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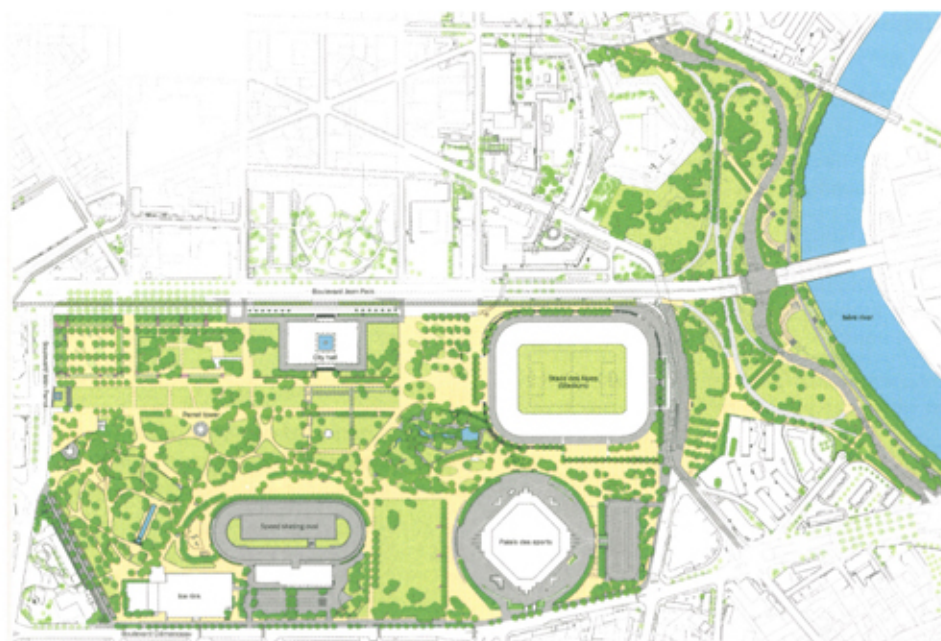
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The projects of Grenoble and Allonnes or the economy of means

A lecture by Alexandre Chemetoff, Versailles, 2008

General plan, the new park Paul-Mistral (Alexandre Chemetoff & Associates)

For a critical interpretation of the notion of sustainable development

Referring to the experience of the Grenoble project, I would like to link the issue of sustainable development to that of the economy of means, what I have termed frugality, or in other words, to use a sort of slogan: to at least "spend less to obtain more" if we can't "work more to earn more."[1] I have the feeling that there is a standard of production which, in order to become virtuous, requires great expense. An ordinary house costs 1,200-1,300 € (excluding taxes) per square meter to build and for it to be ecologically viable it should cost 1,500-1,700 € excluding taxes. A garden could be designed at a cost of 50, 60 or 70 € per square meter and for it to be sustainable it would have to cost more. The same principle applies to consumer goods; ordinary products should be accessible to all and to have organic products this would cost more. I find this situation a matter for concern. It refers to a purist and discriminatory notion, the sources of which are at the origin of ecology and become confused with the worst excesses of the twentieth century.

This purist ecology, that of oblivion and segregation, leads to a mode of production of our cities which would thus escape from their history, their necessary filth, their diversity and their ambiguity, all of which are fundamentally necessary. I rather like diversity, I like impurity and like the popular side to the production of territories and cities.

A consensus seems to be emerging around sustainable development to the detriment of critical viewpoints. When one sees the great thinkers of the day who, in response to the requirements of sustainable development, imagine new model cities, I wonder and think back to the past, just after the last war, when the desire was expressed to re-

build this country upon new foundations free of the constraints of history. It seems to me that the question of urban ecology resides elsewhere: how to go back to history? How can rehabilitating existing situations become a basis for all projects?

I defend another notion of sustainable development which adapts to reality and its ambiguity: an ecology of memory. This approach inspired by the landscape is one in which there is no relocated project with a program formulated independently from the place in which it finds itself and from the special situation at the origin of its history or of its production. One of the best demonstrations is the School of Landscape Architecture where we are today, marked by an incredible superimposition of practices, of layers of history, and an extremely powerful relation to geography.[2] It also rather neatly raises the question of ecology, sustainable development and the way one may question the history of the world that surrounds us.

