
The *Grands Ensembles*

Fifty Years of French Political Fiction

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Fifty Years of French Political Fiction

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The engineer, cartographer, painter, architect, playwright, and poet, all engaged in their individual activities, offer their image and meaning to the world. They extract from it its true reality within the representation they give of it.¹

Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* (1973)

- 1 From the windows of the Ministère de l'Écologie, du Développement Durable et de l'Énergie (Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development, and Energy), one can see the Tours Nuages of Émile Aillaud with their faded colors.² At first glance, there doesn't seem to be anything particularly fictional about these *grands ensembles*, or large-scale high-rise housing projects, erected by the ministry's predecessors.³ And yet these tons of concrete and thousands of HLM (low-cost housing) apartments are vital elements of a narrative of the rise and fall of French urban policy in the second half of the twentieth century.
- 2 The *grands ensembles* are widely regarded as the quintessential products of postwar French government policy in the areas of regional and urban planning. These essential icons of the *Trente Glorieuses* and their "shining legend of modernization triumphant"⁴ were the subject of carefully crafted media campaigns from the very beginning. As early as 1945, the government recognized that control over imagery was an indispensable component of its large-scale reconstruction projects, and it established internal photography and cinematography departments to promote and defend its policies. The approach survived as the policies changed: in the context of subsequent

periods and institutions, photography has been called upon to depict the failure of the social housing effort or cast it as a vital part of the country's architectural heritage.

- 3 These photographs must be analyzed, not just in terms of how they depict the *grands ensembles*, but more importantly in light of the different purposes for which they have been used in the course of the past fifty years. In this essay, I follow W. J. T. Mitchell in regarding representation of the landscape as a medium rather than a genre: "It asks that we think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed."⁵ While its meaning may be influenced by its form, it is only truly determined by its use. The image forms part of the implementation of a discourse; it is an integral part of a media strategy that weaves text and image together into a specific staging, be it the graphic layout of a publication or the design of an exhibition. The image is harnessed to a use that may be characterized as "projective;"⁶ it is a means for naturalizing a fiction grounded in a specific context of utterance—or rather multiple fictions in several different periods. The institutional iconography to be considered here, with its combination of aerial and ground-level views, black and white and color, chemistry and pixels, initially supported the notion of a visionary state, seen as the builder of ideal modern housing complexes. It later accompanied a critical reversal in which that program was denounced as a disembodied policy leading to the gradual disintegration of these structures and ultimately their—figurative and literal—implosion at the end of the century. The historiographic work on the *grands ensembles* that began twenty years ago sought to abstract from these narratives, all equally compelling, and to view them, no longer as the vanguards of modernization or as "disgusting dinosaurs,"⁷ but as historical objects. This approach eventually culminated in the recognition of these structures as part of the national cultural heritage in a gesture that drew once again on images and their formal power, in this case to justify turning them into monuments. The analysis presented here revisits the history of the *grands ensembles*, building on previous studies to view them from a new perspective, that of the media, and more specifically that of institutional photographic production.

The Invention of the *Grands Ensembles*

- 4 In any study of the *grands ensembles*, the first challenge is to identify this architectural object whose contours are as clear as they are ill-defined. Although the term is in general use today, its definition is by no means an easy task. The expression itself did not represent a clearly identified category of urban or administrative action. Paradoxically, its first official use, in the "Circulaire Guichard" (or "Guichard Circular") of 1973,⁸ accompanied the announcement that the government would now be abandoning the policy that had originally given rise to these structures. However, while not a part of official parlance, the expression was used by those in government, and in 1953 it was employed by Adrien Spinetta, Director of Construction for the Ministère de la Reconstruction (Ministry of Reconstruction), in an article for the journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (or *Architecture Today*).⁹ Its subsequent spread attests to the unified perception of a policy that was actually developed "piecemeal,"¹⁰ as the product of uncoordinated and highly disparate operations. This variety makes itself felt quite clearly whenever the attempt is made to strictly delimit the notion. This is how geographer Yves Lacoste tackles the problem in 1963:

The *grand ensemble* thus appears as a *unified* and relatively autonomous complex of apartment buildings constructed in a relatively short period of time, according to a comprehensive plan that, roughly speaking, calls for more than a thousand units. Theoretically excluded from these true *grands ensembles*—true because *explicitly intended as such*—are the many inorganic conglomerates formed by the accidental or intentional coalescence of multiple smaller adjacent pieces of real estate.¹¹

- 5 In the end, the term “grands ensembles” came to be applied without distinction to any complex characterized by an architecture of towers and slabs and that also consists of rental units and meets certain criteria of location and size. In competition with other terms such as “gratte-ciel de banlieue,” or “suburban skyscraper,” which was borrowed from the United States; “ville nouvelle” (“new city”), which was proposed in the 1960s (and designates another moment in the history of urban planning);¹² “grande opération” (“major operation,” proposed by Claudius Petit in 1950); “nouvel ensemble urbain” (“new urban complex”), “nouvel ensemble d’habitation” (“new housing complex”), “cité neuve” (“new social housing complex”), and “grand bloc” (“large block”),¹³ or “ville satellite” (“satellite city”), “ville-champignon” (“mushroom” or “boomtown”), and “mille fenêtres” (“a thousand windows”), which were used in the media, it gradually became established as the generally accepted term. From the mid-1950s on, it became as prevalent in the pages of trade journals as on the walls of the Salon des Arts Ménagers (Ideal Home Exhibition, 1955).
- 6 The term no doubt owed its success to the fact that in addition to being in tune with the times it was also easy to use. No need to master the sometimes arcane language of administrative acronyms to identify the object in question, which was distinguished “by its implacably alien character and its isolation in the landscape and in representations.”¹⁴ Moreover, its rhapsodic quality was in line with the spirit of the period. For the history of the *grands ensembles* is inextricably linked to that of the *Trente Glorieuses*, the mythical period of France’s march toward modernization after the Second World War. The widely shared view of these years, embodied in the expression coined by Jean Fourastié in 1979¹⁵ and broadly accepted since, is that of an age of consensus surrounding the benefits of scientific and technological progress. Current historical analysis, however, has qualified this picture, emphasizing the constructed and artificial character of that heroic narrative.¹⁶ The picture of a visionary, innovative, avant-garde state is largely the product of a concerted public relations effort mounted after the fact by those who implemented the policy, lending a mythical sheen to a chain of events that was initially quite chaotic.¹⁷ This narrative of a golden age of centralized and unlimited technocratic power was linked very early on to the “constructive imagination”¹⁸ of a state fully invested first in the policy of reconstruction and then in that of regional planning. Here again, intentions and practices seem to have collaborated to fashion a modified narrative of the historical sequence of the postwar period, in which architects, intellectuals, and politicians are seen as unanimous in their enthusiastic embrace of the modern ideal.¹⁹ In order to promote construction projects unprecedented in their ambition, the city of the past was depicted as monstrous, ravaged by “la lèpre pavillonnaire” or “the plague of single-family houses”—that is, the uncontrolled proliferation of small unrelated structures—and “deeply pathogenic,”²⁰ scourges that stood in glaring contrast to a new functional urbanism governed by rationality. This godlike vision then found expression in these monumental structures, symbols of the state’s power, which were universally referred to as “grands ensembles,” a term as abstract as it is absolute.

