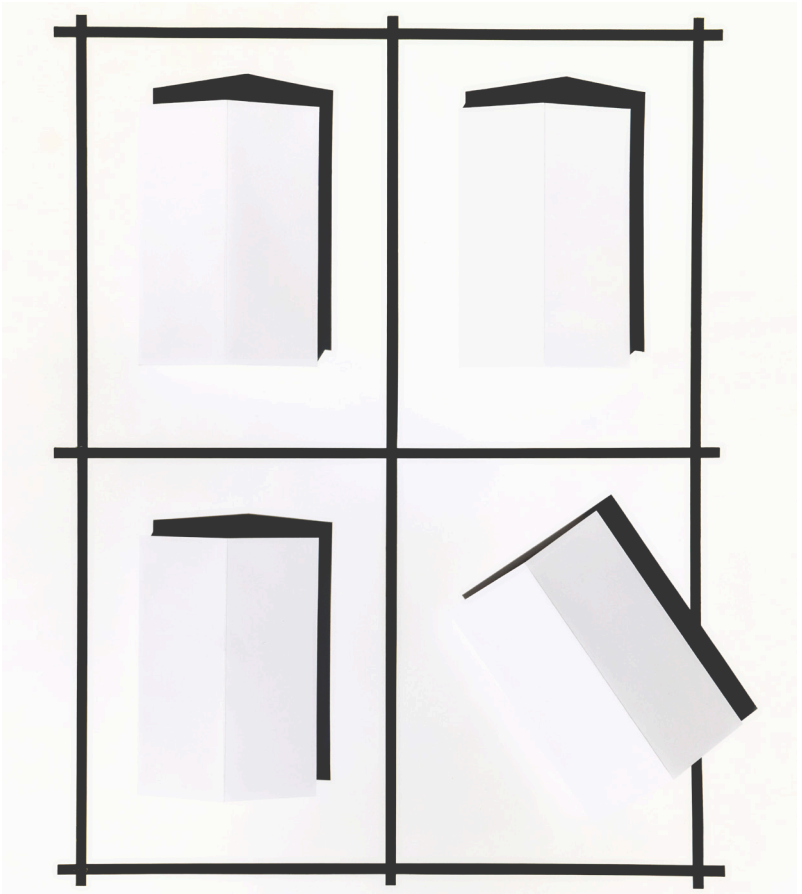


Enhancing ordinariness

For a sustainable horizon in private housing developments ?



Audrey Benas

Research work in spatial design

Enhancing ordinariness

For a sustainable horizon in private housing developments ?

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Research work in design

Under the supervision of Ann Pham Ngoc Cuong, Laurence
Pache and Catherine Pradeau

High Diploma in Applied Art

Eco-design and sustainable development

Raymond Loewy School of Design and Applied Arts

La Souterraine, France

April 2021



Inventory of the hall drawer, 2020. Photography work ©Audrey Benas



Preface

In **March 2020**, when I left my apartment to go back home, at the beginning of the lockdown, my everyday life was shaken up. First, I had to readjust and adopt another rhythm and habits. It was something new and different. However, over time, routine took hold in space and everything seemed to be obvious, usual and banal. That is how it is. We no longer notice what is ordinary, the infra-ordinary because of repetition. We do not question it any more. It was when I was confined in my house that I began to look at what was around me. And it was when I read *L'infra-ordinaire* by Georges Perec that I understood the interest of considering the infra-ordinary. This was the starting point of my research work.

Let us take into account what already exists to question ourselves about our way of life and its impacts in a society focused on mass consumerism, growth and novelty...

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Introduction

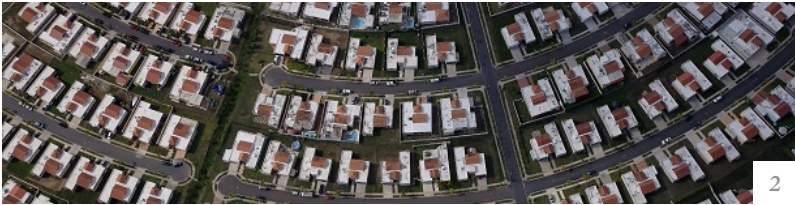
As citizens and inhabitants, we should be able to be aware of our customs, our practices, in order to take what surrounds us into consideration. However, by living on an established territory, colonized by mass media, we are only interested in events that do not concern our real existence and do not call our way of living on Earth into question. Thus, our society prevents inhabitants from acting in their everyday life and appropriating it to build a better future.

