The expertise of participation: mass housing and urban planning in post-war France

Kenny Cupers*

Department of Architecture, The State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14214, USA

This article analyses the advent of participation in French planning as the historical touchstone of a larger shift in urban thinking. It investigates how the interactions between inhabitants, developers, state officials and social scientific experts in the production of large-scale modern housing areas and new towns helped bring about user participation as a category of action and discourse. The article argues that the transformation of inhabitants into active participants entails the development of legitimate ‘user knowledge’ and therefore – perhaps paradoxically – the continuing involvement of experts. The first part of the article examines how the turn towards mass housing production during the 1950s prompted the question of the user and established the ground for debates about participation. The second part of the article explores the relationship between inhabitant contestation and changing urban planning and policy-making during the 1960s. The focus here is on Sarcelles, which served both as a national urban model, a key object of sociological study, and the main target of national public outcry, and helps to reveal relations between local contestation, national policy and shifts in urban thinking. The last part of the article looks at the concrete influence of ideas of participation on subsequent urban policies during the 1970s.

Keywords: urban planning; mass housing; post-war France; grands ensembles; participation; expertise; the user

Introduction

Participation is generally cast as a ‘socially responsible’ approach to urban planning and much-needed corrective in large-scale urban development. Differently associated with right-wing populism and left-wing activism, it appears today both as an unfulfilled promise and as a dead end. For some, participation is still the only option for successful urban change; others lament that it amounts to not more than unworkable NIMBYism. This article reframes such contemporary critiques by analysing the advent of participation as the historical touchstone of a larger shift in urban thinking in post-war France.

The preoccupation with participation in the built environment is generally associated with the critiques and civil activism of the 1960s and 1970s. In the USA, the rhetoric of and experiments with participation are often understood as part of civil rights movement and local community struggles against the large-scale infrastructure and urban renewal projects of the post-war decades. Personified by figures like Jane Jacobs, these movements have established participation and community as new planning concepts in diametrical opposition to the expert culture of modern planning. Despite many differences, Britain witnessed a similar discontent with modernist planning and a gradual institutionalization of community planning. In France, where the notion of community has been less influential, a strong discourse around participation

*Email: cupers@post.harvard.edu
nevertheless emerged in the wake of 1968. Across national boundaries, the self-proclaimed legacy of entire generation of local activists and community organizers is to have overturned technocratic beliefs and authoritarian decision-making in favour of alternative planning methods based on community participation.

What seems intuitively clear is the way in which participation breaks with the technocratic nature of planning. In radical opposition to the political elites and technical experts at decision-making tables during the first post-war decades, many social movements around 1968 based their political ideology on the notion of the user and their active participation in the everyday built environment. When we take such contemporaneous rhetoric at face value, participation appears as the opposite of modernist planning and its culture of expertise.

While over the past decade, architectural and urban historians have revised the canonical understandings of modernism by revealing the multiplicity of actors involved in the planning process, one fundamental assumption has remained surprisingly intact: that of the opposition between ‘top-down’ planning and ‘bottom-up’ participation. By aligning the emergence of the latter with the activism of the 1960s and 1970s, most observers have assumed a clear dichotomy: top-down planning is associated with modernism, authoritarianism and technocracy, whereas bottom-up approaches are identified with user-oriented design, participatory planning and community development.

At first sight, France seems to only epitomize this duality. On the one hand, French post-war urbanism was under the jurisdiction of a centralized state apparatus, run by a class of elite technicians whose ideas were indebted to the notoriously authoritarian wartime government of Vichy. On the other hand, the discipline was perhaps most profoundly touched by the rhetoric of participation that hit France during the 1960s and 1970s. As this period slowly moves from memory to history, scholars from a range of disciplines have begun to more carefully excavate it. First of all, recent studies have brought to light that in French planning, participation is an ambiguous notion that does not constitute a single identifiable approach and needs to be understood as a promise more than a practice. Some scholars have confirmed the conventional view that participation originated as a local place-based reaction to dominant planning traditions. Michael James Miller, for instance, has analysed local inhabitant activism in the Alma-Gare neighbourhood of Roubaix, where critiques to urban renewal ultimately led to new forms of planning based on participation.

Other scholars, however, have put forward contradictory evidence. If we take participation to entail the various forms of public engagement in matters of the built environment, its terrain of action is far broader than the well-known experiments. Nicole Rudolph and Brian Newsome in particular have demonstrated how in France concerns with participation began more than a decade before 1968; both scholars see the move towards participatory thinking in urban policy in the realm of national fairs and housing exhibitions during the 1950s and in the government’s early public information programmes and marketing studies. This suggests that participation began not from the revolts of the governed but from the workings of the centralized state itself.

The question of participation in post-war French planning has thus remained unresolved. What is the relation between concrete local activism around large-scale planning projects, governmental efforts to include participatory processes and a larger paradigm shifts about the importance of the user and the making of cities at large? The article addresses this question by looking at how participation emerged out of the practical implementations and negotiations of modern urbanism in 1950s–1970s France. More particularly, it investigates how the interactions
between inhabitants, developers, state officials and social scientific experts in the production of large-scale modern housing areas and new towns helped bring about user participation as a particular category of action and discourse. The article argues that the transformation of (passive) inhabitants into active participants of the urban environment, entails the development of legitimate ‘user knowledge’ and therefore – perhaps paradoxically – the continuing involvement of a group of experts. In France, this group was made up of social scientists in research institutes, civil servants and policy-makers, leaders of local associations and architects, often ambivalently positioned in between the professional world and the public sector.

