

# ‘In Service of: Le Mirail’ seeks to revert the punitive narratives coursing on aging modernist estates by collectively conceiving urban design strategies for this precious housing stock—homes to many—on the site of Le Mirail, Toulouse. In this context, the ‘In Service of’ studio conducts a reflection on architecture as a form of public service.

In Service of: Le Mirail

Studio BA5 (Malterre-Barthes), Studio MA1 (Malterre-Barthes)  
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In Service of: Le Mirail  
Fall 2024 Design Studio

Mondays and Tuesdays

Monday: 10:00-12:00, 13:00-18:00  
Tuesday: 10:00-12:00, 15:00-18:00

Credits: 12

Location: SG 2211 - Studio Space

Office Hours as requested

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“Remember those walls I built? Well, baby they’re tumblin’ down!” Beyoncé, “Halo,” Ryan Tedder/ Evan Bogart/ Beyoncé Knowles © Columbia Records.

Nota Bene: This studio is part of the ‘In Service of...’ studio fall series that seeks to redress uneven access to design and planning literacy for the majority (Previous studio: ‘In Service of: Marseille’). The studio series places architecture as a tool at the service of a place, a population, a narrative— in benefit of the common good. In this class, we seek to deploy architecture processes ‘with values and interests different from those of capital.’ [1] In that sense, ‘In Service of: ...’ reflects on architecture as a form of public service.

This studio collaborates with the Ecole d’Architecture de Toulouse-Le Mirail and the Maison d’Architecture-Occitanie.

In 2012, the new university of Toulouse II- Le Mirail is inaugurated by three men, Jean-Michel Minovez, President of the University, Martin Malvy, President of the Regional Council, and Olivier Dugrip, the Rector. About the new Languages, Literatures and Foreign Civilizations Training and Research Unit (UFR)— the newspapers report: “A building that bears little resemblance to its predecessors... “Before we were cold, here we work better”, sums up student Antoinette.” The new building is erected on the ruins of the previous 23-hectare campus, constructed in 1971 in La Reynerie district, part of the new city designed by three other men: Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, and Shadrach Woods: Le Mirail. Between 1962 and today, a modernist vision emerged, was constructed, and partially knocked down. More demolitions are ongoing and planned. An array of reasons can explain why Le Mirail, organized along an elevated slab (‘la dalle’, now demolished), structured in 3 districts (Bellefontaine, La Reynerie, and Mirail-Université), suffers such a fate. Today the city is home to some 20’000 inhabitants, 67% of which are living in social housing—modest, racialized populations under police surveillance.

To grasp what is happening in Le Mirail, it must be relocated in the context of France’s national housing programs, petty politics, and global narratives. Once understood as the materialization of utopian projects under inter and post-war welfare policies, modernist estates have been under attack, perhaps ever since the first moment they were constructed (i.e., Pruitt-Igoe, St Louis, by Minoru Yamasaki, 1954-1972).

Decades of punitive narratives targeting these districts and their architecture—arguing of their obsolescence, blaming their urban forms, perceived ‘ugliness,’ and the social crisis they allegedly foster have almost succeeded in depicting these projects as failures.[2] Updated arguments traffic around ‘ghettoization’ and sustainability sermons, accusing these estates of being asphalted deserts and poorly isolated ‘thermal sieves’ contributing to the climate crisis. While it is true that renovations would be necessary in these districts, many of these assertions are grounded in racist planning approaches, neo-liberal policies aiming at discrediting public housing, and state betrayal vis-a-vis the working class and modest populations.

Voluntary negligence, lack of maintenance, racial and economic discrimination, and absence of infrastructures are some of the real culprits of the intensifying warfare against modernist mass housing. However, these estates cumulate many qualities beyond their fettered modernist designs: affordable, dense, and efficient housing blocks with good circulation and inherent plastic attributes. They are also just homes to people who hope to live in peace, hosting, at times, communities with strong ties that organized to defend their districts—despite suffering policing, prejudice, and discrimination.

This studio is not interested in a nostalgic and romanticized approach to modernist urbanism and its demise, nor is it after canonizing the works of Team X and its architects. Instead, we seek to explore how dense urban forms respond to housing needs and the politicization of this architecture. There is an urgent need to revert punitive narratives to address aging modernist estates as precious housing stock and homes to humans and non-humans and think collectively about engaging urban design strategies—on the site of Le Mirail. The topic is particularly urgent, as fascist politicians preach for the demise of these estates. In a 2013 interview, French extreme-right Marine Le Pen called for “demolishing public estates built between 1955 and 1970” to replace them with “housing of traditional size and aesthetics.” [3] Such irresponsible statements exemplify in the most bitter way that architecture can never be neutral, a position defended by the studio and RIOT at large. We strongly oppose the idea that architects are powerless in making and unmaking the built environment.

This belief is not grounded in a delusional view of architecture as a humanist discipline—rather the opposite. Acknowledging that if architecture has generated and still generates harm, unwillingly or not, via extraction, segregation, or gentrification, then the profession can also undo that harm. We celebrate the potential for design to repair urban conditions, foster social cohesion, limit environmental damages, enhance well-being, and contribute to the overall betterment of society

In parallel, the studio also conducts a self-critical reflection on its format to question architecture attachment to solutionism, the expectation to ‘fix problems’, and other tropes that have led to socially and spatially unjust situations. It also acknowledges the limitations of seeking engagements with communities within the given format of the studio. Within these limits, we strive to produce works that have some utility for active local groups engaged in struggles against demolition, neglect, and expropriation, to name a few of the questions faced by inhabitants of

Le Mirail. By focusing on the idea of being helpful without idealizing the task, this design studio hopes to articulate an agenda for a self-critical architecture practice with a heightened sense of responsibility and a commitment to creating spaces that truly serve the needs of the people.

[1] Pedro Fiori Arantes, *The Rent of Form: Architecture and Labor in the Digital Age*, ed. Adriana Kauffmann et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 152.

[2] “Jennifer Mack: ‘Creepage and Seepage in the Modernist Suburb That Never Was’”, Uppsala Universitet <https://www.uu.se/en/staff/events/archive/2024-02-06-jennifer-mack-creepage-and-seepage-in-the-modernist-suburb-that-never-was> (accessed June 30 2024).

[3] AFP, “Marine Le Pen Veut Détruire Les Cités,” *Le Point* (2013). [https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/le-pen-veut-detruire-les-cites-07-05-2013-1664548\\_20.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/le-pen-veut-detruire-les-cites-07-05-2013-1664548_20.php) (accessed 3 July 2024).

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[A] ZUP du Mirail, Toulouse (Haute-Garonne) : coupures de presse et publications. 1962-1980, Archive Candilis OFFICIEL-BTP-1969-10-N-63-P-18, Projet CANGE-F-02, Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, Paris.