Can the spatial designer have a role to play in the ordinary consideration and the ways of living of inhabitants? On which ground can the spatial designer act? And what possibilities exist for inhabitants to become aware of their practices?

This research work tries to question, through the spatial designer's vision, and through the analysis of a private housing development, the tools necessary for residents to realize their current way of life. What's more, it attempts to think about the role of private housing developments, in the future, for building a lively and ecologically responsible place conducive to interactions, meetings, etc. What would a housing estate look like if a spatial designer offered actions that disrupted the current order and suggested a new way of doing and living?



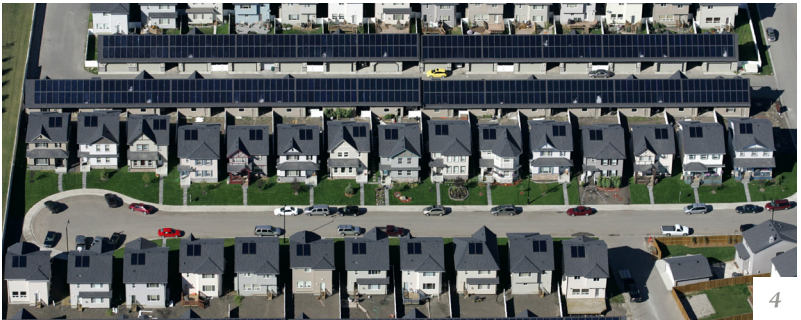
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1. Housing estate, United States ©Nuli_k / Getty Image
2. Housing estate, Caguas, Puerto-Rico ©Yann Arthus-Bertrand
3. Housing estate, United States ©Unsplash
4. Housing estate, Okotoks, Canada ©Mike Ridewood
5. Housing estate, United States ©Unsplash
6. Housing estate, Brondby, Copenhagen, Denmark ©Henri_do

The questioning potential of the infra-ordinary

1. ◆

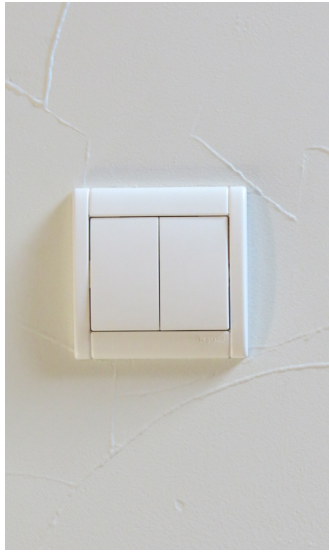


Exhibition of banal objects of everyday life. Jasper Morrison and Naoto Fukasawa, Super Normal, Axis Gallery, Tokyo, 2006 ©Jasper Morrison Studio

The infra-ordinary talks about us

Nowadays, our society is marked by events and innovations. In a familiar environment, we tend to be attracted only to what is spectacular, surprising, etc. The Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa and the English designer Jasper Morrison condemn current design which focuses on spectacular production, originality and media coverage in an environmental crisis. In other words, they object to objects created to attract attention.

What George Perec is attentive to is quite different. In his work *L'infra-ordinaire* (1989), George Perec invites us to take everyday life insignificant things into consideration. According to him, considering the infra-ordinary would allow us to become aware of our "truth" because it is part of us. In addition, beyond the simple appearance of infra ordinary things, there could lie some hidden data about our current world and what defines us. For example, let us examine our switches. What is a switch? How can it inform us about ourselves and so much more, about our society? We use these little objects, yet we never look at them. What is the point of examining switches? Investigating would enable us to discover how they are made and where the raw materials come from. Starting from that, the "made in France" promoted by Le Grand Corporation - the specialist in electrical and digital building infrastructures - is not real. Indeed, to make plastic we need oil that is extracted elsewhere, in Algeria, Saudi Arabia or Russia. Thus, Globalisation is present even in the most insignificant elements of our everyday life. And that is how, through the capture of a technical and geographical truth, the infra-ordinary reveals all the world's complexity to us.