I have always found it strange that sustainable development should be associated with an insouciant and in essence more virtuous way of life. All the examples we hear about and which in many instances come from Germany often have nothing to do with the city or the transformation of territories but rather with people that make very special choices about the way they live. The cost of land in the area of Boulogne-Billancourt is equal to the cost of new constructions pretty much everywhere in France.[3] In such conditions it is possible to have a totally misleading vision of the city that is necessarily sustainable and possessing all these new appealing aspects eliciting no comments on the part of politicians or the media: no one appears to take a critical stance concern-

ing the up-market version of sustainable development. However, I am for a return to a popular and economic form of ecology.

I will take as an example the Paul Mistral Park in Grenoble,[4] a park we worked on. This park was created in 1925 for the first hydroelectric exhibition – the reason why there is a tower in the middle of the park built by the architect Auguste Perret. This park is also famous for having hosted the Winter Olympic Games in 1968. Due to the development of the city in preparation for the Olympics and the personality of its mayor at the time, Hubert Dubedout, the city of Grenoble was also a pioneer in the field of urban development.

It is interesting to return to Grenoble forty years after the games and to a park marked by a very strong history. Back in 1925 the park itself was developed as part of a project by the urban planner Léon Jaussely for the creation of the Grands Boulevards of Grenoble on the site of the former ramparts that still enclosed the city after the extension of 1850. In the plan we can see the locations of the town hall built by Maurice Novarina, the Perret Tower, the botanical gardens, the Isère River, the sports stadium, the new Stade des Alpes football stadium designed by the architects Chaix and Morel and inaugurated in February 2008, the speed-skating rink built for the Olympic Games and the skating rink. We also see the limits of the city bearing in mind that, in the park, vestiges of the fortifications were kept with the stronghold which was preserved and the Grands Boulevards that follow the traces of the ruins.

How can this park be transformed?

The work we did on opening the park up onto the banks of the Isère is rather special since it implies the transformation of the road interchange into a park. The initial idea was to demolish the interchange. Then the program of the competition was made public. It stipulated the need to integrate the football stadium and for the park to open onto the city whilst preserving its heritage. It was then that certain ecologists from the local council decided to hang from the branches of a few trees threatened by the construction of the stadium, an event that received a great deal of media coverage. As far as I am concerned, I was more in favour of integrating the stadium into the town, because I believe it is interesting that people should be able to walk to the stadium and that it should not be isolated in a location outside the town surrounded by a large car park. The park is also a way of entering the stadium and there needn't be any contradiction between the two.

In our project, based on the layout of the park, existing copses to the southeast have not been fundamentally disturbed. Our project consisted of tracing the Grande Allée as an extension of the Grands Boulevards, replacing the car parks on the south-western side by garden islands, enlarging the lawn situated between the speed skating rink and the sports stadium, installing a sort of enclosure around the sports stadium, integrating the stadium and its enclosure and transforming the interchange into a park. In this work the cost of the intervention was given at the same time as the programme itself. The municipality had budgeted several phases each amounting to 6 million €. If one considers the first phase of the project, a budget of 6 million € for the development of a park of just

Grenoble, Sablons interchange, October 2007

Above Before the work: the Sablons interchange, April 2006
Below The interchange park, August 2008

over 30 hectares may seem totally insufficient. So we worked on the proposal the other way around, thinking about what we could do at that price.

The budget is the programme

Would our point of view concerning the park change if the budget were the program with the aim of realizing the project as quickly as possible? A converse approach with a hypothetical budget of 40 million € programmed over fifteen years and realized in successive phases would have produced totally different results. Such a project would have been conducted without it being possible to show the park's transformations as they were being made. It would essentially have been a return to a Soviet vision of planning. That's why I am persuaded that each phase of the project must be autonomous and make it possible to commence working on a layer of visible transformations. I believe that by doing this we are contributing to sustainable development, although it may appear exactly the opposite. This approach does not pretend to be virtuous in terms of, for example, the quality of the

benches installed made of wood coming from such and such an origin and grown by so-and-so.

It is simply a way of managing the collective heritage, a relation to what exists and a relation to the means, that is to say the money, bearing in mind the fact that the production of money can be extremely polluting in certain circumstances. Green or blue banknotes, irrespective of their color, are more than a means of exchange; they also have the capacity to produce a certain number of consequences that need to be integrated into the rationale if we wish to be consistent with ecological principles. Sustainable development must take into account the question of money and of the production of the goods needed to conduct the work. It is not just a question of considering the budget as a closed circuit within which we will endeavour to spend virtuously, but rather of ensuring we are able to make a different impact not only on the economy but also on the way of maintaining and managing the collective heritage.

