

# Architectural Improvisation

Spatial occupation practice in Marseille

Group Marseille

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Cover Image  
Taken by author  
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# Context

Atelier Bow-Wow uses the term "Pet Architecture" to describe the buildings that have been squeezed into leftover urban spaces. "Our society does not consist only of human beings. Various animals come into our lives as 'Pets', and they are given spaces to live... If decent buildings standing in decent spaces are considered 'human beings', small buildings standing with all their might in odd spaces would seem to be like pets in urban spaces."<sup>1</sup> This type of architecture is not at the forefront of aesthetic design or advanced technology but produces a unique characteristic of self-appropriation in cities.

Architecture is the practice of constructing buildings and related spaces for people to use and occupy. And of course, it is not restricted to the interiors of buildings. City squares and streets, even highways, for people who use them, they all achieve a variety of expression comparable with that of interiors. But architects are not the only doers of architecture. Long after the building has been made the non-architects continuously do architecture. When non-architects occupy a space, they start to "do-it-themselves".<sup>2</sup> In most cases they do this in an already occupied territory, where the activity of doing architecture has been classified and claimed by architects - the rules have already been established. But there are also some space occupations that are out of the rules, such as

squatting, vendors, graffiti, protest. They, like "pet architecture", do not necessarily create appealing spaces, and some are even illegal, but they can highlight people's demands and show people's bottom-up determination to shape the city.

These practices can be seen as improvisation. When people do the occupation out of rules, they mainly based on their own current needs and what material they have at that time instead of considering the building or city as a whole. Seen architecture as paintings, in these cases, their improvised activities are more like a collage rather than fully considered "Design" or "Composition". But as explained by Jencks, 'design, essentially a collage, where every part of a building, or each element of a building complex, is designed with scant regard to the whole and often involves disparate parts taken from catalogues'.<sup>3</sup> Architecture is capable of mounting a profound critique of the status quo. In doing so, it can also model partial worlds and offer up these models for public discussion and disputation. Not perfect worlds, but possible ones.<sup>4</sup> And for public, there should be nothing preventing the public, in an agonistic and participatory manner, from devising and debating forms of their shelter and space for daily life. The Spatial occupation practice has itself taken inspiration: *Another world is possible*.

