

So who is it who made the chicken? Did the egg made the chicken or did the chicken made the egg?

It was the great age of decentralization, away from Paris. A certain number of firms came here. But the firms had workers. And the workers had to be housed. The workers didn't like voting much. So they managed to persuade the little mayor of that village that he was set to become a great man, and that he was going to build a town of 30,000 inhabitants. Things started to develop and grow, and two kinds of people arrived. On the one hand, the workers' world made up essentially of defectors from the rural world roundabout, and, on the other, what we might schematically call middle-class folk, technicians, executives, things like that, people like that, people coming from the length and breadth of France.

We were uprooted, people adrift, and we had to find a foothold. The town council of those days kept its side of the bargain, in other words, it put up buildings to house people. Period. New para. So in no time at all a certain number of people who were a bit more determined, or committed, or involved, or brave, started to campaign for a whole series of programmes, for the school, for the environment, for green areas and parks, for playgrounds, for transport to get things moving.

At the time we were green and callow. You were called Tartempion, you came from Biarritz or somewhere else, nobody have a damn. Here you could get things done without being surrounded or preceded by prejudices about your name and your parents, and this made it possible for a whole lot of people to make a personal investment very fast. I think that was crucial. We were all "foreigners" or outsiders - "horsains" as they say in Normandy- people coming from other places.

The town is a place for meetings, with people of several nationalities and origins. An African is well placed in this respect, because in our conception of History, the idea of borders is a strange notion. It's the Europeans who built borders in our countries, and introduced this idea. For us there are just spaces. There are spaces where people come and go, which means that we're more or less prepared for an instinctual kind of communitarianism insofar as you meet people who come from every quarter. In Africa I myself come from a climatic region that is the savannah, so a region of wide open spaces ideal for meetings, mergers and mixtures. So coming here and seeing all this, I was quite at ease and that was the nice side of the town.

The town came to me little by little. People became interested in each other, the town and me, right, because I'd bought an apartment, I got married, a bit later on I was a teacher, so there you have it, our love affair started out like that with my town, slowly, and then after that it was head over heels, and then involvement, and then...

We all have the feeling we're in the process of constructing, we're not in the process of altering things, there's a different spirit. When you're in a town that's already built, you're going to get it to develop, you start off from something that exists. Here, we started out from nothing, except the people who were there, so it was actually up to us to construct reality. I myself had the impression that we could really create, construct everything, it was great, because there was nothing, we were starting out with everything brand new. And actually things were introduced that we would never have imagined.

I was walking across wheat fields and beet fields that stretched as far as the eye could see, it was in 1958-59. There were just farms, fields and crops.

And then one day a decision was taken to create a town that wouldn't necessarily be of the utopian kind, but which would be

different from what we had hitherto known.

That was in 1975. And it was very exciting because there were also utopias at neighbourhood level, i.e. a kind of slightly basic self-organization. There were people who were in touch with peasants, shopkeepers, and farmers, and we made shopping lists every week, so you'd have a kind of rep. in the neighbourhood, you'd say, okay, next week I'd like a Pont-l'Évêque cheese, three litres of milk etc. and the farmer would bring all that to your doorstep. That organization was set up in a slightly alternative way. I should add that there wasn't a shopping centre there. Carrefour [a large supermarket chain] didn't exist and then in those days people were concerned about good quality food, and eating well, avoiding being poisoned. Our thing about safe food is nothing new. So we did little things like that.

To start with there weren't going to be any traffic lights, that was one of the ideas. A town without traffic lights was a really nice idea at the time, come what may. And then little by little we saw one set of traffic lights arrive, then two, and they started popping up everywhere, the way poppies used to in the Hérouville wheat fields. But they weren't poppies.

We're very keen on our green areas: the town was created around them. It was something... at the Belles Portes there was a garage -you know the one- almost opposite the shopping centre, which was the centre of an incredible quarrel. There were huge hoardings, it was "grass not diesel" -in French "du gazon pas de gasoil"- a good slogan.

