

**The architect confronting neoliberal processes,**  
through the study of *d'architecture* magazine articles, from 1980 to nowadays.

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## ***The architect confronting neoliberal building processes***

« His clients would accept anything, so long as he gave them an imposing facade, a majestic entrance and a regal drawing-room, with which to astound their guests. It worked out to everyone's satisfaction: Keating did not care so long as his clients were impressed, the clients did not care so long as their guests were impressed, and the guests did not care anyway. »

Rand, A. (1943). *The Fountainhead*. Penguin Putnam.

### **Introduction :**

Since the 1980s, a new wind is blowing in the architecture professional field. As this period marked the shift to neoliberalism, the architectural work has evolved from a practice based on honorary public projects to a growing private-owned sector, led by real estate developers. The architect is then facing neoliberal challenges, like competitiveness, while publicly being responsible for the quality of our public built environment. As architecture composes our common surroundings, the architect seems to stand in an uncomfortable position since the neo-liberalisation of the profession: between a public good designer and a consumption object producer. As Veronique Biau writes in *Les architectes au défi de la ville néolibérale*, the definitions architects use to define their profession go from « *being the author of a piece* », to « *optimize a product* » or « *provide a service* », in that spectrum is the tension « *between Art and business* ». As have evolved the schemes of actors involved in the neoliberal building industry, the role of the architect has changed.

As this shift arises, the critical French architectural media sphere takes over the topic of the professional transformation of the architect's work. The magazine *D'Architecture* is created in 1989 to question the evolving practice of architecture in France, facing these new economic challenges. As time moves forwards, it seems like the french political power is sponsoring a neoliberal evolution of the legal framework of architectural production. For instance, the *Loi Elan* (Law on the evolution of housing, development and digital) voted in 2018, raises many debates over its consequences on the future built environment, as it transforms the authority of the architect and even its necessity, in the construction of architectural projects. The development of « *Contract conception - réalisation* » for instance, changes the architect's tasks as he/she becomes an equal part of a multidisciplinary conception team instead of supervising it.

Opposing the neoliberal schemes of actors involved in the construction process, some part of architecture seems to resist transforming into a consumption object like any other. Lucien Karpik defines « *singular goods* » differently from standard « *off-the-shelf* » goods as their quality and value are uncertain due to their multiple dimensions and lack of potential comparisons<sup>1</sup>. Architectural production fits into that

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<sup>1</sup> Karpik, J. (2007). *L'économie des singularités*. Gallimard.

category as its quality is mainly defined by judgment. As Robert Lion<sup>2</sup> wrote in *La commande en architecture*, « *In the progressive dislocation of the field of aesthetic values and in its disconnection from the system of economic efficiency values that have progressively and massively invaded the field of everyday life, architecture is in a difficult situation* ». Architectural quality seems to struggle to be financially valued.

As professional media mirrored this transformation, I would like to analyze these changes through the lens of the magazine *D'Architecture*. Using actor-network theory as a theoretical framework, a set of dossiers from *D'Architecture* will be analyzed as primary sources, to disclose and recreate schemes of actors involved in the production of different architectural projects. The specificity of actor-network theory allows me to include non-humans actors, like financial streams into these organization networks. A particular emphasis will be made on detecting the status and role of the architect inside these organizations. I would like to question: how have the neoliberal processes in the scheme of actors in the building industry impacted the work of the architect as seen in the professional magazine *D'Architecture*?

Theoretically basing my work on Douglas Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance*, I am interested in questioning the definition of neoliberal architecture. As his definition is based on the spatiality of neoliberal architecture, I would like to define it also, as a process of conception. Contextually, the book of Véronique Biau, *Les architectes au défi de la ville néolibérale* testifies of the evolution of the architect's practice, in France, throughout the 2000s. It constitutes the basis of my chronological frame. I am also using the work of Bruno Latour and Albená Yaneva, « *Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture* » as a methodological example. I also consider architecture as an evolving object, shaped by design by also multiple controversies and actors.

Foremost, I will depict the theoretical context of the *neo-liberalization of architecture* and elaborate on its definition, I will paint a portrait of the architect's profession reality in France and what I mean by *architects*. Then, I will present the historical context and shift from 1980 to the 2000s, focusing on the legal framework of architectural conception and how it evolved, comparing this information to the reality of the architectural profession according to the *d'Architecture* magazine's articles. Afterwards, I will look over the ELAN Law of 2018 as a major shift towards a neo-liberalization of architectural production in France and compare its analysis to the projected reality of the practice according to *d'Architecture* magazine. Finally, I will look over the prospect of the years the 2020s when it comes to the role of the architects but also the possible evolutions of the practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Lion, senior official, director of construction in the french ministry of equipment from 1969 to 1974, he was president of the sem-tête Défense, responsible for the La Défense district development in Paris, he was the organizer of the la Défense arch competition.

## Theoretical context

Gilles Pinson and Christelle Morel Journal define neo-liberalization as « *the set of intellectual streams, policy orientations and regulatory arrangements that strive to extend market mechanisms, relations, discipline and ethos to an ever-expanding spectrum of spheres of social activities, and all this through relying on strong State intervention* »<sup>3</sup>. Several sources like Brenner and Theodore show the neo-liberalization of the city as an event generalizing in today's city-making.<sup>4</sup> Douglas Spencer in *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance*<sup>5</sup> defines neoliberal architecture as a multitude of spatial concepts promoting a neoliberal order in society through architecture. Nevertheless, through the study of the *d'Architecture* articles, it seems like the evolution of building and conception processes toward a general neo-liberalization is developing as a threat to architectural quality.

Liberalism and neoliberalism are both notions questioning the relationship between the individual and society, between the role of the state and the one of the free market. The surrounding debates around them question the moral norms around competitiveness, economic calculation or capitalistic accumulation. Michel Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* defines the specificity of neoliberalism as the free market system also imposing itself on the social system. Making it a mode of governmentality, « *an environmental apparatus working to produce the mentalities and dispositions conducive to its continued operation* », the free market is the entity responsible for ordering society through the same rules of competition and accumulation of wealth according to Douglas Spencer.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to the production of architecture, the neoliberal city becomes a competitiveness-driven space, not only answering the needs of citizens but entering a strategy of offer and attractiveness, for investors or companies. It is paving the way for practices like benchmarking or model transfer. Veronique Biau writes in *Les architectes au défi de la ville néolibérale*, that these policies are favouring socio-spatial fragmentations between gentrifying districts and impoverished neighbourhoods, for instance,<sup>7</sup> David Harvey in *Géographie et capital* adds that they « shift the focus from equity and social justice to efficiency, innovation, and higher real operating rates »<sup>8</sup>. The neoliberalization process also comes with the financialization of the architectural production by the extension of the private actors inside the making of the built environment. Also, we can see the rise of the *New Public Management* ideology within public actors, a new management concept borrowing technics from the private sector based

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<sup>3</sup> Pinson, G., & Morel Journal, C. (2016). The Neoliberal City – Theory, Evidence, Debates. Territory, Politics, Governance, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Brenner N. and Theodore N. (2002) Cities and the geographies of “actually existing neoliberalism”, *Antipode* 34(3), 349–379. doi: 10.1111/1467-8330.00246

<sup>5</sup> Spencer, D. (2016). *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance*. Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>6</sup> Spencer, D. (2016). *The architecture of neoliberalism : how contemporary architecture became an instrument of control and compliance*. Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>7</sup> Biau, V. (2020). *Les architectes au défi de la ville néolibérale*. Parenthèses.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey, D. (2010). *Géographie et capital*. Syllepse.p.126.

on, among others, a results culture.<sup>9</sup> One of its characteristics is the introduction of a market mechanism in the handling of goods and services of common interest.