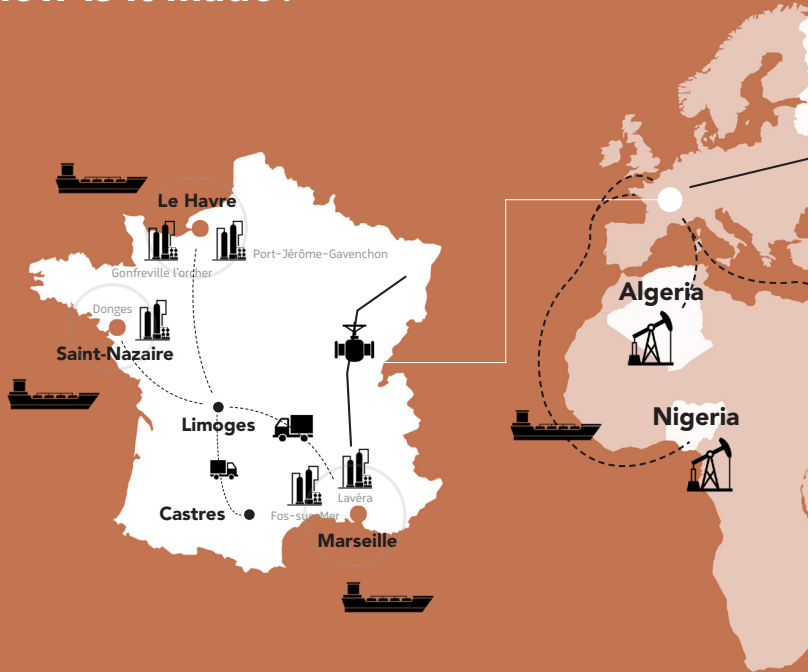


Inventory of switches, 2020. Photography work ©Audrey Benas

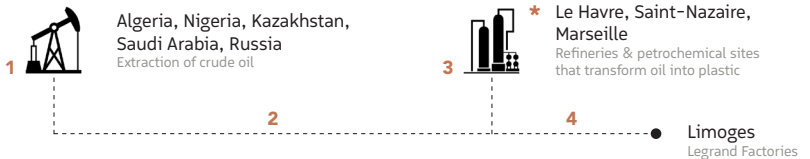


Plastic

how is it made?



how is it made?





2

Oil import by sea or pipeline to refineries



4

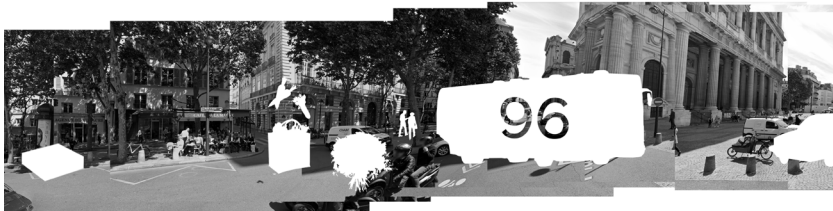
Transportation of plastic granulates to Legrand Factories / Transportation of switches to the distributor and setting up of devices in homes

* 3 stages

1. Extraction of Naphtha (raw material of plastic) after oil distillation
2. Fragmentation of Naphtha molecules in monomers after a cracking operation
3. After monomers polymerisation, creation of plastic granulates

An alienated and alienating everyday life

Therefore, catching the spatial truth is looking at what the infra-ordinary says about our way of life, our spatial experience. It is questioning our position concerning the world and others. What's more, the infra-ordinary can be defined as an indicator of our ways of life and society. Thus, the question is how can design allow people to discover their spatial truth by taking the infra-ordinary into consideration? The main issue is that we are not aware of this. Why? Everyday life may threaten our attention concerning the infra-ordinary by having an effect on our perception, thoughts and actions. It is the power of habits and repetition that reduces our interest in invisible and insignificant things. Indeed, we immerse ourselves in a familiar environment and we no longer notice nor call into question what surrounds us. Nevertheless, if our everyday life can be perceived as an alienation, according to Henry Lefebvre, it may also be comforting as Bruce Bégout says in *La Découverte du quotidien* (2005).



In addition, it can be essential for life in society. In this respect, Erving Goffman compares everyday life to a theatre where each person plays a role for a collective interest so as to keep social relationships stable. Thereby, everyday life makes the world acceptable and society possible. In order to allow people to discover their spatial truth, the spatial designer does not have to exclude everyday life places. On the contrary, he will have to act precisely in this environment, where people live every day. Nevertheless, he will have to find a way of getting around social determinism and repetition. How can the designer make the infra-ordinary be considered within everyday life spaces?