We started out by being a heart, it's like in a film that's an imaginative film, and a director started out in a kind of creative craziness, so the individual shows his heart, first of all, a heart that beats, and around the beating heart there are vessels, and at the end of the vessels, cell tissues which will build the body, and that's how it is here. The new town has been made like this, and what's more there's a whole symbolism of the heart, give yourself a heart and you'll be what you are afterwards, and actually it hasn't been easy to find a heart. Which means the buildings that have been put up were like tissues in the process of growing old, in a way, which weren't irrigated, veins were needed, and arteries, a thousand and one things were needed, and a motor to send life coursing through the arteries. We had to move from the dormitory zone to the town. The dormitory town had no life in it because people were there at night just to sleep. We were gone at daybreak, so it was like a dormant body, and to bring it back to life it needed a heart, and this is how it's been a very good thing. Later on, the rest was done by means of juxtaposition, collage and turning things around.

To start with, we didn't know each other, and it all happened in an artificial way. We hadn't come from villages, we could actually have been relatives, cousins, like in a real village, it often happens that way. But here, not a bit of it, we all arrived en masse and together, so to speak, coming from different places with different skills. We could very well have laid into one another tooth and nail, hated the sight of each other, been unable to stay in the same room, but not a bit of it, little by little it all came together really nicely, we also know one another's faults, but we go along with them, and it's all pretty cool. It's a successful mixture, let's put it like that...

I came from Moselle. I came to work. I had a job, I'd been taken on by a firm that was in the port. There was no kind of vision at all. But all the same, there's something that struck me. When I was hired, the boss of the firm said to me: "You're an executive, and I'm asking two things of you. I'm asking you to drive a French car, and live in Caen". One day I said to him: "I've found a house in Hérouville". He said: "Oh no, no way, not in Hérouville." So I said to him: "Sorry, but yes", and any way it wasn't his job to tell me

how or where to live. So I said to myself: "Hey, what's going on? Why shouldn't I live in Hérouville, when I'm a supposedly right-thinking exec?" Is this what helped me to be a bit more aware of things? I don't know.

We were all either from rural backgrounds, or foreigners. There were also lots of people coming from North Africa and Turkey, a few from Africa and Asia, and all these people ended up in this kind of melting-pot where we had to recreate a society, because in the end of the day we'd all lost our roots. So it was necessary both to build the town and build relationships between people, and I think this was an incredible strength.

Take an orchard, which turns into an isle of resistance. When you construct a town, you buy land from someone, nearly always from country people, and farmers, and they're entitled, at their own peril, to use that land until the moment when the construction work's going to start. At times this can go on a long time, when there are financial problems or problems to do with tenders causing difficulties - a year or two sometimes. Which means that you have bulldozers cheek by jowl with wheat and beet fields right up to the last minute. I've seen a field of cabbages where you've now got a business estate, full of garages, Toyota and all that, I've seen cabbages growing there and a bit further on there's still this orchard. So there are holes here and there, it's a bit like a border zone, it's a bit moth-eaten. There are cultural layers like that that survive, rubbing shoulders in places that are a bit blurred.

Setting up extra-municipal committees was the slightly utopian dream of restoring power to the citizen. But from down-to-earth activism we were before very long landed with the concrete realities of power. And then we discovered that the town was virtually bankrupt. And we managed to renegotiate a one-off subsidy from the Government to try and complete the town in the least adverse conditions.

"Brasilia in Normandy" ran the headlines, it was meant to be Peru where everybody had to live in perfect harmony, and then it went wrong because of dire economic stories. Money destroyed the idea, if you will. And afterwards, why weren't the other neighbourhoods made in accordance with the original overall plan? It's because the shortcomings we've mentioned, which got up people's noses the most, had to do with this vertical stacking. It was loud noises between one apartment and the next that people got into their minds, smells, ducts and pipes, waste water invariably coming down from the 12th floor into your own apartment, on the 6th.

The initial town-planning architects had planned small play areas here, there and everywhere, and that was something people wanted, but on reflection people realized that this type of individualized playing, where the mother would put her baby into a sand pit, didn't make for social contacts, particularly because there are no streets, no shops, nothing to let people window-shop, nothing to natter about, so it's a handicap for social bonding. And, at this particular moment, the idea at the Bois -the Wood- is very clear-cut, in other words, the same total area of green spaces is gathered into a single green area, this is important, the idea being that people will all come there to play football and, when they play football, they won't just play football with their kid, but they'll play with the neighbour, and when they have a barbecue, they won't have one for just themselves, but they'll make a barbecue with other people. Maybe this is another utopia.