## The architect

The architect profession is understood as a multiplicity of situations and jobs that can be practised by architects. It is a profession very multiform and disseminated in several sectors. From the starchitect to the employee of a small architectural firm, this profession is lived in many different ways. The number of architects registered in the Order of the architects has tripled from 1975 to 2009, there is now 45 architects for 100 000 inhabitants in France, the European average being 100 architects for 100 000 inhabitants. The size of the architecture practices stays very low, 70% have no employees, and 20% have only one or two.<sup>10</sup> The evolution in terms of competition in the architectural market seems to be the growing and other actors in the building professions: entrepreneurs, developers or real estate managers, seem to be taking over works of supervision, coordination etc usually handled by architects. Some sectors are particularly touched by this phenomenon like private houses where architect's projects only represent 32% of the private houses commissions in 2015, the rest being handled by construction companies.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, an important information to understand the problems facing these professions is that the individual median income for an architect went from 33 400 euros in 2007 to 28 426 euros in 2016.<sup>12</sup> The precarity of the profession also translates by the multiple activities undertaken by architects depending on the economical fluctuations of the construction sector. Overall, the architects tend to « diversify, segment, specialize »<sup>4</sup> their practices. This can be seen as the difficulty for architects to stand and defend their conception and an essential competence in their work. It can also be seen as an opportunity to transform the profession and expand it to other fields through competencies of synthesis or anticipation for instance.<sup>13</sup> From this portrait also emerges the gap between the societal vision of the work of the architect and the reality of the professionals. Magali Sarfatti-Larson defines the «*professional project*» as «*all the ways in which a profession asserts a form of power, other than through the legal protection of a monopoly of practice*»<sup>4</sup>. Which means the construction of what it means to be an architect in that case, by the public society. She writes that doctors and engineers, for instance, did it better than architects as the public opinion values their profession.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, it seems that architects don't get recognition from society justifying the necessity of their activity.

The architects went from the glory of honourous public commissions to more complex systems of actors influenced by the economical weight of big construction groups as well as the financialization of real

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<sup>9</sup> Chappoz, Y. & Pupion, P. (2012). Le New Public Management. *Gestion et management public*, 1(2), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.3917/gmp.002.0001>

<sup>10</sup> Chadouin, O. & Evette, T. (2010). *Statistiques de la profession 1998-2007, Socio-démographie et activités économiques*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication.

<sup>11</sup> CNOA. (2017). *Archigraphie 3, Une étude économique de la commande d'architecture*, Paris, p.14.

<sup>12</sup> CNOA-Credoc, op.cit, p.45.

<sup>13</sup> Chadoin, O. (2007). *Être architecte, les vertus de l'indétermination : De la sociologie d'une profession à la sociologie du travail professionnel*, Limoges, Presses universitaires de Limoges.

<sup>14</sup> Sarfatti Larson, M. (1977). *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. University of California Press.

estate developers. This change impacts the perception and value of the architect's profession. We will see in the following chapter, the historical context developing the neo-liberalization of the practice of architecture.

### **The architect's archetype in France, before the neoliberal era**

The architect's professional archetype in France goes back to the middle ages and the King's architects, responsible for royal commissions through the constitution of the Royal Academy of architecture (*Académie royale d'architecture*) in 1671. In the post-revolution 19<sup>th</sup> century, the system conserves this architecture elite, trained in the *Beaux-Art* school and rewarded by the *Prix de Rome*, a prestigious national architecture competition. The architects are then destined to work in esteemed functions in the state architectural services. The built environment professionals in France are from then on separated into three sectors: the architects from the *Beaux-Arts* school, designing prestigious buildings, the engineers from the *Ponts et chaussées*, building infrastructural projects and the entrepreneurs, working on private commissions. This distinction pushes the architect to develop an « artistic » identity to claim their difference<sup>15</sup>. Since then, the architect's profession is anchored by prestigious public commissions and competitions. These commissions are numerous and vectors of symbolic value for both architects and commissioners, whether they are Mayers or public representatives. The post-second World War reconstruction of France as well as the urban development of the seventies maintain the strength of the State actor, through public commissions and competitions, on french architecture<sup>16</sup>. If even in the nineties, the amount of these commissions is lowering due to the increasing importance of private actors, the professional model of the architect in France stayed based on this practice of architecture<sup>13</sup>.

This professional context of architecture will be deeply transformed by both the global contracts, like the *conception-realisation*, associating architects and contractors (that I will develop in the following chapter) and bottom-up approaches of participative and collaborative conception. With these types of architectural practices comes a transformation of the value of architects, their skills and the role they should have in the building industry. According to Paolo Tombesi, this evolution can be understood by the carriage and the needle metaphor from Karl Marx's *Capital*<sup>17</sup>. If the needle is born from an in-line production, in contrast, the carriage needs the input of different experts creating a more collective form of production. Architecture used to be a linear form of production, a needle, where each step had to be achieved for the next one to start and the architect stood on top of the line. It evolved towards a more collective production where contractors and various experts have an impact even at the beginning of the conception process that tends to become more horizontal in the organizational scheme.

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<sup>15</sup> Biau, V. (2020). Les architectes au défi de la ville néolibérale. Parenthèses.

<sup>16</sup> Lengereau, E., & Sirinelli, J.-F. (2001). L'Etat et l'architecture, 1958-1981, Une politique publique ? Picard.

<sup>17</sup> Tombesi, P. (1999). « The Carriage and the needle : Building Design and Flexible Specialization Systems », Journal of Architectural Education, Vol.52, n 3.

## The architect's role, according to the Law

*« L'architecture est une expression de la culture. » Loi n° 77-2 du 3 janvier 1977 sur l'architecture*

*- Architecture is an expression of culture - 1977 Law on architecture*

At the term of french reconstruction after the Second World War, the public opinion rejects massively modern architecture (70% according to an IFOP survey), represented for instance by the *Grands ensembles*, a type of modernist social housing projects mass-built after the war. Facing that rejection and the global in-satisfaction of inhabitants regarding the modern built environment, President Pompidou engenders a new policy regarding architectural quality, leading to the 1977 law on architecture ( *Loi n° 77-2 du 3 Janvier 1977 sur l'architecture* ). The first article of this law aims to engrave in law the respect for the right of inhabitants to architectural quality in their living environment. Architecture is defined for the first time as an « expression of culture » and public interest, protected by the state and by law. The verification procedure of the building permit (*permis de construire*) is supposed to guarantee that quality, in terms of construction, architectural expression but also respect for natural and urban landscapes as well as patrimonial value. Indeed, for every project, a file describing the project, the building permit, must be submitted to the public institution which is responsible for the verification of the architectural quality of the future building.