In what follows, I begin by examining how the turn towards mass housing production during the 1950s prompted the question of the user and established the ground for debates about participation. The second and main part of the article then explores the relationship between inhabitant contestation and governmental attempts to reform urban planning and policy-making during the 1960s. The focus here is on Sarcelles, which served both as a national urban model, a key object of sociological study, and the main target of national public outcry, and helps to reveal relations between local contestation, national policy and shifts in urban thinking. The last part of the article looks at the concrete influence of ideas of participation on subsequent urban policies during the 1970s.

Mass housing and the advent of the user

Like most of Western Europe, France came out of the Second World War with a severe housing shortage. Triggered less by wartime destruction than by a chronic lack of real estate development throughout the century, this situation was left unaddressed in the immediate post-war years. As the first economic modernization plans neglected the construction sector in favour of heavy industries, the built environment in France did not change dramatically – isolated reconstruction projects excepted. Strong rural migration and the French baby boom led the situation in metropolitan areas to become so acute that from the early 1950s housing became one of the central goals of the national government. State policy focused almost exclusively on the development of _grands ensembles_, modern collective housing in consolidated areas often on the periphery of metropolitan areas across the country. Developed by social housing organizations as well as semi-public and private developers, and designed by Beaux-Arts-trained modern architects, these developments were meant for working- and middle-class nuclear French families coming from the provinces and inner cities.

Despite the fact that they were not directly constructed by the state, these mass housing estates were products of state-led capitalist urban development and constituted the norm – quantitatively as well as qualitatively – for French domestic culture from the mid-1950s until the late 1960s. The ultimate embodiments of the country’s post-war decades of unprecedented economic growth, they were the result of a streamlining of production in which the state took on a more indirect yet at once more central role. Collective housing moved resolutely away from the realm of social reform to become a generalized good assured – at least in principle – by the welfare state. In stark contrast to the USA, and perhaps more than in any other Western European state, this development marks not only the state’s exceptionally strong impact on post-war urbanization but also the primacy of mass housing in urban planning practice.

This turn in the production of the French built environment was heralded by the Plan Courant. It consisted of a series of laws, under the direction of the then Minister of
Construction, Pierre Courant, aimed to encourage the rapid and massive construction of low-cost standardized housing. The Plan was unprecedented in that it tied together land use legislation (to facilitate expropriation), a way to finance housing (through state subsidies) and a programme of normalized low-cost dwelling units. The Plan not only prescribed their size, maximum construction price and minimum standard of comfort, but also promoted particular architectural forms. It was hardly the first time the state enforced housing norms; technical norms for social housing had long been in existence. But the application of such a comprehensive set of norms on different categories of housing was unprecedented, and gave the state a principal role in shaping the architecture of national housing production.

Consequently, architects and planners, now working within the dominion of the centralized state, were faced with a new category of design: the user. No longer in service of an individual patron, with which they were in direct contact, they now needed to design for this anonymous, abstract figure behind which a multitude of different inhabitants and dwelling cultures remained hidden. The development of a standardized architecture of mass housing further entrenched the assumption of a universal user. User needs were objective and if not quantifiable, then at least quantifiable: How many people needed to be housed? What was the minimum space per family unit? What was the ideal number of units per block and the ideal number of inhabitants for a new town?

This technical and economic rationale was ultimately based on the promise of industrialized production to generate housing units of approved, standard quality. Carried by the impetus to build ‘massively, quickly and cheaply’, the efforts of industrialization were channelled into the single rationality of heavy prefabrication. During the 1950s, the standardization of dwelling units was mirrored in the similarity between grands ensembles nationally: just like France’s standard four-room apartment, the F4, was repeated infinitely across the country with minimal layout variations, so did the housing estates they made up appear as ever so many variations on a theme, whether they were built in the suburbs of Lille or on the outskirts of Marseille (Figures 1–3).

The new Frenchman that was implicit in this kind of production was a standardized one. Yet, as soon as this standardized user was constructed, it became questioned. If experts agreed on the need for norms and standards, they often disagreed on what these should be. On the one hand, the larger project of national modernization of which mass housing production was a part implied a standardized, modern way of living; on the other hand, it prompted the question of how to adapt housing to increasingly complex and unknown user needs.