- 7 The discourse of a break with the past, which made it possible to showcase the boldness of the undertaking, concealed the formal and intellectual connection between the projects of the period and ideas and experiments of the years before the war.²¹ In fact, while the analysis of the invention of this mythology of the *grands ensembles* clearly belongs to that of the *Trente Glorieuses*, it nonetheless requires us to expand our chronological framework. Maurice Rotival is generally credited with having coined the expression in an article in the journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* from 1935 (fig. 1).²² This genesis of the term reveals the ideological basis of the representation, which is linguistic as well as visual. Rotival was seeking to theorize a modern urbanism by developing a progressive set of reflections based on the Charter of Athens.²³



FIG. 1. PAGES 56 AND 57 OF *L'ARCHITECTURE D'AUJOURD'HUI*, VOL. 1, NO. 6 (JUNE 1935), ARTICLE BY M. ROTIVAL, "LES GRANDS ENSEMBLES."

- 8 His argument rests on a critical description of a "photographic map" of the classical city, which gradually leads to a stroll through the modern city of the future:

We hope to one day exit cities like Paris not just via the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, the only truly superior feature of the Parisian urban landscape, without which the city itself could not exist, but also through Belleville, Charonne, Bobigny, etc., and find great shining residential complexes, well situated and standing in bright sunlight, harmoniously arranged along wide highways surrounded by large wooded areas, parks, and stadiums.²⁴

- 9 The visual aspect of this description is associated with a rich iconography combining plans, models, and photographs. While it was not unusual for photographs to appear in the journal's pages, their inclusion suggests a desire to signal the progress of the modern movement.²⁵ In keeping with the internationalism of its editorial line, various examples of radical European architecture stand alongside the French structures, which include the Cité de la Muette in Drancy (1931–1935). This complex, designed by the architects Marcel Lods and Eugène Baudouin, who are presented as pioneers, is singled out for especially lavish photographic coverage, combining aerial and pedestrian views. The forward-looking aspect of the discourse is accompanied by a "projective" use of the images. The aim of the media strategy combining text and

images is to highlight the promise of this modern architecture, despite the fact that it has not yet been realized in practice. The images thus give substance to the modernist “ideal” in a staging that combines the possibilities of photographic composition with the suggestive power of words. The caption of the final photograph exemplifies this dynamic: “Urban housing surrounded by greenery. But this ideal picture could only be obtained by taking the photograph from a neighboring field” (fig. 2). Far from being a tool for bearing witness to reality, here the image is used to propose a new dimension of the built environment and helps to construct a modern fiction.



Fig. 2. PAGE 72 OF *L'ARCHITECTURE D'AUJOURD'HUI*, VOL. 1, NO. 6 (JUNE 1935), ARTICLE BY M. ROTIVAL, "LES GRANDS ENSEMBLES."

A Modern Fiction

- 10 In 1944, when the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism) was created within the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République (Provisional Government of the Republic), its mandate was threefold: to reconstruct the building stock destroyed in the war, to confront the population explosion, and to gradually reduce the amount of poor and substandard housing.²⁶ By the 1950s, this ambition, together with the progressive industrialization of the construction sector, led to a shift toward a more collective orientation and the construction of the *grands ensembles*. This orientation was thus the result of economic as well as technical considerations, but it was also heavily influenced by the urban policy adopted under the leadership of Eugène Claudius-Petit beginning in 1948.²⁷ To understand how this policy was communicated to the public, one must consider the horizon of expectations of those who devised it. The discourse they adopted was based on the theses of the progressive movement in architecture combined with arguments that frequently refer to the society of the future.²⁸ Far from being confined to the design of new buildings, the aim was to radically rethink how the city was organized. Idealizing rationality, they aspired to design a space that would be adapted to

contemporary humanity conceived as a universal ideal type, which they sought to provide with a hygienic and harmonious living environment based on a separation of functions (living, working, leisure, and circulation), organized in a geometric pattern.



FIG. 3. H. SALESSE, "PARIS, GRAND PALAIS, SALON DES ARTS MÉNAGERS [IDEAL HOME EXHIBITION], MARCH 1955," COLL. MINISTRY OF TERRITORIAL EQUALITY AND HOUSING / MINISTRY OF ECOLOGY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND ENERGY.

- 11 This modern vision laid the foundations for the urban policy promoted in the early postwar period, which was supported by an extensive visual production—cinematographic²⁹ as well as photographic—on the part of the relevant government departments.³⁰ Designed to “convince [viewers] of the need for new construction and to demonstrate the merits of a new city planning approach,”³¹ the images were widely disseminated to the public: exhibitions and traveling movie theaters carried the gospel of modernization to every corner of the country. In them, the *grands ensembles* are presented as the concrete harbingers of a city conceived and intended for humanity, ideal residential complexes in which one finds the importance attached to sun, space, and greenery by the modernist credo. All of this constitutes a clear orientation that emerges especially clearly in the staging of the photographs at the Salons des Arts Ménagers (Ideal Home Exhibitions) in the 1950s, the privileged vehicles for communicating this “comprehensive plan for happiness”³² to the public. There, visitors are greeted by the sight of children enjoying the newly constructed playgrounds of these “radiant cities” (fig. 3), followed by large panels checkered with images in which views of the clean-lined buildings alternate with photographs of cloudless skies (fig. 4).



FIG. 4. H. SALESSE, "PARIS, GRAND PALAIS, SALON DES ARTS MÉNAGERS [IDEAL HOME EXHIBITION], MARCH 1955," COLL. MINISTRY OF TERRITORIAL EQUALITY AND HOUSING / MINISTRY OF ECOLOGY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND ENERGY.

- 12 These same scenes of everyday life can be seen in the pages of the trade journals, where they rub shoulders with shots of the buildings as well as plans and models. An example is the double-page spread which opens the special report on "Les Grands Chantiers" ("The Major Construction Projects") in an issue of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* from 1953 (fig. 5), or another depicting the *grand ensemble* of Sarcelles, the iconic image of the period, in a 1959 issue of the journal *Urbanisme* (fig. 6) entirely devoted to the *grands ensembles* and illustrated with photographs from the ministry. The "graphic strategy"³³ of these page layouts is typical as well. Combining views from the ground and views from above, the buildings are pictured in such a way as to emphasize their forms, accentuating their clean lines and vast dimensions.



Fig. 5. PAGES 30 AND 31 OF *L'ARCHITECTURE D'AUJOURD'HUI*, NO. 46 (1953).

- 13 The impulse behind these photographs was technical as well as symbolic. As Hélène Jannière points out, these anthropometric portraits or “mugshots” of the structures, which are shown in front view as well as in profile, initially echoed the traditional approach to representing architecture. Panoramic views avoided the distortions caused by monocular perspective, producing photographs that resembled geometric drawings.
- 34 But it was above all the pervasiveness of aerial views that most strongly impressed contemporary viewers, because of their relative novelty.

