The Social Project

The complex legacy of public housing in postwar France.

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Sarcelles Locheres, near Paris, in a ca. 1960s postcard. [Image: Lapie; courtesy of Kenny Cupers]

Building the Banlieue

Even its public transport has a different name. To visit the other Paris, you take not the metro but a regional express train. You cross underneath the périphérique, the circular highway that has replaced Paris’s 19th-century
city wall but that has the same effect of demarcating the center from the rest. After this threshold, still the official limit of Paris, the familiar historic city quickly disappears in the view from the train window, and suddenly, the other Paris — perhaps the truly modern one — materializes. Housing slabs and tower blocks in bright white, daring pink, drab gray. Palaces for the people, gigantic in scale but mostly less than glamorous. Ten-story pyramids imitating Mediterranean hilltop villages. Expansive multilevel plazas and exuberantly designed playgrounds. Graffiti-covered concrete and postmodernist cladding. Well-meaning community centers and monstrous shopping-mall megastructures. Highways, parking lots, and patches of green space, large and small.

In the popular imagination this landscape — the unplanned result of planned developments — is the opposite of all that the image of “Paris” has long embodied and evoked. Here beyond the edge is the Paris tourists rarely see but where most Parisians actually live. The situation is not much different in Bordeaux, Marseille, Lille or Grenoble. Yet suburban landscapes, which comprise so much of contemporary France, seem somehow to be the product of another society, altogether different from the one that created the grand boulevards and monumental architecture of the great cities. Indeed it can feel uncannily to journey from a central Paris that seems ever more set in its ways to the periphery, the banlieue. There you will find a new world — where 60 years ago there was little more than cabbage fields and cottages — and yet you might also have the lingering sensation of visiting the puzzling remains of a long-lost civilization.

This built world has its equivalent in paper. The vast proliferation of paperwork that documented France’s frenzied postwar urbanization has been poured into a subterranean city of dusty boxes in a far-flung suburb.1 Given the uniquely French fervor for bureaucracy, the period archives fully express the outmoded ambitions that shaped the environments that flash by the train window. Housing for all. The rational organization of the national territory. Universal access to public services. A modern nation of
socially mixed neighborhoods. Even if the rhetoric was sometimes accompanied by less lofty motives, the extensive urbanization of peripheral Paris was nonetheless unprecedented and unparalleled in its consequences — one of the largest, and perhaps least understood, social and architectural experiments of the 20th century.

After World War II, France evolved in less than three decades from a largely rural country with an outdated housing stock into a highly modernized urban nation. This evolution was largely the result of the massive production of publicly funded housing and state-planned New Towns on the outskirts of existing cities. The sheer scale of these developments — tens of thousands of housing units rising simultaneously — makes the interwar modernist housing (e.g., New Frankfurt) look almost as quaint as the garden cities on which they were modeled. The upshift in postwar housing production was both quantitative and qualitative. During the middle decades of the century, architecture undertook a whole new role — a social project. In those years modern architecture did not belong solely to an avant-garde; it was shared and shaped by government officials, construction companies, residents’ associations, real estate developers and social scientists alike. And even with this broad constituency, its logic and language were remarkably consistent. Never before — and not since — were modernization and modernism so pervasive and so closely allied. Never before was modern architecture built on such a massive scale, never before was the regional landscape reshaped so definitively, so rapidly. And never before were entire generations so aware of how better their lives were than those of their parents — especially in the social and material realm of quotidian experience. As older agendas of social reform gave way to state-sponsored rationalization, architecture participated in the spatial organization of welfare and progress. In France, modern architecture and postwar urbanization developed in tandem, in a process of continual experimentation centered on everyday life as a target of modernization and an emerging domain of expertise.
It is hard not to read the resulting built environments through the lens of current events. In recent decades, much mid-century housing has undergone physical degradation and been left to those with no choice to live anywhere else. As white middle-class families left collective housing in favor of suburban single-family homes, they were replaced by poor families, many from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Today many larger collective projects — especially those built in the 1950s and ’60s — are sites of high rates of youth unemployment and crime. More than 700 projects have been officially labeled “urban problem areas” by the French government, stigmatizing more than five million inhabitants,
predominantly from ethnic minorities. The continuing unrest in a relatively small number of these deprived neighborhoods — the [riots of November 2005 and 2007 being the most notorious] — has come to symbolize the country’s (sub)urban crisis, and critical observers in France and abroad have decried the contemporary banlieue as emblematic of social and racial apartheid. Thus two vastly different images now dominate our understanding of urban France: on the one hand, the monumental splendor of Paris’s historic center; on the other, the bleak poverty of suburban tower blocks. By the early 1980s, fewer than 16 percent of Parisians lived within the city limits — within its administrative boundary. 2 The majority of the city’s 2.2 million residents inhabit the sprawling suburbs known as the banlieue. Other French cities mirror this pattern.