When we built the church, there were problems. Because the archbishop, or bishop -I'm no longer too sure about the rank of those bigwigs- asked, when they were told: "We're going to put a church here", they said: "Oh yes, where the bakery is?" So the socialist mayor, who, himself, needless to say, probably didn't go to church, was surprised. And the archbishop said to him: "When

people leave church on Sunday morning" -because people didn't go to church every day, they went mainly on Sunday, I mean- "they go to the cake shop and the bakery before going home, so you can't put a church too far away from a bakery". He said: "But there's no question of a bakery; if we have to, we'll build a shopping centre." Then they said: " You put it where you want, we don't give a damn, it doesn't interest us."

People had certainly asked for a community centre. A community centre means a place where you have dances, and meals for veterans, if there are any, but you can also put on plays there, and have shows. Right now there's a theatre. I really doubt whether this particular theatre meets people's needs though.

It's very well known who goes to exhibitions, who goes to the theatre, who goes to art films and experimental films, but you also have to bear in mind that there's a whole chunk of the population -definitely the largest chunk- that doesn't have access to all that. Not that they're banned from admission, but people who don't have access to any desire to come to these venues, and that's a fundamental job to be done, and it's probably not being done. It's a general problem, but I regret all the same that there isn't more attention being paid to this problem. It was part of the spirit of what we wanted to do at the outset. A spirit of greater openness with a bigger population. So you'll tell me that everyone's free to go or not go, but at the same time...

It was a town that was planned for cars and pedestrians. For cars, because you could get around the various neighbourhoods very quickly, in a one-way system, so you could drive very fast, and there weren't any traffic lights. There was a slight drawback there, it'll always be a drawback for the neighbourhoods, which is the fact that visitors don't realize that the street goes round in a circle. You can have a straight street which actually takes several bends and will therefore change names on its route, which means that people are often getting lost - it's well known for that.

People who came to get elected to make a name for themselves, oh, there were two or three of them in the council, all the time, and you could quickly pick them out, people who were there to swagger about, chests puffed out, and thought that everything was just fine, well those people were quickly put in their place, in my view. But the people who were in the council, on the whole, were nevertheless people who had no personal ambitions, but who really wanted to get things done, and, well, there are fewer and fewer of those people because it's true that you get tired, too. I'm a bit afraid that they're not finding many people with that spirit, and that at this particular moment we're really in the hands of the technocrats.

Town council meetings have lost their spice, there's no debating any more, and what's more we've got a new thing to deal with, which is that there's no opposition, none at all.

I was out walking and I saw in the building put up by Massimiliano Fuksas, you know, the green screen with big patches of reds and oranges and so on, I saw a poster. It had just been opened, and I was trying to get into it like everyone else. I saw a poster stuck right by the entrance to that building, which is, incidentally, a university residence. It was by the CROUS and it read: "We're not responsible for the colours outside and inside the corridors, the architect wanted them that way."

They said in no uncertain terms that they found it absolutely dreadful. So it's true that you realize that, among young people, that is, people between 40 and 50, that they have phenomenally conservative ideas about architecture. And it's not surprising that their brats, when they're at school, still draw houses that they've never seen, i.e. with a pointed roof, even though I've got just such a house, with a chimney sticking up above the roof, and then two little windows, and a door in the middle, in other words, a

completely stupid plan that no longer exists. That's exercised me a lot.

A project that's called "citadel" is something closed, even if it's innocuous, and then nobody ever goes to the square, there's never a soul there, and what we did to equip it was to alter the scallop structure that was meant to be the shelter for the various festivities, we equipped it, okay with the agreement of the national employment agency, that brings people to it, but it doesn't give the place any life. But there've been attempts made, there've been markets that were very lively, organized in that square. But nobody wants to go there. It's off-putting, you know, we're not going to remake history, we're not going to dynamite the town centre. Even if I don't stop there, I have plenty of good things to say about it whenever I have visits from members of my family, and they all make the same observation: "How enthusiastic you are!" I spend the day walking them round the town, showing them things, it's amazing the work that's been done in thirty years, really extraordinary. The people involved in all that deserve a lot of praise, but there are a few warts, shit, a few damn silly things, and if they weren't there, that would be just fine, too.

