

*Landscapes of Care. Public housing across multiple  
geographies: crossing theories and practices*



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# Public housing from within: childhood memories as a landscape of care

Chloé Darmon

## Abstract

This visual and auto-ethnographic essay – through research in private archives and childhood memories – aims to reconstruct the history of a public housing building on the Place du Marché in a small town in the Paris suburbs, Viry-Châtillon, and to show the transformation of the ideal of public and social housing in the suburbs of the capital. Through amateur and family photographs, we will examine the organisation, construction and transformation of this site at three key moments: the 1950s, the 2000s and the present day. This method of photographic analysis, which is also intended to be artistic, brings together the personal archives taken by my grandmother, the photographs taken by the author in 2004, and the photos taken by my grandmother again, in 2024, whom I asked, using a disposable camera, to take a portrait of the public housing building in which my flat was located and the urban context in which it is inserted. The result is a mixture of photographs taken in different temporalities and geographies that create a multifaceted portrait of public housing as a landscape of care based on childhood memories.

Keywords: photography; grand-mother; childhood; memories; public housing; public space.

**Chloé Darmon** (Evry-Courcouronnes, 1997) is an architect and researcher with a degree in architecture from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville (Ensapb) and a master's degree in architecture from the University of Porto (MIARQ/FAUP) with the dissertation "Inhabiting water, the public washhouses of Porto: an experience of women in the modern city". Since 2020, she has been co-founder and co-editor of the journal *Lina: Feminist perspectives on architecture and urbanism*. She combines professional practice of architecture and research with the independent project "Inhabiting water. Documenting women's urban practices". She integrates the CiAUD.UBI (Portugal) as a PhD Candidate.

## Part I : Banlieue stories

Over the course of several family migrations, the grey Paris region became the meeting place for my parents. The first ten years of my life were spent in public housing, which became the place where our little family lived, fragmented across the country. From 1997 onwards, we lived in this flat in the centre of a suburban town. A very small town, so close to *Paris-Capitale*, but so far away at the same time. Public housing was one of the only solutions for young parents with a young daughter, then two from January 2000. All the memories of childhood, of daily life and care, of children's games and school, come from this flat in this building. Strangely enough, it is a social housing block, but it wasn't built away from the centre; it was built around the centre, around the *Place du Marché*, next to the secondary school and the primary school, next to the small Municipal Theatre. Which is strange, because many of the public housing blocks in this area are isolated from the basic facilities needed to maintain daily life – particularly when it comes to looking after children. The building and flat of my childhood were successful experiments, both architecturally and urbanistically.

Paradoxically, there is little or no information about the architect, the date of construction or the impact of this restructuring of the *Place du Marché*. Despite this urban 'success', there was a certain melancholy when we came back from holiday, even if we were lucky enough to be able to go away in the summer, unlike some of my friends and classmates. This melancholy perhaps comes from the generic nature of the place, all these towns look the same and the families from regional migrations are totally uprooted. We miss the south, the mediterranean sea and the sun, as if they've been torn away from us, and we have to gravitate around Paris, not because we have any particular attachment to the place, but because the workers in the capital need people to keep these dormitory towns going (social workers, policemen, nursery school teachers, etc.), the work of caring for and maintaining the lives of the workers rests on those who keep these satellite towns going. Through my personal archives, I revisit this scenario, which forms an important part of my development, and I find photographs that represent our life there.

And in this album, which I take with me wherever I go, I find my first photographs, imperfect perhaps, but already at the age of 7 (in February 2004), connoting a sensitivity for the details of the beauty of everyday life, the importance of the sun reflecting on the architecture, the presence of plants in the house, the views and the rain that glistens. The photographs presented in this visual essay reflect a first relationship with photography and the transition between being object/subject, being photographed/photographing, in a family where amateur photography has always been important. In these personal/private archives, we can encounter treasures that make us reflect on the landscapes of care and on public housing as a catalyst of history and memory.

## Part II: how to make photographs talk?

Starting with Susan Sontag's writings in the book *On Photography* (Sontag 1977), and more particularly the essay "In Plato's Cave", my family album, which I had kept as a memento and thought was only sentimental, began to be transformed into an important tool for understanding an experience of social/public housing. Susan Sontag (1977, 8) writes: "Cameras go with family life. According to a sociological study done in France, most households have cameras, but a household with children is twice as likely to have at least one camera as a household in which there are no children." The presence of cameras in my family is not specific to my family, but a general trend in the democratisation of photography in households, and French households in particular. My photo album thus becomes a very specific portrait of my childhood and my life in this HLM (low-income flats) building, Susan Sontag (1977, 9) writes: "Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished."

What remains for me in this album is a phantasmagorical presence in the photographs, the past remains a presence of a reality already lived and already past, but constitutes a childhood memory that materialises a memory – sometimes blurred, sometimes falsified, and allows us to rethink the childhood lived and the first gestures. The standardisation of photographic use is passed from generation to generation: from my grandmother to my mother, from my mother to me, from me to my grandmother. The family's photographic subjects are the members of the family, but the first test photographs I took were of the facade of our building, the flowers and my sister dancing. The photographic gesture is anchored – because it has become democratised – and so the HLM (low-income flat) becomes the playground for photographic experimentation, of the register of the memory of a place. According to Susan Sontag:

"Like the dead relatives and friends preserved in the family album, whose presence in photographs exorcises some of the anxiety and remorse prompted by their disappearance, so the photographs of neighborhoods now torn down, rural places disfigured and made barren, supply our pocket relation to the past." (Sontag 1977, 16)

In this way, the photographs taken around the year 2000 in my childhood, which I took in 2004, and the portrait taken by my grandmother Bernadette Vol, in 2024, are documentation of a process of urban transformation that began a long time ago. In fact, the market square is already mentioned at the end of the 19th century, and in the post-war context of reconstruction in the 1950s, in 1948 the town centre was the subject of a development plan in which apartment blocks were already appearing around this square. For Susan Sontag (1977, 16): "A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs – especially those of people, of distant landscapes, and faraway cities, of the vanished past –



In the book *Before and After: Documenting the architecture of disaster*, authors Eyal Weizman and Ines Weizman explain that "The juxtaposition inherent in before-and-after photographs communicates not a slow process of transformation over time but, rather, a sudden or radical change". And it was with this in mind that I asked my grandmother to take a portrait of the present day; in fact, you can see in her photographs that the public space is virtually deserted and all that remains of my childhood memories is the architecture of the market and the public housing. This challenge to my grandmother is also a way of getting her to revisit photography, a practice she loved so much when she was young, and when we were children, and of trying to understand her sensibility on this particular subject, another way of constructing a landscape of care from architecture, social housing and photography with shared memories.

## Bibliography

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

Weizman, E., and I. Weizman. *Before and After: Documenting the Architecture of Disaster*. Strelka Press, 2014.

## Captions

[Fig. 1]

visual essay by Bernadette Vol (author's grandmother)

[Fig. 2]

me and my mother at the public of our town (1997) author: my dad.

[Fig. 3]

me and my parents on the balcony of our apartment (1997) author: my grandmother.

[Fig. 4]

flowers on the balcony - 2004 (photograph of the author)

[Fig. 5]

visual essay by Bernadette Vol (author's grandmother)

[Fig. 6]

my sister dancing in the living room - 2004 (photograph of the author)

[Fig. 7]

facade of our public housing building after the rain - around 2004 (photograph of the author)

[Fig. 8]

living room of our flat, around 2002 (photograph of my grand-mother)







