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W. Brian Newsome, *French Urban Planning 1940-1968: The Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009. Xviii + 250 pp. List of abbreviations, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$76.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4331-0400-8

Review by Nicole C. Rudolph, Adelphi University.

War, like natural disasters, can offer communities what French modernist architect Marcel Lods once called a “monstrous opportunity.” That is, from the destruction wrought by fire, flood, earthquake or bombs, might rise planned environments that better match a population’s needs. In any reconstruction, there are two fundamental questions to be answered: What will be built? Who decides?

In *French Urban Planning*, Brian Newsome, a professor of history at Elizabethtown College, looks at how the French answered these two questions when facing the wide-scale destruction wrought by World War II. He establishes three objectives for his study. First, drawing upon both secondary sources and primary sources culled from the mass and specialist presses, as well as national ministerial archives, he seeks to write the history of the centralized state-run planning apparatus; this history might be characterized as one of rise and fall, where, perhaps counter-intuitively, it is the fall that is to be celebrated.

Second, Newsome wishes to correct the historical record as it pertains to *participation*, that is, the recourse to more democratic policymaking by consultation with affected populations. According to Newsome, where scholars of urban planning have tended to see the protest movements of 1968 as spawning the critique of urban development that in turn led to more consultation with representative groups, the turning point should really be identified as 1959, when Construction Minister Pierre Sudreau, a Charles de Gaulle appointee, hired consultants to confer with public-housing residents and re-evaluate home design. Newsome thus aims to demonstrate that it was the Gaullist republic, “allegedly much more authoritarian than its predecessor” that initiated the democratization of planning (p. 185).

Finally, and most originally, Newsome argues for the pivotal role of the Catholic left in this process of democratizing planning, focusing on the backgrounds of the key actors in this regard: urban sociologist, Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe; head of the Caisse des dépôts et consignations, François Bloch-Lainé; and *Jociste* and consumer advocate, Jeanne Aubert-Picard.

Over the course of seven chapters that range from the Second Empire to the Mitterrand years, Newsome traces the role of the French state in urban planning. Zooming in on the years 1940-1968, Newsome eschews conventional periodization; it is neither the Trente Glorieuses nor the Fourth and Fifth Republics that provide the temporal framework for his book. Instead, Newsome’s focus is primarily the years after World War II when the need for new structures was greatest and when state procured for itself the legal, material, and financial resources necessary for construction. Vichy France offers an organic starting place as it was only the wartime obligation to rebuild that prompted the state to fully develop a planning body in the

first place. The choice of 1968 as an end point is less clear, given Newsome's thesis that participatory planning began in 1959 and that the protests and contestations of 1968 were further catalysts for consultative policymaking. A more logical endpoint might have been 1973, when the Guichard Circular put an end to the construction of the high-density housing projects known as *grands ensembles* and, for all intents and purposes, ended the state's career as a housing developer.

Newsome opens his study by noting that the "phony war" took a toll not only in lives but also in buildings, 400,000 of which were destroyed in six weeks. By the Liberation, over two million buildings were in ruins. This exacerbated a pre-existing housing shortage that was largely due to a lack of investment in housing in the interwar period, a phenomenon related to the maintenance of the rent controls put into place during the First World War. Newsome offers us the staggering statistics that by 1937, French renters spent only 6 percent of their income on rent, and by 1939 the net return on buildings was a mere 1 percent (p. 26). Consequently the French lagged far behind the Germans and trailed the British in the arena of interwar housing construction. This situation persisted into the immediate postwar period, as 1944 found French families devoting only 3 to 5 percent of their income to rent, whereas the British, Germans, Italians and Americans devoted somewhere between 19 and 21 percent (p. 86). Newsome thus grounds the state's decision to assume for itself a larger role in housing design and construction in the general disinterest developers had for housing the masses.

These circumstances, particularly when combined with reports on urban slums and contemporary perceptions of chaotic, unplanned suburban sprawl, led to a consensus among state officials that a return to the status quo was not a fitting approach to building modern France. The state should guide urban development in the same way that it should plan the economy. To this end, de Gaulle created a new ministry, the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism. Following Danièle Voldman,<sup>[1]</sup> Newsome emphasizes that the staffing and policies of the new ministry drew substantively from its Vichy Regime predecessors, "retain[ing] the authoritarian planning apparatus" (p. 58).

