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SEA, Sun and Fun: Georges Candilis’ researches on leisure units (1963–1979)

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Added in 2014 on the list of French Historical Monuments, the holiday village of Les Carrats, built by Georges Candilis along the Mediterranean coast (1966–1970), is widely recognized as a “timeless model” of the Modern Movement for its grid composition and architectural qualities. Furthermore, as underlined by our previous paper¹, this village is representative for a wide research on “leisure housing” developed by Candilis from 1963 within his planning mission of the Leucate–Barcarès “leisure unit”. Indeed, on the one hand, in order to meet the expectations of this development program intended for 70,000 to 120,000 summer vacationists, Candilis established urban principles to host different scales and types of accommodation. On the other hand, during his general coordination duty, he had the opportunity, alone or with other architects, to design and build several housing units as well as public or commercial facilities. Candilis summarized these experiments in the book *Researches on leisure architecture* (1972), by means of theoretical diagrams, views of construction models or achievements organized by scales and types (from horizontal combinations to urbanism). Thus, he raised the Leucate–Barcarès project to a theoretical level, as a case study for a new approach of the human environment, matching the needs of the contemporary “leisure society” (as defined by Joffre Dumazedier in *Vers une civilisation des loisirs*, 1962). Based on a new lecture of Candilis’ writing and archives (partially deficient), this paper aims to reveal this specific research and to assess its status in the architect’s work and within the Post–War historiography.

1. Introduction

As shown by Tom Avermaete, beyond its ambition to define new theoretical concepts (such as *stem* and *web*), the work of Candilis–Josic–Woods “emerges as an attempt to bring architectural knowledge in congruence with the everyday reality of urban culture”².

The roots of this attitude are, without any doubt, Candilis and Woods’ collaborations in Morocco with Michel Ecochard and ATBAT–Afrique (from 1951 to 1954), exploring the potential of the 8x8 grid to generate built combinations echoing the ancient medinas urban fabric while offering “new forms” of housing. In the Carrières centrales neighborhood, besides the horizontal development of patio houses, the Semiramis and Nid d’Abeille buildings demonstrated their “wish to adapt modern architecture to local cultures and

identities” while satisfying the essential comfort needs (light, space, hygiene, etc.)³ (Fig. 1).

Candilis–Josic–Woods’ approach is also linked to the Post–War CIAM debates, notably the discussion on the “habitat for the greatest number” held during the CIAM 9 (1953)⁴. Like many young architects attending this meeting, they believed that contemporary habitat should take into consideration two local “contingencies”: the “natural environment” (which “conditions the choice of architectural materials”) and the “social environment, affinities necessary for the foundation and the life of social groups”. They also adopted the concept of “evolutionary architecture”, based on the prior idea of a “constant and universal relationship between the *permanent* (climate/nature of the soil) and the *evolving* (human environment/built environment)”⁵. Therefore, as Woods wrote in 1961, they considered that their role as architects and urban planners was “to establish the optimum conditions in which the present becomes the future” – that is to say to establish an “organic *milieu*” in which “buildings appropriate to their function can exist, and to encourage a reaction between these buildings and their *milieu*”⁶.



Figure 1. Carrières centrales in Casablanca, Morocco, 1951–53. Service de l’urbanisme and Michel Ecochard, horizontal 8x8 grid: housing typology, site plan and partial aerial view. ATBAT–Afrique, Georges Candilis, Shadrach Woods, Sémiramis block: undated view. Sources: Tom Avermate, *Another Modern*: 140–141 (up) ; *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* no. 60, 1955: 37 (down left) ; Maurice Besset, *New French Architecture*, Teufen, Arthur Niggli: 72 (down right).

From 1954 to 1960, Candilis–Josic–Woods had few opportunities to fulfill this wide ambition. But the team’s nomination in 1961 for the new town of Toulouse–Le–Mirail, followed in 1963 by Candilis’ appointment within the Languedoc–Roussillon urban planning agency, offered exciting case studies to explore the possibilities of implementing this “organic *milieu*”.

2. Building new environments

Throughout their first projects, Candilis–Josic–Woods established a register of conceptual tools, among which are the constructive grid, the symbolic figure of the “svastika” (usable at various scales) and the housing schemes of the patio house and the semi–duplex apartment. The quest for building flexibility, scalability or expandability also led to question the “rational relation” between two “families” of elements: *determined*, permanent and universal (essentially constructive) and *undetermined*, constantly changing (function, interior–exterior relationship, aesthetic)⁷.