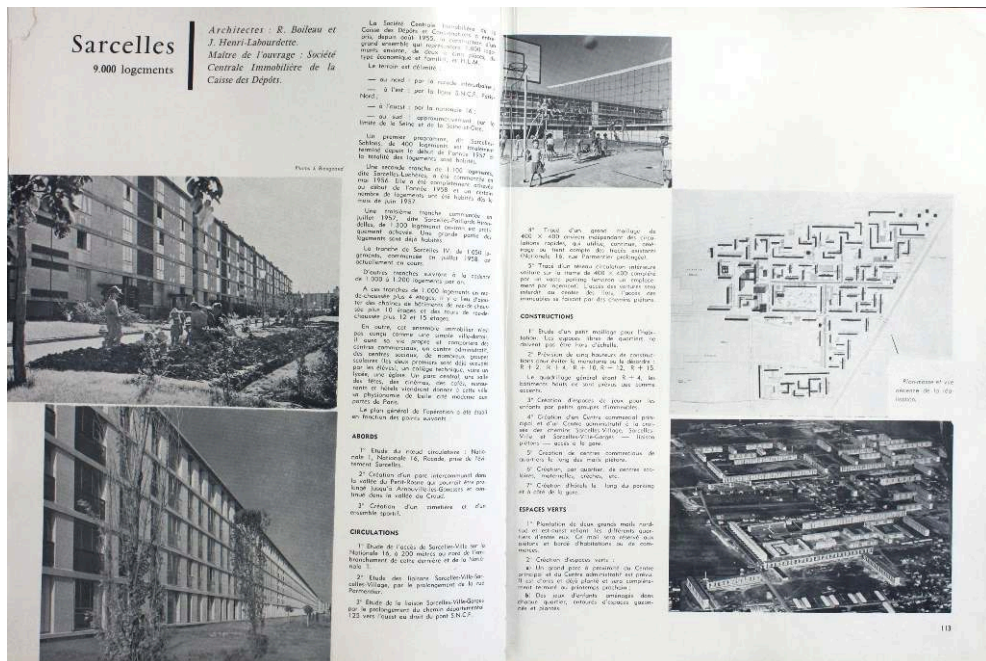


Fig. 6. PAGES 112 AND 113 OF *URBANISME*, NO. 62-63 (1959), PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. BIAUGAUD.

- 14 Providing a literally heroic vision of the terrain when first introduced, the aerial view derived its appeal and its fascination from the vantage point it offered the viewer. A “magical quality”³⁵ that earned it great popularity. The aerial photograph gradually lost its status as the document of a daring exploit and entered the pages of trade as well as mainstream publications.³⁶ In the early 1950s, its merits are explicitly touted in the journal *Urbanisme*,³⁷ which also mentions the abundance of such views in the ministry’s collections. Indeed, the distance it permits from the subject became the instrument of a strategic vision.³⁸ As early as 1935, in his book *Aircraft*, Le Corbusier bases his denunciation of urban chaos and his case for modernizing the city on aerial photographs:

For the bird’s-eye view has enabled us to see our cities and the countries which surround them, and the sight is not good . . .

The airplane is an indictment.

It indicts the city.

It indicts those who control the city.

By means of the airplane, we now have proof, recorded on the photographic plate, of the rightness of our desire to alter methods of architecture and town-planning.³⁹

- 15 Because it offered a clearly readable image of the terrain, aerial photography was embraced before the war as an ideal tool for urban planning. It was used in two different ways. The first is purely cartographic and involves adopting a vertical viewpoint. The space is depicted in its entirety and looks like a map with no relief. The second is more specifically architectural and involves the adoption of an oblique perspective. This is the approach of special interest to us, since it conveys information about the built environment while also staging it in a spectacular manner. The virtually unanimous preference for oblique views in the promotion of the *grands ensembles* was no doubt due to the fact that it made it possible to capture these complexes in their entirety, highlighting their overall structure while also providing an apparent legibility for uninformed viewers. Most importantly, however, the use of this vantage point opened up a new space of the gaze. The distinguishing feature of oblique views is that they combine topography and perspective within a single image, the former being associated with geometric operations of measurement, the latter with figurative operations of representation.⁴⁰ This position midway between description and narration helps to tell a visual story in which, in the words of Louis Marin, “the utopic figure of the city” begins to emerge.⁴¹ In contrast to the vertical or geometric view, which presents the picture of an “ideal” city, the perspectival view makes it possible to inscribe that utopia in real spaces. It presents the project of the modern city as a reality, giving it substance by installing it within the terrain of the contemporary world.
- 16 The oblique view became very closely associated with the representation of the *grands ensembles*, not only in official photographs and in images appearing in trade journals but because the vantage point was widely adopted by the culture industry of the postcard. Yet the implications of this perspective were not univocal. The height from which the photographs are taken, combined with the photograph’s inherent tendency toward foreshortening and the absence of a horizon, which interferes with the perception of scale, lead to a rereading of the buildings as sculptural masses. This simplified picture, coupled with the view overlooking the structures, is somewhat reminiscent of the cognitive function assigned to the observer by scale models.⁴² Precisely this resemblance alluded to by minister Pierre Sudreau in 1960, when he

described certain projects as “excellent models or noteworthy competition entries.”⁴³ A comment that is actually a criticism, in which the view from above is associated with a position of power, invoked to suggest the godlike position adopted by those who built the *grands ensembles*.

- 17 As the years passed and the discourse surrounding the *grands ensembles* evolved, aerial views thus accompanied the most laudatory articles as well as the most scathing attacks. Hence the photographs were harnessed to different “projective” uses, their meaning shaped by the media strategy to serve the policy interest of the moment. They were successively symbols of the (re)constructive power of the state and of the development of a managerial and disembodied vision.

A Technocratic Vision

- 18 The early 1960s marked a decisive turning point in the discourse surrounding the *grands ensembles*. Previously cast as the glorious achievements of a nation turned toward the future, they now became symbols of a planner state intoxicated with its power. The targets of this critique were both the excesses of the “new architectural academicism”⁴⁴ of these mass housing complexes marked by monotony and uniformity and social problems caused by their lack of infrastructure. The polemic began in 1959 with the publication in *L'Habitation* no. 72 of studies by four experts decrying the evil of the *grands ensembles*. It continued with a series of articles on the same theme in general-interest magazines, likening the structures to “rabbit cages”⁴⁵ and lamenting “the madness of the *grands ensembles*.”⁴⁶ Almost paradoxically, the government did not seek to distance itself from this criticism. Far from defending the policies of his predecessors, in August 1959 Minister of Construction Pierre Sudreau evoked the “the overly gigantic scale of certain structures” and the associated planning excesses:

The point, for the architects, is not to please themselves by developing an *a priori* aesthetic.

The point, for the engineers, is not blind faith in the primacy of a technology that becomes oppressive as soon as they forget that its primary mission is to serve.

The point, for the state, is not to make quantity and “affordability” the be-all and end-all, since houses are not built solely for the day of their inauguration.

The point is to remain at the scale of man, whom one does not have the right to crush or to violate in the belief that one is prefabricating his happiness... along with his house.⁴⁷

- 19 In an issue that same year of the journal *Urbanisme*, which effectively served as a platform for Pierre Sudreau, the latter presented the findings of the Commission de la Vie dans les Grands Ensembles (Committee on Life in the Grands Ensembles) formed in 1957 and insisted that from this point forward “the projects undertaken will essentially be in the service of humanity. In a word, technology will be subordinated to human beings.”⁴⁸ A position that Annie Fourcaut describes as “schizophrenic”,⁴⁹ since the building programs actually proceeded without any genuine questioning of their fundamental principles, be it their collective orientation, their use of heavy fabrication, their exclusive dependence on concrete, their vast dimensions, or their preference for a single planner.

