

# To speak in order to inhabit: oral tools for the history, analysis, and design of architecture

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The place of oral history within the historiography of modern architecture is not yet sufficiently understood and, therefore, its potential use has been diminished. The oral history of architecture has had a discrete conceptualization since the explosion in the 1960s and 1970s of publications and other media that established the modern architectural canon as a perfect illustration of ‘the medium is the message. If, as Michael Hays states, the vocation of theory is to produce the concepts by which architecture relates to other spheres of social practice, oral history is a sociological method that deals with the spoken word through interviews to learn information from the past. The interview will be approached as a means to access information, significance, interpretation, and meaning, the latter depending, in the words of J. P. Bonta, on the responses of the interpreters, reflected in documents or experiments.

The interview is the raw material of oral history. Since the 1970s and 1980s, oral history enthusiasts such as Ronald Grele, Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini, and Michael Frisch, among others, have been engaged in this task and, since then, oral history has been a political movement, benefiting from what journalists had been doing since the mid-19th century to construct the news of the moment. Oral history interviews within the discipline of architectural history and theory constitute the inclusion of other voices in the theoretical discourse, something that goes hand in hand with a broadening of the scope of architectural critical production. The lived experiences that inhabitants can recount about projects have often been considered off-limits to the discipline, but the reality is that they expand the working material to be recorded in architectural historiography.

In 1969, architect and historian Philippe Boudon published *Le Corbusier's Pessac* in French, the 1972 English version of which was titled *Lived-in Architecture, Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited*. It was based on oral accounts gathered from interviews with the inhabitants of Le Corbusier's housing project in the Pessac industrial district outside Bordeaux (1926-1930) to contrast the known story of the architect's vision with the reality lived by its inhabitants. Boudon's

experiment in interviewing those who lived in what Le Corbusier called ‘machines for living’ is a sociological exercise that involves the instrumentalization of orality for architectural decision-making. Through transcribed accounts, Boudon's example demystifies the figure of the architect, that of the solitary creator who maintains a distance from reality; something which, albeit at that time was a guarantee of a critical spirit, today can easily become an unnecessary distance from society.

*Lived-in Architecture* is structured in two parts: the first, with the historical account of the project, the reaction of the contemporary press, and Le Corbusier's conception of Pessac; the second, with the method used and interviews with the occupants. The foreword was written by Henri Lefebvre, whose work on the production of social space and everyday life has made significant contributions to the field of architecture. For him, Boudon inaugurates a new form of research in the book, and his analysis of the qualities produced by the occupants of Pessac in an undifferentiated urban environment contributes to the advancement of urban studies. He states the following:

“What was Le Corbusier trying to do at Pessac? By building in a modern style and by taking due account of economic and social problems he hoped to produce low-cost houses that would be pleasant to live in [...] But what did he actually achieve? [...] Le Corbusier produced a kind of architecture that lent itself to conversion and sculptural ornamentation. And what did the occupants do? Instead of installing themselves in their containers, instead of adapting to them and living in them ‘passively’, they decided that as far as possible they were going to live ‘actively’. In doing so they showed what living in a house really is: an activity. They took what had been offered to them and worked on it, converted it, and added to it. What did they add? Their needs. They created distinctions, whose significance is analyzed in this book. They introduced personal qualities. They built a differentiated social cluster”.

It is revealing that it was a sociologist who wrote the foreword to a book that, in Lefebvre's own words, introduced the ‘lived’ aspect of the discipline of architecture. The documentary work of the interviews serves to recover the stories of those co-producers of architecture whose voices have been overlooked and whose contribution has not been recorded, the inhabitants being other agents involved in a project and who should be the subject of further research as representatives of other fields that would come into play. The interviews involve the construction of an intermediate space in which drawings or some traditional design tools disappear and are replaced by the word. Using Boudon's case study, the objective is to make an interpretation of the oral source as a transversal tool for the history, analysis, and project of architecture, and thereby show the instrumental value of interviews with inhabitants as a link between habitats and those who inhabit them.