In 1961, the competition for the new town of Toulouse–le–Mirail offered Candilis–Josic–Woods an opportunity to summarize their multi–scale researches. Facing the complex challenge of a new town program for 100,000 inhabitants, planned on the outskirts of Toulouse, they first defined an innovative concept: the “stem”, a linear “street space” raised at 4 meters above the natural ground, “urban framework [...] capable of adapting along the different stages of realization⁸”. Then, in the first “experimental zone of Bellefontaine”, they “applied three different grouping systems of housing complexes:

1. *Linear large blocks of various heights articulated at angles of 90° or 120°, centered around a vertical core of transportation (elevators, staircases).*
2. *Low–rise buildings articulated at a 90° angle, centered around a staircase;*
3. *Patio villas* ⁹.

Corresponding to “three different conditions of family life–styles and allowing the inhabitants a choice”¹⁰, these housing groups were built with concrete techniques, which allowed few internal transformations. However, the architects tried to give a flexibility of use to the interior spaces. The quest of an architecture that could “be transformed at any given time” and would offer “a great liberty for room occupation” is another construction system: the “light, transportable structures” planned along the linear “street space”, intended to inform “demountable constructions” (also called “containers”) for the yet “undefined, temporary urban activities”¹¹ (shops, schools, etc.) (Fig. 2).

The conceptual principles of Le Mirail will find an echo in Leucate–Barcarès. But for the leisure unit created along the wild Languedoc–Roussillon coast, the logic of implementation is reversed. Starting from the wider landscape, the objectives are indeed:

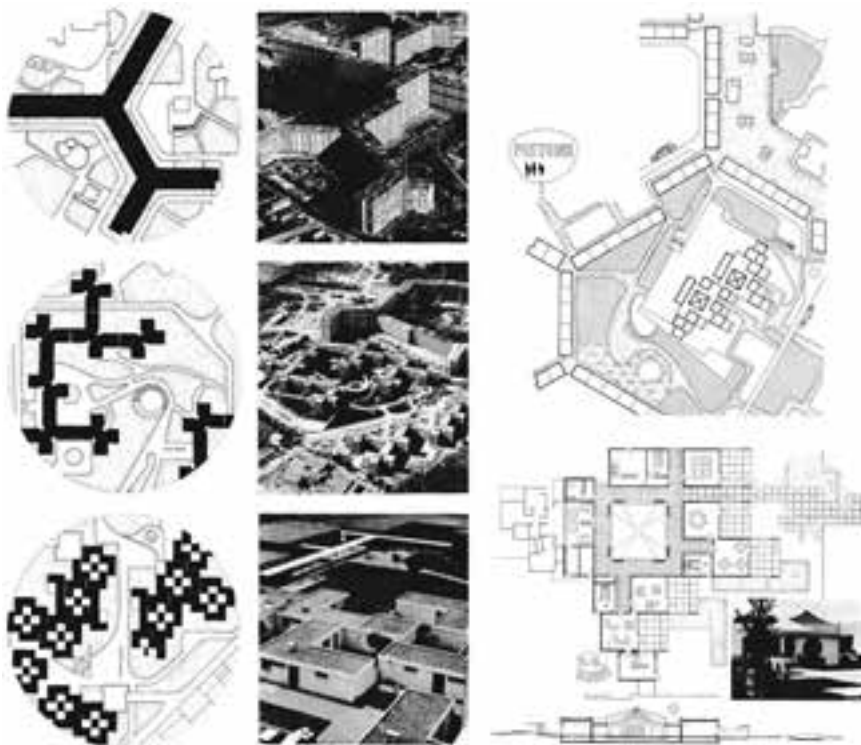


Figure 2. Candilis–Josic–Woods, Toulouse Le Mirail, 1961–65: grouping systems of Bellefontaine (left), first schools built with the dismantlable construction system (right). Source: *Toulouse–Le Mirail, Birth of a New Town*: 40, 68–69.

First to develop a site directed to sailing holidays [...], calling for the creation of harbors on the sea and the lake [...] with links between these two basis elements [...].

Second, to construct dwellings, hotels, villages, facilities, etc. [...], a new architecture dictated by simplicity, economy and climatic conditions (enclosed areas, patios for dwellings, gardens for groups of apartment–blocks, etc.).

