

Vaulx-en-Velin, a suburban city on the tracks of its past.

ABSTRACT:

Shared wisdom (*sensus communis*) meant, for the Romans, humanity and sensibility as well as common sense. Indeed, wisdom can be translated as the common sense of the common folk. It is the wisdom born from immediate and practical knowledge. This is a common and collective cultural heritage. Our work in Vaulx-en-Velin, a suburban residential city, East of Lyon - France (the Greater Lyon conurbation counts around 1.5 million people) aims to reclaim this notion of "shared wisdom". Since the 60's, Vaulx-en-Velin has been expanding from an old rural community to a residential suburb with factories.

The 60's urbanization applied rather typical theories to all of France's developing territories. It introduced a "platform" urbanization, consisting mainly of social housing, surrounded by large empty "green spaces" built on old orchards, farmlands and wet lands. Today, designers and planners alike search for all remaining traces of this past, both historical and social, in order to elaborate the city's new urban landscape. Our goal is to reintroduce and reinterpret different aspects of the old landscape through new public spaces but with a shared vocabulary (orchards, vegetable patches, meadows, rain gardens).

Our team agency sought out new tools to take on this task: rediscovery of local species (willow, alder, ash), regeneration of used or polluted soils, implementation of technical solutions improving project economics (water storage, storm water management, lighting), dialogue and consultation with the local population (meetings, talks and exchanges revealing the social and individual story of the city and the community).

Our experience as designers allowed us to build a sensitive, human urban environment, anchored in the social history, and perhaps dreamlike past, of the residents. This dreamlike past is so linked with real "belief" that it stands almost against reason. For us, the age of change is also linked with chance.

"Buildings grew on fields, then "priority development areas" became true 'pressure cookers' Olivier Bertrand, journalist for Liberation, "Vaulx-en-Velin, the new found city" (Documentary of 52 minutes).

INTRODUCTION

In october 1990, in the peripheral suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin near Lyon, the death of a young man triggered the first big French city riots. Television crews came from around the world and filmed the riots of hate and anger. Several days of plundering followed by confrontations with the police left the city traumatized. Its public image found itself brutally destroyed. After the violence, over 5,000 people (out of a population of 45,000) fled Vaulx-en-Velin, moving to other parts of the Greater Lyon area. Public authorities realized that this 'Cité nouvelle' (newly sprouted urban city) based on the "ideal city" concept, had in fact accumulated much anger and social disparity.

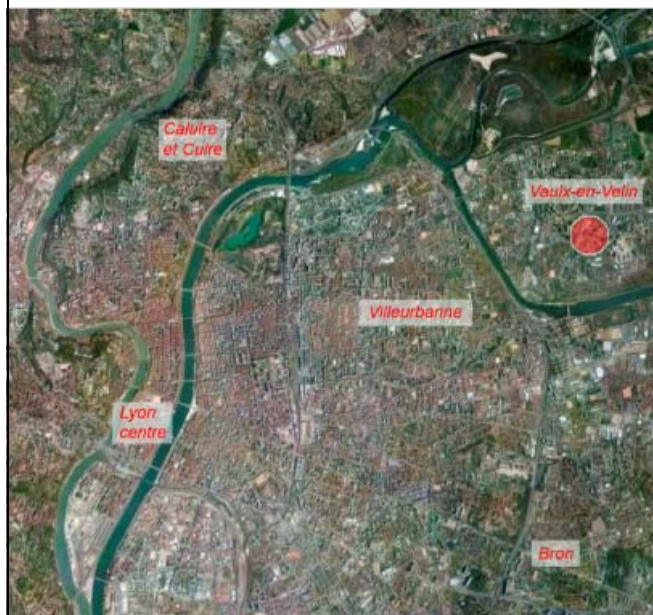
It took a long time for the city to overcome these social wounds, but the riots allowed

them to re-think the city model on a different basis. First, by associating the inhabitants with the political decisions governing them, then by analysing and considering all at once the factors (social, urban, political) intervening in these decisions. Twenty years after the riots, a real social and urban model has been re-invented in Vaulx-en-Velin. Today, it remains a major social, economic and urban laboratory, in France as well as in Europe, aiming for the understanding of public policies by all and showing the way to the improvement and renovation of our neighbourhoods and cities.