The attempt to accurately determine housing needs, the technical normalization and standardization of mass housing and the growing concerns with the social repercussions of what was built spurred the incorporation of new forms of expertise in state-led housing and urban planning during the late 1950s. At a relative distance from state policy, certain French experts had already begun to develop forms of ‘user knowledge’ as a basis for design and planning. Crucial in this respect, and more influential for France than the parallel discourse of Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (International Congresses of Modern Architecture, CIAM) and Team X, was the sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, who developed what he called ‘applied’ sociological studies geared towards urban intervention. Throughout the decade, he emphasized the need for in-depth sociological surveys prior to urban planning – not only in academic circles but also in several meetings at the Ministry of Construction. In two key studies of housing projects in Paris and Bordeaux, he had pointed to the need to
research, apart from ‘fundamental needs’ a series of ‘specific’ inhabitants needs based on sociological profiles of household types.11

Chombart’s calls to include qualitative sociology in national planning and housing policy were certainly pioneering when he first launched them. By the later part of the 1950s, however, more and more state administrators began to realize that such knowledge could help improve
Figure 2. A diagram by the Union international des organismes familiaux (UIOF) to illustrate the calculation of minimum surface norms for apartments, 1959. Source: Techniques et Architectures 19, no. 2 (1959): 121.
housing construction and the planning of urban expansion. As the mindset of national planning
infiltrated the diverse realms of the state apparatus during the post-war period, the French state
had become a knowledge-producing institution as much as an interventionist one. The state
gradually yet selectively adopted sociological expertise as it promised to control the country’s
rapid urbanization and improve life in its proliferating housing areas. This new kind of expert-
tise did not only imply research on housing norms, but more importantly, growing attention to
qualitative aspects of use and the subjective world of the user.

Figure 3. Overview of housing projects in the Paris region, around 1960. Source: *Architecture
Most remarkable in this respect were the urban policies of Pierre Sudreau. When he became Minister of Construction under de Gaulle in the newly established Fifth Republic in 1958, one of his main goals was to improve national housing production. His Committee on Life in the grands ensembles (Commissio de la vie dans les grands ensembles), motivated by a growing responsibility to facilitate social life in mass housing areas, provided an important platform of reflection and dialogue for high-level civil servants, politicians, architects, urbanists, social scientists and representatives of national civil society organizations. One of their achievements was the creation of a grille d’équipement or ‘facilities grid’ (Figure 4). Published in the prominent journal Urbanisme, it offered a model for the ideal physical and social composition of a grand ensemble. This included a listing of 85 types of collective facilities to be located at different scales of the urban development, from residential groups and neighbourhood units to quarters and arrondissements. The grid expressed a functionalist and statistic conception of use based on a rigorous quantification of need. At the same time, however, it was the product of an entirely different sensibility. The grille was not complete as a model in itself; the organization of social life in the grand ensemble was not to be considered an automatic consequence of its urbanism. Instead, the meticulous design of housing, collective amenities and public spaces needed to be guided by a policy of community development and social work. In the many debates of the working groups inside the commission, there was a clear acknowledgement that qualitative sociological research was necessary to avoid social problems in the grands ensembles. Thus emerged, during the 1950s, a generally shared understanding that the production of housing needed to be informed directly by investigations into its ‘consumption’, or in other words how these environments, once built, would be used by their inhabitants. Over the following years, the continual revisions of the grid would foster both urban sociological research and the development of new urban design strategies meant to elicit neighbourhood liveliness based on inhabitant participation.

In short, the epistemological repercussions of mass housing production in France in the 1950s amount to the advent of the user as a category of design, research and planning. The concern with an accurate quantification of user needs and increasingly with social life in the newly built environments gradually led to the incorporation of sociological expertise into urban planning and state policy. Rather than torn between a humanist view of the user as a participant of neighbourhood life against a statistical notion based on functionalist or quantified need, French urbanism during the 1950s shows how the former is in fact part and parcel of the latter. This ambivalent notion of the user was an integral part of the experience of mass housing and urbanism over the following decades.

The experimental urbanism of Sarcelles

The implementation of mass housing estates gave rise to a complex of local and national reactions that shaped urban policy-making throughout the 1960s and the 1970s. The vibrancy of inhabitants’ reactions to the mass urbanism of the grands ensembles was a result of what some called their ‘Frontier’ character. Inhabitants were forced to organize their everyday lives in an environment that was often neither finished nor accommodating to their way of life. Whether they arrived from poor housing in Paris’ 13th arrondissement, from a small village in rural Bretagne, or from a decolonizing Algeria, the first generation of inhabitants had to make do with what they found in their new environment, which was
Figure 4. The *Grille Dupont* as it was published in the journal *Urbanisme* in 1959. Source: Dupont, ‘Le grand ensemble’, 11–14.
often located at the very edges of the existing city. They had to insert themselves in a society still largely in the making.

These conditions were epitomized by the grand ensemble of Sarcelles. While it was not the first large housing estate to appear on the outskirts of Paris, it was proclaimed as ‘Europe’s largest construction site’ and soon became notorious as journalists and sociologists flocked to it to gauge the future of urban France. From the late 1950s onwards, Sarcelles was the national staple for popular criticism about the grands ensembles: when newspapers wrote about them as ‘a concentration camp universe’, ‘silos for people’, ‘rabbit cages’ or ‘dormitory suburbs’, they often made explicit reference to it.

The grand ensemble of Sarcelles was built incrementally between 1955 and 1975 and not according to a comprehensive plan drawn up at the outset. Sarcelles’ developer and landlord was the powerful Société Centrale Immobilière de la Caisse des dépôts (SCIC), established by the state in 1954 to aid in the construction of mass housing. Only around 1960, when SCIC had assured land purchase, an overall master plan was drawn by the Beaux-Arts-trained architects Jacques Henri-Labourdette and Roger Boileau (Figure 5).

