residential arrondissements on the outskirts are not densely populated.<sup>12</sup> Owner-occupants comprise the majority of residents. Today, this area attracts new middle-class arrivals drawn by the sun, sea, rocky inlets, and quality housing offers.<sup>13</sup>

Marseille’s average poverty rate (26 percent, or 210,000 people)<sup>14</sup> is the highest of large French cities. But in contrast to wealthy suburban sprawl, this poverty is concentrated around the city center and toward the north (between the Vieux Port and the train station, more than 40 percent and as many as three-fourths of the residents are poor) (see fig. 11.3).<sup>15</sup>

### Endemic poverty inside the municipal perimeter of Marseille, 2015

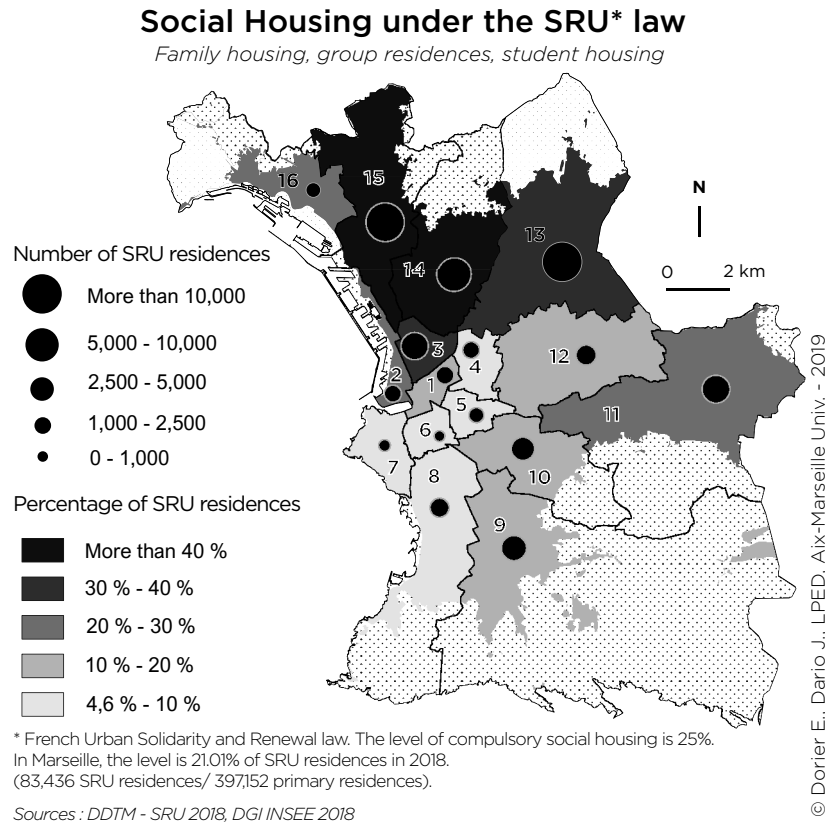


**Figure 11.3.** Endemic poverty inside the municipal perimeter of Marseille, 2015. © Dario and Dorier.

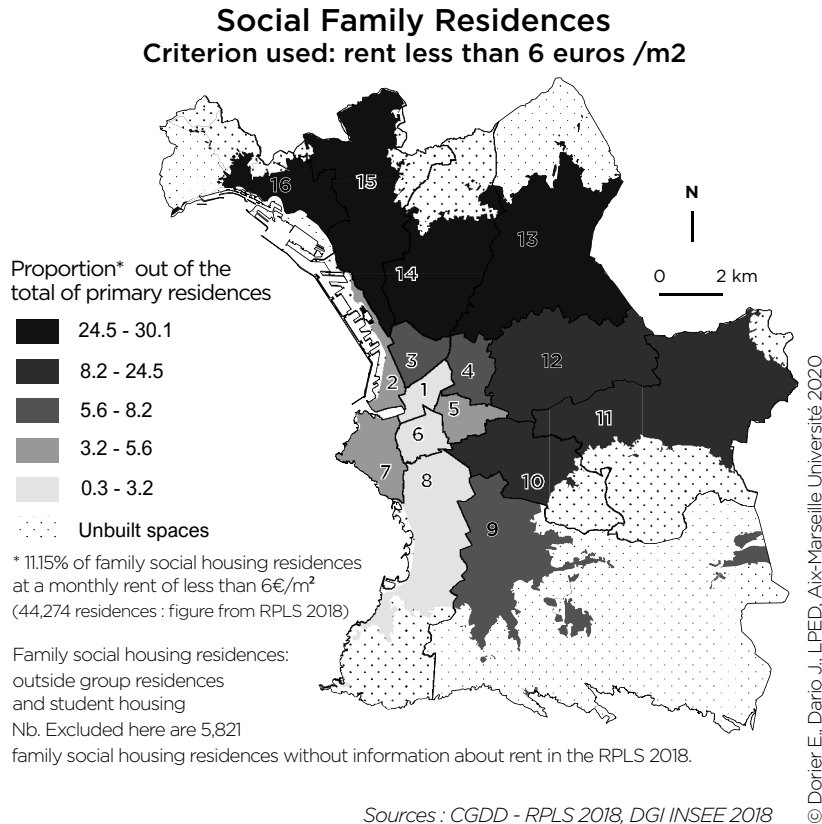
### Social Housing and Poverty in the Northern Neighborhoods

Marseille’s public-sector housing strategies partially explain the concentration of poverty in the *quartiers nord*, but not in the center. For the past fifty years, large, low-income HLM housing projects (mass subsidized, rent-controlled residential housing) were especially constructed in the north, extending away from the port and its now-shuttered industries, as Figure 11.4 demonstrates (see also Naylor’s chapter in this volume).

The 21-percent ratio of housing units built in response to the Urban Solidarity and Renewal Law (Loi Solidarité et renouvellement urbain) mapped here is the official French figure.<sup>16</sup> But it also includes subsidized housing for students or units requiring a middle-class income. Our Figure 11.5, showing “very social” family housing,<sup>17</sup> was created according to rent criteria (fewer than six euros per square meter) and reveals seri-



**Figure 11.4.** Social housing under the SRU (French Urban Solidarity and Renewal) Law. © Dorier and Dario.



**Figure 11.5.** Social Family Residences. © Dorier and Dario.

ous inadequacies.<sup>18</sup> This is the only social housing accessible by right to the 26 percent of households that public aid criteria define as “poor.” But it only represents 11.5 percent of all housing, which causes interminable delays. Concentrated in the working-class outskirts, where it consigns the poorest populations, social housing does not exceed 6 percent in the central, old neighborhoods.