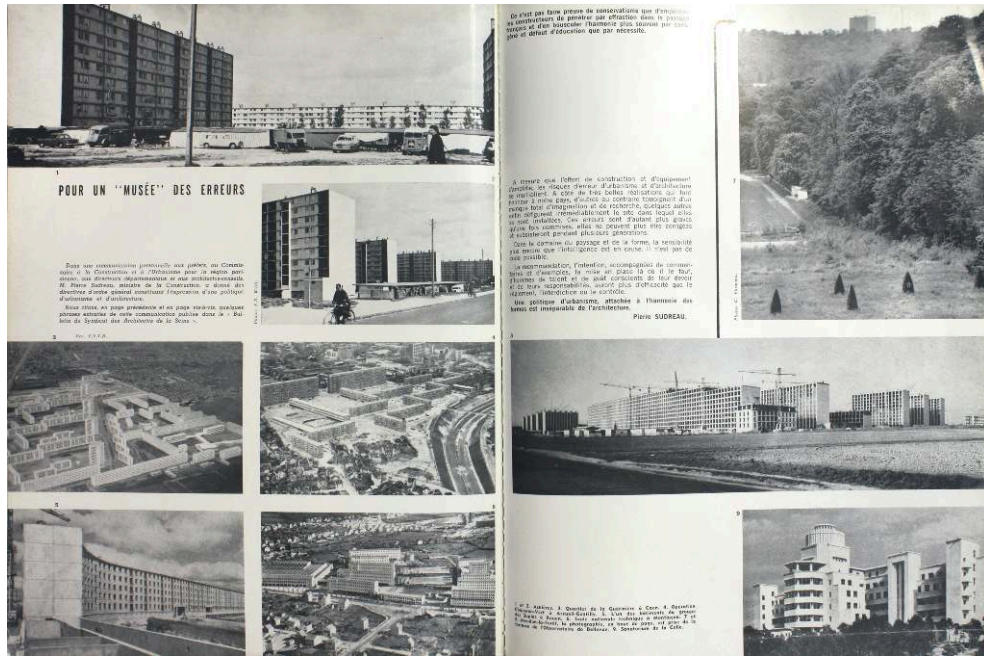


Fig. 7. Pages 10 and 11 of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 95 (1961), article by P. Sudreau, "Pour un musée des erreurs" ("For a Museum of Errors").

- 20 Aerial views, which had previously held out the promise of a new city, thus became exhibits in the case against the *grands ensembles* through an inversion of their "projective" use, of the imaginary construct to which they were harnessed. They were now tangible evidence of the distant and dehumanizing outlook of reconstruction's authors and belonged in the "museum of mistakes" evoked by the minister himself in 1961 in the pages of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (fig. 7). As if to corroborate that judgment, the article in that same issue on living conditions at Sarcelles, which denounces "a dreary life from which no escape is possible" (fig. 8),⁵⁰ is primarily illustrated by ground-level or at least clearly situated shots by photographer Jacques Windenberger. Here, then, the aerial view is seen as being complicit in the development of a state-based approach to urban planning unilaterally imposed on anonymous territories and blind to the resulting social problems, which can only be perceived on the ground.



Fig. 7. Pages 10 and 11 of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 95 (1961), article by P. Sudreau, "Pour un musée des erreurs" ("For a Museum of Errors").

- 21 A formal opposition which is actually the product of a cultural construction. Jeanne Haffner's analysis of the use of these two different types of representation enables us to relativize their formal and conceptual opposition in favor of a complementary sense of their relationship. "The view from above, in fact, gave rise to the view from below."⁵¹ Haffner points out the link between the emergence of the notion of social space and the use of aerial photography in early twentieth-century work on human geography and ethnography, and later in the work of researchers like Paul Chombart de Lauwe and Robert Auzelle after the Second World War. The latter posited the importance of everyday life practices in producing social space and sought to demonstrate their thesis with large-scale surveys for the Ministry of Reconstruction in the 1950s.⁵² They favored an empirical approach to the terrain supported by the simultaneous use of visual techniques: maps, views from the ground, and views from the sky. Thus, the proponents of a social approach were also the first champions of the potential of this new way of apprehending the physical world.⁵³
- 22 In the 1960s and '70s, the aerial view was discredited by thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Guy Debord, and Michel De Certeau in the name of this very same social approach. Certeau developed the rhetoric of an irreconcilable conflict between a view from above, the expression of an "all-seeing power" and the "exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive," and the everyday life practices which can only be observed on the ground.⁵⁴ This critical reversal becomes understandable if one places this perception of the aerial view in a broader cultural context. While overflights were primarily used for reconnaissance purposes in the "war to end all wars," in the late 1940s they came to be associated with the deadly bombing raids of World War II, which continued in France in the turbulent context of the Algerian War. Metaphorically, the vertical perspective thus became the symbol of an inhuman destructive power.
- 23 It is worth pointing out that, while the opposition between ground-based and aerial views becomes an enduring fixture of the visual culture, the aerial perspective is not

always cast as the negative term. It is praised, for example, by geographers Pierre Deffontaines and Mariel J. Bruhnes Delamarre in their famous *Atlas Aérien de la France* (*Aerial Atlas of France*) published between 1955 and 1964, in which they oppose the view from above to a “linear [view] along the ground,” which they roundly reject: “the source of constant distortions in one’s observations,” it “submerges the traveler in an individual feature of the landscape” and prevents any global overarching perception.⁵⁵ This view is then echoed by Olivier Guichard, the government’s delegate for regional planning, who in 1965 asserts that “flying over [the landscape] in an airplane or better still a helicopter” is the only way to ascertain “the exact dimensions of things.”⁵⁶ This commitment to the aerial perspective then became the basis for the visual culture of the leading figures of regional planning, which was dominated by this “cartographic” representation in the 1960s and ‘70s.

- 24 In fact, while the increased popularity of the pedestrian view in the 1980s, in particular thanks to the Mission Photographique de la DATAR (DATAR Photographic Mission), was regarded as a conceptual break, it actually echoed practices early in the century, especially the pioneering use of photography by officials of the Service de Restauration des Terrains de Montagne (Department for the Restoration of Mountain Territory),⁵⁷ practices that continued in the photographic department of the postwar ministries. The return of the pedestrian view in the early 1980s was linked to the emergence of a new concern with the landscape and the adoption of a “sensitive” approach to spatial planning.⁵⁸ On this occasion, the senior member of the project, Robert Doisneau, returned to the scene of an earlier chapter in his career and walked the outskirts of Paris. At the end of the war, his black-and-white photographs had depicted picturesque suburbs of narrow cobbled streets and free-standing homes. Forty years later,⁵⁹ he used color film and a large-format camera to depict a territory that had now become unrecognizable, bristling with modern *grands ensembles*. His compositions, which omit human figures and focus on structures, are organized around effects of scale and relations of planes and surfaces. It should be noted that there is a formal resemblance between Doisneau’s images and those of the ministry’s photographers, who also strolled among the *grands ensembles*. Like them, Robert Doisneau plays with the masses and volumes, voids and solids created by the structures. However, his approach was not intended as a scathing critique of this architecture (which is nonetheless rejected) but betrays a desire to restore these gaudy-colored buildings to favor (*fig. 9*).⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Doisneau’s photographic statements remained isolated exceptions among the many photographs that focused on suburbs blighted by deterioration and ruin.