Democratic consultation

The democratic approach through consulting people raises other types of questions: At which point does one start to consult someone? When you have a drawing? When there is a real visible transformation you can walk in or through? I think it is pointless to create committees to show drawings or perspectives. It is much more interesting to carry out work and open the site to the public. It is not just a worksite of a public space but a worksite in a public space. Then there is the issue of the commitment of those conducting the project, of the clients and the landscape architects, and of their capacity to get people to come and discover what they are doing.

If we take the example of the plan for the interventions in the park it may appear incomprehensible to most people. Besides, this is quite normal, since this plan is not intended to be shared but is a working document. Rather than such a plan, one can possibly show the site as it is, the interchange as it is and as we intend to transform it: we keep the lanes of the interchange with their original asphalt but they become the alleys of the park

Above Before the work: the garden islands, January 2006
Below The garden islands, August 2008

Above Before the work: the banks of the River Isère, October 2006
Below The amphitheaters on the banks of the River Isère, August 2008

without any change in the levelling. Our intervention simply consists of cutting off road access and planting trees. But when we talk about it no one believes us because no one thinks we will do something so simple: cutting off traffic to the interchange, resuming its layout and changing a few things, re-cutting the asphalt a little and planting a few trees in the middle. Yet by doing so we shift from the interchange to the park, an amusing reversal of circumstances when one knows that the model for the interchange was inspired from drawings of English style gardens, a way of allocating a project based on a transformed starting point.

The economics of recycling

In addition, this trend towards transformation leads to spending much less money and to preserving the investment that was made in the '60s and '70s. However, those decades are stamped with a negative image and each time the subject of rehabilitation of constructions from the '60s or '70s is raised we keep hearing how awful that period was, as if we had stopped listening to the music of

that period! But I don't see why we should consider the re-release of a Neil Young record as brilliant and the interchange built at the same time detestable without stepping back and simply examining the situation. It is necessary to get away from the idea that the interchange from the '70s must be demolished because it symbolizes the city and the car – to get away from demolishing it with bulldozers to create a virtuous and totally ecological park. By doing this, we destroy everything, including the investment that was made in the '70s and which may be worth retaining. Is everything we undertake today by essence noble and everything undertaken yesterday blighted with every evil? Of course the answer is no, even when applying the principles of sustainable development.

Simple solutions

To transform the site, we can work with simple things. Let's take the car park, for example, and attempt to look at it differently. Let's take away the cars to reveal a magnificent plantation of plane trees. On the site of the old car park all that was

needed was to plant a few perennials at the foot of the plane trees so that the same place that we had left untouched, or almost – we even kept the streetlamps – should become a park. You have to learn to accept what is already there. Our intervention is so slight that it could almost be dispensed with. This minimum intervention, however, produces a maximum effect; it completely transforms the site and restores its value. There are other examples of even more minimal transformations: instead of parking the cars at an angle we propose to park them lengthwise and instead of having tarmac all the way to the buildings, there is a stabilized surface and plantations at the foot of the trees indicating that we are in the park.

Re-establishing links

Another challenge in the development of this park, segmented by roads and composed of ill-assorted structures, was to re-establish a link between its different sections. Access from the park to the River Isère was re-established via a pedestrian crossing on a road which used to be impassable. On the

Allonnes in June 2002, survey of the site

General view during the work, September 2004

ARNAULD DUBOYS FRESNEY

other side of the road, terraces overhanging the Isère River now provide a view of the landscape. The integration of the stadium inside the park was another problem: how to ensure the stadium fence served above all as the park fence? It is only closed when there are matches and remains open onto the park the rest of the time. The trees are an integral part of the fence. We have thus fitted in with what existed with an extreme economy of means whilst changing things radically.

Re-establishing old patterns

We extended the Grands Boulevards into the park by means of two allées with a stabilized surface, a lawn and some trees that were already there. This is a question that we are often asked: "Won't these trees spoil the perspective of the boulevard?" The boulevards represent the continuity of the city and the completely random pattern of slightly strange species of trees represents the park. The superimposition of the two means that we go indistinctly from the larger pattern of the city to the system of the park itself.