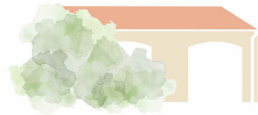
*Inspired by Georges Perec, Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien, 2020.
Frieze, photomontage, 120 × 16 cm ©Audrey Benas*

And what can be the aim of design in the capture of spatial truth? Indeed, the second question is what for? Helping inhabitants to catch their spatial truth could be a way, for the designer, of making a difference and changing ways of life and practices. In his book *Où atterir?*, Bruno Latour thinks about a new form of communal policy after taking the current policies into consideration and highlighting their shortcomings. According to Bruno Latour who suggests a new horizon heading for coexistence and respect for the environment, the spatial truth could be an operating method whereby a more ecologically responsible life could be rethought. This way, in a media-driven world and consumerist society, we should question ourselves about our current way of life and imagine a more shared and tenable horizon.

A place that favours awareness

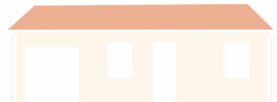
The third question is on which ground can the spatial designer act to raise collective awareness? As previously induced, it is necessary to consider ordinary and daily places if we want to realise how we live and how we use space. In addition, it would be more effective to think a collective awareness in a place where people really live, at the heart of their daily actions. Then, after examining three banal places, a commercial zone, toilets and a housing estate, it seems the spatial designer should take action in the private housing development.

Unfortunately, residents live there without really occupying it, people pass by it without acknowledging its existence. In general, a housing estate is a transit place created to be a final destination and not to be experienced or used by residents, as Henri Raymond notes in his book *L'habitat pavillonnaire* (2001). Private housing developments are defined by architectural standards that vary in each region. The detached houses are separated from each other and from the town centre, which makes the use of cars necessary. In this respect, in his book entitled *Le cauchemar pavillonnaire* (2012), Jean-Luc Debry regards it as a spatial translation of a consumerist, individualist and conformist society with ways of life looking towards mass consumerism.





Facades of detached houses in the housing estate "Les jardins de l'intendant", 2020 ©Audrey Benas



However, French people seem to be attached to private housing developments that they consider to be the ideal housing. More precisely, according to a Stébé and Marchal survey in 2016, more than 80% of them want to own a detached house with a garden. What's more, this place is appreciated for economic and identity reasons: prices are attractive and it represents a lasting property to be bequeathed. Finally, the possibility of privacy and of a calm and safe environment is important for residents. Thus, the private housing development is a desirable ground for the designer since it appeals to the majority of the French population. Can the spatial designer help residents to improve their lives? By which means?

As a result, the role of the spatial designer would be to make people imagine the possibility of a sustainable future through a design action in the private housing development.



*Private housing development "Les jardins de l'intendant", Castres, 2020
©Audrey Benas*

Scenarios in favour of a sustainable future

2.



Operations that distort space and rules of the housing estate "Les jardins de l'intendant", 2020. Photography and video work ©Audrey Benas

Spatial experience to reawaken interest and attention

For the rest of my research work, I decided to start an exploratory work in a specific place: a private housing development in Castres that is called “Les jardins de l'intendant”.

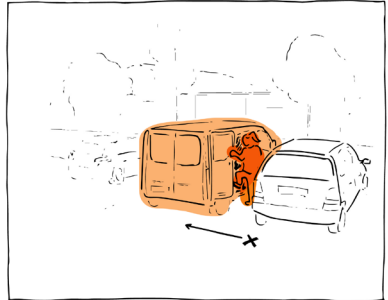
To trigger a reaction from residents and to make them think about their current life in the housing estate, it is important to make them perceive differently their living environment and their way of living. Thus, design could offer new possibilities in the context of the town planning laws. How can the spatial designer encourage inhabitants to have new practices and customs?

In his book entitled *L'invention du quotidien* (1990), Michel de Certeau talks about “poaching”. In other words, he examines what some people do to distort society codes in order to reinvent their everyday life. What might happen if we distort space and rules in the housing estate? For example, a parking place could be occupied for reading or having a picnic rather than parking our car.

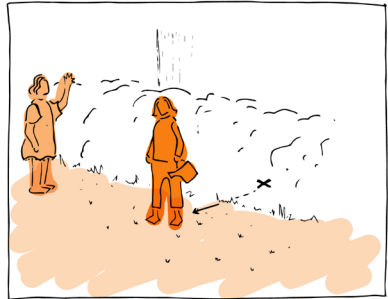
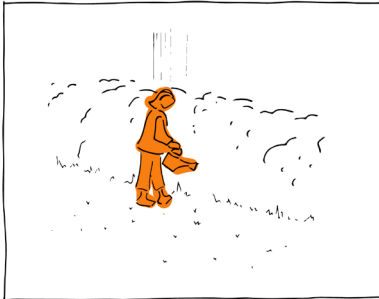
In addition, Jacques Doillon in his movie *L'An 01* tells about a new world after a step aside: having an unusual and unexpected walking could enable us to take a new look at what surrounds us. Indeed, walking could cause new situations. What if residents took a step aside in their private housing development? For example, they could be in their next-door neighbour's car instead of taking their own car to go somewhere, which would cause more car sharing. They could also visit their neighbours instead of going back home, and create more interaction.

