



French Urban Planning 1940–1968

The Construction and
Deconstruction of an
Authoritarian System

W. Brian Newsome

PETER LANG PUBLISHING

French Urban Planning 1940–1968 explores the creation and progressive dismantling of France's centralized, authoritarian system of urban and architectural planning. Established in the wake of World War II to facilitate the reconstruction and expansion of cities, this planning program led to the evolution of large suburban housing estates plagued by inter/intra family conflict, juvenile delinquency, and other social difficulties, which sociologists connected to poor planning and design. Critics began calling for the democratization of planning to remedy design problems, and the government of Charles de Gaulle started reforming planning procedures in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This book moves beyond technical and political issues to explore forces of religion, gender, and class that affected planning practices. Key critics and state officials emerged from the Catholic Left. Some were women from working-class backgrounds, and they manipulated gender stereotypes to insert working- and middle-class women into the design process. Sometimes in opposition, but often together, these reformers initiated the most significant change of architectural and urban planning until the introduction of François Mitterrand's decentralization reforms in the 1980s. *French Urban Planning 1940–1968* will appeal to scholars and students interested in architectural, urban, and social trends in twentieth-century France.



W. BRIAN NEWSOME is Assistant Professor of History at Alfred University in Alfred, New York. He received his Ph.D. in modern European history from the University of South Carolina. Newsome has published articles in *The Historian*, *French Historical Studies*, and *French Politics, Culture and Society*, and he has co-edited a special issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* on French colonial urbanism. A Fulbright Grant and Alfred University research grants supported the research for this book.

French Urban Planning
1940–1968

Studies in Modern European History

Frank J. Coppa
General Editor

Vol. 61



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Newsome, W. Brian.

French urban planning 1940-1968: the construction and deconstruction
of an authoritarian system / W. Brian Newsome.

p. cm. — (Studies in modern European history; v. 61)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. City planning—France—History—20th century. 2. Housing policy—
France—History—20th century. 3. Reconstruction (1939-1951)—France.

4. Urbanization—France—History—20th century. I. Title.

HT169.F7N49 307.1'2160944—dc22 2008041477

ISBN 978-1-4331-0400-8 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4539-0394-0 (eBook)

ISSN 0893-6897

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Bibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the “Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de/>.

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29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006

www.peterlang.com

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For Susan and Braden

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Acknowledgments

Many people played important roles in bringing this project to completion. First, I would like to express my debt to Anne-Louise Shapiro, Danièle Voldman, Rosemary Wakeman, and other scholars of French urban history, particularly those cited in the introduction. Though I am challenging a number of points in the historiography of urban planning, I also am synthesizing the work of my predecessors, whose research has made so much of my own book possible. Second, I wish to express my appreciation to the members of the Franco-American Fulbright Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities Committee at Alfred University, and Provost Suzanne Buckley, who provided generous funding to support research and writing. Without their assistance, the publication of this book would not have been possible. Third, I would like to thank Frank Coppa, the editor of the Studies in Modern European History Series, and Caitlin Lavelle, my editor at Peter Lang, as well as the anonymous reviewers who read my manuscript, for their suggestions and their support. I also am indebted to Vicki Eaklor, Michael Smith, and Steven Zdatny, who read the manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions.

I owe an equal debt of gratitude to the staff members of the Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine, the Archives départementales du Finistère, the Archives nationales (Fontainebleau and Paris), the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine (Musée d'histoire contemporaine), the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and the Centre de documentation du Ministère de l'équipement for their assistance with primary sources. The librarians of Thomas Cooper Library at the University of South Carolina, Memorial Library at Berry College, and Herrick Memorial Library at Alfred University provided invaluable help with research conducted in the United States. Special thanks are extended to the professors of the History Department at the University of South Carolina, particularly Owen Connelly and Kenneth Perkins, who served as members of my doctoral committee, and Michael Smith, who served as my dissertation director. Professor Smith has shaped my understanding of European and French history, and he guided my work as a young historian. Without his encouragement and constructive criticism, this book could not have been completed.

