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## **► To cite this version:**

Samuel Deprez. De l'effacement de l'identité architecturale et bâtie du Marais-Vernier : une chronique du rêve pavillonnaire comme expression de la société de consommation. Colloque international L'architecture vernaculaire, un appui au développement territorial, Ecole Nationale d'Architecture de Rabat, Oct 2024, Rabat, Maroc. pp.19-25, <10.21741/9781644903391-3>. <hal-04905960>

**HAL Id: hal-04905960**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04905960v1>**

Submitted on 3 Apr 2026

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# Erasing the architectural and built identity of the Marais Vernier: A chronicle of the suburban dream as an expression of consumer society

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**Keywords:** Natural Environment and Landscape Organization, Architectural and Built Identity, Land Use Change, Sururbanisation, Consumer Society

**Abstract.** At the heart of an ancient meander of the Seine, the Marais Vernier micro-region (France - Normandy) is renowned for its vast wetlands, an ecological sanctuary protected by multiple French and European schemes. It is also an exceptional area in terms of architecture and buildings, the fruit of local determinisms that have dictated the nature and form of the habitat and land. While the “chaumière”, a thatched, half-timbered house, is the land's defining feature, its place in the landscape is gradually disappearing under the weight of the urbanization movement initiated in the early 1960s and the opening up of the area. Since then, in a random arrangement and denial of the existing, singularity and richness, the various forms of built-up areas that have marked each new phase of individual construction in France since the post-war period have been sedimented. The result has been a long process of erasing built, land, and architectural identity, driven by the realization of the suburban dream and the myth of the single-family home as the material manifestation of consumer society.

## Introduction

Nestled in an ancient meander of the Seine, some thirty kilometers from Le Havre (Normandy, France), the Marais Vernier micro-region is today primarily known and recognized for its vast wetlands, an ecological sanctuary for countless protected species, enhanced and preserved by multiple national and European classification measures. The area's uniqueness and richness stem from an ancient hydrogeological process that over time has dictated its shape, topography and soil structure. During the great ice ages of the Quaternary, the erosive action of water on the chalky plateaux of the Caux to the north of the Seine's present bed and the Roumois to the south formed numerous meanders, giving the river its original sinuous course. During the last ice age, the river was redesigned and shifted to a northerly position, abandoning the meander it formed at the Marais Vernier as it is today. Enclosed by a barrier beach, the area became a tidal mudflat, where 4,500 hectares of one of France's largest peat bogs gradually formed. In the southern part of the area, a dense forest borders the summit of the hillside, which closes off the area and marks the boundary of this vast semi-circular depression, where the first identified traces of human settlement date back to the 11th century.

These original witnesses mark the starting point of a complex and singular process of anthropization that took place over a long period to create the conditions for human life in a natural environment that was hostile in many respects. Based on the dual principles of adaptation and appropriation, a habitat and land use with original attributes were gradually designed and structured, based on making the most of existing resources and dealing with physical constraints, such as marked topography and the presence of water in the soil, which posed the challenge of settling and living in these places. The inventiveness and genius of the local people have given rise



to several distinctive features, built forms, and spatial organization, the traces of which can still be seen today, and for which the area is renowned as a heritage site and tourist attraction.

Long protected from the influences of modern society by its landlocked location, the Marais Vernier has nevertheless undergone profound upheaval since the 1960s and the commissioning in 1959 of the Pont de Tancarville, which provides a continuous crossing of the river and opens up the area to Le Havre, its conurbation and the industrial and petrochemical complex of the Seine estuary. This entry into the age of modernity, of which the automobile is one of the most emblematic symbols, marks the beginning of a new phase in the process of anthropization of this micro-territory, which calls into question the built identity and original landscape of the Marais Vernier and threatens to erase its future. This is the starting point for our reflection on the changes that have been at work for almost seven decades now in the architectural and built landscape of the village of Marais Vernier, from which this micro-territory, comprising six communes, takes its name by extension. We'll be taking a critical look at these trajectories, between the disappearance of a built identity and the erasure of the foundations that enabled these places to "make territory".

### **1 - From the original natural environment to a living space built *ex-nihilo*: the Marais Vernier or the genesis of a territory as a process**

The first contact with the Marais Vernier micro-region confronts the visitor with the singularity of its morphology and topography. From the wooded hillside a hundred meters above sea level, an immense amphitheater unfolds before the visitor's eyes, all the way to the chalky ledge 4.5 kilometers away, at the foot of which flows the Seine, now stabilized in its dyked bed.