Thus, these scenarios could be a starting point to invite inhabitants to question their current way of life and consider these practices. If nowadays these proposals are fictional, maybe they might become new habits in the future.

However, currently the question is: do residents want to resist a model which they seem to accept? In this respect, they already twist rules about the nature and height of their fences. Thereby, the way spaces are experienced and re-interpreted could make a difference and suggest a new prospect for a sustainable and communal life.



A resident in the next-door neighbour's car instead of taking his own car. ©Audrey Benas



A resident in his neighbour's garden instead of gardening on his own plot. ©Audrey Benas





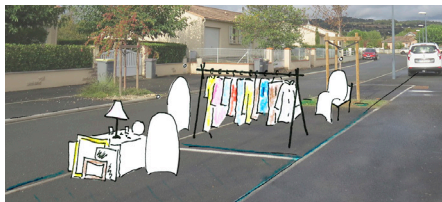
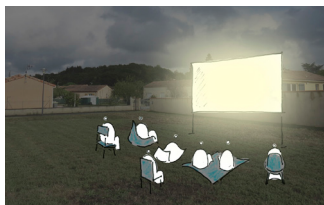
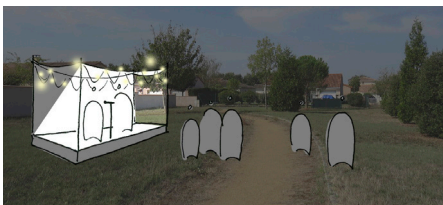
Operations that distort space and rules of the housing estate “Les jardins de l’intendant”, 2020. Photography work ©Audrey Benas

Hypotheses of spatial design actions

How can the spatial designer think about the construction of a new horizon in private housing developments? In what forms? Indeed, once the spatial truth is revealed and acquired by the residents, the designer will have to consider various possibilities of design actions. Besides planning a more ecologically responsible life, the aim would be to transform the housing estate into a model of neighbourly relations.

As previously introduced, private housing developments have many issues that the designer can try to tackle and resolve. First of all, these places that are a long way from shops and activities could be revitalized and revived. In her book entitled *Ville affamée : comment l'alimentation façonne nos vies*, the architect and urbanist Carolyn Steel underlines the importance of markets and shops. According to her, they are the heart of the social and political life of a town. Thus, the spatial designer could bring back small businesses like a bakery. She can also organise several events like a festival of open-air cinema or concerts at night, a car boot sale or a local products market during the day. These events may gather the inhabitants from all the housing estate and they also could be a way to entice other people to come and create new interactions.

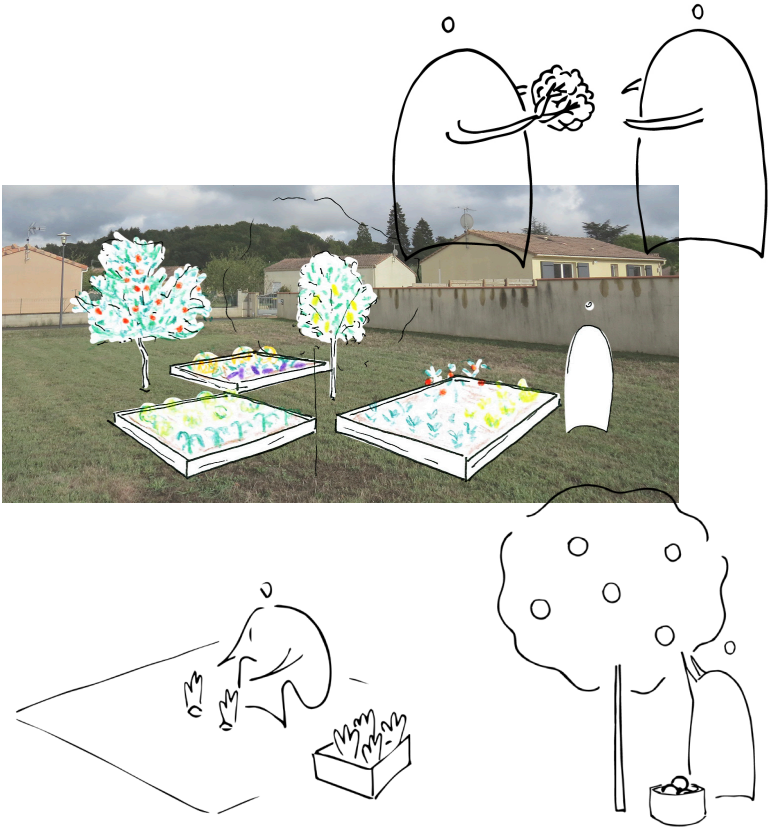
Activities in the housing estate “Les jardins de l’intendant”, 2020. Sketches and photo-montages ©Audrey Benas