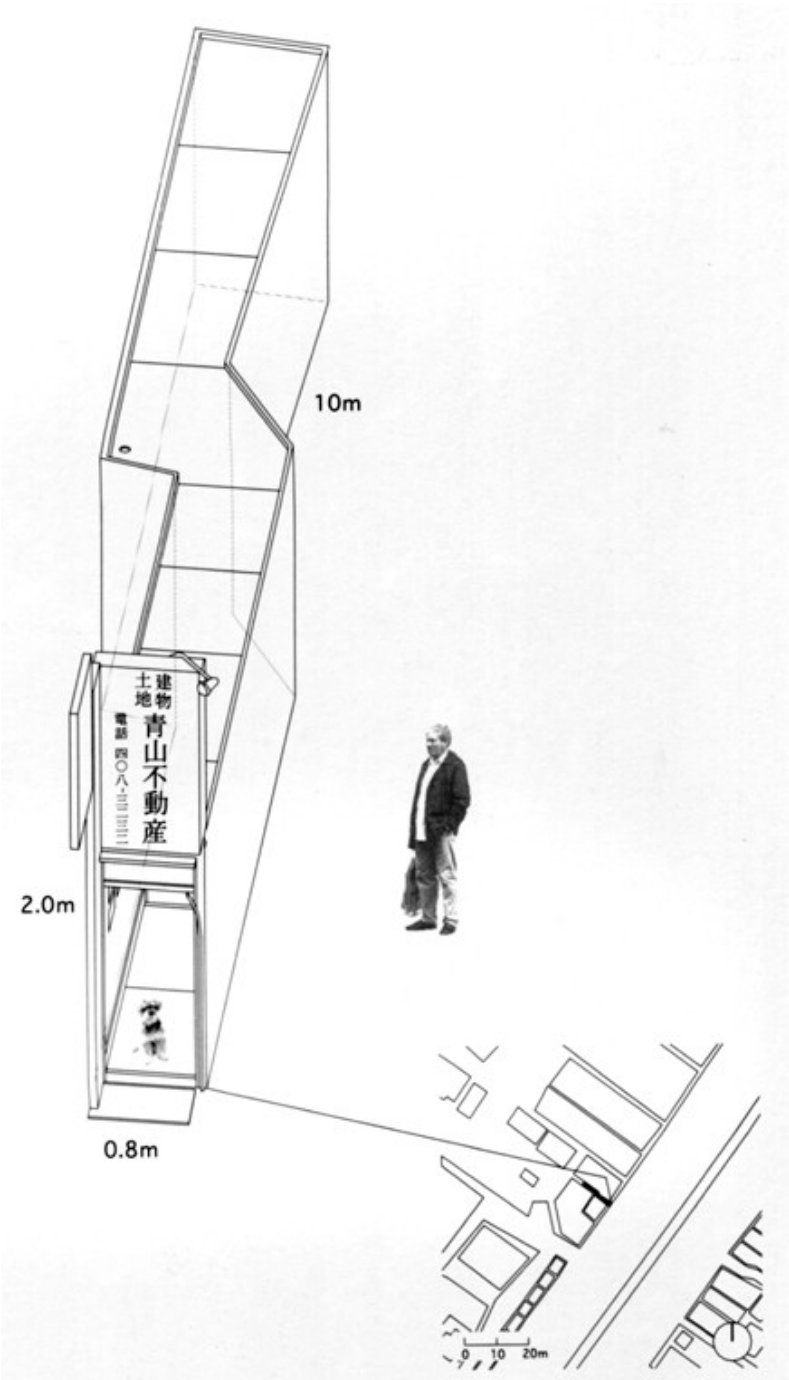


Figure 1. "Pet Architecture"

1. Bow-Wow, Atelier. Pet Architecture Guide Book Vol 2. World Photo Press, Japan, 2002.  
2. Hill, Jonathan. Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User. London: Routledge, 1998.  
3. Jencks, Charles, and Nathan Silver. Adhocracy, Expanded and Updated Edition: The Case for Improvisation (The MIT Press). Expanded, Updated ed., The MIT Press, 2013.  
4. Reinhold Martin, "Occupy: What Architecture Can Do," Places Journal, November 2011. <https://doi.org/10.22269/111107>



Figure 2. Graffiti - Marseillers

## Background

Some french people don't think Marseille is really situated in France because a strange and singing french is spoken over there and there has never been any riot while all the french ghettos often burn.<sup>5</sup> While many people in Marseille also think they are not French – they are "Marseiller". As a port city since 600 B.C., Marseille has offered refuge to wave upon wave of immigrants. The Mediterranean metropolis of more than 850,000 is home to 100,000 foreigners from Algeria, Italy, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, and beyond.<sup>6</sup> The city image and culture of Marseille are complex and highly diverse.

In this maverick city built by people from many different backgrounds, there are also many problems. Marseille has first known significant issues of social exclusion in the neighbourhoods located in the outskirts, especially in the north. And the whole city, especially the core center is endangered by impoverishment, urban decay, short of housing and social segregation. The center of Marseille located near the old harbour

of the town, is characterized by a great diversity of architecture, which is the heritage of the past. But the urban shape is now in decay, especially in the north of the target area. The main problems encountered as far as urban planning is concerned are congestion, pollution, and the bad state of the public areas.

What's more, economically, the city suffers from the economic crisis and the downturn of the harbor activities. Socially, unemployment is very strong in this area, particularly for young people. By the postwar years, with the industrial port in decline, a complex intertwining of political, administrative and criminal links had come to dominate public affairs.<sup>7</sup> This situation is the consequence of the local decline of industrial and tertiary activities between 1975 and 1990. It leads to various problems: poverty, delinquency, and bad educational attainment are some of the worst.



5. "Urban Dictionary: Marseille." Urban Dictionary, 2019, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Marseille](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Marseille).

6. Dickey, Christopher. "Marseille's Melting Pot." Magazine, 3 May 2021, [www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/marseille-france](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/marseille-france).

7. Hoad, Phil. "Corrupt, Dangerous and Brutal to Its Poor – but Is Marseille the Future of France?" The Guardian, 3 Feb.2020, [www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jun/08/corrupt-dangerous-brutal-poor-marseille-future-france](http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jun/08/corrupt-dangerous-brutal-poor-marseille-future-france).



## Problem

Some of these problems are related to insufficient or improper use of space: Marseille is losing public places and people struggle to find affordable and inspiring space to live and work, make and sell. While the city is filled with derelict buildings and barren plots of land. Several policies have tackled these problems, but even if they have succeeded in some matters, they failed to insure the development of the whole city. Therefore, from the bottom up, people need and are looking for their own ways to solve or at least alleviate these looming problems. Through the research of Marseilles, I have posted some problems in the use of space in Marseilles and some actions that people are taking.

For example, squatting. There are more than 15,000 squatters in Marseille, and according to many associations concerned, the phenomenon is on the rise.<sup>8</sup> "There are a lot of different situations and gray areas of the squat,"<sup>9</sup> What we do know, however, is that across the city, squats are established, from small isolated apartments to social housing buildings such as Les Flamants and Petit-Séminaire, in condominiums like Corot or Kalliste, of abandoned buildings or in the form of small slums scattered along the

edge of expressways. Each time the occupation is illegal.

