Architecture

Cold Comfort: The New French Towns

By Ada Louise Huxtable

The future has come to France, and it happened in just 10 years. In the decade from 1965 to 1975, officials of the French national government and the Paris region planned and built five new towns and "restructured" and expanded half a dozen older suburbs within a 20-mile radius of Paris. In so doing, they radically altered the image and actuality of the French way of life for an anticipated 600,000 to one million people. The job was done cooly and systematically, with the impeccable logic that characterizes the operation of the French intellect at its best.

First, population and economic growth were projected for the Paris region. Next, a policy of "centralized decentralization" was formulated to channel that growth to specific locations deemed desirable by the French government.

In the late 1950's, permanent green areas were designated as *zones naturelles d'équilibre*. In 1965, the master plan for the Paris region was officially adopted, establishing construction areas, open space and a communications network. Development was to be encouraged east of Paris, to counter the existing drift to the west, and two new types of community were to be created: those on virgin land and those to be built on the base of an existing suburb.

The new towns program was undertaken in 1966. The five towns started from scratch — all are now functioning realities — are Cergy-Pontoise, Evry, Marne-la-Vallée, Melun-Senart and Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. Some of the dramatically expanded suburbs include Le Defense, Bobigny and Créteil, the last selected as the capital of the newly-created department of Val-de-Marne.

Each of the new units was seen as having an eventual population of 200,000 to 300,000, with residential neighborhoods of from 30,000 to 50,000 people, served by the appropriate political, administrative, economic, cultural and recreational machinery. The specifications also called for the rapid completion of *les grands équipments*, that fine French phrase for all of the infrastructure and services

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from roads, rails and water purification plants to city halls and cinemas. Hospitals, universities, art galleries and a lively mix of urban activities were promised.

The point of all this was more than the production of badly needed housing and the redistribution of the population. The program was meant to modernize Paris and its environs — a city and an area long known to be strong on civilized charm and short on plumbing and communications.

To be sure that there would be no monotony, a policy was established of assigning each sector of the new towns to a different architect, who was given maximum freedom of design. What was anticipated, according to the official literature, was "not a futurist architecture that would strike one with its insolence, but building better adapted to varying needs."

In the 60's and 70's, construction proceeded with joint public and private financing through hybrid companies called Sociétés d'Economie Mixte. *Zones* of industry, commerce and leisure were included to provide the base and facilities that would turn the housing quarters into true cities.

It was, as the French would say, a formidable achievement. In the last three years, as construction has accelerated with the second stage of planning, the new towns around Paris have become a spectacular and unsettling part of the traditional landscape. From the look and result today, France has now entered, not the 20th, but the 21st century.

But if the new towns and rehabilitated suburbs can be legitimately hailed as a triumph of logic and logistics, they also raise a great many questions about their architectural and urban design. The master plan's "strategic" recommendations have been translated into a disquieting reality. The *zones* and *quartiers* of the maps range from clusters of ordinary towers similar to most small city commercial renewal, to surreal settings for a kind of monumental superkitsch.

For Parisians, it must be like moving to the moon. And for foreign visitors, a group of whom recently toured a number of these towns under the auspices of the French-American Foundation, the contrasts are staggering. These earnest planning exercises, with their bland impersonality or self-conscious efforts at individual-

Créteil: many buildings of overreaching originality making statements that have little to do with people, purpose or setting.

ization, seem light years away from the traditional scale, character, easy functional and social mix, and elegant and sophisticated architecture of Paris, which may be the most beautiful and urbane city in the world.

The American visitor, in particular, finds these new towns the antithesis of the American suburb, esthetically and socially. They are being made both accessible and affordable for a worker population, migrant and otherwise, that cannot pay Paris's high housing costs, and which is being forced out of the old quarters that are increasingly going through the process of "gentrification" that turns historic slums into costly, chic neighborhoods. And the design emphasis, now beginning to change, has been on high-rise towers that symbolize modernity.

