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FERNAND POUILLON.  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY.  
THE “ENSEMBLES MONUMENTALES URBANES”

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FERNAND POUILLON. BUDOWA MIASTA.  
„ENSEMBLES MONUMENTALES URBANES”

A b s t r a c t

The residential neighbourhoods which Pouillon designed and realized aspired, in his own words, to become “monumental urban complexes”, in which it was proposed to lay out large significant collective spaces and “arrange for people to live in beautiful apartments”.

They bear a resemblance to other examples of 20th-century architecture that tried to represent the new social conditions by a monumentality which could express a collective interest and a precise identity for places.

These neighbourhoods have the complexity and compactness of the historical city, without any idea of re-proposing it, and aspire to a unity of intent. They are characterized by a composition of architectural types that engage with a structured and circumscribed urban situation while referring to ideas of the city, emphasizing a clear desire to define an accomplished, recognizable urban form, wherein the collective urban space constitutes the very reason behind the problem of constructing residential buildings.

*Keywords: monumental urban complexes, urban design, composition, construction, character*

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Dzielnice mieszkalne zaprojektowane i zrealizowane przez Pouillona aspirowały do tego, by, jak on twierdził, stać się „monumentalnymi zespołami urbanistycznymi”, w których zaproponowano rozplanowanie dużych, znaczących przestrzeni zbiorowych i „zaaranżowanie ludziom życia w pięknych mieszkaniach”.

Przypominają one inne przykłady architektury XX wieku, które starały się odzwierciedlać nowe warunki społeczne poprzez monumentalizm, który potrafił wyrażać zbiorowe zainteresowanie i precyzyjną tożsamość miejsc.

Dzielnice te charakteryzują się złożonością i zwartością historycznego miasta, bez żadnej koncepcji jego przeprojektowania, i dążą do jedności założenia. Cechuje je kompozycja typów architektonicznych, które wpisują się w zorganizowaną i zdefiniowaną sytuację miejską, odwołując się jednocześnie do idei miasta, podkreślając wyraźną potrzebę zdefiniowania zrealizowanej, rozpoznawalnej formy urbanistycznej, w której przestrzeń zbiorowa stanowi główną przesłankę budowy budynków mieszkalnych.

*Słowa kluczowe: monumentalne zespoły urbanistyczne, urbanistyka, kompozycja, budownictwo, charakter*

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*Je prétends que l'architecture est  
un art au service de la société.*<sup>2</sup>

Fernand Pouillon

The residential neighbourhoods which Pouillon designed and realized aspired, in his own words, to become “monumental urban complexes”, in which it was proposed to lay out large and significant collective spaces and “arrange for people to live in beautiful apartments.”

The architecture of the city centre is what interested him, to be realized through the construction of a collective space characterized by an idea of an architectural *ensemble* that defined the face of the city. For Pouillon “*Ensembles* are (...) the most necessary of isolated masterpieces: necessary, because they form a part of daily human life.”<sup>3</sup>

The city was the centre of his work, the theatre where human vicissitudes were played out. In building his houses and residential quarters, he never neglected to build the city by fragments. He tried to build places for people’s lives that were unqualified design objects.

Pouillon shared with others the opinion that the city is a collective work when considering the general and social aspects of its architecture. As Paul Valéry wrote: “Normally, architecture is misunderstood. The idea that we have of it oscillates between the theatrical scenario and the fixed income house. To appreciate the generality, I would like us to refer to the concept of the City.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, for Valéry, “The monument constitutes the City, which is almost totally civilization.”

## 1.

For the Pantin quarters and the “Buffalo” residence, Pouillon said, “I wanted a sober, traditional architecture, free from excess, with comfortable solutions albeit not ‘luxury’ in the Parisian sense of the word: buildings inspired by the quarters in the 17th and 18th *arrondissements*, and by those banal yet fascinating houses found in the 4th or 6th, devoid of any worth save for their proportions and the use of the stone.”<sup>5</sup>

For the residential complex at Point du Jour (Boulogne-Billancourt), he wanted to build a “complex as important as the Rockefeller Center” and to tackle “a new theme: *l’ensemble urbain monumental*”, which, in defining the volumes of the buildings, would include “precious gardens reserved for pedestrians.”<sup>6</sup>

Regarding Meudon, he stated: “Having taken the basins of Versailles and the avenues of its park as a model, the scale of my intervention was defined. As in the case of the *Climat de France*, I designed a monumental, Cyclopean project, to accommodate the less fortunate.” ... “I wanted the centre of the composition to be occupied by the largest of urban basins (...) greater than those of the Tuileries and the Luxembourg Gardens.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> F. Pouillon, *Mémoires d’un architecte*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1968, p. 174. “I expect architecture to be an art at the service of society.”