"These are locations that due to their architecture, location or size have become useless. People hardly notice when walking by."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, there are many people in Marseille who urgently need space to solve their actual needs. They used methods other than the rules to occupy these spaces. As a result, many similar neglected spaces in Marseille are being occupied by people for new use: vendors, graffiti, protest...

By investigating how people shape space and how cities cope with new improvised practices, the research tackles urgent questions of people's life in Marseille in relation to architecture and urban space. Marseille is a city in crisis, but architectural/urban improvisation and design can be symbiotic, innovative and powerful tools for actors involved in the production of the built environment to contribute to a more inclusive practice of urbanism. Through the joint efforts of government, urban planners, architects and people from top-down and bottom-up, how is Marseille now and how Marseille will be?



Figure 3. Squat in Rue Republique

8. Marsactu. "Squats à Marseille, la part invisible du mal logement." Marsactu, 19 July 2021, <https://marsactu.fr/squats-a-marseille-la-part-invisible-du-mal-logement/>

9. ---. "Logement indigne et squats: la mairie de Marseille interpelle le gouvernement et demande la tenue d'états..." BFMTV, 27 July 2021, [www.bfmtv.com/marseille/face-a-la-problematique-du-squat-la-ville-de-marseille-demande-au-gouvernement-la-tenue-d-etats-generaux\\_AV-202107270409.html](http://www.bfmtv.com/marseille/face-a-la-problematique-du-squat-la-ville-de-marseille-demande-au-gouvernement-la-tenue-d-etats-generaux_AV-202107270409.html).

10. Bow-Wow, Atelier. Pet Architecture Guide Book Vol 2. World Photo Press, Japan, 2002.





Figure 4. Street in Marseille

## Research Question

In Marseille, a city where public space is lacking, population composition is complex, poverty and crime rates have always been severe problems: how do people occupy space from the bottom-up? What kind of demands and resistance are they expressing to their life or Marseille by occupying these spaces?

Of course, there are many more specific issues involved: What is the process by which they occupy these spaces? Are these space-occupying behaviors legal? How long did they occupy these spaces? What finally ended their occupation of this space: did they find a new place, or were they forced to leave due to the intervention of the police? In addition to these more common forms of occupying space, are there any more special methods of occupying space in Marseille? Under the overall research questions, these questions are also the details that I would like to explore in my research.



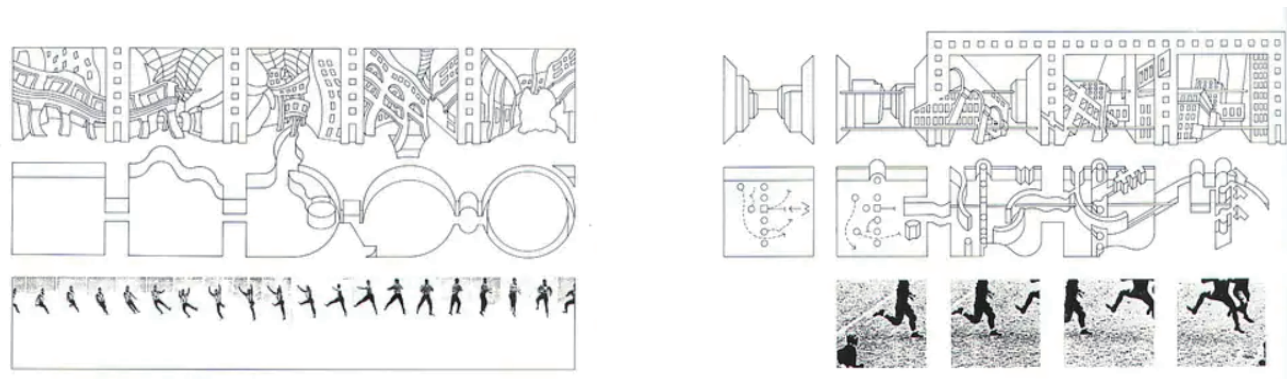


Figure 5. Manhattan Transcript - MT4 The Block - Zoom in

## Methdology

### ·Zoom in

Through literature, news and field research, I will collect as many as possible cases of people occupying space in Marseille. Understand their particular occupancy purpose, occupancy time, whether it is legal, etc., and draw the process of occupying into a diagram. Diagrams allow me to study the behavior of people in each case more intuitively: how their needs specifically reflect the process of occupying space and the transformation of space. By horizontally comparing and categorizing different cases, I will further study the logic between different needs and spaces, looking for the most urgent problems to be solved for the Marseille people and what kind of space they prefer to occupy. And there are many ways to classify: length of time, function after occupation, purpose of occupation, legality, etc.

### ·Zoom out

From the architectural scale to the urban scale, draw these cases seperatly on the map based on different categories. First, study each map about the relationship between cases and the urban form. Is it closer to the port, city center or the northern area? Then compare the distribution of space occupation activities by different categories through comparison of different maps. Do different classification methods affect the distribution of these cases on the map? And further analysis can be done by overlapping different maps.