In the interest of sustainability, the spatial designer could also reconsider the question of agriculture that is completely neglected and ignored by developers. Indeed, housing estates are built on agricultural lands. According to a Gateau and Marchal survey, 60 000 hectares of agricultural lands are eradicated each year. This is causing the decrease and disappearance of woods and agriculture. What about continuing to farm in a private housing development? Besides ensuring the production of local resources and reducing the number of purchases in hypermarkets, it can promote sharing, interactions and social cohesion. By the way, some collectives already try to develop farming forms in urban centres and suburbs. For example, we can talk about the action of “The Incredible Edible” who create convivial moments and interactions between inhabitants and their environment thanks to an urban and a participative agriculture.



The Incredible Edible, Paris
©Lesincroyablescomestibles.fr



Communal garden in the housing estate "Les jardins de l'intendant", 2020. Sketches and photomontages ©Audrey Benas

In addition, what if the designer opened detached houses to other inhabitants? In his book entitled *Le cauchemar pavillonnaire*, Jean-Luc Debry defines the detached house as a place closed on itself because of natural hedges, low walls, and because its occupants stay home. Thus, may a design action on housing estate plots contribute to better putting inhabitants in touch with each other? This could allow pensioners not to endure a withdrawal into themselves and enable a general sociability.

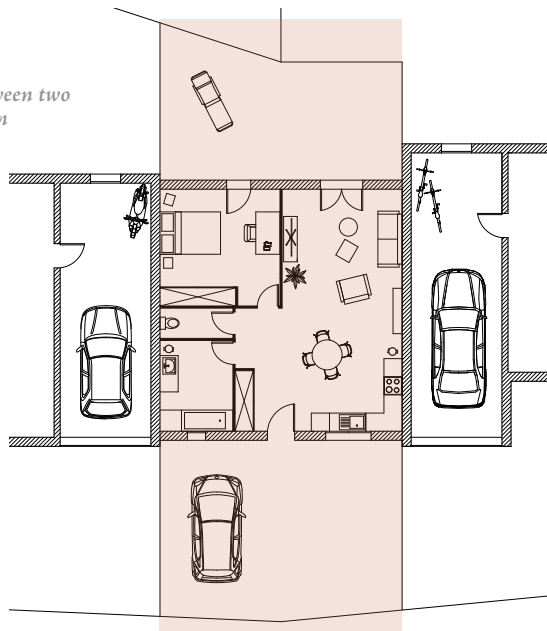
For example, opening the gate and the garage door can be perceived as an invitation to come in the courtyard. The garage and the driveway could receive a garage-sale for a week-end or several workshops to discover the resident's skills and share and learn new activities. The removal of the low walls could widen the public road. The creation of openings in the natural hedges could open the gardens to neighbours. Thereby, the space between two gardens could receive a simple bench, a play area for children or a shared vegetable garden. It could also allow residents to share equipment, tools, etc. Finally, the removal of all fences could transform the private housing development into a communal place. The gardens would turn into a large public park.



Layouts and events that bring inhabitants together, 2020. Sketches ©Audrey Benas

Finally, the spatial designer could question the current urban densification and the spread of private housing developments on the French territory. Therefore, the place between two detached houses may be redesigned. What would happen if we no longer went around houses? Between two houses one could create another room shared by the neighbours. One could imagine to build another home for students or young adults for example. Moreover, the designer can think about a densification by height, by adding spaces above housing estates.