Special thanks also are extended to Marvin Cann, Herrick Chapman, Ted and Jo Burr Margadant, and Kathleen Paul, the editors of *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, *French Politics, Culture and Society*, *French*

Historical Studies, and *The Historian*, respectively, as well as the anonymous reviewers who read the essays that I published with these journals. The suggestions of these scholars led me to turn my research and writing in new directions, and portions of these articles have been incorporated into this book. I also wish to thank my current and former colleagues at Alfred University for their support: Laurel Jay Carpenter, Bill Cassidy, Bill Dibrell, Beth Ann Dobie, Vicki Eaklor, Dale Inglett, Linda Mitchell, Gary Ostrower, Tom Peterson, Lidija Slovkovic, Emrys Westacott, and our division secretary Marilyn Saxton.

Most of all, I would like to thank my wife Susan, my son Braden, my parents Danny and Ann, and my sisters Dana and Ashley. They have read and offered valuable comments on many drafts of this book. They also provided financial and social support throughout the process of research and writing. I could not have finished this project without the help of my family, and to them I am eternally grateful. I alone, of course, am responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation contained in these pages.

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List of Abbreviations

ADHS	Archives départementales des Hauts-de-Seine
AFNOR	Association française de normalisation
AN	Archives nationales
CAC	Centre des archives contemporaines
CGP	Commissariat général du plan
CIAM	Congrès international d'architecture moderne
CIMP	Compagnie industrielle des maisons préfabriquées
COBTP	Comité d'organisation du bâtiment et des travaux publics
CRI	Commissariat à la reconstruction immobilière
DGEN	Délégation générale à l'équipement national
HBM	Habitations à bon marché
HLM	Habitations à loyer modéré
INED	Institut national d'études démographiques
JOC	Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne
JOCF	Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne féminine
LOC	Ligue ouvrière chrétienne
LOCF	Ligue ouvrière chrétienne féminine
LOGECO	Logement économique et familial
MPF	Mouvement populaire des familles
MRP	Mouvement républicain populaire
MRU	Ministère de la reconstruction et de l'urbanisme
PSU	Parti socialiste unifié
RAF	Royal Air Force
SAS	Syndicat des architectes de la Seine
SCET	Société centrale pour l'équipement du territoire
SCIC	Société centrale immobilière de la Caisse des dépôts et consignations
SERPEC	Société d'études et de réalisation de procédés économiques de construction
SFHBM	Société française des habitations à bon marché
SONACOTRA	Société nationale de construction de logements pour les travailleurs
STUP	Société technique pour l'utilisation de la précontrainte
UDSR	Union démocratique et socialiste de la Résistance
UNAF	Union nationale des associations familiales
UNC	Union nationale des castors

ZAC Zone d'aménagement concerté
ZUP Zone à urbaniser par priorité

Introduction

In May 1940, the German army invaded France. By the time the fighting ended in June, the French had lost 92,000 citizens and 403,000 buildings in Dunkerque, Beauvais, and other cities. The devastation did not stop with the signing of the armistice, though, because in April 1941 the British began raiding strategic targets in France. British and American air raids continued throughout 1942 and 1943, and the destruction only worsened after the D-Day landings in June 1944. Caen, Lisieux, and Le Havre were almost completely destroyed, and as Allied forces pushed the Germans out of the country, dozens of cities in eastern France suffered the same fate. By the end of the war, the French had lost 562,000 citizens and 2,115,000 structures: 1.35 percent of the population and 16 percent of the building stock.¹

