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Nicole C. Rudolph, *At Home in Postwar France: Modern Mass Housing and the Right to Comfort*. New York: Berghahn, 2015. xiv + 257 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78238-587-5.

Review by Michael Mulvey, Saint Thomas University.

Hundreds of thousands of French families moved into functionalist “4P” or *quatre pièces* apartments, oft denigrated as drab pigeon cages, during the *Trente Glorieuses*. The ubiquitousness of postwar French interior designs concealed how each apartment represented a domestic revolution in the provision of comfort to citizens. Slavoj Žižek noted humorously that the traditional design of French, English, and German toilets could not be accounted for in utilitarian terms, but instead national toilets materialized specific political ideologies.[1] Everyday domestic objects and spaces may serve practical purposes and yet they also reflect contextual beliefs. Urban France suffered from a housing crisis after Liberation repeatedly exacerbated by rural migrations, the baby boom, colonial repatriations, and immigration. Nonetheless, by 1975, the Hexagon boasted 8 million new homes, the majority of them, apartments. France literally changed the meaning of home in the decades after the Second World War. Embedded in each of those apartment designs were assumptions about the roles of men, women, families, and social classes. As Nicole C. Rudolph argues, postwar French debates over the placement of a toilet (should it be in its own room? yes) and the size of a kitchen (should it be large enough to dine? it depends) materialized a transcendent objective: making “modern comfort”—defined as heating, plumbing, and electricity by the 1948 *Larousse*—a guaranteed social right of French citizenship.

At Home in Postwar France thus chronicles utopian dreams and contested realities in the provision of comfort inside French homes from 1945 to 1975. Rudolph has composed a well-researched monograph that focuses on how modernist apartment interiors spread across a national territory through state-approved designs, state financing, and a major social housing developer. In doing so, Rudolph charts what she terms an “invisible revolution” in the domestic spaces of French homes (p. 1). *At Home in Postwar France* dialogues with the recent scholarship of W. Brian Newsome on postwar centralized urban planning, Minayo Nasiali on squatters in Marseilles, and Kenny Cupers on the architectural evolution of social housing construction.[2] Whereas Newsome focused on urban politics, Nasiali on activism, and Cupers on architecture, Rudolph is primarily interested in home interiors and the debates, struggles, and changes they generated. She relies on home interiors as a lens to understand the goals of architects and policymakers, as well as residents’ lived experience of modernity. Rudolph’s voice, moreover, joins Western European and North American scholars rewriting the history of postwar mass housing beyond teleological narratives of success and failure.[3]

Rudolph’s history explores two sets of tensions from Liberation to the post-1968 period. The first tension was between the desires of planners and architects—the experts—to extend modernization into the domestic sphere and resident resistance to inhabiting functional apartments as imagined by their designers. The second tension, far briefer, was between visions of egalitarian-democratic domestic spaces or one-size-fits-all-classes apartments and home interiors differentiated by socioeconomic standing. Rudolph emphasizes that underlining these two tensions was the ever-changing meaning of

what constituted a comfortable domestic life. The history avoids condemning modernist mass housing and instead attributes to it the success of changing mentalities, thereby raising French expectations in terms of what might be considered a minimum of domestic comfort across time. Rudolph analyzes a broad source base to discuss domestic space ranging from national archival documents to resident surveys and architectural journals. The most fascinating material evidence comes in the form of apartment floorplans submitted to ministerial and architectural competitions.

The first half of the book covers the period from 1945 to 1953 with specific attention to how state planners, architects, and institutions strategized putting French families in technically “comfortable” homes with varied standards of indoor plumbing, heating, and electricity. Rudolph begins by reassessing postwar Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme or MRU experiments with functionalist home interiors and minimum definitions of domestic comfort. She identifies a paradox in the immediate postwar years. In an age when Western European nations were crafting strong social protection systems, she finds limited evidence that French households clamored for a right to comfort in the form of indoor plumbing, central heating, refrigerators, kitchen appliances, and rationalized floorplans. Despite a postwar housing crisis, French couples preferred to live without comfort rather than devote a greater percentage of household budgets to rent. She cites the future MRU minister Eugène Claudius-Petit who observed, “In 1948, the French spent 30 billion on their rent, 204 billion on their tobacco.” (p. 41). Rudolph argues that the often overlooked experimental projects undertaken by the MRU between 1944 and 1952 should be considered the precise moment when the MRU committed to providing comfortable, functionalist interiors for all citizens, although it remained uncertain if the ministry would promote apartment buildings or individual homes.

Chapter two examines the different ways postwar architects imagined the “4P,” followed by a chapter on the *Salon des Arts Ménagers* or SAM, an annual home exhibition that ran from 1923 to 1983. Rudolph describes the postwar “4P” interiors as a hybrid combination of pre-war state-sponsored *Habitation à bon marché* plans and modernist language. She concludes that architects designed these apartments foremost for middle-class needs, despite proclamations that they served all class interests. The postwar “4P,” Rudolph argues, was a creative edit rather than a radical re-imagination of domestic space. The floor plans imagined, staged, and built for various competitions were prewar middle-class apartments tailored by architects to match modernist rhetoric by eliminating hallways and separating kitchens from dining areas. This grafting process was quite visible in the “*Appartement idéal*,” a model home sponsored by *Paris-Match* magazine at the 1952 SAM, designed by architect Marcel Roux. Rudolph, reading floor plans carefully, is struck by the similarity between this ideal modern home and pre-war apartments serving better-off classes. Aside from the absence of a servant’s entrance to a small, equipped kitchen, the postwar ideal people’s home and the pre-war middle-class home looked quite alike. Yet neither working-class nor middle-class individuals who encountered this and other “ideal” apartments considered postwar “4P” designs entirely satisfactory to their specific aesthetics and domestic lifestyles.