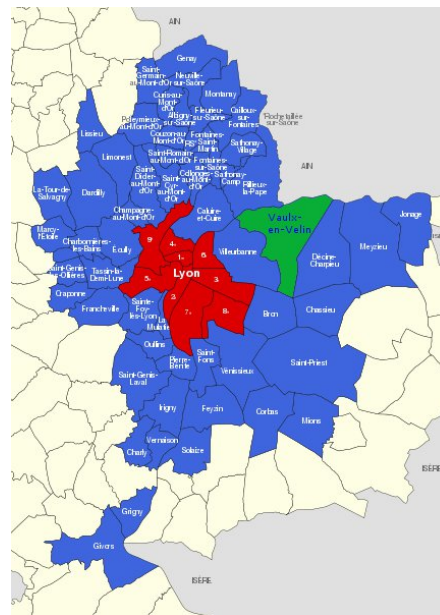
I - HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Vaulx-en-Velin, a living suburb in the North-East of Lyon.

Located in the alluvial plain of the Rhône river, this region was well known, from the beginning of the 19th century, for its market gardening and its industries (notably the manufacturing of artificial silk). The city's history has always been linked to its more prestigious and richer neighbour, the city of Lyon. Today, Vaulx-en-Velin is one of 55 municipalities that make up the Greater Lyon area and was among the first municipalities to join the new operational plans and the urban renewal policy initiated by Lyon. It is also one of 44 French “free trade zones” relative to the implementation of the City Renewal Pact.



Picture 1 - Location of Vaulx-en-Velin



Picture 2 - The 55 municipalities of the Greater Lyon area
In green, the city of Vaulx-en-Velin
In red, the city of Lyon

But in the 60s, vast farming lands stretched far and wide. Their apparent ‘availability’ allowed for the planning and then the development of a “*priority development area*”. At that time, the layout for the construction of the city was considered a model for the ideal city. The development project was well received by an impoverished population who was, for the first time for most, able to live in a fully functional flat.



Picture 3 - Textile factories and workers' housing developments-20s



Pictures 4 & 5 - Construction of the priority development area in the 70s



In 1970: The construction of new housing districts saw the arrival over 35 000 new inhabitants. In 1978 there were 43 791 inhabitants in Vaulx-en-Velin. At the end of the 70s an economic and social crisis revealed strong racist sentiment and behaviour, a real danger of a social fabric explosion menaced. The middle of the 80s saw aggravated racism and violent relationships with the police (eg Brixton riots in United Kingdom) and then in 1990, the riots. After the riots, the reconstruction occurred.

But how do we rebuild a city? On what grounds? No one seemed to know...



Picture 6 - The riots in 90s



Picture 7 - Vaulx-en-Velin in the 70s

II - EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC AND GREEN SPACES.

The turning point of the 90s : Political awareness and human welfare at the centre of the city's renewal

Vaulx-en-Velin has been completely renovated. It remains today a true social and human laboratory. Some of the experimental methods developed here are still used to

inform renewal of other French cities. And it is said: “*In suburbs, with time, means and convictions, everything remains still possible*”.

(Olivier Bertrand, Vaulx-en-Velin, the new found city, 2009).

From the breaking point of the 1990 riots, Vaulx-en-Velin never tired of working on improving every aspect of its city. Today it is able to put forward and offer a better life and real community for its inhabitants, a major part of which has been achieved through the evolution of the public places of the city.

Let us follow step by step this transformation (process), and the emergence of a common (shared) wisdom, which restored life in rundown neighbourhoods.

A - Inheritance of the green spaces of the 60s

Large empty green spaces are the last remnants typical of these 'large scale social housing developments' (called 'grands ensembles' in France). These empty spaces have long contributed to a contradictory feeling of confinement.

The building density, the length of these constructions and their absence of passages or 'gaps', the absence in the hierarchy of spaces, the monofeature of the built environment. All of these aspects contributed to the dehumanization of these districts. Despite the open spaces, and especially the openness giving onto the light and the sky, nobody could find any well-being in the neighbourhood.

Trees planted more than fifty years ago are still very notable in today's landscape: they were able to develop well because they had room and sun, but they had not been planted as remarkable and unique species. Trees still alive today are veterans !



