The Vertical Village: the long road travelled by a Lyon housing cooperative

Marie-Pierre Marchand

The "Village Vertical" development that has taken shape in a mixed-development zone in Villeurbanne, near Lyon, is today one of the most prominent experiments in the alternative housing sector. Here, Marie-Pierre Marchand – who has monitored the development's progress as part of a research project[1] – describes how this cooperative came into being, along with the values that it embodies.

Following significant media coverage, the Village Vertical (in English, "Vertical Village") development seems to have become the showcase operation of a movement that is trying to reinvent the status of residents' cooperatives in France, in particular via the Habicoop association, which promotes the notion of collective property and adopts an anti-speculation stance. But this project is also – and perhaps above all – the story of a collective undertaking led by a group of "everyday adventurers", to use an expression coined by Catherine Bidou-Zachariansen (1984). Driven not only by a desire to follow a different way of life, but also by a sort of obligation to exercise their rights as citizens and call for a "dialogue on an equal footing" with the public authorities, the members of this group share the conviction that they are taking on a pioneering role in seeking a "right to the city" and the right to build and live in a particular form of housing. Although this operation is emblematic of the current fervour surrounding "alternative housing", it also reveals the contradictions and fragile situations involved, in an institutional environment that has difficulty adapting to experimentation.

The strength of a community that grows with the project

The development – the foundation stone of which was laid on 16 November 2011 – is located within the Maisons Neuves ZAC (*zone d'aménagement concerté*, or mixed-development zone) in Villeurbanne, a city of 145,000 inhabitants immediately adjacent to Lyon.[2] It is an apartment building comprising 14 housing units and a number of shared spaces, that in turn forms part of a larger complex that also includes 24 rent-to-buy social housing units built by Rhône Saône Habitat, a social-housing cooperative. The operation was initiated by a group of 10 households, via a long journey that began in 2005, when a couple in their thirties and a few of their friends had the idea of buying property collectively in an existing building. Following the failure of this initial attempt, owing to a difficult property market, the current project gradually came into being, eventually becoming a public project.

---

1 Field study conducted in the dual context of a thesis and research for PUCA (the French environment ministry's "Urban Development, Construction and Architecture Plan"; see bibliography), essentially between September 2008 and late 2009, with a few non-exhaustive updates in 2010 and 2011.

2 Together, the cities of Lyon and Villeurbanne (combined population: 625,000) form the core of the Lyon urban area (population: approx. 1.5 million).

The "Village Vertical" association was created in the autumn of 2005, and a charter and statutes were drawn up. These texts specify the founding values of the project (neighbourly solidarity, urban ecology, democracy, etc.) and define the way it operates. Indeed, one of the unique features of the group (and perhaps the key to its success) lies in the great importance accorded to effective and efficient organisation and the participation of all members, in a spirit of "democracy through action". The aim is to ensure true collective control and supervision of the project, with decisions made consensually via a "village council"; the rotation of responsibilities; and the collective management of all tasks. A text entitled "*Être villageois, ça implique*" ("Being a 'villager' means getting involved") reminds members of these rules. In addition, a welcome procedure for new arrivals has been formally established. The group also uses a number of well-designed IT tools and committees on various themes (architecture, communications, legal issues, etc.) to ensure the effective diffusion of information and ongoing self-training.

New members of the group are "recruited" from within the alternative and environmental scenes in Greater Lyon, which includes an ATTAC[3] free-software group, the Habitat Groupé ("Group Housing") network, communal garden associations, community-supported agriculture associations[4] and the Primevère alternative ecology show (held at Eurexpo in Lyon). The group has, over time, become more diverse (with different family situations and the presence of several generations) and, owing to the long duration of the project, has also seen a partial turnover of its membership.

