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Taking care of people, taking care of spaces: vulnerable actors and architectural renovation in the context of urban austerity

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1. Austerity and care of public buildings

This paper will draw on insights from a research project¹ that aims to analyse the effects of “care for repair”. Fitz and Krasny understand care for repair as something beyond mere restoration, whose quality is to bring new uses or new functions as reparative for buildings, humans and non-humans alike (2019: 20). Following Denis and Pontille we argue that is even mostly the idea of maintenance that becomes central in our cities today:

“This ‘ecocentric’ ethic can inspire an ambitious and desirable policy of maintenance. It invites us to develop ways of caring for things that are aware of the multiplicity of material interdependencies, and that cultivate an awareness of the fragility of environments and the relationships that develop within them.” (Denis & Pontille, 2022: 219).

We would like, first of all, to replace the maintenance in the context of austerity urbanism. This is to be understood as a reduction in public budgets in favour of new cycles of innovation in the fields of outsourcing and privatisation of urban public services (Peck, 2012), which becomes a routine policy rather than a response to the urgency of the 2008 economic crisis. The spatial effects of austerity urbanism can vary due to the interaction between the redistributive capacities of state policies and the local policy capacities (Addison & Artioli, 2020). Among those effects, the alienation and optimization of municipal real estate is becoming more and more important in cities' policies and it is leading to new forms of regulatory documents and planning devices. The repair and maintenance of existing buildings is in fact a key issue of the budget reductions as it concerns not only the structural and internal security expenses but also, more and more, their energy efficiency. In an austerity context, municipalities are realising that the burden of hundreds or thousands of square metres not only need to be repaired, but ask for a more intelligent maintenance, when they do not simply become a source of income through selling. In this sense, the transformation of those municipal assets can lead to ambiguous policies: some, clearly neoliberal, oriented to alienation; others, more or less alternative, inventing new forms of regeneration and governance. Public buildings are then a good lens to see how the imposition of austerity measures in cities opens up a discussion on care for both people and spaces. In some cities, the management of public buildings is actually allowing new forms of partnership between institutions and citizens in the co-creation of public services.

Through an ethnographic approach, our research attempts to understand which factors enable these alternative policies to facilitate non-capitalist economies (Gibson-Graham, 2016) and commoning practices. The hypothesis is that caring attitudes in political and architectural spheres are one of the main conditions for this emergence. The research is observing closely the tangled histories of buildings and communities in some French, Italian and Spanish cities with municipalist traditions (in particular Grenoble, Nantes, Bologna, Turin and Barcelona).

¹ *CARE Commoning processes in Austerity urbanism: spatial REgeneration and governance* (ANR-22-CE55-0002), 2023-2026, founded by the National Research Agency (<https://www.pacte-grenoble.fr/programmes/care>), coordinated by Federica Gatta. This research has been preceded by the research *Grinnurb Grenoble face à l'innovation urbaine*, 2019-2021, founded by the Idex Grenoble Alpes and coordinated by Federica Gatta.

In this paper we will focus in particular on one case study in Grenoble. It concerns a project designed to accommodate care practices, combining housing and activities, in a 19th-century villa that first has to be refurbished. Like five other municipal buildings, this villa was the subject of a call for innovative urban projects in 2017 (Gatta & al., 2023). This call was inspired by calls experimented in Paris since 2014 whose objective is to adapt “public land transfer procedures to the challenges of innovation. Sites are put out to tender [by a local authority], accompanied by a set of 'special conditions' [...] expressing expectations in terms of innovation - constructive, technical, but also in terms of uses. The definition of programs is thus at least partially transferred to the candidate groups" (Gomes, 2020: 5). In Grenoble the call has the ambition to “reawaken” certain under-used buildings in the municipal heritage “by helping Grenoblois rediscover them through new uses” (Gren’ de Projets, 2017). While most of these buildings are of undeniable heritage interest, their main need is for maintenance and renovation. The call is linked to a *Plan de sauvegarde des services publics*, created by the ecologist municipality in 2014 in order to react to austerity conditions. One of its goals is to optimise the costs of managing the city's extensive property holdings and to make the existing stock more energy-efficient, by renovating the busiest facilities and thinking about pooling the occupancy of those that are less busy (city technician, November 2020). At the same time the municipality wants to be sure that the projects respect the general interest, the openness to the public and the patrimonial value of the buildings. As a result, winners or shortlisted, the five projects finally selected for the call are not backed by any private developer and just one of them (the smaller) has been alienated. Most of the project leaders are coalitions of small business owners or of local associations that propose cultural and/or social service activities. Those groups have obtained long-term leases and their renovation projects are accompanied by the city which ensures that projects respect the criteria of the call.

