

The Value of Architects II

Demonstrating the value of design through research in European architecture practice



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University of
Reading

Demonstrating the value of design through research in European architecture practice

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This report should be referenced as:

Hay, R., Samuel, F., and Farrelly, L. (2020). Demonstrating the value of design through research in architecture practice. University of Reading, Architects' Council of Europe.

April 2020

Acknowledgements

The team would like to thank all those who advised on the writing of this report including Janeche Bull Borander, Judit Kimpian, Jasper Kraaijeveld, Ian Pritchard, Peter Andreas Sattrup, Ruth Schagemann and Veronika Schröpfer.

Special thanks to those organisations who generously contributed case studies including 3XN Architects / GXN Innovation, AART, atelier d'architecture autogérée, Bucholz McEvoy / PAC Studio, Kraaijvanger Architects, Library Architecture Unit at the Diputació de Barcelona, VELUX Group and the Wroclaw University of Science and Technology.

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R-URBAN, Paris

Key research partners: atelier d'architecture autogérée, EU Life programme, Public Works City of Colombes

Practice size: Small

Project type: Regeneration strategy, community facilities

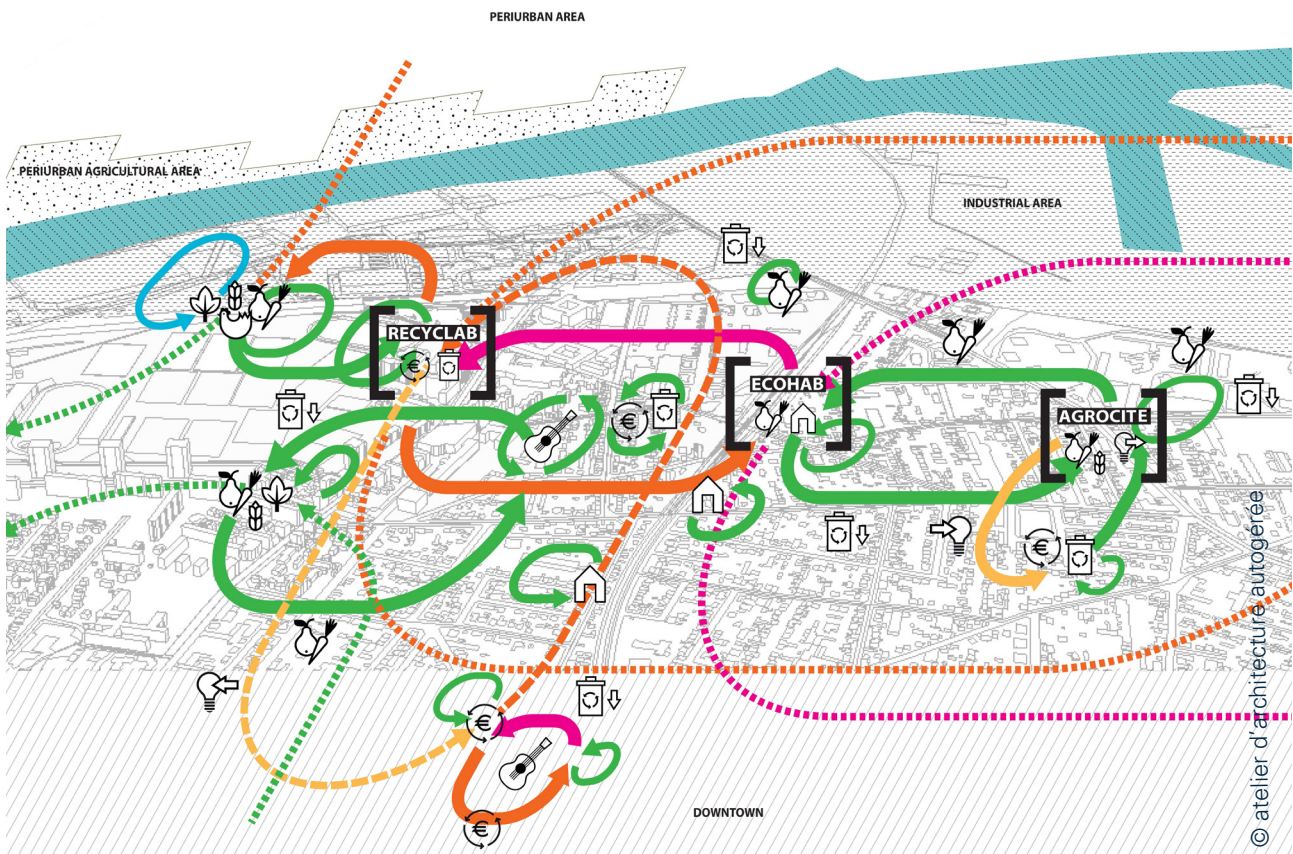
POE value type: Environmental, social and economic

Established in Paris in 2001, atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) is a non-profit NGO that aims to instigate and support development in disused urban sites that contribute positively to the social and environmental life of the communities in which they are located. The practice is committed to a participatory approach, which means working with ordinary citizens to enable them to have a say, not only in accepting or rejecting a proposal, but participating in the whole cycle from choosing a plot, developing a brief, designing, constructing and using a building or space. The structure of their involvement means that aaa always have a long-term role in their

projects, helping community organisations to transition from co-management to the self-management of the projects they initiate.

