# Lacaton & Vassal: Open Conditions for Permanent Change. Interview with Anne Lacaton

## Interview by José Mayoral Moratilla

**Realized in Lacaton & Vassal Architects Office, Paris (December 21st, 2018).**

Anne Lacaton, founding partner of Lacaton & Vassal, is a professor at ETH Zurich and has been a visiting professor at ETSAM, EPFL, TU Delft and Harvard University, among other institutions. The work of Lacaton & Vassal has been widely published, including monographs in *2G* and *El Croquis*, and has been recognized with the granting of the EU Mies Award in 2019.

From their first house, Maison Latapie, to the transformation of 530 dwellings in Bordeaux, Lacaton and Vassal's approach aims to create open conditions to facilitate permanent change. Expanding the space, doubling the height, and increasing the structural capacity are several of the spatial strategies they employ to embrace evolution and change.

*How does contemporary architecture deal with obsolescence?*

Obsolescence is not typically considered within the field of architecture. However, designers of the built environment have the capacity to integrate obsolescence by acknowledging a building's lifespan and the reality that all architectural elements endure for different periods of time. Throughout our studies and practice we have been interested in freedom of use, a theme very much connected to obsolescence. Ensuring maximum freedom of use can generate the renewal of spaces, granting them with further lives.

*As opposed to starting from a blank slate, your strategies focus on incorporating the context by adding, transforming, and reprogramming. From your perspective, does the concept of obsolete architecture not exist? Does every architectural work have the potential to be reused, rethought and readapted?*

Yes. We believe that a part of everything, no matter how unfavorable, can be incorporated within the existing situation. There is always something to update, to readapt, and to maintain. Our methodology involves a period of detailed observation to better understand the given conditions. We then work with what we have to reimagine and reinvent something new from it. It's essential to trust the value of the existing. And, for this, analysis is critical.

*I would like to talk about the Plus project. The French government's policy implied the demolition of many housing projects from the '60s and '70s. Were these high-rise housing blocks considered obsolete?*

Not only the buildings but also the neighborhoods in which they were built were considered obsolete, most of which were in suburban areas. At the time of construction, there was a future vision that showed how modern life in the modern world should be lived. While living conditions improved temporarily, the work remained unfinished because no infrastructure followed the construction of the housing units. There was no public transit or facilities that could transform these places into parts of the city. These areas gradually became isolated as many families started to leave. The national program of demolition in France reacted to the obsolescence of these buildings; some of them were renovated while others were demolished. The French government used demolition as an easy solution after many years of avoiding the deterioration of the situation. Even though many of the buildings were functional from a structural point of view and their deficiencies were primarily attributed to poor insulation and a lack of facilities, many of them were demolished.

*Have all the buildings that were initially marked to be demolished been destroyed?*

A lot of them. Over 150,000 dwellings have been demolished. The units were supposed to be rebuilt, but this has not been the case. While there is a great

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Plus is a study conducted by Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, and Jean Philippe Vassal for the French Ministry of Culture and Communication and the French Department of Architecture and Heritage. Source: lacatonvassal.com

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"The national program of renovation of public social housing buildings was introduced in the early 2000s. It planned the demolition and reconstruction of around 150,000 dwellings and the renovation of about 250,00 dwellings." Source: Lacaton, A. (in conversation) (2016). Approaching Buildings form the Interior. In W. Nägeli & N. Tajeri (Eds.), *Small Interventions: New Ways of Living in Post-war Modernism*. Bassel, Switzerland: Birkhauser, p. 97.

demand for housing, the French government is actually losing units because a significant number of blocks have been demolished. The buildings that were rebuilt don't have a much longer life. A significant focus on energy saving has inhibited discussions about extending the lifespan of the buildings. Reflecting on extending the life of a building is not part of the discussion as there is a significant focus on energy saving. However, today, residential architecture and unit layouts are not very different from that of the '60s and '70s. In my opinion, the public debate should focus on the question of materials and how to face a change in the life of the building over 50 years. We should engage in the question of how spaces and structures are defined, as well as architecture's environment. We believe that through observation of the existing context and employing strategies such as densification and highlighting inherent qualities, we can respond to the building's ability to change. It isn't necessary to start from a blank slate, but rather, to focus on integrating a capacity for permanent adaptation within the existing structure. This, in turn, is inseparable to the use defined by the people who inhabit the space. We cannot talk about architecture if we do not bring people and program into the discussion.