The project is based on a number of founding values, which observations have shown to be very well established (Marchand 2010). The members of the group have often fought hard to preserve these key values, in response to the various technical and financial arbitrations that are inherent to such a project. Just like the democratic process (one member, one vote) mentioned above, the group's ecological values are also the result of a consensus. The members of Village Vertical have adopted an all-encompassing approach, which they call "life ecology", that owes as much to the chosen construction model (bioclimatic architecture, shower-only bathrooms, etc.) as it does to simple and mutualised lifestyles: certain spaces and facilities are shared, and an urban setting was deliberately chosen for its high density and good public-transport provision. Another of the project's strengths is that the desire for conviviality and mutual assistance is present not just within this one specific group – indeed, the association discourages inward-looking attitudes – but also across the rest of the future neighbourhood, where the "Vertical Villagers" are keen to become actively involved (with, for example, communal allotments, the rental of communal space and the inclusion of a car-sharing station). Furthermore, as part of the project's ideological dimension, the group is committed to the construction of "new social solidarities", and actively sought to include four inclusionary housing units to be managed by a housing association for young people. Lastly, following research into Swiss housing cooperatives and a meeting with Habicoop in 2006, the "Vertical Villagers" decided to adopt a militant approach tending towards a "cooperative alternative", whereby collective property is promoted as an antidote to real-estate speculation.

These are not just abstract values, but – as is common with new militant movements – values that manifest themselves in real attitudes and in the priority given to day-to-day action, which is sometimes differentiated from (or even opposed to) "politics" by those involved. Indeed, as one of the "Vertical Villagers" says about their commitment to the project, "it isn't political, it's real". These values are present in each member's acts and behaviours: ensuring transparency with regard to one's income and financial contributions to the project; accepting certain compromises concerning one's future home in order to facilitate collective decisions; being tolerant of temporary difficulties that other members may have in making their financial contributions; and eschewing strong leadership. All of this reflects a certain closeness among the Vertical Villagers, which show that the recruitment of members by co-option necessarily implies a degree of affinity, although the

[3] ATTAC: Association pour la taxation des transactions financières et pour l'action citoyenne (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizens' Action).

[4] These associations, known as "AMAPs" (*associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne*) in French, typically run (organic) vegetable box schemes in conjunction with local producers.

group makes it clear that it is wary of overfamiliarity, regularly stating, “We are neighbours, not friends”.

Essential partnerships

Although the result of a private initiative, the project has nevertheless developed in the context of a public partnership, without which it could not have existed: the central question of access to land was resolved thanks to support from Villeurbanne city council, which offered the group a location within a new ZAC that was then just being created. The partnership dynamic was boosted by the commitment of a number of “militants”, who were able to open institutional doors (including a Green councillor on Villeurbanne council; a well-placed officer within Greater Lyon council;[5] and the director of Rhône Saône Habitat, the social-housing cooperative involved in Habicoop). As a result of this strong support, the land was made available to Vertical Village at the social-housing rate, despite the fact that the plot “chosen” by the group (because of its ideal sunlight levels for bioclimatic architecture) was initially intended for private development. This episode reveals the considerable negotiation skills of a group whose primary concern was the realisation and management of its project, but which nonetheless managed to acquire the knowledge necessary to put together a strong technical case, even though its members were unfamiliar with the worlds of architecture and urban planning.

The support of Greater Lyon council and Villeurbanne city council seems essentially motivated by the experimental aspect of the project and its potential for future adaptations of urban policy – an aspect of the project lauded by the mayor of Villeurbanne for its social innovation at the laying of the foundation stone. Balance and mix are core concerns for local authorities, and this project meets these criteria in two ways: first, through the presence of four “inclusionary” housing units; and second, because it falls into the “affordable housing” category. Indeed, this intermediate form of housing is something that is missing in cities, occupying a space midway between social rented housing, equity-sharing schemes for first-time buyers, and a free market that has become inaccessible to certain parts of the middle and lower-middle classes – a category to which many members of the group belong; indeed, most of the group were previously renting in the private sector, and all but one were eligible for social housing of some sort.[6]

An uphill struggle

In the absence of a suitable legal and financial framework, each stage of the project has been plagued with problems, and the group has had to battle long and hard to uphold the founding principles of a project whose hybrid nature (collective property, mixed public and private funding) goes against the neatly segmented logic of the conventional housing production system. First, pending hypothetical legislative reforms, the group was forced to adapt existing legal statuses – notably that of the *société par actions simplifiée* (simplified limited company) – in order to create something that was more or less suited to a cooperative model. It also had to establish a partnership that would comply with the allocation rules for “inclusionary” housing while also requiring a certain commitment to the project’s values on the part of future tenants. The proportion of shared spaces had to be reduced, owing to insufficient funds, and the legality of loan guarantees by local authorities had to be approved. Finally, some of the project’s environmental credentials were

[5] Greater Lyon (in French, “Grand Lyon”) is an intermunicipal structure covering Lyon and 57 neighbouring towns and villages (including Villeurbanne) in the Lyon metropolitan area. Its council is made up of elected officials from each member municipality.