The material damage worsened an existing housing shortage, the origins of which lay in nineteenth- and twentieth-century patterns of economic development, Napoléon III and Georges-Eugène Haussmann's programs of urban renewal, and the housing and town planning policies forged under the Third Republic. The housing crisis and a perceived failure of town planning in turn prompted officials of the Vichy regime and the Fourth Republic to establish new laws that took planning authority away from municipal officials and individual citizens, placing it instead in the hands of national officials, who thought they knew best how to provide their countrymen with modern housing and a rational urban environment. In the late 1940s, proprietors struggled with planners and architects and won several notable successes, including the elimination of Le Corbusier's modernist plans for the reconstruction of La Rochelle and Saint-Dié. Over time, however, national officials gained predominant authority over architectural and urban planning by tying state financial assistance to strict technical oversight. The French were not obligated to accept government aid, but in fact, they did so widely. By 1955, only 11.5 percent of new housing units were built without some form of financial assistance and the stringent requirements accompanying that support.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, architects and engineers in the state and private sectors also developed a few apartment models that could be built quickly and cheaply. As France moved from reconstruction of the ruins to the construction of new housing, the government began subsidizing the building of tens of thousands of these units in suburban housing parks known as the *grands ensembles*. Between 1950 and 1960, housing production increased

rapidly, solving the country's housing crisis. The *grands ensembles*, however, were plagued by social problems that were the results of poor architectural and urban planning. First, modern architects introduced new designs, such as nude concrete buildings and open interior spaces, which accorded poorly with popular tastes and social practices. Second, financial exigency led architects and state officials to reduce standards of size and quality for subsidized housing, creating apartments that were small and noisy. Lack of funding also reduced the number of schools, shopping centers, cultural centers, and transportation connections that could be included in new housing estates, leading to high rates of social and psychological problems among residents. Tiny apartments aggravated family quarrels. Poor sound insulation led to hostilities between neighbors. Lack of educational, commercial, and cultural amenities contributed to even worse dilemmas, as restless teenagers roamed the streets and housewives developed a crushing sense of isolation. In the *grands ensembles*, rates of delinquency among young people and anxiety among adults rose quickly.

As conditions in the housing parks worsened, the sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe and other critics began calling for reform, including the democratization of planning, which they hoped could remedy design problems and increase residential satisfaction. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Pierre Sudreau (Charles de Gaulle's first minister of construction) and François Bloch-Lainé (the head of the nation's largest para-public planning and construction firms) began listening to the critics, improving new housing estates, and democratizing the planning process. This change was a product of its time. With the end of the housing shortage in sight, state officials began shifting their focus from quantity to quality. Thanks to economic growth, they also had more money to devote to housing than their predecessors had, meaning they could afford to build better housing than had been available in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Several scholars have examined the mechanisms of reconstruction and urban planning but not the deconstruction of that system.² Others have analyzed the way competing interests shaped urban space but only in city case studies or for limited segments of the postwar era.³ Scholars who have examined the democratization of planning from a wider perspective have assumed that the move toward democratic planning emerged only after 1968, as a project of the Socialist and Communist Parties, and that this new approach to urban affairs did not achieve real success until the adoption of François Mitterrand's decentralization program in the 1980s.⁴ This book demonstrates, though, that the government of Charles de Gaulle took the first significant steps toward democratic planning. Most scholars have missed this shift

because of their general hostility toward the Gaullists and their oversight of many reformers' progressive Catholic backgrounds, which gave state officials and outside critics a common language and similar modes of thought.⁵

Chombart and Bloch-Lainé emerged from the Catholic Left. Both had been members of the *Équipes sociales*, an educational ministry, and both had migrated from the right, highlighting a pattern that was common for the Catholic Left.⁶ Their tale also provides evidence of the progressive contributions of left-wing Catholics during the postwar era,⁷ a story that has been marginalized as recent scholars have analyzed the connections between left-wing Catholics and the Vichy regime.⁸ This study does not seek to disprove the association of left-wing Catholics with the government of Marshal Pétain. In fact, it examines the ties that Chombart and other Catholic reformers had to Vichy. Analysis of the Catholic contributions to democratic planning nonetheless reveals that individuals who were associated with the wartime government could and did draw unexpected lessons from their experiences and helped change the course of French urban history.

