Fig. 1
Overview of recent housing projects in the Paris region, 1961.
Introduction

In France, numerous Grands Ensembles have already been or will be inscribed on the land, from the mining and steel region of the Lorraine to the oil-rich Béarn, passing through the important industrial regions, old or new. But, it is not enough to build dwellings adapted to the needs, and to create the necessary facilities according to carefully established plans and norms, if those houses, social centers, schools, kindergartens, and parks do not bring happiness, and do not serve human and social progress. Even if the project is technically successful, inhabitants can be dissatisfied, the social atmosphere generate protest, families dissolve, and youth gangs emerge. It is not enough that the Urbanist and the Architect thought about the sociological problems and avoided errors in conception. What still needs to be done is to create a human Community in the sphere of individual freedom.¹

By appearing to dismiss an urbanism of numbers and norms, this statement served to introduce a pivotal—and highly consequential—study that detailed quantitative and technical guidelines for what were called équipements collectifs in mass-housing estates. These “collective facilities” were a mix of basic public services, community and welfare institutions, and private amenities, and were intended to transform housing estates into thriving new neighborhoods. The result of intensive research by a state-led commission of experts, the study was published in the journal Urbanisme in 1959 and presented itself as a model for France’s grands ensembles.² By this time, these large-scale, modern collective-housing estates had become the quintessential product of urban development and would remain so for the decade to come (fig. 1).³
Developed by social housing organizations as well as semi-public and private developers, and largely designed by Beaux Arts-trained architects, the projects were primarily and initially meant for working- and middle-class French nuclear families. Yet, despite being cast as a “feature of social and human progress” in the rapidly expanding economy of postwar France, there was no blueprint for what a grand ensemble might be, or what kind of social life it should facilitate. 

And that was exactly the premise of the study. Within its “general nomenclature” of collective facilities—there were eighty-five types, including churches, cultural centers, dispensaries, fire departments, hospitals, kindergartens, playgrounds, police headquarters, post offices, retirement homes, schools, shops, social centers, sports centers, youth centers, and many more—it offered a veritable planner’s shopping list for social life (fig. 2). Entitled la Grille d’équipement d’un grand ensemble d’habitation, but soon known as the “grille Dupont” after the state administrator in charge, the publication set the parameters for intensive reflection on the grands ensembles during the following decade. As much a propaganda tool as a self-critical account of an ongoing exploration, the journal Urbanisme would remain its principal source of documentation.

Since the 1980s, the grands ensembles have been portrayed as the main cause of France’s suburban crisis. Large-scale demolition and radical redesign is now the order of the day. Some years ago, historians could be surprised that “a society would undertake the destruction of a generation of buildings of which it had not even understood the making.” Today however, the grands ensembles are far from being a virgin domain of historical inquiry. Historians have approached them first of all from the perspective of social housing and national politics. Their work has shown that, rather than being naive architectural utopias, they are the outcome of concerted, socially oriented state-policymaking. During the 1950s and 1960s, the grands ensembles embodied France’s industrial ambitions and became prominent tools of economic and regional development. Their emergence during the mid-1950s was the result of complex interactions between government officials, housing organizations, architects, large-scale developers, and financiers, and embodied a concept at times contested, but generally shared, of economic rationality and social need.

Most interestingly, scholars have shown that the grands ensembles constituted a societal experiment, involving a network of experts focused not only on their financing, conception, and production, but also on studying the social life in these environments once they were built. Yet, their design has rarely been considered as part of such experimentation. While many historians now doubt architects had much agency in the face of large-scale economic and political forces, architectural historians have tended to dismiss their monotony and repetition, preferring instead to explore the period’s utopian and paper projects, rather than the often-grim built results.

Bruno Vayssière was one of the first to study the “statistical architecture” of the grands ensembles; he situated it in a particularly French strain of modernism.
that was closely linked to the French state apparatus, particularly the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism. More recently, Nicole Rudolph has shown that their modern comfort and highly standardized apartment units were instrumental to France’s social modernization, a project led by the centralized state and enthusiastically embraced by modern architects. Nevertheless, if such accounts ascribe an experimental character to the grands ensembles, they locate it long before their actual proliferation over the French territory—be it interwar CIAM modernism, wartime and postwar Reconstruction programs, or even going as far back as nineteenth-century Saint-Simonianism. By focusing on formal origins and “moments of invention,” existing accounts threaten to obscure their design and transformation during the time the grands ensembles were actually built.

This article focuses on the role of architecture and urban design in the large-scale production of the grands ensembles from the late 1950s until the late 1960s—the period in which their initial policies, techniques, and formal examples were already in place and before they became fundamentally questioned. The archives of the Ministry of Construction and architecture journals like Urbanisme, Techniques et Architectures, and L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, as well as the accounts of sociologists and consultancy firms, show that the urbanism of the grands ensembles was not set in stone during this period. Their formal conception was continually transformed in close relationship to changing social and urban policies, shifting ideals of social life in them, and feedback on the problems of their actual inhabitation.

The search for a doctrine

The pioneering research on the Paris region under direction of Pierre Sudreau set off the search for an urbanistic doctrine for the grands ensembles. As Commissaire à la construction et à l’urbanisme pour la région parisienne—before he became national Minister of Construction—Sudreau’s main concern was how to manage Paris’s rapid urban growth. In 1957, faced with the uncontrolled sprawl of suburban housing projects and concerned about their social repercussions, Sudreau established a special committee, the Commission de la vie dans les grands ensembles. This unprecedented initiative brought together architects, urbanists, state administrators, social housing experts, social scientists, representatives of family and women’s organizations, medical doctors, school teachers, landscape architects, and even editors of popular magazines to study the urbanism of the grands ensembles.

