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French Student Housing Turn Industries into Great Good Places of University Life

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Abstract

The post-industrial era has left many European cities seeking new drivers of economic growth and modern uses for their underutilised and often abandoned industrial heritage. This situation has led various urban districts to transform from historical centers of material manufacturing into vibrant cultural hubs linked with immaterial knowledge production. In our contemporary context, where the growing lack of affordable student accommodations is becoming critical to the international appeal and competitiveness of our university and cities, student-housing projects offer us the opportunity to develop sustainable urban regeneration programs by fostering the continuous presence of a young and active population. By analyzing recent French case studies that highlight recent design philosophies and innovative reuse processes, this research aims to emphasize some international best practices that could prove helpful in addressing both the current Italian student accommodation crisis and the urban regeneration challenges set by recent European Agendas.

Keywords: Student-Housing, Architectural Reuse, Industrial Heritage

The French Context

In France, the interest toward abandoned industrial sites, which has been ongoing for fifty years, can be linked with the similar developments in the field of cultural heritage that have characterized the academic debate in many other European countries since the late 1960s. After some important documentary initiatives aimed at preserving the memory of demolitions through photographic campaigns often carried out in a hurry, the post-industrial era has since prompted many urban centres to seek innovative drivers of economic and territorial growth. At the beginning of the 1980s, growing concerns about the future of the increasingly numerous and large abandoned industrial areas, and rising interest in the possible revitalization of territories and suburbs, affected several French cities. The possibility of interpreting the urban layouts linked to manufacturing as a foundational element of contemporary material culture led to renewed public attention toward the uncertain future of these historic sites. Within the context of this new institutional focus toward the conservation of this "built heritage of labour" and the promotion of its historical and social value, the CILAC[1], founded in 1978, is probably the best-known national association.

In recent years, drawing on social and formal interests stimulated by the central and strategic location that many industries have since gained thanks to the expansion of cities, universities have often become strategic players in numerous urban regeneration processes[2] aimed at improving the sustainability of our cities and reducing their land use. Furthermore, the globalised crisis in student housing has prompted us, as architects, to reflect on the possible role and challenges of these projects. By developing the attractiveness of new international centres of the knowledge economy, these facilities for university life are becoming an integral part of increasingly complex programs, aimed at developing new uses, values, and users for the city.

Faced with the growing interest of numerous private and public institutions towards student housing, a series of recent student-housing projects involving the redevelopment of "heritage" buildings has been selected for this study. Although each one is characterised by specific technical challenges and different political agendas, these French case studies offer some best practices that highlight the emergence of new architectural philosophies linked to the processes of reuse and the urban role of these social infrastructures. The Cité Internationale des Chercheurs de Toulouse highlights how elements of display and narration can help reopen previously forgotten and fragile urban structures. The Manufacture de Strasbourg underscores how long and complex programs of patrimonial reuse can integrate student housing facilities to improve their social and economic sustainability. Finally, the project Sheds in Lyon demonstrates how even a smaller industrial structure can become a vibrant center of social exchange and the last testament to the industrial past of a growing neighborhood.

The Cité Internationale des Chercheurs de Toulouse: an Urban Scale

The completion of the Cité Internationale des Chercheurs de Toulouse in 2023 has revitalised an abandoned building constructed by Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Sabatier, providing an example of how the creation of university accommodation can go hand in hand with the symbolic and cultural valorisation of a forgotten historic site. Strategically located in the Quartier des Sciences and well-connected to the city's metro and tram lines, the project involved the demolition of several buildings, the construction of a new one, and the renovation of an existing structure to create approximately 300 accommodation places for an international university population already advanced in their studies. From the beginning, the stated priorities of the project were to enhance and consolidate the international influence of university life in Toulouse by grounding its contemporary strengths in a long tradition of scientific culture. A challenge that immediately led to the development of this project on an urban scale through the creation of services for the university and the city—including conference rooms, co-working spaces for students and start-ups, and bars and restaurants—which reopened this previously closed and inaccessible fragment of urban fabric to the local community. To achieve this result, a group of two buildings arranged in a horseshoe shape was added to the historic "H" building, encircling the lot around a series of new tree-lined courtyards. These three public urban squares were interconnected by a long, straight path that pierces the closed volumes of the buildings, visually reconnecting these works with some urban landmarks and giving continuity to the paths and views of visitors. This public pedestrian street, which reconnects two parts of the city, features a permanent exhibition on the history of the university and its most famous

academics and scientists[3].
From a design perspective, priority was given to the more symbolic aspects of the existing structure. Internally, the building was structurally hollowed to prioritize the integrity of the historic external envelope, which was completely restored. Thanks to this high-impact choice, three floors were created where previously there were only two, improving and optimising the space to accommodate a larger number of students. While the typological, material, and technological characteristics of the architectural structure have been almost completely lost, the façade, considered emblematic of Toulouse's industrial past, has been preserved. The different types of student rooms created by Tailandier Architectes Associés are sized according to the regular geometry of the windows. Nonetheless, the disruption of the building's structural elements has made it possible to rethink the layout of this student residence, facilitating social interaction among residents. The openings that previously characterized the façades of the inner courtyard of Paul Sabatier's laboratory have been reinterpreted to become the arches of a series of covered galleries (Fig. 1), reminiscent of the cloisters of some monastic buildings.