Third, to create an element of basic architecture in the form of a urban linear center [...] descending by stages from lake to sea and bestriding the circulation ways for fast and local car traffic.¹²

3. Leisure housing combinations

During the first decades of implementation, the primary architecture of the site has proven its capacity to progressively host a wide range of housing and equipment projects. Candilis, alone or with other architects, designed and/or achieved nearly twenty of these projects – from social tourism villages or villas districts to private apartment buildings and facilities. He had

therefore the opportunity to demonstrate the “new architecture” he had in mind. (Fig. 03)

From an aesthetic point of view, his housing achievements are a result of a sleek and harmonious play on small concrete volumes, enhanced by pops of colors. From a design point of view, as synthetized in the book *Researches on leisure architecture* (1972), their grouping systems decline from a skillful game on the horizontal and vertical combination on a grid of three figures: patio houses, ribbon houses and puzzle houses. These figures were inspired by both the traditional Mediterranean typologies of villas or houses aligned along the narrow streets, opened to the exterior spaces and landscape. (Fig. 04)

In the footsteps of Le Mirail, a composition of patio houses was proposed for a private housing estate: the “Greek village” (1968–72 approx.). These houses, based on a 2 x 3m grid and grouped by four units following the svastika scheme,

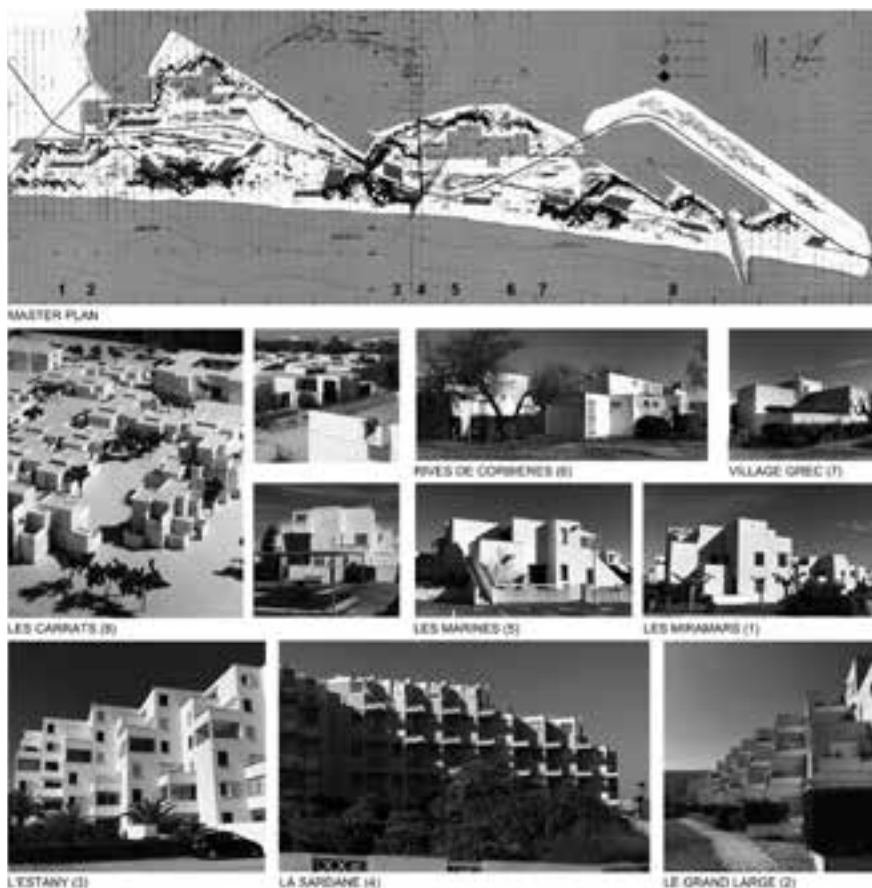


Figure 03. Master plan of 1965, views of various built projects. Sources: Candilis archives (Master plan & Carrats model view), photo report by Duport (2022).

