



## **Anchoring a municipal bath house in a (reluctant) Marseille neighborhood**

### **How to balance a policy of solidarity with the politics of living together?**

Claire Bénit-Gbaffou

Associate Professor, Planning, Aix Marseille Université &  
Researcher in MESOPOLHIS / CUBES

Coordinator: Atelier Marseille 4-5

[Claire.benit@univ-amu.fr](mailto:Claire.benit@univ-amu.fr)

<https://atelier4-5.mmslh.fr>

*© 2023, photo taken by a resident living rue Crillon, from her flat. A bath user sits in the street at a building's gate, waiting for his turn.*

# « I live through hell »



© Bénit-Gbaffou, April 2023. On this large, mineral pavement just next to public hospital La Timone, homeless people are accustomed to gather in the evening – as at 19h00 every evening, there is a mobile food distribution on this spot, and some beneficiaries spend the night there, leaning against the shopwindows of Casino supermarket.

As I was putting up posters to invite the neighborhood to our Atelier 4-5 exhibition on the relationship between the municipal bath house and the area, asking traders if i could use their shopwindows to do so, a supermarket manager invites me to her office, and tells me, with photographs on her phone and tears in her eyes: *« every morning, I have to clean the garbage and the feaces of the homeless people who have spent the night at our shopwindow. We fill in a full trolley of garbage everyday. Really, I live through hell »*

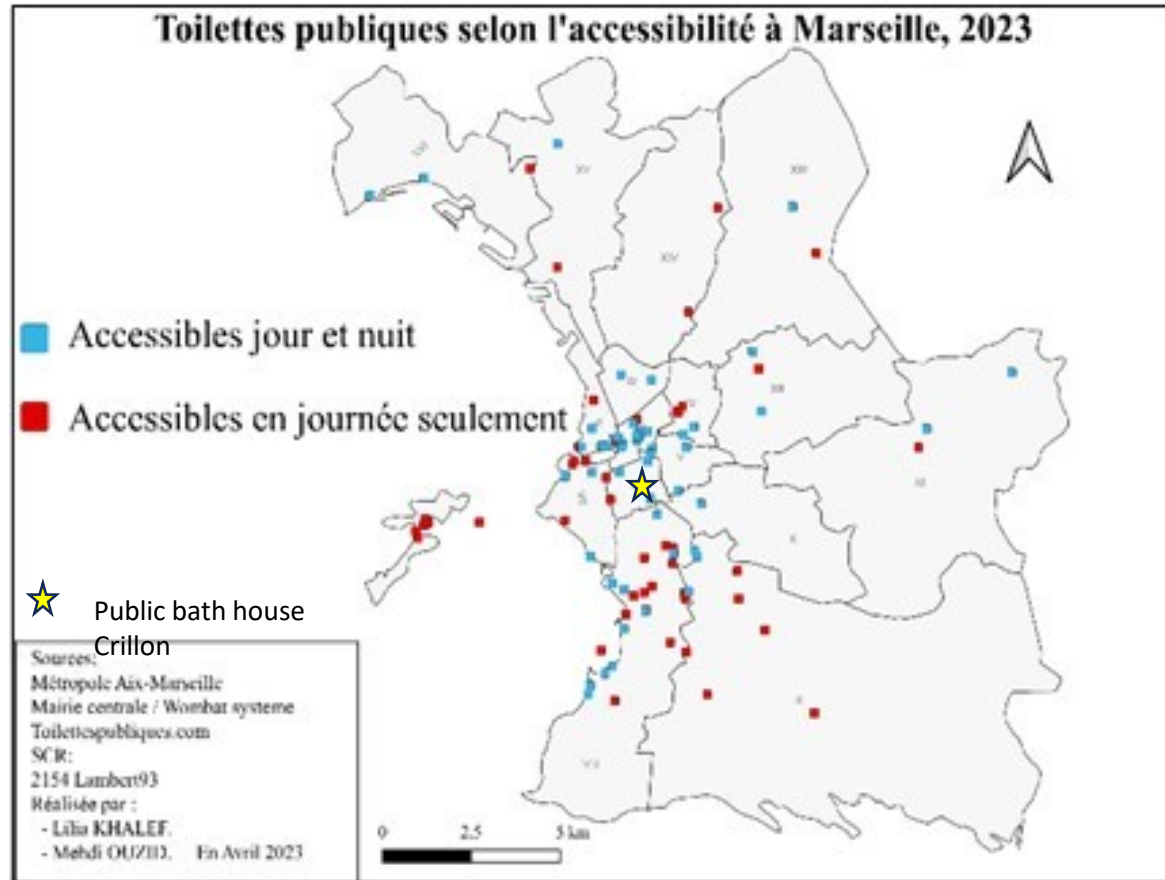
The homeless people using the public bath house, interviewed by students, had narrated how important the bath house was to them : to access, at least at specific times in the day and week, cleanliness (a shower, a set of clean clothes), dignity and solidarity from the municipal agents (food, coffee, welcome, networks), and a degree of structure in their day and week (schedule, regularity, reliability). They did not say so, but *not* having access to sanitation facilities (and public toilets) certainly was part of living « through hell », if not « in hell »