<sup>3</sup> F. Pouillon, *Ordonnances*, Aix-en-Provence 1953, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> P. Valéry, *Introduction à la méthode de Leonard de Vinci*, Gallimard, Paris 1894.

<sup>5</sup> F. Pouillon, *Mémoires...*, *op. cit.*, 1968, p. 308.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 321, 322.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 362

For his projects in Algiers, Pouillon wrote of the humanism of my “contemporary Kasbahs”. He described the city of Diar-Es-Saada, known as the “City of Happiness” and that of Diar-El-Mahçoul by evoking the imagery he had generated: “they are in part constituted by the bastions of monumental Turkish forts, while the interior, the patios, squares and gardens recall Spain with their ceramics, porticoes, fountains and waterfalls. The bougainvillea scale the stone walls.” For the construction of the *Climat de France*, “I traced out my immense project.” A grand collective space, which has a form hovering between a large Roman Forum and the square at Esfahân, in hosting the dwellings that characterize the place. He stated proudly that “this city for the poorest of the poor would be a monument” and that for the first time “Algerians would inhabit a real city”, while the inhabitants themselves “would bless the large square with its two hundred columns.”<sup>8</sup>

Pouillon’s residential districts, which would take on the form and nature of the “monumental urban complex”, resemble similar examples of 20th-century architecture that attempted to represent the new social conditions by a monumentality which could express a collective interest and a precise identity for the sites. In fact, it is possible to establish parallels with, among others, the experience of Socialist Vienna in the Twenties, (but also, among others, the Amsterdam of Berlage) where the monumentality that characterizes its districts was a consequence of the planned housing programme; “Behrens would speak of a commissioning that was an expression of the popular will.” A programme that had “the aim of offering the image of a large democratic city,” where the Karl Marx Hof had become a “symbol and emblem of the social housing policy.” The buildings the expression and witnesses of a “grand collective affair.”<sup>9</sup>

Designing “monumental urban complexes” therefore meant considering the issue of the recognizability and identity of urban places and neighbourhoods, not only for the inhabitants but for the city in general.

It also meant overcoming the functionalist attitude that characterized (at least in terms of the production of housing) a great deal of urban expansion, especially following the Second World War. Pouillon countered the *grands ensembles* of French reconstruction with his *ensembles urbaines monumentales*.

If, as Giorgi Grassi wrote, “monumentality means the condition of a concrete and durable witness, this is inherent to architecture”<sup>10</sup>, then it relates to the beauty of the architecture and the appropriateness of the forms with respect to their use and character. This conception of monumentality seems to have been shared by Pouillon. It concerned the composition, the arrangement of the volumes and the implementation of the design, therefore the use of figures of affection and a language that longed to be shared.

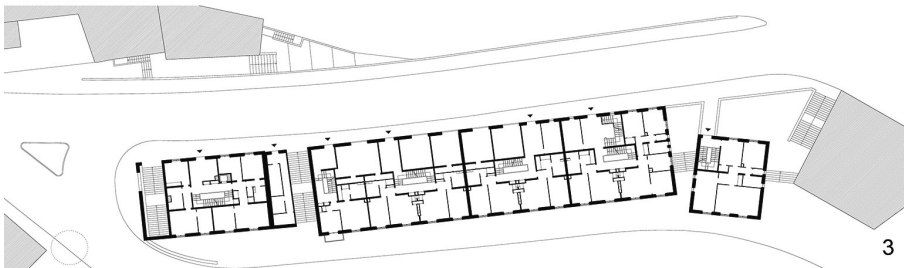
Pouillon, architect and inventor of places and aware of a city’s history, despite or perhaps precisely because he always considered himself a ‘social architect’, built analogical pieces of the city that were rooted in the built city and the imagery to which these referred.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 203, 205, 208.

<sup>9</sup> Referring to some considerations of Manfredo Tafuri in “*Das rote Wien*”, *politica e forma della residenza nella Vienna socialista, 1919–1923* [in:] M. Tafuri (ed.), *Vienna Rossa*, Electa, Milano 1980, pp. 68, 69, 76, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Grassi, answer to *Tre domande a dodici architetti italiani* [in:] L. Patetta, *La monumentalità nell’architettura moderna*, CLUP, Milano 1982, p. 156.