No matter the national particularities, suburban France is inscribed in a wider global narrative about modern architecture and state planning. During the postwar decades of unprecedented economic expansion — roughly between 1945 and 1975 — large-scale urban renewal, mass housing estates, and ambitious New Town projects proliferated not only in France but also in Britain, Scandinavia, the Middle East, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Despite, or perhaps because of, the global front lines of the Cold War, these diverse regions shared remarkably similar assumptions about the virtues of planning and mass housing. And with important exceptions, notably Singapore and Hong Kong, [many of the built environments that resulted are now viewed as relics of once passionate convictions that we have lost]: belief in modern architecture as a vehicle of social progress, and confidence in the capacity of government to provide directly for individual citizens and families. Just a decade or two after construction, mass housing projects — such as Pruitt-Igoe, Sarcelles, Bijlmermeer, and Aylesbury — came to represent [not progress but crisis].

The dominant perception, among scholars and the public alike, is that postwar housing has been a monstrous catastrophe. Many have blamed the architects and planners who drafted the schemes. How could they conceive
of placing near-identical towers and slabs in vast, isolated and ill-defined open spaces? With Le Corbusier usually taking the brunt of the critique, three decades of building production have become synonymous with modernism’s failure: its rationalistic hubris, its inflexible and inhumane urbanism, its denial of people’s needs and aspirations. Architects and planners themselves have participated in these virulent critiques; which were not without self-interest — if the origin of social malaise lay in design, so too would the solution. But the problem with handing out blame is not that it would incriminate the wrong culprits, but rather that it reduces the history of a significant part of the urbanized world to a singular error. Meanwhile, historical shortsightedness has helped to legitimize the current policies of massive demolition. The famous footage of Pruitt-Igoe being imploded, in 1971, is now shorthand for an approach that can seem the clearest way out of mass housing, and since then it has been demolition, rather than improvement, that’s gained purchase. Yet rarely does this do more than simply displace the social problem of poverty; meanwhile the legacy of the golden age of state welfare is disappearing even before it has been properly understood.
Top: Reconstruction of Le Havre [Photograph: Fonds Aillaud. SIAF/Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d’architecture du XX siècle; courtesy of Kenny Cupers] Bottom:
Architectural history has done little so far to challenge this state of affairs. Conflating the history of mass housing with the history of architectural discourse, English-language scholarship has continued to neglect the complex genesis of what are often dismissed as mediocre projects — at best watered-down versions of a brilliant idea, at worst thoughtless iterations of a revolting idea. But how can the forms and concepts in Le Corbusier’s sketches of the 1920s, or the discourse of a self-appointed architectural elite like the Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne (CIAM), possibly suffice to explain a process of urbanization that has literally changed the face of the earth? Mass housing remains an excluded topic in architectural history because it falls through the gaps of the discipline. It is neither a vernacular expression of local culture nor easily taken up in the canon of high architecture. Mass housing developments can be seen as pervasively global and yet nationally specific, never quite unique nor completely alike. No wonder they challenge the norms of a discipline that privileges intentions over consequences — despite being modern architecture’s most widespread manifestation to date.

