
H-France Review Vol. 23 (October 2023), No. 178

Nicholas Bullock, *Modernising Post-War France: Architecture and Urbanism during Les Trente Glorieuses*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022. ix + 294 pp. Photographs and image credits, maps, figures, notes, and index. \$128.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367556501; \$35.96 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780367556518; \$35.96 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003094562.

Review by Sue Collard, University of Sussex.

This is a superbly researched study of how planners, engineers, and architects influenced the modernisation of France in the three decades after the end of the Second World War, the period known in France as “the thirty glorious years” after the famous book published by the demographer Jean Fourastié in 1979, *Les Trente Glorieuses*.^[1] Its author is an expert in the history of architecture who combines his scholarship with first-hand experience of France in the 1950s and 60s to produce a volume that is both technically detailed and eminently readable, with illustrations on almost every page. Just to have organised the copyright permissions for all these images must have been a mammoth task, but they are indeed invaluable in helping to convey a better understanding of the many projects and buildings that were planned and built over the years concerned. The book will be of interest to all who are fascinated by France, especially those readers with some prior knowledge of the politics of planning, urbanism, and architecture in the post-war period.

The book explores three main issues: the setting and implementation of an agenda for modernisation, the shift in understandings of modernisation over the period, and the uneven spread of the benefits of this modernisation across different layers of society. It is divided into two main parts: part one sets out the story of how urban transformation developed from an urgent postwar need to address reconstruction to a process harnessed by the State; the second part explores the various criticisms that were expressed by those architects who tried to challenge the architectural status quo. An epilogue briefly reflects upon the changing role of the State in planning and architecture after the mid-1970s, under a new, non-Gaullist President, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.

Part one is divided into seven chapters, which focus on the different stages of modernisation over three decades. Starting with the immediate need for reconstruction, Bullock reminds us of the extent of destruction of infrastructure, illustrated in particular by the total devastation of Le Havre. A new ministry, the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme (MRU) was created after France’s liberation, but the necessary legal and administrative machinery had, in fact, been established under the Vichy regime. A new *code de l’urbanisme* was then approved to oversee the massive reconstruction process. Since this reconstruction was managed in a technocratic, top-

down manner, it led to some tensions with local interests, feeding into a lively debate as to the relative merits of modernisation or reconstruction of the past. The influence of Le Corbusier is discussed here, notably his *Charte d'Athènes* published in 1943, seen to represent a radically new way of thinking and a break with the past. But most reconstruction did not follow this path. Chapter two shows how, when reconstruction evolved into new construction in the 1950s, the MRU concentrated its attention on trying to develop new industrialised techniques, especially since building resources were still in short supply. As discussed in chapter three, these new techniques were implemented in the building of the now infamous *grands ensembles*, huge blocks of flats designed to meet an acute housing crisis brought about by the combination of a rural exodus and the immigration of workers, largely from France's colonial empire. At the time, these new dwellings were seen as a gateway to modernity for families who did not previously have equipped kitchens and bathrooms, and the sheer scale of these buildings meant that there was capacity for significant expansion of social housing to cater to those who had been confined to the slums or *bidonvilles* in the suburbs of all the main cities. Bullock illustrates some of the most striking developments, such as Les Grandes Terres at Marly, Sarcelles in the Paris region, and La Caravelle at Villeneuve-la-Garenne: this is where the photographs speak volumes in conveying the huge size of these new designs. Their inhuman scale was not the only criticism of the *grands ensembles*: there was a notable lack of public services of any kind—even schools or transportation—and of spaces for community interaction. Recognising these weaknesses, the government then introduced the idea of ZUPs (zones prioritised for urban development), but the implementation of this initiative was problematic. By the mid-1960s, the State instead promoted New Towns, the antithesis of the *grands ensembles* that were now recognised as a failure of planning and architecture.

Chapter four describes how the ideals of modern domestic and family life were influenced by publications such as *Paris Match*, *Elle*, and *Marie-Claire*, and the advent of the annual Salon des Arts Ménagers. New inventions (like the washing machine and the refrigerator) and American ideas influenced kitchen design and style of living. Chapter five looks at public architecture, opening with the inauguration of the new airport at Orly, described by one newspaper as “our modern Versailles” and seen to represent France's new modern identity and international post-war standing (p.115). Likewise, buildings in Paris like the CNIT exhibition hall, the Maison de la Radio, and the UNESCO headquarters were upheld as signs of France's modernisation by the Gaullist regime. But these were built against the backdrop of an ongoing battle between a small, élite group of architects known as the “mandarinat”—who advocated France's great academic tradition in architecture—and a new generation of modernising architects who were increasingly favoured by the State and soon became the “new mandarinat” (p.122).