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- III. 1. Fernand Pouillon, Old-Port in Marseille (photo by Gino Malacarne)
- III. 2. Fernand Pouillon, Bastia, Rebuilding of the Old-Port area, 1958–1965
- III. 3. Fernand Pouillon, Bastia, Rebuilding of the Old-Port area, 1958–1965; Plan, elevation and section (drawings by Gino Malacarne, Francesco Mirri)

For Pouillon, there was no project that was not conceived as an urban design; attention to the city's architecture imbues all his work while never proposing mimetic interventions on Old Towns, and with an idea of a principle of order belonging to classical architecture. Against the trend to reduce the urban problem to a pure organization of the road system, identification of the areas for building and their functional statutes, Pouillon returned to the point of view of architectural construction. Unlike the "functionalist architects", he thought that there were not enough purely quantitative solutions to give answers to urban problems: the cities that we know and see are also pervaded by an atmosphere and reveal their character, something which transcends the solely functional datum of the design. In order to respond to need, he was interested in the construction of a 'useful beauty'.

In the city seen as an artefact the plan was therefore realized through works of architecture, the only possibility for an urban project that contemplated as a final result a significant form of the city, endowed with its own character.

A particular attention to the urban form seen as a complex of many peculiarities led him to propose projects aimed at achieving a balance between the singularity of the design responses to individual sites, to valorize their individuality and belonging to a more general order.

His ability to imagine figures and spaces came from his knowledge of historical cities, and French ones in particular.

The important experience of the urban survey conducted at Aix-en-Provence, (accompanied by the essay *Ordonnances*), the references to the *Places Royales*, (Place des Vosges, Place Vendôme), the relationship with the projects of Vauban, the references he found in the urban history of French towns, and in his favourite cities in general formed part of his imagery.

He considered the relationship with tradition not yet exhausted; forms that had not fulfilled their task were still necessary and only new tasks could lead to a change of form.

In the projects for the four quarters along the Parisian limits already mentioned, Pouillon recognized that the city desired by "the modern", with buildings surrounded by greenery and connected by major infrastructure, had not worked, but also that it was not possible to return to the city of the 19th century. Pouillon therefore proposed "intermediate" units suspended between the open city of the *ville radieuse* and the closed and compact city which history has bequeathed us.

These neighbourhoods have the complexity and compactness of the historical city, without any idea of re-proposing it, and aspire to a unity of intent. They are characterized by a composition of architectural types that engage with a structured and circumscribed urban situation while referring to ideas of the city, emphasizing a clear desire to define an accomplished and recognizable urban form, wherein the collective urban space constitutes the very reason behind the problem of constructing residential buildings. The idea of the grand civilly composed empty space that holds together the buildings and the community is one of the main features in the design of these neighbourhoods.

Fences, courtyards, bases (arranged communal spaces), welcome the architectural types (with courts, in-line, in a comb, towers) and, together with the geometry, allow control over the "measure" and unite the projects. The use of forms and figures derived from history also helps to make the urban artefacts recognizable and identifiable. The neighbourhoods have a morphology defined by an alternation of different volumes that evoke the new urban landscape.

Pouillon had no “modern prejudices against the classic urban model”, he established a relationship with history to be understood as a generative, rather than stylistic imitation, and that was built by means of an analogical process.

As in the best works of architecture, it is the “precedents” and historical references that we can glimpse which feed the imagery that they themselves produce. Inspiring images are in fact necessary for the principle of recognition and the construction of identity of places.

## 2.

In Marseilles and Bastia, through the design of public spaces and important residential buildings, the new and the old rubbed shoulders without fabrication and certainly within a tradition where Pouillon had somehow reconnected the wires of continuity, operating within a principle of blending the work, the cities and the places.

In his way of building/rebuilding the city there is an attitude that is rational and empirical at the same time: it seems that he did not recognize any urban planning art or science that proposed a universally valid treatise, especially if it meant intervening on the built city; instead, his design approach to architectural and urban themes seems to have been “case-by-case.” In fact, each part of a city has, within an overriding idea, its own specific nature which individual projects seek to offer concrete answers to.

