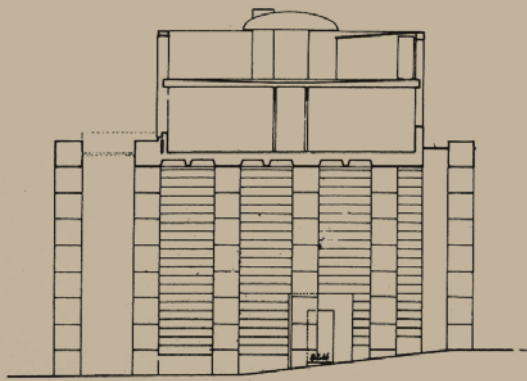
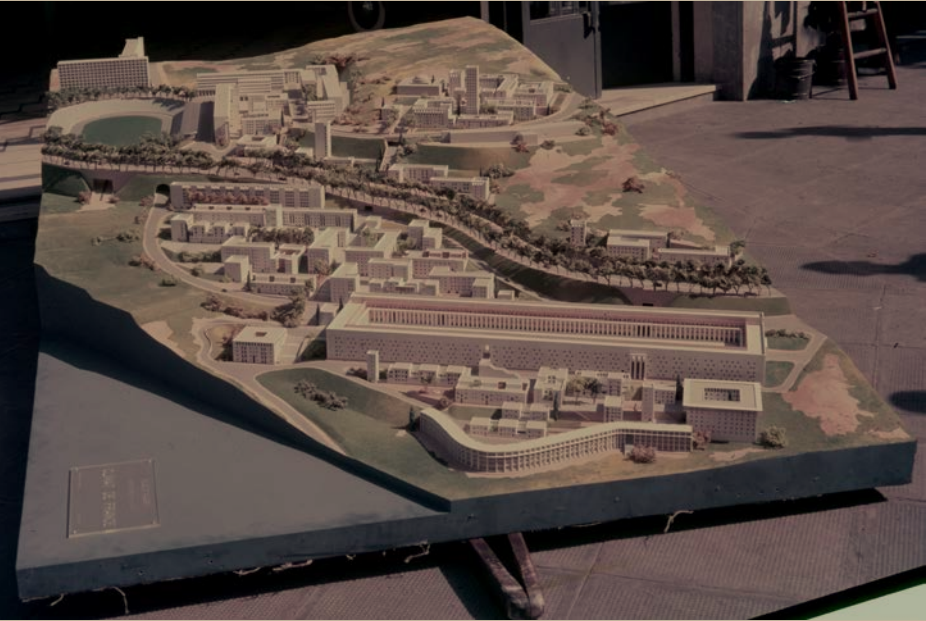


Fernand Pouillon's most ambitious housing estate for Algiers remains an important staging ground for protest and revolution, write *Brittany Utting* and *Daniel Jacobs*