Picture 8 - Construction of the “priority development area” in the 70s



Picture 9 - A beautiful isolated tree: a veteran tree of the 60s, silent partner of the urban landscape

B - Formalism of spaces (1990 - beginning of 2000) and the cityscape

Urban planners and landscape architects then went to work (Vexlard – Latitude Nord for the quarter of Ecoin, Bernard Paris – Atelier de la Gère and Alain Marguerit for the quarter of the city centre). The existing plants and vegetation were not specially mixed, nor varied. They were mainly implemented as visual structuring elements (using heights and sizes). What dominates this period is the regeneration and the

renewal of all public spaces, which meant changing the very logic behind these large scale social housing developments, and redefining new uses for old spaces (In Ecoin for example, the street becomes multi-use space). From this period on, there is a will to develop, for Vaulx-en-Velin, a landscaped system based on garden city models, suggesting the creation of a new cityscape. The street structure is developed into a *modus operandi*. This approach to public spaces is the first to restore a sense of scale and urban continuity.

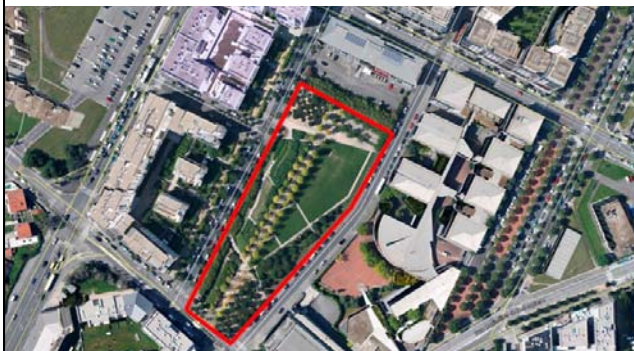


Picture 10 & 11 - Neighbourhood of Ecoin - the restructuring through the introduction of a new levelling of the landscape and the hierarchy of its formalism

C - Implementation of a more mixed vegetation landscape (middle 2000) and development of the central and collective urban park

The development of central urban parks is introduced: the garden of the Peace and Liberties by Alain Marguerit (5 ha) in the city centre (2005). In 1990, a new urban project was also developed and the shopping mall was demolished (*le Grand Vire*), leaving the ground floor space available for a public park in the city center of Vaulx-en-Velin. Thanks to this demolition, the whole site breathed easier and found new grounds for new development and landscaping.

Vaulx-en-Velin, being largely built on the Rhône river bed, has a particular landscape of ramified thoroughfares made up of swamp land and stagnant river tributaries rich in biodiversity



Picture 12 & 13 - The garden of the Peace and Liberties (A. Marguerit): The landscape architect's use of water (stagnant river tributaries) as a main theme to create a new landscape drawn from the past (and a new children's playground !)

D - Biodiversity and a return to more primary plants and vegetation, less water dependant (2010). New technologies for new projects. A collective work allowing designers and engineers to share a mix of expertise.

The example of the City hall URBAN DEVELOPMENT ZONE. 1st PHASE (before 2010): Bernard Paris - Atelier de la Gère, architect & A. Marguerit landscape architect
2nd PHASE (from 2010): M. Pelosse architect, Eranthis landscape architect, Sitétudes engineers, F.Gschwind lighting designer).

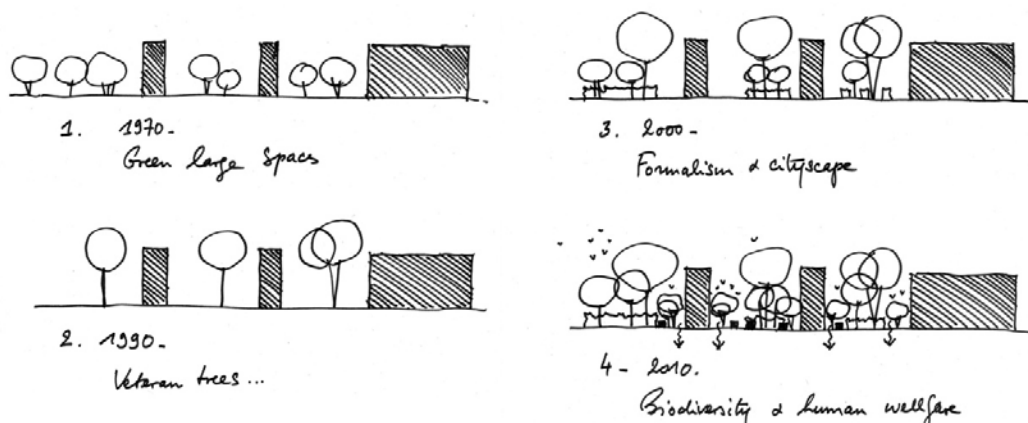


Evolution of the site : 1996 (the shopping mall still exists)
2002 (the main lines of the Urban Development Zone are drawn)
2012 (today's urban park and renewed landscape)