These projects also aspire to be part of the architectural *ensemble* that defines the face of cities in responding to Perret’s quote on banal architecture: “He who, without betraying the materials nor modern programmes, has produced a work that seems to have always existed, that, in a word, is banal, in my opinion must feel satisfied.”<sup>11</sup>

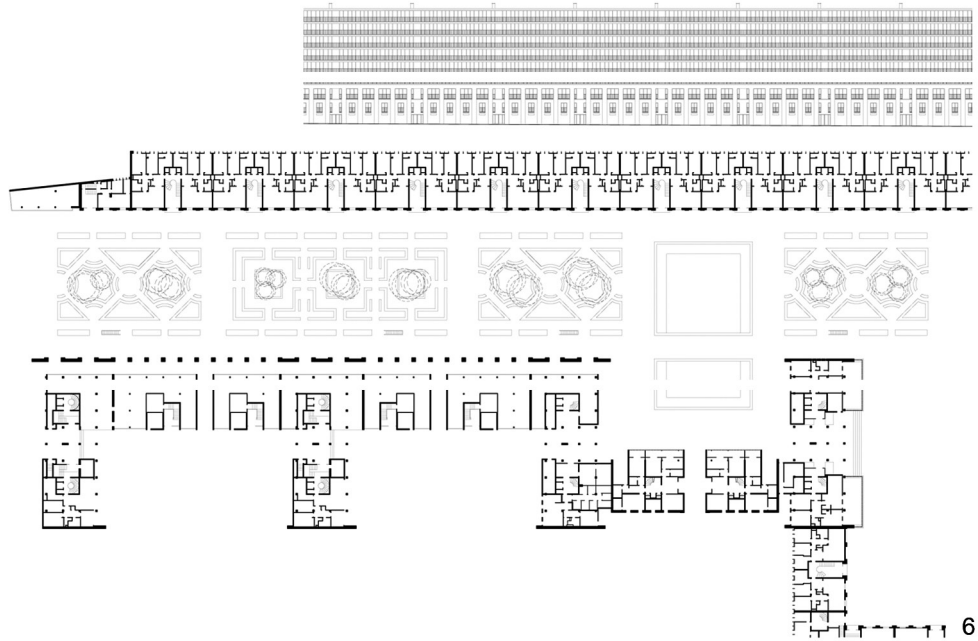
Pouillon received a commission, along with A. Devin and under the “light and loving protection of A. Perret”, to reconstruct the Old Port of Marseilles, largely destroyed during the Second World War, in a rather daring way and after a series of vicissitudes (which he dubbed “the battle for the Old Port”) that would cost him many enmities within the association of architects destined to last for the rest of his life. In fact, with the approval of the Minister of Reconstruction and Urban Planning and the support of Perret, he supplanted the architect A. Leconte chosen previously and replaced when the project was already underway.

Leconte’s project was mannered (in the International Style): a long building, with a flat façade in reinforced concrete, it would have run the whole length of the port uninterruptedly, cancelling out the historical pre-existences. A building that might have worked anywhere except on the waterfront of the Old Port of Marseilles, where the theme of “the harbour front” would have been absolutely annulled by such a building, seemingly as perfect as it was indifferent.

Leconte’s project envisaged for the reconstruction of the marina area, a “bar” six hundred metres long, interrupted only by some passageways that would permit the transit of vehicles; to the right of the city hall another “bar” would stretch as far as Rue de la République.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Perret, *Contribution à une théorie del l’architecture* [9 April 1952] [in:] A. Perret, *Auguste Perret. Anthologie des écrits, conférences et entretiens*, Moniteur, Paris 2006, p. 457.



- III. 4. Fernand Pouillon, Point du Jour, Boulogne-Billancourt. Yard, PSB Archives (Image editing by Gino Malacarne)
- III. 5. Fernand Pouillon, Point du Jour, Boulogne-Billancourt, 1957–1963 (photo by Alessandra Moro)
- III. 6. Le Point du Jour, Boulogne-Billancourt; Plan, elevation and axonometric from the bottom (drawings by Claudia Sansò)



- III. 7. Fernand Pouillon, Park Residence. Meudon-la-Foret, 1957–1962. Aerial view  
III. 8. Fernand Pouillon, Park Residence. Meudon-la-Foret, 1957–1962  
III. 9. Fernand Pouillon, Park Residence. Meudon-la-Foret, 1957-1962. Yard

Instead, for Pouillon, “the new interventions should be of average dimensions, like those of the past, and have a hard character like the Ledoux buildings on the quay opposite.” He added, “Giving life to something unusual in such a serene ensemble was, in my opinion, more than an error, it was a crime.” He envisaged a “programme that favoured the construction of housing” and thought of giving this the character of a “monumental urban complex.”<sup>12</sup>

With respect to the project he had inherited, the façade was advanced four metres; an alignment of stone pillars gave the façade rhythm and framed the loggias. Some existing structures of the previous project were preserved but some new plans were included, along with new arrangements for the apartments and a new look for the façades. The “breaks” envisaged by Leconte’s project “were transformed into small squares” to allow the buildings behind to open onto the port and create new public spaces.

