Caroline Maniaque-Benton, *French Encounters with the American Counterculture, 1960-1980.* London: Ashgate, 2011. 244 pages, 51 color and 58 b&w illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. $99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-1409423867.

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In 1975, an exhibition was mounted at the American Cultural Center in Paris called "Marginal Architecture in the United States." The exhibition featured some of the key works of countercultural housing design: Steve Baer's dome at Drop City, the Clarence Schmidt house in Woodstock, and other projects built from found and recycled materials. Echoing Bernard Rudofsky's "Architecture without Architects" (1964) show at the Museum of Modern Art, this exhibit had a similarly polemical thrust. But the French organizers--Jean Dethier and David Elalouf--could not whole-heartedly embrace the philosophical underpinnings of the examples of alternative design they had been at pains to collect: "[S]peaking of 'spontaneous architecture' is to subscribe to the belief in a 'free and virtuous' primitivism; to evoke the 'serenity' of these constructions is a tribute to the noble savage. Sadly, there has never been a golden age in this world. Far from justifying our nostalgia, 'spontaneous' architecture speaks to us more of the problems of survival…of the power relations within implacably hierarchic societies, of civilizations where the individual is weak" (pp. 79-80).

Here, an obvious enthusiasm for the projects is tempered by a critical disposition. This architecture on the margins of American culture was seen, not as exemplary of new social organizations, but rather as symptomatic of the failures (or inherent logic) of the mainstream system. The desire to live in harmony with nature by developing an ecological approach to design was most definitely not seen as an apolitical maneuver. But even if the curators were able to take a nuanced view of these deceptively complex constructions, American dignitaries immediately saw the exhibition as a condemnation of American culture, and an embrace of those domestic forces that might seek to undermine it. The American ambassador to France saw the displays and sought to have many of the images and texts removed. Instead of submitting to this redaction, the organizers simply had the show relocated to the Musée des arts décoratifs, where, thanks to the furor it had caused, it was a tremendous public success.

This incident is the pivotal moment in Caroline Maniaque-Benton's *French Encounters with the American Counterculture, 1960-1980.* It anchors a study that deals with two different cultural contexts and the intriguing moments of contact and exchange that took place between them. One of the overarching lessons of this text is that, even during the most intense moment of the French reaction against American cultural imperialism, the French also made a concerted effort to seek out the "other America." In this context, the other America alluded not only to socio-economic disparities, but to a certain segment of the population that had rejected mainstream values altogether and were seeking alternatives, most famously through new forms of community living, music, and drugs. According to Maniaque-Benton, "the [French] Left was torn between a distrust of capitalism regarding American exports and consumer products, and a simultaneous attraction for American cultural expressions" (p. 23).

These cultural expressions took on the umbrella term of the "counterculture." The aesthetic and design production of the counterculture has recently received much scholarly and institutional attention.[1]

Maniaque-Benton's book slots into these other initiatives nicely, and adds much needed political specificity to a topic that can too easily lean toward generalization and hyperbole. *French Encounters* approaches these nuances via architectural design and theory. By its very nature, the counterculture was a spatial phenomenon, defined by its position on the proverbial margins of the technocratic society, and often expressing itself via literal relocation (from urban to rural areas), and the construction of new dwellings and other building types. As it happens, the way in which the counterculture appropriated (or rejected) the ethics and aesthetics of modernist design encapsulated its ambivalence regarding the relationship between society and technology. The French designers whose stories Maniaque-Benton recounts shared this ambivalence and, as she writes, saw the U.S. as "not only...the icon of modernity, but also as the driving force behind a return to nature" (p. 3).

Though the book treats the American and French contexts almost equally, it is clearly written from the French perspective; it follows in the footsteps of French visitors to the U.S. and asks to what extent they were able to appropriate and adapt what they found in that strange land of boundless horizons and seemingly endless possibilities. Perhaps it should not be so surprising that a number of French designers, conceptually disheveled after 1968 and the reorganization of architectural pedagogy in France, would want to escape that context altogether, at least for a moment, and find a new approach in a new land.[2] Young designers such as Marc Vaye, Jean Soum, and a host of others, made the trip for both practical and profoundly utopian reasons. Packed into camper trailers, they sought out the hippies, the communes, the underground magazines, Buckminster Fuller, and other idiosyncratic but invigorating phenomena in the States. What they found in the U.S. were individuals and groups who had availed themselves of vast tracts of affordable land in the Southwest to set up new communities; people who had sloughed off the aesthetic constraints of modernism; and, moreover, people who had established networks of shared information and accessible techniques that ostensibly worked against the dominant system of global capital.

In addressing the American context, Maniaque-Benton gives a summary of the building activities in alternative communities, of the social context of the formation of the counterculture and the postindustrial society against which it was a reaction. She concerns herself with the postwar reception of Buckminster Fuller, and the ecological design movement that he helped to inspire. She also discusses the radical appropriation of communications technologies by individuals and groups such as Ant Farm. By now, this is familiar material, and has received more critical analysis elsewhere.[3] Here, though, it serves to throw the French experience into relief. Indeed, it sets the stage for some intriguing reversals. Maniaque-Benton recounts, for instance, the interesting fact that the builder of one of the most sensational of the eccentric houseboats in Sausalito, California--highly visible icons of alternative design--was the Greek artist, Jean Varda. As it happened, his niece was French New Wave filmmaker, Agnès Varda, who produced a short film about her "American Uncle" that was a part of a series she directed on the counterculture. Here, design is mediated by film, and the counterculture emerges as a distinctly international phenomenon, not exclusive to the United States at all.

Moments like this are when the book is at its strongest. Maniaque-Benton has done a superb job of research here, not only consulting and referencing the existing literature, but travelling to sites, archives, and conducting extensive interviews with the individuals whose experiences she recounts. This makes the text into something like an oral history of the period and therefore an extremely valuable resource for scholars seeking to gauge international responses to the counterculture. But as invaluable as the text is in terms of documentation, one wishes the author had offered a bit more interpretation at times. For instance, Maniaque-Benton's initial discussion (chapter one) of French and American attitudes toward what Jacques Ellul famously described as "the technological society" hinges upon a tabulation of sources that took a "positive" or "negative" view; a dichotomous approach that tends to reduce the conceptual dissonance so evident in the sources she cites, as well as the buildings she discusses.[4]

The book also constitutes a remarkable visual document, as Maniaque-Benton has managed to gather photos from personal albums, as well as bits of ephemera the survival of which is nothing short of miraculous. Covers and illustrations from obscure journals such as *La face cachée du soleil*, and *Icosa* are beautifully reproduced in *French Encounters*. But as obscure as these documents might be, and as narrow as Maniaque-Benton's approach to the material might seem, it becomes evident by the book's concluding chapter that the relevance of the material is quite broad, and includes nothing less than architecture's attempt to continue or transform the utopian project of modernism. Can a revolutionary praxis precede a revolutionary theory? In the years surrounding May '68, this was an urgent question in both the French and American contexts. And, beyond the carefully defined chronological scope of her project, Maniaque-Benton convincingly sets up the encounter between French and American experimental architecture as a prelude to the contemporary scene, offering much historical and ideological material on which to meditate in assessing the mandate of "sustainable design."

NOTES

[1] See Christoph Grunenberg, ed., *The Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005); Alastair Gordon, *Spaced Out: Crash Pads, Hippie Communes, Infinity Machines, and other Radical Environments of the Psychedelic Sixties* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008); and Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, eds., *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[2] Jean-Louis Violeau, *Les Architectes et Mai 68* (Paris: Éditions Recherches, 2005).

[3] In addition to those sources already cited, see: Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[4] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964).

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