Fig. 1. Section of the interior courtyard of the Cité internationale des Chercheurs de Toulouse. Image of the authors

The political and social challenges of this project are clear: to return to the city a previously unknown architecture while integrating the scientific history of the University of Toulouse into the collective memory and regional identity. The elements of storytelling that characterize this residence on an urban scale have fostered a positive perception of this regeneration program, enhancing the elements of harmony with the past and concealing its discontinuities with society. In this way, the complete typological transformation of the building into a community space for open-air meetings and social exchanges can be interpreted as part of a continuity of values and processes aimed at emphasizing Toulouse's renewed creative capacity. Faced with the loss or the impossible conservation of patina, materials, and historic forms, the use of display and narration appears to not only be capable of enhancing the perceived value of reused buildings but also to nurture and strengthen a diffused "sense of belonging" to a local collectivity. The temporary stays of international students foster unique opportunities for synergies and mutually enriching encounters, allowing us to interpret student accommodation as an "information ground" (Fisher, Naumer, 2006, 98-99) that can strengthen international relationships, and as a

"third teacher" (C. Edwards, L. Gandini, G.E. Forman 2014), which can also positively contributes to the academic education and social vibrancy of the city as a whole.

La Manufacture des Tabacs de Strasbourg: the Creation of "Tiers Lieux"

The tobacco factory in Strasbourg, founded in 1849, was once regarded as a pioneering example of industrial architecture[4]. After its closure in 2010, the factory was quickly listed as a French historical monument in 2016[5]: a recognition that facilitated its recent redevelopment and its historical restoration. Back in 2015, the SERS (Société d'Aménagement et d'équipement de la Région de Strasbourg) had already acquired the structure precisely because of its monumental value, creating a multidisciplinary commission that included associations, citizens, and heritage services, which were called upon to participate in the definition of design guidelines for a radical transformation of the site. In this case, the decision to transform this factory into a genuine urban infrastructure for the university was strongly influenced by the strategic position that this industrial site had since acquired within the urban fabric. The complex, initially constructed on the outskirts of the city, was now located at the frontier between the historic city centre and the new campus of the University of Strasbourg. As such the conversion of the spaces, uses and users of this former manifacturing space can be considered, first and foremost, as a political intervention resulting from three actions deemed fundamental for the city: the strengthening of teaching and research in the sciences and arts at the University of Strasbourg, the support for the development of contemporary creativity desired by the municipality, and the institutional promotion of an economy linked to social and solidarity principles (Smith 2017, 119). As was the case in Toulouse, this project involved an extensive reflection on an urban scale. Both the public areas at the front and rear of the Manufacture have been completely reorganized to provide more space for cyclists and pedestrians. By introducing various plants, despite the technical difficulties posed by the presence of numerous underground pipes, and creating shaded areas where tables and chairs can be set up, these interventions made the entrance to the inner courtyards of this building more pleasant for the public. These outdoor spaces, now protected from the heat and chaos of the city, have become a privileged meeting point for the various users of this new urban center. The program for this redevelopment was thus quickly divided in successive stages, the first of which was linked to the creation of residential spaces for students and young people (Fig. 2).

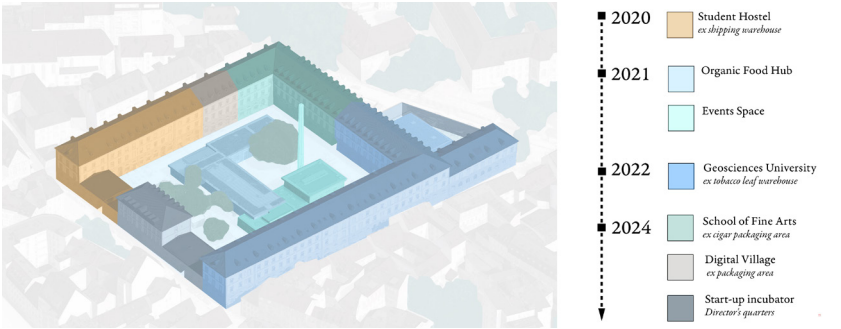

Fig. 2. Bird-eye view of the evolution of the reuse project for the Manufacture de Tabac de Strasbourg. Image of the authors

The People Hostel, designed by AEA studio as a student residence and hostel, spans an area of 2,700 m² and accommodates 264 beds. University residences such as this one enable the rapid revitalization of the neighborhoods in which they are located, thanks to the continuously renewed presence of a highly active population, which encourages the creation of additional services and ensures their initial economic stability. In the case of the Strasbourg Manufactories, it was possible to build, in the years following the completion of this first residence, an organic food centre, a bar, and an events space, subsequently complemented by university and co-working spaces for start-ups.