The building we are interested in here², has been the subject of a project by a collective of third-sector players associated with a social landlord. The project involves the cohabitation of both living and working spaces for precarious people and various shared spaces designed to facilitate encounters between precarious residents and people from the outside. We are dealing here with an atypical living space that will have to protect the privacy of its occupants, facilitate the work of the caretakers who will manage it, and at the same time lend itself to uses that are open and programmatically uncertain. The analysis of this case study will allow us to observe an ethic of care in the making. Our observations show how this ethic is the fruit of a process of negotiation and dialogue within the project process between different agents. By asking “how it all [*will*] work in everydaylife” (Denis & Pontille, 2022), we are looking at what is often invisible: the process of designing the maintenance of a place and its commoning conditions.

2. Agents, caretakers and caresupports

In this second part we will outline the portrait of four agents involved in the project in order to underline the forms of interdependence and care which characterise them: the villa itself, the collective and users, the architects in charge of refurbishing the site and the contract signed with

² The Villa Clément case study is the object of an ethnographic survey involving interviews with members of the collective and the architects in charge of the rehabilitation project, as well as participant observations at collective meetings over one year in 2020-2021.

the City. Afterwards we will see how these actors negotiate the project and its ethics through an example of a meeting about the accessibility of the space.

2.1 The villa

This 19th-century bourgeois residence has a distinctive architectural style, making it a key part of Grenoble's heritage especially for its monumental woodwork staircase, 19th-century cement tiles and stained glass windows on the veranda. Situated on the right bank of the Isère river, to the east of the Bastille foothills, this streetside building complex occupies the corner of a wooded plot of approximately 4 255 m². The vast park is home to a number of remarkable tree species and has preserved its early 20th-century garden features, with pathways and rockery borders. Villa Clément was built at the end of the 19th century. At the time, it comprised eleven rooms and benefited from its current ornamental park. An extension was added to the west at the beginning of the 20th century. The villa is a building that has already undergone numerous transformations over the course of its history, and has suffered from twenty years of under-occupation. Previously used for residential purposes, it became, after the war, the site of municipal activities (a leisure centre) and then a centre for disabled children, before being abandoned and left unused, it is now partly occupied by a regional association for employment training. As mentioned by the architects, in the 70s the villa was already heavily transformed in order to fit the accessibility norms of the time. Today the building is not in a bad situation, but seepage into the walls of certain garden-floor rooms has weakened the floors in this part of the building (architect, October 2019). Within the call for innovative urban projects, the villa was one of the buildings with the most identified (but also damaged) heritage value. It is one of the first “vulnerables” in this project.

2.2 The collective and the users

The villa will host: 9 boarding houses, a flat for short stays for single parents in precarious situations, workshops for professional reintegration, a kennel for homeless and precarious people, social integration projects, a shop selling refurbished bicycles and a bicycle repair workshop, a beehive, some work and exhibition spaces. The beneficiaries of the project will be: single, ageing, homeless people; single parents for parental care; young people far from employment; dogs; integration employees and customers of the bicycle workshop; local associations and other city inhabitants. The project therefore aims to accommodate people who live, work and provide services, as well as more occasional users: customers and work space tenants. This raises issues of cohabitation:

“Unlike most boarding houses, it proposes that the collective facilities be shared with other associations, the public and partners. Because of this particularity, which enables a very ‘civic openness’ but can also call into question the residents' appropriation of the common areas, from the outset of the project, we wanted to involve boarding house residents in the project process.” (Response for the call, 2018)

The Villa Clément collective is made up of a wide range of players: future users of the site (both permanent and temporary), local associations, members of the associations involved in the project, coordinators as well as the social landlord (Grenoble Habitat). The RSA38 association³, is a key element in the project, representing knowledge on the history of the associative sector in Grenoble

³ The Revenu de solidarité active (RSA) is a French social welfare benefit providing a minimum income to people with few resources. 38 is the code of the department Isère in which Grenoble is situated.

guaranteeing also the history of the site. The aim of the associations involved in the project is to relay the needs of the precarious public, such as the person who is in charge of the kennel project and who seeks to respond to all types of needs encountered by people who own a pet, especially those who are homeless. The member of the RSA38 association points out that the project is aimed at all types of precariousness:

“We have social integration, RSA recipients, and the street. If we can demonstrate, on the scale of a single site, that user expertise can give shape to programs adapted to these groups and be sustainable over time, we'll have won!” (October 2019).

The collective therefore includes associations specialised in housing of precarious populations (the Relais Ozanam and Oiseau Bleu), as well as in professional reintegration and peer workers (Mutualité française and Cycle and go). What's new about the project is the early collaboration of these several pioneering structures in the fields of social integration and care, enabling them to make the most of their expertise in bringing together activities that have their own specificities. Moreover, the idea for this collaboration originally came from Grenoble Habitat, the social landlord, who wanted to involve the members of the collective closely in the process of building the project, as well as the architects commissioned, who have specific expertise in the repair and preservation of heritage buildings.

2.3 The architects

PNG is an architecture workshop created in 2007 by three architects, all graduated from Grenoble architecture school. One of them has a specific diploma in architectural restoration. They work between two sites: in Paris and in Voiron, a rural area nearby Grenoble. They have been chosen by Grenoble Habitat for the heritage expertise necessary for this kind of historical renovation but also for their youth and open-mindedness. On one hand, they are called to defend the attention paid on the site and its fragility:

“We were approached by Grenoble Habitat because we're architects and we've been trained as heritage architects since 2015, and we were interested in ‘what already exists’ in the architectural process. We started out working on projects like this, more or less by chance, and we found a lot of interest in trying to do with what was already there, to bring things back to life.” (November 2020)

But they defend also the fact that the uses planned by the collective will be just a part of all the past and future uses that this space will have to support:

“[There are some requests] we were never able to translate into architecture because it had far too great an impact on the villa. And for a unique and particular use that is not even guaranteed to last. [...] So there's a real trade-off to be made here.” (November 2020).

On the other hand, they also showed interest in the participatory process, which was a novelty for them, and sometimes a challenge.

2.4 The contract

After the call, the projects have been followed by a city technician specialised in project management. This technician represents the presence of the institution that provides support, not financial, but in terms of management engineering, helping to find support and realise the project business plan. The technician also guarantees compliance with the innovation criteria required by the call, firstly the respect of patrimonial value of the site and the openness of the activities. This

task takes shape both in regular meetings, but also, and most of all, on the realisation of a specific contract:

“We're doing it for the first time. We adapt the tools. [...] Through this partnership agreement it was a give-and-take. We each have rights and duties [...] We're bound by them, we've chosen them, we've pampered them, we've brought them to what they are today. [...] In the deliberations of the jury that selected the projects, it is written that the City would formalise the partnership through a partnership agreement that recognizes the fact that the City has the right to negotiate by saying, for example, as you have seen: [...] we're going to work to a certain timetable; we're going to optimise the architectural project; we're going to look at the costs. [...] In fact, there were some safeguard measures.” (July 2020).

Even if the technician is absent from the internal meetings of the collective, the contract with the City is the foundation of the duty of taking care of the space and also not privatising it, which can sometimes be a source of contradictory positions.