The French suburbs epitomize these contradictions. In no other country were modern architecture and state planning so strongly united, shaping both the image of contemporary urbanity and our understanding of the social ambitions of architecture. It is also notable that this convergence cannot be explained by the predominance of a single political ideology. Midway between the Soviet bloc, where social housing was a direct expression of Communist ideology, and the United States, where it never became the dominant development model, France was shaped both by the workings of a centralized state and by the dynamics of liberal capitalism. During the trente glorieuses, the three decades of economic growth and prosperity following World War II, mass housing was France’s preeminent
tool of national modernization. Its cornerstone was the standard four-room apartment, resulting from mass production and typified in France as the “F4” — just as the nuclear family was to be the backbone of the nation. Despite the increasing engagement of private capital and the gradual liberalization of planning procedures, the centralized state remained the country’s main urbanist, *de jure* and *de facto*, until well into the ’70s. Not surprisingly, this period is known as “the era of the technocrats,” a time when the country was steered by a class of leaders with a penchant for authoritarianism and technocracy inherited from wartime and colonialism.

The pervasive towers and slabs of metropolitan France today stand as symbols of what is now bedeviled as a regime of violence breeding violence.

To understand the French suburbs, we need to sidestep the morass of myth and symbol in which this history has been buried; we need to favor situated agency over abstract forces and contingency over determinism. Contrary to accepted wisdom, this perspective reveals that the postwar French city is more than the product of a utopian blueprint gone awry. Yet the idea that French urbanism amounts to little more than a poor imitation of Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation* remains a persistent fiction in both popular and scholarly accounts. Even if there are striking formal resemblances between some French housing developments and certain CIAM and Team X projects, these cannot be reduced to a matter of “influence.” Even if discussions between Corbusian modernists and mid-century urbanists such as Gaston Bardet reveal the ideological struggle over the proper shape of French reconstruction, these do little to explain the circumstances that actually informed mass housing on the ground.

The French suburbs were not built in a day or according to a singular principle. To be sure, architects and planners were engaged in large-scale
reorganization and modernization; but this hardly implied a unified agenda or one-off implementation. Motives competed and projects conflicted. Crime and violence in France’s mass housing did not erupt only in recent years; female depression and youth delinquency were only the most sensational problems reported by journalists and social scientists at the height of construction during the 1960s. Such concerns accompanied the rapid postwar urbanization, and during this period architecture was not only planned and built, but also inhabited, criticized, studied, modified and revised. Mass housing was not just produced but also consumed, and these processes were intimately intertwined. Instead of the prevailing assumption of triumphant rise and spectacular fall, this period was one of accumulative experimentation and continual revision.
The social agenda of interwar modernism — architecture as the vehicle for an egalitarian society — was reversed in the postwar decades. Architecture was now to facilitate societal changes already under way. This was in many ways a far more complex task, involving a complex set of actors and institutions. As modernism turned mainstream, the production of the built
environment in postwar France went hand in hand with a phenomenal expansion of expertise and specialized knowledge. Architecture has rarely been considered an integral part of this development; its role has often been understood merely in terms of artistic, utopian, and paper projects of the 1950s and ’60s. Yet postwar architectural modernism was about more than radicalism and technophilia; architectural experimentation was both a driving factor and a result of the new regime of knowledge production. In areas as diverse as social life, building technology, and economic policy, a growing body of empirical knowledge provided architecture’s intellectual context in those years. Together architects, policy makers, developers, social scientists, and resident associations experimented with urban planning principles, prefabricated construction, modern housing typologies, collective amenities, and commercial centers, from the first mass housing projects until the fundamental reorientation of the mid-1970s. Contrary to our contemporary intuition, the prevalence of technocratic expertise and functionalist doctrine did not exclude “humanist” concerns with the social and the desire to accommodate a diversity of needs.

