



The complex representations of working-class residential towers

The rise and fall of the Plein-Ciel tower in three acts

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Rachid Kaddour's analysis of the trajectory of perceptions of the Plein-Ciel tower in Saint-Étienne in south-eastern France shows that certain housing tower blocks can take on a system of representations that is far more complex than the often deprecating views presented in discourse intended to legitimize urban renewal.

Series: The Resurgence of Towers in European Cities

The general image of towers in France is still very much associated with blocks of working-class housing, owing to the frequent presence of buildings of this type on large, high-rise housing estates (known in France as *grands ensembles*). While towers accommodating working-class housing have been the subject of recurrent debate in France since 2003, it has primarily been with regard to demolitions: the National Agency for Urban Renewal, ANRU, has been encouraging social landlords to demolish the most imposing buildings in sensitive urban neighbourhoods, including the tallest tower blocks. But is the negative image of the *banlieues* and their problems only associated with working-class residential towers? Does this viewpoint not obscure other representations that are also attached to these buildings?

In this respect, focusing on one particular residential tower – the Plein-Ciel (“Open Sky”) tower in the industrial (and former mining) city of Saint-Étienne, near Lyon, in south-eastern France – is an approach that offers a wealth of information. This tower, which figures prominently on the Saint-Étienne skyline and is emblematic of the image associated with *grands ensembles*, was built in 1972 and demolished in 2011. The compilation and analysis of a corpus of a dozen or so promotional and artistic images (publicity films and photographs) featuring the Plein-Ciel tower enables us to draw up a history or chronicle of this building. This chronicle highlights a complex system of representations: throughout its four-decade lifespan, the tower was variously perceived as a symbol of modernity, as the emblem of a housing project in decline, and as a monument within the city's landscape. The last two representations – one stigmatized, the other valorized – even coexisted in the tower's final years. In all these different and competing representations, however, the verticality of the building played an essential role.

Act 1: Plein-Ciel as a symbol of modernity

The oldest identified image of the tower dates back to 1970. It is a photograph of the scale model of the ZUP (*zone à urbaniser en priorité* – priority urbanization zone) at Montreynaud, taken at the

“Saint-Étienne demain” (“Saint-Étienne tomorrow”) exhibition at the city’s economic fair. This exhibition showed off the major urbanistic operations that were under way in the city, demonstrating “the transformations and new face of the city,” with the aim of shaking off Saint-Étienne’s reputation as a “smoke-blackened industrial city still stuck in the 19th century”.¹ The exhibition was part of a publicity campaign orchestrated by Michel Durafour, mayor of Saint-Étienne from 1964 to 1977. From 1973 onwards, photo and film² reports focused on Montreynaud (up to 4,400 dwellings planned) and, in particular, its centrepiece tower, Plein-Ciel (by architect Raymond Martin), with its striking verticality (18 storeys), the water tower that gives the building its distinctive bowl-shaped “hat”, and its hilltop location that sets it apart (physically and figuratively) from the historic city centre.

Figure 1. Model of the Montreynaud estate (1970)



Credit: Saint-Étienne City Archives, ref.: 2Flicono1354.

¹ Extracts from the film *Saint-Étienne, on en parle* (Atlantic Film, 1970) associated with the exhibition.

² Such as *Les Grands Travaux à Saint-Étienne* (City of Saint-Étienne, 1974).

Figure 2. Aerial view of the Montreynaud estate (1973)



Credit: Saint-Étienne City Archives, ref.: 2FIcono837.

In Saint-Étienne as elsewhere, the reasons for such modern constructions during the three post-war boom decades – “*Les Trente Glorieuses*” – are linked in part to France’s chosen solution to the national housing crisis and to the industrial overhaul (stabilizing the workforce, industrializing the construction sector) that was in progress nationwide at this time. But housing developments such as Montreynaud must also be seen as the physical manifestation of a modern sociopolitical project where aspirations and ideologies were turned towards the construction of a new urban era and its associated ambitions (in terms of well-being and hygiene) that broke with the difficulties of the time (slum housing, poor health, individualism, etc.). Housing, which until then had been both uncomfortable and inadequate, became one of the major areas of intervention: more than 8 million housing units would be built between 1945 and 1975.