Revisit Climat de France

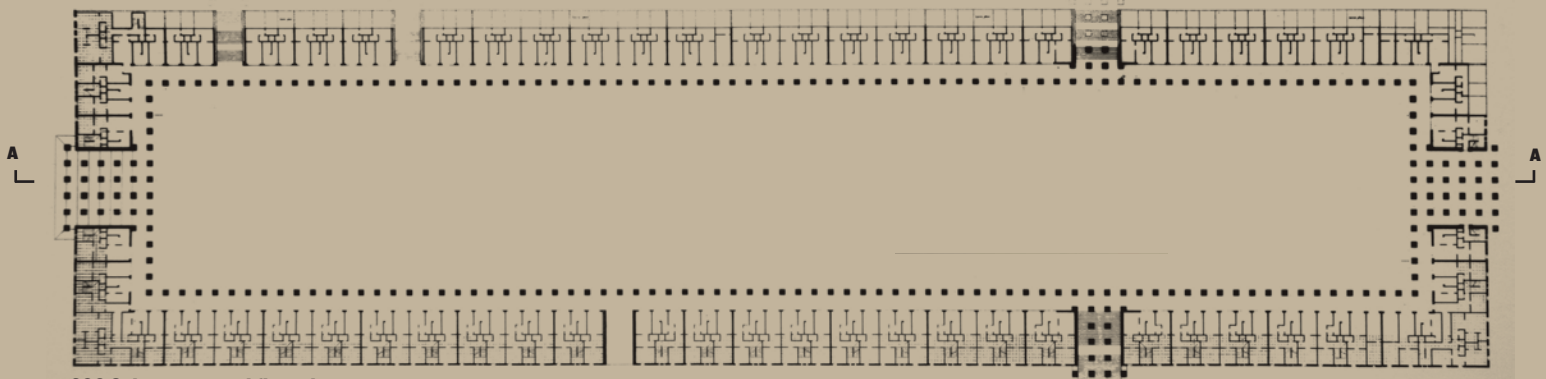


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Comprising some 40 buildings and 3,500 units (5,000 were included in the original plans) on a sloping terrain (left), Climat de France is the largest of three housing estates built by Pouillon in Algiers. Its most impressive space is the grand 200 Colonne courtyard (opposite). 'I wanted men to have a kind of monument,' wrote Pouillon. 'Given that these were very small apartments, made for very poor people, I wanted the monumental spirit to enter their lives'



section AA



200 Colonne ground floor plan



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As the terrain slopes down towards the sea, the short sides of the 200 Colonnnes are flanked by wide streets made of steps with a propylaeum marking the entrances (below). As the French army deployed its troops into the streets of Algiers, it infiltrated Climat de France, which becomes the backdrop of the concluding scenes of the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers* (below left)



All the buildings of Climat de France are made of solid stone, transported from the Fontvieille quarries in southern France – the same stone used to build Diar es-Saada and Diar el-Mahsul. Inspired by the forms and architectural language of the casbah, Pouillon designed the estate as an autonomous city, with an array of blocks of different heights (this page)

As participants in the administrative bureaucracies of North African colonial rule, French architects and urbanists confronted what they saw as the task of housing populations living under conditions antithetical to modernism. To consolidate power over its colonies, France asserted its political and cultural dominance through architecture, using housing as an instrument of assimilation and control. Architect Fernand Pouillon led the effort in producing housing in the French colony of Algeria during this period, although he publicly denounced colonialism. Pouillon saw his architecture as capable of bridging the gap between modernist agendas and the local needs of the Algerian people, seeking to provide durable and high-quality housing. As French architect Jacques Lucan writes in *The Stones of Fernand Pouillon*, Pouillon explored an approach that combined monumentality with an interiority that more directly adapted to Algerian spatial and material practices, in opposition to the dominant ideologies of the time, represented by International Congresses of Modern Architecture's (CIAM) 'open order' urbanism that produced replicable and decontextualised social housing projects. Climat de France, designed by Pouillon for Algiers in 1954, is paradigmatic of both this effort and ideological conflict.

The local population of Algiers grew in size from 70,000 in 1926 to nearly 300,000 in 1954, rapidly filling up the already overpopulated casbah and expanding *bidonvilles* (self-built settlements). Due to the increasing hostility of the local populations against the French colonisers, the mayor of Algiers, Jacques

Chevallier, ordered the planning of several large-scale urban housing projects with the intent to relocate, integrate and pacify the colonised populations. Chevallier saw modernisation in housing and urban infrastructure as a means to solve the increasing unrest of the Algerian population, but also to ensure the continued existence of the French colonial state. Problematically, these projects 'signified at one and the same time oppression and modernisation', writes Jean-Louis Cohen, yet 'also brought hope of other potential ways of living'.

Newly appointed as chief architect of Algiers, Pouillon led the effort to house local populations in Chevallier's 'battle for housing'. As historian Sheila Crane writes, 'Pouillon's new housing complexes were actively framed as readily visible, material evidence of peaceful coexistence' between European and Muslim Algerian populations. From 1953 to 1959, Pouillon designed and oversaw the construction of three major projects, each intended to house a different colonial subject: Diar es-Saada or 'Land of Happiness' (1953–54) was exclusively for Europeans, Diar el-Mahsul or 'Land of Plenty' (1954–55) combined both European and Muslim dwelling types in distinct structures, and finally the immense Climat de France (1955–59), retaining the name of its district, to house an exclusively Muslim population in the lowest-cost and most compact dwelling units.