Re-establishing a consistency within the park

At the site of the former car park transformed into a garden island, the ground is simply covered by a stabilized surface and planted with perennials that can stand shade. These planted areas form ellipses, shapes that we have used in other parts of the garden to establish a continuity. Originally there was also the Alpine Garden with enclosures for deer, which have been sent to a high-altitude resort in the mountains where they are much

happier. Reintegrating the enclosure for the deer made it possible to re-create a trail in the park.

Maintaining the park differently

With Gabriel Chauvel [5] we worked on the maintenance of the park by making a distinction between open and closed spaces. We established the following program. The open spaces will have the status of a meadow or of a stabilized surface and the closed spaces the status of woods or undergrowth where we will let vegetation develop. We cut some species of trees to give a chance to others. For example poplars have made room for elms. We left the poplars cut up into logs in the park, like in a forest, on purpose. This took place during parliamentary elections. There was a debate: How did we treat the park and the trees in the town center? People finally understood our approach because we used the wood shavings to make a sort of track inside the copse, which is very much appreciated by runners. This didn't preclude the debate on the relevance of forestry-type maintenance in the town center. But it made it possible once again to address the question of the level of maintenance in the public spaces of the town and the quality of things that were a little less well maintained because they encouraged freer practices. Questions usually confined to the private domain were debated openly in public.

Urban planning: Child's play

Since we didn't have enough money to make a playground, the discussions led to us switching roles with the client who was asking me to install

a playground whereas I was reminding him that we couldn't afford one! I found myself in the position of the one who was minding the budget! In the end I managed to propose a temporary play area funded with the budget initially earmarked for communication. A climbing wall was rented during the summer as well as a temporary swimming pool and board games. Gradually people started to come and play cards in the park, they also organized concerts and the park became a sort of natural extension of the town. And instead of investing in equipment, we worked on maintenance and organizing activities. Instead of a play area with just a few children pretending to play we suddenly had an entire crowd from Grenoble, people who stay in the city during the summer who were on vacation in the park.

It isn't a universal solution which functions in all situations but more of an attitude; by intervening as we did on the Paul Mistral Park we are minding the city, sustainable development, the economy and in a certain way democracy. The first stage of the work is finished even though many details of the park are not finished. A second phase of the work will start after the public have taken possession of this site. Pending that, in the month of July 2007, we organised a picnic for one thousand people in the park. People started to take advantage of the slightly wild side to the park that encouraged them to behave in a different way and to enjoy a feeling of freedom. In this city that most people used to think of leaving at the weekend there were now reasons to remain in town and go to the park for a picnic with the family.

View from the new street perpendicular to rue Charles Gounod, May 2005

Paths and gardens between houses and buildings, May 2005

View from rue Charles Gounod, May 2005

Paths in the Bois de la tour aux fées, May 2005

Public discussion
Ecological neighbourhoods, sustainable development and principles of reality

Karin Helms: Alexandre, do you believe there can be no possible modernity? Or do you consider it more as a continuation of history? Do the issues of the ecological neighborhood and other such subjects close to the hearts of our ministries get on your nerves?

AC: No, it doesn't get on my nerves but I don't see the connection with reality! I understand the concept but I don't see what it leads to. In fact, no one does and since people are not complete fools, they say: "We'll put the sustainable neighborhood in a new place." When this idea is applied to a real situation, what happens? When developing a city must we evict the people already there? Do they conform to the criteria of a sustainable

neighborhood? Starting from scratch is a modern or modernist approach, or at any rate one already explored. But ecology cannot become a doctrine that would release us from addressing the question of the place, of people's origin and the pre-existing situation. Ecology must take people into account, the houses in which they live, their old cars that pollute too much and their old furniture that doesn't quite comply with standards. Otherwise it's terrifying; it means moving everyone out and projecting them into a sort of better world. It is a Chinese-style cultural revolution in which old furniture and old houses are burnt in order to rebuild a better world, with as a bonus a market economy, which marks a major differ-

ence with the imaginary means of radiant socialism. For that reason I believe we must be watchful. All projects must bear a relation to what already exists. And this whole ecological victory should be a victory of ecology in an inhabited environment. I think man has a place on the planet. Ecology should take into account what we have already made. We can keep an old house and instead of demolishing it improve it, even if it doesn't comply with today's standards, because it may have other qualities. Besides, in terms of sustainable development, isn't the fact of having to undertake less criteria for making a choice? To refer again to the example of the Grenoble interchange, if I calculate in terms of grey energy, the demolition of the in-

terchange and its reconstruction are not profitable. Unfortunately these parameters are not taken into account. If I demolish the interchange, what do I do with the asphalt? Do I throw it away? Which Third World country will receive our waste that no longer complies with ecological standards? On the contrary, should we not adopt a responsible attitude and manage our relation to history and the past ourselves? I believe this subject deserves further reflection. The restoration of a tower block, repairing a building, even an imperfect one, may be desired as well as advisable. The regeneration of a certain number of things that have been made I believe is crucial. I don't know if this is a modern attitude, undoubtedly it is contemporary.