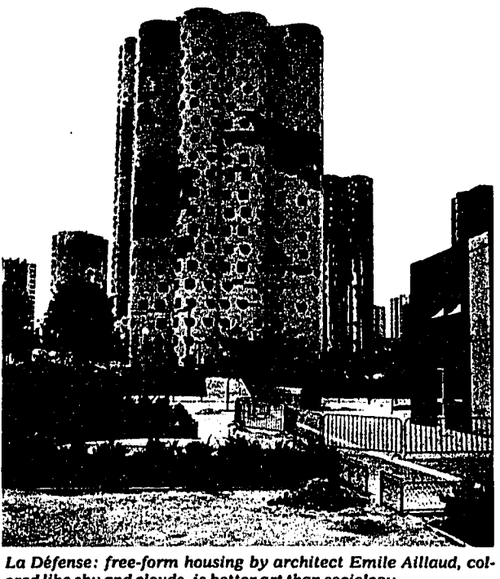
This is the reverse of the American pattern where the rich go to suburbia and the poor are trapped in the inner city, and it is not without its virtues. There is. of course, plenty of heat and running water and open green space in the new towns, and every serious consideration for all personal needs from shopping to leisure. There are hospitals and universities and arts centers. One is even told that it is possible to indulge in that traditional French activity expressed by the verb *flâner* — hanging around with an eye for the pleasures of life.

However, a kind of disaster appears to have occurred on the way from the maps to the drawing boards. The conclusion that one keeps trying to avoid is that this incredible accomplishment in planned urbanization has either caught French architects off guard, or that there are inadequate channels of communication between architects and the bureaucracy, or that the unsettled state of the profession has made it hard to produce solutions of genuine beauty and amenity.

But the fact is that those 10 years of aggressive construction apparently coincided with what an American urbanist in Paris, Stephen S. Cohen, writing in Le Monde, has called "the nadir of French architecture." Something has gone terribly wrong with the tradition that has had all the right answers for city-building for centuries.

Too many buildings are straining to make a tortured statement about the world of the future, which has clearly been on everyone's mind in spite of the disclaimers. There is a great deal of architectural overreaching and underachieving, and the predominant effect is emptiness — vacant spaces and vacuous design content.

The inverted pyramid that serves as administrative headquarters at Cergy-Pontoise, the new town that eclipses the character and charm of the neighboring old town of Pon-



La Défense: free-form housing by architect Emile Aillaud, colored like sky and clouds, is better art than sociology.

Maison des Arts at Créteil: the undulating design of a vast desertlike plaza that serves as the city and regional center combines with an isolated monument to form a Kafka or de Chirico alliance.

toise, offers much more novelty than felicity. It is simply uninteresting, either as a built form or as a symbolic structure. A cultural and administration center in construction now by Vasconi and Pencreac's is a far more sophisticated building, but its version of the current "high-tech" vogue of mechanical effects, with its brightly colored metal panels, has little to do with anything else around it.

The City Hall of Créteil, the administrative capital of the new department of Val-de-Marne, designed by the architect Pierre Dufau, consists of an interconnecting glass-walled cylinder and drum hung by cables from a concrete crown. The building exults in a suggestion of sleek, "modernistic" technology that would be more at home in Norman Bel Geddes's Futurama of 1939 than on a public plaza with asinuous paving pattern that suggests an uncomfortably undulating sea. (These things look marvelous on models or in bird's-eye views.) The combination of the plaza's desertlike expanse and its isolated monuments makes a Kafka or De Chirico alliance.

Most of the new plazas, meant to be public forums, are empty and bleak. Most of the shopping centers are suburban look-alikes. The cultural facilities are fixed and formal instruments that must substitute for the spontaneous life of the arts in older cities. The planners' carefully laid out spaces, levels and landscaping remain joyless terrain.