*« The architectural creation, the quality of the constructions, their harmonious insertion in the surrounding environment, the respect of the natural or urban landscapes as well as the heritage are of public interest. The authorities authorized to issue building permits and subdivision authorizations shall ensure, during the examination of applications, that this interest is respected. »<sup>18</sup>*

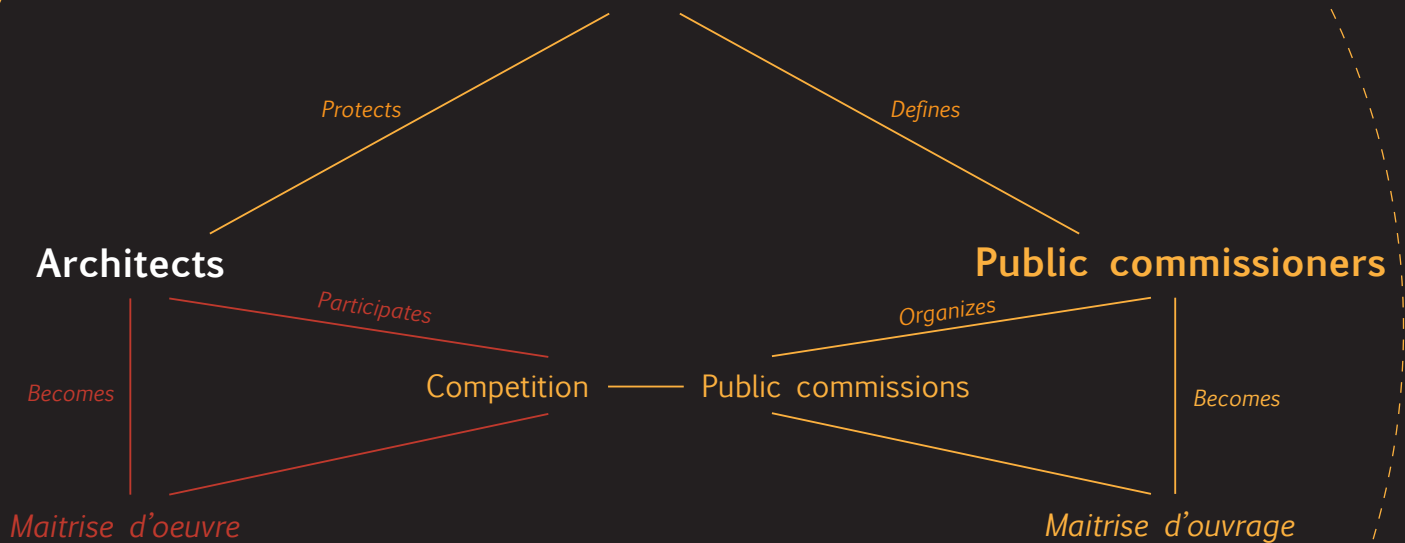
The task of the architect is, in the same instance, set in stone. As written in the third article of the law, « *Anyone wishing to undertake work subject to a building permit must call on the services of an architect to draw up the architectural project which is the subject of the building permit application* ». For every project for which the ground surface is superior to 180 m<sup>2</sup>, the landowner needs to file a *building permit*, and this permit can only be filed by an architect. This procedure is then protecting the architect's task in the construction process, as he/she is legally bound to every building conception. The law also establishes the Order of the architects, protecting the title of architect, as only members of this order are allowed to be practising architects. Nevertheless, it is also stated that the architect is not responsible for the construction of the building, which can be delegated to others. The architectural task is then defined as a conception work, dissociated from the realm of the construction process.

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<sup>18</sup> Loi n° 77-2 du 3 Janvier 1977 sur l'architecture, Journal officiel du 4 janvier 1977, Traduction, « La création architecturale, la qualité des constructions, leur insertion harmonieuse dans le milieu environnant, le respect des paysages naturels ou urbains ainsi que du patrimoine sont d'intérêt public. Les autorités habilitées à délivrer le permis de construire ainsi que les autorisations de lotir s'assurent, au cours de l'instruction des demandes, du respect de cet intérêt. »

Contractors

## 1977 Law on architecture



**Scheme 1:** the importance of the state regulation over the conception and construction process in after the law on architecture of 1977.

The law on architecture of 1977 was a key factor in the evolution of the organization of actors of the building industry in France. Indeed, the protection of both the *maitrise d'oeuvre*, the architect and the *maitrise d'ouvrage*, the public commissioner but not of the contractor will be a factor in the evolution of these three parties. If the first two ones will keep the type of organization they use to have, the contractor companies will evolve within the free market.

State actor — Architectural project — Economically neutral actors — Neoliberal actors —



In 1985, the *Loi MOP* is the second actor in the definition of the architect's task in the French building industry. The law creates three actors, separated and legally established, for the conception and construction of an architectural project, none of them can practice (in theory) two of these domains. French specificity in Europe, is two have these two functions not coinciding with a precise profession, which makes them impossible to translate to another language<sup>19</sup>. This law engraves the responsibility, duty and power of the *maitrise d'ouvrage public*, which is the public institution deciding on building an architectural project. The *maitrise d'ouvrage* is strictly dissociated from the *maitrise d'oeuvre*, the architect, which is responsible for bringing an architectural, technical and economic response to the project brief. Then the contractor, whose task it is to follow the construction work as a contractor for the *maitrise d'ouvrage*. Again, the architect and the contractor fall under two separate roles. The architect's tasks are clearly stated in nine different steps, each coming with a minimum remuneration.

If the framework of the tasks of the architect seems clear and respected through these two laws, the adaptation of the *Loi MOP* in 1993 changes the balance<sup>20</sup>. The global contracts, like the *contract conception-réalisation* enters then the legal realm, as an exception, that will gradually become the norm. The contract allows the *maitrise d'ouvrage* to group the contractor and the architect as one entity, in charge of the conception and the construction. When this contract first appears, it is supposed to be limited to specifically technically challenging projects, needing the presence of the construction team during the early phases of conception. The law states, «whose characteristics, such as exceptional dimensions or particular technical difficulties, require the use of the economic operators' own resources and technical skills». This type of contract will become heavily critiqued inside the architectural profession and is used for an increasing number of projects. In practice, the contractor oversees the conception process and the economic cost and the value of the project become the main factor of the conception, the architectural quality being delegated to a background position. This type of organization shows the beginning of the evolution of the law towards a neo-liberalization of the architectural conception processes.