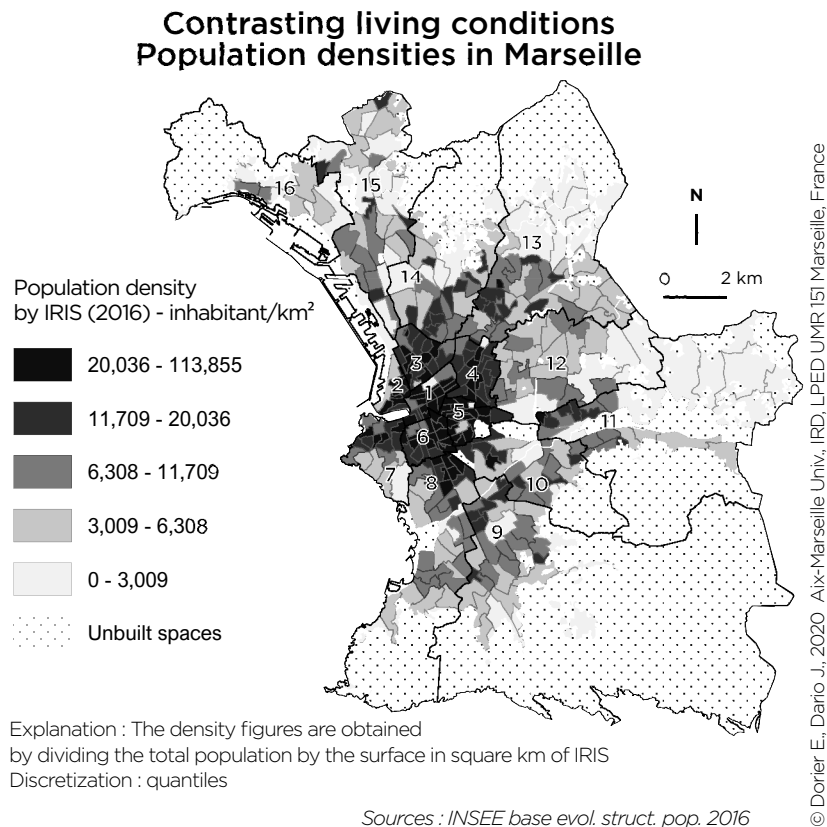
**The Poorest Populations Live in Old, Private Rental Housing in the City Center**

The working-class character of Marseille’s old city center is an exception among French metropolitan centers, whose restored historical neighborhoods have been gentrified.<sup>19</sup> The poorest neighborhoods of France are located between the Vieux Port and the north of the train station.



This center-north area is the subject of a program of the Agence nationale pour la rénovation urbaine (National Agency for Urban Renewal),<sup>20</sup> which ordinarily intervenes in poor suburbs. The old housing there is private and predominantly rented (owner-occupants represent fewer than 20 percent of residents).<sup>21</sup> Poor tenant households' settlement in the city center despite the near-absence of social housing results from economic and community-based mechanisms. The residents are particularly poor, with the lowest incomes in the city: isolated *chibani* retirees,<sup>22</sup> single-parent families, and "informal" workers (in construction and the food service industry) who need to live close to the city center to get by on a daily basis. These neighborhoods also have a concentration of recent migrants, primarily of African origin.<sup>23</sup>

Though it remains predominantly working-class, the Noailles neighborhood near the Vieux Port is becoming one of the city's tourist at-



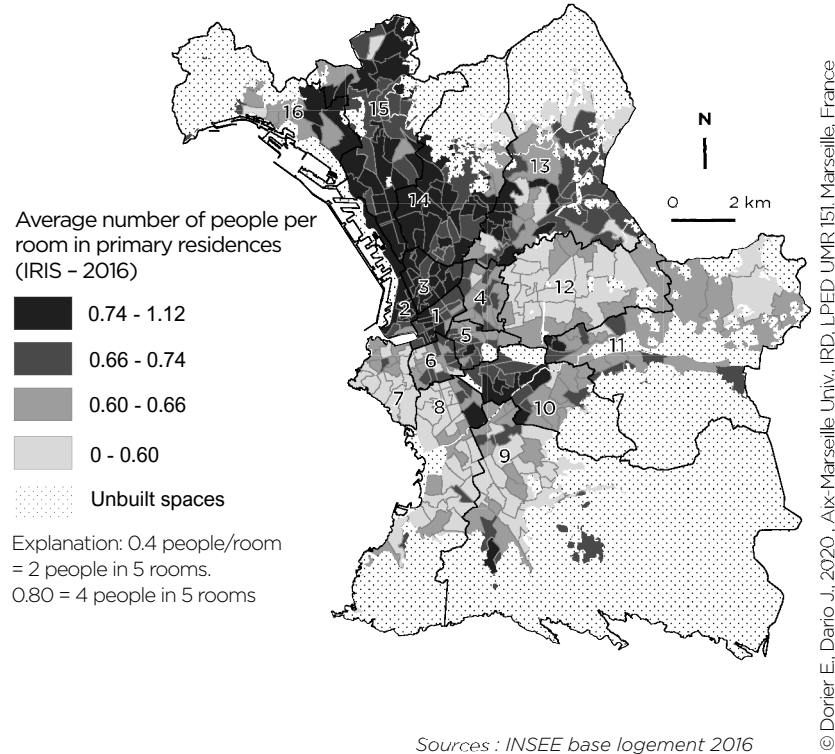
**Figure 11.6.** Contrasting living conditions: Population densities in Marseille. © Dorier and Dario.

tractions, and this is thanks precisely to its colorful “ethnic” businesses, especially African ones.<sup>24</sup> It also charms the “pioneers” of gentrification (students, artists, and intellectuals), who have often come from other French or European cities. However, these neighborhoods are considered repulsive by the middle and upper classes, who have chosen to move away from the working-class city center and never set foot there.<sup>25</sup> Marseille’s social boundaries are also community-based. Stemming from ethnic origins more than nationality or even place of birth, they are difficult to study because French legislation prohibits all “ethnic” or religious statistics. Analyzing files of first names provides an approximation, but this politically sensitive subject is often avoided. A study conducted from 2016 to 2019 concerning the urban representations of 1,100 Marseille high school students, including 300 youth from the privileged southern neighborhoods, confirmed that Noailles is the neighborhood most often considered “repulsive” and stigmatized, frequently in the absence of direct experience.<sup>26</sup> Feeding underlying racist prejudices, the deteriorated housing, dirty streets, and prevailing insalubrity are attributed not to the lack of upkeep by landlords or the municipality but to the residents’ practices. These shared representations no doubt explain the denial of questions of poverty, inequalities, and unfit housing that have marked Marseille’s politics for decades.