*Are the strategies that you mention above applied to many of your projects?*

In FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, the strategy centered around adding a new structure to double the use and improve the quality of the space instead of transforming the existing in a constraining way. By doing this, we solved technical problems such as security and increased energy saving. In the housing projects, by extending the area, we solve the problem of fire security, because a new structure can provide more resistance against fire while simultaneously helping with acoustics. The winter garden offers insulation more effectively than mineral wood while at the same time generates space for living. These strategies engage with the obsolescence of the buildings by reimagining how we can use the materials and the space. For us, materials are never considered from just one dimension. Materials must have two or three positive values, and we try to use as little as possible to maximize the space. For the School of Architecture in Nantes, we did a diagram of the weight and volume of the material and, surprisingly, the materials used for construction, namely concrete and glass, were less than ten per cent of the building's volume. For us, it is always interesting to extract what isn't essential. We seek to provide more space, more capacity for the building. Less material means less of a risk of degradation. In fact, obsolescence occurs more frequently in light-weight materials, such as cladding, that do not have a long lifespan. As opposed to these materials, we use concrete and steel as joint frames to allow for more precision in the details throughout the construction process, ensuring a longer lifespan for the materials. We aim to reduce the structure and partitions to a minimum, allowing people to add finishes at the end of the process.

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FRAC (Dunkerque, France, 2015) is a 11,129 m$^2$ complex containing artwork storage space, exhibition rooms, and education facilities designed by Lacaton & Vassal. It is located in an old boat warehouse on Dunkerque port. The project keeps the warehouse in its entirety and creates a double of it for containing the program. "Under a light and bioclimatic envelope, a prefabricated and efficient structure determines free, flexible and evolutionary platforms, with few constraints, fit to the needs of the program." Source: lacatonvassal.com

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L'École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Nantes (Nantes, France, 2009) is a 26,837 m$^2$ educational facility for 1,000 students designed by Lacaton & Vassal. The design scheme creates a set of diverse situations of interest to the school, the city, and the landscape, allowing extensions and future evolution. Volumes with non-attributed functions are open to appropriations, new interventions and reconversion. "Like a pedagogical tool, the project questions the program and the practices of the school as much as the norms, technologies and its own process of elaboration." Source: lacatonvassal.com

*According to the idea of firmitas established by Marcus Vitruvius, pursuing solidity is an indisputable objective for every building. This principle has remained fundamental to this day and has become an essential base for the contemporary conception of both architecture and urbanism. Architects design buildings with an idea of permanence, assuming that their design will persist indefinitely. Do you consider the temporary nature of your buildings?*

There is a relationship between solidity, lifespan, and temporality. A building must, simultaneously, be permanent and have the capacity to change. While the structure is permanent, the use is temporal. We like to engage with this combination. This does not mean that temporality is something light or unfinished, it means that the structure offers an initial condition while integrating the capacity for variation at any time – use in the short term and the changing of function in the long-term. We like to think that buildings should offer these conditions simultaneously. Structure, as we conceive it, can be considered permanent because is not a constraint but rather, a means to provide a base of floors and spaces. In this way, anything can unfold inside. It is about creating different architectural components that overlap but are not constrained by the same layers. The ground layer and the structural layer are not the same as the envelope layer or the use layer. We aim to produce conditions for permanence and for permanent change.