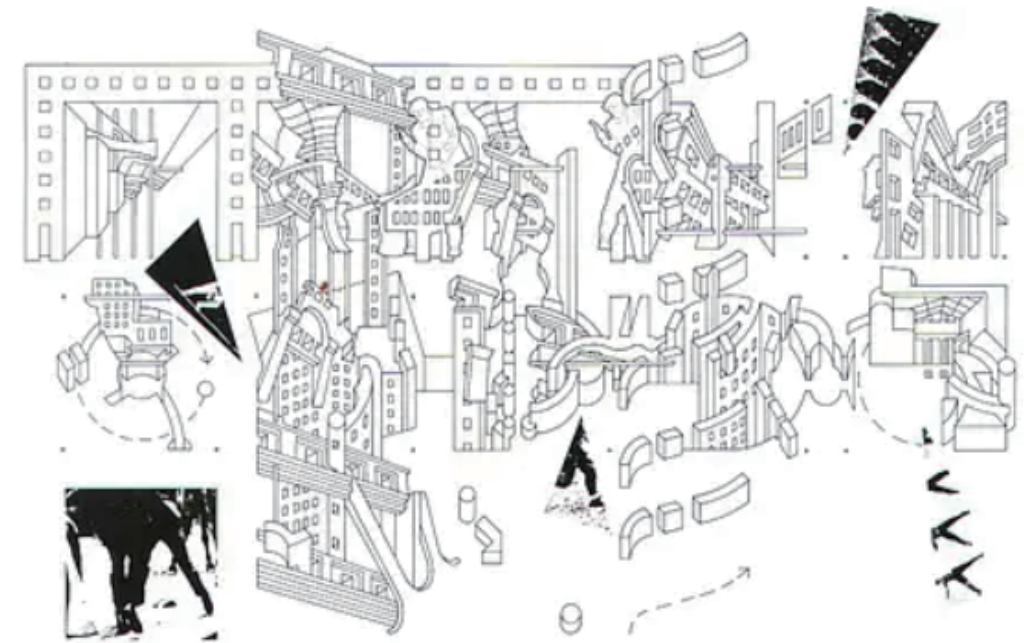


Figure 6. Manhattan Transcript - MT4 The Block - Zoom out



## Figure Bibliography

Figure 1. Bow-Wow, Atelier. Pet Architecture Guide Book Vol 2. World Photo Press,Japan, 2002.

Figure 2. By Author.

Figure 3. Squat in Rue Republique accessed November 12, 2021, [https://www.habitants.org/the\\_urban\\_way/european\\_protest\\_in\\_marseille\\_2008/images/squat\\_in\\_rue\\_republique](https://www.habitants.org/the_urban_way/european_protest_in_marseille_2008/images/squat_in_rue_republique)

Figure 4. By Author.

Figure 5. The Block, The Manhattan Transcripts by Bernard Tschumi (1994–04-29). (2021). Wiley; 2 edition (1994–04-29).

Figure 6. The Block, The Manhattan Transcripts by Bernard Tschumi (1994–04-29). (2021). Wiley; 2 edition (1994–04-29).

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[1] Bow-Wow, Atelier. Pet Architecture Guide Book Vol 2. World Photo Press,Japan, 2002.

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[4] Reinhold Martin, “Occupy: What Architecture Can Do,” Places Journal, November 2011. <https://doi.org/10.22269/111107>

[5] “Urban Dictionary: Marseille.” Urban Dictionary, 2019, [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Marseille](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Marseille).

[6] Dickey, Christopher. “Marseille’s Melting Pot.” Magazine, 3 May 2021, [www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/marseille-france](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/marseille-france).

[7] Hoad, Phil. “Corrupt, Dangerous and Brutal to Its Poor – but Is Marseille the Future of France?” The Guardian, 3 Feb.2020, [www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jun/08/corrupt-dangerous-brutal-poor-marseille-future-france](http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jun/08/corrupt-dangerous-brutal-poor-marseille-future-france).

[8] Marsactu. “Squats à Marseille, la part invisible du mal logement.” Marsactu, 19 July 2021, <https://marsactu.fr/squats-a-marseille-la-part-invisible-du-mal-logement/>

[9] ---. “Logement indigne et squats: la mairie de Marseille interpelle le gouvernement et demande la tenue d'états...” BFMTV, 27 July 2021, [www.bfmtv.com/marseille/face-a-la-problematique-du-squat-la-ville-de-marseille-demande-au-gouvernement-la-tenue-d-etat-generaux\\_AV-202107270409.html](http://www.bfmtv.com/marseille/face-a-la-problematique-du-squat-la-ville-de-marseille-demande-au-gouvernement-la-tenue-d-etat-generaux_AV-202107270409.html).