### **Housing Inequalities: The Overcrowded City**

Rate of occupancy is one of the indicators of potential “bad housing,” a notion that encompasses “over-occupation,”<sup>27</sup> insalubrity, and “danger” (risk of collapse). It is a lens for evaluating one of the most concrete consequences of inequality in Marseille. Note the resemblance between Figure 11.7, showing the average number of people per room in primary residences, and Figure 11.3, illustrating poverty levels. With equivalent average population density per square kilometer (always higher in the city center and lower on the outskirts),<sup>28</sup> one can see the extent of contrasts in housing conditions related to social differences. The size of private, old housing in the city center is diminishing with the speculative practice of purchasing apartments chopped into small units to increase rental profits. Not every owner, whether heir to a family-owned building or an investor, is a slumlord, and certain small accommodations are “decent.” But the overcrowding of private rental units is the daily reality of the most vulnerable residents, whose employment is precarious and who are denied access to social housing. Added to these disparities in occupation density is residents’ unequal access to natural spaces (the sea, hills, parks, and private gardens). During the COVID epidemic, sev-

### Contrasting living conditions Housing occupancy in Marseille



**Figure 11.7.** Contrasting living conditions: Housing occupancy in Marseille. © Dorier and Dario.

eral contagion “clusters” developed in zones of overcrowded housing, particularly in the 3rd arrondissement (St. Mauront, Belle de Mai) and in the impoverished areas of the northern neighborhoods.

### The Collapsing City: A Crisis of Buildings at Risk and Evacuations in the City Center

It was in Noailles, the historical, small-business, and working-class center of Marseille, that eight residents—migrants, artists, and students—died in the collapse of two decrepit apartment buildings on 5 November 2018. The emotional, media, and political shock took on a national and international scale, with articles in *Le Monde* and *The New York Times*.

Mayor Gaudin provoked an outcry by citing rain and landslides as the only cause. Highlighting municipal inertia, one of the collapsed buildings had belonged to the city for ten years. The other building belonged to private owners, including a local elected official, which brought the historical connections between Marseille's political and real estate worlds to the fore. Media and legal investigations exposed significant government negligence, even indulgence, regarding unscrupulous real estate businesses, property owners, and property management companies that even acted as slumlords.

Under pressure, the mayor's office ordered the emergency evacuation of nearby buildings as a preventative measure. Hundreds of others were inspected and declared "at risk": 1,300 people were evacuated in fifteen days; more than 5,000 were evacuated from more than six hundred buildings over two years. Though residents' security was the goal of these evacuations, they took place in traumatizing emergency conditions. The occupants of a building recognized as "at risk" had less than an hour to leave their residence, supervised by fire fighters and the police. When evacuations were ordered due to dangerous conditions, it fell to the owner-landlord to provide accommodations during the completion of the construction work required before residents could return to their homes. But in light of many owners' insufficient response, the city took over and ensured emergency accommodations in hotels,<sup>29</sup> where family life proved impossible. Many forced hotel stays lasted several weeks to several months while residents waited for their buildings to be secured. The construction ordered by some slumlords was botched and poorly overseen by the city. Some attempted to rehouse their tenants in equally unfit units. A temporary situation hence extended over several months for the most vulnerable households. Many households evacuated in 2018 still had not been rehoused in 2021. According to a report by the Haut Comité au logement des personnes défavorisées (High Committee for the Housing of Underprivileged Persons), the situation evolved "from a housing crisis into a humanitarian crisis" in the center of France's second-largest city.<sup>30</sup>

### **Associational Activism and Oversight of Evacuations**

The great majority of the victims of the collapsed buildings on 5 November 2018 were very socially precarious residents, but there were also students, artists, white-collar workers, and even an elected official—a testament to the beginnings of spontaneous gentrification in the city's center. The presence of these forerunner residents possessing significant cultural resources explains the substantial local reaction and its political

impact in a year preceding municipal elections. In the first days after the collapses, existing associations like Un Centre Ville pour Tous (A City Center for All), founded in 2001 and new groups like the Collectif du 5 novembre and Marseille en Colère (Enraged Marseille) joined forces to organize large street demonstrations and an intense media campaign. They denounced the crisis's causes as much as the response to it, demanding temporary accommodations and new housing more aligned with family life and close to the evacuees' original housing. Mitigating public authorities' significant weaknesses in the first months, they guided the most fragile displaced tenants through the process, particularly households ineligible for public aid (informal roommates and people housed without a lease, etc.). An ensemble of associations that joined these groups with influential private institutions, like the Fondation Abbé Pierre, fiercely negotiated a Rehousing Charter for evacuees. Signed on 8 July 2019 by the mayor's office, the state, and activist groups, its oversight coordination committee aimed to guarantee more humane management of the evacuations, temporary lodgings, and provisional rehousing, above and beyond legal requirements. It ensured a "right to return" in dignified conditions after the evacuation phase: a return to duly secured and habitable original housing or rehousing near the original neighborhood. The charter was unevenly respected. Activist groups and the new municipal administration, elected in 2020, nevertheless negotiated its three-year renewal, which was officialized in October 2021.

### **Mechanisms of a "Poor Housing" Market**

Observation of buildings evacuated because of dangerous conditions indicates they belong to a largely private rental housing stock, first and foremost to private individuals (*personnes physiques*) who themselves live in Marseille. This stock has long been identified as unmaintained and "potentially unfit."<sup>31</sup> The few owner-occupants are rather low-income. The rental of old, unmaintained buildings is a source of profits due to pressing demand from a poor, captive clientele, grateful to have access to housing in a centralized location, even in poor condition, and due to the indiscriminate awarding of public subsidies. In France, the income of owners who rent to the poorest populations is guaranteed by individual public benefits, usually determined by the quality of housing offered. But the municipal administration has long closed its eyes to the piteous state of buildings in Marseille's city center, for this housing supply mediates the lack of "very social" housing offers, leading to incorrect assertions of "de facto social housing."<sup>32</sup> According to our studies, the rent per

square meter of dangerous housing evacuated since 2018 is two or three times higher than that of social housing with an equivalent surface area. Such prices encourage overcrowding, which exacerbates poor housing conditions. The slumlords of deteriorating buildings engage in a particular speculative strategy in order to profit from monthly rent payments. Out of fear of violent reprisals or eviction, tenants often pay the owners illegal supplementary rent in cash. Our research into land registry files confirms that many landlords in the Noailles, Belsunce, and Belle de Mai neighborhoods themselves live in the wealthiest parts of the city (nearly 40 percent) or in the wider Métropole's wealthy towns.

