

THE NEARNESS OF ARCHITECTURE: TO BUILD FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

1-2 April 2025, Châteauroux (amphithéâtre Alfred Dauvergne)

Conference co-organised by the National Superior School of Architecture of Lyon (ENSAL) (UMR-CNRS 5600 EVS-LAURE), the University of Tours (InTRu, EA 6301), and the Council for Architecture, Urbanism and Environment (CAUE) of Indre.

Argument

Locavore diet, participatory democracy, relocation of economic activities, urban-to-rural exodus phenomena, the 15-minute city... short supply chains are being highlighted everywhere, both as tools in the fight against climate change and as a way for many of our fellow citizens to improve their quality of life, in particular since the Covid-19 pandemic. Currently perceived in a largely positive way, 'nearness' has become a trendy concept. Politicians well aware of this. They readily praise the 'sense of proximity' in rural areas (GOUTTEBEL, 2022) or in small and medium-sized towns, which the French government is actively concerned with (research-action POPSU Territoires since 2018; *Action coeur de ville* program 2018-2022, *Petites villes de demain* program 2020-2026, and now *Villages d'avenir* as part of the *France Ruralités* plan, launched in 2023). Researchers, for their part, are careful to question this trend, its various forms, its origins, and its effects, as evidenced by the seminar called *Nouvelles proximités*, co-organised by EPFL, ENSA Toulouse, and the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (2021-2024), or the *GéoProximités* journal, created in 2022 by a team of geographers.

In the field of architecture, debates around metropolisation are now existing alongside distinct reflections on the emergence of a new 'architecture of nearness', against a backdrop of renewed interest in rurality (OBRAS and Collectif AJAP14, 2016; Archiscopie, 2018 and 2022; MAROT, 2024; DANA, 2024). The launch in 2023 of the '1 Mayor, 1 Architect' initiative by the National Council of the Order of Architects, and the awarding of the same year's Grand Prix de l'urbanisme and the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture to architect-urbanist Simon Teyssou, came to legitimise this committed approach (TEYSSOU, PETITJEAN, and MASBOUNGI, 2023). Within architecture schools, future architects are preparing to transform existing structures rather than creating *ex nihilo*, learning ancient construction techniques and tracking down bio-based and geo-based materials (spatialization Design Build), revisiting critical regionalism, embracing reuse, abandoning digital-only methods to rediscover the spontaneity of hand sketches, which can be amended through direct exchanges with clients, and dreaming of regaining better control over the implementation of their ideas through smaller-scale projects. This aspiration to reconnect with the simplicity of primary gestures, supposedly stemming from timeless vernacular practices, tends to obscure the fact that the built legacies of these 'architectures of nearness' still visible today are largely the result of regular reinterpretations and updates of these ancient techniques over time. As regards the way of being an architect who shares the daily realities of its commissioners and users, we have to admit that we can find that kind of professional practice in various times in history, for example with the creation of civil-service architect positions attached to municipalities or prefectures. Recently used to describe the contemporary practitioner who came to set up her/his agency in a rural area, the image of a 'countryside architect' (MULLE, 2014; DANA, 2014; Archiscopie, 2018), , travelling across the region she/he has chosen, quite accurately describes, in reality, the French "architecte départemental" during the second half of the 19th century (CALLAIS, 2010; BRUANT, CALLAIS, and LAMBERT, 2022), whose scope of action extended far beyond public commissions alone.

Thus, the modalities and challenges of nearness in the design of architectural and urban spaces seem to us to deserve exploration over the long term (18th-21st centuries) in order to enrich and qualify current reflections and practices.

We start the enquiry with the built heritage and practices of the French 19th century, firstly because this conference is part of the final phase of a series of cultural events (exhibitions, conferences, workshops, etc.) organized in the rural department of Indre, between autumn 2023 and summer 2025, to celebrate the bicentenary of Alfred Dauvergne's birth (1824-1885). He was the head of a family of departmental and municipal architects whose works, built between 1849 and 1920, have shaped and continue to mark the landscapes of Indre, not only with public facilities but also many private buildings. The French countryside— it is quite the same across Europe—remains dotted with the products of the construction boom that began at the end of the 18th century, aimed at equipping and modernising territories and establishing public services (ANDRIEUX, 2009). Building locally today means imagining an architecture that is situated, but also considering the existing as a resource, perhaps drawing on the village centres formed during the 19th century, which have now become less visible. Would it not be worthwhile to reconsider the strengths of these structures, which managed—particularly in the realm of public commissions—to offer a synthesis between the diversity of local construction traditions and the unity of the national framework, all while adhering to the principles of the *Conseil des bâtiments civils* (efficient, simple, cheap)? This design approach, producing architecture that is both ordinary and 'at the crossroads of function, monumentality, and symbolism' (ANDRIEUX 2009), to which residents remain emotionally attached (town hall-school, parish church...), seems to us to be a source of inspiration for today's practitioners, who are sensitive to the concept of frugality (BORNAREL, GAUZIN-MÜLLER, and MADEC, 2018; MADEC 2021) and concerned with contributing to (re)creating a sense of community (NAJI, 2019).