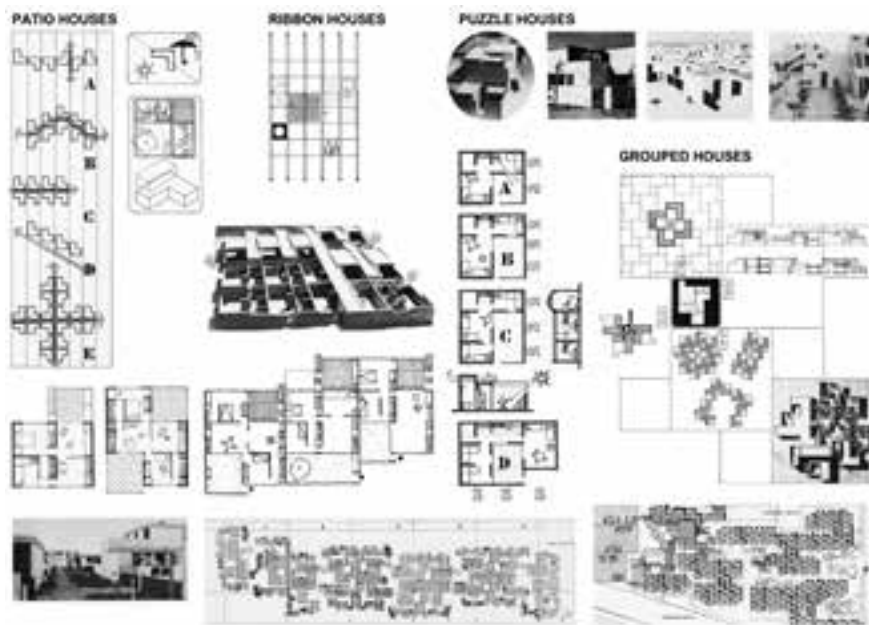


Figure 04. Housing figures: patio, ribbon, puzzle and grouped houses. Source: *Recherches sur l'architecture des loisirs*: various pages (edited by Blain, 2022).

are served by narrow alleys and paths. For the holiday village of the Touring-Club (1965–66), Candilis made an attempt with the figure of the ribbon house. Structured by a 3,50 x 2,40m grid and presented as “a continuous architectural structure formed of standard bungalows of two types, assembled to obtain essential variety¹³”, that project had no follow-up. The puzzle house figure was explored for the next social holiday village study, that led to achievement: Les Carrats (1966–72). Declined from the patio house and based on a 3,30m x 2,20m grid (which can be “reduced or enlarged according the needs”), the puzzle house allowed to create a “continuous and rational organization of volumes in which one dovetails into another¹⁴”. Like in the Greek village, some housing units were combined by four, around a central technical block. Others explored the various possibilities of transition between “dwellings at ground levels assembled in a horizontal direction and dwelling combined into vertical blocks¹⁵”.

The puzzle house figure was also used for two other social holiday villages, made up mostly of horizontal combinations: Rives des Corbières and Les Portes du Roussillon (with Maria Kandreviotis, 1967–72). Private owners also benefited from Candilis’ skills. While the svastika structured the low density housing estates of Les Marines and Les Miramars (1969–73), a first vertical combination was experienced with the Estany building (1968–72). In echo to Le Mirail, the project adopted on a 45° “system” to align the row of apartments on each floor, distributed by a central corridor. The same system generated Y or V compositions in larger programs like La Sardanne (1969–73) and Le Grand Large (1971–74).

4. Towards a new architecture

Most of Candilis' housing projects in Leucate-Barcarès were built with standard concrete or masonry units and bricks for the partitions. Thus, they offer no real innovation on that matter. But the real innovation concerned the way these constructions were implemented in the landscape and the relationships established between the housing units and the open private or public spaces. Freedom was the leading idea for the "architecture of leisure" wanted by Candilis in response to the needs of the emerging "leisure society"¹⁶. Besides dwellings, this architecture encompassed facilities for various activities (commercial, administrative, cultural and recreational). Like in Toulouse, the ambition was to host them in the "polyvalent primary structure" of two pedestrian linear centers, providing a great flexibility of use¹⁷. This idea will never get off the ground. But a few built projects showed the way.

The first built example was the service building of Les Carrats, a mat building made of a prefabricated concrete structure assembled like a "meccano"¹⁸. Candilis used that system for other constructions of different scales, like a school of navigation (1970–75) and a Harbor office pavilion (Capitainerie, 1975). He also developed with Anja Blomstedt another scale of constructive research, inspired by boat cabins: a futurist orange plastic module called the *Hexacube* (1968–75). That module, a cube of 2.5 meters of side (300 kg), is made of interchangeable prefabricated shells and hexagonal panels that can be easily assembled in two hours and offer freedom of combination and evolution. The prototype, was patented on October 22, 1971. Several experiments were made, among which a housing unit of two modules (living room/bedroom/dining room + facilities) and a "camping of the year 2000" of twenty modules.