## The interview as an architectural practice

As oral historian Lynn Abrams points out, conducting the interview is a practical means of obtaining information<sup>1</sup>. But in the process of elaborating an analysis of the material, *Lived-In Architecture* interviews are an act of communication to find ways to understand not only what is said, but also how it is said, why it is said, and what it means. What is produced is both the act of recording and the recording. As a result, practice becomes theory without being separated from analysis, i.e., the interview process is not disaggregated from the narrative and its interpretation. Considering narrative as a form that is used to translate knowledge into something that is told, the dialogue with the inhabitants of Pessac configures a spoken story organized in the form of narrative as a theory that can benefit from the practical experience of design.

Boudon's book is a precedent for *Post-Occupancy Evaluations*<sup>2</sup>, and the academic articles<sup>3</sup> that make reference to the text do so from very different angles. Authors such as F. Kostorou, M. Guggenheim or S. Eloy and P. Vermaas, emphasize the transformations of the building made by users over time. Other works such as that of J. Gosseye, with N. Stead and D. Van der Plaats, K. Block and F. Scott, consider it an essential reference as a methodology in the oral history of architecture. Some authors such as N. Mota also link Boudon's text with the theories of *open-building* architecture or adaptation of buildings during their life cycle, reflecting on the duality between seriation and individuality or, like T. Benton, with regards to the need for a housing architecture that transforms and grows over time.

When Boudon visited forty years after its completion the *Quartiers Modernes Frugès* (that was the name of the housing project for industrial workers commissioned by the entrepreneur Henry Frugès) built in Pessac by Le Corbusier, his surprise was that not only had the colors disappeared, but the windows were narrower, the courtyards were enclosed, the terraces roofed and the piles blocked, creating a “general impression of dilapidation”<sup>4</sup> [Fig. 01]. There was an obvious conflict between what the architect intended and what the inhabitants wanted. Far from seeing it as an architectural failure, the interest lay in the motivations that had led the inhabitants to convert their homes, and to understand their reactions to the architect's original conception, it was necessary to talk to them.

## Interviews as lived experiences

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the spoken word takes precedence over the written word because the modulatory qualities of the voice are particularly successful in uniting the rational element with the emotional one. The edited transcript loses many of these advantages compared to the active event that reflects a specific culture with a particular time and space, so Boudon's aimed to report on a particular housing experiment where architectural and

habitational factors were at work on a more intimate scale, considering the following: “whenever the verbatim reproduction of original material might prove of interest to the reader, I have not hesitated to adopt this course. On many occasions it has seemed to me that press articles, printed texts and interviews have spoken for themselves; in such cases, I have preferred to let them do so”.

The evaluation of *Lived-in Architecture* has an objective basis, as it is developed from verbatim transcripts of interviews conducted in Pessac with the occupants at the time. Looking at some architectural concepts in the light of these interviews, one of the advantages of the research was that it made it possible to assess the reality of architectural functionalism and to determine the practical implications for the occupants of a concept based on a theoretical classification. For Boudon, it is significant that some of the interviewees complained about the “lack of rationalism”, stating that certain features of the houses are “not logical”, “not rational”, “inconvenient”, “awkward”, or “impractical”. Instead of limiting his study to the analysis of a specific aspect of Pessac’s experience, he attempts to compare the ways of living with the architecture that must integrate the various technical, aesthetic, and human factors involved in the construction of houses.