This approach was pioneered in the early 2000s through a series of action research projects, including Ecobox (aaa, 2001) and Passage 56 (aaa, 2006), created to enliven underused plots in Northern Paris by encouraging residents to transform them through the construction of community spaces and assets using recycled materials, the creation of community gardens, and through the curation of cultural activities. The practice learnt a lot from these projects including the:

- Strength of working as a network of interested parties including local residents and workers, community organisations, academics and students.
- Importance of focusing on the development of physical assets alongside the programming of activities that would enliven them.
- Capacity building potential of providing spaces which encourage citizens to do things together, and learn from each other.



The small scale of these initial projects limited the impact aaa could have. As a result the practice sought out an opportunity to scale up their approach through the development of a neighbourhood wide strategy. In 2008 this ambition was realised through funding from the European Commission, which led to the development of the R-URBAN strategy, centred around the suburban area of Colombe in North Western Paris.

R-URBAN is based on a network of complementary resident-run facilities, that are designed to tackle the climate emergency, as well as social and economic deprivation at the local level. R-URBAN seeks to increase self-sufficiency by closing the loops between production and consumption at the neighbourhood scale, by:

1. Promoting the sustainable production of materials including water, energy, waste and food.
2. Harnessing and developing local skills, building upon existing community assets and the strong civic culture in the area.
3. Developing a network of activity hubs focused on recycling, food growing and housing.

In 2011 aaa and their partners received further EU funding to realise the R-URBAN plan in Colombe. Working with the local community and municipality, two pilot projects were built to implement and test the approach. These include:

AgroCité - an agricultural hub, including a farm and community allotments; a wooden pavilion that accommodates a shop, classrooms for workshops and events, and a greenhouse for growing food under glass. AgroCité also supports the development of experimental devices and techniques, such as compost heating, solar-energy production and aquaponic gardening.

Recyclab - a recycling and eco-construction hub, consisting of a number of facilities for the storage, recycling, reuse and transformation of locally salvaged materials into building materials. The hub also runs practical workshops to initiate the spread of eco-friendly practices, such as reducing, repairing and reusing waste.

The plans to develop a third housing hub **Ecohab** were disrupted as a result of the dismantling and renovation of AgroCité to make way for a car park on the municipally owned site.

Despite this set back, the impact of R-URBAN has been wide ranging. The team have been careful to document the quantitative impact of the project, both through the recording of the number of people engaged in events, talks and workshops [2500], the number of active community members volunteering time [250], to the number of jobs created and sustained as a result of the project [200]. In terms of economic benefits, for an apportioned annual investment of €250,000 during the

first five-year period in Colombes (including the costs of building and management of the two hubs), the yearly return on investment (which includes the value of ecological and environmental repair embedded in the hub's activities) grows gradually over time, reaching almost €2 million in 2016.

The environmental impact of the project has also been investigated (Stevenson, 2012). In comparison to traditional buildings of a similar size and programme, R-URBAN has resulted in annual reductions in CO2 emissions [37.3 tonnes], waste [330 tonnes] and water consumption [24.5K m3]. In addition 50 per cent of the energy used is produced locally from renewable sources.

aaa have also gathered evidence that points to the qualitative impact of involvement in R-URBAN on the individuals involved, including the development of skills and enhanced professional trajectories, community cohesion, changes in patterns of everyday life including opportunities to eat organic food, and the health benefits of communal food growing activities.

We believe a lot in this project. It is a place of resources for all, which creates a social bond. We need today islands of greenery, places where we can share, exchange [and] mix experiences.

(Annie, Agrocite 2015)

The availability of the R-URBAN model, through the dissemination of knowledge and resources generated from the project in an open-source format, has also meant that the approach can be used and adapted in different contexts. The model has already been reproduced in other suburban contexts in the Parisian region, such as Bagneux, where a new Agrocite has been built in 2019 and a Recyclab will be launched in 2020. It has also been rolled out in other countries, including R-Urban London.

The resilience of the project can be summarised in the successful relocation of AgroCité and Recyclab, which have fulfilled design intentions by being dismantled and repurposed in a new site. In this way aaa point to a very different type of architecture which is less about building a-new, but rather is concerned with re-inhabiting, re-occupying and re-using spaces in the city in an innovative, and truly sustainable way.

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