Following the basic assumption that collective facilities were crucial to the “social and economic equilibrium of the Grand Ensemble”—a view that had already been put forward by sociologists like Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe (1913–98) and would become further entrenched in planning and government circles in the following years—the principal goal was to “first of all define, and subsequently finance and build these facilities.” In order to do so, social surveys, urban research, and public consultation were needed. The committee visited housing areas and individual apartments, interviewed inhabitants, and compiled lists of what they liked and disliked about their homes and neighbor-
hoods. They consulted with social science experts and public figures and gathered information through standard questionnaires sent to representatives of civil society organizations. On the basis of these, they compiled a series of “objective” criteria for collective facilities that were inserted into a detailed overview.

When Sudreau became Minister of Construction in 1958, this work was not forgotten. On the contrary, it was moved up from the regional to the national level, and resulted in the publication of the *grille Dupont* in 1959. That year, a string of reports in national newspapers, popular magazines, and the specialized press brought the topic of the *grands ensembles* to French public attention. Many reports were elaborate in their criticism. A key issue was promiscuity: the reduction of norms for state-aided housing in the early 1950s had led to the construction of small rooms and minimum-sized apartments in the first generation of *grands ensembles*. The use of pioneering prefabrication techniques at a large scale had led to technical deficiencies and insufficient sound insulation. Many critics deemed the number of units serviced by the same hall or staircase far too high, giving an impression of crowdedness without intimacy. Such unwanted concentration of people was thought to be the cause of numerous social problems, juvenile delinquency being among the most widely publicized ones. Other critiques centered on the geographic isolation of many housing estates: cut off from the rest of the city, they left their residents socially isolated and with strenuously long commutes to work. Inhabitants of housing projects in the suburbs often took more than an hour to get into the center of Paris, which was the necessary passing point for any other regional destination in the heavily centralized capital. The lack of basic local amenities like schools and shops only aggravated this sense of isolation. Complaints often made reference to the inhumane scale of the projects, the uniformity of buildings and dwelling types, and the absence of trees, streets, and other traditional socializing spaces.

Public criticisms during subsequent years only increased, but could not dispel the conviction that the *grands ensembles* were the inevitable face of contemporary urban development. Within the cultural worldview of France, there was no real alternative to them. Fueled by repatriation from former colonies, the intensifying migration from the countryside to French cities, and the French baby boom, the urgent need for mass housing remained undiminished during the 1960s.

The question was therefore not *if*, but *how* to build the *grands ensembles*. And to answer this question was the main ambition of Sudreau’s committee: though in his introduction, the Minister was careful to call the *grille* simply a “guide for practical use,” the publication was proof of a belief in a single, guiding doctrine for mass-housing development. The emphasis on collective facilities in fact further legitimized the *grands ensembles* as a model for development: a larger housing development could be more comprehensively planned, and thus better equipped. This idea was fundamental to the ZUP, or *zones à urbaniser en priorité*, legislation that served as one of the crucial tools for the proliferation of the *grands ensembles* during the 1960s.
The grille Dupont was pioneering in that it brought a diversity of institutions within the purview of a single, systematic approach, aiming to translate all possible user and social needs directly into an urbanistic program. It normalized the assemblage—under the single term équipement—of a variety of collective institutions from theaters to churches, each of which had its own distinct tradition and historical development. The fact that all these different types of places could now be understood as “facilitating entities” was a sign not only of an all-encompassing functionalism, but also of the prominence of the welfare state as a new form of oversight and source of provision in social life.22

The approach of the grille was not entirely new; it was directly inspired by national economic planning. Its research on commercial facilities followed up studies of the Commission Générale du Plan (CGP), France’s national planning think-tank established after World War II.23 In response to the neglect by both private and public sectors of the development of commerce in the fast-growing suburbs, the CGP had been involved with the making of a grille d’équipement commercial that allowed the calculation of the necessary commercial facilities to be provided in a given area.24 The grille Dupont followed this approach, which was indebted to one of the fundamental convictions underlying French national modernization: the superiority of the state vis-à-vis the market in the rational management of economic affairs.

Concomitant with this conviction was the assumption—also adopted by the authors of the grille—that centralized planning of commerce would be more efficient than spontaneous development. Its direct spatial translation was the concentration of commerce in planned commercial centers rather than on traditional streets, a view that remained unquestioned until the second half of the 1960s, when the economic failure of such shopping centers and the criticism of bored consumers began to question it. Until then, the method of the grille continued to be used inside the state apparatus, not only by the Ministry of Construction, but also by the CGP.25

The grille was not only part and parcel of state-led economic planning methods; it was an equally important feature in architectural modernism. Proposed by Le Corbusier and first used at the CIAM 7 conference in 1949, the grid was first and foremost “a system for graphically organizing information” by means of small coded panels that could be organized into larger screens.26 The grid initially functioned as a tool for rationalizing, understanding, and re-conceiving urbanism and the built environment at large. Yet, its form was altered as soon as the following CIAM 8 meeting in 1951, where the British MARS group proposed a simplified grid, advocated by Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, and based on CIAM President Josep Lluís Sert’s ideas.27 The CIAM presentations now came to be organized according to five socio-spatial scales of settlement: the village or primary housing group, the neighborhood, the town or city sector, the city itself, and finally, the metropolis or multiple city.