Forces of gender and class also shaped the urban landscape, as a number of historians have argued.⁹ In the late nineteenth century, male bourgeois perceptions of gender and class heavily influenced architectural design. Elite men created public housing, for example, in an effort to transform workers into *petit-bourgeois* who would support the existing social order, including the ideal of the fecund housewife. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, women from working-class backgrounds began manipulating the conservative discourse to insert themselves into the design process, claiming the home as a female sphere and contributing to both the expansion of feminine influence and the democratization of planning. This process was rather complex, as working-class women advocated an intricate array of working-class and middle-class ideas, creating a circular pattern from the working class, to the middle class, and back to the working class. Nonetheless, the ultimate result was the general promotion of democratic planning.

Most scholars have not noticed this female achievement, which began with an "apartment referendum" organized by Pierre Sudreau and his chief consultant, Jeanne Aubert-Picard. The latter was a progressive Catholic of working-class origins and former general secretary of the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne féminine*, a Catholic youth group. Aubert-Picard advocated Catholic, middle-class concepts of women and the family, including the ideal of the stay-at-home mother. However, she also thought that women, including working-class women, had the right to shape their sphere within the home. Ironically, that belief led her to construct opportunities for women outside the home, both in Catholic associations and as a partner of Gaullist officials, to

whom she appealed because of her ostensibly conservative characteristics. To determine the flaws of current apartment designs, Aubert-Picard visited three hundred families who lived in state-subsidized housing. Most of her informants were housewives, and most of them were working-class. Aubert-Picard then drew on the design recommendations of Chombart and consulted both working-class and middle-class home economics organizations and family associations, many of them Catholic. With the architect Marcel Roux, Aubert-Picard and her team designed a model apartment and submitted it to public scrutiny in 1959 at the Salon des arts ménagers, an annual Paris housing fair that attracted thousands of largely middle-class women from Paris and the provinces.

The “apartment referendum” was neither a real referendum nor a scientific survey of public opinion. It was an amalgam of the recommendations of Chombart, the survey methodology of the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne féminine, and the techniques of popular consultation that state marketing experts had been elaborating at the Salon des arts ménagers and other housing exhibitions. Aubert-Picard consulted working-class women to develop her apartment model, but by concluding her project at the Salon, she defined the popular will as feminine and socially conservative, making the program less than truly democratic.¹⁰ Still, her project was unprecedented. It empowered ordinary people to voice their views on public housing, and it initiated a dynamic debate on the merits of public participation in planning, which pushed forward the process of democratization.

In the wake of the referendum, Sudreau sponsored the construction of apartments based on Aubert-Picard’s model, increased surface standards for subsidized housing, improved requirements for social infrastructure in the *grands ensembles*, and ordered the creation of extraordinary commissions representing community interest groups in cities working on new town plans. Sudreau and Aubert-Picard also paved the way for Bloch-Lainé, who involved all social classes in planning and management for the housing estates for which his agencies were responsible. In the late 1960s, democratic procedures were used to plan the new cities built around Paris. The protests of 1968 provided further impetus toward the decentralizing and democratizing reforms introduced in the 1980s under the leadership of François Mitterrand and Gaston Defferre. Clearly, though, neither the protesters of 1968 nor Mitterrand initiated the first democratizing reforms, which began in the late 1950s and the early 1960s as the product of intersecting forces of politics, religion, gender, and class.

Unfortunately, many of the original *grands ensembles* remained in poor condition. As the native French grew more prosperous, they moved into the

new, improved housing estates, leaving the old, decrepit ones to colonial immigrants who found themselves isolated from the rest of French society, particularly after the economy contracted in the 1970s. Between 1973 and 2000, rates of economic growth remained low and those of unemployment high compared to the patterns of the *trente glorieuses*, the “thirty glorious” years of economic expansion that followed World War II. As a result, tensions remained high between the *Français de souche* on the one hand, and immigrants, their children, and their grandchildren on the other, even though most of the second and third generations of immigrants were French citizens by virtue of their birth on French soil. Racism and xenophobia, fueled by economic resentment, were real problems, as evidenced by the performance of Jean-Marie Le Pen (the founder of the xenophobic Front national). Le Pen polled 15 percent of the vote in the presidential elections of 1988 and 1995, 17 percent in 2002 (which placed him in a run-off with Jacques Chirac in the second round), and 10 percent in 2007. Immigrants and their offspring have long been subject to socio-economic discrimination and physical segregation, and from time to time they have lashed out, as residents of some of the old *grands ensembles* did in riots in 2005. An investigation of urban planning is thus relevant to the problems confronting French society at the outset of the twenty-first century.