Chapter six is concerned with the modernisation of the city of Paris, much of which was considered *insalubre*, or unfit for human dwelling. Paris was still home to many industries, including the Citroën car factory, responsible for an astonishing 80% of all French car production in the late 1950s, a slaughterhouse at La Villette, and a wine merchants' market at Bercy. The road network had not been updated since the days of Baron Haussmann in the mid-nineteenth century, but the increasing number of cars was creating acute congestion. The future of the central marketplace at Les Halles (Zola's “belly of Paris”) became the most emblematic battle between modernisation and conservation.[2] Modernisation won and, having dismantled the famous Pavillons Baltard and moved the wholesale market out to Rungis, the State used the space to build a massive underground hub for the new RER regional urban transport network which would connect the city centre to the New Towns and beyond. Industries were gradually moved

outside the city to make space for more housing (such as the Front de Seine development on the site of the former Citroën factory) and deindustrialisation led to gradual gentrification. But not without a series of battles between the various State authorities and the Municipal Council which did not at that time have a directly elected mayor. Outside the city's boundaries, La Défense was developed in the 1960s and 70s into a new business and financial quarter, where the absence of height restrictions on buildings allowed the construction of skyscrapers containing offices as well as living space.

Part one concludes with an analysis of the development of the wider Paris region—three departments and 250 municipalities—managed through a complex network of state appointees and agencies in conjunction with local authorities. The seemingly unstoppable growth of Paris led the State to build eight New Towns outside the capital, including Évry and Cergy-Pontoise, to be accessed using the planned new RER network. These New Towns were supposed to make good the failings of the *grands ensembles* and the unstructured development of the suburbs. They were envisaged as *technopôles* that would attract employment thanks to incentives offered to big companies to relocate there. Public services were not forgotten, and individual housing rather than big blocks became commonplace, encouraged by a private sector which was beginning to challenge State *dirigisme*.

Part two is considerably shorter than part one, and it focuses on opposition to modernisation from three generations of radical architects and urbanists. Chapter eight concentrates on Le Corbusier, whose reputation as a radical modernist was international. Le Corbusier built very little in France apart from the famous Unité d'Habitation at Marseille, inaugurated in 1952. This building embodied the architect's ideal of the "vertical neighbourhood," incorporating generous proportions in the individual dwellings, and facilities for sports and entertainment as well as childcare and shops. With its distinctive use of concrete, this was the creation that all students of architecture wanted to see. But Le Corbusier's vision was incompatible with the cost-conscious agenda of the MRU, and the relationship between them exemplified the tension between modernism and modernisation that this chapter explores. Chapter nine moves into the 1960s when three broad streams of critique emerged: the radicals, the visionaries, and the ideologues, all of whom had different views and agendas for reforming the existing order. The final chapter centres on the student-led riots in May 1968, which aimed to bring about a radical change in the practice of architecture and urbanism in France. The student protests grew, in part, out of long-standing demands for reform in architectural education, linked to the system of cronyism and the influence of institutions (Beaux-Arts and the Académie) which controlled official patronage. However, "by the Summer of 1971, the activist legacy of May 1968 was all but extinguished" (p.261).

The epilogue reminds us that the impact of the oil crisis in the 1970s would bring about massive changes in priorities for public policies, and the power of the State started to wane as market forces began to play a greater role in property development and planning. The new president, whose architectural preferences were more traditional, also put a stop to some of the more controversial plans such as the demolition of the Gare d'Orsay (now a museum), and the construction of a tower block on the Place d'Italie. Most poignantly, Bullock observes that "By 1975, modernisation of the Paris region, far from levelling up the poorer parts, had laid the foundations for the inequalities that would be harshly exposed by the *crise de banlieues* of the 1980s" (p.278). Indeed, France's problems with social unrest are largely caused by the disastrous housing policies of the 1950s and 60s, which have resulted in the creation of ghettos where large

numbers of immigrants are now housed in outlying *cités*, with poor public services, limited access to transportation, disproportionate rates of unemployment, and crime fuelled by poverty and low educational attainment. Decades of resources poured into these areas in the name of the well-intentioned *politique de la ville* since the 1980s have not produced tangible improvements, suggesting that these problems are rooted in cultural tensions as much as in the failures of post-war urbanism and architecture. France is not alone in experiencing such problems with its immigrant population, but it is surely their concentration in “new *bidonvilles*” that makes the French case so distinctive.

This book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how architects, planners, urbanists, and technocrats influenced the nature and speed of France’s postwar modernisation. It offers a wealth of detailed information backed up by a very rich selection of photographs and other illustrations. Its main weakness is perhaps the structure: rather than reading as a straightforwardly chronological narrative, it deals with topics in a partly thematic way, which makes for some repetition and chronological backtracking which can be confusing at times, given the amount of detail provided. But for anyone who wants to understand the very complex development of post-war planning and its relationship to architecture and urbanism, this is essential reading.

NOTES

[1] Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou, La Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

[2] Émile Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris: Charpentier et Cie, 1873).

Sue Collard
University of Sussex
s.p.collard@sussex.ac.uk

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172