Sudreau’s committee developed its own quantified version of this idea by organizing its list of collective facilities, also according to five nested socio-spatial scales: the residential group (200–500 dwelling units), the neighborhood unit (800–1,200 units or 3,000–4,500 inhabitants), the quartier
Fig. 2
The Grille Dupont as it was published in the journal Urbanisme in 1959.
Designing Social Life: The Urbanism of the Grands Ensembles (1,500–2,500 units), the arrondissement (3,000–6,000 units), and ultimately the city at large (fig. 2). The residential group would have a minimal amount of facilities, like parking spaces, green space, a children’s playground, and street furniture. At the neighborhood-unit level, a preschool and primary school should be provided, as well as social amenities like a daycare center, a small medical center, a social center, a youth community center, and fifteen to twenty shops for everyday necessities. At the level of the quartier—comprised of two neighborhood units—inhabitants would find a “religious center,” a day nursery, additional social facilities for youth, other shops, a public market, and so on. Finally, a secondary school, more playgrounds, a dispensary, and a principal commercial center with larger and more specialized stores should be located at the level of the arrondissement.28

Of course, this ideal scenario was rarely built as such. In reality, many contingencies crossed planners’ paths. A crucial limitation was the availability of land, which, together with fragmented ownership structures, speculation, lengthy expropriation procedures, and physical restrictions—whether topography, infrastructure, or existing buildings—left architects and planners with less-than-ideal options for their schemes. Nevertheless, throughout the 1960s the grands ensembles continued to be thought of in terms of the neighborhood unit. In typical projects like Sarcelles, Massy-Antony, or Mourenx, the housing blocks were arranged in a grid organizing the different neighborhood units, not unlike the image of an electronic chip (fig. 3). The dictum of light, air, and openness created a spatial framework in which collective facilities could be plugged in as independent entities, simple add-ons to the basic program of mass housing. This formal and functional independence coincided with the particular financing structure of the grands ensembles. Whereas funding was readily available for housing construction through state loans and subsidies, funding for the diverse array of collective facilities was problematic and dispersed over different state institutions. This was one reason why so many projects contained only housing and, at least initially, lacked collective facilities.29

What linked the grille to earlier concepts of the neighborhood unit—going back to Stein and Wright, Clarence Perry, and Ebenezer Howard—was the assumption that certain forms of sociability corresponded to a certain spatially bounded area. Despite its global reach from the American Greenbelt towns to the Soviet micro-rayons, the modernist neighborhood concept was reinforced in postwar France by a specific vision of community solidarity inspired by social Catholicism. This idea of a close-knit local community bore remarkable resemblances to the descriptions of inner-city neighborhoods the grands ensembles were meant to replace.30 Urbanists like Gaston Bardet and Robert Auzelle related such ideas to the conception of the grands ensembles.31 The publication of the grille Dupont featured one of Bardet’s more-famous citations: “The city as it is conceived: a spot, an endless expansion of a central point; the city as it is: a cluster, a federation of communities.”32 Concepts like “cluster,” also addressed by Alison and Peter Smithson at this time, were used both to describe the socio-spatial structure of existing cities and to project a novel “natural” structure for new urban developments.33
The conception of the *grands ensembles* presented in the *grille* thus entailed as a “sociologization” and “structuralization” of existing modernist concepts. A year later, Maurice-François Rouge contended: “The goals [of the Athens Charter] were too general and not accompanied by structural principles, which are needed to provide the vision for attaining them. ...The Athens Charter does not give any indication in terms of structure; one could say it is a-structural. And yet, to propose structure is the *raison d’être* of any science.”

He conceived of the *grand ensemble* as an overlay of four structures: functional, physical, socio-professional, and aesthetic. Such schemes were widespread and contributed to the conviction that the urbanism of the *grands ensembles* was a scientific “completion” of the Athens Charter.

The idea that science, structuralism, or sociology would complement interwar modernism, however, did not lead to the creation of an ultimate doctrine. On the contrary, it set in motion a gradual questioning of some of the Charter’s basic stipulations—namely, the separation of functions and the abolishing of the street.

In the years following the publication of the *grille Dupont*, the CGP continued to revise it, and the results were published in 1962 as an official update, again in the journal *Urbanisme*. In his retrospective article on recent French urbanism, published soon after in the same journal, Gérard Dupont alluded to an important shift in mindset when he emphasized “the respect for measure,
Fig. 4
Research for playground design.
The concern with the landscape, the importance of intimate spaces encouraging social contact, shopping boulevards, and lively centers as crucial concerns for future urbanism. He continued: “Against strict zoning has now emerged the desire to situate places of activity in the middle of residential zones, in order to facilitate human contacts, to create liveliness, and to bring employment closer to the home.”

The following revision of the grille, published in Urbanisme in 1965, translated these concerns. Based on extensive research by several committees inside the Ministry of Construction between 1963 and 1965, it now envisaged four kinds of spatial levels, divided into two types: the unité d’habitations (itself divided into the résidence of 50–150 units and the groupe of 200–500 units) and the unité d’organisation urbaine (itself divided into the voisinage of 800–1,200 units and the quartier of 2,500–5,000 units). This reorganization gave more weight to cultural facilities and exterior spaces, which were more-finely distributed over the grand ensemble. The level of the city-at-large was eliminated because it was now understood as uncontrollable. Yet the real shift was clarified in the accompanying study: planners now set themselves the goal to rethink the grand ensemble in its totality, “from the individual home to the city.” They would do so by addressing “the absence of certain socio-cultural facilities directly linked to the housing” and by focusing on “the whole of the non-built space available to inhabitants.”