The structural façade, tectonic with an emphasis on the material used, identifies and protects the large loggias that overlook the port and the portico that characterizes the ground floor of the buildings.

Six buildings in blocks, constructed with the limestone of the Pont du Gard, mark the margin of the Old Port; their size, proportions and volume related to the scale of the harbour basin. This is a construction on an urban scale that marries the cityscape: the buildings accept the scale ratio with the harbour basin and with the urban landscape in general.

In Bastia, Pouillon invented a harbour front which seems to have always existed, in fact, the reconstruction project retained the atmosphere that time had conferred on the small port.

The new buildings are imposing, as severe and silent as the architecture that surrounds them and characterizes the harbour basin. They continue to express the character of this place through an analogical architecture. In the photo album with analyses kept by the Foundation<sup>13</sup>, prepared by workers who spent some time in Bastia to finalize the project, there are a series of very important images that cover a search for the architectural character and dimensional characteristics of the site which the intervention tried to interpret and that Pouillon had already grasped during his first visit.

The project interprets the character of the place, “the site had to blend in naturally with simple buildings, constructed using local materials.” This is a piece of analogical city that Pouillon had discovered in his memory composed of places and cities he loved. Pouillon had a capacity to observe places, to understand them, and to invent urban solutions. He worked constantly on the form of the port, with existing buildings and within a Mediterranean tradition that his designs sought to follow and make good.

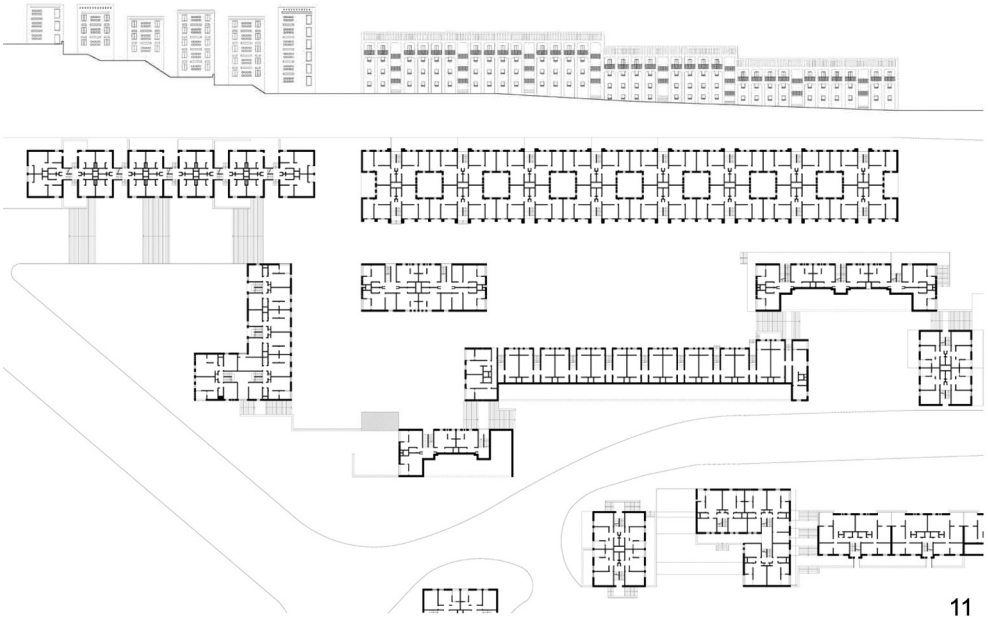
### 3.

If the city is the theatre of public life, it is the works of architecture through their façades that make the urban landscape intelligible in terms of cultural and experience. Through the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> F. Pouillon, *Ville de Bastia, Aménagement du quartier du Vieux-Port*, Marseille, 7 July 1956, Fondation Fernand Pouillon Architecte.



