

POLYTECHNIC OF TORINO
FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE
Degree in Architecture
Honors theses

The reconstruction of Le Havre (1944-1956). Plan and construction site

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The centre of Le Havre was laid waste by the bombs on September 5 and 6, 1944.

The *Atelier*, led by Auguste Perret, was commissioned to plan the reconstruction of the town.

The town improvement project of Auguste Perret and his collaborators in Le Havre tend to fall into a larger project characterising the second phase of the reconstruction in France (1944-1950).

This event was marked by the creation of the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (MRU) on 16 November 1944.

The plan elaborated by the *Atelier de Reconstruction de la Ville du Havre* was described by the critics of that time as a model of technical advancement and economic rationality. The plan for Le Havre was considered the ultimate expression of the monumental feats that French architects were capable of producing, the illustration of a valid planning method and the proof of its functionality.

The reconstruction of Le Havre, however, remains an isolated event: an experiment that, contrary to the expectations of the *Atelier*, had no consequence and no influence on any other architectural projects during the French Reconstruction. The work played an ambiguous role in history, often taking up a marginal place in the study of Perret and his works.

This survey aims to analyse the gap between the actual experience and its representations, between the reconstruction of the town and the image it set forth with time.

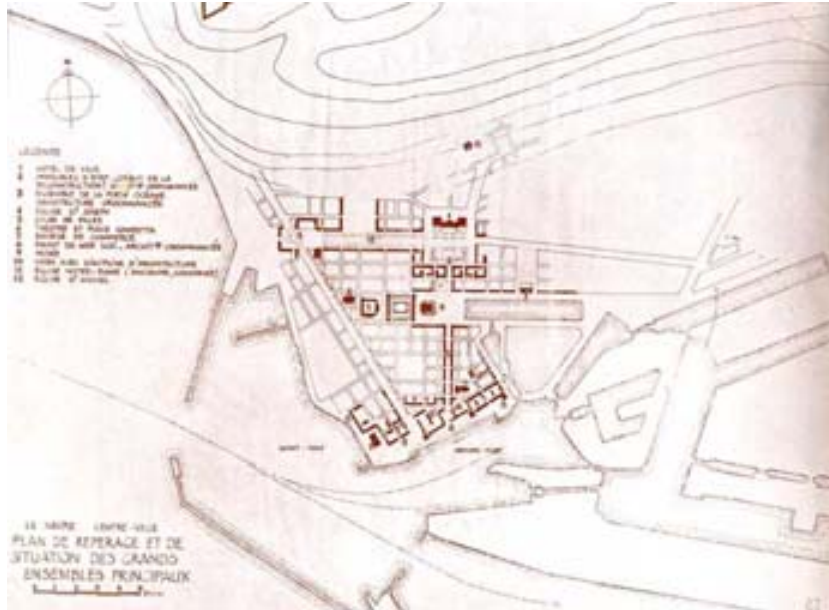
In order to examine such a gap, the study developed in two ways: on the one hand, an archive research regarding the practices of the reconstruction of Le Havre was carried out – actors and their respective roles, negotiations, ministerial directives, plans and structural techniques; on the other hand, the critical success of this experience was analysed.

In order to understand the rebuilt town, I first focused on the reasons why a decision to reconstruct the town was taken and how it evolved – the ministerial programmes of the time, the reasons for the creation of the *Atelier* – and I subsequently carried out an analysis of the tale concerning the imaginary city: the relevant architectural imagination and town planning proposals. A very relevant problem concerns the promotion of the *Atelier de Reconstruction de la Ville du Havre*: why and how was it founded? Perret played a quite marginal role in the process of organising the *Atelier*. The proposal and plan for an atelier reveal the influence of the school created around Auguste Perret, the demonstration of its secondary role in the French architectonic survey and the intention to systematically assign specific work to specific bodies for the reconstruction.

Perret's architecture has not had the same amount of impact on contemporary culture as it did back then - even though Perret received the greatest of honours and his work represents one of the most important components of contemporary French architecture. In this case it seems that the reconstruction of a town provided the occasion for recreating a central establishment that had been lost.

This thesis subsequently concentrated on the construction of the town: intervention strategies, negotiations, building yards, techniques.

The study of the town aesthetics, which was eventually a distinguishing mark of the intervention – a clear and coherent design of spaces, contributing to their monumental character -, allowed me to highlight how important certain formulations and systems are for the management of a construction site.



1. Plan for the new centre of Le Havre.

The project for the new centre of Le Havre is strictly connected to the reorganization of the landed property map. This is modelled through the *remembrement*, an instrument spatial reorganization and investment coordination. In Le Havre the *remembrement* takes on a new type of role and paves the way for the idea of co-ownership of urban blocks.

At the same time, the modular structure of the buildings allowed for the use of new construction techniques connected to the industrialization of the building sector. This led me to the comparison between traditional and innovative methods of the construction using reinforced concrete.

The work of the Atelier represented an alternative solution to contemporary planning. The plan for Le Havre remains on the border between classicism and the problem of functionality. It globally elaborates a whole and draws upon the importance of aesthetics, lighting and on the volume-surface ratio.



2. View of the new centre of Le Havre, 1957.



3. Building in Avenue Foch

An analysis of the production and spread of the image of the relevant centre (both on the architectural and historiographical level, and among the town residents), followed the study on the construction of the new centre of Le Havre.

In this part I tried to determine how the myth of Le Havre new centre developed and became very popular and also analysed the critical gap separating the original enthusiasm from the present scepticism about it. In doing so I have attempted to distinguish between the history of architecture and the history of the town, on the one hand; between the repetition of an ingrained myth and the stories connected to the origin of the construction, on the other.

The new historical perspective, regarding Le Havre new centre, is linked with the process of the revaluation of Perret's architecture. In fact, a revaluation of the architectural and technical qualities should make us reflect on the possible uses of the town and the potential types of conservation methods for it.

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