This revision of the grille was shaped by the ambition to bring into the realm of design a number of previously ignored aspects of the built environment, like the sensuous perception of the natural site, its colors, light, and microclimate, but also the urban and local context. This implied a larger role for the social sciences, and for urban sociology in particular. During the 1960s, calls for the inclusion of urban sociology in urbanism had begun to enter the mainstream of the French professional world. For the urbanists behind the grille, this emerging discipline promised to transcend the “functionalist division of human activity” and encourage local community life and better design. Space, so they argued, should be designed according to the complexity of users’ needs. Playground design, for example, should be based on a detailed analysis of sociologically defined age groups, giving particular attention to “sensorial and mental development” (fig. 4). Such attention to children was particularly pertinent to the grands ensembles, whose inhabitants were predominantly young families with children. Another priority for such a sociology-enriched urbanism—which designers would take to heart over the next years—was to transpose the architectural and social qualities of the traditional urban street into new urban design (fig. 5).

Most importantly, the publication did not propose a ready-made formula for the grands ensembles; while the grille itself was reduced to a limited practical tool for administrative and financial planning, its accompanying studies implied the need for in-depth sociological study and encouraged the development of local urban research. Though the conception of the grands ensembles was fundamentally shaped by architectural modernism, their urbanism slowly moved away from the dogmas of the Athens Charter under
Fig. 5
A return to the traditional street.
the influence of sociological expertise focused on the user. The grille did not constitute a static doctrine or unquestioned recipe for an automated production of grands ensembles. Rather, it instigated a decade-long search pointing not only to a different epistemological basis for design, but also to new formal concepts that embodied this shift in mindset.

**From socio-cultural facilities to urban design**

While the first grille listed urban functions from shops to fire departments and sewer installations, its 1965 revision focused specifically on “socio-cultural facilities”: a mix of community centers, cultural centers, social centers, and youth centers. Experts at the time explained that the appearance of the socio-cultural sector in France was a direct consequence of the growing awareness that social work was necessarily cultural in its contents, and that culture inevitably had a social basis. This mindset was the sign of a shift in French state welfare, from a model based on guardianship and reform to the consumption of modern state services aimed at personal and social development.

The diverse traditions and publics of these maisons des jeunes et de la culture, centres sociaux, and maisons de la culture did not withhold planners from emphasizing their similarities in terms of activities, funding, management, and, especially, goals—namely the incitement of local social life. These socio-cultural facilities were understood less as providers of service and increasingly as a “centers of participation,” or pôles d’animation. While the term user remained predominant in descriptions of their operation, it became increasingly contested: people should no longer be seen as passive users or beneficiaries, but as active participants. A 1964 committee on équipement and animation summarized this line of thinking as follows: “The specific character of the socio-cultural domain lies in the active participation of users. This is what distinguishes it from commercial leisure and certain forms of recreation in which the user remains simply a passive user.”

The notion of animation translated this new mindset. Henri Théry, one of its main proponents, went so far as to call it a new paradigm for French society. Until recently, he claimed, “emphasis was only on the creation and administration of things,” but postwar consumerism, mass production, and state welfare had prompted the imperative of animation. “To animate,” he continued, “is to give life, to create or activate a vital process through which individuals and groups affirm themselves and get going; it is to generate a dynamism that is at once biological and spiritual, individual and social.” In terms of urbanism, this was a matter of distinguishing between neighborhoods with and without a “soul.” Animation, state administrators and urban planners explained, used to be assured spontaneously by the local communities and municipalities. Now, due to large-scale migration to the city and the construction of entirely new urban areas, new inhabitants were having problems settling into the housing projects built for them. To integrate them, they contended, organized social and cultural activities and community events—in other words, animation—were what was needed. In the context
of the grands ensembles therefore, animation referred both to the spontaneous liveliness of a neighborhood and the artificial means of instilling community life in new housing areas through organized activities.

What experts and community leaders increasingly agreed on during the 1960s was that the development of community life in new housing areas required new kinds of spaces, which would facilitate activities in which inhabitants could freely participate. A first attempt to translate this idea into an urbanistic program was the experiment with what were called locaux collectifs résidentiels, or residential meeting places. These were conceived as spaces in between the privacy of the home and the publicity of the park or commercial center. Distributed inside the housing projects, they would be used by local residents for a range of recreational activities—block meetings, children’s games, creative workshops, family parties, youth meetings, and so on. This was a proposal already suggested by architects like Le Corbusier, in particular through his concept of logement prolongé, or the “extensions of the dwelling,” and by sociologists like Chombart de Lauwe, who had argued on multiple occasions for the importance of small intimate spaces for inhabitants to socialize. Nevertheless, the government did not succeed in making this a standard feature of the grands ensembles.

Yet urbanists envisaged more than the inclusion of discrete facilities in an otherwise repetitive housing scheme, and the notion of animation soon had
implications for the general urbanistic conception of the grands ensembles. As the grille revisions suggested, architects and urbanists realized that bringing the built environment to life was not only a matter of social work; architecture and urbanism could play its part as well.