[6] More specifically, all but one of the group members had incomes below the upper limit for what is known as “PLS” housing (i.e. social rented housing built by social landlords using a loan called the *PLS* or *prêt locatif social* – literally “social rental loan”). The rent is higher than for other types of social housing; consequently, the upper income limit for tenants is also higher, with PLS housing accessible to around 70% of the French population.

compromised by building and planning regulations – for example, the group was unable to use a non-certified natural insulating material, and had to fight tooth and nail to reduce the number of parking spaces to be provided.

The Village Vertical project will be completed in 2013, some eight years after its inception. This timescale highlights the difficulties facing the alternative housing "movement" in France unless it manages to develop beyond a few isolated initiatives. An adaptation of the national regulatory framework, the support of local authorities (formalised via contracts) and support for nascent groups all seem to be essential conditions for real growth of this kind. However, such "rationalisation" could also run the risk of stifling social experimentation, which is necessarily complex. Indeed, the conventional frameworks for the negotiation of projects between elected officials, technical experts, property developers and residents is called into question when residents seek to be more than just consumers and taxpayers. The Vertical Village, with its unique outlook and culture of participation that transcends mere bricks and mortar, shows that it is a challenge worth taking on.

Bibliography

Bacqué, Marie-Hélène and Carriou, Claire. 2011. "Participation et politique du logement en France, un débat qui traverse le siècle", in Bacqué and Sintomer (dir.), *La démocratie participative. Histoire et généalogie*, Paris: La Découverte.

Bacqué, Marie-Hélène and Vermeersch, Stéphanie. 2007. *Changer la vie ? Les classes moyennes et l'héritage de mai 68*, Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier.

Bidou-Zachariansen, Catherine. 1984. *Les aventuriers du quotidien. Essai sur les nouvelles classes moyennes*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Laville, Jean-Louis, Magnen, Jean-Philippe, de França Filho, Genauto and Medeiros, Alzira (dir.). 2005. *Action publique et économie solidaire, une perspective internationale,* Ramonville-Saint-Agne: Érès.

Marchand, Marie-Pierre. 2010. "Le Village vertical à Villeurbanne", in Biau and Bacqué (dir.), *Habitats alternatifs, des projets négociés ?*, report for PUCA in the context of an invitation to tender ("Le projet négocié"), pp. 176–204.

Maury, Yann. 2009. *Les coopératives d'habitants : méthodes, pratiques et formes d'un autre habitat populaire,* Brussels: Bruylant.

Roux, Nicole and Denèfle, Sylvette. 2007. "Des locataires coopérateurs aux habitants coopérateurs", paper presented at the *II Coloquio Internacional RULESCOOP*, Costa Rica. Available at: http://www.sylvette-denefle.fr.

Silence. 2009. "Le consensus, source d'émancipation ?", dossier, no. 373, November.

Silence. 2010. "Vivre en colocation", dossier, no. 383, October.

Territoires. 2010. "Habitat alternatif, une troisième voie pour l'accès au logement ?", dossier, no. 508, May.

Marie-Pierre Marchand is an urban planner and consultant specialised in the field of urban policy, urban renewal and social housing. She is a member of the LAVUE (Laboratoire architecture, ville, urbanisme, environnement) research laboratory, within the Mosaïques team, where she is currently writing a thesis on the renewal of shared housing in Greater Lyon. She is also participating in a research project (INSA/Habicoop) on residents' cooperatives, in the context of an invitation to tender entitled "*Université citoyenne et solidaire*" launched by Rhône-Alpes regional council to encourage closer links between universities and their local communities.

Further reading:

Village Vertical: http://village-vertical.org.

Habicoop: http://www.habicoop.fr.

To quote this article:

Marie-Pierre Marchand, translated by Oliver Waine, "The Vertical Village: the long road travelled by a Lyon housing cooperative", *Metropolitics*, 10 October 2012. URL: http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Vertical-Village-the-long-road.html.