Boudon conducted his study based on interviews with inhabitants in collaboration with Raymond and Monique Fichelet—who organized a discussion group made up of architects—and Claude Nedelec. Of the 174 people who lived in the neighborhood, they were only able to interview about 40, as they initially aroused the curiosity of several inhabitants who were more receptive to talk but the task ended up becoming a routine that diminished the interest of other residents. Their selection was determined by several factors, such as the type of housing, whether or not there were modifications, the ownership or tenant status of the inhabitants, time of residence in the district, the age of the occupants, and the size of families in the various dwellings. For the interviewees, it was difficult not to form preconceived ideas about the evolution of Pessac or to formulate theories to explain the changes to which the neighborhood had been subjected. In their words, “this made it all the more important not to hint at such theories in the interviews, for we had to create a framework—without bringing any influence to bear—that would enable the occupants to think about their houses and recall their experiences”.

They attached greater importance to the presence or absence of fixed questions and how these were formulated, so these were non-directive interviews where questionnaires were excluded: “It would, after all, have been a pity to have thrown away the considerable advantages offered by the non-directive method in order to obtain precise answers on isolated points [...] any answers given to specific questions of this kind would almost inevitably have been subject to a certain reserve, especially those to questions involving the personality of Le

Corbusier [...]”. In the first phase of Boudon’s research, the interviews lasted about an hour and a half each, and in the second phase, they were shorter and more numerous. All were tape-recorded. As highlighted by Anisa Puri and Kevin Bradley in *Creating an Oral History Archive* (2016)<sup>5</sup>, the act of listening provokes an internal process of visualization that humanizes our understanding of the interviewee.

### **Interviews as an element of representation**

The interviews in *Lived-in Architecture* seek to reproduce as faithfully as possible the encounter with the inhabitants and their perception of the architect’s intentions. In the words of its author, pointing to one of the shorter interviews: “this interview nonetheless conveys a definite impression of the profound resonance which life, in all its fullness, is able to produce in a dwelling house”. He refers to how a house, despite its apparent passivity, can constitute a target for the projection of feelings and reflects the image of the people who inhabit it: “A house expresses the universality of life. For this reason, I felt that I should reproduce one of the interviews at length since it is only in its totality that an interview can represent the totality of ‘living’ [...] I have drawn attention to the repetition of the word ‘now’ by printing it in italics. By insisting on this comparison between past and present the tenant would seem to imply that the house was no longer the same as it had once been. [...]”<sup>6</sup> [Fig. 02].

The validity of this interpretation is questionable because it is subjective in architectural - not sociological - terms, but what concerns Boudon is the close personal relationship that the inhabitant develops with his house, and he even goes to great lengths to make this evident in representing the ‘spoken word’. In a note presenting the interviews studied, he acknowledges that the most fruitful way to study them is by comparing them with each other [Fig. 03]. A method that, according to him, allows a continuous reproduction with certain problems of representation that are solved using an explanatory legend to ‘draw’ the interviews, located on a reference plane [Fig. 04]. The interviews with inhabitants stage an alternative discourse to the one that sometimes the architectural discourse is accustomed to, and which can assume a fundamental role in configuring a tool of oral representation. This a scenario in which, as Leonor Arfuch points out, conversations do not seek to reduce complexity—they rather delve into it- and do not constitute a minor genre compared to the essay, the treatise, or the thesis, but a different way of sustaining the word<sup>7</sup>.

### **Interviews as a transforming agent**

One of the challenges is how to understand and preserve the orality of the spoken word in the architectural discipline. There are cases where oral history can innovate in format but not in method, as in the case of the audio interviews that John Peter included

in *Oral History of Modern Architecture* (1994), well-known history of some renowned architects<sup>8</sup>. It is not a matter of both interviewer and interviewee having a status to gain but of not perpetuating the same answers or the same view of the subjects. In contrast, Boudon’s method does give voice to other co-authoring agents in the evolution of a Le Corbusier-built project: its inhabitants.