The various projects that have transformed the uses and users of this industrial complex are united by a desire to preserve its emblematic structural elements. These have been entirely preserved, restored, and integrated into the various public and private spaces created within the building's structural grid, often becoming a valuable component of the interior design and layout. The valorization of past construction methods extends beyond simple historical preservation. In this case, it becomes a real opportunity to enhance the perception and enjoyment of the spaces by their users. Overall, the site is very attentive to the development of tiers lieux, which are particularly important in France today[6], offering a positive model for the recovery of industrial heritage: a place that welcomes students and tourists, but also a tool for creating services open to the entire local community. In this sense, new patterns of interaction among students, teachers, and visitors alike have fostered activities such as cultural exhibitions, collaborative workshops, and informal gatherings that now animate these former industrial spaces.

The Sheds of Lyon: on a Building Scale

On the outskirts of Lyon, the municipality decided to preserve the external appearance of a 19th-century workshop, the only survivor of an industrial past amid the construction of new and frenetic real estate projects in the Vaise district. Here, the A-MAS agency has successfully transformed the requirements of historical architecture into an opportunity to experiment with new solutions for interior design and student sociability. This is an atypical project that has characterised a small building in a heavily built-up urban area. The original workshop has been converted into 24 beds for students, as part of a residential program featuring eight apartments, one for each of the building's eight roof sections. It is therefore a small university residence, where the overall volume of the building is divided into different autonomous sections, each designed to accommodate four students. Considering the building's shape to be emblematic and immediately recognizable, the project completely reorganized the interior spaces, retaining only the steel structure and part of the mâchefer[7] walls. The project takes its name from the shed roof: the only element of the project that still makes its original function recognisable. Although historical examples of this type of architecture are now rare in France, it is worth noting that the characteristic construction features of this industrial and traditional architecture are experiencing a revival in recent designs and renovations, as they are considered suitable for meeting new environmental requirements. Born out of real functional needs when electric lighting was not yet fully developed, this feature allowed a lot of light to be brought into the workshops, while limiting overheating and unpleasant glare effects for the workers. Today, this construction detail is being reinterpreted to bring light into all the shared spaces of these micro-apartments. The preservation of the original envelope has led to the creation of atypical

dwellings with openings to the outside on only one side of the building. Each flat consists of several overlapping common areas—a kitchen, a living room, a dining room, and a study - which, spread over three floors, become the matrix for a distribution system that encourages socialization while leaving space for private rooms. By redefining the interior spaces of the original structure, the architect utilizes the entire height of the interior to develop a housing model that combines different floors to meet the students' needs for both isolated study sessions and communal gatherings. It goes without saying that different spatial arrangements give rise to other social interactions. In this sense, the architectural project developed here is also an opportunity to compare, over time, the responses given by students to collective living in spaces that are certainly different from those of newly built university residences. For example, a concrete pergola connects this complex to the adjacent building, which is still under construction and is expected to house around a hundred apartments (Fig. 3). This covered passageway, which features bicycle parking facilities, is intended to be more than just a physical link between the building and the neighborhood. It is also a metaphorical link between the past and the future of an urban fabric, which, although it has now lost most of the material evidence of its industrial past, can still evoke its social memory through symbolic forms and references (David, David 2024, 127). This careful adaptation preserves the building's original spirit while providing modern comforts for residents by introducing an innovative layout that encourages interaction in shared zones, blending the industrial interior characteristics of the building with contemporary student needs through thoughtful and functional design.