Under the influence of a young generation of international modernist architects—in particular the Team 10 group that had emerged in 1954 out of the postwar CIAM meetings—the creation of everyday sociability and urban liveliness had become one of the major themes in postwar modernism. The modernist reimagining of traditional urbanity, like that of the Mediterranean townscape and the traditional street, were a crucial means to address this. The work of Alison and Peter Smithson was exemplary of this turn in focus: their famous “Urban Re-Identification Grid,” presented at one of the last CIAM meetings in 1953, radically proposed the abolition of the four functions of the Athens Charter—dwelling, work, transportation, and recreation—in favor of the celebration of the traditional street. Illustrated with Nigel Henderson’s photographic reportage of playing children in a working-class London street, their poetic and ethnographic sensibility went hand-in-hand with a modernist architectural reimagining: alongside the grid, the architects presented urban designs in which housing blocks were multiplied to create a megastructure connected by what they called “streets-in-the-air”—spacious, publicly accessible galleries giving access to the apartments.53 This interest in the everyday was often accompanied and reinforced by the structuralist anthropology for which Lévi-Strauss had become famous.54 Only during the 1960s, however, did this new urban ideology trickle down to the conservative mainstream of French urbanism.55

The work of Candilis-Josic-Woods, the most influential spokespersons of Team 10 in France, functioned as a principal conduit for the translation of these new ideas into French mass-housing projects. By the late 1960s, the firm had designed about 40,000 dwelling units in France.56 The most iconic project for their experimentation with French mass-housing was that of Toulouse-le-Mirail (fig. 6). Begun in 1961, the project further developed the concepts of “stem” (trame) and “cluster” (grappe) that were inspired by the traditional urban typologies of the street and neighborhood and largely derived by Candilis from the theories of the Smithsons.57 The street, which the architects understood at once as a morphological structure and a social space of everyday life, functioned as the structuring device for the urban plan of the whole development, a massive new town for 100,000 inhabitants. The project was a primary case-study in the 1962 grille revision. Referring to Georges Candilis’s 1962 article “A la recherche d’une structure urbaine,” the research accompanying its second revision acknowledged the pertinence of his ideas, often formulated as an implicit critique of the monotony of an older generation of grands ensembles: “It is necessary to re-establish the notion of the ‘street,’ which has disappeared in current projects ... The street becomes an active center through the diversity of its components; it reintegrates the spontaneous character of everyday life, in opposition with the sphere of repetition, uniformity, and banality.”58
Fig. 7  
Robert Camelot and François Prieur, Grand ensemble of Bures-Orsay, plan c.1967.  

LA VIE SOCIALE - Quartiers Les Ills-Le Diamanche
En dessinant les rues pistantes, il faut s’assurer de les faire vivre...
Avoir observé la vie des ensembles récents, on a délibérément implanté toutes les entrées d’immeubles, et les accès aux points d’attraction le long de ces rues.
Puis, des représentations graphiques superposées ont visualisé les mouvements quotidiens.
Ces graphiques indiquent le nombre de personnes sortant ou marchant dans la rue dans un temps donné.
Ce nombre a été calculé suivant la composition familiale, établie à partir de la répartition des logements (étudiants, familles, personnes âgées).
Le dessin ci-contre — extrêmement schématisé — indique un point pour 16 personnes.
L’importance des étals ou rosaces correspond au pouvoir d’attraction des équipements.
Urban spontaneity, liveliness, and diversity were the conceptual ingredients of this new vision of an animated urban space, which found application—though often in watered-down, fragmentary ways—in new projects during the 1960s. One of these was the *grand ensemble* of Bures-Orsay, designed by Robert Camelot and François Prieur (fig. 7). The project renounced the idea of zoning in favor of a formal complexity that was thought to evoke an animated sense of space: “We cannot add the unexpected, it needs to be provoked: the basic scheme needs to engender fortunate coincidence, that of volumes or spaces, as much as that of spontaneous activities.” Concretely, the plan consisted of two separated networks of circulation: a basic layout of roads and a network of pedestrian pathways. The housing blocks were placed alongside these paths so as to create an enclosed streetscape. Located in the middle of the new development was a “principal urban center” connected to surrounding neighborhoods via overpasses. Schools, shops, and other collective amenities were no longer morphologically detached from this structure as they were in older *grands ensembles*. They were inserted in the pedestrianized areas in order to assure a “natural” liveliness, and their entrances, as well as those of the residential units, related to this space for the same reason.

The project’s 1967 publication in the journal *Urbanisme* featured a series of diagrams aiming to represent the future “density of animation” of one of its neighborhoods by visualizing the everyday movements of future inhabitants (fig. 7). According to the architects, calculations were based on the estimated power of attraction of individual amenities at different times of the day. The image they depicted was an idyllic street life, one in which cars were absent, children played freely, adults strolled and met spontaneously, and the elderly sat in the sun to distract themselves with the pleasure of seeing others. This kind of *animation urbaine*, they argued, was inscribed in the plan itself. Embracing spatial and formal complexity was part of their strategy to assure that the project would have “an organic life in which the different organs are imbricated and live in symbiosis.”

