

**Michel-Pierre Chélini, Philippe Roger (dir.), Reconstruire le Nord-Pas-de-Calais après la Seconde Guerre mondiale (1944–1958), Villeneuve-d’Ascq (Presses universitaires du Septentrion) 2017, 374 p. (Architecture et urbanisme), ISBN 978-2-7574-1589-4, EUR 28,00.**

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This is an invaluable book which brings together a rich mixture of different ideas and sources. It offers a way of connecting Danièle Voldman’s pioneering national study of reconstruction (»La reconstruction des villes françaises de 1940 à 1954«, Paris 1997) to what was actually happening on the ground in one of the regions of France that was particularly badly damaged not just in 1940 but in the fighting that followed the Normandy invasions. Voldman’s research set out for the first time the broad structure of national developments. It was complemented by more detailed discussion of a number of different local examples but what it could not do was to provide a sense of the complex interplay between the different dimensions of reconstruction at the local level. It is the ambition of this book, handsomely discharged, to study just how these complexities played out in practice in the towns and cities across the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region.

To cover this range of issues raised by so varied a subject, the book is divided into two parts. The first explores the key actors and the central issues of reconstruction across the region and is divided into two sections. The first investigates the role of politicians at different levels of government, from senators and deputies to mayors and members of the two departments’ *conseils généraux*, and their role in championing the needs of the region vis-à-vis central government and in competition with the demands of other areas. Who were the men – and invariably the account is one of ageing white men – who pressed the case of the *sinistrés* (those who had suffered the loss or damage to property) most effectively? Which of the region’s local representatives were most fearless in exposing the corruption or financial scandals that inevitably accompanied rebuilding on the scale necessary in the two departments?

The communists, strongly represented across the region generally come well out of this account. But their difficulties in defending the local interests of the working classes while being a major player in national government is highlighted by the study of the , the effort to produce enough coal to feed the needs of the struggling economy. Barely a year after the nationalisation of the coalfields with its promise of a new beginning, the Parti communiste français (PCF) faced resentments over food shortages and the consequences of a new, oppressive system of management at the local level, when forced to confront the contradictions of remaining true to the working class while part of a government supporting the bourgeois »status quo«.

The second section reviews the progress of reconstruction across the region and between the region and the rest of France and provides a welcome picture of the different branches of industry and the way they compared with developments elsewhere. It presents, too, the difficult



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decisions, taken so often with inadequate data, that urgently needed to be taken: should the rebuilding of the ports be given priority? Would the bottlenecks created by the railways' lack of capacity be better served by investments of the national railway operator SNCF in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais or, for example, in electrifying the line Valenciennes to Thionville?

The data assembled in this section raise important questions about the extent to which reconstruction actually achieved the modernisation so clearly needed in some branches of industry. Steel and coal may have been transformed for the better but it made good sense to motor manufacturers like Peugeot to consolidate production in the Paris region, and the textile industry seemed to have looked backwards to the restoration of a pre-war system of production unable to keep up with innovation elsewhere. With food production a priority, both locally and nationally, and 20 % of the region's farming out of commission, what other investments could be cut back to help agriculture? Finally, an essay on the new value given to physical education serves as a reminder that reconstruction was not just a question of the economy. Giving all children the opportunity to engage in sports as part of the school curriculum was a way of recognising the necessity of healing, »reconstructing« the ever-present if less visible damage to individuals wrought by the war.

The second part of the book covers the physical reconstruction of the region's towns and cities. To address their manifest variety, the editors helpfully distinguish between the larger cities, Boulogne-sur-Mer and Calais, the smaller towns along the coast, Berck, Portel and Le Touquet Paris-Plage and the towns and cities of the region's interior, Douai and Lille, Lens, Valenciennes and Saint-Omer, enabling us to contrast the approach to reconstruction chosen for cities of comparable size. The contrast between Boulogne and Calais, for example, presents very different views of modernisation. In Boulogne-sur-Mer, the long held ambitions of the municipal leaders to modernise their city found expression in the plan prepared as early as 1942 by the local architect Roger Berrier. These were taken over with few changes in 1945 when Pierre Vivien, a more obviously »modernist« architect, arrived with the blessing of the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Development (ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme, MRU). The four tall slabs built along the quai Gambetta represent the most obvious product of these modernising ambitions and seem to have been broadly welcomed by the town.

By contrast in Calais the reaction to modernisation, more typical of the region as a whole, was a sense of grudging resentment. In Calais the tall Flemish roofs of Georges Labro's government financed blocks built before 1950, contrast with the modernity that MRU urged after the 1948 visit of Eugène Claudius-Petit. The new minister at MRU had denounced what he saw as the »dolls' house« approach to reconstruction with its grossly inefficient and expensive form of construction. In place of Labro, MRU imposed the modernist Clément Tambuté, whose ideas dominate the planning of the place des Armes and other later projects. But, though the local population and its representatives resented Tambuté's designs, they felt powerless to protest for fear of losing funding from MRU and facing yet further delays to the rehousing of the *sinistrés*.

The wealth of evidence on the way that reconstruction was carried out across the region, nuanced inevitably by local particularities, reveals a number of general issues. In towns large and small there were tensions between MRU and local attitudes, the feeling that architects and planners



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had their own agenda, informed by the Charter of Athens and the values of MRU, and imposed with little or no regard to local sentiment, particularly to the preservation of popular landmarks. There was also a feeling that progress was too slow, that resources were being distributed unfairly between regions as well as across the region. What also emerges is the difficulty of reconciling the expectations of modernisation, urged by MRU and its architects and urbanists, with the existing fabric, however badly damaged, of the region's towns and cities. Yes, people wanted progress, but they also demanded the retention of the familiar, a contradiction to be seen across Europe. Yet how could the region's urban areas, so often a chaotic product of haphazard growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century be transformed, if not by sweeping away the indiscriminate muddle of housing and industry in ruined town centres, creating new streets and clearing overcrowded slums to build new housing further out of town?

Sadly, the evidence presented in the book would speak far more clearly if the work of reconstruction was properly illustrated. Basic plans showing the proposals and photographs to show the contrast between the old and the new are needed, not as visual decoration to the text, but as central to the arguments presented in the essays; how else can we understand the striking »modernity« of Vivien's four blocks on the quai Gambetta or the resentment felt at Tambuté's design for the Calais place des Armes? Quite reasonably, the editors explain in the introduction that including illustrations with the text would make the book too expensive, but could there not be a link to an expanded version of the images already established on the useful website created by Alexandre Pazgrat and Rudy Havez<sup>1</sup>?

By focusing on one of the regions that suffered most in World War II, this book (and the invaluable bibliographies on reconstruction both locally and nationally) makes an important addition to our understanding of the complexities and challenges of reconstruction. But what of France's other regions? The book presents not just a vivid picture of reconstruction in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, but a generous challenge to other regions to document the way in which reconstruction was to serve as the springboard for the coming transformation of France during the Trente Glorieuses.



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<sup>1</sup> Rudy Havez, Alexandre Pazgrat, La seconde grande reconstruction dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais, <http://lareconstructiondunpdc.univ-artois.fr/>, Arras (Univ. d'Artois) n.d.