Picture 14 - Aerial view of the Urban development zone Picture 15 - Along the park (Axe Saône)

Plants and vegetation chosen to be planted in urban zones respond to several criteria the rustic character (resistance to urban pollution and adaptability in forced environments). Blossoming and fruit cycles (to welcome insects and birds). Minimum maintenance necessities (pruning and watering) and the aesthetics of the landscape.



Picture 16: evolution of the green spaces from the 60s to the present day. The role of the landscape architect is to preserve the old trees (first level) and to create simultaneously a new landscape on a human scale (second level)

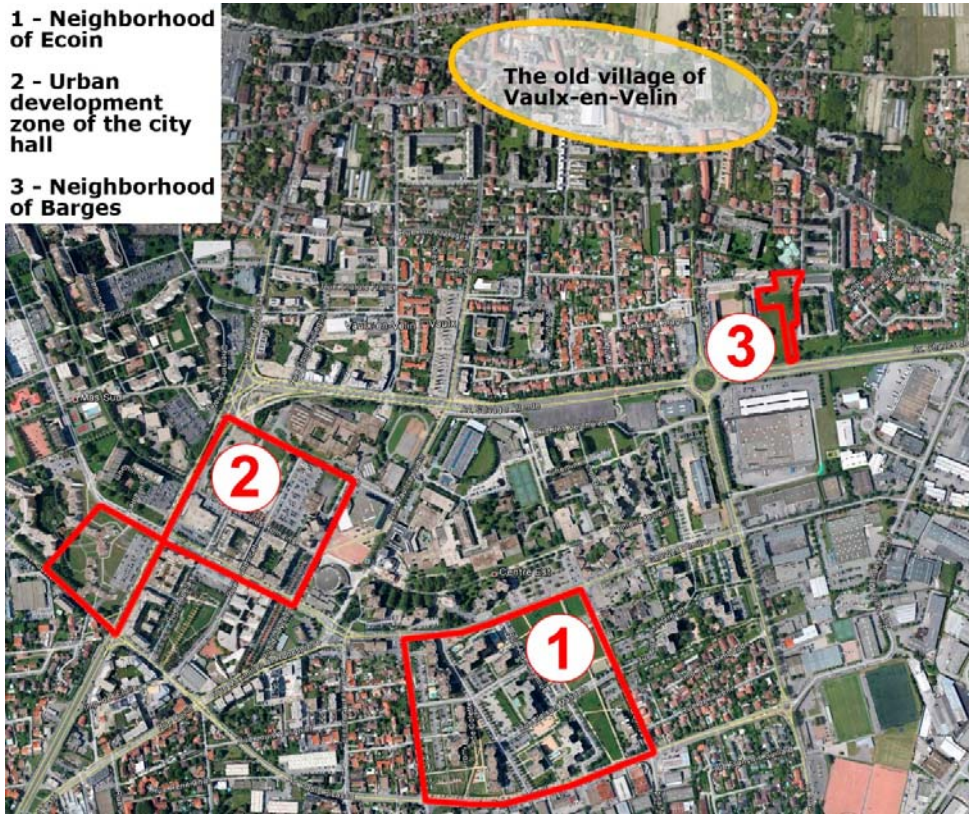
III - THE 'REQUALIFICATION' OF DIFFERENT NEIGHBORHOODS USING SHARED PUBLIC SPACES

Three examples successfully demonstrating the city's process:

1 - Neighborhood of Ecoin

2 - Urban development zone of the city hall

3 - Neighborhood of Barges



- 1. Ecoin (2001 – 2009) – 10 ha. Project management: Latitude Nord landscape architect, Atelier sur les quais architect, Cap Vert engineers.**

The renewal of the whole neighbourhood includes the development of new streets, squares and urban parks, the reconstruction of parking lots, the creation of family gardens and common spaces.

This redevelopment was based, throughout the project, on a strong partnership between the different protagonists and urban diagnosis alongside anticipation of the future management and cross-financing.