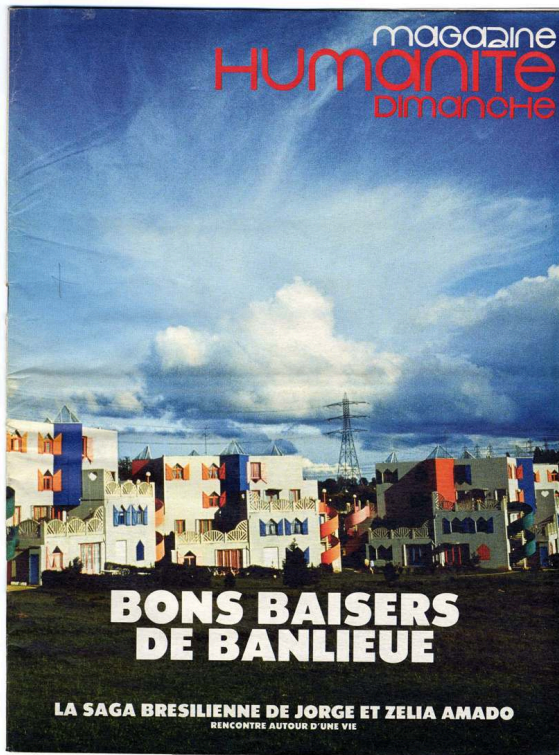


Fig. 9. Cover of *L'Humanité Dimanche*, November 1–4, 1985, photograph by R. Doisneau, series “Banlieue d’Aujourd’hui: Dans les banlieues et les villes nouvelles de la région parisienne” (“The Suburbs Today: In the Suburbs and New Cities of the Paris Region”), Mission Photographique de la DATAR, 1984–1988, coll. studio of Robert Doisneau.

Ruins and National Heritage Sites

- 25 After the era of reconstruction and that of disfavor came the era of ruins. In 1973, the Circulaire Guichard⁶¹ officially called a halt to “the forms of urbanization generally known as ‘grands ensembles’” and marked the beginning of the implementation of the “politique de la ville,” a policy aimed at revitalizing troubled urban areas. Once again, photographs closely accompanied these efforts to “humanize the concrete”⁶² in the 1970s and ‘80s, here too in an effort to document and legitimate a state intervention now based on the general consensus that the *grands ensembles* had been a failure. They were perceived as the source of all the ills of the contemporary city, as responsible for a social breakdown stemming from lack of infrastructure and geographic isolation. Initially, the state chose to embark on a broad renovation effort in light of the deteriorated condition of a certain amount of social housing in the 1970s. To justify it, government departments produced color photographs documenting the decay of these urban complexes and the physical deterioration of their buildings and exposing the “mal-être” (or “malaise”) of the suburbs. In this radiant city gone to seed, children played beside stripped, burned-out cars that littered the former green spaces: the modernist dream was systematically demolished (fig. 10).



Fig. 10. B. Suard, "Bobigny, cité de l'Abreuvoir (architecte Émile Aillaud), 1500 logements, octobre 1984" ("Bobigny, Cité de l'Abreuvoir (Émile Aillaud, architect), 1500 apartments, October 1984"), coll. Ministry of Territorial Equality and Housing / Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development, and Energy.

- 26 In the late 1980s, this demolition ceased to be metaphorical and became a reality. The destruction of the first of these "disgusting dinosaurs"⁶³ in 1986 was widely covered by the media, including newspapers and television. The implosion of the Debussy building of the Cité des 4000 in La Courneuve was turned into a vast spectacle. The structure was dynamited in an effort to wipe from the urban landscape what was regarded at the time as the stigmata of the urban policy mistakes of the past. When the attempt was made to trace the slow disintegration of the housing projects in close-up, at the foot of the towers, the staging of their disappearance echoed that of their construction. The building is isolated as a mass, presented as a gigantic, geometric hulk that stands out sharply against the horizon by adopting a panoramic or perspectival vantage point (fig. 11). The images are harnessed to a projective aim based on overturning the myth; they deconstruct the modern fiction on its own iconographic terrain.



FIG. 11. G. CROSSAY, "CITÉ DES 4000, DÉMOLITION DE L'IMMEUBLE DEBUSSY, 18 FÉVRIER 1986" ("CITÉ DES 4000, DEMOLITION OF THE DEBUSSY BUILDING, FEBRUARY 18, 1986"), COLL. MINISTRY OF TERRITORIAL EQUALITY AND HOUSING / MINISTRY OF ECOLOGY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND ENERGY.

- 27 Now in ruins, the *grands ensembles* went on to be designated as national cultural heritage sites at the turn of the century. In reality, the process was not a linear one, and there were sharp differences of opinion on what should be done. Initially, the *grands ensembles*, now that they had no future, were given a past with the emergence of a historiography devoted first to the urban and social policy of the period of reconstruction and then more specifically to modernist architecture.⁶⁴ A notable example is the research of Bruno Vayssière, which closely associates history and representations in a book richly illustrated with photographs from the ministry's collection.⁶⁵ The author argues for an end to the "collective amnesia"⁶⁶ and urges that the *grands ensembles* be acknowledged as the products of a French architecture characterized by what he calls "le *hard French*," and more generally as "the most impressive representatives of our modern culture."⁶⁷ A process of symbolic rehabilitation was then set in motion in the 1990s, sparking a debate surrounding the possible patrimonialization of these structures slated for destruction by newly established ministerial bodies, in particular the Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine (National Agency for Urban Renewal), created in the early 2000s.⁶⁸ Unlike previous policies, this one was not supported by a specific visual production. Hence it was ultimately the proponents of patrimonialization, particularly through the intervention of the Inventaire Général du Patrimoine (General Inventory of the Cultural Heritage), that the last visual representation of the *grands ensembles* to date was undertaken at the dawn of the twenty-first century.⁶⁹ This time, the task of the photographers was to document these structures for posterity. With this in mind, they were given guidelines to follow that were as precise as they were perfunctory: the photographs were to be taken from a "natural" vantage point, using natural light, and the buildings framed in such a way as to obtain a complete elevation or one seen in axial perspective.⁷⁰ The buildings were restored to their magnificence—proud, solid monoliths that occupy the frame of the image without apology. This effort to showcase the *grands ensembles* came in conflict with the urban policy being implemented

elsewhere. One incident occurred in connection with the publication in 2003 of a brochure on *Le Logement Social en Seine-Saint-Denis, 1850–1999* (Social Housing in Seine-Saint-Denis, 1850–1999),⁷¹ which was illustrated by the photographs of the Inventaire (fig. 12). The prefect refused to allow the brochure to be published, because many of its photographs of the *grands ensembles* included blue skies, an aesthetic decision he felt reflected an ideological bias.⁷²