His more limited but far-reaching research is innovative in its starting hypothesis by including the existence of a relationship between, on the one hand, the location of the houses and, on the other hand, the personality and lifestyle of their occupants. In an empirical procedure through the analysis of interviews, he mainly studied the alterations made by the inhabitants, the composition of the different types of houses, and their positions in the neighborhood. These three variables were chosen for their relation to the common and constant element of standardization, recognized by Le Corbusier as one of the most important aspects for him -but hardly mentioned during the interviews- in the Pessac project. The themes that give titles to the different categories of the interviews are: “the parts of the house and the house as an entity; the conceptions of the occupants; comparison with Le Corbusier’s architectural conception; spatial and social relations in the district”<sup>9</sup>.

An example of the transformative capacity of the interviews with the inhabitants of Pessac is also evident in this aspect, as one of Boudon’s initial assumptions was that the external transformations of the dwellings constituted a reaction to the use of standardized building components and the transformations were made to personalize the standardized appearance of the houses. But after interviewing some of the early occupants, the response was that there was no opposition to standardization but that the alterations were made to highlight or enhance the personal qualities that the homes already possessed. And to demonstrate the correlation between the locations occupied by certain houses and the exterior transformations made by their occupants, he drew up a diagram based on the observations of the residents during the interviews [Fig. 05].

### **Interviews as a participatory project method**

Through the interviews, Boudon demonstrated that the modifications made by the inhabitants were a positive consequence of Le Corbusier’s original conception since, with the changes they referred to have made, the project gave them enough freedom to satisfy and discover their needs. Despite some discrepancies detected in the conversations between the inhabitants’ statements and their actions, he concludes, “This coherence of action between the architect and the occupants seems to derive, in the first place, from the ‘construction game’ used by Le Corbusier at Pessac, which led naturally to the ‘conversion game’ subsequently played by the occupants. Thus, the rules of the game established by Le Corbusier proved very fertile”<sup>10</sup>.

The question is whether interviews should not be another design tool for the conception, construction, and reconversion of an architectural project. Apart from the essayistic and speculative value of interviews 'of' or 'between' architects in the theoretical field, the instrumental value for design purposes is key in the role of an architect in planning and, in the case of a dwelling, "living a house"<sup>11</sup>. The incorporation, on the one hand, of the journalistic method and, on the other hand, of the sociological method - qualitatively or quantitatively - establishes a direct dialogue for project decisions that can serve as a basis or can contribute to an architectural starting point (such as the standardization proposed by Le Corbusier in Pessac). The Smithsons - for whom "architecture is a conversation"<sup>12</sup> - tried questionnaires on collective housing design criteria [Fig. 06] in research such as *London Roads Study*<sup>13</sup>. By failing to do so in their *Robin Hoods Gardens* project, for example, and relying on architecture to solve existing social problems on its own, the result was vandalized by its residents, its design proved too abstract for general use, and the inhabitants appropriated the open space<sup>14</sup>.

It should be considered that attention to the human factor was a priority theme for a relevant sector of architecture after World War II. The concern for the dwelling introduced changes on several fronts, including in the photography used by some architectural magazines. One case is that of the magazine *Espacés et Sociétés* -founded by Lefebvre-, which Giancarlo De Carlo resumed independently in *Spazio e Società* [Fig. 07]. It was a matter of thinking, representing, and projecting architecture as a living space, as opposed to its understanding as a mere abstract object. In that sense, it is convenient not to separate Philippe Boudon's book from its historical context. If Boudon's work is analytical, Giancarlo De Carlo's ideas on participatory design (which explicitly refers to methods based on the oral) are project-oriented.

De Carlo and sociologist Domenico de Masi set up participatory processes in the form of consultations and discussions with the future inhabitants of the buildings in the Matteotti working-class neighborhood housing project in Terni [Fig. 08], including interviews as part of the project phases [Fig. 09]. One of the phases of their proposal consists in the elaboration of a program of previous meetings with the potential users in order to compare the architect's objectives with the real needs of the potential inhabitants. This program consisted of recorded interviews, conducted with groups of no more than fifteen people and preceded by the distribution of a questionnaire [Fig. 10] noting the frequency with which topics are addressed in each interview. The representative sample of interviewees was one hundred people out of a total of more than one thousand households in housing need and was made based on age and members of each family. The participatory interview process contributed to increasing the architect's and inhabitants' awareness of the living needs and their acceptance of the architectural language with a remarkable sense of belonging<sup>15</sup>.