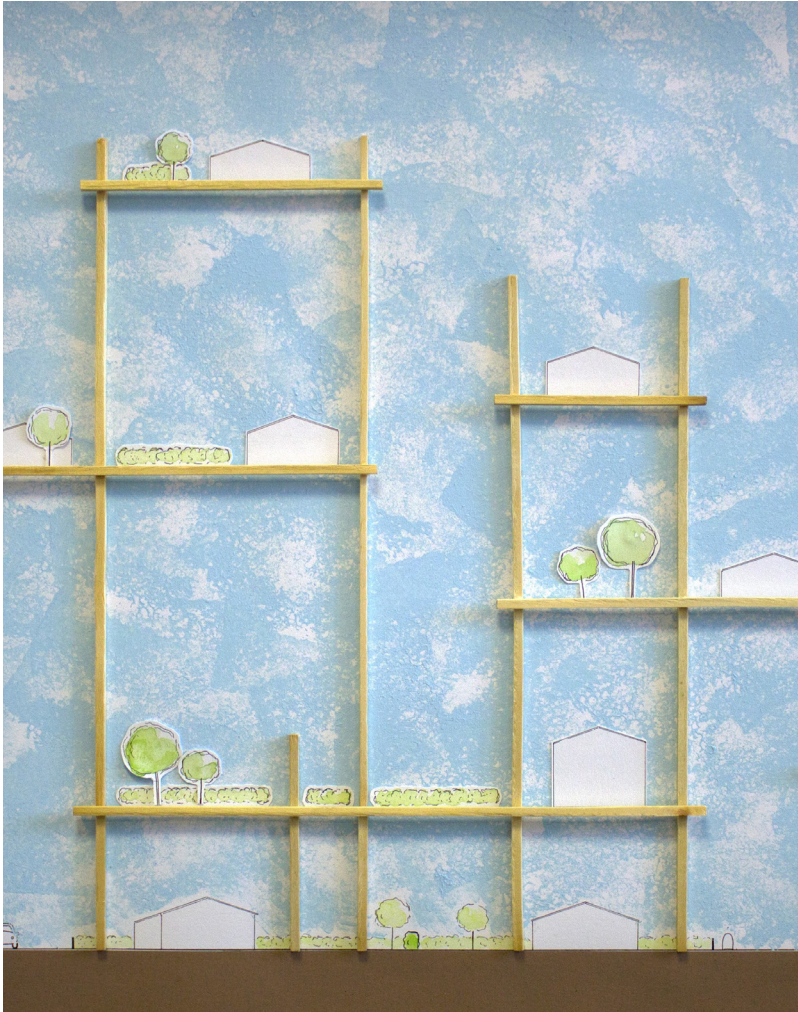
*Another housing space between two detached houses, 2020. Plan
1/250° ©Audrey Benas*

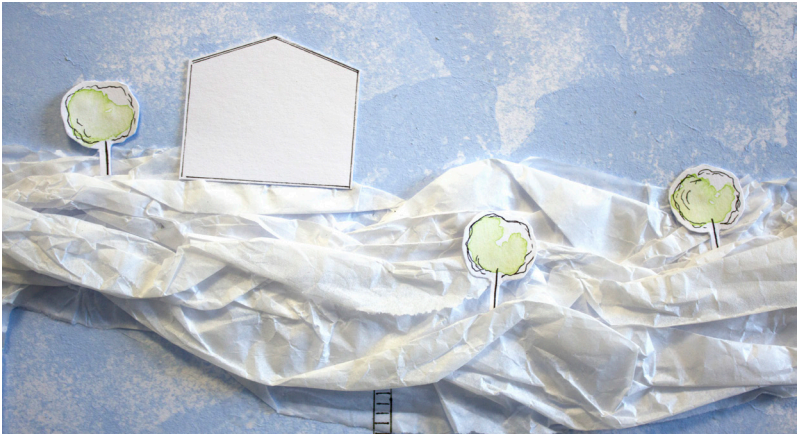
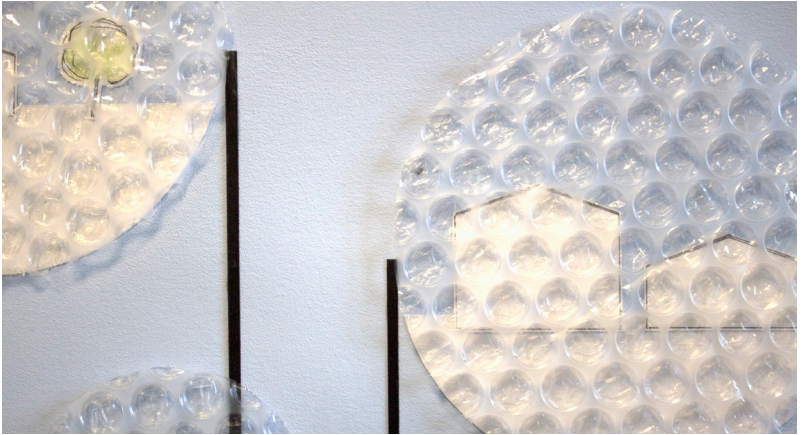


