



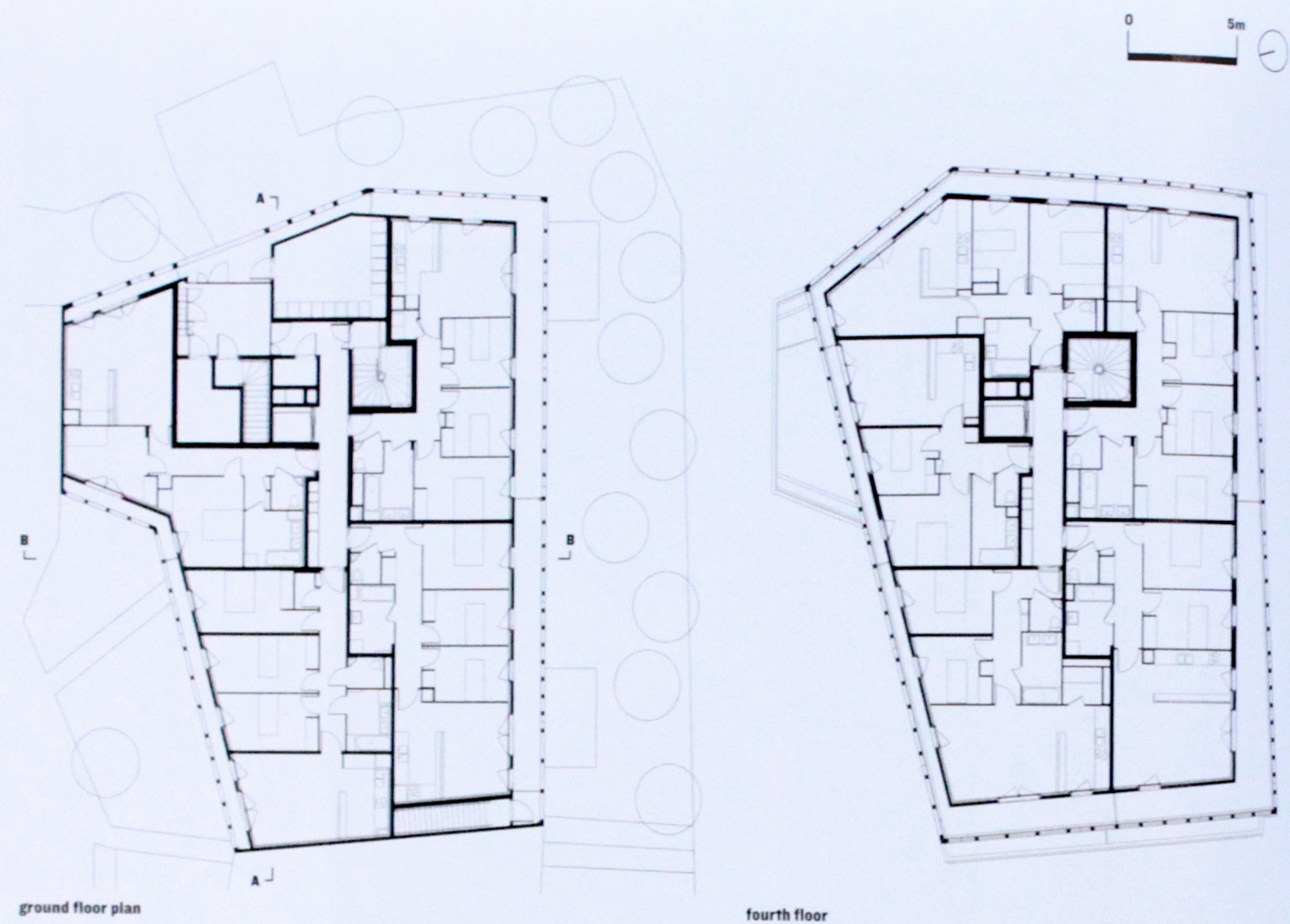
EMERGING





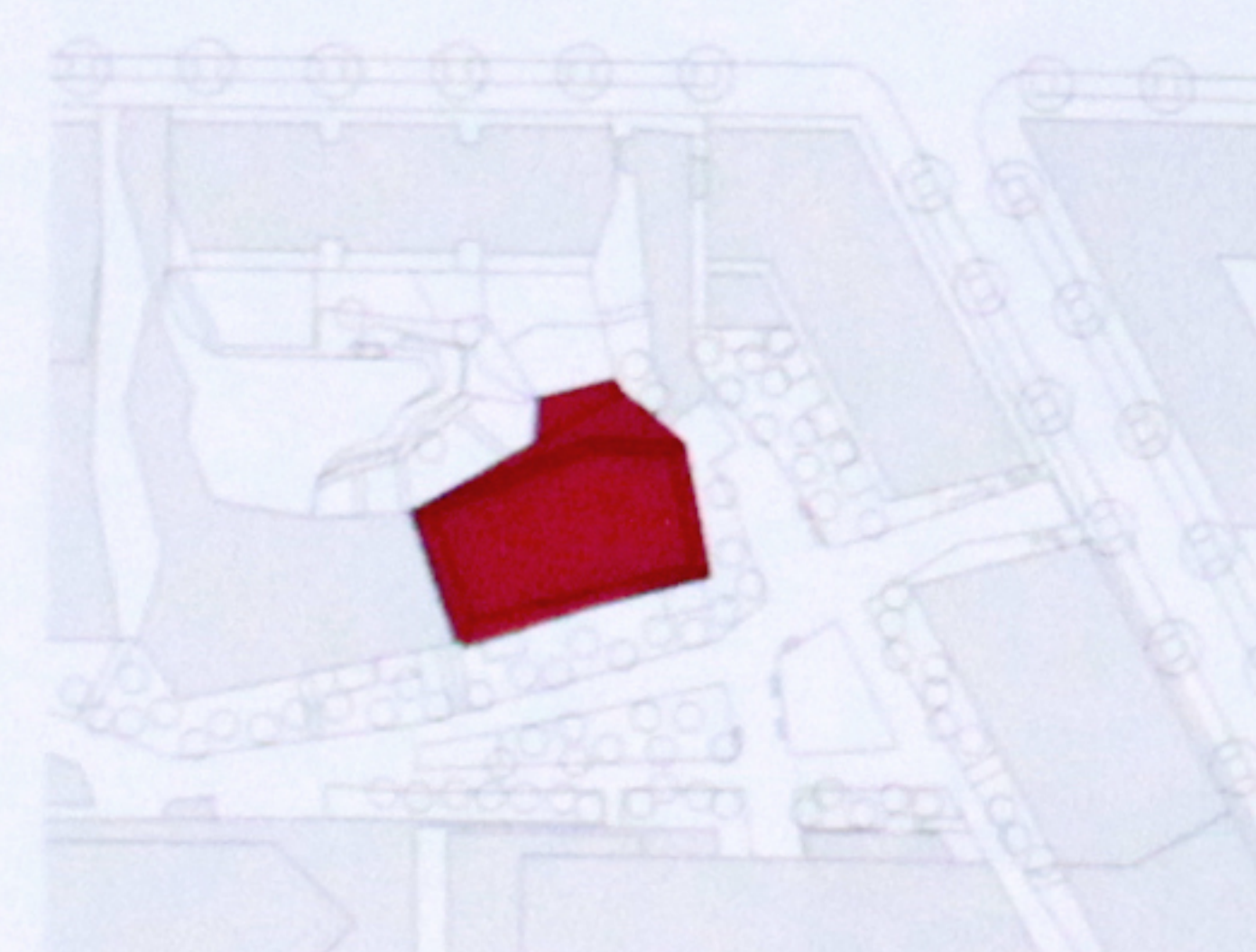
MARCH OF THE ARCH

Antonini Darmon ups the ante for social housing in Boulogne-Billancourt with a design usually reserved for grander schemes



