Books

Larry Busbea
Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960–1970

Larry Busbea’s Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960–1970 is the kind of study we are beginning to see and will see more of over the next few years as new scholarly research on the postwar decades is brought to publication. There is a distinctive character to the best of this work, and Busbea’s book is a remarkable example. The book, based on a dissertation, draws on resources that extend well beyond archival materials and oral history interviews to deliver a substantive account of the architectural and intellectual context of French spatial culture.

The success of this book lies with the author’s agile mobilization of evidence to synthesize a convincing argument. The evidence neither commandeers nor burdens the narrative; indeed, Busbea achieves much more than the architectural materials might at first glance appear capable of telling us about the relations among aesthetic experience, politics, technocracy, and utopian speculation in France during the 1960s. In addressing the 1960s, a decade that has become mythologized within and beyond architecture, Busbea puts the avant-garde neatly into historical perspective. While others might wax nostalgic or idealize the relation between political events and speculative urban thought of this period, Busbea scrutinizes the cultural underpinnings to deliver a precise analysis. Brushing aside assumptions underlying much of the Anglo-Saxon literature on postwar European avant-gardes, he states baldly that “most avant-garde production of the decade in question was what we would recognize today as politically conservative; at least in terms of technologically progressive tendencies of the period” (5). The book is a welcome contribution to understanding the conditions supporting French utopianism and to the architectural history of the postwar period.

The book explores architectural artifacts that at first glance could seem slight in formal terms—particularly when compared to the work of contemporaneous, graphic-savvy designers in Italy or Britain. The speculative works of Yona Friedman, the most recognizable name, are rather ephemeral. His sketches of spindly infrastructural networks, which in scale aspire to map entire regions, or Nicolas Schöffer’s cybernetically enhanced sculptural equipment were, however, aimed at aesthetic and social experiences other than those that readily meet the eye. It was the imagined effects of these technologically enabled ambient environments that mattered to architects, artists, and theoreticians. The significance of such practices has, with the accelerated rise of digital media, become exceedingly clear. These artistic activities, with their frequently paradoxical theoretical and political ballast, stand as a kind of prehistory to what some scholars regard as the technological triumphalism that prevails among the contemporary designers who are enamored with the effects of new media capabilities. Busbea’s organization of content and nimble writing make this a study likely to appeal to audiences beyond art and architectural history.

Busbea usefully points out that however recognizable the objects of his study have become (there have been at least three exhibitions on Friedman alone over the last year), the subject matter under investigation remains a “phantom”: it both partakes in and takes leave of the contemporary city. Busbea’s goal is “to construct in order to stabilize [the phantom’s] ideological, aesthetic, and historical existence for analysis” (3). This is a daunting task, although it turns out that there is plenty of material evidence: drawings, polemical texts, and conference proceedings. The most significant cultural activism was undertaken by Michel Ragon, who attempted to corral a French cultural disposition toward the spatial, the technological, and the urban into an identifiable movement. Such coherence remained elusive, so Busbea shifts his attention to a set of terms circulating within French culture in order to construct the period imagination about the “phantom” city. These words functioned as concrete and metaphoric reference points for the technological avant-garde.

The term topology, which circulated among architects and artists during the 1960s, guides Busbea’s overarching interpretative project. To the propagators of this term, topology described a conception of technologically facilitated spatiality, imbued with, among other things, formal, projective, and geometric qualities. It was a word, then as now, advanced by cultural producers to describe the melding of technology with potentially new aesthetic experiences that advanced “networked space” as a medium for communication. The concept of topology updated the modernist synthesis of art and science to reflect the changing conditions of postindustrial society. The implied political dimension of the “urban utopia” of the book’s subtitle signals yet another challenge presented by practices that, while engaged in imagining and articulat-
ing the unseen possibilities of the urban milieu, were often ideologically and politically at odds. Busbea assesses these “prospective” practices, to use the period term, as both forward looking and at times regressive; as both critical of modernism—particularly the Charter of Athens—and seeking continuity with aspects of modernist urbanism. Within the utopian mandate various aspects of French modernism come into play: the projects of Le Corbusier, Marcel Lods, as well as the planning policies that begat the postwar monstrosity of the grande ensemble. Although formally benign, the conception of utopia was certainly ideological, and some of its theorists were not shy about expressing their technocratic aspirations. The elaboration of such factors situates spatial urbanism and “prospective” thought within the particularity of French politics during this period, illuminating assumptions about administration in an emerging post-industrial society.