Communicate and deploy

Generally, all these hypotheses define the private housing development as a major issue for a more communal and a sustainable future. It may also allow inhabitants to think about a more shared and ecologically responsible life.

To invite them to dream and imagine this new horizon, the designer has to find a way of questioning them with a language that prompts reaction. That is why some funny and subversive scenarios with sidesteps, quirky operations or the creation of gaps in natural hedges are introduced. This could be a way of capturing attention and stimulating discussion before actually initiating sustainable and lasting changes. Then, beyond an experimental and unusual design practice, the designer could create imaginary and funny languages to enable people to become aware of some alternative ways of living, like the Park(ing) Day global movement initiated by the collective Rebar in 2005 or the project “Rêveries Urbaines” made by the designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec in 2016.





Density in the air, 2021. Details. Expressive, plastic work, 65 × 50 cm ©Audrey Benas



Appropriation of a parking place. Rebar, PARK(ing) Day, San Francisco, 2005 ©Rebar



Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec in collaboration with l'Atelier blam, Rêveries Urbaines, Les champs libres, Rennes, 2016 ©Studio Bouroullec

As a result, the meaning of this research work is not to convince and impose a life pattern. On the contrary, the position of the designer is to invite and get inhabitants to question themselves and think about alternatives. In order to do this, the spatial designer will have to meet the residents of the private housing development to show her work, and ask for their advice. Thus, she will have to find a means of communication to exchange with residents. Indeed, if one wants to help people become aware of their spatial truth, that is, their current way of life, and to envisage a nicer future in their housing estate, the stage of mediation is essential. In addition, this research work could also be shared with developers and the Town Planning Department of Castres in order to go further on the future of private housing developments.

To finish, if as part of this research work, these possibilities are imagined in a precise place, the concern is that it could apply elsewhere. Indeed, the question is to think about a model of life, a perspective and an example of a neighbouring relations model. The majority of private housing developments usually raise the same questions. Thus the sense of this work has something universal. Finally, if we want to explore this work deeply, the next stage for the designer would be to estimate what solutions, imagined previously, would be the most suitable for each housing estates in France.

Conclusion

Thereby, the insignificant infra-ordinary is rich in meaning and truth. In our everyday life, it may tell a lot about ourselves, our ways of life and our society if we consider it. Thus, the infra-ordinary is indispensable to enable us to question our current ways of living and their impacts, to think about a better and sustainable future other than mass consumerism, innovations and growth. Also, as previously demonstrated, the projection of a new horizon may indeed be found in banal and ordinary places. As a result, private housing developments that are neglected by developers, undiscovered by passers-by and only crossed by residents, could be a major source of inspiration for a more communal and ecologically responsible life. Indeed, this place has significant potentials that the spatial designer can explore and take into account. Thus, an action from the designer in housing estates could help and invite inhabitants to think about opportunities and more sustainable customs. To open people's mind on these possibilities, the spatial designer could have a practice that could be compelling and set off reactions. Thanks to an exploratory gesture, quirky and subversive interventions with a hint of daydream, the designer could pave the way for new ways of behaving and living in private housing developments.

Finally, at first glance, this place seems without interest, but in reality it could be essential in the construction of tomorrow's world...

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For us, the infra-ordinary seems obvious and insignificant. In a society focused on overconsumption, sensational events and the quest for growth, we find ourselves considering what is out of the ordinariness. In addition, repetition and habits of everyday life reduce what surrounds us each day. However, maybe we should be more attentive to what already exists. And maybe we should take time to question ourselves about our ways of living and what impact they have on our territory in order to start imagining a sustainable and desired future. We will call it catching our spatial truth.

How can we acquire a new interest for the infra-ordinary? How can the spatial designer allow us to become aware of our current way of life? Finally, how can he help us envisage a new more ecologically responsible and shared horizon, and modify our practices? And so why not act in private housing developments?