



PARIS, FRANCE

In suburbs and commuter towns, experimental housing estates represent a different vision of Parisian living. For Italian designer Fabrizio Casiraghi, these architectural outliers are a bracing contrast to the saccharine center of his adoptive home.

The Suburban Sights of Paris

Be it elegant hôtels particuliers, vaulted churches or the Haussmannian typology that has made Paris so readily identifiable, the city's romanticized history lies in its structural silhouette. Fabrizio Casiraghi, a Milan-born Paris-based interior designer with an urban planning background, considers France's respect for its past an asset. "If you're on the Pont Neuf, and you see the Seine, it's fantastic," he remarks. "It's like in every movie, and it's the best landscape."

Casiraghi's own architectural touchstone, however, is an outlier to cinematic Paris: the remarkable and gargantuan Espaces d'Abraxas, conceived by Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill in the suburb of Noisy-le-Grand. The structure is in Marne-la-Vallée, an hour's ride east of the Paris perimeter on the region's RER A commuter trains. Casiraghi was floored by its sheer scope during his first encounter: "You feel very small; it's the scenography of a theater," he says. "That's a feeling we need sometimes, to rediscover new things about ourselves."

Bofill's utopian edifices were designed to represent a truly alternative approach to Parisian living—tellingly, Espaces d'Abraxas served as the backdrop for dystopian movies like *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay* and *Brazil*. As a foreigner, Bofill wasn't beholden to French traditions or codes—and this is

what makes the three buildings (Le Palacio, Le Théâtre and L'Arc) so thrilling. Their expansiveness is a kind of exhale relative to Paris's constricted density, and even its conservative homogeneity. The experiential value of Bofill's buildings is the new sculptural sense of space they inspire, one that is radically different from the rigorous uniformity of the city center.

The Espaces d'Abraxas offer a singular visual vocabulary and unusual scale for the Île-de-France—so much so that Casiraghi likens a trip to the Espaces d'Abraxas to his first teenage visit to New Delhi, in that it provoked a kind of sensorial overload. "Only Bofill could do that, and that is its strength. It's like a piece of art," he says. Its aesthetic punch stems from its oversize proportions: "Everything is neoclassical—like typical Greek columns—but enormous! When you walk along the agora, it's completely different than walking along a boulevard."

Vast estates on the outskirts of Paris, known as banlieues, were originally built in the latter half of the twentieth century to house—and sequester—immigrant populations. The communities and topographies alike were stigmatized, although these projects were framed under the utopian narrative of a *ville nouvelle*, or new city. The stigma stemmed from socio-economic factors and the implementation of utilitarian

structures, a kind of explicit “othering” by flouting any continuity with archetypal French design and lifestyle.

Most banlieue buildings are “horrible boxes with no connection to the city and no architectural value,” Casiraghi states. Bofill, however, applied new iconography to the banlieue, as well as a specific conceptualization of metropolitan living: a mélange across ethnic, social, economic and generational lines. Based on sociological studies he’d read, he saw the necessity of social mixing, insisting that a certain percentage of recent immigrant communities be threaded with local French ones within the residences. Casiraghi concurs that this is the crux of well-adapted urban living.

A handful of Paris’s other suburban sites are worth visiting too: the cluster of stainless-steel residential buildings Les Tours Aillaud of Cité Pablo Picasso in Nanterre (which have recently undergone a vast multi-million-euro renovation), the four-tiered buildings bundled as Les Damiers at La Défense in Courbevoie and the ten remarkable buildings with bulbous balconies producing undulating forms known as Les Choux (*choux* being French for cabbage) in Créteil.

Casiraghi’s own polished, understated aesthetic—a mix of Parisian decorative tradition and Milanese sobriety—has made him a draw for discerning design commissions: boutiques for Lemaire and Kenzo in the Haut Marais, or the interiors for Café de l’Esplanade in the seventh arrondissement, and Drouant restaurant in the second. “I live in the ninth—one of the most fancy, trendy arrondissements in Paris. In my

street, there are two social housing buildings. When you put social housing next to people who can buy an apartment for two million euros—it’s something,” he said. “Having total uniformity of people from the same backgrounds doesn’t work.”

Today, whether these aging banlieue projects are particularly livable is debatable—in fact, there were plans to demolish the Espaces d’Abraxas development in 2006, which were blocked.