The municipal administration's negligence concerning deteriorated private housing and its lack of intervention with regard to neglectful owners and property management companies have been forcefully blamed for this situation. Nonetheless, a succession of numerous planned operations for housing improvement (OPAH), real estate restoration perimeters (PRI), and programs for the eradication of "unfit housing"<sup>33</sup> has offered assistance to private owners.<sup>34</sup> But all these initiatives performed extraordinarily poorly: slumlords benefited from public assistance while completing only superficial construction work. The city expropriated or preemptively purchased rundown buildings, but several of the buildings bought in this manner between 2005 and 2008 to create social housing remained unrenovated, for-profit furnished hotels, while others were left vacant and subsequently deteriorated, like the building at 63 rue d'Aubagne, which ended up collapsing. Clientelism is a useful interpretive framework for understanding some of this indulgence and inertia.<sup>35</sup>

Negligence and clientelism are often invoked by media outlets, but they do not explain everything; there are also strategic reasons that derive from neoliberal choices. After several unfinished initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, the municipal administration's strategies left the old, deteriorated working-class neighborhoods as "fallow land" for future gentrification by allowing rental profits to soar there. In the last quarter of a century, the only municipal investments in property renovations in the old neighborhoods concerned buildings with historical value, transformed into luxury hotels granted to private operators, or perimeters assumed to be profitable for large investors. The latter benefited from access to land, buildings, tax assistance, and public construction equipment, often in partnership with the state in the context of the Euromediterranée Operation of National Interest (see Beschon's chapter in this volume). Such was the case of the operation in the rue de la République, a Haussmann-era artery, which benefited from the refurbishment of the road and a tramway.<sup>36</sup>

### **Governance of a Crisis of Unfit Housing: Emergency Management through Private Contracting of Public Services**

Faced with these factors of the crisis, improvised management in the early stages, and pressure from activists, the state directly intervened in the implementation, financing, and inspection of measures delegated to private operators in Marseille. Several ministers' visits publicized the state's intervention in the city during a sensitive pre-election period. In the beginning of 2019, an Urban and Social Project Management (*Maîtrise d'oeuvre urbaine et sociale*, MOUS) rehousing initiative associated the state, the City of Marseille, the Métropole, and two private operators, one for the welcoming and social support of evacuated households and the other for temporary rehousing (SOLIHA). A budget was allocated for the appropriation of empty units from public and private landlords to rehouse eligible evacuated households. Only tenants with a lease were entitled to rehousing, excluding informal roommates and residents who were hosted by others. The 514 leases signed by SOLIHA allowed for households' temporary lodging on a rolling basis until each evacuated unit was declared habitable.

But both the provisional and definitive rehousing of evacuated households was confronted with the structural lack of social housing in the old city center. As we saw earlier, Marseille remains deficient in "SRU" housing despite a slight recent increase (21.01 percent compared to the 25 percent requirement), and its central arrondissements especially lack a very inexpensive stock of "familial" social housing (fig. 11.5). The several thousand "very social" housing units constructed in the last few years remain concentrated in the north (15th arrondissement) and the center-north (3rd arrondissement). Evacuated households are likely to be permanently rehoused there.

#### **From Evacuations to Provisional Rehousing: Cartographic Monitoring**

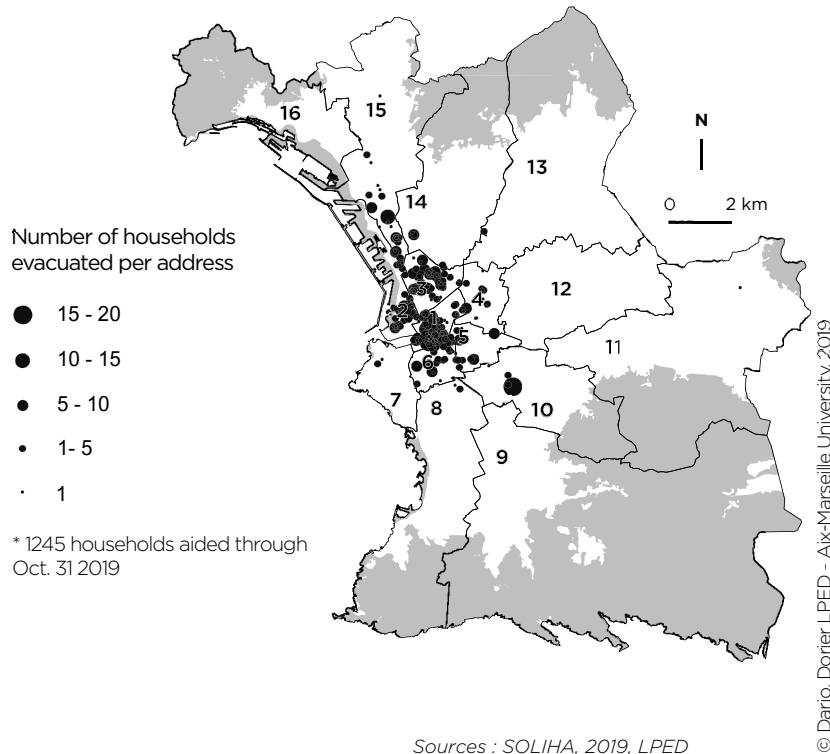
Many examples from near and far feed the fear that this urban crisis will be exploited to justify the eviction of low-income occupants, legitimize an accelerated refurbishment, and provoke the gentrification of the city center's profitable areas. The exploitation of risks or catastrophes by urban authorities has been documented in Mexico City and Istanbul.<sup>37</sup> It can be more or less efficiently contested or negotiated by residents and activist groups.<sup>38</sup> Mobilization in Marseille has been fed by the city's recent history, including the abrupt eviction of hundreds of low-income households in the rue de la République (near the Vieux Port) in the context of financial institutions' speculative resale of Haussmann-era

building lots from 2004 to 2007.<sup>39</sup> A portion of the evicted households dispersed. A large number of renovated housing units and businesses remained empty because they had become too expensive.<sup>40</sup> But others ended up siphoning off new middle- and upper-class residents and were transformed for seasonal and student rentals.<sup>41</sup>

Faced with unclear public statistics, our initiative to map “at risk” buildings aimed to avoid the repetition of a similar scenario.<sup>42</sup> It was conducted as a collaborative effort between scholars and activist groups.<sup>43</sup> It allowed for the geolocalization of evacuated buildings and the paths taken by evicted households supported by associations.<sup>44</sup> After six months of work, this web-cartography collaborative was publicized to accompany the signing of the first Rehousing Charter.<sup>45</sup> This approach aimed to obtain access to complete official statistics. As a result of media coverage, these statistics were indeed relayed to the university upon prefectural

