

At home in postwar France: modern mass housing and the right to comfort

Emile Chabal

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BOOK REVIEW

At home in postwar France: modern mass housing and the right to comfort, by Nicole C. Rudolph, New York, Berghahn Books, 2015, 272 pp., £60.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-78-238587-5

One of the most striking things about political language in postwar Europe is the generalisation of rights discourse. Before 1945, 'rights' were largely limited to political questions. But by the 1970s, democratic governments had to grapple with human rights, social rights and the right to diversity—to name but a few. In fact, one could plausibly argue that rights discourse has today become the primary means by which citizens make claims on their states: first there is a 'right', then there are policies. The French, of course, had something of a headstart since the idea of rights had already been widely debated at the time of the French Revolution. Nevertheless, things changed after the Second World War. The prosperity of the Trente Glorieuses expanded the range of potential rights into more individual and intimate domains. An outstanding example of this shift is the emergence of the 'right to comfort'.

Such a concept can appear rather odd at first sight. Questions such as who confers the right to comfort and how comfort is defined are hardly self-evident. But, as Nicole Rudolph shows in her fascinating book, these were questions that some French policymakers in the 1940s and 1950s took extremely seriously. This is hardly surprising given that France faced a major housing crisis at the end of the war: one in twenty buildings had been destroyed and one in five were damaged. France was ripe for reconstruction and a new generation of planners and architects wanted to ensure that residential construction would adhere to rational, modernist precepts. Their dream was that all French people would have access to well-designed and well-built housing.

Inevitably, things were not quite so simple. For a start, the Communists' staunch defence of rent control meant that repair of existing buildings was initially prioritised over new construction. In the early years of the Fourth Republic, housing did not seem to be an urgent problem and France quickly fell behind the UK and Germany in the number of new units being built. By the mid-1950s, however, it became painfully clear that the rate of new construction was entirely inadequate for a booming demographic and the state finally began to pour money into housing. But the speed with which many buildings—the now infamous 'towers' and 'bars' of France's *banlieues*—were built meant that corners were cut. Building materials were of poor quality, apartment sizes were smaller than those specified by architects, and the absence of decoration (tenants were supposed to paint their own walls) left a bad impression.


Not to mention the fact that those living in these new apartments did not always match the ideal-types imagined by architects and planners. In some of the most engaging passages in the book, Rudolph shows how residents ignored the normative spatial injunctions to which they were supposed to conform. Thus, many residents continued to eat in the kitchen even when planners designed them to be too small to accommodate a table. Likewise, they insisted on the status symbol of a large, standalone wardrobe in the master bedroom, despite the fact that each flat had its own built-in storage. Even on the fundamental issue of how an apartment should be configured, there was little consensus. Some preferred a central corridor, with rooms coming off the corridor, while others wanted a more open-plan arrangement. Clearly, the modernist fantasy

of the one-size-fits-all 'P4' apartment could not survive untouched and, by the late 1960s, state officials encouraged the development of 'personalisable' floor plans.

For many residents, these concessions came too late. Hundreds of thousands of new units had been built and the fundamental flaws in the modernist paradigm had already begun to emerge. But Rudolph is careful not to let herself get carried away by a teleological reading of the *banlieues* as a disaster waiting to happen. Instead, her book carefully reconstructs the multiple pressures and influences that turned housing into one of the biggest policy problems of postwar France. Her balanced reading of all kinds of interesting material—from architectural designs to household goods catalogues—offers many new perspectives on France's postwar years, not least because it shows how citizens interacted with the French state on an everyday level through design, architecture and space. Perhaps there was room in Rudolph's discussion for a greater consideration of why public housing was built in specific places and the administrative mechanisms by which HLMs were allocated. This, after all, played a vital factor in shaping neighbourhoods both spatially and socially. But this omission does not make the author's central claim any less persuasive. Readers of this book will come away entirely convinced that the French did indeed come to expect a certain 'right to comfort', even if they often could not decide what that meant.

Emile Chabal

University of Edinburgh

 Emile.Chabal@ed.ac.uk

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