France is deeply proud of, and protective of, its heritage—perhaps most fervently in the realm of architecture. Visitors and residents alike tend to want the mythology of Paris—with its elegance and taste—to remain undisturbed, rather than refreshed, even in the twenty-first century. But Paris is in the process of implementing an ambitious urban plan for the future: bridging the divide between the underprivileged banlieues and the central arrondissements. The hope is to make communities less sectarian and less isolated. Perhaps it will also lead to a flowering of culture outside of the city center.

Casiraghi believes that if Bofill’s original vision for the Espaces d’Abraxas had been better maintained, the complex could have become a design destination, joining the pantheon of long-standing Paris landmarks. Even in a place as seemingly suspended in the past as Paris, what possesses value and beauty can shift. “A person living in the first or second arrondissement doesn’t want to go to the eighteenth,” Casiraghi laughs—by extension, the reticence to go to Noisy-le-Grand is even greater. “Yet people will travel to the chapel made by Le Corbusier in middle-of-nowhere France. Why couldn’t they come here?”



Opposite

Les Arcades du Lac at Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines is just over an hour on the train from Paris’s Gare du Nord. The social housing project was the first that architect Ricardo Bofill completed in France.

Above

Casiraghi walks through Les Arcades du Lac, which are entirely pedestrianized. The apartment blocks were designed to mimic the hedgerows of a formal French garden.



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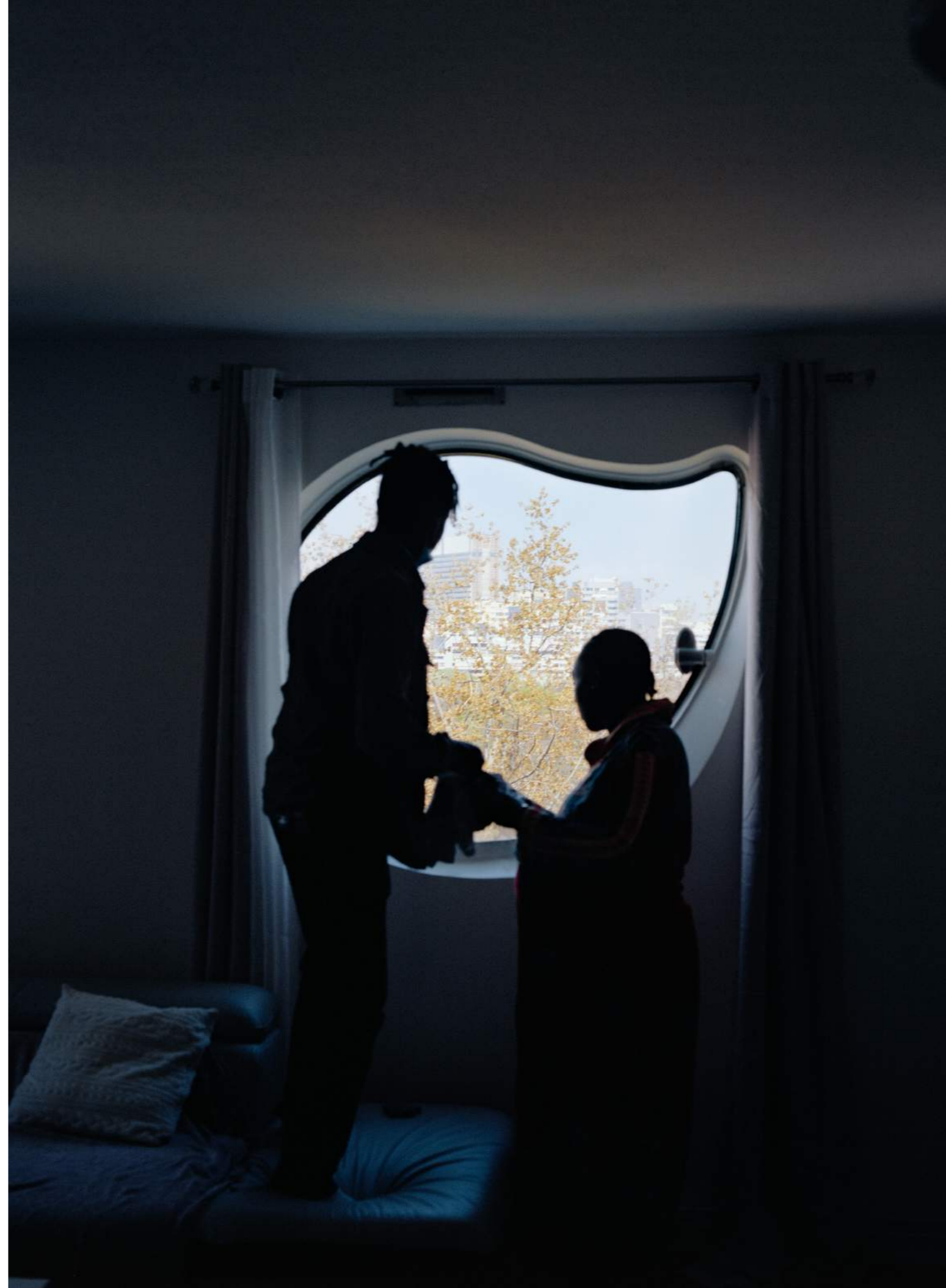