### Locations of evacuated residences aided by SOLIHA

Marseille – Nov. 5, 2018 – Oct. 31, 2019



**Figure 11.8.** Locations of evacuated residences aided by SOLIHA. © Dario and Dorier.

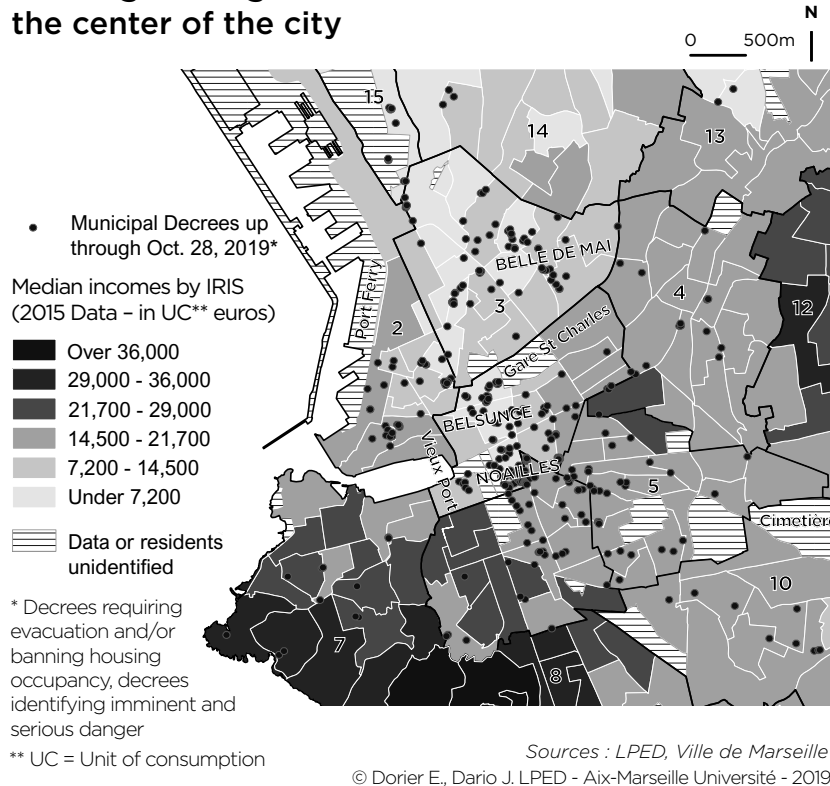


intervention. A report of the first year of crisis could therefore finally be established based on complete information provided by the private operator SOLIHA and considered through the lens of insufficient social housing. This work was made public thanks to the Haut Comité pour le Logement des Personnes Défavorisées (High Commission for Housing Disadvantaged People), a governmental institution under the authority of the Prime Minister.<sup>46</sup>

### Geography and Temporality of Municipal Decrees of Imminent Danger and Evacuations

Our study confirmed that nearly all the decreed risks concerning the old and private buildings of the city's center-north coincided with a diagonal line of deep poverty in Marseille. In the beginning, the perimeter

#### Housing in danger and low annual income in the center of the city



**Figure 11.9.** Housing in danger and low annual income in the center of the city. © Dorier and Dario.

remained close to the collapsed buildings. But as the months went on, the perimeter of legal procedures extended to the entire old city center (Noailles, Belsunce, Panier, Joliette), then to neighborhoods on the outskirts of the center (Belle de Mai, Versailles), following the axis of the Euroméditerranée operation. Beginning in the summer of 2019, evacuations related to the security perimeter and to established risks corresponded to public refurbishment sites so closely that one could well wonder whether the municipal decree, coupled with the evacuation of low-income residents, was not becoming an overly commonplace tool for securing urban renewal operations.

### **Evolutions under Tutelage for Marseille's City Center?**

One of the consequences of this crisis was a series of direct state interventions that repudiated local action. Over the previous twenty-five years, the state had already launched most of the urban renewal measures in the deindustrialized port neighborhoods through an Operation of National Interest led by the Euroméditerranée public agency. Similarly, the National Urban Renewal Plan (Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine, PNRU) for seventeen neighborhoods, including the center-north, was piloted by the state in cooperation with local governments. It was again the state that financed several large construction sites, including the renowned Mucem (Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean), which was undesired by the Gaudin municipal administration but has become the pride of Marseille in the very center of town. Following the crisis, the state initiated a vast, fifteen-year “cooperative construction project” (projet partenarial d'aménagement, PPA) for the renovation of the built environment that concerns 1,000 hectares and two hundred thousand residents of the greater city center. Though it involves all levels of local government (Métropole, department, municipality), this project confers the most action resources to state agencies and to the Métropole. It leaves little financial and decision-making power to the city of Marseille, and at first, left no space for the residents in question to express themselves. It involved a profound evolution of the city center that would lead to new evacuations of residents, for in addition to spontaneous “reports” of deteriorated buildings under investigation (six hundred reports in 2020), the PPA provides for the systematic assessment of old buildings. This is the reason why an operation to rehouse evacuated households remains entrusted, in a contract valid until 2023, to the private operators who managed the emergency situation. The Reception Center for Evacuated Persons (EAPE) has been allotted a permanent space and expanded personnel. With these conditions in

mind, activist groups firmly renegotiated the Rehousing Charter in 2021 to protect the most vulnerable households. With support from the new municipal administration elected in 2020, they obtained the creation of a “committee for the oversight of local usage by residents” within the PPA to ensure residents’ opinions would be heard.

### **A City That Is Spreading Out and Closing Itself Off**

For the past twenty-five years, the areas surrounding the deteriorated city center have been built up and transformed. In the context of wide-spread real estate speculation, the authorities’ *laissez-faire* attitude toward private owners in the impoverished city center is on par only with the spontaneous and disorganized spread of building initiatives in wealthy neighborhoods and the residential suburbs. These are the two inseparable sides of Marseille’s “privatopia” coin.