*How do you apply this understanding of permanence throughout your design process?*

One example that illustrates this idea is the School of Architecture in Nantes, which is an urban infrastructure project where the first layer is architecture. However, we see how there is an emerging layer of public life. There are many spaces and thresholds between public life and urban life. We designed this building with the understanding that it could transform into something else. I think it's an example of the possibility of permanent use and permanent change. The scale of change is much longer, but the freedom of use is permanent. When we design buildings, we seek to create open conditions for future functions and prepare the building to have several lives.

*Your projects have a certain degree of incompleteness or openness. There are extreme cases such as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, in which the intervention is minimal as you merely provide accessibility and ensure habitability. What is the level of incompleteness that architecture should aim for?*

Rather than incompleteness, it is the moment in which we stop the design of the project and the construction, and hand it over for someone to use, to appropriate. Of course, this depends on the client and the brief. When we work for public clients, we have to provide everything, but in this type of project, we can oversize space to provide openness. We do not mean oversizing every

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*Firmitas* (solidity) is for Vitruvius one of the three qualities all architecture must have, being the other two *utilitas* (usefulness) and *venustas* (beauty). This trilogy may be a simplification whose origin would be found on the summary translation of Vitruvius' treatise published in 1674 by the French a physiologist Claude Perrault. See: González Moreno-Navarro, J. L. (1996). Los tratados históricos como documentos para la historia de la construcción, in *Actas del Primer Congreso Nacional de Historia de la Construcción*, Madrid, pp. 255-260.

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Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (1st Century BC), was a Roman architect and engineer. He is the author of the only surviving treatise of architecture from ancient times, *De architectura* (*On Architecture*). Source: britannica.com

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Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 1937, 2001-2014) is a 24,300 m$^2$ exhibition space for contemporary art and creation. At the time of its complete rehabilitation, it become the largest center of contemporary art in Europe. The building, built for the 1937 International Exhibition (on the Quai de Tokio), has hosted since then different visual arts institutions. The first phase of the rehabilitation was opened to the public in 2001; the second, in 2014. "The public dimension is the primary focus of this facility dedicated to contemporary art." Sources: palaisdetokyo.com; lacatonvassal.com

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'Freedom of Use' was a lecture given by Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal at Harvard GSD on August 2015 (publication available). The architects opened their lecture "with a manifesto: study and create an inventory of the existing situation; densify without compressing individual space; promote user mobility, access, choice; and most importantly, never demolish." Source: gsd.harvard.edu. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdgYGkQM9zc

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Maison Latapie (1993, Floirac, France) is a 185 m² low budget family house designed by Lacaton & Vassal. "It's a simple volume on a rectangular base that posits two open platforms. On a metal frame, one half, on the street side, is covered with opaque fiber-cement sheeting, and the other half, on the garden side, with transparent polycarbonate sheeting, forming a conservatory." Source: lacatonvassal.com

function but providing unprogrammed extra space is extremely important because it is the space where you have no special technical requirements. Incompleteness implies leaving space for the user, as we do not want to provide too many constraints. We aim to create open conditions and eliminate constraints for the users.

*This extra space allows you to include an undefined program without constraints that can be used in many ways.*

Moreover, this is a place where appropriation can finally happen.

*At your lecture at Harvard GSD 'Freedom of Use' in 2015, you insisted on opening possibilities, offering freedom. Could you argue that design is contrary to flexibility and freedom of use? In other words, the more designed and detailed architecture is, the less room it leaves for further interpretations?*

I think in a way, yes. However, it is not completely linked to the issue of details. It depends on how we define detail. On the other hand, it means that a space is allowed to have a use other than the predetermined one. Even if we must fulfill the program of the brief, the program requirements can be implemented in different ways. Flexibility is not about moving walls, but rather, how space can allow for variation of use beyond what is required by the program. The program is taken as a kind of guideline, not as a result, and certainly not as an obligation. In the design of a project it is crucial to not assign spaces predetermined uses. We imagine that a classroom could be a living room and a place to do nothing. We make certain that it is ready for different uses as we try to limit the statement 'function creates form'. Even if we know several examples that work well, it is not our way of working. For us, the interesting duality is in the structure and the infill.