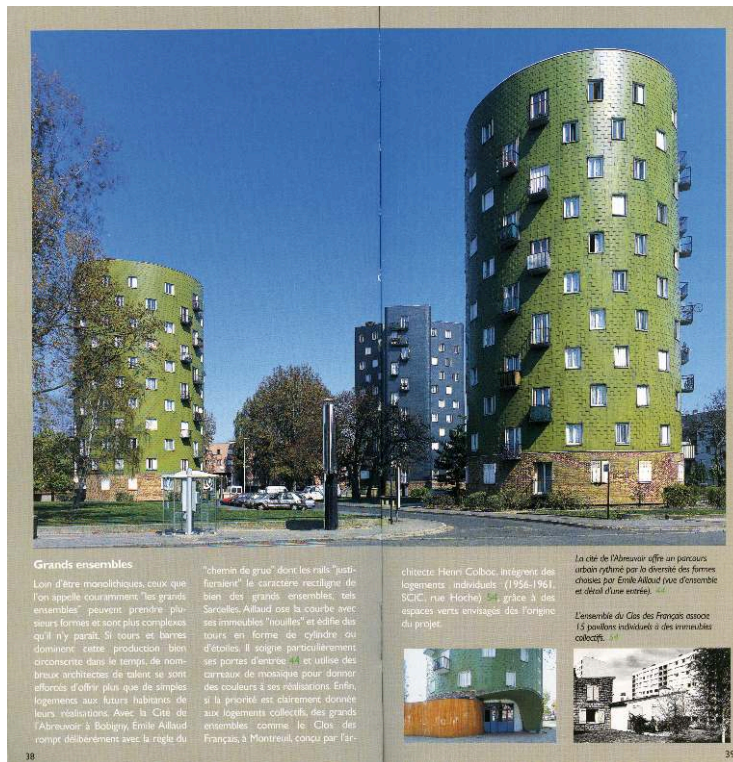


Fig. 12. Pages 38 and 39 of *Le logement social en Seine-Saint-Denis, 1850–1999*, Itinéraires du patrimoine (Social Housing in Seine-Saint-Denis, 1850–1999, Itineraries of the National Cultural Heritage, 2003), ed. G. Monnier and B. Pouvreau, photograph by S. Asseline / ADAGP 2003, "Cité de l'Abreuvoir, Bobigny (93)," coll. region of Île-de-France.

- 28 The end of the first decade of this century seemed to mark a turning point in the recognition of the historical importance of the *grands ensembles*, as evidenced by a series of events. These included the exhibition *Toit et Moi, 100 Ans de Logement Social (Roof and I: 100 Years of Social Housing)*, which incorporated these projects into an expanded chronology of the history of social housing in France,⁷³ and the rediscovery of the photographic collections of the Ministry of Reconstruction both in the context of that exhibition and through the publication *Photographies à l'œuvre. Enquêtes et chantiers de la Reconstruction, 1945–1958* (Photographs at Work: Surveys and Construction Projects of the Period of Reconstruction, 1945–1958).⁷⁴ Finally, the *grands ensembles* were celebrated as products of a singular architectural history: showcased at the French Pavilion of the Biennale d'Architecture in 2012, they were the subject of a book⁷⁵ and an exhibition⁷⁶ supported by the Ministry of Culture. In this context, the contribution of the American photographer Alex Mac Lean was accorded a place of honor both on paper and on the gallery walls (fig. 13). His work consists of striking color aerial views, the results of a commission he received in 2010. Thus, they represent the most current manifestation of this state-based visual policy and seem to bring the iconographic development full circle by reviving the glorious mythology of the "utopic figure of the city."



REGARD PHOTOGRAPHIQUE SUR NEUF SITES FRANCILIENS

Alex MacLean

Alex MacLean est un photographe américain spécialiste dans les prises de vue aériennes. Il est diplômé de l'école de photographie d'Art et d'Architecture de l'université de Paris. Il a travaillé pendant 30 ans à l'agence d'architecture et de photographie de Paris. Il a collaboré avec les architectes, les urbanistes et les médias pour créer des images qui racontent l'histoire de la ville. Ses photos ont été publiées dans des livres et des revues de renommée internationale.

La première chose qui m'est apparue c'est la grande variété d'apparences parmi les ensembles urbains que l'on m'a demandé de photographier : la diversité de Paris, la rigueur de Barcelone, l'insolence d'Israël... Bien que je sois habitué à ce genre de travail, je dois dire que l'insolence des prises de vue face à une ville diversifiée n'était pas un exercice si facile. Mais cette variété est pour moi très intéressante comparée aux logements américains post Seconde Guerre, des rangées de maisons en briques marron ou des séries de tours de couleur sans aucun détail commercial particulier et avec très peu d'effort paysager. Ces distinctions de forme sont très importantes car les différents modèles que je distingue de mon avion transforment au sol des modes de vie différents.

La seconde chose qui m'a frappé c'est l'étendue de ces territoires et l'impression de monotonie qu'ils dégagent en raison de leur nature répétitive. J'imagine que l'on peut être dégoûté de vivre dans des espaces d'une telle échelle où immeubles et matériaux paraissent dupliqués selon une symétrie intense au lieu. En même temps, cette répétition produit une grande impression d'égalité. J'aime cette notion d'égalité, mais, poussée à bout, elle fait basculer dans la monotonie et peut produire un sentiment d'ennui, d'oppression.

En tout cas la sensation que ces projets ont été dessinés avec l'intention de séparer les espaces piétons et automobiles est très présente. À Villiers-sur-Marne, on fit clairement la même parking/espace vert qui se répète d'un côté les piétons, de l'autre les automobiles. Grigny est intéressant de ce point de vue : l'automobile est reliée aux habitations, et les parkings sont établis le long de la voie rapide, ce qui donne plus de proximité pour les usagers vers à l'arrivée du complexe. Le plus impressionnant pour moi reste la vision des toits terrassés d'Ivry qui offre des espaces extérieurs adaptés pour ces immeubles de plusieurs étages.

À Nanterre, il y a pourtant un mélange évident de services de proximité et de commerces. On s'explique mal comment les gens se rassemblent et où ils vont faire leurs courses. Exception faite du marché qui occupe une longue rue de Suresnes et qui semble une bouffée d'oxygène. La bonne proximité est de réussir à créer une relation simple et directe qui rende les activités facilement accessibles aux habitants. C'est une échelle que l'on appréhende aisément avec la photographie aérienne.

Fig. 13. Pages 38 and 39 of *Les Grands Ensembles, une architecture du xx^e siècle* (*The Grands Ensembles, An Architecture of the Twentieth Century*, 2011), ed. Ministry of Culture and Communication, Éditions Dominique Carré, photograph by A. MacLean / Landslides Aerial Photography, "Tours Nuages, Nanterre (92)," 2010.

- 29 As we conclude this analysis of the institutional policies that have guided the official photographic representation of the *grands ensembles* for more than fifty years, it is apparent that there is a constant to the narrative, something that endures despite the various critical reversals that have occurred throughout the period. The *grands ensembles* remain inseparably linked to the modernist myth embraced by architects and city planners at the end of the war, a myth that is successively exalted to the skies, denigrated, and finally rehabilitated. Aerial and perspectival views give rise to a certain abstractness in the forms of these structures that embody the implementation of a social and political utopia. This vision is then given substance by the ground-level views, which either set this ideal city in motion or bear witness to its distress, accompanying at different times the glowing or disparaging discourses, encomiums or indictments. This variability in the “projective” use of these images shows how important it is to consult the discourse, the imaginary construct, to which the image is harnessed before interpreting it; there is no determinism exerted by the form of the image itself. An observation which underscores the need to place this analysis of the French state’s visual discourse in an expanded context that also includes vernacular and artistic production. Indeed, as Frédéric Pousin points out, postcards played a key role in “disseminating images of reconstruction to the general public.”⁷⁷ In addition, the *grands ensembles* have served as the backdrop for many amateur productions that look at the suburbs of the postwar period, a general overview of which is provided by the film *Ils Ont Filmé les Grands Ensembles* (*They Filmed the Grands Ensembles*) by Laurence Bazin and Marie-Catherine Delacroix (2012). Finally, quite a few photographers have turned their cameras on the towers and their residents over the decades. Especially worth noting are the works of Jacques Windenberger, Véra Cardot, and Pierre Joly, and more recently the night shots of Cyrus Cornut, the stagings of Mohamed Bourouissa,

and the more conceptual approach of Mathieu Pernot, presented in his book *Le Grand Ensemble*.⁷⁸ These representations constitute a visual history which the state visual policy discussed in this essay also helps to shape.