#### **A Tradition of a Private Urban Fabric, the City of Subdivisions**

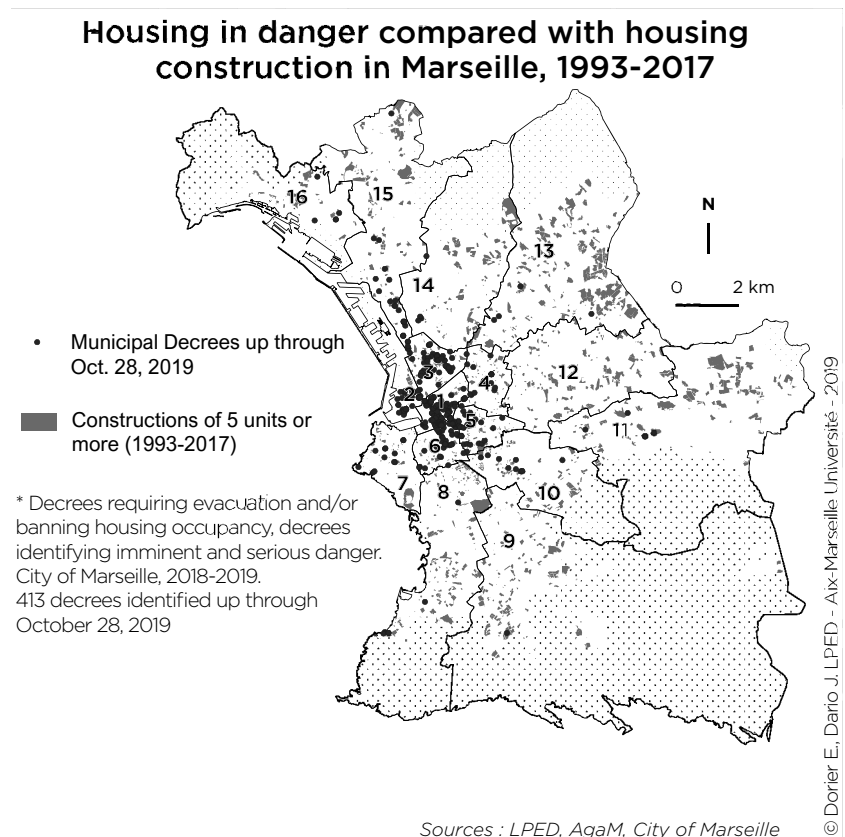
Without being planned, the landscape of Marseille’s outskirts has been shaped since the nineteenth century by the initiatives of property owners, developers, promoters, and housing management companies through the subdivision of agricultural land and informal agreements with successive municipal administrations. It has been dominated by the dynamics of land parceling and the sale of fragments of the large properties (*bastides*) owned by bourgeois families to financial and promotion companies.<sup>47</sup> This tradition of ad hoc agreements between public and private actors created vast residential neighborhoods that turned their backs on the historic city center. This dynamic, based on the promotion of property value, showed little respect for the rules and norms concerning roads, social housing quotas, and protected natural spaces. It resulted in incongruous landscapes and undersized and inefficient public roadways.<sup>48</sup> These neighborhoods’ social and political functioning is steeped in the comanagement practices of economic and political elites and the tolerance of local agreements based on interpersonal connections, clientelism, and community-based relationships.<sup>49</sup>

#### **Twenty-Five Years of Policies Centered on Private Housing**

For twenty-five years, the municipality’s acceptance of neoliberal positions added a new layer to a historical *laissez-faire* attitude, facilitating sprawl and urban fragmentation. Neglecting the impoverished city cen-

ter, the municipality deliberately focused on the profitability of suburban real estate.<sup>50</sup> It did not remain inactive in the housing domain, but rather than prioritize making up for the lack of social housing, it deliberately chose to support the development of “quality” residential housing stock for the middle classes, particularly in areas where the city borders natural areas. Thus, Marseille has followed the “entrepreneurial” model adopted by a number of cities in postindustrial crisis that had lost residents: prioritizing its environmental assets (sea, rocky inlets, natural spaces) and neglecting the old city center, which has therefore remained working class.<sup>51</sup>

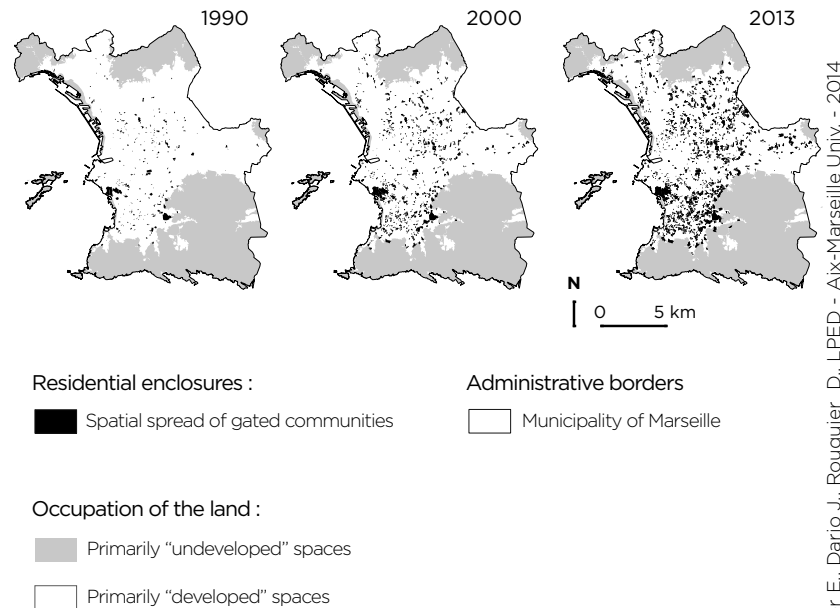
The strategy of disengaging with the management of underprivileged, centralized spaces and supporting private investments is justified through arguments about the city’s attractiveness and reductions in public funding. It is ubiquitous in the municipal council meeting minutes and public studies we have analyzed.<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 11.10.** Housing in danger compared with housing construction in Marseille, 1993–2017. © Dorier and Dario.

The Agence d'urbanisme de l'agglomération d'Aix Marseille (Aix Marseille Urban Planning Agency, AGAM) establishes annual lists of newly constructed housing, which we analyzed to create Figure 11.11. It regularly compiles reports of the settlement of new, upper-class residents in Marseille.<sup>53</sup> To finance and complete this “population” project, a classic among neoliberal possibilities for increasing the city’s status,<sup>54</sup> the municipality methodically associated itself with real estate promoters through a series of Joint Construction Zones (Zones d'Aménagement Concerté, ZAC) intended as living spaces. We analyzed ten of these situated along the coast, near the hills, at the gateway to the Parc national des Calanques.<sup>55</sup> Despite the city’s delays in social housing, these ZAC accommodations have only rarely been provided with the smallest proportion of student housing or social housing with intermediate-level rents, still inaccessible to the poorest populations. They have served as

### The accelerating pace of gated communities in Marseille



Sources : ESVP-LPED Surveys 2008-2013, CLC, INSEE (Municipal limits)

**Figure 11.11.** The accelerating pace of gated communities in Marseille.  
© Dorier, Dario, and Rouquier.

centers for the most diffuse real estate operations, facilitated by the reworking of Local Urbanism Plans (Plans locaux d'urbanisme, PLU). The city has not hesitated to sell its assets to facilitate these operations: stadiums, public gardens, wooded spaces, sites for public parks, and even roadways. It has sometimes preemptively purchased land for public construction before reselling it to real estate promoters. All these initiatives have accentuated urban sprawl in the form of supposedly high-quality residential areas near the coast and on the border of city and nature, where Marseille has begun regaining inhabitants since 1999, distant and disconnected from the center (Figure 11.11). The needs related to public roads and infrastructure that derive from these real estate programs (public transport, public parks, schools) have often been forgotten, generating a dissatisfaction with the environment expressed during inquiries with new residents.<sup>56</sup> New amenities are private and located inside apartment complexes and therefore do not contribute to shared resources in the area: enclosed gardens, play areas for children, and especially new parking spaces, as these accommodations are poorly served by public transport and require several vehicles.

