barely recoverable era of early coastal communities founded by indigenous female rulers.

This is where readers may wish that Meier had pushed the matter further. The other zone of “port cities” constructed prior to European colonization that featured unique architecture with imagined claims to distant elsewhere lies just south of the Saharan “sea” in places like Timbuktu, Djenne, Agadez, and Kanem, where Arabs arrived as traders, settled in small numbers among locals, and founded ethnically mixed families. Yet, to the extent that these cities possessed cultures of in-betweenness, hinted at in written chronicles, this has not developed to anywhere near the degree found on the East African coast, and I am not aware of the existence of a Saheli people (although, incidentally, Sabel and Swahili share the same etymological root). The sustained earlier colonialisms of the Sahelian contexts, and these earlier histories enabled the Swahili to develop a sense of islandness vested in its mapping as one node n an ocean trade network. In this context Africa existed only as a backdrop source of raw materials rather than as a place of culture and filiation. Might Swahili “cosmopolitan longing” be merely a troubled memory of the denigration of the local put in place centuries earlier by the rapidly produced and thinly distributed racially mixed class of the slavery era? This would explain the early expression of an equivocal relation to its primary origin—in fact maternal and indigenous—through identification instead with the foreign father.

Some readers may not recognize this book as architectural history because it often reads like social history. Although formal architectural elements, building plans, and historical photographs of key buildings (including interiors) are exhaustively analyzed, other buildings do not receive the same treatment. Neither as a study of architectural style nor as a detailed account of a city’s development can Swahili Port Cities claim to be as exhaustive as its full title suggests. Many of the book’s photographs, especially street views, leave us wishing we knew a great deal more about the many buildings passed over without comment.

I also wish that Bagamoyo, once an important Swahili town, received more than a brief mention as “a port city to the south” of Zanzibar (107). Renowned for caverns, allegedly escape routes used by captives during the era of slavery, and for its subsequent role in missionary abolitionism, Bagamoyo is the site of a ruined ancient Muslim cemetery that indicates it deserved more attention. I am also not entirely convinced the minarets of Mombasa have no identifiable foreign origins. Could they be reduced, simplified versions of Seljuk minarets? The slightly conical plumpness of Swahili minarets seems to recall the unarticulated rotundity of the Barsian or Sava mosque minarets stripped of ornamentation. Comparison with the Mbaraki pillar that Meier illustrates makes this plausible. The Swahili minaret’s slight curvature and fenestration could be a distanced translation of the Barsian model, although it arguably resembles even more closely both the tapering Kalyan minaret at Bukhara, Uzbekistan (Seljuk), with its barely visible, softly curved cap, and the slant-walled, circular, stout, capped Tughrul Tower in Ray, Iran.

It is likely Meier chose to be more cautious. My wishes and critiques above therefore do not to take away from her wonderfully unexpected insights, for this book does sparkle with an overall brilliance. It ultimately turns our understanding of Swahili history on its head while also fully engaging the interpretive theories it uses and sometimes challenges, as any good work should. Written with admirable carefuless, Swahili Port Cities is an original, well-researched, and nicely crafted reading of the architectural and urban histories of a rare East African Islamic universe and its related aesthetic ways, which are somewhat removed from the worlds of Middle Eastern Islam and its architecture. At the same time, this universe challenges our received constructions of things African.

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Note
1. On Arab attitudes frowning on intermarriage with locals in early “Sahara coast” cities (which, had it been sustained, could have produced a Saheli people comparable to the Swahili), see John O. Hunwick, ed., Timbuktu and the Sonfay Empire: Al-Sa`di’s Ta’rīkh Al-Sudan Down to 1613, and Other Contemporary Documents (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 50.

Kenny Cupers
The Social Project: Housing Postwar France
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 424 pp., 25 color and 167 b/w illus. $115 (cloth), ISBN 9780816689644; $35 (paper), ISBN 9780816689651

The grands ensembles—the large-scale suburban social housing estates, often featuring repetitive rows of tall concrete slabs—are a significant part of France’s postwar built environment. In North America, postwar suburban housing was tied to government financial incentives, private market developments, and individual homeownership, as in the famous case of Levittown tract housing. By contrast, much of France’s suburban landscape was defined by housing projects that were colossal in scale and subsidized by the state, much like their Eastern bloc counterparts. If the grands ensembles initially attracted popular interest as a potential solution to ongoing housing shortages, they quickly developed a poor reputation across the political spectrum and attracted criticism for their monotony and obliviousness to human scale. For many, the postwar French suburbs represent a bygone utopian past, an era French economist Jean Fourastié famously called les Trente Glorieuses, which has since devolved into an everyday reality marked by racial segregation, social alienation, and lack of employment opportunities. As Kristin Ross has argued in her now classic Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, the suburbs were central to France’s economic development and political discourse in the aftermath of World War II and decolonization. Yet, despite their crucial place within the postwar built environment and social imaginary, few studies on the grands ensembles have been available in English, a situation that Kenny Cupers helps to remedy with The Social Project.