Charles Dard: Yesterday I was in Allonnes near Le Mans, where people have mixed feelings ...

AC: Allonnes is a town in the agglomeration of Le Mans with a public housing estate on which we worked.[6]

CD: I recommend everyone to go and see the very fine project Alexandre designed on this site with the architect Jean-Louis Berthomieu. Together, they worked on the project to transform a public housing block, a very impressive block. They cut it up into three sections and re-inserted it within the site. Should one always try to spend less, to use your expression, because from that moment on you were well inspired in encouraging people to spend more in restoring a block than they usually spend on building new projects after demolition? It so happens that I had the pleasure of working in Allonnes a short time after you, and I am perfectly aware that it is a question of who can get to the post first with the people from ANRU [7] who give me the impression of pulling the carpet from under your feet as soon as you suggest something different.

You ask them if we can develop the public space in such a manner as to be able to live with such and such a block of housing project apartments for another ten years and they answer that you can't take away just half of it, everything has to be taken away. It is difficult to believe that after erasing something it is possible to produce something

else more easily than through capitalizing on experience. Contrary to preconceived ideas it doesn't cost less.

AC: It's more complicated than that.

CD: Something that costs more may be worth more!

AC: I took the example of Grenoble where the budget was the program. To prepare this building, an operation that was conducted from 1998 to 2005 in public housing project in Allonnes, we had to demolish a great deal. To conduct proper repairs, because there was a need for heavy repairs, due to the way public housing financing works we had to demolish a greater number of buildings. It is difficult to compare the financing of a park in a city to that of public housing that conforms to infinitely more complex mechanisms. Our intervention consisted of rehabilitating these buildings, of building new houses, of developing the public space and of building new streets. In the master plan it is possible to make out the block of flats on the edge of the forest, the meander in the Sarthe River, the hill of Allonnes and a Gallo-Roman site, bearing in mind that we are in one of the founding sites of Le Mans. The town hall is quite close, proving that we are indeed in town. Our rather ambitious project concerns these elements.

This building, this block of flats, was designed in 1959 by a very good architect, Jean Le Couteur who may be qualified as 'modern'. He built a remarkable block of flats in Paris at No. 29 rue Jean-de-Beauvais, in the 5th Arrondissement next to the Sorbonne, and he frequently worked with Jean Prouvé. This type of economical housing project was being built at the same time. This building with large gangways cut the forest off from the neighborhood. Our initial idea was not to rehabilitate but to restore the building based on the original plans. It wasn't an historical reconstruction, but almost. We repaired the broken ceramic stoneware tiles in the stairwells, we put the letterboxes back where they had been, repaired the lamps when they were broken, repaired the gangways, and ensured that instead of providing access

to twenty-five flats, they provided access to three flats installed with a door code system. The major change is that we cut up the building to let two streets opening onto the forest pass through.

Comparing photographs before and after the work makes it possible to understand our approach: we take a block of flats, repair it, and repaint it white, as it was before, without changing the windows or openings. The only thing we added, to rigidify the facades that we had cut, was to install a system of posts that we used to make balconies at the gables of the flats and to also provide an outward view for the three-roomed apartments in the angles.

Instead of the car park that was at the foot of the buildings we proposed building small houses. We made drawings to explain how we were going to repair the building, what would happen on the gangway and how we would close it, and where we would put a bench so people could set down their shopping baskets before entering their flats. We then decided to re-use all the details of the existing building to construct new buildings. The security railing of the new house is the same as that of the building. What is introduced isn't the contrary of what already exists. It isn't a formal denial of what had already been done. We shall also take advantage of the difference in levels so that people can go into their homes from the garden at the higher level, walk along the gangway that goes around the house to enter the flat through the front door or continue until the end of the gangway and gain direct access to the kitchen. By doing that, we show that the gangway of the former flat isn't condemned, but re-used as a model. It is a way of adapting to the terrain. To take advantage of the difference in levels we put the garages under the entrance of the house, at the level of the street. So that when they come out of their flats people go down into the street through the garden and enter their garage. This exhibition of daily life is similar to what happens in the building where the flats are accessible from the gangway. The relation between the blocks and the new small houses

is not just stylistic. It also concerns lifestyles. The distance between the garage and the house is not an inconvenience but an advantage; it is what I call 'naturality'.