The MRU's first minister, Raoul Dautry, however, had not participated in Vichy institutions. A graduate of Polytechnique, he came to his post after thirty-five years as an engineer and executive for the northern and national railroads and a stint as Minister of Armaments in the Daladier and Reynaud governments. Dautry had an interest in social housing and had, in the 1930s, commissioned a garden city at Tergnier, in northern France, for railroad employees. For Newsome, Dautry was a technocrat who answered the question of "Who decides?" with "We, the experts, will."

Dautry then turned to the question of "What will be built?" In the interest of speeding the return to normalcy, he abandoned ideological design prejudices in favor of an eclectic policy. Dautry looked to a variety of possibilities: experimental prefabricated houses in Noisy-le-Sec, a suburb of Paris; reinforced concrete put to neoclassical modernist ends in Auguste Perret's Le Havre; and more radical forms of collective housing, epitomized by Le Corbusier's *unités d'habitation*. Eclecticism ceased once the portfolio passed to Eugène Claudius-Petit. Claudius-Petit, a former cabinetmaker, Beaux-Arts graduate and *Résistant*, was a passionate champion of Le Corbusier and his CIAM colleagues and was committed to zoning and collective housing as the best means of modernizing the French landscape.

In Newsome's telling, men like Claudius-Petit and Le Corbusier represent the worst of the authoritarians. For Le Corbusier, determining the needs a home had to fulfill and then designing spaces to meet these needs fell within squarely within the architect's purview; resident input was irrelevant. Newsome judges Le Corbusier harshly, identifying him as a

spiritual descendant of the late-nineteenth-century social engineers. His apartments, featuring small bedrooms and large living-dining areas, were designed in order to “force families to interact” (p. 63). Similarly, because Claudius-Petit opted for Modernism even in the face of public resistance, Newsome determines that the minister’s “democratic ethos often gave way to authoritarian tendencies” (p. 70).

Newsome evaluates these men more severely in light of the fact that the French did not lack models of participatory planning. He details the counter-example of Modernist architect André Lurçat. Lurçat’s extensive consultative process during the rebuilding of Maubeuge made for a reconstruction success story. Intriguingly, Newsome admits that Lurçat seems not to have followed this same process in later projects in Saint-Denis and Villejuif. He hypothesizes that the difference perhaps lay in the fact that the latter were new apartment projects and not reconstructions of entire neighborhoods. The distinction Newsome points to here makes explicit what is elided elsewhere in the book: this is a book about housing policy and not urban planning. Though there are a few nods to Haussmannization, to the lack of collective services at new *grands ensembles* and to the development of *aménagement du territoire* policies, the focus is overwhelmingly on housing. None of the illustrations, for example, show maps or architects’ mass plans, nor is there a textual discussion of zoning, industrial parks, transportation planning or other infrastructure. Newsome seems to conflate urban and domestic space, as in his conclusion, where he argues, “French families who rented their homes began losing their say in the organization of urban space in the nineteenth century, when architects started designing apartment houses in which rooms were assigned specific functions” (p. 183).

Nevertheless, the story of housing in postwar France is, in and of itself, a fascinating one. Newsome helps the generalist reader by contextualizing the debates and choices made by key actors at the housing ministries, such as Claudius-Petit’s decision to set an annual construction target of 240,000 new homes. This act, along with the persistent housing crisis, largely determined the state’s turn to mass construction using prefabricated concrete elements, which then resulted in the erection of the massive “towers and bars” represented most graphically by Parisian projects like Sarcelles and La Courneuve and the Haut de Lièvre in Nancy.

Journalists’ critique of these spaces began nearly as quickly as the first apartment was rented, while first-generation residents rejoiced at finally leaving shared accommodations with in-laws, furnished single rooms, or slum housing, discovering in their new apartments the heretofore unknown pleasures of indoor private bathrooms, hot running water, and central heating.

The bloom was quickly off the rose, however, when it came to the location of the *grands ensembles*, placed on the outskirts of town where state-subsidized developers could find the large, cheap parcels of land necessary for the new communities. Commutes to work lengthened, food shopping became an epic challenge, the erection of schools trailed far behind the opening of the apartment complexes’ doors. Relatively quickly, then, the state hired urban sociologists like Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the new forms of housing.

