

# The City of Le Havre – the Story of a Modernist Utopia

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The architecture of Le Havre following its reconstruction is the cause of much controversy. Planned in 1945, the image of the city is tarnished in the 1960s when the modern comforts and modernist aesthetics become commonplace in the peripheries of France's urban quarters. In the last twenty years and in particular since the inscription as a World Heritage Site, the image has changed. The city centre becomes the place to be and attracts more tourists. With time the perceptions have been changing, but the flats are really comfortable and the streets are wide and pleasant, although relatively "empty". What began as a consistent project saw a gradual split into "external utopia" consisting of the town planning and landscape dimension, and "internal utopia" comprising the interior with comfortable flats.

## 1. A model of modernism

Destroyed in September 1944 during the bombarding that was to help the Allied Forces march towards Germany,

Le Havre suffered 5,000 victims with 80,000 people left homeless, half of the city's population. Due to its unique location on the mouth of the Seine and its port frequented by transatlantic liners, Le Havre's ambitions were of state proportions. This is why the reconstruction had to be special.

Supported by a team of about twenty architects, Auguste Perret (1874-1954) decided to rise to the challenge in a concerted effort to rebuild the city. Perret has no qualms saying: "We will show the Americans what makes a modern city". He had already accumulated half a century worth of reinforced concrete design experience. A vision of a new city had to be created, comprising 150 hectares and a population of 40,000. The final design is selected in January 1946 following an internal competition in Auguste Perret's studio. It has three main elements: town plan, concept of a typical quarter and model flats.

While it was not radically "modernist", the design



1. View of Le Havre after reconstruction: the south Ocean Gate (from 1954), with the Church of Saint Joseph in the background (from 1957). © The City of Le Havre



2. View of the city centre during reconstruction, around 1959.  
© GPMH

has particular sensitivity to human factors. It follows some functional principles such as: a specific distribution of special function buildings, a clear system of streets, alleys and squares around the quarters with commercial and residential space that face both the backyards and street fronts. Inside the quarters which are designed as semi-private spaces, far the bustle of the city, we can clearly see the ideas and rules of modernism: calm, space and sun exposure determine the layout of the flats. Inside, the flats offer all the comforts such as central heating, kitchens with all amenities, bathrooms, fitted wardrobes and sunny rooms where furniture can be rearranged.

### 2. A comfortable and monumental city

Speaking to the press Auguste Perret defends his design using pragmatic arguments. He stresses the high quality of concrete comparable to that of stone, and roof-gardens which are just as reliable as sloping roofs. The work allows for lower costs because the mass production of pillars and beams allows shorter deadlines, saves labour and materials, which were hard to come by in those days. Le Havre becomes France's biggest experimental construction site using prefabrication for construction.

As regards the living standards, a street survey conducted in 1949 about the first model flat showed that the people liked the comfortable flats despite scepticism regarding their affordability and availability. Two recent surveys have confirmed that the flats were very much in demand but very difficult to get. In addition, the city centre

4. A so called "building with no particular function" from 1950.  
© Andreas Sirch



3. Wooden model of the rebuilt city centre made in the early 1960s for the Ministry of Reconstruction and Town Planning.  
© The City of Le Havre

remained attractive for commercial functions although some shopkeepers were sceptical about the location because other districts had already repaired the damage of war.

Despite these obvious difficulties, the city received positive feedback all through construction which continued until the early 1960s at which point almost all those displaced were given flats. All public buildings such as churches, museums and a library were also completed. Articles in the local and national press of that day, especially those authored by Bernard Esdras-Goss, a local journalist, praise the modernity of the city. Tourist guidebooks seem to be "enchanted" by the city, even though they use specialist language because the initial texts were written by Jacques Tournant, a town planner working for Perret.

From the perspective of what the city had to offer as a tourist destination, its technical solutions are long past their prime. Today, neither the modernist vision to suit the needs of man nor the comfortable interiors are important anymore. What strikes is the monumental size of the city with its main elements: axes, perspectives and modernist buildings such as the Church of Saint Joseph, the city council and the square with all of this creating an extensive model city to be watched by travellers on board huge transatlantic liners.

### 3. Time of doubt and toning down

Starting from 1959 sparked by an article written by a local architect, some doubts were raised. He responded to some criticism the city was receiving. The article was published in January 1959 in the Bulletin of the Trade Union Chamber with the title "No, Le Havre is not a sad city!". While the author agreed that there was very little activity in the streets, he defended the proposition of "internal utopia". He explained that the streets were not busy because that

5. Construction works from the side of the sea around 1955.  
© Robert Lhomme's collections



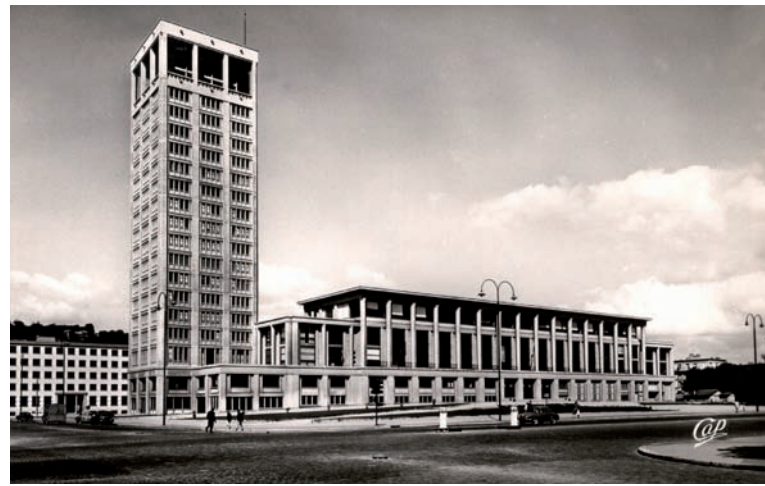


6. Brochure published by a tourist information office in 1954, pages 1 and 2. © Le Havre, City Archives

often meant a comfortable life "I was wondering, why would a resident of Le Havre spend time in the street if they now have a comfortable living room in their home to meet with their family or friends, often with a glass of wine in their hand, to talk, have a laugh or dance? And finally, isn't it true that we have or will soon have wireless transmission, players, colour images projection and... television available for everyone!"