The neighborhood of Surville in Montereau and that of Nîmes-Ouest, two projects by the brothers Xavier and Luc Arsène-Henry, illustrate a further elaboration of *animation* as a design concept. For the architects, it entailed not only spatial complexity, an increased density, and more public amenities, but most importantly, an attention to the temporal atmospheres of the built environment. Following the spatial trajectory of the inhabitant—the gradual transition from the intimacy of the dwelling to the publicity of the urban center—they proposed a corresponding increase in the intensity of *animation*, represented graphically on a map of “iso-densities” (fig. 8). For the urban center, the architectural device facilitating this was the *dalle*, or raised platform. Channeling the megastructural ambitions of late modernism so vividly portrayed by Reyner Banham a decade later, French housing projects like these were directly inspired by Toulouse-le-Mirail, the new town centers of Vällingby and Cumbernauld, and the Parisian projects of Maine-Montparnasse and La Défense.
Fig. 8
Xavier and Luc Arsène-Henry, sketches of Quartier Sud, Nîmes, 1967.
The raised platform, which helped achieve a complete separation of pedestrianized circulation from motorized transportation below, replaced the horizontal zoning that Team 10 associated with CIAM with a vertical one. This, in turn, facilitated the horizontal integration of the urban program, no longer understood as a set of isolated urban functions, but as a total environment needing to be animated. Such an approach required attention not only to the architectural design of comprehensive pedestrian streetscapes, but also to the built environment’s more-ephemeral qualities. One of these previously ignored features was advertising. Rather than ignoring or trying to ban it, the architects were aware of the positive value of public advertising, displays, posters, and other kinds of urban graphics that “accompany, underline and valorize the lively, attractive, colored, and changing character of facades, pedestrian passages or urban perspectives” and provide pedestrians and car drivers with focus and event in the urban spaces they traverse.64 Another new aspect to which the architects drew attention was the nocturnal atmosphere of the urban development: public lighting of facades, monuments, and trees, light displays, street signs, and shop windows, all contributed, in their eyes, to “the wonderful, the unreal and the poetic” elements of the urban landscape (fig. 8).

Even in the final phases of Sarcelles—archetype of the heavily criticized first generation of grands ensembles—there was a marked revision in urban concepts, the most important one being the (albeit modest) return to the street. With their “Entrance to the City” plan of the late 1960s, architects Jacques Henri-Labourdette and Roger Boileau proposed a central avenue articulated by a series of identical towers and a parallel, pedestrianized boulevard at the back of these. The avenue was designed as a traditional commercial axis with galleries on each side leading pedestrians to the cascading landscape of the parallel strip (fig. 9).

Concomitant with this turn to the street was a novel preoccupation with public art; no longer only within its own separate realm of “high culture,” art was incorporated into animation as one of its many tools. Referred to as esthétique urbaine in the 1965 grille publication, this interest was especially indebted to Xavier Arsène-Henry’s article “L’art dans les villes nouvelles,” and the writings of Emile Aillaud.65 Planners understood public art as a vehicle to express “the intimacy, mystery and poetry of the city.” An exemplary case of the inclusion of public art in the conception of the grands ensembles was Aillaud’s famous project, La Grande Borne in Grigny. Its master plan featured the architect’s signature design of playfully curving housing slabs—first built more than a decade before in projects like Les Courtilières and Cité de l’Abreuvoir—as well as a series of small rectilinear housing blocks on a raised platform (fig. 10).

What made the project so unique at the time was the enormous efforts that went into the incorporation of public art. To the architect, it was a way to produce complexity, mystery, and poetry—those crucial characteristics of the traditional city. Many of its squares and open spaces were dotted with gigantic sculptures contributing to particular themes, like The Astrolabe, The Pond of Sand, or The Ellipse. Gigantic murals and sculptures of animals and pieces of
Henri Labourdette and Roger Boileau, Phase “Entrance to the City,” Sarcelles, c. 1969. Located at the western side of the development (fig. 3), this later phase was conceived of as the grand urban entrance to the grand ensemble, leading directly to the new urban center that was being designed at the same time.

Source: Municipal Archives, Sarcelles.
Fig. 10
fruit figured prominently. Combined with sand boxes, patterned paving, street furniture, and other forms of landscaping, the sculptures functioned as playful devices for children and adults alike. The buildings’ side facades were literally used as gigantic canvases for works of art executed in colorful mosaics. In fact, all facades were part of a comprehensive color scheme by the artist Fabio Rieti. This scheme not only gave the housing blocks diversity, variety, and playfulness, it also articulated them by cutting facades visually into pieces and decreasing their perceived scale. These artistic interventions, which were to make La Grande Borne “the city of a painter as much as that of an architect,” ultimately aimed to encourage inhabitants to use public spaces more intensely and appropriate them as they pleased. While planners were keen on stimulating users to participate in this sense, an awareness of how they actually appropriated the spaces provided for them would not emerge until later.

What these later grands ensembles projects had in common was the strategy of using architecture to evoke user participation, and social life more generally. Animation was the key concept that allowed architects to do so. It invoked a simple physiological metaphor—life—but also expressed human personality—soul—and qualities of character, like charm and vibrancy. This naturalism and anthropomorphism in the image of the animated city was the motor behind its success as a socio-technical means to recreate urbanity in the French suburbs. In the context of the grands ensembles, animation was a fundamentally ambiguous concept, referring to the liveliness of the new neighborhood or the recreational activities organized to integrate new inhabitants in their local community. And while the concept acknowledged the active participation of inhabitants as a crucial agent in the success or failure of mass housing areas, it did not do away with urban design and the authority of the architect. On the contrary, experts’ concerns were translated into spatial interventions and informed architectural experimentation—not only with centers for social and cultural activities, but also with the design of urban space at large. These initiatives brought forward alternative urban models, often cast as a clear revision or critique of the earlier grands ensembles, and would be further developed during the 1970s both in the villes nouvelles, France’s official new towns, and in the first programs to rehabilitate the grands ensembles.