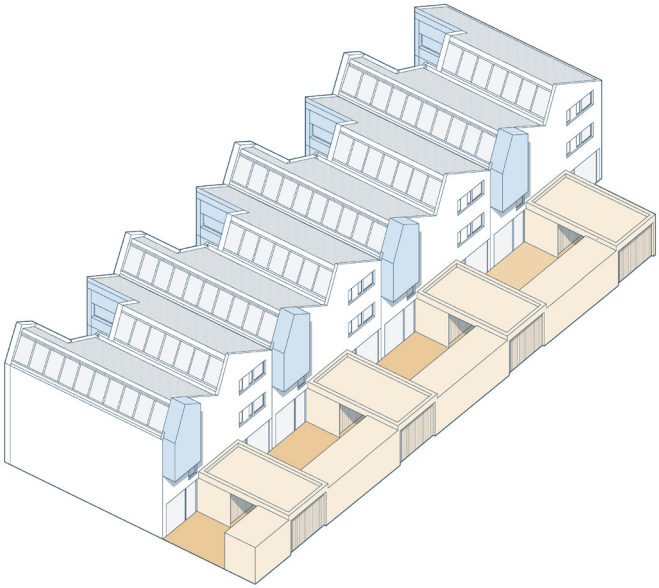

Fig. 3. Axonometric view of the Sheds in Lyon. Image of the authors

Conclusion

By analyzing these recent case studies, which are examples of the latest French practices in the reuse of historic buildings for university residences, this research has sought to highlight contemporary design philosophies and innovative reuse processes that could help address the challenges posed by both the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the current student housing crisis in Italy (Bologna, Piferi 2024). We can highlight how, independently of the site size, historical relevance, and material integrity, student housing presents a strategic opportunity for cities aiming to enhance their university attractiveness within emerging knowledge economies. By reusing historic buildings, cities can create economically and socially supported regeneration programs through the continuous presence of an international and young population. In the symbolic transition from industrial manufacturing to intangible cultural production, the creation of a mixité of uses and users makes the city more dynamic and attractive, even within policies supporting students and other social categories considered vulnerable. However, to be effective, especially when working on challenging buildings where traditional conservation of historical stratifications and patinas would be technically impossible or economically and functionally counterproductive, these projects often need to redefine what we traditionally expect of a student accommodation. They should be open to the public and capable of reconnecting with the urban fabric and its history through design processes with strong symbolic, heritage, and social values. More than just dormitories, these latest-generation university residences should therefore be considered as a social infrastructure for the city, capable of triggering and activating sustainable urban regeneration processes through the narration and densification of historical continuities with the past. Therefore, as architects, we should give more attention to the "in-between spaces" that guarantee the gradual transition from the private to the public sphere. Public path, entrances, common halls, and corridors – sometimes considered as mere residual spaces of the reuse process- offer the opportunity to develop innovative design solutions that could foster informal socialization between users, display the rich history of the building, and highlight the cultural landscape of its context. One could even argue that these reuse programs shouldn't only shed new light on the past but also open new doors into the future: some spaces could be kept as "leftovers"[8] of the architectural project, as lingering areas whose function could be reinterpreted by future projects or by the users themselves. In conclusion, the storytelling of these reuse projects plays a highly political role, both in relation to the local communities and to the students they are intended to accommodate. "Tier-lieux" of university life, these facilities underscore the importance of developing informal spaces where people from different countries, cultures, and institutions can exchange, interact, and synergize. The creative reuse of industrial heritage for student housing is not merely a response to a functional crisis, but a catalyst for social cohesion, urban regeneration, and cultural preservation that integrates temporary users into the fabric of community life, emphasizing the conservation and reinterpretation of architectural elements to strengthen a sense of place and belonging, while encouraging sustainable design and low-impact urban development. To borrow Ray Oldenburg's definition of great good places, student housing is "a home away from home, the place where people can be likely found when not at home or at work", a "neutral ground [...] which promotes the broadening of social networks" (Oldenburg 1989, 23-42).

Notes

1. The aim of the Comité d'information et de liaison pour l'archéologie, l'étude et la mise en valeur du patrimoine industriel is to promote the protection of French industrial heritage in all its aspects by acting as a national interlocutor for local associations, museums, and industrial ecomuseums.

2. Among the projects carried out that meet these characteristics, the following are particularly noteworthy: the Jean Moulin Lyon 3 university campus, built in the city's former tobacco factories, the Grand Moulins campus in Paris, and the Quartier de la Création campus on the Île de Nantes.

3. The exhibition route follows the itinerary created by the architectural layout of the building, allowing visitors to retrace the history of science in Toulouse from 1229 to the present day through a series of panels.

4. The building is the prototype of the "Eugène Rolland" model used throughout France between 1849 and 1902.

5. Notice no. PA67000102, uploaded to the Mérimée database of the French Ministry of Culture.

6. Recently, the "Plan de Relance", the French equivalent of the Italian PNRR, created a fund to offer economic help with the creation of new "Tiers Lieux".

7. Concrete composed of blast furnace residues and a binder such as lime or cement.

8. Using the same term as A-MAS architecture in their latest publication, "L'art d'accomoder les restes", we want to underscore the importance of how giving importance to the processes of reuse rather than its product, allowing for more collaborative and bottom-up endeavors that foster and strengthen the social impact of broader regeneration programs. In this perspective, the experimental project Casa Zera by TRA (Toussaint and Robiglio Architects), which uses prefabricated modules to reoccupy abandoned industrial structures in the perifery of Turin, appears as a good exemple of how to use the leftover spaces of our cities.

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