And, of course, the forms taken by this housing had to be as modern as the rest of the project. Big names and a new generation of architects were called upon. They responded with pure, pared-back geometric shapes and, in the largest operations, made use of technical developments to multiply the

signal constructions of these estates, namely the long “slabs” and tall towers around which other buildings were structured.

As an industrial city that had been hit hard by the housing crisis, Saint-Étienne is a prime example of this movement. *Grands ensembles* mushroomed across the city. Many of them were built atop the hills that surround Saint-Étienne, forming new gateways to the city; they therefore had to symbolize renewal. From this point of view, Montreynaud – a “new little city in its own right”³ – played a key role, and its tower, built on the summit of the hill and incorporating a water tower that was illuminated at night, was its emblem: a “symbol of modernity”.⁴ The tower owes its name to the fact that it offered its residents “apartments in the sky”,⁵ and we can see in this appellation a positive value judgement not just of the building’s verticality, a source of both oxygen and light, but also of its role as an urban beacon.

Act 2: Plein-Ciel as a symbol of an estate in decline

If we class the corpus of identified images chronologically, we see a significant resurgence of the Plein-Ciel tower in the fields of institutional communication and the arts in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In literature, the plot of the saga *Les Sauvages*, by Sabri Louatah, begins in Saint-Étienne, and the Plein-Ciel tower is an important part of the backdrop:

“The Plein-Ciel tower stood with a sinister majesty at the summit of Montreynaud Hill [...]. At the dawn of the 21st century, residents had clamoured for its demolition [...]. The famous tower-and-bowl structure was visible from the station as you arrived from Lyon, and many Stéphanois⁶ considered it [...] the high point of the city in two respects: literally – from the top of its 68 metres,⁷ it dominated the city’s other six hills – but also figuratively, as an emblem of a resounding urban disaster and a city resigned to deindustrialization” (Louatah 2011, p. 89).

This description encapsulates the tower’s situation at the time the novel was written: awaiting demolition. In 2011, photographs by Pierre Grasset (an exemple of which can be found below), commissioned by the city council, shows the building’s moribund structure.

How is it that the Plein-Ciel could go from being a symbol of modernity to an “emblem of a[n] urban disaster” condemned to demolition? First of all, only part of the ZUP’s amenities and half the total planned number of dwellings were actually built, owing to demographic projections that were not attained in reality (Vant 1981; Tomas *et al.* 2003). The incomplete nature of the estate accentuated the inconveniences of its location, some three miles from the city centre, from which it is cut off by major road and rail infrastructure. Second, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the population of Montreynaud became poorer (unemployment was rising, and better-off households were leaving the neighbourhood in favour of home-ownership) and “more ethnic”, with the result, via mechanisms analysed elsewhere (Tissot 2003; Masclet 2005), that perceptions of the neighbourhood changed: in political and journalistic discourse, Montreynaud acquired an image as a dangerous neighbourhood. From this point on, the area became the focus of urban regeneration and renewal operations,⁸ but these had no significant effect on the number of vacant dwellings, poverty levels, educational failure rates, crime rates or discrimination levels. For many Saint-Étienne residents, Montreynaud was something of a forgotten, relegated neighbourhood, “up there”⁹ on the hill.

³ From an undated publicity brochure titled *Montreynaud, Saint-Étienne, résidence les Hellènes*.

⁴ In the words of a resident who had lived on the estate since it was first built.

⁵ From an undated publicity brochure titled *Des appartements en plein-ciel. La tour de Montreynaud*.

⁶ Translator’s note: inhabitants of Saint-Étienne are known as Stéphanois.