Of course the « hell » of the ones cannot be compared to the « hell » of the others. But ignoring the former to only mention the latter, does breed anger, frustration, polarisation and hatred.

**How to we keep together, in our reflexion, in our recognition, in public interventions, the two narratives of « hell » experienced by these neighbours? How can we construct solidarity to be valued by both parties, or at least modes of co-habitation?**

**This is what was at stake in the Atelier 4-5 study and what we tried to foster in organising our public exhibition.**

## Scarcity of public sanitation facilities in Marseille



For Atelier Marseille 4-5, a group of geography students chose to work on 'public access to water' in Marseille – and produced this map of public toilets in Marseille. It shows that the south of Marseille, more touristic and more bourgeois, has significantly more toilets than the rest of the city. The availability of toilet and showers on the beaches in particular, was often mentioned by many homeless people as a reason to go and settle in these areas. Others would sneak in public institutions, such as hospitals or sport infrastructure, to do so.

On this specific spot, notorious for the gathering of homeless people at night, one answer could be... to open a public toilet. But fears abound that rather than alleviating the issue, this could aggravate it, as told by the leader of the local neighborhood association (CID Conception Baille, interview April 2024)

« Some time ago, I suggested that a public toilet be open [on the large pavement in front of the supermarket]. But the neighborhood association members were not keen, they said it would attract more homeless people »

In Marseille, there is a notorious lack of public access to water and sanitation facilities in the city. The second largest city in France only offers one public toilet for 16.000 residents (1 for 3.000 in Paris and Lyon). Yet it is significantly poorer than the other French cities. The same goes for public drinking fountains and municipal bath houses, which were many at the beginning of the XXth century, but in Marseille were always managed by private or NGO actors.

- The project of opening a municipal bath house in the area (rue Crillon) emerged in 2021, just after the COVID sanitary crisis (where all NGO bath houses had to be closed temporarily).
- It was met with huge opposition in the neighborhood: a petition was circulated, angry and racist comments were uttered, councillors and agents were verbally abused, the amenity was vandalised several times
- ... In a neighborhood where there had been earlier plans to open a low-risk drug consumption center (2017), which was never realised due to residents' opposition.

## Conception Baille, a middle-income neighborhood in Marseille?

Conception Baille is located in the 5th district of Marseille, south east of the city center - in a city marked by a broad north-south divide (a more popular north, a wealthier south).

However, it is not a 'bourgeois' neighborhood. Rather, it hosts what french statistics calls the « intermediary professions »: people with a low to medium salary, generally educated but through relatively short studies post matric (traders, small entrepreneurs, self-employed workers).

The average household income, medium at the scale of Marseille, hides a degree of social diversity, with significant pockets of poverty, and households living in decayed and small apartments.