### **The magazine *d'architecture***

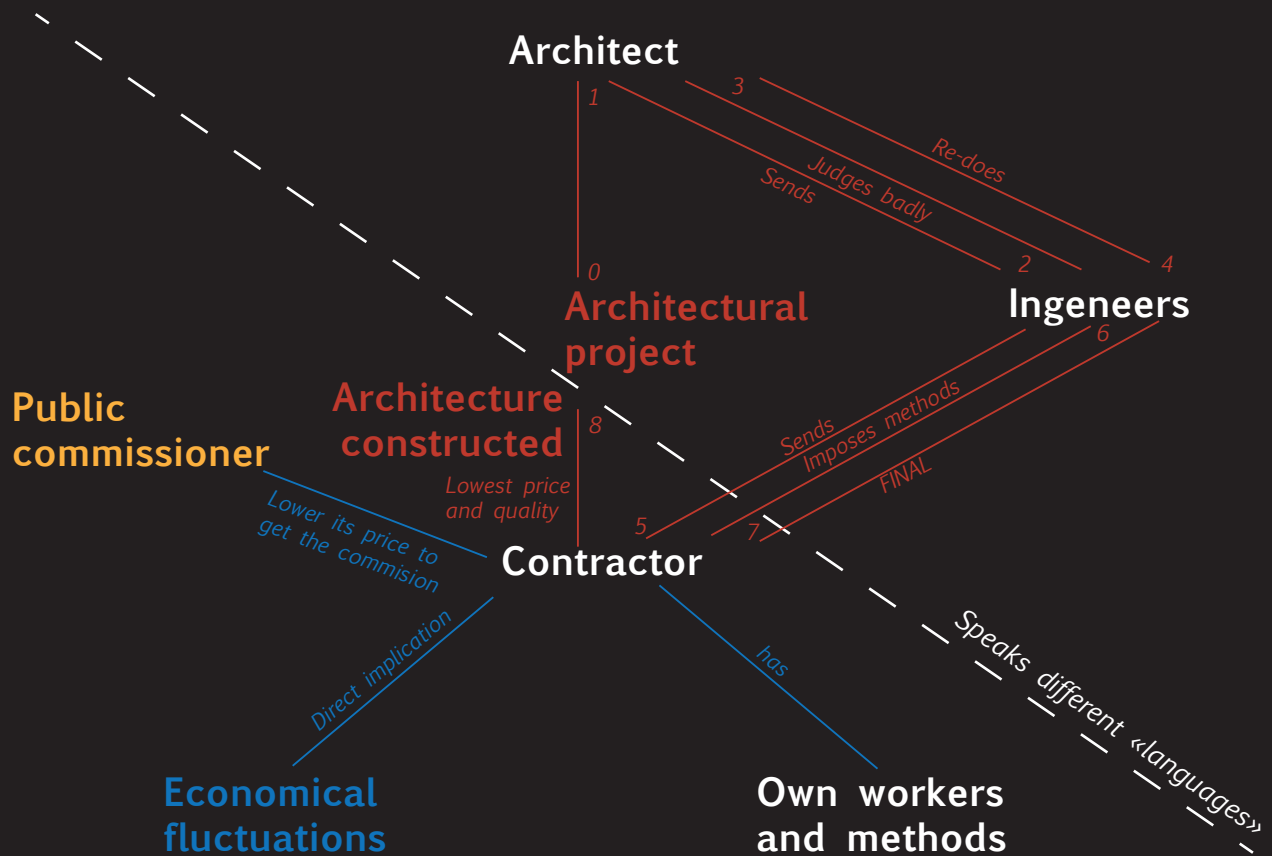
The magazine *D'architecture, le magazine professionnel de la création architecturale* launched its first edition in 1989. It was created during the period of the professional evolution of the architectural practice. It is an independent magazine, defining itself as a « *magazine of actuality and critical reflection, d'architecture observes the world through the prism of architecture* »<sup>21</sup>. The themes discussed in the articles reflect the evolutions of the architectural practice, from the crisis of the architectural quality to the relationship between architect and contractor. In the magazine *D'architecture n 144* of March 2005, the dossier « *Construire : la qualité en danger* » reveals the problems that the architect is facing to fulfil its project facing engineers and contractors. The beginning of the article quotes an interview with Jean Prouvé that, in 1982, was already revealing the imbalances between the work of the different actors. Jean Prouvé (1901-1984) was a French metal worker, architect and furniture designer. He was famous for working in the industrial production of construction elements, then used in his architectural projects, he collaborated with Le Corbusier among others.

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<sup>19</sup> Campagnac, E. (2001). « La commande comme nouveau marché de services : crise ou renouveau du professionnalisme? Les leçons de l'expérience britannique », *Espaces et sociétés*, n° 105-106, p.17-57.

<sup>20</sup> Loi n° 85-704 du 12 juillet 1985 relative à la maîtrise d'ouvrage publique et à ses rapports avec la maîtrise d'oeuvre

<sup>21</sup> Statement found on D'Architecture LinkedIn account.



« This is one of the great ills of architectural firms: they are not in control of the situation » Jean Prouvé, 1982.<sup>22</sup>

**Scheme 2:** the conception and construction process in 1982 according to « Construire : la qualité en danger », article of d'Architecture.<sup>22</sup>

As is represented in the scheme, already in the eighties, the weight of economic actors in the building industry is changing. They are starting to have more and more influence on the final product, the building, and the conception team of architects and engineers seems according to Jean Prouvé submissive to its requests.

State actor — Architectural project — Economically neutral actors — Neoliberal actors —

The scheme represents the vision of the architect's task inside the building industry according to Jean Prouvé in this interview.<sup>22</sup> He depicts the process of validation of an architectural project, and how the architect isn't in control of the realization of the project. Already at the time, it seems that the economical fluctuations have direct implications on the contractor and are at the source of a low-cost policy, threatening the architectural quality of the final building. The actors more dependent on the financial cost of the project end up with very different priorities than the ones in the conception teams.

The article clarifies that the history of the french building industry as we know it today goes back to the post-war period. The need at that time to build fast and in huge quantity, developed the realm of general building companies, handling all the aspects of construction around a « simple » construction. The industrial component becomes the main element as building companies, usually smaller, struggle to make a margin. In contrast, the industrial company mass-producing the construction elements concentrates the economic value.