In summary, how can these 'architectures of nearness' from the past—which are not solely vernacular—both provide us with food for thought (by helping us to question this current enthusiasm for nearness, maybe considered too quickly as miraculous) and food for action (by offering a reservoir of buildings and composed spaces to rehabilitate)?

The organisers of the conference aim to bring into dialogue the work of researchers (in architecture, architectural and urban history, sociology, geography, urban planning, etc.) and testimonies from local actors in architecture and territorial planning (elected officials, local authority professionals, architects, urban planners, etc.), both through individual communications and panel discussions.

All interested parties are invited to submit proposals to the committee, particularly but not exclusively within the topics outlined below:

- WHAT CREATES A SENSE OF COMMUNITY – questioning local identities

How can we (re)define what constitutes the architectural identity of a territory? What tools are available for this (re)definition? Vernacular, neo-rural, regionalist architecture (VIGATO, 2008), neo-regionalist, critical regionalist, bioregionalist (ROLLOT, 2018a)... At a time when focusing on materials (Archiscopie, 2023) or the living world seems to allow architects to avoid venturing into the 'style' debate (undermined by the Modernists), can we truly sidestep a reflection on form, aesthetics, or even ornamentation (PICON, 2017)? To avoid caricature and confusion, isn't a historian's rereading of local architectures—through the lens of their constant evolution and the processes of invention used in constructing identities (LE COUËDIC, 2020)—necessary?

Can the local be considered without the global? What sharing of experience can occur between territories? What new interpretations can we apply to the current and past phenomena of the circulation of models, knowledge, and skills, not only between the capital and the provinces but also from province to province (including across borders)? Is the structuring of the construction sector and the procedures for selecting project managers an obstacle to nearness?

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- COLLECTIVE ACTION – actor-networks: modalities, fortunes and misfortunes of nearness

Yesterday and today, how does nearness manifest between residents, project owners, contractors, experts, and others? Speed, convenience, awareness of the specificities of a territory... in what ways has this proximity been—and continues to be—a virtuous process?

How to sustain local networks around architecture and living environments?

Is participatory democracy a genuine or false promise? What is the assessment after more than a decade of contemporary experiments? (ROLLOT, 2018b) Isn't it possible to find older forms of inhabitants participation in local decision-making, beyond the image of elites confiscating all acting-power?

The dark side of nearness: monopoly positions, clientelism, conflicts of interest, insider trading... what former examples do we have? What kind of safeguards and strategies may we find to circumvent these issues? The history of architecture is marked by numerous breaks in the modalities of access to commissions: when and under what circumstances have we been inclined to value or, conversely, be wary of nearness?

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- PRESERVING/FOSTERING THE COMMON GOOD – old and new architectures of nearness in the age of the circular economy

Inherited landscapes: burden or resource? The future of architectures of nearness, particularly those built in the 19th and 20th centuries (courthouses, town halls, schools, hospices, etc.). What new uses can be found? What is the appropriate measure of preservation for former local public buildings, everyday objects balancing between 'small heritage' and exceptional monuments?

How can we re-qualify public spaces when gradual destruction has led to a slow disintegration of the old urban composition logic?

The integration of contemporary creation within the existing fabric, at the scale of the village, small town, or medium-sized city: what methods of intervention are applicable?

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Proposal submission process

Contributions may be submitted in either French or English. They should include a title and an abstract of approximately 2,500 characters (including spaces), along with 5 keywords, a brief bibliography and, if applicable, an indication of the topics they could be related with, as well as the author's contact details (name, first name, position and institutional affiliation, email, postal address).

Proposals should be sent in .pdf format no later than **20 November 2024** to colloque-proximites@lyon.archi.fr.

Timeline

7 October 2024	Launch of the call for contributions
20 November 2024	Deadline for submitting proposals
20 December 2024	Notification of acceptance of the proposals
1-2 April 2025	Holding of the conference

Organizational Committee

Olivier Prisset (University of Tours)
Brianna Razafimahefa (CAUE)
Caroline Soppelsa (ENSA Lyon)

Scientific Committee

Stéphane Barriquand, state architect-urban planner (Associate Professor *Theory and Practice in Architectural and Urban Design*, ENSA Lyon)
Jérôme Labesse, consulting architect (director of the Council for Architecture, Urbanism and Environment of Indre)
Christophe Morin, PhD in History of Art (Associate Professor *History of Art*, University of Tours)
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Caroline Soppelsa, PhD in History of Art (Associate Professor *History and Culture of Architecture*, ENSA Lyon)

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