ground floor plan

fourth floor

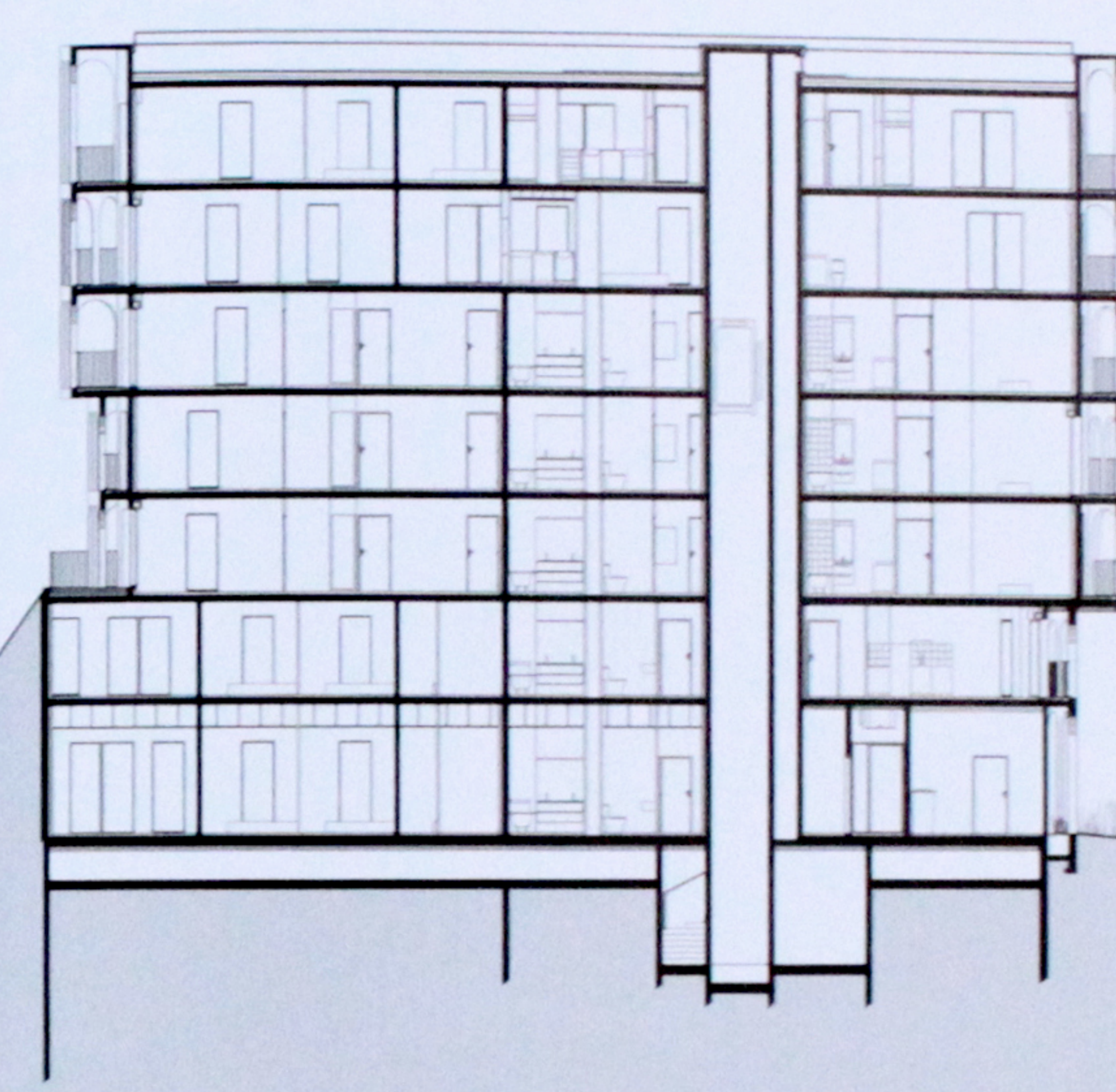


Tiered arches conjure a succession of images: the Colosseum, aqueducts, Romanesque naves, the benediction loggia of old St Peter's and, later, Palazzo della Civiltà. All of these are grand civic or ecclesiastical structures, and it was not until Alberti designed a palazzo for ambitious Florentine banker Giovanni Rucellai that someone had the chutzpah to unwind the Colosseum and graft it onto the facade of a house. Since then the rich have often opted for the grandeur of superimposed arcades, with all the associations of antiquity, power, erudition, stability and wealth that they elicit. To find the trope in a social housing block, however, is an altogether novel experience.