Rudolph assigns the postwar SAM a vital pedagogical role as a national institution familiarizing the French, especially women, with the art of inhabiting these modern apartment interiors. Through Paris and provincial exhibitions and its publications, the SAM served as a postwar evangelist for modern interiors despite the fact the happy homes displayed too often remained outside the budgets of audiences and readers. Rudolph’s first claim is that the MRU depended on the SAM to convince the public that comfortable modern housing was a worthwhile investment.

Rudolph’s second claim is that the exhibitions normalized the idea of collective living in apartment complexes as it called for each family to equip apartments fully through individualized consumption of kitchen appliances, furniture, and wallpaper. Without question, the postwar apparition of the institution promoted a taste for a new conception of home that was unlike the working-class pavilion or the middle-class apartment as it idealized women’s roles as homemakers. The fair certainly attracted a large annual audience, selling a million entrance tickets each year between 1950 and 1972. However, as Rudolph

admits, one cannot measure the exact ways model apartments and notions about occupying them promoted by the exhibitions directly influenced the everyday housing desires and living practices of visitors.

In the early 1950s, the SAM cultivated desires for comfortable apartments that could not be found on either the social or free market. Rudolph thus transitions into a discussion of the active period of *grands ensembles d'habitation* or suburban housing estate construction from 1954 to their 1973 prohibition. She concludes that policymakers and politicians abandoned a Liberation-era vision of an equal right to comfort for all, a truly democratic-egalitarian interior, in favor of an articulated hierarchy of interiors. A commitment to mass production reduced apartment sizes and standards of comfort for some social housing models. The popular expectations raised by the SAM could not be satisfied in rapidly erected *grands ensembles* apartments.

Rudolph refrains from entering into a reductionist debate over what went wrong with social housing in the *grands ensembles*. While she reserves some criticism for the Société centrale immobilière, France's largest public-private developer, a subsidiary of the Caisse des dépôts et Consignations, Rudolph acknowledges that *grands ensembles* residents largely welcomed their new apartments regardless of its category: Logeco, LEN, HLM, etc. Nonetheless, residents did develop critiques of their apartment designs, leading to Rudolph's discussion of occupant frustrations expressed in the 1959 "*appartement référendum*" and Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe's sociological studies. These studies revealed that design ingenuity and architectural vision could not compensate for square meters and cultural practice. Exposure to comfort, however, led families to increasingly prioritize their personal space and distance from different social classes. As Rudolph notes, it was the very provision of mass housing that raised French expectations of what constituted a comfortable dwelling. In hindsight, Rudolph attributes a victory to the Fourth Republic for its commitment to the *grands ensembles*. By familiarizing the French with domestic comfort, the *grands ensembles* cultivated mass desires for more personalizable apartment interiors and even the more individualized single-family home.

At Home in Postwar France is neither a celebration of modernist design nor a narrative of social housing failure. One leaves the monograph with a sense that the functionalist "4P" did little to encourage more rational domestic lives, but did lead citizens to accept that central heat, indoor plumbing, and a kitchen were rights akin to health insurance and retirement benefits. The monograph should appeal to scholars interested in architectural, urban, housing, and design history. Rudolph could elaborate on the theoretical distinction between a right to housing and a right to comfort by engaging scholarship on citizenship and the welfare state more directly. Are a right to housing and a right to comfort synonymous? Moreover, the author could make bolder claims for the right to comfort inside domestic space as a core component of postwar social citizenship of importance equal to financial redistributions. Did the democratization of comfort change what it meant to belong to a particular national community? Did it change how individuals encountered the broader world and its domestic amenities?

The conversation about comfort also leads to a consideration of the right to comforts beyond the home, for example, in the workplace. Political and social rights were hard fought in France. Yet it was the moral outrage over homelessness channeled by Abbé Pierre in 1954 that ignited two decades of unprecedented apartment construction. Modernist apartment towers and blocks memorialize a moral moment, as well as an invisible revolution in domestic comfort. Rudolph notes the vital role of leftist and social Catholics in postwar urban planning. There is perhaps more to be written about the Catholic embrace of housing activism and the extent to which a religious tradition provided a matrix generating creative responses to the housing question. *At Home in Postwar France* convincingly argues that the provision of comfort in modern apartments served as a catalyst for change by raising expectations for domestic comfort across social classes during the Thirty Glorious Years.

NOTES

[1] Slavoj Žižek, “Knee Deep,” *London Review of Books* 26(September 2004): 12-13.

[2] W. Brian Newsome, *French Urban Planning, 1940–1968: The Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); Minayo Nasiali, “Citizens, Squatters, and Asocials: The Right to Housing and the Politics of Difference in Post-Liberation France,” *American Historical Review* 119(2014): 434-459; and Kenny Cupers, *The Social Project: Housing Postwar France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[3] For example, Frédéric Dufaux, Annie Fourcaut, and Paul Chemtov, eds., *Le monde des grands ensembles* (Paris: Ed. Creaphis, 2004).

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