Marseille 4th and 5th arrondissements  
Public Bath House Crillon



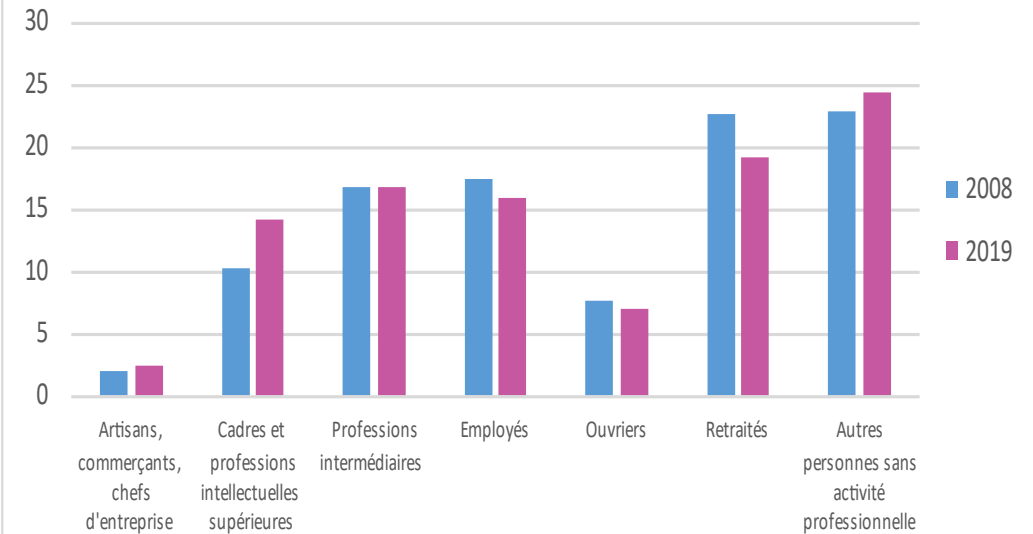
« These vagrant drug addicts are f...g annoying ! Fair enough, we need to take care of vagrants, but there are too many. Poverty is spreading. I have no problem with the bath house, you know, it happens, some people have it tough... The issue really is not the bath house, it is the psychiatric hospital. Loons are roaming in the street here, it is frightening ».  
(Grocery store owner, Baille)

In the last 10 years (2008-2019), the population has changed:

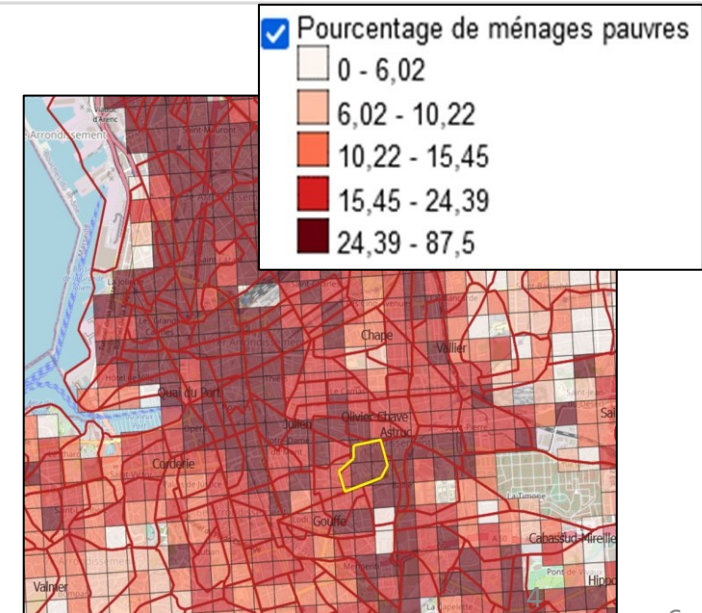
- rise of educated middle classes, and of the unemployed
- decrease of the working class (workers and employees) and of pensioners.

- ➔ A dynamic of '**gentrification**', where the previous population (middle to old age intermediary workers) is declining in favour of younger, more educated households;
- ➔ Where social distance between residents is on the increase (rise of both the richest and the poorest): **social polarisation**

Evolution socio-professionnelle des habitants du 5ème arrondissement de Marseille, 2008-2019