⁷ Translator’s note: 68 metres is equivalent to 223 feet.

⁸ A *grand projet de ville* (“major urban project”) was launched in 2001, followed by an agreement with ANRU (the National Agency for Urban Renewal) in 2005.

⁹ An expression regularly heard during interviews.

Figure 3. The Plein-Ciel tower “undressed”



Credit: Pierre Grasset, Saint-Étienne City Council, 2011.

The tower became the visible symptom of this deterioration. Rumours began to spread about its stability and the insulation of the water tower as early as the 1970s.¹⁰ Ten years after the tower was completed, only 50 of the 90 apartments had been sold. This vacancy rate led to the creation of a “*foyer de logements*” (“accommodation centre”) in the tower for dependent adults with psychiatric conditions, which accentuated the image of a relegated neighbourhood. The management of this centre proved difficult; this, together with the financial problems of a number of homeowners in the tower, led to the homeowners’ association being officially deemed “fragile” in 2002. A study at the time suggested that the demolition of the tower “would have a positive impact on the reclassification of the neighbourhood’s housing stock and would also make it possible to promote a change of image for Montreynaud”.¹¹ The last of the tower’s residents was rehoused in late 2008.

Act 3: Plein-Ciel as a symbolic monument of Saint-Étienne

However, other images from the corpus indicate that, from the 2000s onwards, the stigmatized image of the Plein-Ciel tower as an emblem of a housing project in difficulty was counterbalanced by another, more positive, image as a symbol for Saint-Étienne as a whole. In choosing Plein-Ciel as one of the backdrops in Saint-Étienne against which his saga took place, Sabri Louatah was recognizing its importance within the city. This representation could also be found, in a far more conscious and activist way, in other artistic productions in the 2000s. Most notably, perhaps, the image of the tower has been used on multiple occasions on the posters for the Gaga Jazz festival. While this festival is promoted as a regional event, its name firmly reflects its Saint-Étienne roots – *gaga* is the name of the local dialect – and the choice of visual identity is consistent with this in its

¹⁰ Cf. the article titled “Le château d’eau : mille m³ qui ne fuiront pas” (“The water tower: a thousand cubic metres that won’t leak”), published in local newspaper *La Tribune* on 17 November 1978, p. 14.

¹¹ Newsletter addressed to Montreynaud residents, produced by Saint-Étienne City Council, May 2003.

deliberate use of “the image of a building that is a symbol in Saint-Étienne”.¹² For the designers of these posters, the tower was an obvious choice, as it is “a monument recognized by everyone in Saint-Étienne”. Indeed, it is a monument that was immortalized in a postcard in 1987,¹³ and which, as is only to be expected, has been abundantly photographed – Jacques Prud’homme, for example, has produced a number of pinhole photographs of the tower that can be viewed on his blog.¹⁴ For Prud’homme, too, Plein-Ciel is one of the “symbols of Saint-Étienne”.

Figure 4. Visuals for the Gaga Jazz festival (from 2005 onwards)



Credit: Gaga Jazz association. Photograph by DMS Photo. Graphic design by Carton Plume.

¹² Interview with graphic designers Damien and Sébastien Murat (DMS Photo).

¹³ “Saint-Étienne – le quartier de Montreynaud”, deposited in the Saint-Étienne City Archives, ref.: 2FI icono 4401.

¹⁴ Website: <http://prudhommmestenope.canalblog.com/archives/2009/03/03/12797616.html>. See also the participatory blog 42 Yeux (“42 Eyes”) at the following URL: <http://42yeux.over-blog.com/categorie-11117393.html>.

Figure 5. Pinhole photograph by Jacques Prud'homme (2009)



Credit: Jacques Prud'homme, 2009¹⁵.