**Technocracy Meets Consumerism**

French housing, both before and after the political upheavals of 1968, was often less about its inhabitants than about those who spoke and built in their name. It involved political elites and government administrators, large semi-public and private developers and construction companies, modern yet mainly Beaux-Arts–trained architects, scientific experts, engineers in large consultancy firms — and increasingly, local and national associations of tenants and consumers, assembled under rubric of *usagers*, or users. This term not only emerged in action, through the response of individuals and groups to large-scale urban development; it was also constructed in order to understand an increasingly complicated reality. The white nuclear family with a male bread-winning father, stay-at-home mother, and two or three children remained the reference point for many architects and policy
makers — almost all male — well into the 1960s. At the same time, the residents themselves helped to shape such racial and gendered definitions — sometimes reinforcing them, as when housewives collaborated with policy makers on kitchen designs, sometimes subverting them, as when an unmarried Algerian construction worker moved into an “F4.” In this way the user — whether as an abstract universal, a statistical entity identified with the nuclear family, a normative figure subject to modernization, an active participant of neighborhood life, a free consumer, or a protesting militant — was at once a policy and design category of policy and an agent of the built environment. This category was fundamental both in the course of mass housing estates or grands ensembles and in the villes nouvelles, France’s official program of New Towns officially launched in 1965.

Situated ambivalently between the mass subject and the individual — and between the realms of citizenship and private consumption — the user was in fact emblematic of architecture and urbanization in postwar Europe more generally.  

As a term, *usager* first appeared in the *Petit Robert* dictionary during the 1930s, referring to “a person who uses (a public service, the public domain).” This definition acknowledged the responsibility of the state to furnish goods and services in expanding domains of social and personal life, at a moment when social welfare and modern state planning were in a crucial stage of formation. This approach became central during the so-called golden age of the welfare state in postwar Europe, when governments became involved with citizens’ well-being in novel ways. From natalism to mental health to cultural policy, civil administration seemed no longer to bear just on subjects but also on their very subjectivity. This was exactly the kind of shift that guided Michel Foucault’s search for a definition of *power* beyond discipline, as the organization of social and personal life in general. But contrary to the conspiratorial tone of many subsequent interpretations, the new type of government was hardly experienced as a dark machination. In the eyes of policy makers and citizens alike, the function of the state was no longer just to rule but to serve. More accurately, perhaps, the state would rule by serving.

The figure of the user typified this new role of government. Neither simply a consumer (an independent actor in the private realm of the market) nor simply a citizen (in direct political relation to the state through rights and obligations), the user was relatively autonomous from the state, yet at the same time linked to it as beneficiary of “public service.” This kind of state provision was based on rights — and thus on estimated need rather than individual want. Calculations were devoid of individuality, and in particular of race and ethnicity — these were absent categories in an otherwise meticulous bureaucratic system of social classification. At the same time,
state provision was increasingly understood as a consumer relationship, whether defined individually or as “collective consumption.”

The figures of citizen and consumer were indeed often conflated in a country marked by the melding of state-led modernization with a mass consumer culture grafted upon the American model. If the United States was a Consumers’ Republic, a term coined by Lizabeth Cohen for a regime in which “the consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest,” France was a Users’ Republic, in which mass consumption was guided by elaborate systems of state planning and welfare provision. More specifically, French consumer culture was shaped by conflict between the European emphasis on “collective consumption” as a social right and the American notion of the sovereign consumer whose satisfaction was guaranteed by the free market. The authority of the French state led observers such as Henri Lefebvre to speak of a “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption.” National economic planning — with its roots in the 1930s, its wartime experimental phase, and its maturation under Jean Monnet and the Marshall Plan — made France a quintessential “planning state” in which the government has a pervasive presence in everyday life. The ambiguity of the user — part citizen, part consumer — was an integral part of this intertwining of state, market and society.
Not only was the built environment shaped by this condition; it also helped to shape it. In the first postwar years, the government prioritized infrastructure and heavy industries, but when rapid urban and demographic growth exacerbated the housing shortage, it assumed new responsibilities. Far exceeding any prior involvement in social housing and national reconstruction, by the mid-1950s the state began to promote the mass production of standardized dwellings in large collective housing estates. Architecture was granted a prominent role in this modernization, even as social engineering was restricted by the dynamics of a liberal capitalist democracy, the impact of private development, and the rise of mass consumerism. This tension brought the inherently unknowability of the inhabitant to the very heart of French urban and architectural practice. It
triggered new questions not only for planners and policy makers, but also for architects, who were now faced with a new, anonymous client in their design briefs. This user was to postwar architecture what the “modern subject” was to interwar modernism.