All large scale social housing developments now have common spaces, which put forward various gardens and green spaces, as well as playgrounds. About twenty family gardens have been organized.

Two squares in the heart of this neighbourhood (3 000 - 1 600m²) offer new spaces dedicated to conviviality and allow the planning and the organization of community events and activities.

The urban park suggests various aspects of space sharing: playgrounds, mini sporting grounds (soccer, basketball, etc.), specific gardens and green spaces.

The Association "Vaulx Jardins" manages garden lots that remain at the inhabitants' disposal through a 'Management Service Agreement' signed with the Vaulx-en-Velin city council.

The Association informs and educates the gardeners and the public and enables the development of all the cultural and educational activities.



Pictures 17, 18 & 19 - The family gardens, with rain water collection for use in watering



Picture 20 - The new playgrounds

The Association helps to animate these meeting places and relaxation family gardens with activities and services to the community with the aim to respect the person and the environment.

Following agrobiological gardening methods, the inhabitants participate in the embellishment of their neighbourhood.

**2. The Urban Development Zone of the City hall (2010 – 2018) – 11 ha.
Project management: Marc Pelosse, Eranthis, François Gschwind,
Sitéudes. City planners: Lieux-dits, environment expertise: Urbaneco, soil
expertise: Sol Paysage**

The Urban Development Zone of the City hall began in 2010. The project consists mainly of green infrastructures and rain gardens, using permeable materials (evergreen pavement for parking spaces).

Underground water treatment is made through the tree substrate. Plants used on the riverbank have an inherent capacity to support droughts as well as floods. These plants were selected for their capacity of surviving in polluted environments through root filtration of the rainwater and the physical properties of the substrate.

Piezometers (for water pressure measures) and probes are installed at the same time as planting occurs. The aim of this monitoring is to study the cleaning results as well as the growth rate of the plants. The urban waste management department will test

new alternatives to salt and glycol for winter ice road treatment.

The project succeeded in bridging the operational gap between the traditional departments managing all public streets (rainwater dept., green spaces and tree infrastructure dept., road building dept., urban waste management dept., City of Vaulx-en-Velin lighting dept., City of Vaulx-en-Velin, gardening dept.) and a new storm water /rain water management system: underground water treatment through tree substrate.



Pictures 21 & 22 - Perspectives of the future public spaces: new aesthetics for modern landscapes

3. The neighbourhood of Barges (2011 – 2014) – 0,5 ha. Project management: Eranthis landscape architects, Sitétudes engineers.

Our actions concerning the Barges neighbourhood are located not far from the urban City hall development zone. These two projects will moreover be under construction at the same time, we are but a few months away from the start of construction.

This project has already been the object of a public inquiry, and dialog with the inhabitants. Adjoining the project, a Youth and Sport centre participates strongly in the use of the site. It is for them, as well as for the local residents, that the project was developed.

The plants, evoking Vaulx-en-Velin's past, market gardening, is here at the heart of the project. A drawn shape upon the square's ground represents a huge thistle to remind the inhabitants of the city's past. This floral motif is also drawn in the street furniture.

This project aims to implement specific plant species that allow development of biodiversity. The introduction of bird houses is also planned. General maintenance will be managed either by the city or by the centre's young people.

The reintroduction of a small tree-lined grove (representing the historical forest on this site), of rain gardens and swales, planted for rainwater management purposes and made up of permeable materials (evergreen pavement for parking), and plants like native tree species and blossoming hedges of mixed varieties, recalls a rural image for the new square.

Multiple probes revealed the good quality of the existing soil: it seems to allow good water infiltration. Seeing its good quality, the excess topsoil will be reused for other nearby constructions, enhancing the site's value to all.



Picture 23 - The thistle, the city emblem, refers to the market gardening's past, just as the blossoming hedges of the City hall Urban Development Zone are a reminder of the old alluvial landscape ambiance.



With the Ecoin neighbourhood in mind, the landscape architect's main role consisted in establishing the layout for plants to be featured in display, using "French formalism". This restructuring formalism first changed *visitors'* attitudes and point of view on the city of Vaulx-en-Velin. Only then did the city's own *inhabitants* renew with this exterior viewpoint and came to see their living area as a more comfortable and convivial space: somewhere one is proud to show where he lives.