It's a town that's been designed artificially by a few determined people and it's ended up creating a small floating population, because there are people coming and going, like there are in all towns, but all the same there's a core of people who've stayed here. I think you'll find quite a few of them. I talk all the time about my own neighbourhood because, for me, outside my neighbourhood there's no salvation, but all the same there are now one or two notions of sharing, and that means I have less and less desire to leave, even if I have the wherewithal to do so. I could very easily go to a posher area, with much more luxurious housing. Which just goes to show that, seen from outside, it can all seem rather sinister, and not very nice, but seen from within, and by focusing on specific places, you can have much more optimistic information.

You'll find people who no longer want to leave, just as some people no longer want to leave the Place du Tertre, which is nevertheless much more picturesque, or other places of that ilk. Little by little you end up settling down, putting down a few roots, even if the earth isn't as good as the loam you're born in, but this said, you settle down none the less.

We've boasted so much about being the youngest town in the whole region that we've never given a thought to the fact that young people are going to end up getting older at a given moment in time. I'm 30 years older than when I came here, and there's a certain number of us in this particular mould - potentially dead. So for myself, I don't think I'll need a whole lot of room, but there's quite a few folks who are still attached to major traditions, in the vein of having a big coffin in a big hole, but you don't think about all that. I call that lapses, or oversights. The cemetery system doesn't make any sense, in a civilization where people are soon going to have wait for 110 years, when one day everything's going to burst, everything's going to burst. So we'll have to find something else, but, for all that, the people who're going to die in the next ten years who come here, they're not culturally ready to be incinerated, and even less so when they toss their ashes in some remembrance garden or other, because they don't want to be put in with Tartempion, it's silly what I'm saying but that's the way it is. When you see the ads they put in the papers for old folk: "Organize your funeral", and the questionnaires they give you, all the merchants of death, well it's all very conservative. It's all about big monumental coffins, vaults and tombs, things to make it all cushy and calm. Because they know it's something that still has some currency, all that...

In the last census, not the last one but the one before that, the town had 25,000 inhabitants, or a bit more. I remember, one night,

with some friends at the bistro, while the girls and the young students were doing the rounds of the houses for the census, we had a bet about how many we'd be. And everybody said we were 25,000, and then it rose from 26,000 to 28,000, that was the range. Actually I've got the figures, I jotted them down on the paper tablecloth and afterwards I made a notice because we'd said: "The winner pays for a round of drinks". And we all got it wrong, there were less than 25,000 inhabitants. And if we'd really thought about, even though we're fond of our town, and we know it, or we think we know it anyway, we wouldn't have made that mistake. Because the population is thirty years older. Here I am thirty years later, with my daughters all gone, and it's the same everywhere. There are just old people left like my wife and me, and my neighbours on either side!

The SMN as the crow flies, I don't know how far that might be, let's say maybe two miles like that, as the crow flies, I'm not too sure, but something like that. But seen from our house, that was a whole life that was spread out over such a huge area, it was wonderful that thing we lived with every day, every night, even in the daytime. In the daytime, needless to say, it wasn't the same, there were no lights, but by night, all those factory lights, the lights of the blast furnaces, it was something else, it was pretty to see. For us it represented life over there, and now it's dead and gone. If I'd got less involved, I'd have become a slightly better-off executive, I'd have a bigger car, I'd have a fatter pension and then afterwards I wouldn't have any memories, I wouldn't have anything, I'd just have memories made of money, and that's not interesting.

The town certainly isn't as ideal as we'd imagined, but you also have to bear in mind that at the time we were very young, and with time you really do grow wiser and you realize that, sometimes, there's also a need to change things. So the dream has frayed a bit at the edges, but this said, it's still an interesting town.

We don't want to be an urban development zone, we want to be a fully-fledged town, in its own right.