The urban plans of all three projects consist of intricate compositions of linear, L-shaped and U-shaped structures, varying in dimension and height, and perforated by smaller courtyards and staircases that articulate the more public spaces. Each complex mobilises different geometric and typological strategies to negotiate steep topographical conditions in their urban settings. The three projects also each contain a unique architectural element that visually distinguishes one from the next: Diar es-Saada features an iconic 20-storey tower, Diar el-Mahsul deploys vernacular brick vaulted structures and arcades in the public spaces, and Climat de France is organised around a monumental courtyard.



LEO FABRIZIO





LEO FABRIZIO

‘The surfaces of the blocks were left rough to accentuate the massive scale of the dry-stacked masonry, creating the appearance of a fortified stone surface’

Climat de France was among the largest housing projects constructed in North Africa at the time, containing 3,500 dwellings to house over 30,000 inhabitants. Conceived as a small, autonomous city with its own hierarchy of streets, squares, schools, services and residential blocks, the 25-hectare urban plan occupied a mostly uninhabited hill to the west of the casbah. As Crane writes, the complex was designed as Algiers’ new casbah, intended to relieve the overcrowded conditions in the medieval quarter. While Pouillon broke down the scale of the site into an aggregation of smaller housing blocks of varying heights – referencing the roofscape of the old casbah – he cleared away the centre of the plan with a grand courtyard space, named by its inhabitants as 200 Colonnnes. The massive 235 by 40m central square is lined with nearly 200 (actually 182) immense three-storey high stone columns, surrounded by ground-floor shops and dwelling units above. The units – each containing a living room, one to two bedrooms, a kitchenette, bathroom and courtyard-facing patio – are united by a public outdoor walkway also facing the central collective space. The building was constructed from a cream-coloured limestone quarried in southern France and shipped by boat to Algiers, pre-cut to specified sizes to reduce construction time and labour cost. The surfaces of the blocks were left rough to accentuate the massive scale of the dry-stacked masonry, creating the appearance of a fortified stone surface pierced only by small windows and ventilation holes. The thick walls of the housing block are crowned with a cornice



of thin columns at each end, accentuating the 8m-high columns of the entry halls.

The 200 Colonnnes sits on a dramatic elevation change, with a sweeping external stair along the eastern edge of the block to navigate the steep slope. Critically, it was the architectural layout and urban position of Climat de France that heightened the building’s role as an instrument of colonial power. The monumental interior of the central square created conditions opposite to the winding passages and close-quartered courtyard dwellings of the casbah, not only reflecting a European sensibility of public space, but also generating ideal conditions for the French military and police to surveil and control its exclusively Muslim population. As architectural historian Zeynep Çelik describes, quoting a report from the colonial administration, despite claims by the French that ‘the settled, well-housed population of Climat de France is less fidgety than that of the neighbouring casbah’, it was from within these same housing projects that the anti-colonial protests that sparked the Algerian revolution emerged.

On 1 November 1954, just before the start of construction of Climat de France, the political situation shifted dramatically when the National Liberation Front (FLN) of Algeria, a group of organised insurgents fighting for Algerian freedom, staged a series of armed attacks and publicly demanded the end of French colonial rule. These events forced the strategic militarisation of Pouillon’s projects; as noted by Çelik, ‘The War of Independence transformed the social atmosphere of the settlement, turning the public squares and gardens into proper battlegrounds and army stations.’ For instance, during the violent demonstrations of December 1960, the French army killed 60 people demonstrating in the 200 Colonnnes. For the following two years of the war, Pouillon’s housing projects often became spaces of military control and violence. The French army tactically infiltrated these new housing complexes to suppress the FLN while also blockading the entry points of the casbah, preventing the free movement of its



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The dimensions of the central courtyard (opposite and above) are dictated by the 1 x 1 m stone blocks piled up to form each of the nearly 200 (182) columns. In total, the courtyard is 40m wide and 235m long. Half a century after Algeria’s battle for independence, Climat de France once again became the backdrop of violent confrontations during the Arab Spring (left)

The estate is also home to a few public buildings such as a school and a post office; the alleys, covered passages and stepped streets (this page) all form integral parts of Pouillon's project. The stone facades of Climat de France have since been painted over in white; the brick end walls in red (below)



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‘The iconicity of the housing continues to represent the colonial project of modernism and the often violent role of architecture in the process of subjugation’

residents to and from the fortified quarter.