Its social make-up was the direct result of national policies that prioritized young working-class families. A 1962 survey showed that only 8% of Sarcelles’ inhabitants were older than 45. The first inhabitants were remarkably homogeneous in terms of both age and class. This was typical for the grands ensembles nationally: a predominance of white French nuclear families with young children, a mix of blue- and white-collar workers often from the same factories and companies, and a significant number of civil servants. There were almost no rich, poor, adolescent, elderly or non-French among them. Despite this homogeneity, the new social world they entered did not have much in terms of a shared urban culture or tradition. The only things to bind them were the sameness of their new dwellings and the sheer novelty of the modern world outside their doorstep.

The emergence of social life in the grands ensembles was shaped as much by their particular social make-up as by their physical characteristics. Their isolated nature was often reinforced by their unfinishedness, architectural monotony, massive size and urban form. Their rigid composition negated the surrounding fabric – whether it be urban or suburban. Their architecture isolated and united in similar terms: the same facades, the same avenues, the same perspectives and window views, the same apartment layouts and the same interior finishings. But also, the same modern technologies and appliances, and especially, the same problems and aggravations when these did not function as they should. Defined in such way, the grand ensemble constituted a new world, entirely onto itself.

This condition engendered a particular climate of neighbourhood solidarity. When in the Spring of 1957, the first inhabitants of ‘the new Sarcelles’ moved into their newly finished apartments, they were confronted with an unwelcoming environment of construction dust, noise and mud. Without nearby train or bus connections, post office or grocery shop, the inhabitants were stranded in a landscape of agricultural fields and shabby single-family home allotments. A year later the nearby train tracks were electrified and trains stopped, but for an actual train station residents had to wait until 1966. The unfinished character of their everyday environment stimulated inhabitants to find company in common goals: pavement instead of mud, shorter commutes to work and the construction of local amenities. When they complained, they did so in group. This kind of solidarity shaped associational life – often separate and different in nature from that of the surrounding villages and allotments.
Figure 5. The grand ensemble of Sarcelles by Jacques Henri-Labourdette and Roger Boileau. (a) Top left: the first phase, built in urgency between 1955 and 1957 after land was coincidentally obtained, did not contain any collective facilities. (b) Top right: the second phase (plan of around 1958) followed soon after. (c) Bottom: subsequent plans corresponded roughly to a 400 m by 400 m grid, with secondary commercial centres dotted inside the neighbourhood units and the principal centre in the middle of the development, plan of around 1964. Source: Municipal Archives of Sarcelles.
While some of the associations were typical of their time – sports and leisure clubs for example – others were of an entirely new kind. Most remarkable was the Association Sarcelloise. This voluntary association was established less than a year after the arrival of the first inhabitants with the explicit aim to ‘defend the material and moral interests of the inhabitants, tenants and homeowners’ of the new housing areas. Through insistent letter-writing, the association complained about technical problems like collapsing staircases, about the lack of public transportation and local amenities – schools in particular – and about undue rent increases, collective charges and insufficient maintenance. Via a weekly newsletter, it updated members about these struggles and similar situations in other grands ensembles. What shaped the novelty of this associational life to a large extent was what it contested. The Association Sarcelloise directed its complaints against SCIC – which was not only the developer, but also the landlord, financier, builder and manager of their everyday built environment. While its demands were first of all defined by the private law of the relationship between landlord and tenant, the association posited demands far beyond these conventional domains.

Inhabitants’ political mobilization was triggered by consumerism as much as socialist militancy. The Association Sarcelloise defined itself explicitly as ‘at once a syndicate of tenants, an association of users, and a grouping of consumers’. What is crucial here is the unique way they came to assert themselves; no longer just as tenants of housing blocks, but as users of a new kind of city. A survey of Sarcelles’ local periodicals demonstrates that they perceived the environment in which they lived as a new city (une ville neuve, ville nouvelle) more than as a housing area (une nouvelle cité). Compared to the housing projects of the interwar period, Sarcelles was a new kind of place, a ‘welfare state city’ with its own governance and, consequently, its own political struggles. These struggles were defined as much by its monopolistic ownership structure as by its physical characteristics. Sarcelles’ associational life was symptomatic for the grands ensembles more generally – even when it was not always equally vibrant or successful. Their social life was shaped by a fundamental ambiguity between housing provision and city building.

The consequent conflation between tenants, users, consumers and citizens in the grands ensembles led to an unprecedented experimentation. This entailed, first of all, the involvement of sociological study. Already in 1960, the Association Sarcelloise suggested that the municipality involve a specialist urban research institute for a sociological survey that would help ‘adapt the architecture to its users’. The association eventually decided to organize its own survey by questionnaires mailed to the 4000 households. While its results where hardly surprising and the survey did not find any direct application, it demonstrated the growing importance of user knowledge both to legitimize inhabitants’ demands and to guide planners. As Sarcelles grew exponentially throughout the 1960s, so did its associational life. Soon enough, tension rose between the developer and the local associations (Figure 6).