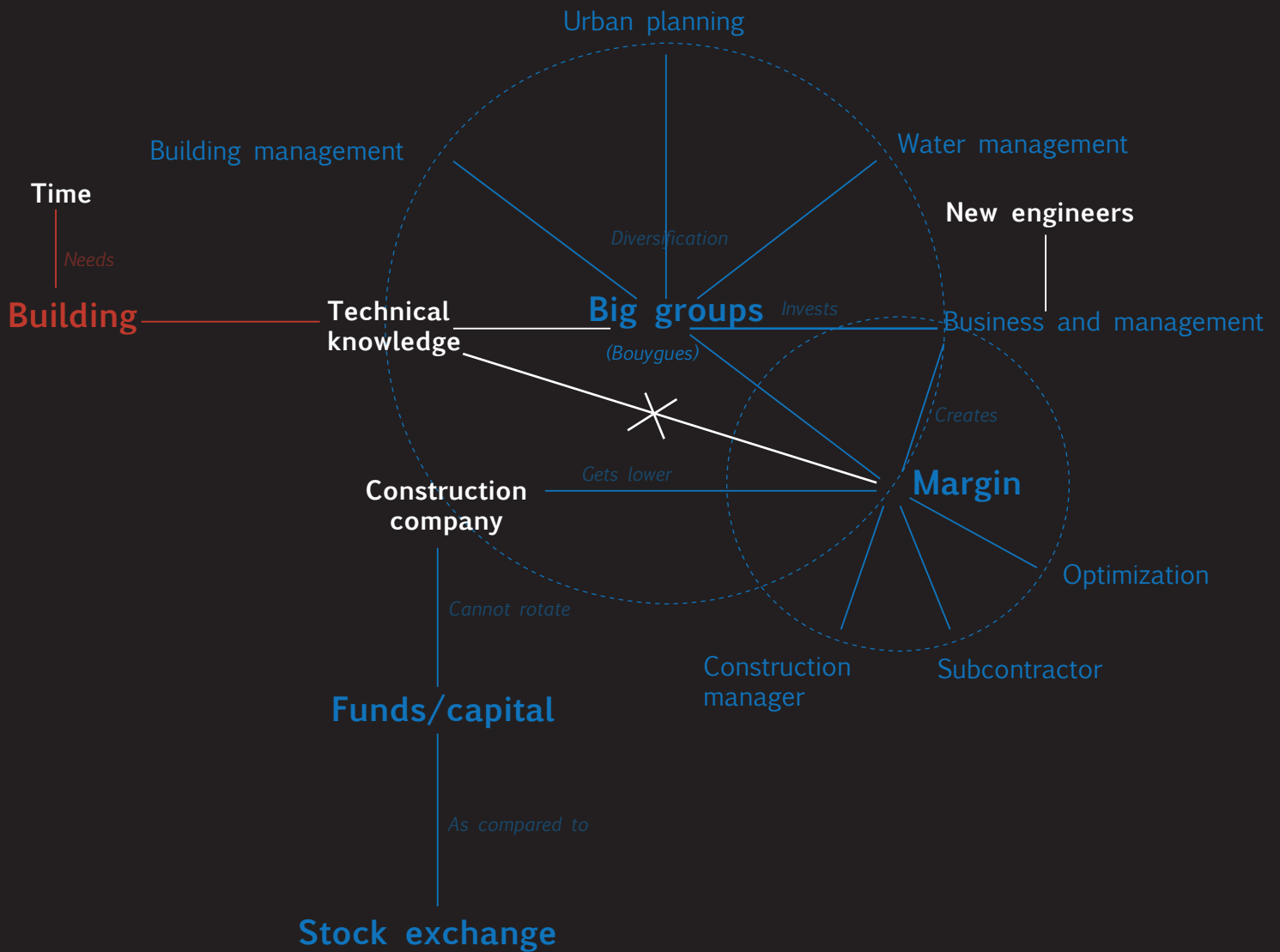
According to the same article, the years 2000<sup>nd</sup> are marked by the evolution of the main activities of major building groups. Indeed, to make a margin on their production, the main knowledge and investments now go into business and management strategies, including processes of optimization and subcontracting for instance. Whereas, the technical knowledge is left behind, as its consideration doesn't allow the building companies to make major profits anymore. We can see forsee, through this article, the evolution of the building industry towards a neo-liberalization of the methods and main activities of the construction companies.

The shift towards the 2000<sup>nd</sup> saw appear a new set of problematics that architects had to integrate into their practice. The notion of sustainable development enters the realm of construction and politics, bringing with it a set of specialists and new technical knowledge to integrate. It also brought a new « social responsibility » for the architect that has to consider the environmental value of its projects<sup>23</sup>. In parallel, the construction companies bring to the table new buildings technologies but also interfaces and software that become necessary knowledge for the architecture practice. Overall, the organization of the project in all its phases complexities and the number of actors involved grows. The architect needs to not only conceive architecture but also understand how the project organization sets and how it evolves at the discretion of new laws and societal evolutions. As we can see, the architect seems to be standing in between two contrasting positions. On the one hand, he or she is responsible for a common good, the right to architectural quality as stated in the law, moreover linked to the newer idea of sustainable development. On the other hand, the architect is now part of a complex neoliberal building process, where architecture is part of a financial system for companies, now internationalizing and growing in different sectors (construction, insurance and real estate for instance) where economical logic surpasses material ones.

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<sup>22</sup> Lavalou, A. (2005). Construire : la qualité en danger. D'Architecture, 144.

<sup>23</sup> Biau, V. (2020). Les architectes au défi de la ville néolibérale. Parenthèses.



**Scheme 3:** the conception and construction process in 2000 according to « Construire : la qualité en danger », article of d'Architecture<sup>22</sup>

The scheme represents the evolution of the actors of the building industry at the turn of the 2000<sup>nd</sup>. Contractors have evolved to become bigger multidisciplinary companies where margin is made through strategic business or organizational choices. Technical knowledge isn't the key to making margin anymore, this logic also leads to many young engineers choosing to specialize in business or management to access valued positions.

## The *starchitects* in the neoliberal order, making icons

In the article from *d'Architecture* n 244 « *Les désillusions du Grand Paris* », the magazine tackles the Grand Paris project's ambitions, stakes and planning. The *Grand Paris* is a political and administrative project aiming to regroup Paris Intramuros and its suburbs into one entity: the *Grand Paris metropolis*<sup>24</sup>. This project brought with its creation a number of stakes in terms of urbanization, transportation or financial implications among others. This magazine was published in 2016, as was legally born the *Grand Paris metropolis* on the 1st of January 2016. Nevertheless, the project and public consultations, led by architects, started in 2008. It is then an interesting topic to understand the years 2000<sup>nd</sup> to 2016 as for the architectural production and conception and its actors.



Figure 1 : Architects (from right to left, Zaha Hadid, Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel, Christian de Portzamparc, Rem Koolhaas, Thom Mayne) seating in the front row of the consultation of the Grand Paris, from *d'Architecture* n 244 « *Les désillusions du Grand Paris* »<sup>24</sup>.

The *Grand Paris Metropolis* is, first of all, a national project carried out by Nicolas Sarkozy, French president at that time (2007-2012). He says during a speech in Roissy in 2007 « *There will be no strong and ambitious France if the Ile-de-France region closes in on itself, if it gives up on building the highest towers in Europe, on attracting the best researchers, on its ambition to be a leading financial centre* ». After describing all the administrative layers and negotiations needed to create the project, we finally see appearing the name « architects », presenting projects for the metropolis. Nevertheless, compared to different actors, it seems like architects do not hold any decisional power. One of the articles insists on the city making itself, no matter what, with the developers seizing opportunities to build for the needs of the inhabitants. The risk is that the architects get erased by the financial actors valued by the political realm, as they are waiting for the public unpredictable commissions. Overall, the article is revealing that the *grand Paris* is a political and financial project where architects serve the purpose of creating iconic buildings, representing financial attractivity as Nicolas Sarkozy's quote implies.

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<sup>24</sup> Chaperon, A. (2016). *Les désillusions du Grand Paris*. *D'Architecture*, 244.

As we can see in that article, it seems that some architectural offices blossom in the neoliberal system. Icons of architecture seem to be valued by the public audience and even, Presidents. Indeed, iconic architecture carries a *flagship* effect, building such architecture has positive consequences on the territory in which it is implanted in terms of economic value through tourism for instance. This effect is also known as a *design dividend* where the prospect of financial benefits allows for a better consideration of the design process by developers for instance<sup>25</sup>. The *Bilbao effect* is a good materialization of this principle, where the construction of the Guggenheim Bilbao by architect Frank Gehry was part of a will to valorize a neighbourhood through iconic architecture<sup>26</sup>. This example enlightened the importance of international tourism for the business of iconic architecture, becoming *architainment*, term of Luis Fernández-Galiano where architecture meets entertainment<sup>27</sup>. It seems that these icons, by their wow effect and attractivity for public and fame, have a space in the neoliberal construction system.