### The Dynamics of Enclosed Apartment Complexes

Two-thirds of the apartment complexes built between 1993 and 2017 (represented in fig. 11.10) were conceived as enclosed and secured, including within municipal ZAC zones.<sup>57</sup> This trend intensified spatial fragmentation and socially homogeneous population clusters, accentuating the mosaic effect of peripheral neighborhoods. The massive phenomenon of gated apartment complexes began in the south and west in the 1990s with the enclosure of existing apartment complexes and private streets located in old subdivisions, which were requested by co-owners' associations that had been encouraged by property management companies.<sup>58</sup> It was accelerated by the creation of new complexes primarily conceived as enclosed spaces.

This spread of enclosures was almost wholly unregulated.<sup>59</sup> It occurred through mimicry: more than half of the closed-off housing complexes touch one another in clusters, transforming the appearance and possible uses of urban space. The city and the Métropole, responsible for roadways, approved of this retreat into socially homogenous groups and the private management of space. This city-mosaic made of closed-off condominiums can be described as a "privatopia."<sup>60</sup> Conceived by local developers and real estate giants and run by condominium management companies, they function more and more as an archipelago disconnected from the historic city center.<sup>61</sup>

### The Impacts of Enclosed Apartment Complexes

Due to the authorities' disengagement, even Marseille's privatopia finds itself fragmented. Aggregates of several adjoining, enclosed apartment complexes require detours and block pedestrian crossings and access to public transportation stations, a source of conflicts and traffic congestion.<sup>62</sup> These evolutions aggravate local inequalities in living conditions. Within working-class neighborhoods near renewal zones, projects for enclosed properties benefit from tax support as a supposed tool for promoting social diversity. But in reality, this strategy has increased the value of the most well-located private properties (in terms of view and surrounding environment). These enclaves of quality accommodations for the middle classes within underprivileged zones sharpen local tensions and are even constructed to the detriment of the development of public spaces and infrastructure. For example, in the Plan d'Aou neighborhood in the 15th arrondissement, a large, closed-off apartment complex took the place of a plan for a public park between two low-income housing projects.<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion

If Marseille appears to be a city with two faces, it is the same urbanization of *rentier* properties that simultaneously led to the abandonment of the old, private buildings in the city center (the "collapsing city") and the rise of the "gated city" on the outskirts. Between passive governance and self-assumed neoliberalism, real estate speculation was elevated as the motor of urban policies. The abandoned state of old, private buildings in the city center, dedicated to the development of rental units, can be assimilated to a public/private strategy of turning real estate into fallow ground while waiting for public funds to assist the owners in renovations and allowing them to conduct speculative resales. In parallel, the same real estate and property actors, closely linked to local administrations and sometimes to local elected officials, have shaped the unsustainable suburban sprawl of the "gated city." However, the crisis of building collapses and evacuations intensified pressure regarding the future of a working-class center confronted with a city of condominiums, where everyone lives and consumes according to their means. It also precipitated an increased awareness of the need for public policies, regulation, and planning in Marseille.

Following the 2018 tragedy, subsequent social and political mobilizations, and new, on-going governmental measures, what kind of renewal

will take shape for the city center and its low-income residents? The new municipal government advocates a diversity strategy, a quota for the number of social housing units in the renewal of the old city center and in all new construction plans. But it has little room for maneuver. According to recent reforms enacted in France (the Nôtre Law of 2014, and the Métropole requirement, 2016), the primary expertise and regulatory and financial resources for housing planning are now attributed to Métropoles and not to municipalities. And the new political context following the 2020 elections is conflictual: Marseille's former municipal majority won the Métropole elections that took place through indirect suffrage in the Métropole's ninety-two municipalities. Martine Vassal, heir apparent to former Mayor Gaudin, who lost the election to Marseille's current administration, therefore remained president of the wider Métropole thanks to the support of small municipalities. Marseille's social needs must be understood in the context of the Métropole, which is very unequal and was built up quite painstakingly under pressure from the state in 2016. The wealthy municipalities are hesitant to join in solidarity with Marseille, particularly in matters concerning social housing but also public transportation and cleanliness.

These circumstances have been lamented in several public reports (Ettouati and INSEE [2015]; ADIL 13 [2015]) and even an OCDE study (2013). Despite its commitments, the Métropole has not yet mobilized existing tools in order to address the problems.<sup>64</sup> In the middle of the evacuation crisis, the Local Housing Plan (PLH), which planned social housing and its balanced distribution between municipalities, was rejected by a majority of the wider Métropole's ninety-two municipalities, including several prosperous towns surrounding Aix-en-Provence and along the coastline that have some of the lowest proportions of social housing in France when compared to legal quotas. Three years after the buildings' collapse, it was once again the state, through two solemn visits to Marseille by the President of the Republic (August and October 2021), that demanded that the Métropole reform its operations in exchange for exceptional subsidies for the city.

The new framework of a cooperative construction project (PPA) for the broader city center, which brings together the city, Métropole, state, and private actors, offers a new outlook. To defend its policies against the Métropole, the new municipal government, elected for five years, will have to rely on state arbitration and a strong civil society consensus, particularly among the activist groups and associations committed to the "right to the city," from which the new administration partially emanates. Unprecedented citizen mobilization around housing has led to innovations in governance, such as the Rehousing Charter for evacuees—



renewed in October 2021 between activist groups, the city, and the state—and the official creation of a committee for the oversight of practices imposed on the PPA by the city. The perspectives for the urban renewal of Marseille’s city center are not consensual and will therefore remain at the center of the city’s contradictions and difficult social and political negotiations in the years to come.

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### Notes

1. Donzel, “Marseille une métropole.”
2. Donzel, “50 ans d’évolution.”
3. Dorier and Dario, “Marseille 2018–2019.”
4. Lorrain, “Gouverner la grande ville”; and Pérouse, “Istanbul.”
5. Smith, “New Globalism”; Colomb, “Le new Labour”; Berry-Chikhaoui and Deboulet, “Restructurations urbaines”; and Rousseau, “Redéveloppement urbain.”
6. AGAM, “Contrat de projet.”
7. The “Aix-Marseille-Provence” Métropole includes ninety-two municipalities with 1,878,061 residents (INSEE census, 2017).
8. Calculations and cartography based on declared median income by unit of consumption in 2015. Analysis from the Localized Social and Fiscal File (Fichier Localisé Social et Fiscal, FiLoSoFi), source: INSEE.
9. The lowest declared incomes include allocations such as the RSA or Active Solidarity Income (575.52 euros per month in 2022) and the minimum old-age pension (916.78 euros per month in 2022). Those receiving such benefits include many whose work has often been undeclared, such as former Maghrebi migrants (*chibanis*), and single mothers who have often worked part-time.
10. Jourdan, *Du processus*; and Baby-Collin and Bouillon, “Le centre-ville.”
11. Roncayalo, *Les grammaires*; and Zalio, *Grandes familles*.
12. Marseille is divided into sixteen arrondissements. As in Paris, the lowest numbered are in the center and the higher numbered are farther from the center.