<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2011101?geo=COM-13205>

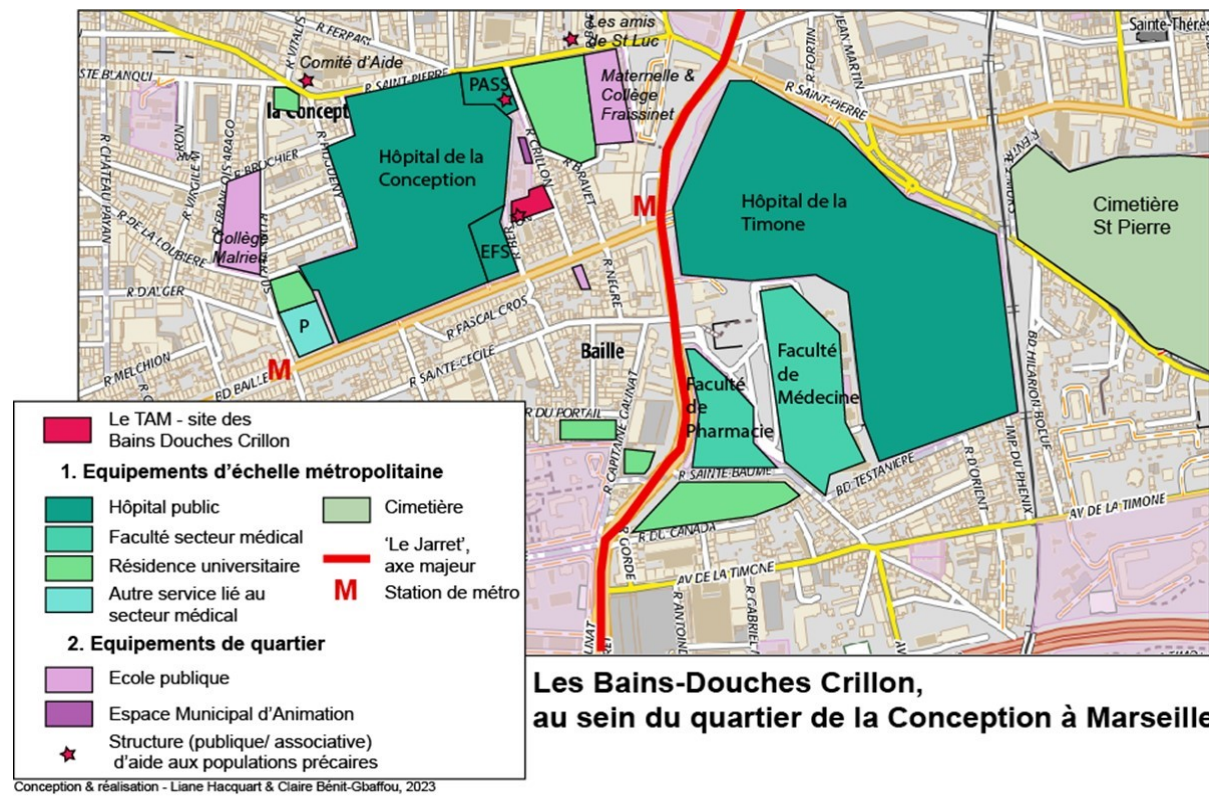


Source: INSEE 2019 – Conception Baille in yellow

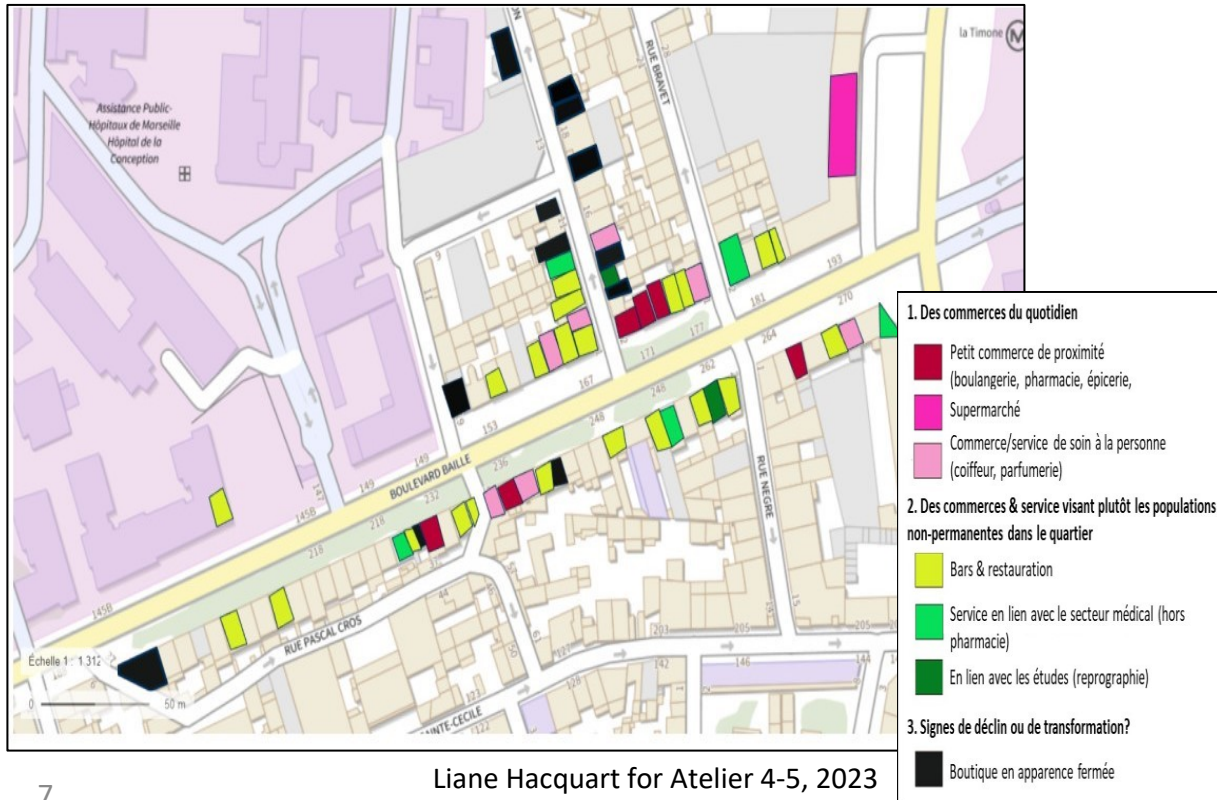
# Conception Baile, gentrification and decay – a feeling of loss of ‘neighborliness’