The book is very clearly organized, with an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter explores different aspects of the “phantom” city, connecting and elaborating the terms introduced earlier in the text. This makes for a rich historical account in which the competing influences, paradoxical interpretations, and conflicting ideological overtures take tangible shape. Michel Ragon, for example, coined the term urbanisme spatial and further served as an “animator” for the formation of the Groupe International d’Architecture Prospective (GIAP) in 1965. According to Busbea, Ragon saw that “radical social and technological change calls for the radical architectural and urban solutions” (86).

The easy circulation of images through architectural culture made available entire bodies of work that were at times deprived of their theoretical groundings and social context. The more arcane period pieces were consigned to the dustbin of history, but Busbea usefully unearths them for analysis. Important texts such as Henri Van Lier’s Le nouvel âge, the various works by Abraham Moles (including those with Élizabeth Rohmer such as Psychosociologie de l’espace) situate the discussions of networks, cybernetics, the astonishingly optimistic belief in self-organizing systems, and the conflicts between the structural and phenomenological potentials of new technologies. The aims of “prospectivists” are distinguished from groups such as Architecture Prinçipe or the Situationists, which have enjoyed comparatively enthusiastic reception beyond France. Busbea offers useful historical accounts of the roles that Roland Barthes and Jean Bau-drillard played in interpreting effects that architects and artists had imagined years earlier. He also explores the links between utopian thought and such postwar architecture and urban planning projects as La Defense, highlighting the paradoxes inherent in utopian thought when, as he demonstrates, social and ideological aspirations can be duplicitous.

There are many positive qualities that distinguish Busbea’s book, and any search for the negative would only produce picayune comments. This would simply turn away from the work of architectural history and dwell instead on tidbits of evidence, missing the real contribution of this book. Given the quality of Busbea’s analytical and interpretive achievement, it is not surprising that Topologies was short-listed for the 2008 Bruno Zevi Award of the International Committee of Architectural Critics.

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Kelly Donahue-Wallace
The Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 304 pp., 32 color and 104 b/w illus. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 9780826334596

The entwined endeavors of religious conversion and military conquest that established Spanish power in the Americas also produced some of the Western Hemisphere’s most remarkable architecture. The buildings constructed between 1521 and 1821 in the Spanish American colonies relied on Western European architectural vocabularies and traditions, and were shaped by the distinctive geographic, political, and cultural circumstances of their American settings. The post-conquest convergence of European forms, local architectural precedent, and native practice gave rise to buildings that often do not fit neatly into the usual stylistic categories of architectural historical analysis. Study of this architecture and its varied influences offers an opportunity to consider the processes of stylistic change and the malleability of stylistic labels.

Kelly Donahue-Wallace takes up this challenge and provides a welcome survey of the major monuments and styles produced in the Spanish-American colonies. The author focuses on the viceregal centers Mexico City and Lima, and Cuzco, capital of the Inca Empire, but includes discussion of smaller centers of artistic efflorescence (Puebla, Zacatecas, Quito, and Potosí, among others) as they become significant to her more or less chronological narrative. Emphasizing the communicative power of style and form in architecture, painting, and sculpture, Donahue-Wallace delineates the significant differences in the art of distant parts of this vast region even as she demonstrates the continuities found there.

Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821 was conceived in response to the need for an up-to-date book for teaching colonial Latin American art. It serves this purpose ably. Particularly commendable is Donahue-Wallace’s close focus on a limited number of sites and objects. Too often scholarship on Latin American architecture has attempted to survey many buildings at once, an approach that yields superficial analyses at best. In an especially effective chapter on the missions of New Spain (a vast area encompassing the present-day southwestern United States, Mexico, Central America, and much of the Caribbean) and Peru, Donahue-Wallace focuses on the Franciscan mission at Huejotzingo (New Spain, 1547–71) and the Dominican complex at Chucuito (Peru, 1581–1608), placing these in the context of the multi-dimensional, socio-cultural work of the early priests. She explains the more academic classicism of the Peruvian facades, in contrast to New Spanish eclecticism, in terms of both different indigenous artistic traditions and changing European approaches to evangelization after the Council of Trent.