Were the myriad postwar suburban housing schemes in France a long series of “monumental errors,” to use the title of a book by architectural historian Michel Ragon? Or do we, in hindsight, continue to underestimate the humanist ambitions and the varied solutions proposed by French architects and planners for whom modernism was “not a style but a cause”? Those reading Cupers’s latest book may be
disappointed if they are seeking clear-cut answers regarding the progressive aims of architects, planners, and the French state and the subsequent failure of their resulting constructions. Instead, they will find something far more rewarding and challenging: a textured, multilayered, and ambivalent historical narrative.

This elegantly written book is clearly organized in a tripartite structure, with the parts corresponding to consecutive postwar decades: the 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s. It is then subdivided into seven thematic chapters. Cupers criticizes the polemical narratives that have often overstated the degree to which Le Corbusier’s prototype for the Unité d’Habitation, at once idolized and reviled, provided the model for the grands ensembles. Instead, he is concerned with tracing the specific operations of intersecting architectural, urban, and bureaucratic networks in France at midcentury. In the first part, “1950s: Projects in the Making,” Cupers lays the groundwork by outlining France’s socioeconomic conditions, such as its long-term housing shortages, and introducing key political initiatives meant to address them, such as the founding of the French Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism. Cupers also considers important changes in planning expertise, prefabrication, and mass-production methods, and how they affected the architect, who began to act increasingly “as mediator between engineers, developers, and construction companies” (20). Important mass housing projects by notable postwar architects such as Marcel Lods, Bernard Zehrfuss, and Émile Alliaud—about whom little has been written in English—are the focus of analysis here. Cupers also explores the broader intellectual context of postwar France, including the growing interest in the study of “everyday life” by key figures like urban sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe and Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre.

The second part of the book brings together built projects from different regions to chart the complex development of large-scale urban and social housing schemes and examine how these engendered new forms of participation and “a particular climate of neighborhood solidarity” (147). Here Cupers considers in detail the controversial housing slabs constructed in Sarcelles, a multicultural suburb north of Paris. He also addresses how, in light of mounting public outcry against such projects, planners began to incorporate responses to these critiques in their new proposals, particularly by providing enhanced social and cultural amenities. Although the book is focused primarily on residential architecture, it does address other building types. For instance, in the chapter “Animation to the Rescue,” Cupers includes a pertinent discussion of how public art initiatives and cultural centers, such as those in La Grande Borne, aimed to encourage more dynamic suburban community life. The third section of the book considers megastructural projects from the 1970s and the continued quest to improve social and urban integration. Cupers concludes with interesting remarks on postmodernism and the superficial “return to history” in projects such as Ricardo Bofill’s Les Espaces d’Abraxas in Marne-la-Vallée (Noisy-le-Grand).

Cupers is very clear from the outset that it is not his intention to present a history of postwar social housing “from below.” The book does not incorporate oral histories of former or current residents, nor does it feature sociological postoccupancy analyses à la Philippe Boudon. Rather, it is a reflection on the history of planning through the study of a vast collection of archival sources and documents, including “television reportage, photos, written testimonies, social-scientific surveys, and here and there, local publications and periodicals” (137). The core questions that weave the book together are thought provoking and extremely relevant: How can scholars, through the study of architectural and urban projects, better historicize postwar France’s “bureaucratic epistemology”? What can distinct housing schemes tell us about the postwar socioeconomic landscape in France? More crucially, what roles did the users play in the building process, both as abstract objects of study and as agents in their own right? The result of meticulous research in French municipal, departmental, and governmental archives and libraries, The Social Project draws on an extraordinarily rich array of historical sources to present the diverse institutional actors engaged in housing postwar France. Throughout the book, Cupers does a remarkable job of handling policy documents and connecting dispersed actors, from architects to social scientists, from city planners to government bureaucrats, from militant members of tenant associations to real estate promoters. Indeed, one of the significant contributions of his rather detached study is precisely its ability, through these heterogeneous fragments, to contextualize the elusive concepts of “planification,” “expertise,” and “participation” in postwar French urbanism. Cupers also avoids a blanket dismissal of top-down “authoritarian high modernism” by revealing how the grands ensembles were shaped, at least in part, by user needs and contributions.

Cupers’s book is a welcome addition to the scholarship written in English on twentieth-century French architecture. Its sharp documentary focus acts as a useful complement to recent publications on modern dwelling culture by W. Brian Newcombe, who looks more closely at France’s authoritarian power structures and how political and religious ideologies, particularly the entanglements of socialism and Catholicism, have shaped postwar design practices, and by Nicole C. Rudolph, who gives much more sustained attention to interior design as well as to questions of gender and domesticity. The Social Project also sheds new light on the scathing critiques mounted against postwar technocratic planning by various French neo-avant-garde groups, such as the Utopie group and the Internationale Situationniste. For those not familiar with the pioneering work of Francophone scholars such as Kopp, Ragon, and, in more recent decades, Bruno Vayssière, Daniele Goldman, Annie Fourcaut, and Gwenaelle Le Guillon, the book will be particularly valuable. Through an analysis of institutionalized and bureaucratic architectural practices, which are often overlooked in favor of more formally daring or experimental projects, Cupers provides a more complete understanding of the French postwar architectural scene.