## The architectural interview as an oral tool

Colin St. John Wilson affirms that the intervention obtained in response to the dialogue possesses greater richness than that of the monologue and allows understanding factors such as "the facts of life"<sup>16</sup>. The case of Boudon talking to the inhabitants opens the field to an architecture that applies orality as a method of work, design, thought or exploration, and thus acts as a project tool. In *The Linguistic Turn*<sup>17</sup>, Rorty proposes the replacement of academic philosophy by various forms of conversation in art, literature and, why not, architecture. The idea is not to replace but to normalize oral documentation in architectural knowledge as a form of knowledge for practice and theory that preserves scientific rigor, not rigidity. The defense of conversation and the word allows architectural studios to be more open and communicative, and decisions are not only made through drawing but by using another project method: an oral, collective one.

This was done by De Carlo using participation in a pre-occupational dialectical design with a sociological methodology that integrated interviews of a rather quantitative nature, but for planning purposes. In Boudon's case, the dialogue is post-occupational, although of qualitative nature, so that despite its analytical purpose, it is of instrumental utility for the design of other projects. Thus, the key but largely overlooked question is the role of the interview as an oral tool in architectural practice; not interviews of architects but interviews by architects. And how the interview technique can be part of the design process, defining a category of an interview that makes it architectural in the same way as we refer to an architectural drawing. The interview is not only used as a mechanism to obtain information but also as a strategic format of the project itself, that is, a fruitful strategy that arises as a response to the needs of inhabiting and which operates with proprietary methodologies to represent a project.

## Biography

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1. Lynn Abrams. *Oral history theory* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 13.
2. It is posed as the *Post-occupancy Evaluation* (POE), which emerged in the 1960s to evaluate social aspects of design through social research techniques -including interviews- with occupants.
3. Scholarly articles from the last ten years in mainstream journals (cited in the final bibliographic references) mentioning Boudon.
4. Philippe Boudon, *Lived-in Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972), 1.
5. Kevin Bradley and Anisa Puri. "Creating an Oral History Archive: Digital Opportunities and Ethical Issues", *Australian Historical Studies: Oral History and Australian Generations*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2016), 75-91.

6. *Ibid.*, 79.
7. Leonor Arfuch. *La entrevista, una invención dialógica* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1995).
8. John Peter. *The Oral History of Modern Architecture: Interviews with the Greatest Architects of the Twentieth Century* (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).
9. Boudon, op. cit., 1.
10. Boudon, op. cit. 163.
11. Carmen Castro, "Especie de examen de conciencia", *Revista Arquitectura*, n.º. 104 (1967), 38-40.
12. Beatriz Colomina. "Collaboration is the story" in *INTERVIEWS*, ed. Federica Goffi (London & NY: Routledge, 2020), 306.
13. Alison and Peter Smithson, "London Roads Study", in *Team 10 Primer* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1968), 75.
14. Dirk van den Heuvel, "Recolonising the Modern: Robin Hood Gardens Today", in *Architecture is not made with the brain: The labor of Alison and Peter Smithson* (London: Architectural Association, 2005), 30-36.
15. Alberto Franchini, *Il Villaggio Matteotti a Terni: Giancarlo De Carlo e l'abitare collettivo* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2020), 174.
16. Colin St. John Wilson. *La otra tradición de la arquitectura moderna: el proyecto inacabado* (Madrid: Reverté/DCa ETSAM UPM, 2021), 85.
17. Richard Rorty. *The Linguistic Turn. Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Oral history  
Interview  
Sociology  
Boudon  
Lived-in Architecture