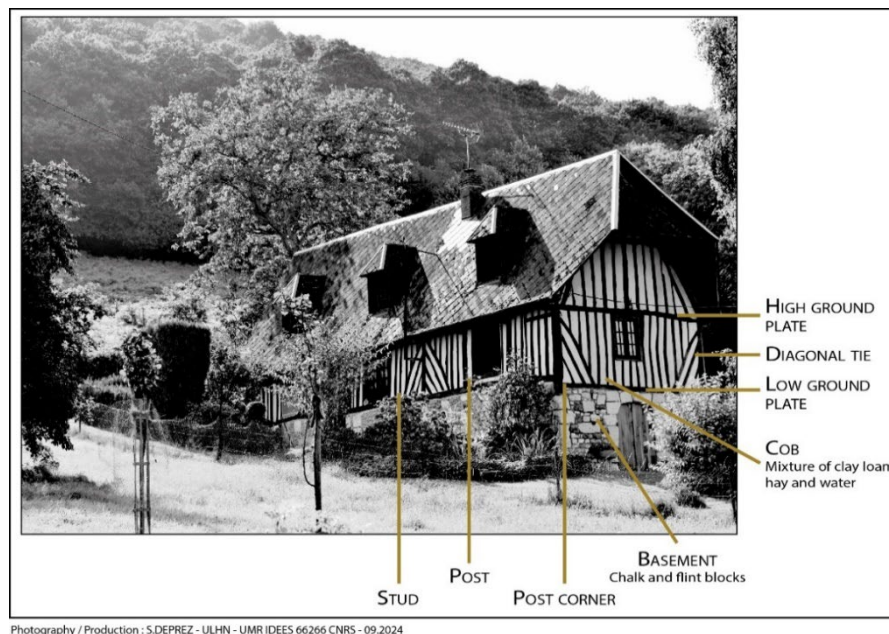
*Fig.1 - The Marais Vernier from the hillside panorama. Photo: S. DEPRez - 09.2024*

The beauty of this remarkable landscape, the serenity it exudes, and the feeling of suspended time, like a privileged interlude away from the noise and bustle of the industrial zone on the horizon on the other bank of the river. Before taking the road that will soon take him through the forest to the commune of Marais Vernier, however, he is certainly far from suspecting that the components of this landscape have all, and each at its level, both determined man's ability to settle and dictated the modalities of his presence, foremost among which is his habitat.

#### **1.1- Buildings as an expression of territorial anchorage: exploiting and enhancing the resource environment**

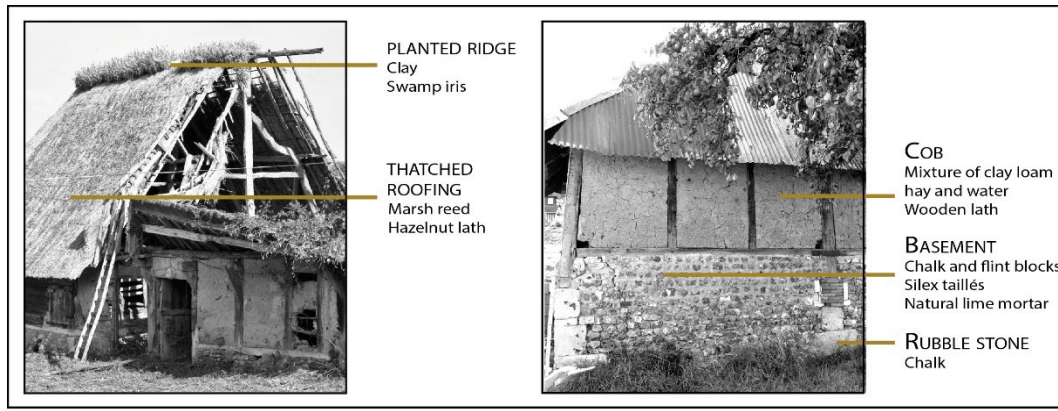
If the Marais Vernier has one well-known attribute, it's the original buildings, of which there are still vivid traces today. Despite more or less skillful work, these traces help us to understand the consubstantial link between the *thatched cottage* and the environment in which it was built. Each element expresses the ability of the people of Marais to transform their surroundings into a resource for building their dwelling, according to similar principles depending on the status of the

occupants - farm owners or workers, farmers or laborers. From the woodlands on the hillside, he extracted the *timber-framed* structure made of a complex assembly of different oak pieces (Fig. 2), which would ensure the rigidity of the whole and its durability over time. From the subsoil, he extracts blocks of chalk and flint, which he cuts, superimposes, arranges, and combines with a natural lime-based mortar to form the bedrock that supports the dwelling while protecting it from the dampness of the soil. Further on, in the reed bed at the heart of the marsh, he cuts and gathers reeds, which he assembles into bunches to form the roof, at the top of which the clay ridge fitted to the house and planted with iris, a marsh plant, ensures watertightness (Fig. 3). Over time, slate has supplanted thatch roofing, transforming the *thatched cottage* into a *Norman house*, but in the Marais Vernier there are still a few examples of this traditional know-how, which is now threatened because local resources are limited and the thatcher's trade no longer appeals.



*Fig.2 - The thatched cottage, a traditional half-timbered house*

As you wander around, you'll notice how the gaps between the timbers are filled in to close off the walls, another way of making the most of what's available locally to build your home. On a horizontal wooden lath made from split branches or hazel twigs, *torchis* is projected by hand, a mixture of clayey loam, sometimes animal matter, hay and water, smoothed to facilitate sliding and the evacuation of rainwater (Fig. 3). In this way, the various resources of the environment are exploited and valorized by drawing from each of these horizons, from the soil to the subsoil, from the wooded hillside to the wet marsh. Beyond the general matrix, *thatched cottages* take on singular attributes depending on the social status of their dwellings. Thatched cottages with narrow half-timbering or high foundations, because they require more wood and materials for their construction, as well as more openings, bear witness to the wealth and affluence of their owners, whereas those of day laborers or workers are much smaller, with just one door and a single window.