In « *Iconic architecture and capitalist globalization* », Leslie Sklair argues that iconic architecture works at the service of capitalistic globalization. He defines the quality of iconic buildings as a three-way relationship between fame, aesthetics and symbolism, where the architecture serves an advertising purpose to sell the building, the lifestyle it offers and sometimes, its architect.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, iconic architecture is highly symbolic, it has to be different and unique, and its novelty is necessary for the building to become an icon. Within the neoliberal ideology, its newness and potential design dividend make it a successful business that some architecture offices strive for.

Patrick Schumacher, principal architect of Zaha Hadid architects writes in the essay, *Free Market Urbanism - Urbanism beyond planning*, « *Perhaps society should allow the market to discover the most productive mix and arrangement of land uses, a distribution that garners synergies and maximizes overall value. The market process is an evolutionary process that operates via mutation (trial and error), selection and reproduction. [...] leading to a self-organized order. Thus we might presume that the land-use allocation and thus the programmatic dimension of the urban and architectural order is to be determined by architecture's private clients.* »<sup>29</sup> Some professionals seem then to have embraced a neoliberal, self-organizing ideology, where the free market is also in charge of architectural Programming and land-use.

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<sup>25</sup> Droege, P. (1999). The design dividend, Sidney, Property council of Australia.

<sup>26</sup> Gravari-Barbas, M., & Renard-Delautre, C. (2015). Starchitecture(s), Figures d'architectes et espace urbain/Celebrity architects and urban space. L'Harmattan.

<sup>27</sup> Fernández-Galiano, L. « Spectacle and its discontents or the elusive joys of architainment », in Saunders, W. (2005) Commodification and spectacle in architecture, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>28</sup> Sklair, L. (2006). Iconic architecture and capitalistic globalization. *City*, 10(1).

<sup>29</sup> Schumacher, P., 'Free Market Urbanism – Urbanism beyond Planning', in Tom Verebes (ed.), *Masterplanning the Adaptive City – Computational Urbanism in the TwentyFirst Century*, Abingdon, Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 118–22.

In the neoliberal context, State serves the purpose of assisting free-market order.<sup>30</sup> As presented in the following chapter, France is developing state policies regarding the built environment that could be considered as favouring a neoliberal development of the sector.

### **The 2018 shift of the ELAN Law in France**

The ELAN Law on the evolution of housing, development and digital, was voted on the 16 October 2018 « *facing the observation that building housing is a long and complex process* »<sup>31</sup> and with the ambition to build « *more, better and cheaper* »<sup>32</sup>. In broad terms, the law deregulates the production of architecture by dismissing some of the control systems for the respect of *architectural quality* in place since the *Law on architecture of 1977*. I will develop how this law deeply transformed the architect's task and status in the building project organization.

Indeed the law of the 3 January 1977 ensuring *architectural quality for the citizens* is transformed by the ELAN Law. Firstly, social housing organizations among other building organizations will be exempted from organizing competitions for the building of new projects. Moreover, this law dismantles the MOP Law of 1985, meaning that the *maitrise d'ouvrage* won't have to follow the missions supposed to be given to architects. The extension of the possibility of the *conception-realization* contract for architectural projects strips the architect of its independence and responsibility to overview the project. The ABF (*architect of french buildings*, responsible for safeguarding the patrimonial value of specific sites) will also see their power resorb as in some cases the opinion of the ABF will only be an option instead of a strict guideline to follow. Considering all these aspects, the law's ambition to build *Faster and cheaper*, which the official aim is to simplify the administrative framework of the building industry, tends to favour the privatization of the market, allowing building companies to enter the project's process from the start « with » the architect through the *conception-realization* contract. The overall theme is a deregulation of the building processes, by cutting out the actors responsible for the control of the construction like the ABF, but also the architect in general.

The ELAN Law faced a lot of criticism from professionals of the built environment. Denis Dessus, President of the National Council of the Order of Architects, said in an interview with Liberation that « *this law destroys all the tools of architectural quality, it is catastrophic for the living environment* », he adds « *housing is not a consumer good like any other, it cannot be governed by financial reasoning alone* »<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, the deregulation of the building market allows for any actor to take over the overall architectural project and prioritize financial value without any guard rail, which used to be the independence of the architect as coordinator of the architectural quality.

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<sup>30</sup> Spencer, D. (2016). *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance*. Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>31</sup> *Projet de loi portant sur l'évolution du logement, de l'aménagement et du numérique*, (2018) (testimony of Conseil des ministres).

<sup>32</sup> Loi ELAN, 16 Octobre 2018

<sup>33</sup> Vincendon, S. (2018, May 17). *Logement: La loi Elan se passe des architectes*. Libération. [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/05/17/logement-la-loi-elan-se-passe-des-architectes\\_1650548/](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/05/17/logement-la-loi-elan-se-passe-des-architectes_1650548/)



Figures 2 and 3: Images from the architect’s Union Magazine of July 2018 on the ELAN Law titled *Elan will kill me*.

A cluster of professionals created the group *Ambition logement* to stand up against the new ELAN Law. In the architect’s Union Magazine of July 2018, they criticize the loss of independence of the architect as a coordinator of the globality of the project, dissociated from the building company<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, the use of conception-realization contracts will transform the relationships between actors, as the client of the architect will become the construction company, instead of the public *maitrise d’oeuvre*. The suppression of architectural contests is also seen as a way to cut down costs when it comes to research and negotiations, to favour standard solutions. They also criticize the promotion of major construction or developing groups to take over the projects instead of small local companies, whether they are architecture, engineering or construction firms. They refuse that the architect becomes a « facade designer » or a « consultant ». He writes a definition of the architect's work, according to them :

« *We, architects, design and build buildings for the common good, understanding the needs of the users, taking into account the evolution of lifestyles, anticipating future developments, respecting the environment and being extremely conscious of our social responsibility. Let's not forget that the architectural creation was recognized of public interest by the law of 1977.* »

<sup>34</sup> Julien, P. (2018). Loi ELAN, Pour quoi? Pour qui ? Passion Architecture, La Revue Syndicale Des Architectes, Edition ELAN va me tuer(65).



## The architect and the developer

« *We don't choose to be a developer for Art or the common interest but to make a profit, as if we sold vacuum cleaners* » *D'Architecture, dossier « Calimero et le promoteur »* September 2019.<sup>35</sup>

In the 2019 magazine *D'Architecture*, the dossier « *Calimero et le promoteur* » discusses the relationship between the architect and the developer. The title references the Calimero syndrome used to describe people systematically complaining, in that case, the architect. Far from the law MOP and the duty of *common interest* mission of the built environment, the architect according to the magazine has to follow the brief decided by the developer. If some architects regret the public *maitrise d'ouvrage*, transparent and more clear on its rules, the developer is an actor « in a hurry », submissive to a high rentability in his practice and trying to limit the risks he is taking. Facing this actor is the public representation: the mayor. This figure is also criticized by the magazine as « *incompetent in terms of architecture and urbanism* ». The actor supposedly representing the people would put more care into his re-election than in the long-term quality of the built environment, as he is also willing to go fast, and built fast to satisfy his electors according to the political schedule, every four years. When that architect « *understands his ( the mayor) expectations, doesn't offer any resistance and can seduce the mayor* », he's the best possible for the developer according to the article. The financial question stays central, the developer takes risks in a very competitive market, and his strategy would be to minimize his investment while maximizing its margin. In within these two, he would handle all the costs, including the architect's fees, as low as possible and the quality of the finished building, « *DIYed by lack of time and budget* », wouldn't last in time.