Surprisingly, the perception of this architecture differs from what it was when the city was first completed: comfortable interiors, a city boasting its modernity, monumental perspectives along with some difficulty accessing the flats and the visible emptiness in the streets. With around

8. A concrete column of the S29 quarter, an illustration of the notion of structural classicism defined by the architect and historian Joseph Abram. © The City of Le Havre



7. City Council around 1958, postcard by Cap. © The City of Le Havre

10,000 flats completed, the occupancy seems to be down and less than four users per flat just as in the mid-twentieth century. The occupancy will not increase and the city's image will be tarnished with the onset of the economic crisis in the early 1970s.

Tourist guidebooks increasingly often leave out the new part of the city and prefer to quote older buildings left undamaged by the bombarding (the cathedral, nature museum, history museum). Tourist brochures no longer publish illustrations of the rebuilt city centre. This unfavourable view does not apply to this place only. Architecture historians underestimate all of Auguste Perret's work or even ignore it. This disinterest will continue from the mid 1960s to the 1980s.

While this is difficult to explain, there may be a variety of hypotheses. Modernist architecture received bad press as social problems on city outskirts began to mount. Another reason may have been the rejection of concrete considered a symbol of stylistic failure and a greater liking for more radical doctrines with a distinct "plastic" aesthetics. Whichever the case, Le Havre faces a lot of criticism expressed with a fairly caricatural tone. The style of concrete buildings was even said to have been the idea of the city's communist authorities.

#### 4. Renewed interest

Joseph Abram's work in the late 1980s heralds a new interest of historians in Auguste Perret's work and fits in with the trend of promoting the landscape of post-modernist history supported by the French Institute of Architecture. Historians recognise the intended toning down of expression, deliberate stress of utility values and exposure of the urban structure, especially when the project was recognised as ignorant and shy by the avant-garde of radical modernism (Leonardo Benevolo even mentioned a "wasted opportunity"). Since then Le Havre's concrete has become the synonym of "structural classicism".

9. Inside the Church of Saint Joseph. © Arnaud Jammet





10. Reconstruction of a model flat from the 1950s. © Andreas Sirch

As a consequence of this renewed interest of specialists in Le Havre, local restoration initiatives emerged. The first brochure published by the city emphasises the diversity of means of expression used in the layout, quality of concrete and unique finishing. As a result, the logic of mass production is no longer the topic, instead classicism and quality of work are rediscovered.

As the city authorities changed, so did the interest in the city. The new mayor decided to change its unfavourable image. Promotion now focuses on the city centre, starting with a decision to establish a landscape protection zone in 1995 and the city's successful bid for the "city of art of culture" emblem in 2001 supported by a variety of educational and tourist activities. Following these early attempts, the result is a mosaic picture of the districts which pushes the centre slightly to the back leaving it relatively invisible in the entire image.

### 5. Le Havre – a fashionable city

With its regained recognition, the city can better prepare for an important moment in its information and promotional policy. It will eventually apply to become a UNESCO World Heritage site. Le Havre is officially listed in July 2005. Even if the number of visitors to museums and places of culture has risen slightly, the number of guided tours increases geometrically from 2,000 to 30,000 between 2001

and 2010. The city's image improves because its identity has been discovered in the consistent and modernist expression of the rebuilt centre.

Today tourists equipped with cameras are no surprise to anyone anymore. The city centre is an example of a success that was predictable a decade ago. There is renewed consistency between the residents' sense of the place and the opinions expressed in scientific publications, press articles and tourist guidebooks. Le Havre's moderate modernism is well received and seems close to today's art of town planning: a consistent landscape with details boasting a particular quality of the work, even Perret's model flat reconstructed in a small museum surprisingly meets the needs of today.

But the fundamental problems remain unchanged. Despite having an image of a monumental city with exceptionally high standards of living, the number of flats does not change. Today there are 15,000 residents compared to the planned 40,000. The city centre has low population density, an ageing population with increasingly more nursing homes for the elderly and less and less schools and shops.

### Conclusion

The utopian dimension works well with the city. Rebuilt almost entirely, it was to have as much activity as cities historically had, or at least as much as the pre-war Le Havre did. However, ever since the work was completed, Le Havre has had the advantage and sometimes the disadvantage of the "external utopia" effect which is a modernist landscape as seen by the residents and tourists. The unfavourable image that continued from the 1960s until 1990s is changing to become an advantage in the early 2000s. In that time "internal utopia" has not changed its number or gender. While the modernist comfort of the flats had a huge following, its indirect effect included deserted streets and the current depopulation as residents move out and age. Although the flats in Le Havre mark the start of comforts becoming commonly available, an unquestionable advantage in the process of improving living standards, they are also an irretrievable loss of social ties. This particular view of "inside-outside" relations which we have seen in Le Havre for 50 years suggests that we should view modernism in a broader perspective.

*Translated and adapted by Marcin Kaczmarczyk*

11. Illustration of Perret's model flat made by the artist Pascal Monteil in 2007. © Andreas Sirch