*You encourage freedom of use and avoid predefining a set of possibilities for particular spaces. Have you ever been surprised by the way people use your buildings?*

Constantly. For example, in the first house (Maison Latapie), we included a winter garden, and we had in mind that it would be an indoor garden. However, the clients never planted anything inside, they filled it with different kinds of furniture – old furniture, new furniture, garden furniture. They created a combination which we might have never dared to propose, but they did it, and it is fantastic. Many housing projects are appropriated differently from what we initially had in mind. The principle of the 'open project' is based in the fact that we trust people in how they choose to use the space. We do not feel that we have to show people how to use space but rather, we provide them with the conditions that allow their own creativity to emerge.

*When people use your buildings in unexpected ways, are you always pleasantly surprised?*

Sometimes people use space badly. For example, when they place furniture in front of the light. This is part of the risk and part of the success, the randomness that we have to assume and to accept. There is always the hope that the next users will do something else. It is true that, all in all, we are usually surprised positively.

*Beyond the use of your buildings, your projects do not seem to be attached to a particular program. Could the School in Nantes take on another program in the future?*

Yes. That project could turn into housing or another program. For example, the fact that we did not include a basement for car parking because we oversized construction over the ground level, means that at any moment the car parking floor could take on another function. During the construction process, the city decided to create a new line of transport, and they allowed us to reduce the number of parking spaces that led to gaining 1,000 square meters for the use of the school. After some slight modifications during construction, this area turned into studio space. As you can see, the open project starts from the beginning of the design process and allows for user participation.

*In many of your projects you have decided, as a design strategy, to increase the area or the structural strength, going far beyond the project requirements. This allows for future flexibility and adaptability. Does this increase in area imply a more significant budget? Is it hard for you to convince the client?*

Not at all. It is evident that, at the beginning of the design process, our goal is connected with the appreciation of the site but also with the budget we have as we aim to do the maximum with the same amount. For substantial projects, we sometimes think that we have too much budget. However, for other programs such as housing and schools, where budget is limited, the most important thing for us is to oversize the space of use without increasing the cost. These goals make us think of different ways of building, considering the construction economy from the early stages of the project. The idea is not to do less but rather to establish hierarchy and to do more. This is something that we understood very early on in our careers. For the first house that we did in Bordeaux, the budget was low, and we knew that if we were able to manage the budget, we would get more freedom to design. It is about the efficiency of construction and using materials in the best possible way. When you look carefully at catalogs of industrial products, you find that there are dimensions that are more economical than others because the industrial process is more efficient. We look at how the materials are produced in order to reach our goal of giving more freedom and more space for use, without increasing the budget. This is why working within the existing conditions is another parameter

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Maison Bordeaux (Bordeaux, France, 1999) is a 340 m² residential space. The house was set up by Lacaton & Vassal "in an old cookie factory that occupies the whole of the 50 x 10 meters plot." Source: lacatonvassal.com

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Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) is an American architect. He is considered the spiritual father of modern American architecture and is one of the pioneers of Skyscrapers. He studied briefly at the first architectural school in the United States (founded in 1865 at MIT) and in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Back in Chicago, he partnered Dankmar Adler. Frank Lloyd Wright worked at his firm as an apprentice for six years. Sullivan is *the author of Autobiography of an Idea (1924) and Kindergarten Chats* (1901–02). Source: H.F. Koeper, 2019, in britannica.com

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Aldo Rossi (1931-1997) is an Italian architect and theoretician. He studied at the Facoltà di Architettura del Politecnico di Milano. He was a teacher at Politecnico di Milano, IUAV, Yale and Cornell. He received the Pritzker Prize in 1990. He is the author of *L'architettura della città* (*The Architecture of the City*), first published in 1966. Source: J. Zukowsky, in britannica.com