SCIC, no doubt aware of the potential danger of these tensions and faced with a similar situation in more of its grands ensembles, decided to organize a conference addressing what it described as the ‘problem of the management of the grands ensembles’. While it might have been a harbinger of participation in the eyes of inhabitants, the conference undoubtedly was also the part of a strategy towards more efficient management for the developer. Its housing management had hitherto been extremely centralized; while it had established more than 200 subsidiary development firms for the execution of local projects, the management of their real estate was all done in Parisian headquarters. Most likely, SCIC’s leaders were increasingly
aware of the mismatch between this extremely centralized operation and the task of managing an immense collection of buildings and projects scattered all over France. Its housing stock had grown exponentially since its inception and had simply become too large for direct management.20

The first conference meeting was held in Sarcelles on 11 January 1964 under the direction of François Bloch-Lainé. For those in charge, the place constituted the perfect site of study: ‘Sarcelles was already very well known, the symbol of the grands ensembles and thus everything we did there would be exemplary. If we would find something interesting in Sarcelles, it was known and could be done elsewhere. Sarcelles had a large enough size for attempting interesting experiments.’21 Following this meeting, SCIC commissioned the National Foundation of Political Sciences (Fondation nationale des sciences politiques) to pursue a social scientific study about the possibilities for participation in their housing estates. The foundation created an expert working group comprised of jurists, sociologists and leaders of civil society organizations, resulting in what was called the Sérieyx Report.22

Concretely, the report proposed the creation of a resident organization that would operate via a Residents Council (Conseil de résidents) comprised of representatives elected by the inhabitants and delegates of already existing local associations. After long negotiations with the various organizations representing inhabitants – national family organizations, tenant
associations and local associations like the Association Sarcelloise – all parties agreed to a convention. Signed on 24 June 1965, the agreement instituted such councils in 12 housing estates, 10 of which were in the Paris region. Each council would work to regulate relations between developer and residents in three particular domains: rents, charges and socio-cultural amenities. First elections were held in 1966 (Figure 7).

During the following years, the councils were remarkably energetic. Sarcelles’ council won its struggle for the establishment of a new three-year rental contract guaranteeing protection from sudden rent increases. It also made proposals to modify the communal charges, at least some of which were taken into account. With respect to the management of socio-cultural facilities, the council did not appear to be very motivated at first, but during the following years it demanded a more powerful voice in the functioning of social centres and youth centres. Other councils likewise gradually broadened their goals and began to demand direct participation in issues of urban planning. Ville-nouvelles, the new local periodical of Sarcelles’ council, was a mouthpiece for these ambitions (Figure 8). The council saw the local knowledge and actions of inhabitants as the perfect tools for a new, ‘intelligent urbanism’.

Meanwhile, the municipality of Sarcelles slowly began to steer its own course in these urban affairs. Initially the mayor’s office was both ill equipped and ill prepared for the arrival of the grand ensemble ‘from Paris’ and remained practically silent during the first phases of
Figure 8. The periodical *Ville-nouvelles*, issue of December 1968. Source: Municipal Archives of Sarcelles.
During the early 1960s, however, the growing contestation of local associations spurred it to take on a more active role. Municipal leaders, however, enjoyed little trust with the inhabitants and seemed to lack the necessary leverage to make demands vis-à-vis the developer. Municipal actions only really changed in pace with the political shift of 1965, when the energetic communist Henri Canacos took over as a mayor. Under his leadership, the municipality contested the developer more resolutely and in more specific terms. It began to systematically deny building permits on the basis of a specific criticism of the proposed development, which it considered too dense and not including the necessary schools and commercial facilities. It demanded in-depth social scientific study preliminary to any future urban development and stipulated that sufficient land be reserved inside the grand ensemble for future collective facilities. Most importantly, it decided to hire ORGECO, a consultancy firm specialized in sociological research. At the same time, it also commissioned an architect-urbanist, Jean Bailly, to draw up more comprehensive plans for the future urban development of the municipality.

These plans aimed first of all to unify the existing village and the grand ensemble. In between these two separated entities, Jean Bailly proposed the construction of a new urban centre containing administrative functions as well as housing and a connecting park. His plan also included the renovation of the existing village centre, the implantation of an industrial zone to create local jobs and a zone of low-rise housing on the yet undeveloped other side of the municipality. The municipality decided to commission Jean Bailly for the execution of the village side of the plan and SCIC’s architect Henri-Labourdette for the grand ensemble side. During the following years, it spared little effort to convince inhabitants about the virtues of these plans (Figure 9). Henri-Labourdette used the ORGECO study to create a synthetic map of existing and future collective facilities, on the basis of which the municipality could then approach SCIC. The municipality succeeded in obliging it to provide terrains and funding for the collective facilities, in exchange for approving its building permit applications for the final phases of the grand ensemble.

The Residents Council was kept out of these negotiations and had not been informed about them, neither by SCIC nor by the municipality. Despite the fact that certain of their recommendations had been taken into account, many of its adherents felt disillusioned and betrayed. While the Residents Council remained faithful to its militant position, it did not succeed in getting a real voice in urban planning decisions. The agreement between the municipality and the developer had cut the council off from this. Subsequent council elections drew fewer and fewer crowds, and the percentage of inhabitants actively involved diminished continually. Ultimately, it was the municipality rather than the experimental Residents Councils which achieved an increasingly important role in urban development.