And housing was more than a straightforward service such as postal delivery or electricity. It was claimed as a basic citizens’ right; increasingly built as a modern consumer product; and remained a complex feature of personal identity, collective belonging and social life. Meanwhile the state did not refrain from intervening in these various aspects; the democratization of rights, goods and services that was one of the primary goals of French welfare generated a continuum between the public realm and the private domains of market and household. Urbanism was a key factor in this thoroughgoing reorganization of public and private. When inhabitants — organized in local associations and national civil society organizations — formulated demands for participation, they did so in the name of an all-encompassing user, not simply as tenants, citizens or consumers. Mass housing and New Town development thus changed what it meant to be a French citizen and a household inhabitant. The urbanism of “collective facilities” — urban amenities from shops to churches that were included in housing developments — became a key element of the state-led project to improve life. In a system in which production and consumption were separate yet interdependent realms, the question of how one could inform the other thus became crucial.

Concrete and Knowledge

In the postwar era, new types of experts circulated in the hallways of government — and not just in France — and the social sciences especially grew exponentially, both within the state apparatus and the academy. And if this development was reinforced by Cold War politics (which came to define the global influence of American social science), French sociologists were nonetheless shaped by their own intellectual traditions. Yet even in
postwar France, the figure of the autonomous intellectual was increasingly replaced by that of the expert, a shift captured by Michel Foucault’s notion of the “specific intellectual.” No longer the intellectual of universal claims, the “master of truth and justice,” the expert was the knowledge producer who worked in specific contexts and thus combined theory and practice. Against the background of a decolonizing and rapidly urbanizing France, housing and urban development were crucial fields for this new culture of expertise. French urbanists and social scientists had first encountered each other in the colonies, which since the late 19th century had been regarded as *champs d'expérience*, laboratories for controlled tests that could eventually be applied to France itself. With the redeployment of former colonial administrators during the ’50s and ’60s, this experimental approach was now folded back onto the metropole.

But in postwar France the intersection of architecture and social science was not just a matter of pragmatic state planning, of overcoming problems with the construction of housing estates or new neighborhoods. The relationship between built space and society was in fact one of the most fruitful themes in postwar French intellectual culture. In all its dimensions, whether in central Paris or the mushrooming suburbs, urban space informed the work of thinkers and artists from various disciplines and perspectives — from Situationist critiques of capitalist urban boredom to Jacques Tati’s sterile world of glass and steel in *Playtime*. While such cultural production might seem far removed from the workings of government or the actual economic and political forces shaping the environment, many intellectuals — Henri Lefebvre most famously — moved fluidly between avant-garde circles and state administration. Their work was often both critical of and instrumental to government planning and its consequences on the ground. Of these burgeoning intellectual cultures, sociology became increasingly central, especially given its claims to answer the elusive question of how built environments were actually “consumed.”
Initially, however, such sociological concerns were practically irrelevant to state planners faced with the daunting task of rebuilding France during and after World War II. Their focus was on the scientific management of production. High-level civil servants, graduated from France’s elite grandes écoles and hardened by wartime experience, comprised a class of planning experts who cultivated technology as a means to achieve national modernization and reinstate French grandeur. In the immediate postwar decade, these nonelected administrators were convinced that technology and applied science would transcend the deadlock of politics. This conviction — as old as Saint-Simonianism — set off an intellectual debate about technocracy, which became a pejorative by opponents concerned about the disregard for human values.