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*The Architecture of the City* (ed. Marsilio, 1966) is an essay by Aldo Rossi that "established him as a leading international theoretician. In the text he argued that, over the course of history, architecture has developed certain continuous forms and ideas, to the point that these are standard types in the collective memory that move beyond the scope of style and trends." Source: J. Zukowsky, in britannica.com

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Cedric Price (1934–2003) was British architect and writer. His vision of the city "expressed his sense of architecture's moral obligations toward its users. (…) He was determined that his work would not impose physical or psychological constraints upon its occupants nor reduce them to a standard form – unlike typical modern architecture." Source: moma.org

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Fun Palace was a large-scale project commissioned to Cedric Price by Joan Littlewood, founder of the Theater Workshop. It "was conceived for the East End of London as a 'laboratory of fun' and 'a university of the streets'. Although it was never realized, unlike other visionary projects of the 1960s it was fully intended to be built. Designed as a flexible framework into which programmable spaces can be plugged, the structure has as its ultimate goal the possibility of change at the behest of its users." Source: moma.org

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*L'Architecture Mobile* (1956) is a manifesto presented by Yona Friedman at CIAM X. The aim was "to involve public opinion in formulating innovative principles for designing the living environment or 'habitat'." Some of the principles in *L'Architecture Mobile* are: creating elevated city space; restrain the land use; not to demolish; and compactness. Source: yonafriedman.nl

that we consider. Usually, thinking of the construction costs implies doing less or restricting but for us it is the opposite.

*Louis Sullivan's well-known phrase 'Form follows function' and Le Corbusier definition of the house as a machine for living in, illustrate the modern movement's appreciation for functionality in architecture. However, you create many undefined programmatic conditions, which increase the versatility of the spaces. As Aldo Rossi did in his book* The Architecture of the City, *do you oppose the functionality of the modern movement?*

Modern architecture marks a moment in which everything is opened. If we look at what we call 'International Architecture', the opening of the façade is interesting as well as the separation of the layers of construction and the modifications of the structural systems. For us, this change in the way of doing architecture, which is linked to the structural possibilities, is interesting. Our approach is not the opposite of this but rather a contemporary interpretation. We are interested in the idea of potential infrastructure where anything can happen. The reference we have in mind is Cedric Price's Fun Palace in which maximum freedom is given to space.

*In terms of functionalism, the modern movement assumes that each space is linked to a specific purpose. Although you incorporate many lessons from the modern movement, is functionalism something that you reinterpret?*

Some very functional parts can be present. However, if you provide extra space, the constraints become different. This is why we are interested in doubling the size. We think that the combination of functional parts and undefined spaces can lead to the right solution. Having very defined spaces is not a problem as long as the equivalent area is free for any use.

*Other architects have shown their interest in the open project that allows users to participate in the evolution of buildings. In his manifesto L'Architecture Mobile, Yona Friedman proposes a city that adapts to the future needs of users. Archigram's Plug-in City is also a project designed to evolve with its users. Are these architects influential to you?*

Yes. However, we also have other sources of inspiration such as greenhouses and industrial buildings as they offer technical solutions. We are interested in the work of the Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger and the relationship he establishes between space and the participation of users. He considered that the structure could provide this freedom. Frei Otto's work on housing is probably less known than his work on large-scale structures. He worked on the question of how housing projects could provide freedom and not just a subdivision of spaces. He studied how you can finally introduce the next scale. Le Corbusier's Dom-Ino house is also fascinating for us, due to its definition of routes and minimum architecture.