2.5 Public heritage and caresupports

In order to understand those contradictions, this section aims to show how these agents had to negotiate in order to reach agreement on the building project. The architectural planning of the site often faces disagreements or requires regular arbitration, given the multiplicity of planned uses and the villa's heritage constraints. We're going to focus in particular on a scene that played out during a meeting on 17th of July 2020 that brought together the collective, the architects and representatives of some of the associations involved (RSA38, the solidarity kennel, a neighbourhood association, the Mutualité française et the Relais Ozanam).

The meeting deals with the most complex issue: managing access between permanent users of the villa and visitors. It starts in the morning only with the collective talking about the governance of the association. Following a meeting that took place one month before, they discuss again of the articulation of different levels of governance: the association's office, some thematic divisions linked to the different functions (living, farming, programming, sharing), a house council for everyday management (including users). Moreover, they agree on the fact that a householder is needed in order to take care of the everyday life of the place: managing stocks, taking out garbage, mediation between users, secretary and communication. At the same time the people representing the inhabitants of the district and the volunteers express their fear that this organisation is going to be too rigid and that it will exclude those who come from the outside. They agree then on the idea of “guaranteeing the void” i.e. leaving some uncertainty for making space for the unplanned. Then the architects join the meeting. The purpose is to discuss with them the architectural plans in order to fix the uses assigned to each space. Three issues appear to be problematic in particular: the shared kitchen, the ground floor office and the doors opening system. Each of them has to deal with the conflict between two kinds of necessities: on one side, letting the different users meet and protect them; and on the other respecting the rules of a public-access building (which is a quite ambitious choice of the collective) and the needs of an ancient building.

The architects bring technical plans without furniture, only a A3 print per floor. They maybe do not have thought to this moment as needing some more comfortable mediums of discussion. This obliges everybody to get close and to take time to interpret the plan.

Talking about the kitchen, one of the members representing the boarding house explains that, even if people have kitchens in their apartments, the collective kitchen is needed for regular common meals that allow the cohesion and prevent solitude of people. They are going to be 10

on those occasions. But one architect says that the kitchen is designed for 5 people. People try to find solutions to enlarge it, but the architects remember that the plans approved by the Municipality concern a “familial kitchen”. This creates some tension, a woman says: “you should come to see one of our boarding houses to see how important the kitchen is!”. This by implying the architects are not caring enough about the vulnerable people that are going to live there and their specific needs:

“The boarding house will accommodate people who will be living there for many years, some of whom will pass away within the walls of the villa. The collective kitchen is going to be their kitchen. I think we need to be careful about that, we need to take care of this place!” (collective member, July 2020)

The architects then explain that, even if the kitchen space and furniture is not very big, the “A room”⁴, just close, can be used to extend the kitchen space with an opening wall.

This seems to be enough to satisfy and talk about other subjects. The collective proposes to talk about the workshops, where there is again a discussion on some big incompatibilities between the need of workers in terms of spaces, accessibility and comfort, and the constraint of the space, in particular the facade. No solution is found even if all the actors try to find alternatives from their point of view, so the meeting moves to the next point: the ground floor office. This office is needed for the boarding house, but it must also become the place of work of the householder which is now very important for the project. The architects are surprised, they designed only a small space of 5 square metres with a small window:

“In terms of fire regulations, C room must have a second access to the outside to provide an emergency exit that’s why the space we had allocated to the office must remain through-access.” (architect, July 2020)

The collective explains the idea of the householder and the security needs of the boarding house office. It is actually something new for the architects, but they try to find a solution proposing that the “C room” becomes then the office as it was in any case though as a workspace. After some discussion everybody seems satisfied with this idea which seems to give some flexibility to the future uses. The atmosphere is now getting a bit more relaxed. But it becomes soon a bit tense again when it comes to the discussion of space accessibility. Through the debate it emerges that the fact of keeping the original doors for patrimonial reasons, plus the fire security norms for a public-access building, creates a series of difficulties.