Such opposition, however, only disguised the formation of a shared culture of expertise. As the mindset of national planning infiltrated the bureaucratic apparatus, the French state became a knowledge-producing institution as much as an interventionist one. By the end of the 1950s, state planning included a range of social and cultural domains, and high-level administrators acknowledged the social sciences as key auxiliaries to political action and decision-making. The construction of some the first grands ensembles in the mid-50s was already accompanied by sociological inquiry, both independent and government-commissioned. And if the sociologist Chombart de Lauwe was a pioneer, and Henri Lefebvre his most famous critic and successor, the role of sociology in postwar urbanization — and architecture — cannot be reduced to the work of a few “great men.” In postwar France, sociology constituted a dispersed realm that included not only academic research, but also social work, popular studies, journalistic reportage and, most important, a huge mass of government-sponsored studies.
The latter were conducted by semipublic and private bureaux d’études, research institutes and consultancy firms that had emerged in response to growing government demand for research. Many housing projects thus functioned as life-sized laboratories under the scrutiny of social-scientific experts. They were experimental — though not necessarily innovative or radical — in that their built form embodied hypotheses about everyday life and gave rise to processes of testing, evaluating and adapting. Apartment layouts, housing blocks, public spaces and collective amenities were revised and improved in project after project, often on the basis of sociological models and first-hand observations. Sociological expertise thus assumed a crucial mediating role between what policy makers, developers and architects produced in their offices and ordinary life “on the ground.”

French sociology thus grew up in the postwar housing estates and New Towns, and these projects became the social scientists’ quintessential barometer of French society. Their far-reaching effects were accompanied by a conceptual revolution of what this quotidian realm was and could be. Henri Lefebvre’s work — beginning with his 1947 Critique de la vie quotidienne — was at the forefront of a generation that would turn “everyday life” into a fertile domain of investigation. The stakes were understood to be high. While everyday life was seen as compromised by the alienating forces of capitalism and bureaucracy and also — following the fervent writings of Guy Debord — by the voracious demands of consumer society, it was also viewed as fertile ground for change, for a critical reengagement with more authentic and meaningful ways of life.

Architects did not remain on the sidelines. For an international avant-garde of architects and artists, the everyday was becoming a crucial concern, allowing them to expand the concepts of functionalism and to incorporate social life more directly into principles of architectural design. In this new modernist agenda, the 1953 CIAM meeting in Aix-en-Provence, which saw the birth of Team X, and in which sociology was assigned a key role, was a landmark. In France, however, it was not Team X but the centralized state
that figured as the primary nexus for sociology, architecture and urbanism. From the mid ’60s on, collaboration within multidisciplinary planning teams — most importantly for the *villes nouvelles* — allowed French architects and state planners to channel social critiques into urban models, alternatives to the *grands ensembles*.

After the protests of 1968, which “reintellectualized” French architectural culture and inspired a newly critical architecture, sociological concepts — such as Lefebvre’s notions of everyday life and the right to the city — became staple references, and were soon taken up by design collaboratives such as the Atelier de Montrouge and Atelier d’urbanisme et d’architecture, as well as younger state administrators. Although it proved impossible to instrumentalize sociology for design, the field provided architects and planners with a unique entryway into the practices of dwelling as well as with specific techniques like “programming.” Sociological ideas also enabled architects and planners both to promote citizen participation and to entice consumers in novel ways. This nexus thus connects what are conventionally understood to be opposing approaches — participatory planning and modernist architecture.
[Photographs by Kenny Cupers]
Politics beyond Ideology

The fact that both the embrace of state-funded housing and calls for citizen participation cross the French political spectrum reduces the explanatory force of political ideology. Left and Right were, of course, not always in agreement, but state-led urbanism was supported by both sides, albeit for different reasons and in different ways. What the Right saw as a matter of economic rationality and national pride could be, for the Left, an issue of affordable housing and social solidarity. Thus in the 1950s politicians generally agreed about the virtues of mass collective housing, and in the 1970s they agreed again about its vices. The rise of citizen participation was not a matter of one political ideology supplanting another; it was part of a larger shift that confounds clear distinction between (right-wing) authoritarian planning and (left-wing) citizen empowerment. During the presidency of Giscard d’Estaing (1974–81), participatory urbanism and quality of life became central preoccupations in architectural culture and urban policy; yet these themes had been developing for more than two decades in what continues to be seen as the heyday of technocratic France.