III. 10. Diar El Mahçoul, Algeri. Postcard

III. 11. Diar El Mahçoul, Algeri. Plan, elevation and axonometric from the bottom (drawings by Cecilia Fumagalli e Emilio Mossa)

III. 12. Fernand Pouillon, Residence a Pantin, 1955–1957 (photo by Gino Malacarne)

construction, which involved the implementation of the project but also its representation, Pouillon defined a language that he wished to be shared.

In fact, for Pouillon: “When you imagine a city, or a part of a city, it is not sufficient to think only of the plan: we must be able to imagine the architecture”; also “It is a given that the city draws its ugliness, sadness, greatness and beauty from the built landscape. The architecture and the composition are responsible for the qualities and shortcomings of all cities.”<sup>14</sup>

A system of consistency between the construction system and the architecture, between the form and the construction is what characterizes Pouillon’s work and places it within the tradition of the classical rationalists to be found throughout the history of modern French architecture.

In their search for order, his projects are a part of the classical dimension.<sup>15</sup>

He was in fact an assiduous reader of A. Choisy, a scholar and collector of treatises on architecture, and an admirer of A. Perret, and although he probably did not share the latter’s love of reinforced concrete, he did share the principles of order and clarity of construction which characterize his architecture. Like Perret, also for Pouillon “architecture that does not derive from a construction system is nothing more than a fad.” His works of architecture, the forms adopted, are consistent with the construction system chosen, forms in which the practical aim is evident as is the representative purpose.

Pouillon wanted to embrace the tendency of the classical rationalists to represent construction with a very personal research into the possibilities offered by new technologies: in his case the possibilities offered by the new way of cutting stone, and therefore of using it, made him an architect who, in determining a technique, tried to create a particular kind of architecture. In his opinion, new materials were not necessarily always the best, in fact, materials acquire meaning from the way they are used, and their modernity therefore was not a novelty “but their *raison d’être*.”

The technique of construction in stone, a noble durable material, for Pouillon was economically sound and also responded to a precise idea of architecture that aspired to be evocative.

Pouillon was also certainly in agreement with Alain in affirming that “the debatably essential character of architecture (...) is to admit no fraud (...)” “(...) Everything in this naive art of architecture, is made to show solidity and weight (...)”<sup>16</sup>

Architectural forms are derived from the construction system chosen, but this cannot simply be reduced to a technical and functional option. The beauty of the proportions, the quality of the implementation, the reference, and the evocation of the classical tradition mean it is far from being a simplistic functional response.

Like other modern architects, he believed that architecture “must be inserted in a context of the duration and continuity of tradition.” For Pouillon, “the great currents of the art of construction are based on culture and a lengthy evolution of forms: although some may not like this, the masterpieces of modern times bear witness to it.”

The rigour and austerity of his “rough and essential” architecture eschew any decoration that does not match the choice of appropriate forms for the construction elements. And this,

<sup>14</sup> F. Pouillon, *Ordonnances*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> As was noted by Jaques Lucan in *La forza dell’espressione* [notes on the architecture of Pouillon] [in:] B. F. Dubor (ed.), *Fernand Pouillon. Architetto delle 200 colonne*, Electa, Milano 1987, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Alain, *Système des Beaux-Arts* (1920), translation by Beniamino Dal Fabbro, *Il sistema delle arti*, Muggiani, Milano 1947, p. 144.

as Pouillon himself stated, led him to use “a limited vocabulary” which strengthened the expression and character of the buildings.<sup>17</sup>

“Poverty, efficacy, austerity, and economy” were a means to express faith and discipline for the Cistercian monks in architecture – as Pouillon emphasized. His interest in Cistercian architecture, in the character of the monasteries of Saint Bernard and “the inclination of the founder towards the poor, efficacy, the unadorned” undoubtedly strengthened his poetic strength.

The identification with the Cistercian construction tradition, with its character of generality, universality and all-embracingness which reduced the singular aspects of the works to a minimum, led his research to maintain an aware balance (paraphrasing T.S. Eliot in “What is a classic”) between tradition – the collective personality, achieved in the architecture of the past – and the originality of the living generation, and led him also to identify with the builder, the “*maître d’oeuvre*”, of Le Thoronet Abbey whose construction history is narrated in the form of a diary in his book “*Les Pierres Sauvages*”, along with all the “*maîtres d’oeuvre*” who had anonymously built precious things over the centuries.

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<sup>17</sup> F. Pouillon, *Mémoires ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 362. Even if Pouillon was referring to the activity of the writer, the relationship seems relevant: “*un vocabulaire limité donne toujours plus de force à l’expression.*”