Constructed in the midst of these uprisings, Climat de France became a scenographic and literal stage for the revolution. As the most emblematic of Pouillon's three projects in both scale and ambition, its iconicity became inextricably linked to the Algerian War of Independence and the dismantling of the French colonial state. Documented in the famous concluding scenes of the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*, directed by Italian neorealist Gilberto Pontecorvo, the monumental limestone walls of the 200 Colonnnes serve as a critical backdrop for this moment in history. The film highlights the guerrilla strategies of the Algerian freedom fighters as they move through the labyrinthine streets and intimate courtyards and dwellings of the casbah. The film's visual tactics and camera techniques symbolically connect these spaces of the casbah with the 200 Colonnnes, ending in the moment of Algerian liberation as protesters occupy the monumental stairs and streets in front of the housing complex to celebrate victory. ‘The Algerians may have lived inside the buildings of the Climat de France,’ wrote Alan O’Leary in his critique of the film, ‘but they rejected the designs that its architecture had upon them.’ While housing was used to transplant a European form of life into Algeria, these projects were ultimately co-opted by the same populations they were meant to control, transformed into a battleground from which to assert national identity and independence. In 1962, three years after the completion of Climat de France, the Algerian Revolution successfully overthrew the French colonial regime and France withdrew from Algeria.

‘This architecture is without contempt,’ Pouillon wrote in his memoirs. ‘For the first time perhaps in modern times, we men installed a monument. And those men who were the poorest of the poor Algerians understood it.’ Despite the architect's rejection of the dominant agendas of European modernism, the violent paternalism of the colonial regime became imprinted on projects like Climat de France. The symbolic resonance of Pouillon's

projects made them a crucial staging ground for protest and revolution. As the character of revolutionary leader Ben M’Hidi says in *The Battle of Algiers*, ‘It’s hard to start a revolution. Even harder to continue it. And hardest of all to win it. But, it’s only afterwards, when we have won, that the true difficulties begin.’

Today, these neighbourhoods persist as complex spaces of Algerian identity and political activism. Erected on the edge of the Diar el-Mahsul housing project, the 1982 Martyrs’ Memorial commemorates the lives lost during the War of Independence, placing in direct tension the image of colonial housing with the revolution. These neighbourhoods are also spaces of continued protest and anti-demonstration police violence, reflecting the ongoing legacies of neocolonial oppression evidenced by insufficient housing, lack of urban infrastructure and scarcity of social resources. From the October 1988 riots, to the Arab Spring, to the 2019–21 Hirak Movement or ‘Revolution of Smiles’, populations continue to occupy the public spaces and streets of these districts. For instance, in 2011 the 200 Colonnnes once again reasserted itself as a prime location for protest, operating as a critical staging ground for Algerians demanding social and political change. During the riots, Algerian police entered the complex to demolish the self-built extensions and additions constructed in response to overpopulation and deterioration, resulting in clashes between residents and police.

While the enduring presence of projects such as Pouillon's 200 Colonnnes – a seemingly permanent monument of stone – resists the radical changes called for in these ongoing revolutions, it serves as a powerful symbol against which revolution must take aim. The iconicity of the housing continues to represent the colonial project of modernism and the often violent role of architecture in the process of subjugation. Although its durable stone walls may not reveal many traces of these struggles, the legacies of the 200 Colonnnes offer a critical lesson for projects of decolonisation today.



The imposing, fortress-like facade of the 200 Colonnnes as seen from the hills of the El Kettar cemetery (overleaf). Below the central square is a long and winding housing block (opening page and above), the only curved lines of Pouillon's plan for the project