Photography / Production : S.DÉPREZ - ULHN - UMR IDEES 66266 CNRS - 09.2024

*Fig.3 - Construction diagram of a traditional thatched cottage*

This link to the environment as a determining factor in the structure of the building is expressed with equal acuity in its organization into three distinct levels, made possible by the use of each material. The ground floor (R-1), as we would call it today, houses the *cafoutin*, a semi-buried storeroom where fruit and vegetables are kept in the dark, particularly those collected from the apple-tree planted courtyard surrounding the dwelling. The living quarters are located on the first floor, with a common room, a storeroom, and one or two bedrooms, depending on the number of generations living under the same roof. On the same level, a stable and/or cowshed sometimes extended the building. They can also be found in the form of isolated buildings close to the house. The second floor of the house can be used as an attic if the structure can support the weight of sacks of grain, sheaves of hay, or straw. In recent decades, it has been transformed into a living space, often housing bedrooms and offices lit by dormer windows or skylights.



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*Fig.4 - Organization of the traditional thatched cottage*

However, the *thatched cottage* as an expression of human adaptation to inhabit an environment has developed into much more than a simple architectural singularity. It has given rise, without being formalized as such, to a veritable territorial project which, in an overall logic, articulates buildings and land dedicated to livestock rearing, cultivation, and food production. This anthropization has taken place in a context constrained by a marked topography and the presence of water, both of which have dictated the conditions of human presence, determined the organization of space, and presupposed inventiveness on the part of the inhabitants.

### 1.2 - Constrained architecture and urbanization.

Marais Vernier is structured around the main road at the foot of the hillside. From this axis, housing developed in two different ways: along the road, over a width of a few dozen meters, particularly in the heart of the village; perpendicular to the road and in the direction of the slope beyond this first curtain of buildings (fig. 5). Numerous surviving buildings bear witness to this topographically dictated urbanization, creating a singular landscape. On the hillside, dwellings with asymmetrical facades can be seen, where one end, sometimes less than a meter high, seems to be buried in the ground, while the other rests on high timbers to reach the same roof level (fig. 6). Beyond the road, where the differences in levels are less marked, the same pattern applies, producing a dwelling with lower ceilings on the first floor and smaller cellars and storerooms below.

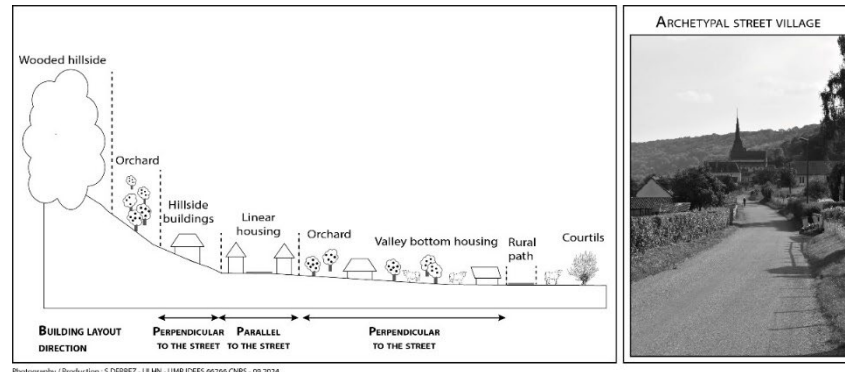


Fig. 5 - Functional structuring of the Marais-Vernier space

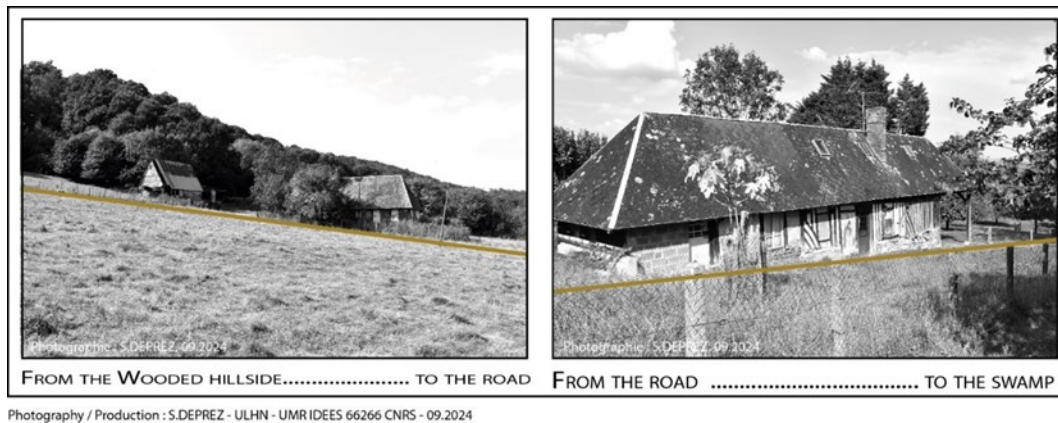


Fig. 6 - Building on slopes: two expressions of building adaptation

The determinism of topography can be seen just as clearly in the way land use is allocated and organized. Between the wooded hillside and the first houses built along the slope are apple orchards grazed by small herds of sheep and cattle. They extend beyond the road and its built-up front to the rural road that separates the inhabited part of the commune from the wet marshland. This organization of space is based on a singular plot of land. On either side of the street are small, narrow strips of land on which the buildings and surrounding ornamental gardens are built. On the second front, the plots develop vertically in a single block: rising up to the wooded edge in the southern part; joining the rural road in the northern part. Beyond this, the *courtills* (small fields) take their place, in the form of long, narrow strips, sometimes over a kilometer in length. In the Marais Vernier commune, the most extensive of these “measure just 650 meters before giving way