A flashy *Hexacube* was positioned on the beach in front of Les Carrats' service building. For a while, with its restaurant, collective kitchen and bar, sometimes transformed at night in discotheque open to the beach, that building became the "fun palace" of the area. But shortly after, Candilis had the opportunity to build a real public entertainment building: The Kyklos, including restaurants, bars, nightclubs and shops (with Paul Gardia et Maurice Zavagno, 1968).

In the early 1970's, does all this represent, as hoped by Candilis, the beginning of "a new intellectual and social attitude, a new manner of thinking, of living ... a new culture"¹⁹? The commercial brochures are there to defend this hypothesis. (Fig. 05)

5. Conclusion

Our analysis has shown how much the theoretical project of Leucate-Barcarès leisure unit relies on a conceptual toolbox which has developed since the 1950s, as well as a generous utopia of new human environment (urban and natural). Within this mission, Candilis did not only put forward a careful planning approach taking into account geographical particularities²⁰ but also tried to define "a new architecture [...]" so that the new human environment may stay shape, in harmony with the wonderful elements of nature²¹.



Figure 05. The fun theory of the 70s. Source: Images from promotional materials, Candilis archives (edited by Blain, 2022).

While in new town of Le Mirail Candilis–Josic–Woods had to build rapidly a large quantity of dwellings on the same model, mostly large social housing buildings, at Leucate–Barcarès, Candilis was able to experiment a more open process, allowing for staggered implementation over time. He took part in it, building housing complexes that served as models on the field and as parts (or built examples) of a theoretical approach in his book of 1972.

Nowadays, some of the achievements published by Candilis in 1972 have gained a heritage recognition: Les Carrats (Historical Monuments List, 2014), Greek village, holiday villages of Rives des Corbières and Les Portes du Roussillon, apartment building L’Estany and La Sardagne (20th Century Heritage Label, 2012). That recognition guided our research and the consultation of Candilis archives in Paris, which contain a huge number of project files related to Leucate–Barcarès: up to 35 references, among which approximately 25 realizations. This recognition therefore seemed small in comparison to the magnitude of Candilis’ mission, which would merit an in–depth case study.

In the meantime, we could question the legacy of Candilis’ researches on leisure housing and, more generally, the resonance in this planning approach of Bakema’s idea of “building for an open society”²².

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Notes

- 1 See Blain and Duport, “From Leisure Housing to Modern Heritage: village of Les Carrats by Georges Candilis”, 2021.
- 2 Avermaete, *Another Modern: The Post–War Architecture and Urbanism of Candilis–Josic–Woods*, 384.
- 3 Eleb, “An alternative to functionalist Universalism: Ecochard, Candilis and ATBAT–Afrique”, 68.
- 4 See Ascoral, *CIAM 9, Aix–en–Provence (19–25 juillet 1953). Contribution à la Charte de l’Habitat*. Paris: Ed. de l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, 1953.
- 5 Idem.
- 6 Candilis, Josic, Woods, « Urbanisme », *Le Carré bleu* no. 3 (1961), 3.
- 7 Candilis « Proposition pour un habitat évolutif », *Le Carré bleu* no. 2 (1959), 4.
- 8 Josic, « A la recherche d’une structure urbaine », *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* no. 101 (April–May 1962), 50.
- 9 Candilis, Josic, Woods, *Toulouse–Le Mirail. Birth of a New Town*, 40.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., 62.
- 12 Candilis, *Recherches sur l’architecture des loisirs*, 131.
- 13 « Village de vacances de l’unité Leucate–Barcarès », *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* 131, April–May 1967, 17.
- 14 Candilis, *Recherches...*, 35.
- 15 Ibid., 59
- 16 Ibid., 12.
- 17 Ibid., 114
- 18 See Castellanos–Gómez and Domingo–Calabuig, “Meccano: the building game, the architecture of commerce”, 2015.
- 19 Candilis, *Recherches...*, op. cit., 11 (translation of the article about Les Carrats : Georges Candilis, « Vers une architecture du loisir », *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* 131, April–May 1967: 15–17)
- 20 « Rapport de l’agence d’urbanisme pour l’aménagement touristique du littoral du Languedoc–Roussillon » (January 1964), in *Notes et études documentaires* no. 3326: *L’aménagement touristique du littoral Languedoc–Roussillon* (Paris, La Documentation Française, 13 octobre 1966): 53.
- 21 Candilis, *Recherches...*, 12.
- 22 As pointed out by Dirk Van den Heuvel, this idea “involves several relevant issues: the role of the government in relation to spatial planning, the relationship between architectural design and user, and the space for a collective and individual identity in the context of a democratized mass society” [“The Open Society”]