This demographic change is visible in the urban landscape:

- Shops permanently closed down, especially in inner narrow neighborhood streets
- Bars and restaurants are multiplying on the main avenue (Boulevard Baile),
- Students accommodation are densifying the area and replacing low-rise, decaying and affordable buildings.



**Les Bains-Douches Crillon, au sein du quartier de la Conception à Marseille**



Previous destructuring urban change, metropolitan-scaled facilities (1970s):

- A major urban highway (running North-South and covering a former river, Le Jarret)
- Metropolitan health facilities: Hôpital La Timone (adding to the former Hôpital La Conception), and several medical faculties.
- Major public and private parkings have been constructed – while on-street parking is being restricted by the new municipality

All those infrastructure both destructuring the neighborhood by their scale, and not perceived as benefiting directly its permanent residents.

**These two features : the presence of major metropolitan facilities (including a psychiatric hospital), and the demographic, commercial and residential change in the neighborhood, contribute to a feeling of loss of « neighbourliness » by its aging, long-term residents.**

## May 2023 –Atelier Marseille 4-5 exhibition on site 'The public bath house and the neighborhood'

The Studio organised a poster exhibition in the public bath house, presenting various actors' practices and putting the bath house and the neighborhood in a larger perspective and context (2 years after its opening).

The event was a moment of grace. I even thought for myself 'everyone is happy: I must have done something wrong!'. What went 'right', then? Everybody seems to find their place – recognition of their views – and some ability to listen and acknowledge others.

- **Public bath users** were moved to see their words written down and taken seriously
- Irrate **residents** and their leaders felt acknowledged and not caricatured, not treated as fascists even if some conservative views could be contested or criticised
- **Street level municipal agents** were pleased that some of their challenges were flagged to the authorities, in particular they having to bear the charge of anger and violence in the area
- **District councillors** were happy to no longer be molested and able to celebrate this achievement, .... and that some of their frustrations towards **central councillors** (who had opened the public bath house without informing them) could be aired;
- **central municipal officials** were imagining how this story of (relative) integration could be used in other areas to open other public bath houses
- A homeless man ended the exhibition by quoting a poem (Rudyard Kipling, 'You'll be a man, my sons') to **students who were all very moved**, as his 'life lesson' to them

## How did we organise this exhibition, so that it could become a success? A short note on City Studio methodology - the important place given to « feedback »

There were 7 groups of students (Geography/ Anthropology) each focusing on a specific study for 3 months, on the broad theme « public bath houses and their neighborhood » (history/ residents/ users/ workers/ design/ traders etc).

Their draft poster was discussed and edited with each stakeholder, prior to publication: this process allowed for discussion, reformulation, complementary information.

After the exhibition, follow up mediation meetings were proposed.



©Floderer, May 2023, Bains Douches Crillon. Vote of thanks for the closing session – district councillor (late) Jean Michel Laurens, a bath house user, bath house manager Cathy Lafon, and Studio director Claire Bénit-Gbaffou

# What were the tensions that the Studio uncovered and possibly, at least temporarily, help to mediate?

► The first of these tensions was embodied **between central and district municipality**, and relates to the **contradiction between principles of solidarity and redistribution (substantive justice) versus principles of local democracy and attention to all social groups (procedural democracy)**

- Substantive justice = heralded by the central municipality : not compromising on the opening of a much needed public bath house, in an area with an existing (and available) municipal building, and already an important number of precarious inhabitants in the neighborhood.
- Procedural justice = the domain of the district municipality, whose main political mandate (and power) is being close to the people at neighborhood level. But it was not able to conduct it, all the more that residents were viewed by some councillors as only political opponents and illegitimate in their claims.