Between the buildings and the houses, the treatment of the gardens is done in the same spirit of economy with simple materials, stabilized soil and ground ivy. The construction of the houses amounts to 850 € per square meter. Before saying it's expensive, one should put things into perspective! It's so economical that we are concerned because it's an architecture that's borderline to extreme poverty. In terms of architectural expression, it's hardly interesting, but that's not the point. By putting these houses and restored flats face-to-face we are providing another potential in terms of housing in the neighborhood. We are planting a small forest with tree species found on the edges of forests, sorb and wild cherry, which is a reference to the forest and underscores the paradox between a suburban housing project and the Gallo-Roman background.

CD: Alexandre, you have surely heard of people complaining of the loss of free space, of open spaces.

AC: They complained of that in the beginning. Then they realized that they had gained a public space instead of an abandoned site. It isn't a question of quantity but of quality in the continuity of lifestyles and of care given to details. During a visit by the Prime Minister, François Fillon, accompanied by the Secretary of State for Urban Policies Fadela Amara, a delegation of inhabitants from the small houses said:"We're better off here than in a public housing project." Whereas they obviously were in a public housing project!

Even if Charles Dard is right when he says that we spent on these buildings barely less than for a new construction, one of the reasons for this is that we completely restored buildings that had never been maintained. There was a problem of the general disrepair of the installation, the buildings were in total disrepair. The windows, the electricity, the plumbing and the floors needed redo-

ing. In the end the only thing we didn't pay for was the structural work. We did a detailed study of the housing units and conducted major levelling work. We adapted to the terrain, paid attention to the way of installing things with a detailed earthwork plan and work on the movable elements, the gabions, the streetlamps and the access to the garages. We transposed these elements into the houses by creating small courtyards facing the garages and stairs making it possible to go back up to the garden. As one man said so pleasantly to Mr. Fillon, without denying the presence of the blocks of flats in the background: "We feel as though we're living in a real house!"

When we did the work, the residents had to leave the buildings and many of them asked to return to the same flat they occupied before the work started. Look at what happens and which is a pretty clear sign. People have set up couch hammocks in the gardens and have chipped in to buy geranium seeds which they cultivate collectively. They have even bought a small lawn mower to cut the grass between the paving stones in the gardens! There's real awareness and people have taken things in hand. We have also installed paths, with wooden planking providing access from the building into the forest. We have re-established a link between the forest and these buildings.

Notes

1 Travailler plus pour gagner plus, one of the slogans used by Nicolas Sarkozy, the UMP candidate during the French presidential campaign in June 2007.

2 After the Second World War, in 1945, to make up for the new need for professionals in landscape design and architecture because of the reconstruction of cities, General de Gaulle founded a landscape and garden arts department at the Ecole nationale d'horticulture de Versailles. In 1976 the Ecole nationale supérieure du paysage (ENSP) de Versailles was created, a public training establishment under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture.

3 In these areas on the western outskirts of Paris, the GDP per capita is three times higher than the national average.

4 The first phase of the intervention on the Paul Mistral Park (2004-2008). The contract for the redevelopment and extension of the park includes design of access to the stadium, lighting of the square in front of the stadium and of the ticket office.

5 Gabriel Chauvel is a landscape architect. He teaches at the Ecole nationale supérieure du paysage de Versailles.

6 The redevelopment of a residential neighborhood in Allonnes (1998-2005): contract to build 25 housing units in 7 town houses, to demolish 46 housing units and to rehabilitate 129 housing units.

7 The Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine (ANRU – National Agency for Urban Renovation) created in 2003 and developed after 2005 riots, implements the National Programme for Urban Renovation by approving global projects it finances with public and private funding. The agency provides financial support to local authorities, to public establishments and to public or private organizations conducting urban renovation operations. However, changes in the aspects of these areas are often brought about by demolition work which is not always justified.