A 1975 study of Sarcelles aptly represented this evolution in a graphic diagram (Figure 10). In its initial period, from around 1954 until 1965, the various inhabitant associations – first informally led by the Association Sarcelloise and then officially by the Residents Council – functioned as outside pressure groups attempting to intrude the closed decision-making process of the developer. Then, in a second period (1965–1971), the developer accepted inhabitants’ input, initially mainly from the Residents Council, but increasingly also from the municipality led by Henri Canacos, who had launched his own negotiations independently. Both the Residents Council and the municipality represented inhabitants and claimed to be the legitimate institution to do so. Eventually, however, the council lost power to the municipality, inaugurating a third period after 1971 in which the inhabitants could participate in decision-making
via the municipality through ‘neighbourhood unions’ and ‘enlarged committees’. This diagram inspired Manuel Castells and his colleagues, who published an almost identical diagram in their well-known study of social movements in the Paris region.28

When contemporaneous observers during the 1970s made the balance sheet of participation in SCIC’s grands ensembles, they emphasized the modesty of achievements. Concrete results were a long-term lease contract offering better conditions to tenants, a system of accountability with regard to communal charge and maintenance, and a certain evolution towards the co-management of socio-cultural facilities. In terms of urbanism, some observers vaguely referred to ‘a certain rehabilitation of the grand ensemble’ and ‘the improvement of the built environment’.29 Concretely, the council of Poissy was able to slow down the extension of an industrial
zone that it considered detrimental to the grand ensemble. In Sarcelles, the council diverted plans for the construction of a car park building away from the central park. Despite these successes, there was a great deal of disappointment about the councils, particularly in terms of urbanism. This kind of disappointment was nevertheless not a sign of status quo. The experiment of participatory management in the grands ensembles might not have delivered on all of its promises, but it did give local municipalities a more important voice in matters of urbanism. While SCIC constructed most of Sarcelles during the 1950s and 1960s, the municipality was now in charge of its own urban planning projects. The experiment, thus, set an important precedent for the political decentralization of the 1980s.

The political struggles in Sarcelles were influenced by residential mobility patterns with implicitly racial overtones. The moment when the Residents Council lost its importance coincided with the departure of many of Sarcelles’ first generation of activists. Immigrant families directly from abroad or from peripheral shantytowns tended to move into the older, less desirable flats left behind by French middle-class families, many of them buying their own apartments or single-family homes in the suburbs. The newly arriving inhabitants – mainly southern European and African – thus created a different social dynamic weakening the solidarity that was at the basis of the initial inhabitant associations. Associational life continued to flourish, but was increasingly organized around culturally and ethnically defined interests. Also, in class terms the grand ensemble diversified. Later phases of construction in Sarcelles included areas of luxury condos, indirectly encouraging the segregation of the poor and the immigrants in the older, less desirable housing stock. While it initially served as a homogenizing force, both socially and architecturally, housing became a differentiating force. Ironically, the Communist municipality in fact encouraged SCIC to explicitly attract middle-class homebuyers, in order to create the diversity of what it considered a ‘normal’ city. As the grand ensemble neared achievement and the remarkably homogeneous character of the initial population gave way to intense social and racial diversification, Sarcelles became increasingly a city in
and for itself. In the early 1970s, a census revealed close to 200 ethnicities or nationalities living in Sarcelles. At the same time, income levels were higher than the national average, contradicting the stereotype of the grand ensemble as the ‘place of the poor’. Yet, just like in other new developments, the concentration of a homogeneously undesirable housing stock led to an increasing problematization in terms of social segregation.

This brief episode of Sarcelles shows not only the conflicts but also, especially, the interconnectedness between political elites, high civil servants, social scientific experts, planners, local activists and inhabitant associations in the development of a ‘participatory urbanism’. Many actors and institutions in fact crossed both national and local domains of action. Claude Neuschwander, the first leader of Sarcelles’ Residents Council for example, was not only a local inhabitant and activist, but also an influential actor in the national political scene. Such figures saw participation both as a positive contribution to national progress and a sine qua non for local development. The ideology of participation in urban planning did not only grow out of social contestation ‘from below’ but also ‘from above’, out of a complex of institutions in which the state offered the central platform as it was engaged in developing, projecting, building and amending its own urban production. Participation was not a purely emancipatory device at the hands of inhabitants faced with an all-powerful state; it also entailed opportunities for a more efficient way of dealing with housing, seized pragmatically by those in charge; and it also proved useful in the co-optation of inhabitants’ activism and the smoothening of conflict.

Most importantly, the history of Sarcelles demonstrates the importance of mediation as the precondition of participation – not only because of the involvement of associations or an elite of militants, but also because of the crucial role of expert knowledge about the unknown world of the user. From the early 1960s, users themselves began to understand the role of the sociological survey as a mediating instrument that could translate their needs into a concrete programme for improving their built environment. At the same time, a network of planning experts galvanized the idea that sociological inquiry was a necessary preliminary to planning, and that planning was therefore a matter of the social as much as the physical fabric.