Chapter One examines the origins of the housing crisis in the nineteenth century, the response of the government of Napoléon III, and the philanthropic and public housing programs developed by members of the Musée social (a think-tank dedicated to resolution of the “social question”). The Musée social was also at the heart of efforts to create a centralized town planning system for the Paris region and the nation’s other metropolitan areas. At the same time, some modern architects began advocating democratic planning. Few listened to them, however, and by the late 1930s, modernists were divided over the merits of democratization. Neither the housing nor the town planning schemes adopted by the Third Republic proved adequate either, leading the technocrats of the Vichy regime to adopt a more authoritarian system of planning, which is the subject of Chapter Two.

The politicians of the Provisional Government and the Fourth Republic retained most wartime bureaucrats and the planning laws they had created. The Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism (MRU), the successor of Vichy’s planning agencies, ceded as little ground as possible to property owners attempting to influence reconstruction and extended the state’s reach to new construction. This control in turn facilitated the reproduction of designs elaborated during a series of experimental construction programs, contributing to the evolution of the *grands ensembles* and the problems encoun-

tered by residents of those new housing estates (Chapters Three and Four). Chapter Five analyzes criticism of the *grands ensembles* by focusing on Chombart and the network of progressive Catholics to which he was tied. Chapter Six examines the evolution of the state marketing techniques upon which Aubert-Picard would draw, and Chapter Seven analyzes the apartment referendum and subsequent efforts to democratize the planning process.

This study thus provides a broad, national overview of urban planning in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though it focuses on the era from 1940 to 1968 and the democratization of the planning process in particular. Although the story of democratization is only one piece of a complex puzzle, no account of French urban planning can afford to ignore the increasingly important role of the ordinary citizens who are shaping their cities.

Chapter One

Crises of Housing and Urban Planning under the Second Empire and the Third Republic

Despite the political turmoil of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, French cities were produced in much the same way that they long had been: by a fluid mix of public and private initiatives, with the latter playing the predominant role. Municipal councils regulated some aspects of construction, such as the height of buildings. They also exercised authority over roads, bridges, fountains, sewers, and other public services. Overall, though, cities grew organically, the work of individuals building their own homes and speculators who developed entire new residential and commercial districts with minimal oversight from public authorities. In Paris, national and municipal officials more carefully defined requirements for roads and buildings. Particularly notable are Henri IV's edicts on building lines (1600, 1607) and Louis XVI's ordinances on roads and buildings (1783, 1784). The former attempted to prevent builders from encroaching on public roads with physical structures and from constructing large overhangs on the upper stories of buildings. The latter required builders to obtain permits for new structures, set a minimal street width of ten meters, and restricted a building's height based on the width of the street, with a maximum height of twenty meters (seven or eight stories).¹

Successive monarchs also left their marks on Paris by constructing squares, buildings, monuments, and roads. Good examples include the place Royale (now the place des Vosges) of Henri IV, the Hôtel des Invalides of Louis XIV, the Arc de Triomphe of Napoléon I, and the rue Rambuteau of Louis-Philippe. In the provinces, the king's lieutenants planned fortress cities like Neuf-Brisach and palaces complexes like Fontainebleau. Royal governors and intendants also initiated projects of reconstruction, as Feydeau de Brou did after the fire that destroyed Rennes in 1720, and programs of *embellissement* and extension, as the Marquis de Tourny did during his tenure in Bordeaux (1743–60). Napoléon III, however, took such tendencies to a new level. In 1853, the emperor charged Georges-Eugène Haussmann, prefect of the Seine,