"When you close off a room in the part of the villa that will be a public reception area [which has specific standards], you have to empty it completely and close it off over its entire surface area. If you open up part of this space, you have to open it up completely. [...] That's the problem with the villa. Here, we decided to keep the original doors for heritage reasons and the doors do not open in the good direction [usually recommended for fire and public access standards]." (architect, July 2020)

In fact, the ground floor is going to be at the same time the entrance hall for the boarding houses, a workspace, a collective kitchen, a space for events, the single parents house. The future boarding house responsible remembers the importance of not giving access to all the spaces to the residents that can sometimes be disruptive or even “paranoiac”: “I had a case in a boarding house where a resident repainted an entire corridor!”. She tries to propose programmable entry passes saying they work very well in other boarding houses she works in. But the architects react with some rigidity

⁴ In the architect's plans, ground floor rooms are named A, B and C.

by underlying that the other places she knows are new buildings, while this is an ancient one. This is why they asked for an organisation chart in order to decide who is going to have keys of which door. Even if people are frowning eyebrows, in the end everybody agrees on the idea that the householder will help in getting this organisation more easily. We could ask ourselves if the householder will be able to “guarantee the void” within all these rules and limitations due to the complexity of mixed uses.

3. Conclusions

Apparently, this situation is showing a lack of care as it is reproducing an opposition between relational and spatial issues:

“The point is not that contemporary architects and planners are all uncaring; the point is that they are caring wrongly. They are caring about things, and, often, about the wrong things. [...] The problem is that the pay check money itself is not care; it needs to be transformed into clean clothing, food, a safe and pleasant place to live. Doing so requires participating in the ongoing relations of those who are cared for. Buildings protect people from the elements. But by themselves, they do not provide care; what happens within the buildings, how the building fits within its location and context, how it was built, who it will house or displace, all of these aspects vitally affect the nature of the caring that the building does.” (Tronto, 2019 : 27)

But what we observed here is actually only a part of the construction of a dialogue which engages all the agents in the compatibility of future uses and the interdependencies of people relations. The architects are forced here to participate in the relations of those who are cared for and each participant becomes a care professional who emphasises his expertise in caring. Some are attentive to ensuring that the vulnerable members of the public in their care are well looked after, while others are attentive to ensuring that the doors they open and close all day long are well taken care of. By confronting these two gestures of attention, architects and social workers have taken the time to confront together what repair tends to underestimate, or even invisibilize: maintenance and its relational dimension. What Denis and Pontille (2022) call:

“the role that humans allow themselves to play in the life of things” (21) and that obliges us to “concern ourselves with what is not an event, but on the contrary (...) the small, unimportant gestures that neither break nor restore the order of things, and yet play a full part in their existence and are even vital to the stability of the relationships that humans maintain with most of them.” (52)

Denis and Pontille, following Hilary Sample, point out that maintenance relies on the incessant and often invisibilised agitation of caretakers who take charge of a variety of minute operations. Placed end to end, these operations “weave the fabric of an alternative time which, although it is the condition of possibility, seems foreign to the time of the architects and that of the inhabitants” (Ibid: 53). In the case study of the Villa Clément, we can see how architects and social workers together have come to reconsider this alternative time and reintroduce it into the heart of a process that too often excludes it: that of the project that precedes the actual maintenance and putting into use of a building. This attention made to the maintenance brings to light the role of both spatial and relational care supports in enabling an ethic of care to be discussed and negotiated.

We argue that this very small case allows us to make the hypothesis that today regaining control of municipal assets is not simply a matter of space optimization but a matter of finding a way to ensure that the general interest corresponds to the increasingly transversal needs of people and

their living environments. At the same time the austerity context in which these new needs emerge raises the question of the neoliberal logics which are surrounding the project: which responsibility is given to private actors to take in charge the general interest, especially in economic terms? Behind the contractualisation process, which is the role that the public administration is taking in the daily care of the place and its users?

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