**Reorganizing urban expertise**

In the wake of the students’ and the workers’ revolts of 1968, the ideas of participation in the realm of the built environment transformed in two directions. On the one hand, intellectuals from the left – under influence of a renewed Marxism – advanced more fundamental critiques of the state apparatus and its role in the built environment. Manuel Castells’s 1974 *Monopolville* used the case of Dunkerque to reveal the complicity of mass housing provision with industrial capitalism. Edmund Preteceille’s *La production des grands ensembles*, published that same year, described them as expressions of capitalist contradiction. Other scholars, in particular at the Centre for Urban Sociology (Centre de sociologie urbaine) which at that time brought together some of France’s most fervent Marxists, advanced similar critiques of state-led urbanism. On the other hand, ideas of participation were taken up in a series of government initiatives during the early 1970s, meant to overcome social critique and change existing practices and urban problems.

Within the state apparatus, sociological analyses preliminary to urban planning had become standard practice during the 1960s. Before 1968, however, many of these were purely instrumental to already set methods of planning, which could simply be optimized by anticipating...
users’ needs and mediating their participation. The grand ensemble as a model thus remained largely unquestioned. One of the big changes precipitated by the events of 1968 was the encouragement of new forms of urban research by the state: more theoretically informed, more critical and more closely related to the development of academic sociology and other disciplines; this new wave of contractual research focused in particular on the social dimensions and consequences of state-led urban planning. While considered as independent, this research was still meant by the state to eventually influence policy-making. Critique and reform were thus more closely entangled than the rhetoric of many leftist intellectuals – vigorously critiquing a state apparatus that nevertheless supported their livelihoods by financing their research – would appear to suggest.

Two texts, both by sociologists, were central in this reorganization of expertise: the 1970 article ‘Proximité spatiale et distance sociale: Les grands ensembles et leur peuplement’ by Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Madeleine Lemaire, and Henri Lefebvre’s 1968 Le droit à la ville (The Right to the City). These works galvanized the view that the grands ensembles, rather than the locus of modern living, were products of a capitalist society segregating its population. Their influence marks the appeal of sociology to the general public at this time for explaining societal problems. This is epitomized by the 1973 Guichard bill that was the death stab to the grands ensembles. Filled with references to Lefebvre, the bill linked the abolishment of the grands ensembles directly to its sociological consequences. It suggested that the solution was not simply architectural, but first of all social in nature. In other words, inhabitant participation was the panacea for future development.

The ideas and experiments with participation of the 1960s had gradually brought together social militants and local activists, politicians and civil servants, local associations and national civil society organizations, academics, urban planners, state research institutions, and contractual research firms. While they did not make up a movement within a single milieu, as a loose network of individuals and institutions in a variety of professional and ideological contexts they helped shape the notion of participation. Supported by the critical and activist momentum of 1968 and amplified by the abundance of public research funding, particularly for urban research, this network found its most clear expression at the beginning of the 1970s in the establishment of the programme Dwelling and Social Life (Habitat et vie sociale).

To assure the application of its new urban policies, the government organized a series of regional seminars in 1972. Culminating in a national conference in Dourdan in February 1973, the initiative led to the creation of a coordination group charged with the development of social life in housing estates all across the nation. This group, which would later transform into the official programme Habitat et vie sociale, was the place where many advocates of participation in the early 1970s found a common ground. The group’s main goal was to assemble a set of ‘best practices’ and key precedents in all social aspects of housing and urban planning: participation, consultation procedures, social work and cultural animation, the development of associational life, and so on. André Trintignac, a civil servant at the Ministry who had been at the forefront of sociological research on housing from the late 1950s onwards, was one of the key members of the group. He was in charge of coordinating the meetings, and worked closely with regional administrators who were in charge of developing local initiatives. Paul Rendu, director of the Centre for Urban Sociology, was in charge of the research division.
The group’s main public outlet was a periodical with the same name. It featured analyses of existing cases that could be useful for the development of new planning methods. The by now well-studied experiment of the Residents Councils figured prominently. On this basis the government sponsored a series of experiments through collaboration with regional administrators. In the Bouches-du-Rhône region, for instance, the department established a study group to develop participatory planning projects in 1972. These included new housing developments, like in Miramas, where 600 new social housing dwelling units were designed by a team of architects and sociologists after an architectural competition. It also included projects to improve existing grands ensembles and cultural animation initiatives to welcome inhabitants to their new housing.