Likewise the aesthetics of participation changed gradually from the modern to the postmodern: following the spatial homogeneity and visual repetition of midcentury modernism, participatory urbanism shifted over time to find expression in postmodern form (form that often evoked a preindustrial past). Most important, any a priori registers for understanding the politics or aesthetics of postwar architecture and urbanism were thrown off by the dynamics of a consumer society in which power also meant purchasing power — a form of agency rarely acknowledged, yet increasingly more important than those given by decree or demanded in protest. The proliferation of big-box shopping malls and the predominance of single-family homes from the late 1960s onward, when a newly prosperous middle class could increasingly afford them, were clear signs that a new consumerism was threatening France’s state-led urbanism. It is not
surprising that participation and lifestyle — or shared decision-making and consumerism — were often conflated in urban and architectural debate during the 1960s and ’70s, at the height of the villes nouvelles project.

And in fact participation and lifestyle have come to reign supreme in the private urban developments of the decades that followed. Seemingly arisen from the ashes of a withering welfare state, this mentality came directly from the culture of the French welfare state itself, at the height of its success. By promoting active participation, free agency and the consumption of lifestyle, government-led late-modern urbanism helped shape the social imaginary of contemporary France and the logic of uneven development that has brought us to the suburban crisis of today. Expertise would continue to proliferate, but it would now be used not to build a social vision but to fix the “problem of the banlieue.”

EDITORS’ NOTE

This essay is adapted from The Social Project: Housing Postwar France, just published by University of Minnesota Press. It appears here with the permission of the author and publisher.

NOTES

1. Some of these archives, in Fontainebleau, will be moved to a new archival complex designed by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, located in Pierrefitte, another suburb of Paris. France’s National Archive for the postwar period contains more documents than were produced in all other periods of French history combined.


11. Jean-Pierre Daviet placed the origins of the notion well into the 19th century and showed that it was not only a matter of administrative law but was also shaped by socialist ideas. See Jean-Pierre Daviet, “Le service public et l’usager, entre le droit administratif et la philosophie politique (1873–1945),” in *Consommateur, usager, citoyen: Quel modèle de socialisation?*, ed. Chantal Horellou-Lafarge (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 23–48.

12. See Michel Foucault’s later work on “biopolitics” and “governmentality.”

13. Historians have dated the development of the welfare state to the end of 19th century, but it was the experience of World War II that laid the basis for the comprehensive interventionism of welfare in Europe. See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 362; Richard F. Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge


24. Modern urbanism in France was politically eclectic, to say the least. At the level of the national government, big decisions were made by centrist and right-wing politicians, in particular after the 1958 election of Charles de Gaulle, for whom participation was primarily a question of patriotism; national urban policies were crafted by an elite of nonelected officials with left-leaning but hardly radical political agendas, including socially progressive Catholics. On the local government level, the *grands ensembles* were enthusiastically received by Communist mayors while conservative municipalities tended to resist them. The concentration of modern housing projects in the “red suburbs” of Paris is not an accident. Yet many large-scale housing projects across the nation were planned from offices in Paris. The *villes nouvelles* program was an unmistakably Gaullist invention, drawn up by nonelected technocrats against the demands of local government. Nevertheless, it was exactly in these New Town projects that sociology — more on the Left than Right — inspired various New Town planners, whose political leanings were not often socialist. The firms they commissioned ranged from older, conservative Beaux-Arts–trained practices to new offices of young radicals, many with Communist affiliations. For more on the “red suburbs,” see Tyler Stovall, “French Communism and Suburban Development: The Rise of the Paris Red Belt,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 3 (1985): 437–60; Annie Fourcaut, *Banlieue rouge 1920–1960: Années Thorez, années Gabin: Archétype du populaire, banc d’essai des modernités* (Paris: Autrement, 1992).

Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System (New York:

Peter Lang, 2009) 


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