Conclusion

The urbanism of the grands ensembles during the 1960s revolved around the myriad ways developed to equip and animate them—first by means of collective facilities and then through urban design. Meant to overcome the perceived ills of mass housing, this approach channeled the growing reach of the French welfare state in parallel with the ambitions of modern urbanism to influence social life. The organizing principle to translate these ambitions into concrete programs and urban interventions was a “grid of facilities.” While the grid transformed the institutions of community life into a bureaucratic series of requirements, the research accompanying it translated notions of social life into matters of architectural and urban design. From the provision of
new types of collective facilities to novel urban forms, these measures sought to bring newly built neighborhoods to life. At a relative distance from a younger generation of international architects—many of whom assembled under Team 10—the urbanism of the grands ensembles nevertheless entailed a gradual change of mindset: under the banner of animation, users were increasingly conceptualized not only as passive consumers of dwelling units, but also as active constituents of the urban environments provided for them. This new perspective assumed the incorporation of sociological expertise in urban planning as well as the importance of different architectural designs, and thus, the gradual erosion of modernist doctrine as it was embodied by the first generation of the grands ensembles.

Rather than being set in stone by the interwar CIAM or invented during postwar Reconstruction—that is, pioneered by Marcel Lods and Eugène Beaudouin in their Cité de la Muette (1934) or by Le Corbusier in the Unité d’habitation (1946–52)—the later grands ensembles constituted a gradually evolving experimental urbanism during the time they were constructed: not just on a social or sociological level, but also in their architectural and urban design. The expansion of state welfare and the growing awareness that inhabitants’ active participation was a key factor in the success of mass housing engaged architects, urbanists, state administrators, social scientists, and civil society representatives in collaborative research at the intersections of architectural modernism and social and urban policymaking. Contrary to the common assumption that a single and fixed CIAM model was simply repeated, the urbanism of the grands ensembles evolved continually during the time of their proliferation over the national territory in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Planners’ continual adaptations—essentially meant to make mass-housing work—not only justified the grands ensembles as a solution for urban development, but also led to a changing urban production, one still within the purview of mass housing in large estates. This was the urban paradigm that would eventually break down during the 1970s.

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France came out of World War II with a severe housing shortage, which was neglected in the immediate postwar years in favor of reconstruction and infrastructure. Strong rural migration and the French baby boom led the situation in metropolitan areas to become so acute that by the mid-1950s, housing had become one of the central goals of the national government. The Plan Courant of 1953 created a number of legislative mechanisms that set in motion the production of the grands ensembles. See Jean-Paul Flamand, Loger le peuple: essai sur l’histoire du logement social en France, Textes à l’appui. Série Histoire contemporaine (Paris: La Découverte, 1989); Annie Fourcaut, “Les premiers grands ensembles en région parisienne: Ne pas refaire la banlieue?” French Historical Studies 27, no. 1 (2004); and Gwenaëlle Legoullon, “La genèse de la politique des grands ensembles, 1945–1962” (Sorbonne, 2010). On the Reconstruction period (1945–1954), see Danièle Voldman, La reconstruction, Villes—histoire, culture, société (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997).

During the 1950s and 1960s, apart from the notion of grand ensemble, terms like ville nouvelle, ensemble d’habitation, cité nouvelle, and so on were used to describe similar kinds of large-scale developments.

The journal Urbanisme was sponsored by the Caisse des Dépôts and cofounded by the Société française des Urbanistes. See Gilles Massardier, Expertise et aménagement du territoire: L’État savant (Paris: Harmattan, 1996), 17.


Social housing policy was the primary lens for Flamand, Loger le peuple. Annie Fourcaut has analyzed the grands ensembles as a product of national policymaking: Annie Fourcaut, “Les premiers grands ensembles”; “Introduction,” in Faire l’histoire; and “Trois discours, une politique?” Urbanisme 322 (2002).


The gathering included Jacques-Henri Labourdette, who was in charge of building Sarcelles at this time, and two quite atypical participants: Hélène Gordon-Lazareff, director of the popular women’s magazine Elle, and Jacques Goddet of the sports magazine L’Équipe; see Compte rendu 20.09.1957: Les problèmes de la vie dans les grands ensembles d’habitation. in: Centre d’Archives Contemporaines in Fontainebleau (hereafter CAC) 19770816/006.

Letter by Pierre Sudreau directed at the Prime Minister, 1958, CAC 19770816/004. Chombard de Lauwe was one of the first to emphasize how social neighborhood life was linked to the provision of collective facilities. See Paul-Henry Chombard de Lauwe, Jacques Jenny, and Louis Couvreur, “Logement et comportement des ménages dans trois cités nouvelles de l’agglomération bordelaise.” Cahiers du Centre scientifique et technique du bâtiment 30, no. 282 (1958). This view was confirmed at international conferences, like the 1958 Congrès mondial de la famille in Paris, where French reporters noted that “the problem of housing
construction in France had often been approached without the concern to realize the collective facilities necessary for the life of the new housing estates” (CAC 19770775/006). By the time René Kaës’ popular study of the grands ensembles came out in 1963, its main argument for building collective facilities was already generally recognized; see René Kaës, Vivre dans les grands ensembles (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1963). Letter by Pierre Sudreau, op. cit.