## *Substantive justice...*

*'Opening a public bath house, it is a project aligned to my politics, it is a policy of social justice and solidarity, the programme I was elected to conduct.*

*I did it by stealth and I am not ashamed to say so, I did it on purpose. It is very easy to derail such a project, by endless local opposition.*

*I am not having that. So I prefer to have the project on track before local residents are informed. Or else, the project is just stopped'. (Municipal councillor, Communist party)*

## *... Procedural injustice?*

*'I was informed of the project by the media. This is my area, I grew up here, I know everybody. I used to chair the residents association. I felt like a fool'. (district councillor, socialist party)*

*'We immediately went on site, and were ambushed by residents who were abusive, violent, I mean verbally. People were complaining we did not inform them, we did not consult them.*

*We were not experienced councillors, it was quite a harsh experience" (district councillor, no party)*



© Archive - Chantal Barski, undated. The (central) municipal councillor (Audrey Garino, Communist Party), the district mayor (Didier Jau, Green party), and 4 presidents of residents associations stand in front of the municipal bath house for the media, as a gesture of reconciliation, after harsh engagements.

How was this tension dealt with by councillors ? It was not.

- Central municipality acted without informing district municipality, purposefully and for reasons that have their rationality.
- District councillors found themselves under attack of the residents, not having prepared the ground nor opened any form of engagement prior to the opening.
- This resulted in a lot of verbal violence, forms of vandalism against the facility, and further abuses against local municipal agents.

## What were the tensions that the Studio uncovered and possibly, at least temporarily, help to mediate? (2)

► A second tension was between councillors and municipal agents – the decision-makers and the makers  
 Due to a lack of political work to reconcile residents and bath users, the bulk of the discontent and the work of mediation had to be carried by street level bureaucrats – by the municipal agents working on the ground.  
 It took them about one year to stabilise the situation, at the cost of a huge stress and a change in the nature of the work.

*“Initially, I used to hide my municipal uniform under my jacket, for fear of being recognised when I went out of the bath house in the neighborhood on an errand.*

*People would throw insults at me in the street. Several times our office door was vandalised, people irrupt here and shout at us...*

*It is better now, but it was harsh. Something I am not sure I would have the strength to do again, if we open another facility like this one elsewhere” (grounded municipal agent)*



@Liu 2023. Crillon public bath house – the core team, at their desk – with masks and a protection glass but also a variety of soothing, cleaning and beauty creams to cater for the skin issues of some bath house users.

The job of managing the public bath has become a two-faced job: caring for a (diverse) vulnerable population, but also pacifying the street and the neighborhood. This work entailed

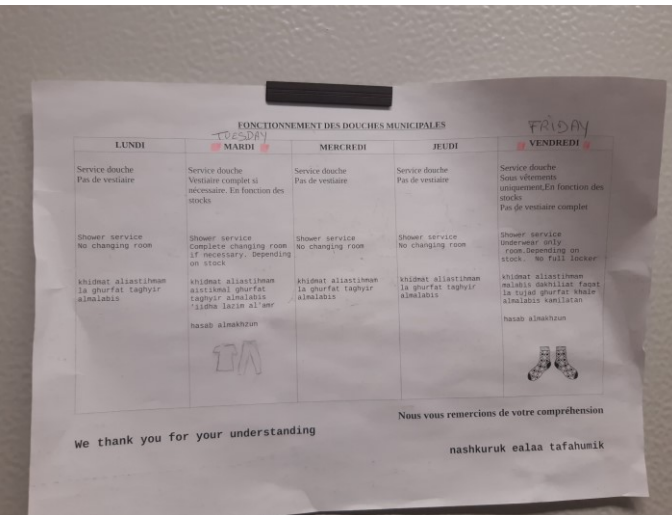
- « normal » social facility work of sorting the users and mediating conflict (when users are under influence of alcohol or drugs),
- reminding users about norms of conduct.
- intervening in the street to mediate conflicts
- sometimes asking people to disperse after having had their shower
- regularly cleaning the street after hours.

Following the residents petition, the municipality supported those efforts on the ground, periodically, by

- sending supplementary cleaning teams,
- asking the police to do rounds,
- sending the social services to accompany the more precarious users and taking them back.



@Liu 2023. Crillon public bath house – municipal agents and private security company whose agents have become also de facto social workers - learning to engage with precarious publics.