The introduction of the article, titled *Architects-developers, a delicate marriage* discloses that in this ecosystem, the role of the architect keeps getting devalued and downgraded in terms of responsibilities. The architectural conception seems to be reduced to volume studies, facades, and common areas. The developers seem to have a precise idea of what the buyers want and leave no space for architectural innovation when it comes to housing typology for instance. In that case, it feels like the developer is actually being the architect. As he is the one « *understanding the needs of the users, taking into account the evolution of lifestyles, anticipating future developments* », if the brief is so specific that the architect has very little creative freedom. Sometimes an internal team is even charged to design the « products », to understand here as the apartments, completely cutting off the architect. All details like colours, furniture and lights are also catalogued. The overall cost of the project is also not to be known by the architects, which makes it impossible to negotiate budgets for the project ( spending more money there, but less here... ). A public commissioner would have to divulge the budget for instance. If the architect is already excluded from the construction site and technical problems of the building, it seems like he or she is also being excluded from the drawing table.

The first victim of this functioning is the overall material quality of the building and its longevity in time. The building has to fulfil the financial margin expectations in the short term, the long term doesn't

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<sup>35</sup>Véran, C. (2019). Calimero et le promoteur. *D'Architecture*, 274.

matter for the financial actors of the project. Indeed, the project stops when the buyer gets his keys. As the usual person doesn't buy an apartment over and over again, the evolution in time of the building isn't a question when the project is being conceived. This is even more the case when the building is designed as an investment or social housing. The most important factor is the image of the project, and the narrative surrounding it when winning the competition or the client. The architect is not an author of an architectural piece but a service provider fulfilling the demands of the developer and the architectural quality as guaranteed by the law on architecture of 1977 could be considered at threat.

Nevertheless, innovation or « newness » is inherent to neoliberal thinking, as with it comes the notion of economic growth but also entertainment, as demonstrated earlier by iconic architecture. According to this article, developers embrace it, as new and different offers are a selling point. Indeed, one of the targets of the criticism of neoliberal architecture is the standardization of architecture through industrial processes for economic reasons. The article discusses several typological innovations like the « free volume », an additional un-heated volume sold with a dwelling supposedly customizable to become an extra room or apartment, bringing more flexibility to the housing typology. Another innovation is « co-living » a super-flexible housing typology coming with extra collective services where the inhabitant could rent for short or long periods and use his housing depending on its needs. Terra Nova group in its study « living in 20 years » projects that the housing market in the future would adapt to less linear life and work trajectories from the population, losing its stability. We can see here the influence of neoliberalisation on our living quality. Nevertheless, these innovations would be more of a commercial narrative for some projects, while a majority would stick to standard typologies. If housing becomes more and more of a service, depending on other systems like deliveries or rented home appliances, we can wonder what would be the place of the architect in designing our living spaces.

In the sub-section of the article titled « *de-correlate real estate from the ground* » which is an interview with TVK office, the architects-urbanists Pierre-Alain Trévelo and Antoine Viger-Kohler explain that the main issue with working with private developers is the question of the ground. The land value would be the actor vacuuming the economical value and the financial speculation. Indeed, when it comes to private construction today, the land value is calculated depending on the future real estate, so to say, the number of square meters to be built and sold. When it comes to contesting with teams of developers and architects from the start, it's even more dangerous. According to the two interviewees, it creates a competition between developers on the price of the land where usually, the one offering the most money wins. Then, during the conception of the project, the developer would have to compensate for this price, by lowering the cost of the architectural conception and construction. This logic would create standard housing typologies in dense buildings to be profitable. The urbanists then offer to calculate the value of the ground beforehand, as a stable price, and to judge the proposition according to its architecture and longevity. In that case, the key actor seems to be the urbanist who creates the « game rules ». In their practice they dissociate the consultations, the developers are chosen depending on the price of the land but also if they accept certain rules like a proper architecture competition and a full mission for the architect, including following the construction of the building. They also insist on the need for a strong public power to ensure the quality of the construction and supervise the actors. Overall, what the author suggest is that the value of the architectural quality is none and that the value of the real estate is the land. It demonstrates the idea that

architectural quality isn't a monetary good, as it seems that buyers are not willing to pay for it. Indeed, a dwelling is priced by the number of square meters, which price depends mostly on the land value. The architectural quality is then an extra cost for the developer, without being profitable in the sale. This issue raises the question of the communication of architecture to a wider audience. If most of the projects are displayed and advertised through images, the question of the quality of spaces or materials isn't brought up and we can wonder, as architects, how to bring these questions all the way to the final user.

One answer to that question could be participative architecture. If it is not mentioned in the article, this practice of architecture can be presented as an alternative to traditional public commissions or private contractors.<sup>36</sup> These typologies are engendered by collective associations of users searching to create more customized or shared living spaces that are not offered by other building organizations. If the pressure of financial actors is relieved as the users usually constitute the funding of the project, the role of the architect is transformed as the users are now part of the conception process. If architects can be interested in this practice because of their « *ideological consonance* » it can also come forward as very time consuming and not economically stable for offices. Nevertheless, this position could be considered a revolutionary approach to the building industry, to eliminate the financial actors.

In this article, it seems that the financial actor, represented by the developer, could be a threat to architectural quality. The *conception-realization* contracts getting more and more common, and their influence grows. The material quality of the buildings as well as the consideration of the architect are declining. Nevertheless, it seems like the architect, struggling to set his position in the building mechanism, could « regain his power » by transforming the vision of the architectural profession and approaching a possible evolution of the architect's work and societal responsibility.

If it seems like the situation is desperate for *Calimero, the architect*, in the following interview with David Albrecht, we discover a potential evolution for the architect's profession, enabling him to gain back his responsibility for the built environment quality.<sup>37</sup> We learn that, if many actors were able to settle themselves in the building industry, the architect keeps losing responsibility. According to him, architects should displace their main competence from « building making » to « project making ». If nowadays, the task of the architect is to conceive a building based on a brief drawn by others, he incites architects to bring their knowledge and tools of project-making upstream in the project-making phases. That would mean including spatial but also non-spatial aspects of the project into his main task. The developers work as any economical sector, minimizing risks, maximizing profits and selling as fast as possible. According to him, the spatial and typically « architectural » aspect of a project is central for developers, but the development of this aspect towards a certain quality needs proof of profitability. If not, that development doesn't occur. Facing that conclusion, the architect, need to re-evaluate his job as a coordinator in the global process of architectural project making. The architect becomes an « articulator », « *taking his pride in the project process and the final product in its multiple dimensions, physical of course, but also economical and financial, operational etc.* ». According to him, the architect should get higher in the hierarchy to optimize

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<sup>36</sup> Biau, V. (2020). Les architectes au défi de la ville néolibérale. Parenthèses.