Above

— Les Tours Aillaud (a thirty-minute train ride from Châtelet–Les Halles station) were built in 1976 and comprise over 1,600 apartments.

Opposite

— What unites each apartment at Les Tours Aillaud is Aillaud's retro-futuristic window design—each is circular or shaped like a water droplet.





Above Right

—
Sarabande pour Picasso, a sculpture by Spanish artist Miguel Berrocal, is just one the decorative flourishes at Les Arènes de Picasso. The social housing complex is sometimes referred to as “Les Camemberts.”

Opposite

—
Designed by Manuel Núñez Yanowsky and inaugurated in the mid-1980s, Les Arènes de Picasso (a twenty-five-minute train ride from Châtelet–Les Halles station) is one of Noisy-le-Grand’s most striking sites.





1

LES TOURS AILLAUD CITÉ
PABLO PICASSO

The soaring steel spires of La Défense are a world away from the Paris you think you know. On the edge of the city's famous business district are the white, pink and blue-veneered Tours Aillaud, more commonly known as the Tours Nuages—or Cloud Towers—whose insouciant undulations add a touch of whimsy to an otherwise gray district.

Nanterre, Paris

2

LES DAMIERS DE LA DÉFENSE

These two pyramid-shaped apartment buildings from the 1960s are looked on affectionately by many—including Brutalism buffs and the two tenants who have so far resisted eviction. To the Russian heritage group whose plans to transform the Damiers into two soaring spires have so far gone unrealized, they are eyesores whose time has been and gone.

Courbevoie, Paris

3

LES ESPACES D'ABRAXAS

Ricardo Bofill conceived Les Espaces d'Abraxas as an "urban monument." The three main buildings feature design flourishes—cornices and columns—inspired by neoclassical buildings in the city center.

Noisy-le-Grand, Paris

4

LES ARCADES DU LAC

The mixed suburban and low-income housing complex of Les Arcades du Lac, built in 1981 by Ricardo Bofill's Taller de Arquitectura, was designed as a response to two very disparate architectural projects. First, they exist in opposition to Le Corbusier's stark white housing projects of the 1960s. But also they are a reaction against the opulence of the nearby Château Versailles.

Montigny-le-Bretonneux, France

5

CITÉ DU PARC

Viewed aerially, the Brutalist Cité du Parc housing complex in the Ivry-sur-Seine suburb of Paris doesn't look particularly hospitable—its spiky jags of concrete make it look more like a huge throwing star than a welcoming apartment complex. But look closer: down in those nooks and crannies are leafy balconies and cozy, homely comforts.

Ivry-sur-Seine, Paris

6

LES ORGUES DE FLANDRE

The Organs of Flanders, four Brutalist towers in the nineteenth arrondissement, are named after types of musical compositions: prelude, fugue, cantata and sonata. They seem to undulate musically too: leaning over the street here, a staircase spiraling upward there. But Brutalist principles hold true in that the towers are also assigned functional numbers to identify them.

24 Rue Archereau, Paris

7

LA CITÉ CURIAL-CAMBRAI

The interlocking balcony systems of the Cité Curial-Cambrai, by which one corner of the building is connected to another, gives it the appearance of a vertical maze. With this unifying effect, it's easy to forget that the block comprises dozens of separate apartments, divided internally by innumerable walls.

Curial-Cambrai, Paris

8

CHOUX DE CRÉTEIL

Paris has its asparagus—that's the nickname Parisians gave the Eiffel Tower when it was first erected in 1887—and the suburb of Créteil has its cabbages. Ten white, 1970s-era towers of fifteen stories each grow out of the ground, with leaf-shaped balconies from which to enjoy the view.

Créteil, Paris