NOTES

1. Louis MARIN, *Utopics: Spatial Play* [1973], trans. Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1984), 207.
2. The Tours Nuages (Nanterre, Hauts-de-Seine, 92) were realized by architect Émile Aillaud between 1974 and 1981. They were designated a twentieth century cultural heritage site (Patrimoine du XX^e Siècle) in 2008.
3. Chief among those predecessors were the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism, 1944–1953), the Ministère de la Reconstruction et du Logement (Ministry of Reconstruction and Housing, 1953–1958), the Ministère de la Construction (Ministry of Construction, 1959–1966), the Ministère de l'Équipement (Ministry of Infrastructure, 1966–2007), and the Ministère du Développement Durable (Ministry of Sustainable Development, 2007 to the present).
4. Annie FOURCAUT, "Trois discours une politique?," *Urbanisme* no. 322 (January-February 2002): 39–45.
5. "It asks that we think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed"; W. J. T. MITCHELL, introduction to *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.
6. Raphaële BERTHO and Marie-Madeleine OZDOBA, "L'image dans ses usages projectifs, réflexions de synthèse," *Image projective*, September 3, 2013, <http://culturevisuelle.org/imageprojective/archives/132>.
7. Bruno VAYSSIÈRE, *Reconstruction, déconstruction: le hard french ou l'architecture française des Trente Glorieuses* (Paris: Picard, 1988), 7.
8. Circular of March 21, 1973, "relative aux formes d'urbanisation dites 'grands ensembles' et à la lutte contre la ségrégation sociale par l'habitat signée par le ministre de l'Aménagement du territoire, de l'Équipement, du Logement et du Tourisme Pierre Guichard."
9. Adrien SPINETTA, "Les grands ensembles pensés pour l'homme," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 46 (February–March 1953).
10. A. FOURCAUT, "Les grands ensembles ont-ils été conçus comme des villes nouvelles?," *Histoire urbaine* 3, no. 17 (2006): 7–25.
11. Yves LACOSTE, "Un problème complexe et débattu: les grands ensembles," *Bulletin de l'Association des géographes français* no. 318–319 (November–December 1963): 37–46, quoted in *Villes et civilisation urbaine XVIII^e–XX^e siècle*, ed. Marcel RONCAYOLO and Thierry PAQUOT (Paris: Larousse, 1992), 500–501.
12. A. FOURCAUT, "Les grands ensembles ont-ils été conçus comme des villes nouvelles?" (note 10).
13. These terms are mentioned by Christine MENGIN in his article "La solution des grands ensembles," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 64, no. 64 (1999): 105–111.
14. A. FOURCAUT, "Le cas français à l'épreuve du comparatisme," in *Le Monde des grands ensembles* (Paris: Créaphis, 2004), 15.
15. Jean FOURASTIÉ, *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

16. Christophe BONNEUIL, Céline PESSIS, Sézin TOPÇU, et al., *Une autre histoire des "Trente Glorieuses": Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d'après-guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).
17. Brigitte GAÏTI, "Les modernisateurs dans l'administration d'après-guerre, l'écriture d'une histoire héroïque," *Revue française d'administration publique* 2, no. 102 (2002): 295–306.
18. See Jean-Claude THOENIG, *L'Ère des technocrates. Le cas des Ponts-et-Chaussées* (Paris: Éditions Organisation, 1973). The term "constructive imagination" ("imaginaire bâtisseur") is borrowed from Sylvia OSTROWESKY, *L'Imaginaire bâtisseur: les villes nouvelles françaises* (Paris: Librairie des Méridiens, 1983).
19. Loïc VADELORGE, "Le Grand Paris sous la tutelle des aménageurs, Planification des usages, critiques et résistances dans les années 1960," in C. BONNEUIL, C. PESSIS, S. TOPÇU, et al., *Une autre histoire des "Trente Glorieuses"* (note 16), 117–135.
20. Jean-François GRAVIER, *Paris et le désert français* (Paris: Le Portulan, 1947).
21. A. FOURCAUT and L. VADELORGE, "Où en est l'histoire urbaine du contemporain?," *Histoire urbaine* 3, no. 32 (2011): 137–157.
22. Maurice ROTIVAL, "Les grands ensembles," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 1, no. 6 (June 1935): 57–72.
23. The Charter of Athens was adopted in 1933 at a meeting of the International Congress for Modern Architecture. Initially kept confidential, it was published in modified form by Le Corbusier in 1941 under the title *La Ville Fonctionnelle (The Functional City)* and finally released in its original version in 1958.
24. M. ROTIVAL, "Les Grands Ensembles" (note 22), 57.
25. Hélène JANNIÈRE, *Politiques éditoriales et architecture moderne: l'émergence de nouvelles revues en France et Italie (1923–1939)* (Paris: Arguments, 2002), 83.
26. See Danièle VOLDMAN, *La Reconstruction des villes françaises de 1940 à 1954: histoire d'une politique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997).
27. Benoît POUVREAU, "La politique d'aménagement du territoire d'Eugène Claudius-Petit," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* no. 79 (2003/3): 43–52.
28. L. VADELORGE, "Le Grand Paris sous la tutelle des aménageurs, Planification des usages, critiques et résistances dans les années 1960" (note 19), 123.
29. See the work of Camille CANTEUX, including *Villes rêvées, villes introuvables: histoire des représentations audiovisuelles des grands ensembles à la télévision, au cinéma et dans les films institutionnels du milieu des années 1930 au début des années 1980*, PhD diss. advised by Annie Fourcaut, Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2008.
30. See in particular Dominique GAUTHEY, "Les archives de la reconstruction (1945–1979)," *Études photographiques* no. 3 (November 1997), posted online November 13, 2002, <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/97>; and Didier MOUCHEL, "Une œuvre commune," in D. MOUCHEL and D. VOLDMAN, *Photographies à l'œuvre. Enquêtes et chantiers de la reconstruction 1945–1958* (Paris: Jeu de Paume / Le Point du Jour, 2011), 125–139.
31. D. VOLDMAN, "Le MRU, un jeune ministère à l'œuvre," in D. MOUCHEL and D. VOLDMAN, *Photographies à l'œuvre. Enquêtes et chantiers de la reconstruction 1945–1958* (note 30), 16.
32. D. GAUTHEY, "Les archives de la reconstruction (1945–1979)" (note 30).
33. H. JANNIÈRE, *Politiques éditoriales et architecture moderne: l'émergence de nouvelles revues en France et Italie (1923–1939)* (note 25), 90.
34. *Ibid.*, 86.
35. Jean-Marc BESSE, *Le Goût du monde. Exercices de paysage* (Arles: Actes Sud / ENSP, 2009), 92.
36. Thierry GERVAIS, "Un basculement du regard," *Études photographiques* no. 9 (May 2001): 89–108, posted online September 10, 2018, <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/916>.
37. B. DUBUISSON, "La photographie aérienne au service de l'urbanisme," *Urbanisme* no. 1–2 (1952): 44–46.