Often modest in scale and scattered all over France, these projects reveal the contradictions of creating local participation by means of a centralized governmental think-tank. And yet, while the initiative was in itself not very successful, it did set the scene for the next decades of urban policy in France. In 1977, the group’s initiatives were further expanded to include actions focused on the rehabilitation of the first grands ensembles. And in 1982, the National Committee for the Social Development of Neighbourhoods (Commission nationale de développement social des quartiers) further institutionalized the participation of local associations in urban planning procedures. Over the following decades, these policies would become generally known under the rubric of ‘politique de la ville’. Striking about these urban policies was the way they instituted sociological study, social work and a bureaucratized procedure of local participation as unquestioned elements of any urban planning project. The state-sponsored research and experimentation with participatory planning of the 1960s and 1970s would thus lead to the dominance of user participation as subject of expertise in planning more than a direct transfer of agency to individual users or inhabitants. The history of Alma-Gare in Roubaix, in which local contestation led to the creation of a public workshop for urbanism, is another staple of urban participation in 1970s France. While it was in many respects a unique and isolated example, it also showed how local and national levels of activism were closely related and amounted to the professionalization of activists and the development of an expertise of participation.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate how the history of participation in the planning process is inextricably linked to the issue of expertise. The implementation of grands ensembles gave rise to a complex series of local negotiations, initially concentrated on inhabitant associations. During the 1960s, a number of such associations working towards participatory management of their housing estates instigated a national debate in which state officials, national-level organizations and social scientists took part. Their initiatives aimed to resolve conflict by developing new participatory procedures of planning and management. Such ideas of participation quickly transformed into more intense critiques and claims with the social movements around 1968. Then, during the 1970s, state-sponsored research and institutional experimentation with participatory planning led to further institutionalization of user-oriented expertise in planning policy. While France’s strong centralized state apparatus channelled much of this practice and research, the burgeoning discipline of sociology assumed an increasingly central role in mediating between producers and consumers.
Between the 1950s and 1970s, the notion of participation in the grands ensembles shifted from an isolated question of (efficient, fair, humanized) management of housing to a contextual question of urban politics. This particular evolution – and the advent of participation that was shaped by the changing culture of French society more broadly – in turn influenced the course of French urban planning. During the early 1970s, exceptional instances of political mobilization in response to the state-led urbanism of the grands ensembles – like in Sarcelles – were harnessed as ‘best practices’ in national attempts to develop an alternative, participatory urbanism. Rather than implying a wholesale shift from the national to a more local level of decision-making, this led to a new kind of ambiguity, while remaining a national affair, experts increasingly acknowledged the need to treat the user as a differentiated actor embedded in local social life.

Rather than concluding that participation failed or only resulted in a slow transfer of decision-making towards the municipality, this article has cast it in the light of a paradigm shift in post-war urban thinking. This shift, in which the 1960s figure as the turning point, has been described by various scholars as one away from modernist expert planning and towards a more participatory form of urban politics. This article has suggested that this shift instead amounts to the reorganization of urban expertise in which the city was no longer conceived as a set of buildings or a transparent footprint of social organization, but a complex set of social relations. Intervening in the city, thus, required sociological as much as architectural expertise. The rhetoric of participation is but a factor of this more fundamental paradigm shift.

The calls for participation ultimately strengthened expertise in planning and the engagement of various mediators between planners and users. The study of social life in new housing estates and the gradual validity given to local inhabitant associations as a source of expertise in urban affairs were key steps in the context of a broader reordering of urban expertise in post-war France. Contrary to the rhetoric of participation, state-sponsored research and experimentation in urbanism did not entail a more direct participation of inhabitants but instead, the intensified involvement of experts. The initiatives of the Habitat et vie sociale programme in particular spurred the development of such expertise in which the centralized state acted as the primary platform. While they promoted local urban research and the direct involvement of inhabitants, these initiatives nevertheless amounted to the further advance of an ‘expertise of participation’ in French urban planning. Ultimately, this article has exposed the complicity of such expert knowledge with power in the built environment. Seemingly opposed to technocracy – the belief that technology is separate from politics, and thus a neutral tool in policymaking – participation in planning results in a socio-technical regime that fundamentally confounds the distinction between technocratic state planning and emancipatory local participation, between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ planning.

Notes on contributor
Kenny Cupers studies the history of the built environment in twentieth-century Europe and the USA. He received his PhD from Harvard University in 2010, and is currently the Reyner Banham Fellow at SUNY Buffalo. His past work includes a book on the public life of leftover urban spaces in Berlin (Spaces of Uncertainty), the editing of a Footprint journal issue on ‘Agency in Architecture’, and journal articles on public space, the urbanism of street vending, and the historical development of participatory planning. He is currently preparing a book which examines how the user became an increasingly central yet paradoxical question in twentieth-century architecture and urban thinking.
Notes


2. Throughout the article, I will use the terms urbanism and urban planning as roughly synonymous within the context of French planning. The French term *urbanisme*, however, reflects the more central importance of architects in the discipline in France, compared to the term urban planning in the Anglo-American context.

3. See for instance: *La participation des habitants dans la ville XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Conférence at Panthéon-Sorbonne Université Paris I, organized by CHS (Centre d’Histoire Sociale du XXe siècle), CHCSC (Centre d’histoire culturelle des sociétés contemporaines), Université de Versailles, 11 June 2008). In particular, the contributions by Annie Fourcaut, Loïc Vadelorge, Hélène Hatzfeld and Thibault Tellier.


9. This argument is further developed in my dissertation ‘In Search of the User: The Experiment of Modern Urbanism in Postwar France, 1955–1975’, based on archival research at the Centre des archives contemporaines (Fontainebleau).


17. See the collection of local periodicals at the Municipal Archives of Sarcelles and the National Library (BNF).
20. This interpretation is based on the periodicals published by SCIC, available for consultation at its archives in Paris.
24. My analysis of the municipality’s role is based on the municipal deliberations conserved at the Municipal Archives of Sarcelles.
27. This dynamic is relatively typical of the conflict between the newly developed urban entities and traditional municipalities in France at this time.
30. See the municipal census of 1968 published in the *Bulletin Officiel Municipal* in January 1970. This census showed that the population of Sarcelles was becoming more and more similar to the national average.
39. See the periodical *Habitat et vie sociale* at BNF.


44. See Miller, *The Representation of Place*. 