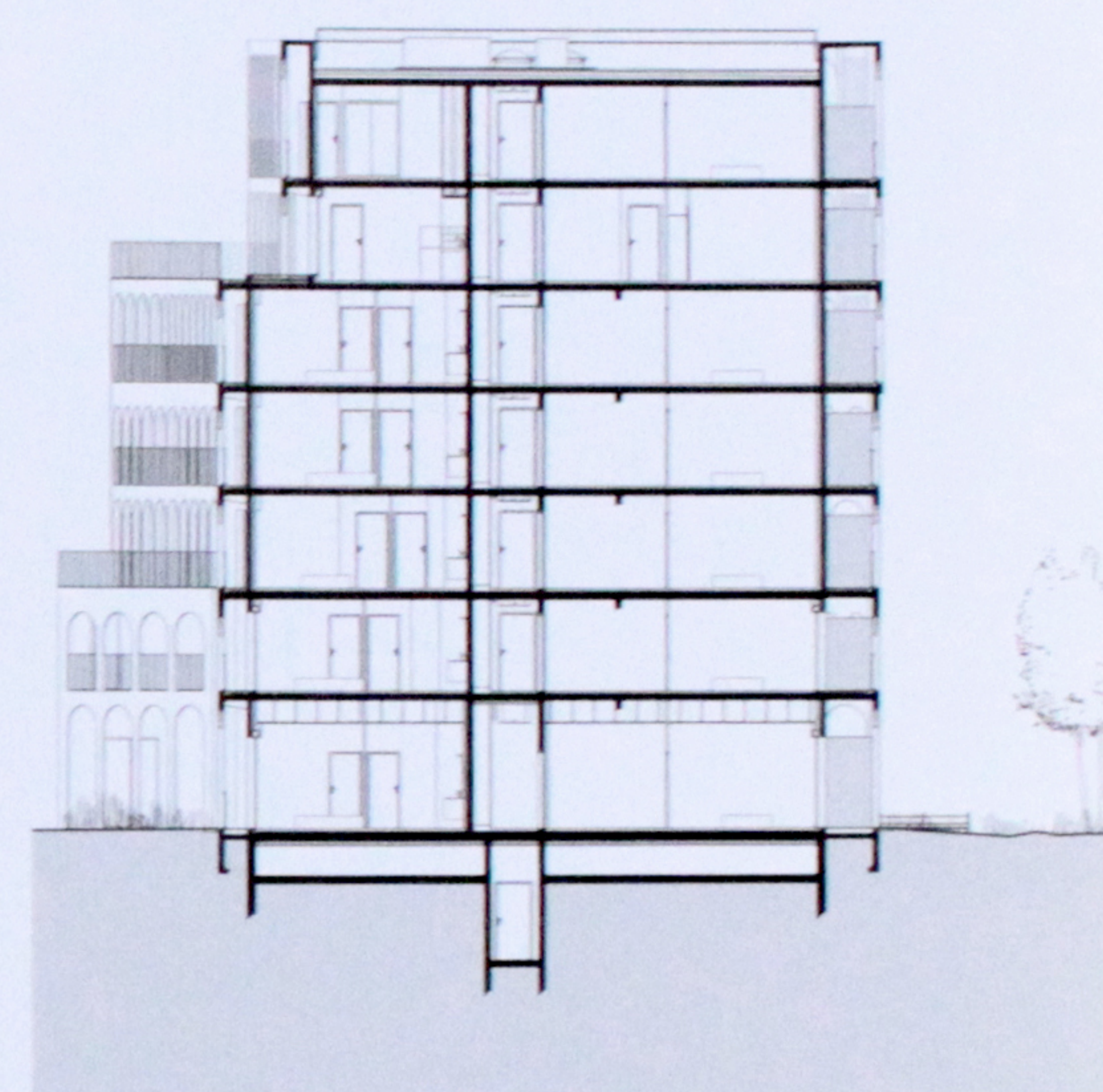
Antonini Darmon's seven-storey building in Boulogne-Billancourt, a suburb of Paris, is the centrepiece of a new housing estate standing on the site of an old Renault factory by the Seine. The six surrounding

blocks are each by a different architect, yet all share the same palette of white concrete, creating a harmonious ensemble. The central building is alone in its use of arches, and yet, thanks to its irregular plan, the public space between the central block and those on the perimeter has an irregular and informal quality, softening the perhaps overbearingly monumental effect a more orthogonal arcaded design would have created.

This irregularity is extended vertically throughout the block, with most of the storeys having a different plan. This has some practical benefits, creating – for instance – a porch overhanging the building's main entrance. And while unevenly stacked volumes have become a somewhat overfamiliar trope, in this instance the wonkiness adds an intriguingly self-critical sensation of instability to the archetypal symbol of *firmitas* with which the building is clad. As does the uneven



section AA



section BB

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intercolumniation: these arches march along at different speeds on each level, slowing and accelerating with little regard for what the neighbours are up to. They do not, therefore, pretend to the traditional structural role played by such members (even if this was, in cases such as the blind arcades of Romanesque facades, a transparent pretence). Instead there is a tension at work between structure and skin.

The architects state that they are interested in exoskeletons, and this is the role the facade takes here: a bleached white concrete shell within which the soft tissue of the building expands and contracts, leaving wider spaces between outer and inner skin on the sun-facing sides. These deeper balconies provide deeper shade for the rooms within, while those to the north are shallower, allowing more daylight in. The 33 apartments within the block are accessed via a central lift and stair, which open onto a

small lobby on each floor. One might perhaps have preferred the arcaded balconies to function as deck-access corridors, but this would have reduced the amount of floor space available to each apartment.

Classicism applied to mass housing is not unprecedented, of course: one only has to think of the grand apartment buildings on Vienna's Ringstrasse – which Loos contemptuously called a 'Potemkin City' – and Berlin's 19th-century *Mietkasernen*. The material used in this instance – precast concrete – has a more direct classicising antecedent in Soviet housing developments such as Stalinallee. To find the mode resurrected in social housing in the 21st century, on the former site of one of France's most prestigious manufacturers, therefore has a poignant historical resonance. More importantly, it creates appealing housing of an unusually confident monumentality. *Tom Wilkinson*

