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Larry Busbea, *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970*. Cambridge, Mass. and London : M.I.T. Press, 2007. ix + 229 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-262-02611-6.

Review by Roxanne Panchasi, Simon Fraser University.

During the final decade of the period of massive postwar transformation known as the *trente glorieuses*, an imaginary city appeared in the writings and designs of a number of French theorists, architects, and artists. In a series of critical texts, architectural drawings, models, and works of art, visions of a “spatial” city of the future emerged: “a luminous city that was to float above the ground, all of its parts (and inhabitants) circulating in a smooth, synchronous rhythm” (p. 3). In this engaging and beautifully illustrated study, art historian Larry Busbea excavates the urban utopianism of the 1960s in France, examining its aesthetic and ideological significance and reading its prospective imaginary “more as a symptom of its historical moment than as the revolutionary force it considered itself” (p. 7).

Busbea begins his analysis by tracing the contours of what he terms the “spatial culture” of the 1960s in France, a culture shaped by the tremendous economic expansion and technological innovation of the postwar period. Cultural theorists and architects in France responded to these changes with projects and images of a new urban society. The social and cultural environments they perceived and imagined were spaces of movement and energy in which the relationships between nature, technology, and humanity would be redefined. According to Busbea, a generalized postwar optimism informed the new field of prospective and predictive urban thought that took off in the period (15). Examining the writing of Henri Van Lier, Abraham Moles, and Henri Lefebvre, Busbea explores a range of theories of space that drew (with more and less critical enthusiasm) upon utopian urban projects in their descriptions of and proposals for contemporary and future cities.

Focusing on the mobile architecture of Yona Friedman, Busbea situates the “spatial urbanism” of the 1960s in relationship to a broader national and international context of postwar architecture and planning. Busbea is careful to point out that the urban utopianism under analysis was not a coherent or homogeneous movement, nor was it a movement unique to France. Nevertheless, the author points to a set of common concerns that preoccupied architects and artists at work in France as nowhere else: a fascination with urban “megastructures” suspended above the ground, an interest in achieving a synthesis or integration of the arts (bringing together architecture and painting or sculpture, for example), an emphasis on movement and mobility, a faith in technology and its possibilities, and a responsiveness to the new society of leisure combined with a suspicion of mass culture.

Busbea identifies the 1965 formation of the *Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective* (GIAP) by the French art and architectural critic Michel Ragon as the “apex” of spatial urbanism in France. In a detailed chapter on the history of this group, Busbea provides a brief biography of Ragon himself, as well as an overview of the contributions of a number of the GIAP’s members (including Yona Friedman, Paul Maymont, Ionel Schein, Nicolas Schoffer, and Victor Vasarely) from 1965 to 1970. Short-lived, the small group never developed a coherent program or shared vision, bringing together only briefly architects and artists with differing aesthetic and ideological perspectives on the nature and future of a

utopian urban landscape. Ragon's effort to bring the projects and ideas of the group to a wider national and international public fell short in the end. By May 1968, critics would denounce this brand of French futurism "as the work of a technocratic neo-avant-garde" (p. 82).

Bridging further the gap between the fantastic and historical aspects of the "spatial city," Busbea explores the relationship between urban utopianism and the world of official planning and building in Paris in the 1960s. According to the author, spatial urbanism emerged within the context of a much broader crisis of modernism in France and an era of unprecedented linkages between the public (state), the private, and the avant-garde in terms of architecture and planning. An era of experimentation in the use of materials and building techniques, the postwar was also the period of the emergence of the *grand ensembles*, massive housing and administrative projects that were the subject of intense critical debate in France. Following the release of a new master plan for the nation's capital (the *Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme de la Région de Paris*) in 1965, GIAP members Friedman, Maymont, and Schoffer all offered "spatial" responses to the problems of density and circulation facing the postwar city. Envisioning a "*Paris sur Paris*," these utopian architects developed elaborate proposals for massive radical structures layering the existing city that would address the need for growth while preserving the city's historic architecture.

Providing readers with a detailed history of the "space frame," the massive, suspended structural grids that were the dominant formal feature of the spatial city, Busbea outlines the ways that style and structure held both aesthetic and ideological meaning during the 1960s. According to Busbea, the opposition between the topology of spatial urbanists such as Friedman and the "anti-space frame" designs of the group *Architecture Principe* (founded in 1965 by Paul Virilio and Claude Parent) constituted "an architectural rehearsal of the ideological conflict between structuralism and phenomenology of the same years in France" (p. 143).

In a final chapter, Busbea examines the discourse of the integration or synthesis of the arts that was particularly important to the artists, such as Schoffer and Vasarely, who participated in the GIAP. Rejecting both American capitalism and Soviet socialism, spatial urbanists in France sought a convergence of art and industry and championed the mass consumption of large-scale art rather than the commodification of art objects. In their critique of a widespread culture of consumption and their interest in the possibilities of ambient space, Busbea's spatial urbanists shared limited common ground with other intellectual and cultural movements in France, including the Situationists. Ultimately, however, their embrace of technology and administrative rationality rendered their politics reformist, even conservative, rather than revolutionary.

Throughout *Topologies*, Busbea's analysis of the projects and ideas of urban utopianists is nuanced and theoretically sophisticated. The author does a commendable job of contextualizing the spatial urbanism of the 1960s with respect to key developments in the social, cultural, and economic history of postwar France. At the same time, readers less familiar with the history of art and architecture per se may find his detailed discussion of certain figures, projects, and technical matters somewhat difficult reading. In the end, these projects and their analysis still seem rather isolated within a world of (Parisian) architects, artists, theorists, their critics and historians. Furthermore, some elements of Busbea's analysis might have benefited from more development. His engagement with the theme of France's confrontation with capitalist modernity is intriguing, but not sustained throughout the book. While the "watershed" of 1968 makes several appearances in Busbea's analysis, the relationship between this moment in French history and the architectural phenomena explored here seems to warrant more attention that it receives in these chapters. Finally, Busbea's political analysis might have been elaborated in more depth. Still, this is an evocative and creative book, a cultural history of imagined urban utopias that traces its own networks and flows between archival spaces theoretical, aesthetic, and ideological.

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