to communal property” [1]. The most common rarely exceed a few dozen meters in width. Their origins date back to the Middle Ages, and their organization is defined in response to the needs of the inhabitants and the constraints of the environment. “Vegetable gardens, which gave their name to the courtils, developed in the less humid areas. Towards the marsh, they extend into meadows and pastures. Then, in the heart of the marsh, the common pastures, a vast area with very imprecise boundaries that is often flooded. To the north, along the sea or the Seine, the coastline contains a few ploughed areas”. [2]. The *courtyards* are delimited by narrow ditches lined with pollarded willows and alders, which serve as drainage systems and fences to keep the animals in. From the pruning of these trees, regularly carried out to give them and maintain their specific shape, the inhabitants extract firewood, precious in this environment subject to high humidity. They also use the finest branches to make baskets and other basketry used in daily farming activities.

In this way, the unique architectural and land identity of the Marais-Vernier, for which it is renowned today, was first and foremost an expression of the inhabitants' appropriation of the area, laying the foundations for an original territorial system in which each stratum corresponds to a use and responds to a need, enabling it to function in complete autonomy and creating the conditions for a subsistence economy as an obligatory response to the closed and landlocked situation of the Marais Vernier micro-region. Here again, topography played a decisive role, which we can now read, with a little hindsight, and by reinscribing it in a multiscale perspective under the dual register of constraint and boon. The site's location at the bottom of a valley, far from the first towns and small centralities, forced the inhabitants to think in terms of self-organization and to find in the environment the conditions for their presence and survival. We owe this heritage to an environment shaped by man, the product of know-how and social organization that have shaped this “landscape of identity” [3], understood as both a collective construct and a singular materiality deeply rooted in a place to the point of “making territory” in the sense of a space “lived in, perceived, appropriated” [4]. In this sense, the landscape of identity defines and characterizes only this “territory”, in these “places alone”. This underscores the importance of a typo-morphological analysis of buildings and land, such as the one we are carrying out, in order to establish a frame of reference from which to analyze the evolution of this landscape and beyond.

## **2 - The future of an original territorial identity in a changing society**

This exercise is the subject of our second part, in which, on the basis of our immersion *in situ* and the repositioning of the Marais Vernier in the wider Seine estuary, we set out to explain the changes that have taken place in the original framework, the determining factors behind them and their consequences for the very identity of the commune as we have outlined it. In addition to factual observation of the changes at work, our aim is to extend our analysis of the link between society, territory and landscape, using buildings and land as entry points to express and reveal an individual and collective relationship with places and territories. Through the physical and organizational markers visible in the built and urbanized fabric, a certain number of changes can be seen as illustrations of the more contemporary links established between the people of Marais and the territory in which they live, and which contribute to the very rewriting of the village's identity. Beyond the relationship between residents and the place where they live, we see these changes as an expression of the profound changes taking place in society, and of societal aspirations for a way of life and living that the Marais Vernier now bears the scars of, and which are reexamining its very nature and its future.

### **2.1 - The Marais Vernier, a chronicle of territories under the influence**

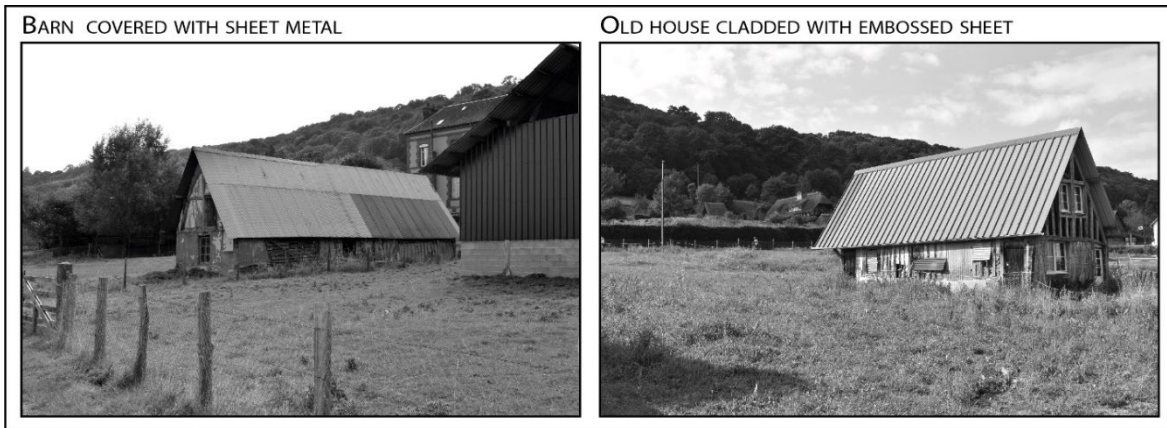
If the Marais Vernier has undergone one profound change in recent decades, it is undoubtedly in its links with the surrounding area, which it has gradually opened up. The inauguration of the Pont de Tancarville and the creation of the A131 freeway that accompanied it in the early 1960s initiated a profound change in the territorial situation. From a situation of functional enclavement posed by

topography, which for the built system had forced us to think about “ensured(d) its balance, cohesion and solidity” [5], the micro-region suddenly found itself projected into an enlarged territorial system driven by the presence of a permanent and continuous service between the two banks of the Seine (Fig. 7).

