

H-France Review Vol. 4 (November 2004), No. 116

Annette Fierro, *The Glass State. The Technology of the Spectacle. Paris, 1981-1998*, MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2003. xviii + 320 pp. \$45. ISBN: 0-262-06233-X.

Review by Colin Jones, University of Warwick.

Annette Fierro's study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the new architecture of Paris in the late twentieth century. Her story is less about post-1945 Paris 'assassinated', Louis Chevalier-style, [1] than the city reinvented, re-emergent and, in some senses, resurrected in the 1980s and 1990s by dint of the *grand projet*. We had become habituated to seeing the latter as at the confluence of presidential pharaonism, planning gigantism and wheeler-dealer corruption.[2] What Fierro proposes--in a work which in some ways updates Norma Evenson and gives her a cultural-theoretical spin [3]-- is that we should incorporate these elements into a much broader cultural and ideological picture, in which political dealing, a presidential *politique de grandeur* and a thirst for speculative profit take their place alongside competing ideologies of space.

Annette Fierro, who is seemingly unrelated (bibliographers and librarians, please note!) to the prolific Parisian historian and bibliographer, Alfred Fierro, is an architectural historian by training. Her beautifully illustrated book is, in general, extremely well written, but it is also, on occasion, rather dense for the non-specialist in architectural theory (*viz. moi*). Nevertheless the grand projet, presidential or otherwise, is such an important element within Fifth Republic politics and culture, that her powerful analysis will be read with real interest and profit right across the disciplinary spectrum.

At the heart of the work is what we might call a monumental prosopography. Fierro proceeds by means of a close reading of her chosen set of public buildings created within the city of Paris over a roughly two-decade period, highlighting the same construction materials (steel and glass), and performing, she argues, a kind of collective cultural mission. The stage for the emergence of this set of constructions, she suggests, was the creation of the Pompidou Centre, but she is also aware of the city of Paris's unique monumental engagement with theories of modernity, and she encases her analysis in the broader context of Haussmannism. The Haussmannised nineteenth-century city and the Eiffel Tower provide a vital key for unlocking the meanings of François Mitterrand's pet *projets* (the Institut du Monde Arabe, the Pyramides du Louvre, the park of La Villette and the Parc André-Citroën, the new Ministry of Finance, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, etc), and a congeries of related projects including Jean Nouvel's Fondation Cartier and Ricardo Bofill's St-Honoré market-place. After all, Mitterrand was well aware of Paris's status as the city of political grandeur and cultural modernity. As the city of light, Paris was more than ready to be re clothed--re clothed in glass, as it happened.

As her subtitle suggests, Fierro's study draws on cultural theory derived from Guy Debord and the Situationists, and urban theory in the wake of Henri Lefebvre, to highlight the spectacular as an essential mode of political representation in late capitalism.[4] What gives the work its novel flavour, however, is the way in which would-be technologies of spatial and political order are linked to new technologies of glass production (which basically permit the creation of a stronger, lighter, larger-paned glass). Fierro is especially instructive and ingenious in highlighting ways in which specific details of technique (such as the type of glass used for the Louvre pyramid by the Japanese architect I. M. Pei, which the architect wanted completely non-reflective so as to permit total transparency) allow us to access the political and ideological project in which the buildings participate. Glass seemed to offer architects and planners a way back into a type of monumental architecture which had lost its confidence in the stripped-down classicism on the inter-war period. Transparency thus became both an architectural and a political prime value. This makes Fierro's work relate to both the architectural audacity and the political metaphor-making inherent in the *grands projets*.

François Mitterrand's quest to monumentalise for posterity his Socialist presidency highlighted accessibility and transparency. The *voie triomphale* was extended from the Arc de Triomphe not only westward to the Grande Arche de la Défense but also through to the poorer sections of the city around a now re-imagined Place de la Bastille, while

the parks of La Villette and André-Citroen were placed in post-industrial environments close to working-class neighbourhoods. Transparency also seemed to endorse a Socialist politics of the state's accessibility to its citizens, and the porousness of boundaries between private and public in a democratic polity. Thus, for example, Fierro shows how Pei's Louvre glass pyramid symbolised the greater opening up to the public of the state's cultural patrimony which Mitterrand drove through.

The democratic dimension to the new glass-based monumental architecture was, however, inherently in tension with a very different cultural narrative. Glass had been a medium associated with power in France since Louis XIV's Hall of Mirrors at Versailles--and this was hardly a democratic site, nor is classicism a democratic idiom. In addition, modernist use of glass in Paris and its *banlieue* in the Le Corbusier-inspired towers of the 1950s and 1960s had given modernism, towers and glass a very bad name. They signified impersonal technologies of control and disciplining very much at odds with the democratic impulse initially behind Mitterrand's projects.

Fierro's discussion of the different projects thus combines close architectural scrutiny with a wider cultural analysis which traces the competing significations of the medium of glass. Glass in the Grand Louvre signified openness all right, but the pyramidal form also evoked a pharaonic impulse which the critics of Pei and Mitterrand were quick to pick up on. Fierro's study shows how the exact mixture of these conflicting narratives differs from project to project (and H-France readers will be particularly interested in the thoughtful and well-documented account of the making of the B.N.F.). She also gives the reader a sense that the process she analyses is still continuing. The stakes remain as high as ever in terms of the type of city which will result.

Annette Fierro's fair-minded and insightful analysis of the cultural politics of the Fifth Republic and the meanings of urban space will be as valuable a vade-mecum for the opponents of new projects as for their enthusiasts. As a result of reading this remarkable and perceptive, if sometimes difficult, volume, I felt I saw Paris with new eyes and understood better what I was seeing of the reconstruction of the city and the emergence of a new monumental order. This is a book not to miss.

NOTES

[1] Louis Chevalier, *The Assassination of Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[2] Cf. esp. F. Chaslin, *Les Paris de François Mitterrand. Histoire des grands projets architecturaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

[3] N. Evenson, *Paris. A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

[4] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983); Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 1971); idem, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

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ISSN 1553-9172