@Liu 2023. Crillon public bath house self-made trilingual schedule – shower and clothing distribution



## What were the tensions that the Studio uncovered and possibly, at least temporarily, help to mediate? (3)

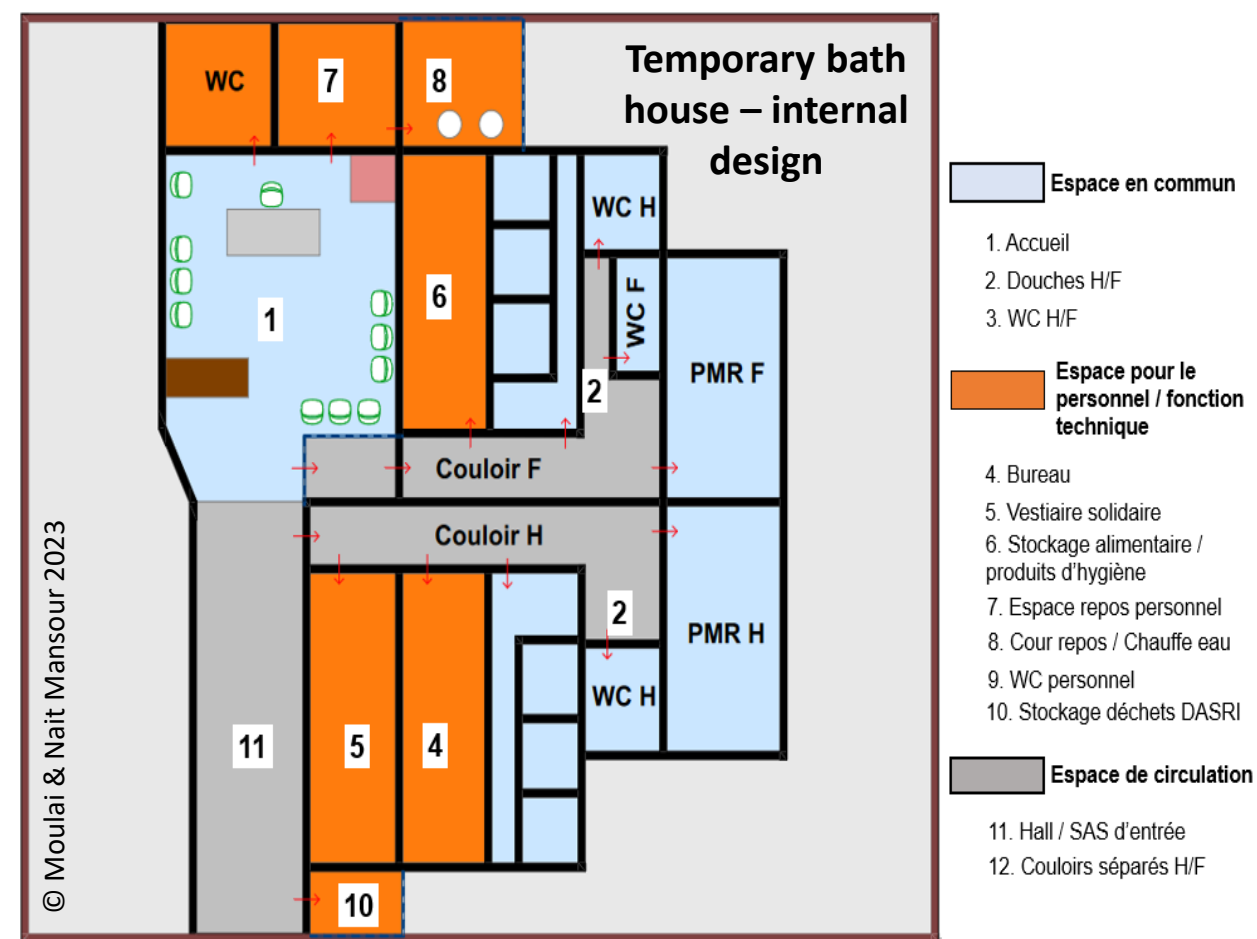


© Liu 2023. The sorting area where the security agents operate before users access the main room.

► A third tension that the Studio helped uncover was a certain lack of consideration for the neighborhood by the municipality: not thinking through the interface, the concrete, micro-local coexistence between the bath house and the nearby residents.

Striking in residents complaints: the « invasion » of « their » residential street (people, litter, piss, cries, dirty cloths...). **Analysing the facility's design showed a far too small waiting room – the waiting room is the street: an unmanaged waiting room.**

© Resident, personal archives, 2023. The resident complained that on Tuesdays (clothing distribution day), her street of residence was occupied by homeless people



La rue espace d'attente ▲

The public bath house was

- deemed temporary,
- opened in 2021 with a degree of urgency,
- designed in a container placed in a former municipal garage,
- in a small, narrow and secluded residential street.