This new openness has brought new dynamics to the area, which are rapidly gaining momentum in a two-pronged movement from and towards the Marais Vernier. On the first front, a large number of Marquais were recruited by petrochemical and automotive companies in the industrial zone of the Seine estuary, near Le Havre, and Port-Jérôme to the west, served by a ferry across the river. Gradually, salaried employment grew among the community's working population, who turned away from traditional trades, particularly livestock breeding and crafts. Some left the village to settle in modern housing in the greater Le Havre area. Since 1968, each census has shown more people leaving than arriving, and household sizes have steadily shrunk. Another indicator of these dynamics is the steady increase in the number of vacant homes, which has doubled between 2010 and 2021. It now stands at 10% of the residential stock, with 266 units [6]. In the village, the decline in agricultural activity and the disaffection of some of the traditional buildings is evident. Unused farm buildings are maintained at a lower cost by protecting them from the elements with metal roofing, which is both less expensive than thatch roofing and easier to install. Beyond the roof, there's no need for renovation work or preventive action to prevent rapid deterioration. As far as housing is concerned, many abandoned houses with closed shutters, similar to those shown above (Fig.6), can now be seen along the roadside. Mirroring these trajectories, vast modern farm sheds are taking their place in the landscape on the initiative of farmers still in business, giving it resolutely contemporary attributes.



*Fig. 7: The Marais-Vernier, an area under the influence of economic and urban centers*



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*Fig.8 - The difficulty of maintaining agricultural and residential buildings over time*

But while some people are leaving the Marais Vernier, others, attracted by the calm of the area and the beauty of the landscape away from the hustle and bustle of urban life, are also looking to settle here, just as some native residents wish to stay. These two groups of people have a dual dynamic when it comes to building. By acquiring existing properties, they contribute to maintaining the original habitat, despite taking a few liberties with its foundations and random interventions. However, the constraints of renovation, the high cost of the work, and the difficulty of reintegrating traditional buildings into the codes and expectations of modernity in terms of comfort and amenities lead many of them to opt for the construction of a new property, with the question of available building land as a prerequisite. Here, the question is posed in very specific terms, since the organization of land plots was a structuring element of daily life and the village, but also because the topography leaves few opportunities. For some years now, we've been witnessing a rewriting of this original layout, driven by a logic of supply and demand between owners of vast plots of land whose original use is no longer valid, and buyers wishing to establish themselves. For the former, the motivations are mainly financial. Often on low incomes or modest pensions, they see the sale of part of their land as a welcome capital opportunity. Some also opt to subdivide their land to build a more comfortable home for their retirement. For the latter, it's an opportunity to buy a building plot at a reasonable price (around 45 euros per square meter, i.e. two to four times cheaper than in the Le Havre conurbation), some thirty kilometers from this urban center, and its jobs. While almost half of the principal residences (91) were built before 1919, according to the inventory, 69 have been built since 1970, including 21 between 2006 and 2018. And our field observations have revealed further construction since then.

In terms of landscape and land organization, this real estate dynamic has brought about major changes: in terms of buildings, the houses erected over the last five decades represent a sharp break with the original morphology, in terms of both the shape of the buildings and their placement within the plot; in terms of plots, the subdivision into small lots is erasing the native matrix and, with it, the founding principles of land structuring (Fig.9).



*Fig.9 - The difficulty of maintaining agricultural and residential buildings over the long term*

The result of this modern urbanization movement is continuous urban sprawl, which makes the original building an increasingly discrete reality, almost invisible when the traditional thatched cottage is hemmed in between modern pavilions which, because of the topography from the heart of the town, dominate and erase it (Fig. 10). In this way, the Marais Vernier becomes a privileged setting for neo-urbanites and native-born villagers alike to make their dream of a new home come true, illustrating perhaps more forcefully than in other areas the weight of suburbanization as it has been manifesting itself in France for several decades now. In our view, it is a dazzling expression of the consumer society that has been the matrix of both society and planning [7] for some sixty years now, placing the residential function at a distance from the workplace, with the automobile as the medium between these two time-spaces of daily life - another attribute if ever there was one of consumerist thinking and planning.

The Marais Vernier is a reflection of this interdependent relationship between (consumer) society, landscape, and territory, with its many strands, which is leading to a profound rethinking of suburban spaces and their identity: the arrival of populations with no previous ties to the territory, the transformation of traditional agricultural land into residential land, the rewriting of original land parcels, the introduction of new built forms (including housing estates, from which our study area still escapes), the regular appearance of new architectural styles as building systems and materials evolve...), and the introduction of exogenous attributes (exotic plants for hedges, verandas and pergolas, shelters for camper vans...). In the Marais Vernier commune, this heterogeneity is now a major trend, apparently irremediable since the dynamic remains and certainly irrevocable since what has been erased will no longer be and what has recently been built is destined to remain. Put into perspective with the national context, it's part of the order of things as the territory evolves according to these principles. Perhaps, as the political discourse legitimizes, this is necessary to bring about a generational renewal, maintain a village school, preserve one last shop, and avoid the risk of abandonment and even greater abandonment. However, the argument

merits a more detailed reading, based on an analysis of the discourse and practices of residents, to validate or invalidate the correlation highlighted between new urbanization and communal (re)dynamization...