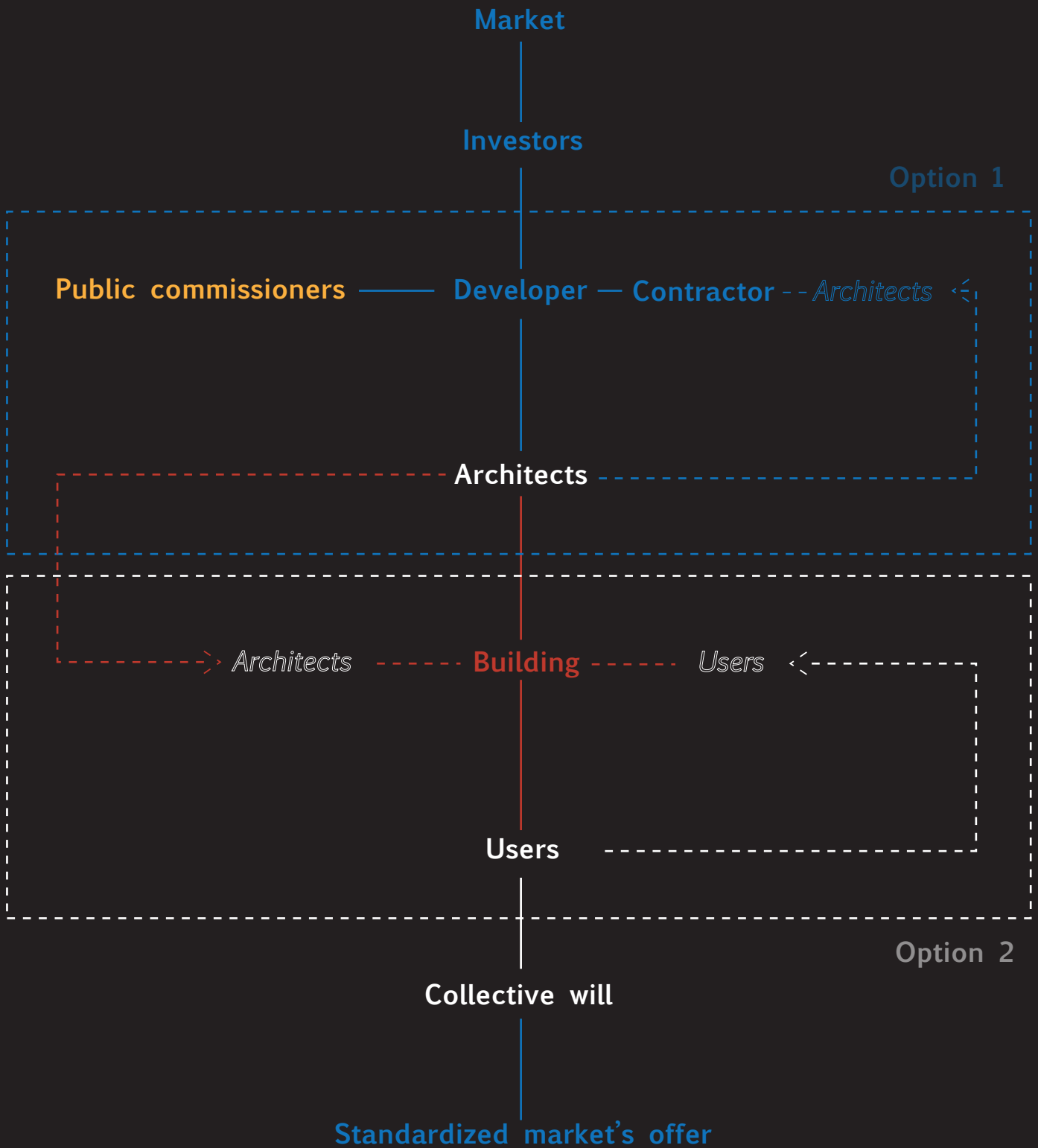
<sup>37</sup> V éran, C. (2019). Calimero et le promoteur. D'Architecture, 274.

the process of construction. Nevertheless, this task would mean endorsing the neoliberalisation of the market. As it seems, becoming part of the neoliberal process of construction as an architect would mean being some kind of enlightened developer.

In the next interview, titled « *developer-architect, or how to regain power* », a new actor appears, the developer-architect, presented as a way for architects to « *regain power* »<sup>38</sup>. The interviewees are the founders of an office called Eliet&Lehmann, working first as an architect practice before becoming also a developing company. They explain this choice as a way to create their own project briefs allowing them to develop a qualitative architecture, according to them, not appreciated by the usual developers. Indeed, they defend a simple architectural language, based on a rational construction and the materiality of stone as the principal construction element. The combination of both these activities is legally possible under the condition that the developing company is independent from the architecture office, the clients must also be informed. As they explain their story in this experience, they disclose that tax exemption processes are very powerful within the standardization of construction. To sell fast, developers offer optimized apartments in terms of surface to offer an optimal tax exemption. This system works for investors not engaged in any kind of architectural quality as long as they can sell their goods. The E&L team offers the opposite, a diversified portfolio of housing typologies, high ceiling heights, adaptable volumes, and several aspects that can be defined as architectural qualities of the apartments. Nevertheless, as they carry the financial responsibility personally, they also present the risks linked to that practice when the developing actor is a small company.

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<sup>38</sup>Véran, C. (2019). Calimero et le promoteur. *D'Architecture*, 274.



**Scheme 4:** the potential evolutions of the architect's profession.

The first option presents an alternative in which the architect takes on a role «upstream» in the project's conception as an organizational project, not simply architectural. By doing so, he's accepting the system in place and evolving in his role as an architect towards a more financially «valued» position. The resulting scheme is a horizontal relationship between the different actors. The second option represents a «bottom-up» approach, in which the architect, by the mobilisation of the users dissatisfied by the market's offer, conceives the building in partnership with the users. If the financial actors are distanced, the scheme is now a horizontal relationship between consumers and the architect.

State actor — Architectural project — Economically neutral actors — Neoliberal actors —

## Conclusion

From 1980 to nowadays, the French context of the production of the built environment has been evolving and with it, the role of the architect. The general neo-liberalization of the construction and real estate sector has transformed the building industry practices. The transformation of the public attitude towards architectural projects, through the New Public Management, for instance, has also impacted the architect's profession as the legal protection of the status of the architect seemed to crumble when the ELAN Law of 2018 got enacted. The systems of actors have evolved towards a devaluation of the architect's skills and his loss of responsibilities at the profit of the developer, controlling the commissions of the architect.

*D'Architecture* magazine is part of the actors questioning and criticizing these evolutions. The magazine is also promoting a certain vision of the architect's role and work that influences the architectural community. According to its articles, it seems like the definition of the main work of the architect is transforming towards a more global organizational role in the making of the architectural project, by finding a role in the neo-liberal system in place. If this approach could be an evolution of the architect's work, some offices aim for revolutionary practices, by promoting participative architecture for instance and the involvement of users to face up to private real estate investors. Nevertheless, both these options mean a transformation of the role and the task of the architect as more and more actors get involved in the conception process from an early stage. Whichever one the architect chooses, the architectural profession seems to be fated to transform from a needle, to a carriage.

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**Figures :**

**Figure 1 :** « *Les architectes aux premières loges lors du lancement de la consultation internationale du Grand Paris par Nicolas Sarkozy en 2008.* » (2008), Chaperon, A. (2016). *Les désillusions du Grand Paris.* D'Architecture, 244.

**Figure 2:** Cover of the architect's Union Magazine of July 2018. (2018) *Elan will kill me*, La revue syndicale des architectes, 65.

**Figure 3 :** Picture of a protest against the ELAN Loi.(2018) *Elan will kill me*, La revue syndicale des architectes, 65.