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Monique Yaari, *Rethinking the French City: Architecture, Dwelling, and Display after 1968*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008. xxxi + 491 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$162.50 U.S. ISBN-13: 978-9042025004.

Review by Patricia A. Morton, University of California, Riverside.

Monique Yaari's study of the post-1968 French city looks at diverse case studies that illustrate changing attitudes toward urban space and emergent practices in post-modern architecture. This text, part of a series on Architecture/ Technology/ Culture published by Editions Rodopi, sets the ambitious agenda of examining the contradictions and paradoxes of contemporary France, in particular the resistance to postmodernism, through architecture, urban design and their theoretical discourses. Yaari argues that persistent French resistance to postmodernism, ironic given the concept's origins in French philosophical thinking, indicates fundamental crises at the heart of the post-war French experience, and requires a reassessment of the specifically French national and historical perspective on postmodernism. In her view, the public domain was the crucial arena in which distinctly French solutions to problems of architecture, dwelling and display (the terms in her subtitle) were proposed. The problem was not an aesthetic one, according to Yaari, but evolved out of French cultural and political traditions and efforts to represent local and national identities. Merging urban studies and French studies, Yaari has written a model of what she calls French culture (as opposed to *cultural*) studies, that draws on French cultural history, select Anglo-Saxon versions of cultural studies, and European cultural analysis incorporating structuralist and post-structuralist thought (pp. xxx- xxxi). Her work belongs to a broad trend within French Studies using spatial theory to studies of identity, social relations and history, but hers is one of the few works to look at the contemporary French city specifically.

Part I begins with a review of French debates over modernism and its aftermath and the French critique of postmodernism, and moves to the chapter on *après-modern*, including detailed examinations of Parisian architectural exhibitions and biennials. In her first two chapters, Yaari draws on aspects of the French response to postwar modernity and the rich French discourse on postmodern architecture during the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on a series of exhibitions that displayed divergent positions on culture, technology, and the city. As a document of this tendentious period, this chapter exhibits an impressive array of sources. For the reader who is unfamiliar with the passionate debates and highly contested positions of French architectural discourse, the density of her references and quotations may be obscure or difficult to follow.

In her second chapter, Yaari poses an alternative to the postmodern, the *après-modern* (after-modern), that was used in some 1980s architectural theories and that avoids some of the ideological pitfalls of "postmodern." *Après-modern* also refers to the concept of *après-ville* coined by architectural historian Françoise Choay in a seminal 1994 essay published by the Centre Georges Pompidou, another of Yaari's case studies (chapter five). In her contribution, Choay asserted that the era of discrete urban entities was finished because urbanization had become universal, ubiquitous and characterized by an ebb and flow analogous to that of communication. We have entered an "ère d'après la ville" of continuous urban sprawl, rather than a period in which the city itself has become extinct. [1] A similar sense of being "after" (or *ailleurs*, elsewhere) without being "post" informs Yaari's account of the shift from modernism.

The rest of the volume is divided into two parts: Part II consisting of close studies of the transformation of two regional French capitals (Montpellier and Lille), and Part III examining urban projects in Paris. Yaari states that she chose the disparate subjects according to their “capacity to account for the period under discussion in a representative way” (xxii). There is a distinct, unifying structure in the chapters in Parts II and III. Yaari begins by outlining a specific issue regarding the subsequent case study, then takes the reader on a promenade through the urban environment under consideration, giving a narrative account of the embodied, temporal experience of walking through the space. Clearly influenced by Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, these are “exploratory strolls through texts, buildings, and neighborhoods, and cities, sharing in a process of discovery” (p. xxvi).^[2] As she notes in her introduction, the book reflects her own “incursions into contemporary France” (p. xx) and these passages link the reader to a more personal experience of the French city.

She begins her first case study, Montpellier, with a walk through the neo-classical Antigone district (1977-80), designed by Catalan architect Ricardo Bofil, which is exemplary of the grand urban design carried out under socialist mayor Georges Frêche. As Yaari describes it, the socialist administration, victorious in 1977, transformed Montpellier from a university town into *Eurocité*, *Europole* and *Technopole*, based on a comprehensive program of urbanism and public places, economic development, and equality of opportunity. Yaari discusses the aesthetic politics of Bofil’s Mediterranean Neo-classical style, but puts more emphasis on the urban design of Antigone than its totalitarian associations. She surveys the important urban design schemes, municipal infrastructure projects, social and economic initiatives, and political currents that created the new Montpellier.

Lille represents the other pole of regional development in terms of aesthetics and urban form. While Montpellier sponsored the creation of traditional publics and a regional design style linked to its Mediterranean location, Lille embraced generic rather than situated urban design. To return to Choay’s model, Montpellier attempted to resist the death of the centralized city, the condition of *après-ville*, while Lille accepted it wholesale. Yaari notes that, ironically, this strategy has given Lille a strong cultural and economic identity and image, rather than anonymous placeness. Euralille, the new business quarter where this strategy was realized, was designed by Rem Koolhaas, arguably the most influential designer and theorist in contemporary architecture and urban design. In his landmark book, *S,M,L,XL*, Koolhaas posited an urbanism of acceptance, *The Generic City*, derived from the “culture of congestion” in Manhattan.^[3] Lille was the first large-scale application of Koolhaas’ theories, aided by municipal and regional planning efforts. Yaari tells the story of Lille’s transformation into a neo-modernist urban statement as a mutual project of the city and the surrounding region, sparked by the location of a TGV station that serves as a hub for international destinations.