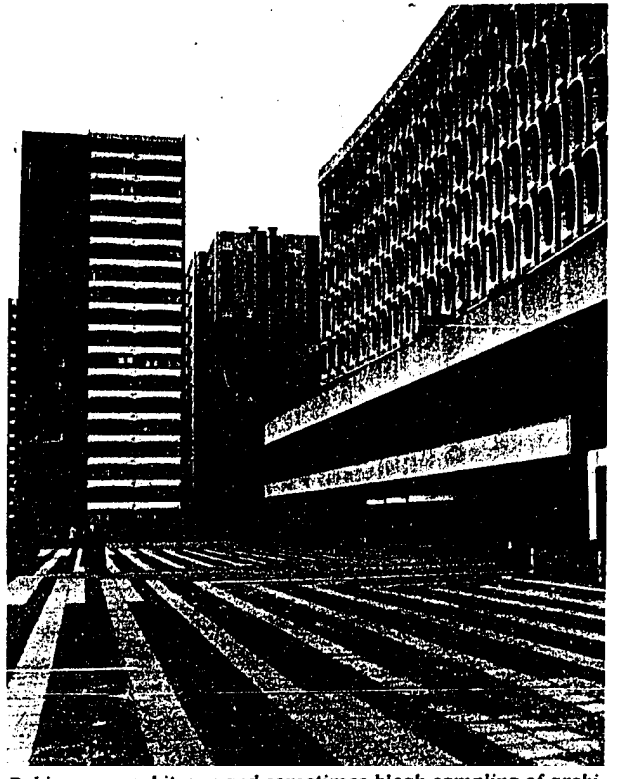
Right now, this is a failed world of the future; its architecture is pure *pompier* — a word the French have used to describe the empty bombast of academic painting — and its sense of community is incomplete and artificial. The real future may impose acident and interaction and even disorder and arbitrariness on the planners' schemes, to vitalize what cannot be beautified. Time can even heal new towns.

But the basic problem is the curious way that the buildings do not seem to relate to the people and places they serve in any way except the directly functional. In an even more curious way, they seem to have become radically detached from Paris's centuries of rational refinement of an extraordinarily successful architectural and urban tradition with its extreme sensitivity to what makes a city a living community with a dense and lively heart — a tradition the planners claim to have recognized.

But in Paris there are streetscapes as opposed to plazascapes and landscapes in the new towns. Where plazas occur in old cities they focus or disperse the activity of the intensively used conduits that lead to them. Paris's streets are "walled" with buildings alive with constant use. These urban walls, in a range of architecture from vernacular to "grand," set the city's scale and style — a superb example of the high level of esthetic and urban quality such a mix of art and life can attain.

It may be that a city is simply an act of God rather than an act of architecture, or a process of enrichment that defies rational analysis. But the character of these new towns may be traceable as well to certain social factors of our time — the trend toward segregation by class and income and daily routine that is eroding the old, successful urban mix almost everywhere.

Or the blame could be laid at the feet of the architectural profession, currently re-examining the Olympian principles of the 20th-century planning beliefs in which a revolutionary modernism was to sweep aside the imperfections and errors of the past to bring sanity, health and happiness to a purified environment. It brought sterility, instead, and a fatal separation from the successful, incremental urban fabric and the traditional architectural culture. Confident that they could build a better world — and what a bitter lesson that has been — architects jettisoned everything that



Bobigny: an arbitrary and sometimes bleak sampling of architectural mannerisms saved by a good plan and landscaping.

went before for a self-created vacuum.

What they discarded, actually, was urban civilization. And what is left, in these places, is the awareness of that vacuum. Le Corbusier's concept of towers in a park was meant to remake the 20th-century city, but it eliminated its humanity and connective tissue, instead. What consummate irony that he should have provided the tired formula that has finally come home to roost in the new towns of France!

It is a truism that the solutions carried out by government and bureaucracies are always 10 years behind the state of the art. And when an art is as imperfect and empirical as urban design, that can explain many of the more disturbing aspects of these excellently orchestrated new towns. Nor is there any guarantee, even with the deeper understanding of the subject today, that communities could be constructed successfully from scratch without the help of centuries of human infill.

But it is the timing of the French new towns that may have been most at fault. Their construction coincided with a period of architectural design in which everything had worked out worst in modernist theory — the housing tower in the past, the monument unrelated to its environment, aggressive gimmickry, "style" for its own sake. This, plus the natural inertia of the public process, insured that the worst would be embraced with historic inevitability. It is now a period permanently memorialized in the French landscape.

The still unanswered question is how to *retrouver la ville*, in the words of French planners — to find again the "warm, enriching animation of the urban environment." But it takes no more than one generation living without these things to lose its urban memory. And the ultimate loss can be urbanity itself, in the most civilized sense of the word. ■