From our current reading angles, the question remains that of the modalities of this new time of urbanization, which *de facto* induces the question of the place of the individual and the collective in the maintenance, preservation, and evolution of territorial identity, to avoid a dilution of original attributes in a disparate aggregate of constructions and land developments, whose sole logic responds to the conception of what each person makes of his or her habitat and property, which, from our point of view, is prejudicial to the very notion of territory.

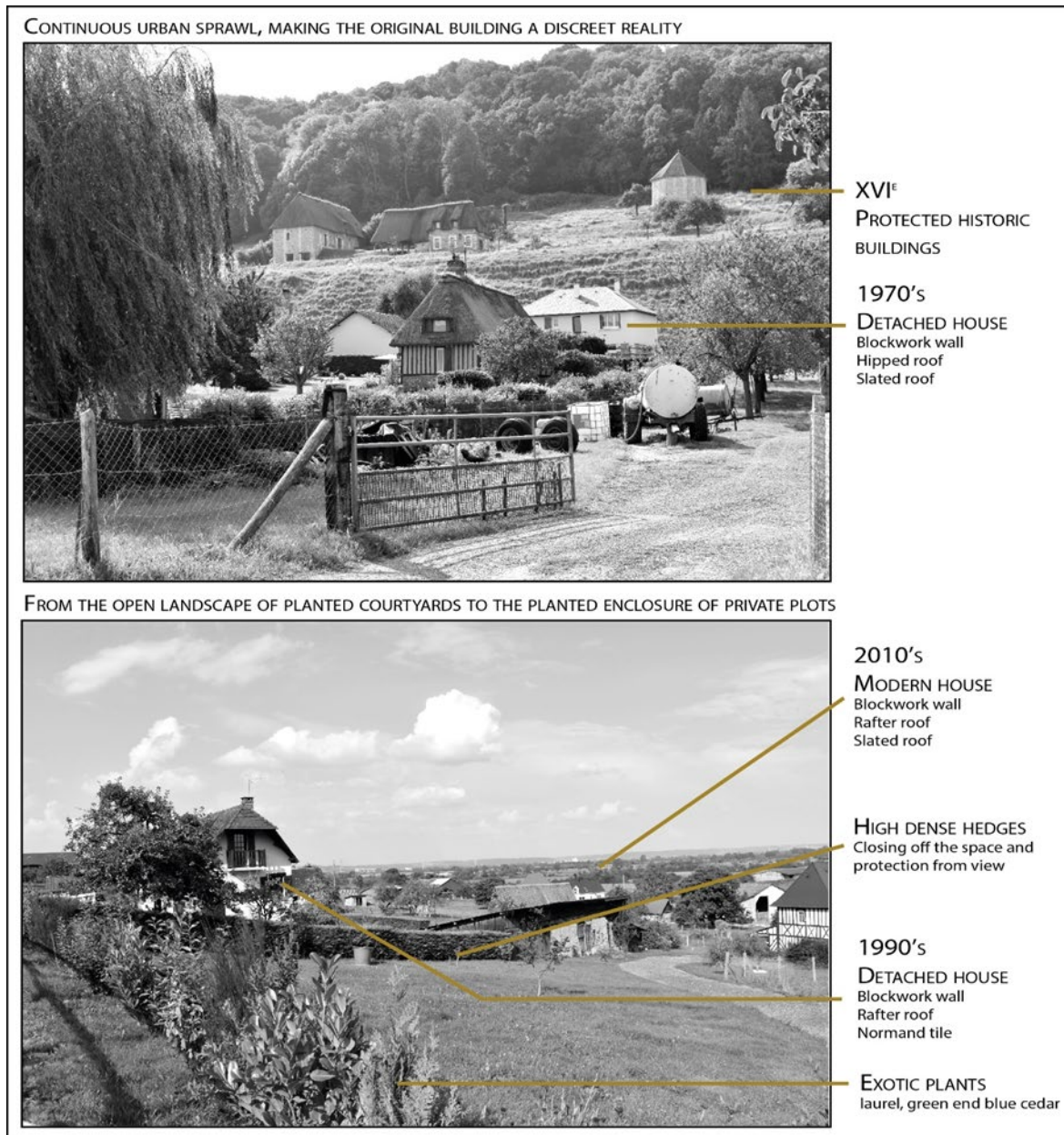
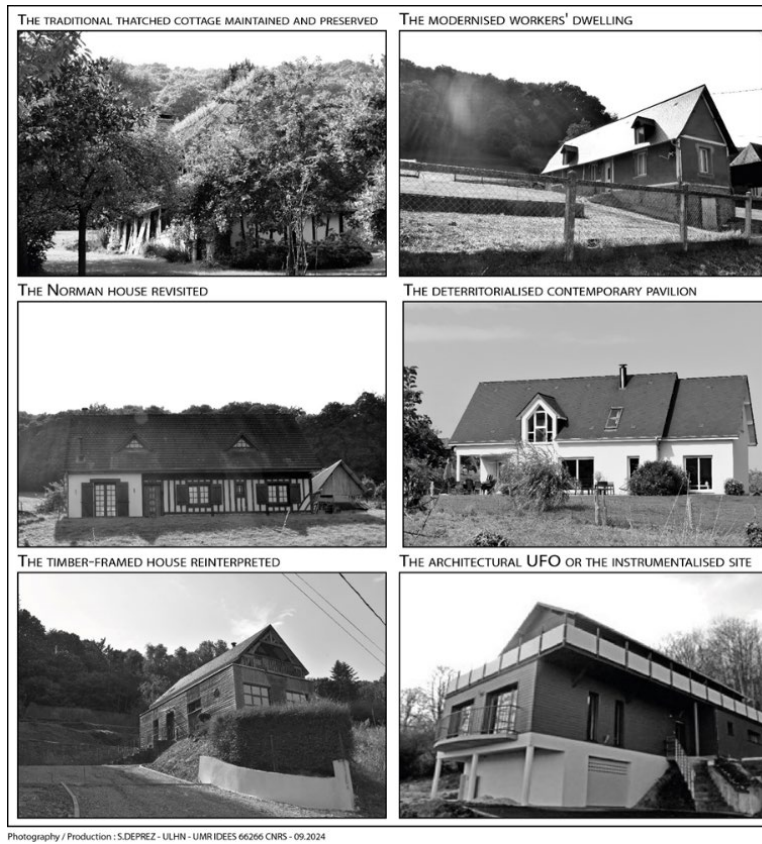