Since the grands ensembles have frequently been scorned by the media and by radicals like the situationists, Cupers’s desire to provide a more nuanced, scholarly perspective on postwar social housing campaigns is both laudable and timely. However, his often detached and self-avowed “postcritical” position does leave certain difficult questions unanswered.
For example, the thorny issues of France’s institutionalized racial inequalities, class exclusion, and the police violence pervasive in a number of suburbs are referenced, somewhat anecdotally, throughout the book, but they are dropped rather quickly from the analysis. To be fair, as an architectural historian, Cupers wishes to avoid a simplistic conflation of built forms and typologies with multifaceted sociopolitical problems linked to uneven capitalist development and to France’s troubled colonial past. The lack of statistical data, as Cupers mentions, is partially to blame for this blind spot. Yet a more sustained and critical engagement with these issues would have been useful, particularly given recent public debates about the French suburbs in the aftermath of recurrent waves of riots. Furthermore, unlike Newsome and Fourcaut, Cupers does not examine in detail the impact on planning culture of influential postwar political movements, whether they were communist, social Catholic, or more conservative. This book does open interesting areas for new research, such as the significant role of religious spaces in France’s multifarious suburban neighborhoods (despite the French state’s controversial laws enforcing laïcité, or secularism), and for more in-depth study on topics such as the place of public art in the grands ensembles. Undoubtedly, many future scholars will have occasion to grapple with Cupers’s impressive study.

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Notes

4. I am here referring to the title of Anatole Kopp, Quand le moderne n’était pas un style mais une cause (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1988).

Philipp Meuser and Dimitrij Zadorin
Berlin: DOM, 2015, 456 pp., ca. 1,000 illus. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 9783869224466; $59.95 (paper), 9783869223922

Between the mid-1950s and its collapse in the early 1990s, the Soviet Union organized the largest mass housing construction campaign in human history. The transformation was momentous: in three decades, approximately thirty million families were ushered into modern living as the socialist welfare state provided them for the first time with their own individual apartments, most of them industrially built and equipped with amenities like central heating and running water. The endeavor was epic, its sheer scope greatly exceeding such iconic modernization projects as the Haussmannization of Paris. Like Haussmannization, the Soviet housing campaign produced its own architectural icons, most notably the so-called khrushchevka, a simple bar of three to five stories developed under Nikita Khrushchev’s reign. Yet, despite its success at accommodating tens of millions in a relatively short time, the Soviet mass housing program acquired a distinctly bad reputation. Notorious for shoddy construction, cramped spaces, and drab urban environments, the buildings came under fire both from professional circles and from the public long before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the many practical and theoretical revisions aimed at improving the standards of design and construction, the negative image of the program’s housing prevailed, becoming entrenched as a global stereotype of soulless urban monotony, even though comparable industrially produced housing was constructed across the world, regardless of political and ideological divisions.

In the past several years, scholars have started challenging the simplistic image of Soviet mass housing as an unqualified failure, bringing to light the project’s emancipatory dimension as well as its social, political, and economic complexities.7 Such scholarly efforts resonate with the simultaneous resurgence of popular interest in the built environments of the former socialist world, most obviously manifested through the mass media’s focus on the more spectacular achievements. From Soviet bus stops and Yugoslav war memorials to futuristic civic structures and resorts found all over Eastern Europe, socialist architecture is now regularly featured in coffee-table books, popular periodicals, and Internet blogs. Between mass-media sensationalism and pioneering works by urban and cultural historians, architectural history proper is only starting to catch up with other fields in historicizing the socialist world, including mass housing as its central architectural problem. Towards a Typology of Soviet Mass Housing is a groundbreaking effort in that respect. A product of obvious enthusiasm, it is best described as a source book that offers an enormous amount of primary information, including around a thousand illustrations: archival drawings, maps, and period and contemporary photos, as well as newly produced diagrams. The book does not offer much interpretation or a strong historical-theoretical argument, but it is notable for providing an unparalleled insight into a vast amount of material previously inaccessible to scholars outside the former Soviet Union.

The volume is divided into two clearly defined sections. In the first part, titled “Typology,” Philipp Meuser presents a broad systematization of the material according to ten parameters: from the institutional and legislative frameworks through spatial organizations, structural systems, and architectural styles of apartment buildings to the typical methods of construction. The “Catalogue,” written and compiled by Dimitrij Zadorin,