

Thibault Tellier, Humaniser le béton. Les origines de la politique de la ville en France (1969–1983), Paris (L’Harmattan) 2022, 454 p. (Historiques. Série Travaux), ISBN 978-2-343-25506-4, EUR 42,00.

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This book traces the story of the transition in France between the late 1960s and early 1980s from technocratic modernist social housing and planning towards a more »humanist«, ultimately conservationist and postmodernist approach. Written by a leading specialist in 20th-century French urban history and grounded in a wealth of in-depth archival research (itemised in detail at the end of the book), the book provides an authoritative and comprehensive chronological account of a crucial decade and a half of transition in both the political, social and cultural discourses of urban life, and in the reflection and implementation of those discourses in French public and governmental policy.

Very noticeable from the perspective of a reviewer with a specialism in built environment history is the fact that this book emphatically does not fall into that category, even though the physical fabric of the city is a constant background presence within its account, and numbers of specific *grands ensembles* (mass housing schemes on city peripheries) are mentioned in some detail. Other than a highly pertinent and amusing (but undated) cartoon on the front cover, there is not a single illustration in the entire book, and thus it could be argued that a second, parallel publication might be useful, tracing the built-form narrative as it shifted from the CIAM high modernism of vast slab blocks in vast open peri-urban spaces, to a more postmodern and intensely »urban« approach – culminating in the monumental projects of Ricardo Bofill, above all »Les Espaces d’Abraxas« (1978–1982) at Noisy-le-Grand, Marne-la-Vallée.

But although the book’s exclusive focus on ideological and administrative affairs gives it in some ways a restricted focus, what it loses in breadth, it resoundingly gains in depth and in intellectual-cum-political insightfulness. Its analysis is divided into three sections, each focusing intensely on a short period of ideological and policy debate. Part 1 covers a decisive phase of questioning of the *grand ensemble* model, and the squeezing out of its middle-class strand, between 1971 and 1973: these policy developments built logically on the previous housing reforms introduced by Albin Chalandon after his appointment as Minister of Equipment in 1968, and which culminated in the decree of 1973 by the new Minister of Equipment and Housing, Olivier Guichard, that new *grands ensembles* were henceforth banned. Part 2 covers the further shift in climate between 1973 and 1977, in which a new »public politics« of urban organisation began to emerge; and Part 3 takes the story onwards to the early 1980s, showing how the



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growing fear of immigration-linked social unrest in suburbs of Lyon and elsewhere culminated in the reforms that coincided with the accession of Mitterrand to power in 1981, including the declaration of a new *politique de la ville*, and the establishment of a National Commission for the Social Development of Neighbourhoods (CNDSQ) chaired by Grenoble deputy mayor Hubert Dubedout.

For a non-French reviewer, what is vividly spotlighted in this exhaustive account is the extraordinary continuity and resilience of certain key policymaking themes and »mentalities« within French post-war housing and development policy, a continuity made possible above all by the integration of elevated intellectual discourses and social ideals into government policymaking. That integration was hugely enhanced by the overarching prestige of the central state in France – not only during the Trente Glorieuses of the mid-40s to mid-70s but, as this book resoundingly demonstrates, on into the decades that followed. As previously first sketched out for Anglophone readers in Kenny Cupers's book »The Social Project – Housing Postwar France« (2014), the overwhelming concern of this policy tradition was to foster a more »humanist« model of housing, at first by reforming the *grands ensembles* and then by shifting gradually away from them altogether – but the centrality of elevated discourses of social life within mass housing remained undiminished.

As Tellier rightly remarks, the 1957 creation by Paris Construction and Urbanism Commissioner (and Minister of Construction in 1958–1962) Pierre Sudreau of a research committee on social life in *grands ensembles*, shared fundamental values with Dubedout's reforms of 1981/1982, notably a conviction that the *grands ensembles* had been developed in a crude and even inhuman way and required a new type of »urban animation«. That conviction was, equally, echoed by architectural innovators such as Emile Aillaud and embodied in late-modernist *grands ensembles* such as Aillaud's curvaceous »La Grande Borne«, Grigny (1967–1971), or the agglomerative, somewhat megastructural early phases of Evry New Town.

This grand continuity of elite central policy intellectualism contrasted sharply with the more convulsive course of mass housing policy in other major European countries, as seen for example in the West German aftermath of the 1982–1986 collapse of »Neue Heimat«, or the conservation-fuelled rejection of high-rise blocks and the Thatcherite crushing of »council housing« in Britain. In all Anglophone countries an additional factor was the intimate interconnection of mass housing and aggressive inner-city »slum-clearance«, and the relative rarity of huge city-periphery developments that predominated in France and many other European countries – including not least the USSR.

Overall, then – despite the relatively short period it covers, and despite its downplaying of built-environment aspects of its topic – »Humaniser le béton«, with its exhaustive supporting archival sources and subtly-interwoven narrative themes, provides an



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indispensable building-block in the construction of a pan-European account of the move away from »high modernism« towards new concepts of more intense and »human« urbanism in the postmodernist period.

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