19 Among others: national newspapers like Figaro and France Observateur, popular-science magazines like Science et Vie, and specialized press like Revue Logement, Le Castor, and Habitation. See Commission de la vie dans les grands ensembles, study by SAS (Balladur and Prieur) analyzing the first critiques of the grands ensembles, 1959, CAC 19770816/005.

20 The grands ensembles appeared to many policymakers and public-opinion makers as the logical expression of Western economic development. In the words of Sudreau at a 1960 UNESCO conference about housing estates: “The grands ensembles emerge from a logical prediction of needs; a healthy conception of Urbanism imposes them.” CAC 19770816/004. Even the fiercest critics agreed that the grands ensembles were “an inevitable evil but an evil nevertheless.” Jacques Loew, “Les grands ensembles: mal inévitable mais mal tout de même.” L’Habitation 72 (1959).

21 Faced with intense land speculation and the problems of finding appropriate pieces of land, state planners became increasingly aware that the surge in mass-housing production had not been accompanied with the necessary planning strategies. This led to the creation of the ZUP, or zones à urbaniser en priorité, as a legislative tool for large-scale urban development. See Journal officiel de la République française, 1958.12.31: Décrets relatifs aux plans d’urbanisme directeurs et de détail, aux lotissements, aux zones à urbaniser par priorité, à la rénovation urbaine, aux associations syndicales de propriétaires en vue de la réalisation d’opérations d’urbanisme.

22 During the postwar boom, when economic growth expressed itself most symbolically in a thriving consumer culture, the role of the French government came to be increasingly defined in terms of collective consumption. See François Ewald, L’Etat providence (Paris: B. Grasset, 1986).


24 Neither the national Code of Urbanism and Housing nor the official plans for Paris gave an indication about the provision of commerce in new urban development. Two subcommittees of the CGP, the Commission de la Modernisation du Commerce and the Sous-Commission de l’urbanisme commercial were responsible for the making of this grille, which was based on previous studies by the Société Centrale Immobilière de la Caisse des Dépôts, the state’s main housing developer since 1954. See Rapport du groupe équipement commercial, CAC 19770775/044.

25 For instance, see Note sur les bases devant servir à l’établissement d’un programme des équipements (CGP, Equipements sociaux, sportifs et culturels), CAC 19920405/006.


27 Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, José Luis Sert, and Ernesto Rogers, CIAM 8: The Heart of the City (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952).


29 Tellier, Le temps des HLM. Kaës, Vivre dans les grands ensembles.

30 As Christian Topalov has shown, working-class neighborhoods were “discovered” at the very time they were about to vanish: sociologists like Herbert Gans and Henri Coing no longer portrayed them as chaotic spaces of promiscuity and moral degeneracy, but understood them as a socially structured space, in which the density of human interrelations created a tightly knit community. In France, the social surveys of such neighborhoods by associations like Économie et Humanisme between the early 1940s and the mid-1950s is what made these spaces first visible as such. See Christian Topalov, “Traditional Working-Class Neighborhoods: An Inquiry into the Emergence of a Sociological Model in the 1950s and 1960s.” Osiris 18 (2003); and Isabelle Astié and Jean-François Laé, “La notion de communauté dans les enquêtes sociologiques en France: Le groupe d’Économie et Humanisme 1940–1955.” Genèse 5, no. 81-106 (1991).


Lauwe began his career as a sociologist with a particular interest in working-class communities; see Brian William Newsome, “The Struggle for a Voice in the City: The Development of Participatory Architectural and Urban Planning in France, 1940–1968” [University of South Carolina, 2002].


39. See Brian William Newsome, French urban planning.

40. For a demographic analysis at that time, see Kaïs, Vivre dans les grands ensembles.


42. An important expert in this novel domain was Jean-Pierre Imhof, director of CINAM. See Journée d’études sur les problèmes posés par l’animation des nouveaux ensembles d’habitation, 1965, CAC 19771142/020.


44. The social center was mainly attended by women and children, while the youth center gathered male adolescents. See Laurent Besse, Les MJC de l’été des blousons noirs à l’été des Minguettes 1959–1981 (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008); “Problèmes posés par les structures communes des centres sociaux, maisons de jeunes et locaux collectifs résidentiels,” 05.06.1964, Direction Construction, Bureau de l’Habitat et de Professions du Bâtiment, CAC 19771142/020; Commission Animation socio-culturelle; Etude des problèmes posés par la coordination des équipements socio-culturels, J.P. Imhof, CINAM, 1965, CAC 19771152/001.


52. Fourcalt, “L’animation dans le béton.”


54. The first anthropological analyses of Lévi-Strauss had been published in the journal Forum, edited by Aldo van Eyck, between 1956 and 1962.


56. Avermaete, Another Modern, 43.


60. Ibid.


62. As analyzed by Virginie Lefebvre, this concept—which Raymond Lopez called “vertical zoning” —
was a direct expression of the urban hygienicism that reigned in interwar CIAM functionalism, and was further developed during the postwar period with a specific focus on traffic engineering. See Virginie Lefebvre, “Les origines de l’architecture sur dalle,” in *Les Années ZUP: Architectures de la croissance 1960–1973*, eds. Gérard Monnier and Richard Klein (Paris: Picard, 2002).


67 Ibid., 69. The team of artists included Fabio Rieti, Gilles Aillaud (son of Emile Aillaud), Cremonini, Lucio Fanti, François Lalanne, Eva Lukasiewicz, and Laurence Rieti.

68 This began with the initiative *Habitat et vie sociale.* See Tellier, *Le temps des HLM.*