Fig.10 - Changes in housing, its forms, and surroundings

## **2.2 - From a unified, “collectively-built” landscape to a heterogeneous, “individually-built” landscape**

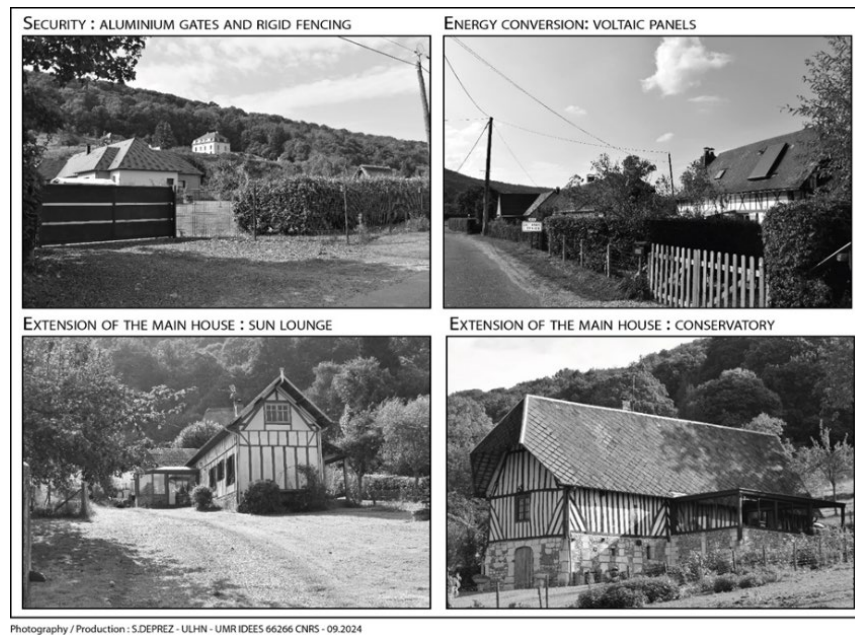
A quick tour of the commune reveals the extent of the shift from a unified landscape - the visible expression of a singular territoriality in which productive activities and housing, land, and buildings were conceived as a coherent whole, where a sense of belonging and strong social interactions were expressed in the same space - to a support environment chosen for building one's residence because it offers amenities sought after in choosing one's living environment. Contrary to the original plan, the different types of buildings on view express a relationship of individual consumption with the landscape, where each person builds, renovates, modernizes, and embellishes his or her own home, without looking at the surrounding area or taking into account what, on a village scale, cements its identity, expresses its specific features, gives coherence to the whole and, through the materiality of the buildings, land and natural elements, contributes to “making territory”.

Careful observation of old and new buildings has produced an enlightening typology of the built mosaic that characterizes the Marais Vernier today (Fig.11). There are two opposing approaches to traditional housing: on the one hand, the original Norman thatched cottage is being maintained and preserved, although only a handful of units remain; on the other, traditional dwellings are being modernized, with the original features of their facades disappearing under thick rendering and their roofs being replaced by natural or artificial slate. At the same time, the pavilion dream is expressed in the search for continuity with the existing, where the house is adorned with faux half-timbering based on the timber-framed structure. More frequently, it takes the form of radical breaks, with breeze-block and concrete construction opening up new perspectives in terms of volumetry and architectural composition. While the double-sloped roof can be seen as a last reminder of the buildings of yesteryear, the wide openings and bay windows break with the reduced openings and small-paned windows. The ease of terracing now makes it possible to disregard topographical constraints for construction, and the original layout is overlaid by a haphazard, almost anarchic distribution of buildings, another expression of the individual's contribution to the material recomposition of the landscape. Even more audaciously, the architects have reinterpreted the wooden house in a size and volume that have nothing in common with what the Marais Vernier has given us to see and look at, regardless of when it was built. Unique yet decisive in its imposing size, and even more at odds with the village's visual identity than its predecessor, this architectural UFO has taken its place at the foot of the hillside, as a blatant expression of a consummate landscape, where the choice of plot overlooking the inhabited areas is dictated by the desire to enjoy a peripheral view of the entire marsh from the house's living rooms.