13. Arrighi et al., “À Marseille.”
14. Individuals from households with “declared incomes” lower than 60 percent of the median French income (1,063 € per month).
15. The rare poor areas in the south and east correspond to a few social housing projects.
16. In France, the Urban Solidarity and Renewal Law, updated in 2014, requires that at least 25 percent of housing in large cities consist of social housing, including student apartment buildings, shelters, and so on.
17. This calculation of “familial” housing excludes emergency shelters and student housing. Map created through an analysis of raw data from the 2018 Social Rental Housing Stock Register (Registre du Parc Locatif Social, RPLS).
18. The least expensive social housing (rent from five to six € per square meter), labeled here as “very social,” is sometimes especially conceived for the poorest populations according to habitability norms (*normes d’habitabilité*, PLAI). But this is often the oldest social housing, sometimes in a very poor state, the rent for which has changed little.
19. In France, the centers of nontouristic, small, and mid-sized towns more often remain impoverished. Maurin and Mazery, “Les taux de pauvreté.”
20. The ANRU is a public agency piloting the National Urban Renewal Plan (PNRU) in coordination with local governments and social housing lessors under the supervision of the minister responsible for city policy.
21. Source: the “Logement” infra-municipal database, INSEE 2017.
22. *Chibani*: name given to retirees of North African origin who live in precarious circumstances after having worked for many years in France.
23. Ascarides and Condro, *La ville précaire*; Baby-Collin and Bouillon, “Le centre-ville.”
24. D’Hombres, Scherrer, and Rosado, *Le ventre de Marseille*.
25. Arrif and Hayot, “Les territoires.”
26. Dorier, Dario, and Lecoquierre, “Les jeunes et la ville.”
27. In legal terms (meaning it accords a priority right to social housing), overcrowding is calculated based on the habitable surface area per person. The INSEE data mapped here allows for an approximation based on the number of people per room in a housing unit.
28. Marseille’s average density is 5,703 residents per square kilometer, much lower than that of other large French towns. It is calculated by removing natural spaces (hilly ranges to the east and the coastline and the Parc national des Calanques to the south); 150 square kilometers of a total 240 square kilometer surface area are constructable.
29. The owner at fault must then reimburse hotel costs.
30. Haut Comité pour le Logement des Personnes Défavorisées, “Marseille: De la crise,” 3.
31. The potentially unfit private housing stock (“parc privé potentiellement indigne,” PPPI) is a statistical estimation based on the buildings’ age, the date of the most recent construction work completed, and the occupants’ income (evaluated according to their tax assessments). In 2015, two offi-

cial reports (Grimal; and Nicol et al.) indicated the extent of this in Marseille (estimated at 40,000 homes). Files of the AVAP (Aire de valorisation et d'aménagement du patrimoine, 2015) and the *Etude urbaine du quartier de Noailles* (Territoires & Habitat et al.) had specifically identified certain buildings.

32. Fijalkow, *Sociologie du logement*.
33. 1990 law: "homes of which the condition, or that of the building in which they are located, exposes the occupants to manifest risks with the potential to cause harm to their physical safety or health."
34. Hernandez et al., *Marseille*.
35. Mattina, *Clientélismes urbains*; and Peraldi and Samson, *Gouverner Marseille*.
36. Borja et al., *Attention à la fermeture*.
37. Diaz, *La gentrification négociée*; and Durmaz, "Transformation urbaine."
38. Cefaï and Trom, *Les formes*.
39. Berry-Chikhaoui and Deboulet. "Restructurations urbaines"; and Borja et al., *Attention à la fermeture*.
40. Un Centre and Ville Pour Tous, "Onze ans après."
41. Bouhaouchine, *Marseille en renouvellement*.
42. Dorier, "Marseille, Fragmentation."
43. The Collectif du 5 novembre's Commission on the Evicted (Commission des délogés), *Marseille en colère*, with support from the Un Centre-Ville Pour Tous association and the Fondation Abbé Pierre. The groups met with the evacuees and visited their accommodations.
44. LPED/Marsactu animated map of Municipal Decrees of Imminent Danger. Vinzent, "Chronologie d'une vague."
45. Artaud, "Universitaires et militants."
46. Dorier and Dario, "Marseille 2018–2019."
47. Donzel, *Politique urbaine*; Roncayalo, *Les grammaires*; Dorier et al., "La diffusion des ensembles."
48. Dario, *Géographie d'une ville fragmentée*.
49. Peraldi Samson, *Gouverner Marseille*; Mattina, *Clientélismes urbains*; Dario, *Géographie d'une ville fragmentée*.
50. Dorier et al., "Ensembles résidentiels fermés"; Dorier, Berry-Chikhaoui, and Bridier, "Fermeture résidentielle."
51. Harvey, "From Managerialism"; Harvey, *Le Capitalisme*; Colomb, "Le new labour"; and Rousseau, "Redéveloppement urbain."
52. Dorier et al., "La diffusion."
53. AGAM, "Qui sont les Marseillais?"
54. Morel Journel and Sala Pala, "Le peuplement."
55. The ZACs analyzed: Les Olives, Château Gombert, la Croix Rouge, la Jarre, Ste. Marthe, la Pointe Rouge, les Catalans, le Baou de Sormiou, la Joliette, la Capelette (Dorier et al., "Ensembles résidentiels fermés"; Dorier et al., "La diffusion des ensembles").
56. Toth, *La qualité environnementale*, and Glauda, *Qualité environnementale*.

57. Dorier et al., “Ensembles résidentiels fermés”; Dorier et al., “La diffusion des ensembles”; Dorier, Berry-Chikahoui, and Bridier, “Fermeture résidentielle”; Dorier and Dario, “Gated communities.”
58. Dario, *Géographie d'une ville fragmentée*.
59. Dorier et al., “Ensembles résidentiels fermés”; Dorier et al., “La diffusion des ensembles”; Dorier, Berry-Chikahoui, and Bridier, “Fermeture résidentielle”; Dorier and Dario, “Gated communities.”
60. McKenzie, *Privatopia*.
61. Dorier and Dario, “Gated communities”; and Toth, *La qualité environnementale*.
62. Dario, *Géographie d'une ville fragmentée*.
63. Dorier, Berry-Chikahoui, and Bridier, “Fermeture résidentielle”; and Dorier and Dario, “Des marges choisies.”
64. These tools would be the extension of the “rental permit,” a vote in favor of social housing planning (PLH), or modifications to the local plan for inter-municipal urbanism (PLUI) in order to guarantee areas of social diversity.

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