How did Plein-Ciel come to be considered a “monument rooted in the Saint-Étienne landscape” in this way?¹⁶ It is true that the combination of a housing tower block and a water tower – perhaps the only example in France – made it a unique building. Combined with its hilltop location, this unusual feature made the tower a major landmark not just for Saint-Étienne residents but also for the many supporters of the city’s soccer team, AS Saint-Étienne (ASSE), on their way to the stadium, just a short distance from Montreynaud. Indeed, the tower has been used as an emblem for the city on at least one ASSE bumper sticker, as well as in a *tifo*¹⁷ produced by the team’s supporters, alongside other symbols that reference the city’s mining history (e.g. headframes, slag heaps) as well as the club’s stadium, the legendary Stade Geoffroy-Guichard.

This representation of the tower as a “monument” could have saved it, using a classic mechanism in the history of heritage protection. Many of the city’s residents reacted, and for the association that runs Gaga Jazz, “the posters and flyers inviting Stéphanois to jazz concerts also act as calls for [the tower’s] preservation”. The new socialist city council, elected in 2008 under the banner of mayor Maurice Vincent, recognized that the tower “represent[ed] a symbol”.¹⁸ In 2010, the council offered residents the opportunity to vote for one of two options: to develop the value and landmark function of the tower by transforming it into an “artistic symbol of the city of Saint-Étienne”¹⁹ via the intervention of a plastic artist, or to demolish the tower and create a park in its place. Of the 318 residents who voted, 71% – 230 people – were in favour of demolition. The proponents of the preservation option expressed a dual regret: first, that the vote was open only to residents of Montreynaud (and not, say, the city as a whole); and second, that the turnout among these residents was so low.

The demolition of the tower took place on 24 November 2011 by controlled explosion. This momentous event placed Plein-Ciel under the spotlight one last time, captured on the many and varied pieces of audiovisual equipment present. The resultant images contribute to the corpus of

¹⁵ Source: <http://prudhommestenoep.canalblog.com/archives/2009/03/03/12797616.html>.

¹⁶ Source: “Tour Plein Ciel : rayonner ou s’effacer”, *La Tribune-Le Progrès* newspaper, 4 February 2009, p. 11.

¹⁷ Translator’s note: the term *tifo*, imported from Italian, designates the various displays and choreographies organized in the stands of football stadiums using different types of materials (plastic boards, fabric or plastic sheets/banners, cards, balloons, confetti, torches, smoke bombs, etc.).

¹⁸ In the words of the deputy mayor responsible for urban planning, taken from the article “Tour Plein-Ciel : rayonner ou s’effacer”, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

existing images of the tower, and indeed are now the only mementos of a building of which no trace remains on the ground.

With this dramatic ending, our chronicle resembles something of a theatrical representation, in three acts: the birth of the building and its subsequent decline and death, with a final convulsion in its death throes in the form of an attempt, in vain, to save it in the name of heritage protection. This also provides us with a third definition of the term “representation” that is used in this conclusion. Indeed, it is representations, in images and words, that have made it possible to compile this history of the Plein-Ciel tower – a history that reveals that three mental representations are associated with the building and its verticality: for the public authorities that commissioned its construction and for its first residents, the tower was a symbol of modernity; for certain Stéphanois, as well as for the actors and stakeholders who decided it should be demolished, it is the emblem of a stigmatized housing project; and finally, for other Stéphanois, including residents of Montreynaud and various artists, the tower is a landmark and a heritage site within the landscape of Saint-Étienne.

In comparison to, say, the Tour Panoramique (“Panoramic Tower”) in the Duchère district of nearby Lyon, which was completely renovated rather than demolished, this focus on the trajectory of perceptions of Plein-Ciel enables us to clarify that the verticality inherited by our cities – or at least the verticality present in *grands ensembles* – is the subject of a complex system of representations that is more varied than that presented in the different forms of discourse intended to legitimize urban renewal.

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To quote this article:

Rachid Kaddour, translated by Oliver Waine, “The complex representations of working-class residential towers. The rise and fall of the Plein-Ciel tower in three acts”, *Metropolitiques*, 26 February 2016. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-complex-representations-of.html>.