38. Frédéric POUSIN, "La vue aérienne au service des grands ensembles," in *Vues aériennes: seize études pour une histoire culturelle* (Paris: Metispresses, 2012), 198.
39. LE CORBUSIER, *Aircraft* (Milan: Editrice Abitare Segesta, 1996 [1935]), 11.
40. J.-M. BESSE, "Catoptique: vue à vol d'oiseau et construction géométrique," paper presented at the *journée d'études* "La Vue Aérienne: Savoirs et Pratiques de l'Espace," Paris, June 9, 2007; available online at <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/19/19/32/PDF/Catoptique.pdf>.
41. Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* (note 1), 207.
42. F. POUSIN, "La vue aérienne au service des grands ensembles" (note 38), 197–216.
43. Pierre SUDREAU, private remarks to the prefects (AN, CAC, 770775/47), quoted in "Trois discours une politique?" (note 4).
44. A. FOURCAUT, "Les grands ensembles ont-ils été conçus comme des villes nouvelles?" (note 10), 21.
45. Françoise CHOAY, "Cités-jardins ou cages à lapins?," *France observateur*, June 1959.
46. Louis CARO, "La folie des grands ensembles," *Sciences et Vie*, September 1959.
47. Interview with Pierre SUDREAU, Minister of Construction, by M. B. Champigneulle, *Le Figaro Littéraire*, August 15, 1959.
48. P. SUDREAU, "Introduction," *Urbanisme* no. 62–63 (1959).
49. A. FOURCAUT, "Trois discours une politique?" (note 4), 41.
50. P. SUDREAU, "Sarcelles," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 95 (1961): 6–9.
51. Jeanne HAFFNER, "Historicizing the View from Below: Aerial Photography and the Emergence of a Social Conception of Space," conference proceedings of "Spaces of History / Histories of Space: Emerging Approaches to the Study of the Built Environment," Berkeley, College of Environmental Design at the University of California, 2001; available online at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8p97g3x9>. See also J. HAFFNER, *The View from Above: The Science of Social Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).
52. Paul-Henry CHOMBART DE LAUWE et al., *Paris et l'agglomération parisienne: l'étude de l'espace social dans une grande cité* (Paris: PUF, 1952); and Robert AUZELLE, *Techniques de l'urbanisme, l'aménagement des agglomérations urbaines* (Paris: PUF, 1953).
53. P.-H. CHOMBART DE LAUWE, *La Découverte aérienne du monde* (Paris: Horizons de France, 1948).
54. Michel DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.
55. Pierre DEFFONTAINE and Mariel J. BRUNHES DELAMARRE, "Nouvelles visions de la Terre par avion," in *Atlas aérien*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 7.
56. Olivier GUICHARD, *Aménager la France* (Paris: Laffont, 1965), 183.
57. See Luce LEBART, "La 'restauration' des montagnes, les photographies de l'Administration des forêts dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle," *Études photographiques* no. 3 (November 1997): 82–101; and *Restaurer la montagne: photographies des eaux et forêts du XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Somogy, 2004).
58. See R. BERTHO, *La Mission photographique de la DATAR. Un laboratoire du paysage contemporain* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2013).
59. Robert DOISNEAU and Blaise CENDRARS, *La Banlieue de Paris* (Paris: Seghers, 1966).
60. For a more detailed analysis, see R. BERTHO, "L'injonction paysagère," *Territoire des images*, November 3, 2011, <http://culturevisuelle.org/territoire/211>.
61. Circular of March 21, 1973, "relative aux formes d'urbanisation dites 'grands ensembles'" (note 8).
62. Agnès BERLAND-BERTHON, *La Démolition des immeubles de logements sociaux. Histoire urbaine d'une non-politique publique* (Paris: Éditions du CERTU, 2009).
63. B. VAYSSIÈRE, *Reconstruction, déconstruction: le hard french ou l'architecture française des Trente Glorieuses* (note 7), 7.

64. Examples of this earliest research on the topic include: Anatole KOPP, Frédérique BOUCHER, and Danièle DUPUY, *L'Architecture de la Reconstruction en France, 1945-1953* (Paris: Le Moniteur, 1984); D. VOLDMAN, ed., *Images, discours et enjeux de la reconstruction des villes françaises après 1945* (Paris: CNRS, 1987); and B. VAYSSIÈRE, *Reconstruction, déconstruction: le hard french ou l'architecture française des Trente Glorieuses* (note 7).
65. B. VAYSSIÈRE, *ibid.* The book's publication was accompanied by a photography exhibition: *Photographes-fonctionnaires 1945-1975. L'inventaire du paysage architectural français par le service audiovisuel du ministère de l'Urbanisme* (November 1988–January 1989).
66. B. VAYSSIÈRE, *Reconstruction, déconstruction: le hard french ou l'architecture française des Trente Glorieuses* (note 7), 7.
67. *Ibid.*
68. The Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine (National Agency for Urban Renewal) was created by Law No. 2003-710 of August 1, 2003, regarding “city planning and urban renewal.”
69. Created by André Malraux in 1964, this inventory is neither exhaustive nor official but undertaken simply in the interest of establishing a record. It includes a description and explanation for each item and consistently associates text and photographs.
70. Michel MELOT, “La photographie face à la commande,” in *Photographier le territoire* (Paris: Somogy, 2009), 21–29.
71. Gérard MONNIER and Benoît POUVREAU, eds., *Le Logement social en Seine-Saint-Denis, 1850-1999. Itinéraires du patrimoine* (Paris: Association pour le Patrimoine d'Île-de-France / Inventaire Général du Patrimoine d'Île-de-France, 2003).
72. This incident is recounted by Arlette AUDUC, a conservator on the regional council of Île-de-France and head of its Department of Heritage and Inventory, in *Photographier le territoire* (note 70), 33–34.
73. *Toit et Moi, 100 ans de logement social*. Scientific committee: Emmanuel Bellanger, Annie Fourcaut, Patrick Kamoun, Benoît Pouvreau, Danièle Voldman, Michel Perrot, and Frédérique Jacquet. Web site: <http://www.toitetmoi.org>.
74. D. MOUCHEL and D. VOLDMAN, *Photographies à l'œuvre. Enquêtes et chantiers de la reconstruction 1945-1958* (note 30).
75. Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, ed., *Les Grands Ensembles, une architecture du XX^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions Dominique Carré, 2011).
76. *Grands Ensembles, 1960-2010: Regards Photographiques*, an exhibition organized in 2012 for the seventh edition of Normandy's Contemporary Architecture Month and curated by Paul Landauer et Kenneth Rabin.
77. F. POUSIN, “La vue aérienne au service des grands ensembles” (note 38), 213.
78. Mathieu PERNOT, *Le Grand Ensemble* (Paris: Le Point du Jour, 2007).

ABSTRACTS

The *grands ensembles*, or large-scale high-rise housing projects, are widely regarded as the quintessential products of postwar French government policy in the areas of regional and urban planning. These essential icons of the *Trente Glorieuses* and their “golden legend of triumphant modernization” were the subject of targeted image campaigns from the very beginning. As early as 1945, the government recognized that control over imagery was an indispensable component

of its large-scale reconstruction projects, and the departments involved established internal photography and cinematography teams to promote and defend the policies they adopted. The approach survived as the policies changed: in the context of subsequent periods and institutions, photography has been called on to depict the failure of the social housing effort or cast it as an important part of the country's architectural heritage. The analysis presented here revisits the history of the *grands ensembles*, building on previous studies in order to view them from a new perspective, that of the media, and more specifically of institutional photographic production.