These time and space constraints partly explain the lack of proper waiting room. Its absence make neighbourliness, tolerance and trust more difficult to build between residents, users, the bath house and the municipality.

## Echoes – the opening of a low-risk drug-consumption facility in a nearby area (same district, 2024)

Similar setting:

- A municipal project led by central municipality councillors (political commitment to develop infrastructure of care)
- With limited debate and no prior work with local neighbours, in a space where crack users were not a local issue
- Information leaked out, triggering residents and local traders' opposition (petition, protests)
- District councillors: not taking local democracy seriously, considering opponents to the project to be « fascists » that should not be bothered with
- Instead, the political discourse that prevailed insisted that « everybody should realise » the benefits these low-risk drug-consumption centers had for the users and public health.

National health services eventually stopped the project.

➔ **Moralising discourses and polarising representations, rather than thinking through a locally embedded politics of solidarity:**

**Being firm on the principle of solidarity AND open to consider and respond to neighbours' practical fears**



### Addiction

Libération, 18/01/2024

## Drogues : à Marseille, l'ouverture de la salle de consommation à moindre risque suspendue

*'I'm a professional nurse, always been voting left, I supported this municipality. But this facility, here, with schools all around... it is just nonsense' (protesting resident)*

*'Crack addicts are not gathering here [on Avenue de la Libération]. They are around the train station, but there the district councillor did not want the facility. Why are they trying to displace them to our neighborhood?' (protesting resident)*

**The missing waiting room for the public bath house /  
the absent public toilets :  
why such a public inability / reluctance to respond to  
both needs:**

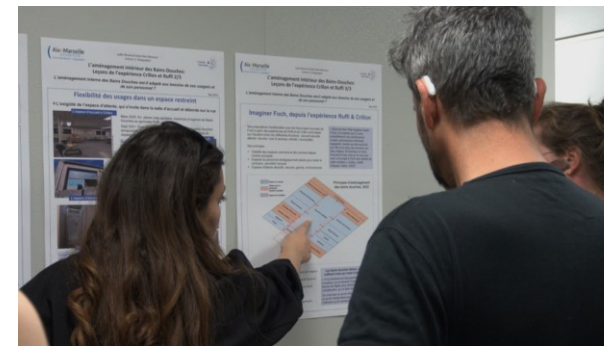
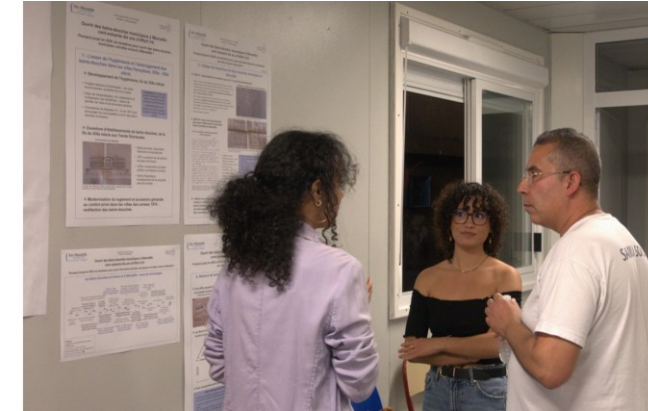
- The need for solidarity and care for the marginalised social groups
- The need for (some) neighborliness?

- ➔ A desire for radical-ness amongst the ‘progressives’ (academic/ politicians)
- ➔ A misconception of what ‘consensus-building’ & ‘mediation’ may mean (cf Mouffe’s critique of consensus as lukewarm and depoliticising)
- ➔ A social and political discard for the (often conservative) lower-middle classes
- ➔ A binary vision of society (rich/poor, bourgeois/workers), that needs to be updated (triangulation of western societies – marginalised poor/ lower middle-classes/economic elites)
- ➔ Unmediated conflict and moralising discourses = polarisation and rise of populism



© Liu 2023, Crillon municipal bath house.  
A public bath user recognising his words  
on a poster, surrounded by students

© Liu 2023, Crillon municipal bath house.  
Students engage with ground municipal  
agent around their findings



© Liu 2023, Crillon municipal bath house.  
Students explain how the future public bath  
house facility could be designed to  
accommodate users’, agents’ and  
neighborhood’s needs, based on their study.

© Liu 2023, Crillon municipal bath house. All  
stakeholders mingle around the posters and  
some refreshments.