The chapters on Paris form a highly heterogeneous group. Chapter five looks at the creation of the Centre Pompidou and the urban renewal of the Beaubourg site. Yaari sets out the Center’s original programs and the public and political debates that informed its creation, including the often hyperbolic, even utopian, claims made for its impact on Paris and its status as a *cit  de culture* (city of culture). She gives a very detailed view of the internal and external forces shaping the Beaubourg’s public programming over its history, perhaps an overly comprehensive picture. At the end of the chapter, she returns to questions of the modern/postmodern polarization as played out in the Beaubourg’s own evaluations of its success or failure, and suggests that her own notion of *apr s-modern* may give more insight into the cultural politics at the Center. In chapter six, “Display Wars,” she examines the politics of display at the Beaubourg, including a ground-breaking exhibition, “*Les immat riels*” (The Immaterials), organized by Jean-Fran ois Lyotard in 1985. Yaari discusses the Beaubourg’s commitment to programming and educational activities devoted to daily life, urban culture, and technological evolution, and traces the changes in emphasis during successive administrations.

The Parisian neighborhood of Belleville, the subject of chapter seven, provides another case study in urban design and culture, one where innovative concepts and practices of “urbanity” and “urban

architecture” have been tested. Traditionally a working class district, Belleville has long been characterized by ethnic diversity and political dissidence, and has been partially transformed by official urban renewal projects and informal gentrification, both hotly contested. Yaari looks at architect Antoine Grumbach’s theories of urban architecture and his renovation of the Mare-Cascades sector of Belleville. In Mare-Cascades, Grumbach employed notions of an architectural “theater of memory” that preserves the neighborhood’s narrow lots and meandering streets while creating new housing and public spaces. Through a combination of political and media-savvy tactics, a militant neighborhood group, La Bellevilleuse, has resisted successfully less nuanced attempts to redevelop the Bas-Belleville (Lower Belleville) district.

Finally, in chapter eight, Yaari examines the Parisian urban park of La Villette, which synthesizes the disparate cultural tensions and urban experiments of the post-1968 era. Another of President François Mitterand’s *grand projets* (great projects), La Villette forms one of the most coherent exercises in post-modern architecture, while aesthetically referring to the canonical Modernist style of Constructivism. Bernard Tschumi, who won the competition for a new park on the site of the former slaughterhouse of La Villette, created a space for the movement of bodies (events), rather than the geometrically-ordered, contained space of the traditional French garden. Punctuated by bright red follies derived from Russian Constructivist architecture, the park at La Villette consists of large green lawns, several sunken gardens and a long “cinematic” promenade. The park is complemented by existing buildings from the nineteenth-century slaughterhouse, a Museum of Science and Technology, the Zenith rock concert hall, and a spectacular Cité de la Musique designed by Christian Portzamparc. Yaari looks at the ways Tschumi realized his theory of “event-city” at La Villette, produced a space of simultaneous popular appeal and intellectual rigor, and helped tie the district to the rest of Paris and to the surrounding suburbs.

In the Conclusion, Yaari finds that the subjects of the book form “scenarios of hope,” a gamut of successful examples of *après-moderne* urban projects. She draws on a wide range of recent texts on the city in order to scrutinize evolving notions of the contemporary city. In the era of the “post-city,” in Françoise Choay’s formulation, the struggle to determine post-modern (if not necessarily postmodern) forms of the urban, urbanism and urbanity has been a hallmark of French architecture in the city. Lacking faith in the grand metanarratives of modernism, French architects have eschewed the totalizing, uniform solutions offered by International Modernism and have shifted to a variety of strategies for generating an architecture and urbanism appropriate to the global economy and local exigencies alike.

Yaari has given us a far-reaching, if discontinuous, portrait of the post-68 period, rather than another grand narrative or a comprehensive survey of the subject. The very sweep of her aspirations forms a weakness in the book, since the case studies are markedly unequal in scale and scope. It is difficult to relate the exhibition and education programs at the Beaubourg to the redevelopment of the city of Montpellier, for example, and the connections between chapters sometimes read as forced. In the first two chapters on the debates over post-modern architecture, a simpler accounting of the events and context of post-war French architecture culture would have helped the reader negotiate the dense theoretical debates that raged among architects during the 1980s. While the extensive quotations, in both original French and English translation, are a valuable documentation of the discourse, they often detract from Yaari’s points. This volume may, perhaps, be sampled according to the reader’s interests, or as a set of fragments, each chapter largely autonomous but related to the larger theme of the contemporary French city.

In my view, the particular contribution made by this book lies in Yaari’s detailed account of postmodernism in France and her focus on architecture as a public discourse. This is less a book about the French city and more about the French postmodern moment, when the city became the testing ground for problems of French popular and high culture, the relationship between past and present, the

apparent failures of modernization, and the political sea change catalyzed by the events of 1968. Her analyses of the contemporary city shed light on broader tensions and movements within French culture and politics and afford a set of snapshots of the culture wars of the last forty years.

NOTES

[1] Françoise Choay, "Le règne de l'urbain et la mort de la ville," in Jean Dethier and Alain Guiehux, eds., *La ville, art et architecture en Europe, 1870-1993*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1994), pp. 26-35.

[2] Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (University of California Press, Berkeley 1984).

[3] Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli, 1995). Yaari mistakenly refers to the book as *SMLE-L*, perhaps because she has used the French edition instead of the original English.

[4] Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: essai sur les saviors* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

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