*You seem interested in the coexistence of two systems that talk about different degrees of temporality, indetermination, and openness. In the School in Nantes, there is a primary structure with a maximum capacity and height that coexists with a secondary structure that is light, flexible, and removable. In many projects, you create defined programs rather than defined areas, such as in the University of Arts & Human Sciences of Grenoble. Do you identify yourself with other architects such as John Habraken that also understand architecture as two systems: one being flexible versus another, which is more rigid?*

Habraken was one of the first to talk about this duality. We reflect on the coexistence of infrastructure and structure, not as a concrete construction, but instead as a way to provide ground. It is essential to call it 'ground' and not 'floor' because the ground is natural terrain which is limited in the city. The natural ground is significant because you can do anything with it: you can dig, or you can rebuild. This is why we are interested in multiplying the quality of the natural ground. In the School of Nantes, we decided that every floor should allow us to build 1,000 kg per square meter, creating platforms to generate life and uses. Le Corbusier found a way to slowly connect different levels using large ramps, extending the idea of ground: a stair or a lift is not the same. If you can walk from one ground to another as you do in the city, there is a different understanding of infrastructure. This pushes the Habraken´s idea of structure and infill to its limits. Infill has a shorter life, starting with the one that the architect brings for the first function, then the one that people incorporate ten or twenty years later, but the life of infrastructure can be quite long. In cities, we miss the ground, which is why we extend cities so much. It is the point at which urban planning and architecture merge; the idea is that architecture is already urban planning and that we do not need expansive masterplans anymore.

*I would like to end the interview with your beginnings. How do you see the relationship between your origins and your understanding of the open project? In Niger, you were in touch with local communities that were creative in the construction of their dwellings. You also engaged with communities that proved to be resilient as they could adapt to changes. Did this experience influence your understanding of architecture as an open project?*

The ability to use any material and transform it into space or something else was a great lesson for us. We learned more than we built. Jean-Philippe was working for the urban department in the city of Niamey, and he was interested in understanding urban conditions and extending the city in terms of networks, for a better use of land. We learned a lot even though we were not totally sure what we would learn. After finishing architecture school, we thought that we had learned enough, but this experience radically changed our approach to architecture which became more open. The best lesson is to inquire into what is primarily needed, and what comes afterward. ▪

★ Yona Friedman (Budapest, 1923) is a Hungarian architect, artist and filmmaker. He founded (with J. Trapman) the *Groupe d'Études d'Architecture Mobile* (GEAM) in 1957. GEAM stated that "occupants must be made able to decision making, and technology has to serve their individual wishes." Source: yonafriedman.nl

★ Archigram was a highly influential group of avant-garde British architects (Warren Chalk, Peter Cook, Dennis Crompton, David Greene, Ron Herron, and Michael Webb) who published a magazine from 1961 to 1979 (most of their production took place on paper) *. "They developed a 'high-tech', lightweight, infra-structural approach that stretched far beyond known technologies (…). They devised autonomous dwellings and focused on survival technology; they experimented with mega-structures and modular construction systems**." Sources: *Sadler, S. (2005). *Archigram, Architecture without Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT. **aabookshop.net

★ Plug-in City (1964) is a visionary urban megastructure conceived by Peter Cook (Archigram). Plug-in City encourages "change through obsolescence: each building outcrop is removable, and a permanent 'craneway' facilitates continual rebuilding." Source: moma.org

★ Herman Hertzberger (Amsterdam, 1932) is a Dutch architect. He designed flexible spaces and "interpretable zones which can be modified for different purposes." Source: ajbuildingslibrary.co.uk

★ Frei Otto (1925-2015) was a German architect and inventor. Working with engineers and biologists, he developed adaptable and changeable structures. He received the Prizker Prize (posthumously) in 2015. Source: pritzkerprize.com

★ University of Arts & Human Sciences (Grenoble, France, 2001) is a 5,062 m$^2$ education facility designed by Lacaton & Vassal. Source: lacatonvassal.com

★ John Habraken (Bandung, Indonesia, 1928) is a Dutch architect. He introduced the notion of 'Open Building', by making "the distinction between the 'support' and the 'infill' by which a building can be adapted over time to unforeseen changes in programme and use." Source: Teerds, H., Habraken, J., & Havik, K. (2011). Define and Let Go: An interview with John Habraken. *OASE* (85), 8–16.

★ Niamey is the national capital of Niger since 1926. It has 978,000 inhabitants (estimated, 2012). Source: britannica.com