With the recent projects (2010), the plants are emerging with a new message. The landscape architects are no longer interested in formalism, but rather in the 'polyfunctionality' of the plants. The new technologies, the new intervention possibilities in public and urban spaces, by combining water, substrate and the plant's capacities (to survive in urban environments, to produce fruits and flowers, to clean the soil pollution), paved the way for projects whose own innovation sparked interest through the community. The landscape architect does not work isolated anymore, or mainly with architects and urban planners. His work has diversified and is now linked with researchers, academics, research laboratories, the most advanced engineers, who analyse water, air and earth. Plants are becoming 'polysémic', they have the faculty to dawn many layers of function and comprehension.

Finally, concurrently to this technology (and to the rediscovery of a necessary urban biodiversity), plants also have the capacity to tell stories. And the landscape architect uses the power of the collective imagination conveyed by plants in his work.

CONCLUSION

The social transformations needed for this community demanded the redevelopment of its territory. Today, the city's evolution puts forward two essential elements, indivisible from one another, in the success of this urbanization.

First, this requalification needs to involve the living being, whether it be human, animal or plant. Today, urban living does not mean breaking away from any form of nature (water, flora and fauna) or our intimate relation with these elements. The return to more permeable grounds, the sharing of garden lots, the welcome of a new biodiversity at buildings feet ... this return of nature in towns and neighbourhoods

creates a new landscape for the suburb.

And then, if these empty zones offered by the urbanization of large scale social housing developments try to create life, it is thanks to the collective work and human investment. Investment made up by users (shared gardens, maintenance of a green space by the community, by schools, by associations) but also by the public authorities (awareness of past errors and generalisation of better practices: managing waters through alternative treatment that don't overcharge the public network, the development of public transportation).

Here the shared wisdom, in this suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin, where nobody wanted to live anymore at the beginning of the 90s, found the strength to start all over again, by using the best means to reconstruct for all. The investment and the commitment of those who redid the city, the human factor, the understanding of past events and, not the least, time allowed these convivial places to successfully relive.

The research in urban policies concerning uses and maintenance in public spaces, has modified our vision of the public place. A return to Vaulx-en-Velin's simpler and calmer past also involved finding the best, individual and community contributions, some common sense that has led us to create spaces that enables inhabitants to implicate and to reinvest themselves bringing new and beneficial actions to the city they live in. This is found in the soil management, the water, the plants and the materials, optimizing the daily practices, the street cleaning and pavements, avoiding the saturation of the public works system, avoiding excess waste, general city embellishment project. To give to people the places that they will like maintaining (or at least not damage), because these are their spaces, because they shaped them.

The return to weekend gardening, the evocation of vegetables and lost landscapes, the reintroduction of biodiversity in towns, the desire to feel water under one's feet, to see it flowing, to hear rush by. The new projects, based on the experience and knowledge of the past, integrate these profoundly human elements, which make up the identity and the richness of a city or a neighbourhood.

« We want to call « landscape » the product of countless compatible policies from inhabitants, who continuously develop the relationship between things ».

(« Nous voulons appeler « paysage » la forme produite par d'innombrables actions compatibles d'habitants qui tissent continuellement les rapports entre les choses »).

Lucien Kroll, « Tout est paysage ». (*Everything is landscape*).

Glossary

ZFU (Zone franche urbaine)

French free trade zone

Pacte de relance de la ville

city renewal pact

ZAC (Zone d'aménagement concerté)

urban development zone

ZUP (Zone d'urbanisation prioritaire)

« priority development area »

Pouvoirs publics

public authorities

Politiques publiques

public policy

Cité nouvelle

« New urban city »

Grands ensembles

« large scale social housing developments »

Works : Olivier Bertrand, « Vaulx-en-Velin, la citée retrouvée », CAUE du Rhône (Parc de la Paix et des Libertés), Vaulx-en-Velin, Grand Projet de Ville (Ecoin-sous-la-Combe), G. Vexlard, Latitude Nord (Ecoin-sous-la-Combe), Bernard Paris, Atelier de la Gère & Atelier des Paysages, A. Marguerit (ZAC Hôtel de Ville), Lucien Kroll, « Tout est paysage ».

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Photo credits: Atelier de la Gère, Vaulx-en-Velin GPV, Jérémie Cormier, Olivier Bertrand, Eranthis.

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