Newsome devotes an entire chapter to Chombart de Lauwe, finding in him a voice for the voiceless and a public-sphere partisan of *participation*. For Newsome, Chombart is also a case study for the influence of the Catholic left on public policy. He narrates Chombart’s evolution from an advocate of elite-led change on behalf of ordinary people to a champion of popular consultation integrated into policymaking procedures. Like Chombart, most of the other heroes of Newsome’s story—François Bloch-Lainé and Jeanne Aubert-Picard—are motivated to improve the lot of public-housing residents by virtue of their backgrounds in Catholic activism and associations. This is a fascinating take on the policymakers of the Fifth Republic, one that bears

more analysis than it receives in Newsome's overview. For instance, Newsome remarks in his first chapter that the few initiatives in the realm of social and workers' housing came from "social Protestants" and "a new generation of social Catholics." He also remarks that "[m]ost social Catholics who joined the crusade for workers' housing did so because they hoped to control the working class" (pp. 16-17). How then, and why, were Catholics like Chombart, Bloch-Lainé, and Aubert-Picard different from those of previous generations? Can the reader learn something about the evolution of Catholic activists from this housing policy history?

Indeed, Newsome's efficient synthesis and detailed exposition can sometimes overwhelm his analysis of the material. This can be seen, for example, in Newsome's discussion of BATICOOP, a building society cooperative pooling the resources of homeowners trying to rebuild after the war: "By 1954, 88 percent of new BATICOOP societies were using the pre-approved project-types of sister cooperatives, thus denying potential homeowners any real voice in the design of their homes" (p. 102). First, it must be noted that Newsome's primary analytic framework relies on a Manichean tension between authoritarianism and democracy, and, while it is true that some property-owners, like the Castors, rebuilt their own homes to their own specifications, a more nuanced view would permit the attribution of agency to BATICOOP members who chose to forgo this opportunity in exchange for the lower construction costs associated with use of the model plans.

Moreover, the BATICOOP case invites us to think about the free-market American Levittown developments, built according to the same cookie-cutter floor plan for hundreds of thousands of people. Levittown inhabitants, too, were "denied any real voice" in the design of their homes, yet not because of an "authoritarian" state planning authority. Is there a difference? If so, what might it be? And what about other European instances? The towers and bars of high-density housing projects appear throughout Europe. Did the planning processes look much different in Britain or in the more authoritarian Soviet Union? Even a brief comparative analysis might help the reader better evaluate the successes and failures of the centralized "authoritarian and technocratic" French planning apparatus.

While at times wishing for more interpretive commentary, the reader also has some cause to lament a weak editorial presence: numerous typographical errors can be found, and there are errors in the index. The author of *Paris et le désert français* is Jean-François Gravier, not François Gravier. Further, it is a bit disconcerting to see the great playwright Jean Giraudoux identified only as "a diplomat who was the disciple of Marshal Lyautey and a friend of Raoul Dautry" (p. 45). Finally, all of the illustrations (at least in my copy) were inexplicably dark, rendering it difficult to identify elements of floor plans or original features of housing projects.

Despite these flaws, Newsome's book offers a welcome look at the fascinating history of postwar French housing, a story that, to date, has largely only been told in French.<sup>[2]</sup> For this reason, his work is especially useful for non-francophones and comparativist scholars. Further, Newsome offers us an original take on this history, ably excising the study of housing policy from the more traditional narrative of modernization, while also sidestepping the more *franco-français* debate about rehabilitating the *grands ensembles*. Instead, Newsome uses his examination of the state's planning apparatus to revise received ideas about the Gaullist legacy and to highlight the contributions of the Catholic Left. Finally, by placing housing policy in a larger social and political context, he reminds us that answers to the questions of "What will be built?" and "Who decides?" have repercussions that may outlast the structures themselves. In this sense, his book's message of *participation* may serve those working at reconstruction at Ground Zero, in New Orleans, in Haiti, and in other areas where "monstrous opportunities" present themselves.

## NOTES

[1] Danièle Voldman, *La reconstruction des villes françaises de 1940 à 1954. Histoire d'une politique*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997.

[2] Selected French works on the topic include, in addition to Voldman above, Bruno Vayssière, *Reconstruction-Déconstruction: le hard French ou l'architecture française des trente glorieuses* (Paris: Picard, 1988); Annie Fourcaut and Frédéric Dufaux, *Le monde des grands ensembles* (Paris: Créaphis, 2004); Thibault Tellier, *Le temps des HLM: La saga urbaine des Trente Glorieuses* (Paris: Autrement, 2007); and Paul Landauer, *L'invention du grand ensemble. La Caisse des dépôts maître d'ouvrage* (Paris: Picard, 2010).

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