*Fig.11 - A mosaic of built forms: from unity to heterogeneity*

There's nothing to unify these different expressions of urbanization, all the result of the personal wishes and choices of their owners. This blurring of the built and land frameworks is equally evident in the natural part of the landscape, where high conifer hedges, veritable plant walls, close off plots of land from outside view, in a radical departure from the open landscape of orchards and low hedges of local species. This natural enclosure is often accompanied by the use of rigid fences, which have become the norm for private property boundaries. Here again, a new landscape is being created, reinforced by the installation of modern gates as new expressions of what, through the offerings of the major DIY chains, consumer society is both proposing and installing. Its influence on the evolution of buildings and, through them, of landscapes, can be seen with the same vivacity in the addition of new attributes around the home, in the register of amenities (verandas and conservatories, pergolas), comfort (roller shutters) or energy conversion (photovoltaic panels), to the installation of which each proceeds (Fig.12). These individual choices give rise to marked trajectories that leave their mark on landscapes and can profoundly alter their nature and original features in a sometimes very short space of time.



*Fig.12 - Modern attributes as new landscape markers*

This process, illustrated by the singular example of the Marais Vernier, is a manifest reality throughout France, and almost no commune escapes this movement. It highlights civil society's capacity to use the habitat as a medium to promote singular forms of territoriality, understood as “a modality of action by which individuals collectively compose a common good and experience it through the relationships they maintain together with the outside world, in ways of knowing and valuing space that is specific to them and that they share” [8], and then rediscussing them through individual initiatives that, juxtaposed, nourish an overall trajectory of erasing primary territoriality, without necessarily replacing it with another. It therefore seems legitimate to re-examine the role and weight of politics and the instruments at its disposal as guarantors of the evolution of territories and the territorialities that originally qualified them. In terms of urban planning and architecture, part of the answer lies in planning documents and their regulations. In the commune of Marais Vernier, the National Town Planning Regulations (RNU) apply in the absence of a Carte Communale (CC) or a Plan Local d'Urbanisme (PLU), which would have defined strong prescriptive principles for future urbanization within a coherent village-wide framework. In the absence of such a plan, land development is governed by the general principles of urban planning in force throughout France. The result is a case-by-case management of requests for building permits or plot subdivisions, with no territorial background or prescriptions on building, its forms, recommended or non-recommended materials, chromatic ranges to be respected, authorized fences or vegetation... as may be set out in urban planning documents drawn up by local authorities. While the French urban planning code (Art. R.111-21) sets the preservation of the interest and character of the surrounding area as the objective of the RNU, the numerous examples we have presented demonstrate that many authorizations have been issued when the project was detrimental to the identity of the commune. Although the illustration is striking, it should be pointed out that in many areas governed by town planning documents, residential development based around the detached house and its various architectural and stylistic variations has been authorized, producing unmarked landscapes in contact with traditional buildings, as in the commune of Saint-Aubin-sur-Quillebeuf, at the western end of the Marais-Vernier micro-region. This is where the subtlety of the rule is expressed in its very essence, where over and above its respect and application, the question of its content and objectives arises, which brings us back to the very notion of

territorialities, those of the past and those we wish to promote, in continuity, rupture or complementarity. This also raises the question of the rule's ability to keep pace with the changes and influences brought about by the consumer society as a planning matrix and to provide the necessary safeguards. This is also where the relationship between individuals and the rule comes into play, where between distrust and rejection of principles seen as obstacles to the freedom to enjoy one's property, the development of private property, both built and unbuilt, and its evolution over time are often written in denial of the rule and against its principles, with all the consequences for local identity.

## Conclusion

The Marais Vernier micro-region, and the commune to which it owes its name, vividly illustrate man's ability to appropriate an inhospitable environment, to mobilize its elements to create the resources necessary for his settlement, to make his mark on it to create the conditions for his subsistence, to organize it materially through buildings and land, and to develop a social life based on solidarity and traditions around activities (farming, livestock breeding...), and thus “to make territory”. They certainly owe their uniqueness to a landlocked situation that has created the conditions for this social and territorial microcosm and enabled it to be maintained over time, along with the singular, unchanging landscape, until recently, when everything accelerated.

This territory is also a chronicle of the short term, where in the space of a few decades, what seemed intangible has been re-discussed as it has been opened up, opening it up to external influences in the same way that consumer society, transformed into a matrix of urban planning and development, has imposed its own on it, through the behaviour of each individual. Over the past sixty years or so, the Marais Vernier's territorial foundations have been, if not erased, at least nuanced, and the movement that began it is still going strong today. Political awareness of these far-reaching changes is now emerging, with the DREAL (Direction Régionale de l'Environnement, de l'Aménagement et du Logement) filing an application for “site” classification in 2023. The purpose of this national provision is to protect classified sites, with the aim of ensuring the preservation of natural monuments and sites whose artistic, historical, scientific, legendary or picturesque character is of general interest. Classification as a site constitutes a public easement which is binding on all owners. While this project may be seen as a welcome opportunity to influence the dynamics of urbanization, many elected representatives are fiercely opposed to it, seeing in this possible classification additional procedures and constraints, particularly in terms of town planning. For if the procedure were to be completed by 2025, as envisaged, “all projects falling wholly or partly within the perimeter of the listed site will be subject to the procedure for authorizing works in a listed site” [9], as well as to the reasoned opinion of the relevant government departments, the departmental commission for nature, landscapes and sites, and the Architecte des Bâtiments de France.

Only time will tell, but perhaps the outlines of a coherent urban planning policy will finally take shape here, based on an affirmed recognition of the architectural, built and landscape identity of the Marais Vernier and the need to maintain the last material witnesses of an original territoriality which, in reality, will never be the same again.

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