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Monique Yaari. *Rethinking the French City: Architecture, Dwelling, and Display after 1968.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. xxxi + 491 pp. $152.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-420-2500-4.

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The Après-moderne in French Architecture and Urbanism

In her latest book, Monique Yaari undertakes an ambitious analysis of contemporary urban discourse in France. The events of 1968, she argues, were a turning point that accelerated postmodern attacks on modernism, ultimately producing "the possibility of a dialectical transcendence of both" (p. xxvi). Yaari traces these intellectual trends through the lens of exhibitions and their accompanying catalogs, most produced in the 1980s. In 1981, for example, the Festival d'Automne hosted La présence de l'histoire: l'après-modernisme, an exhibit in which Paolo Portoghesi coordinated critiques of modernism. The modernist response took the form of another exhibit, Paul Chemetov's La modernité, un projet inachevé, which the festival featured in 1982. A major debate focused on modernist social housing estates. They had failed, contended Portoghesi, because architects had concentrated too exclusively on housing, neglecting to devote sufficient attention to the city as a whole. Chemetov retorted that modernists' dedication to social housing was a valuable democratic project. The major setbacks, he believed, were the product of political and economic forces beyond the control of architects. The divisions between modernists and postmodernists ran deep, but Yaari uncovered elements of common ground. Chemetov saw the city, broadly writ, as "modernity's unfinished task," while Christian Norberg-Schultz, one of the contributors to Portoghesi's program, saw housing as an essential element of "authentic" architecture (pp. 32, 35). For Yaari, the fuzziness of the edges between the two camps gave rise to a third way. Drawing on Portoghesi's title, Yaari terms this trend the "*après-moderne.*"

Yaari sees the *après-moderne* most clearly illustrated in the catalogs of the Paris Biennials of 1980 and 1982. Numerous innovators participated in these exhibits. Jean Nouvel, François Barré, and Françoise Choay argued that urban forms had to link past, present, and future in nuanced ways, rather than resorting to either modernist futurism or postmodern historicism. Pierre Sansot and Damien Hambye embraced the blighted suburbs (*banlieues*) and advocated user participation in planning. Bernard Tschumi applied deconstructionist principles to urban design. Olivier Mongin and Christian de Portzamparc wove plant life into the physical spaces of the city. In sum, "the focus of the debate moves away from the temporality and spatiality of the modern and postmodern movements, toward other concerns that permit rethinking the city in different terms" (p. 49).

Some readers will take issue with Yaari's *après-moderne*, an ambiguous concept that blurs the lines between modernism and postmodernism. However, the hybrid nature of recent French thought on the city is precisely the characteristic that Yaari is highlighting. The conflicts and contradictions, she reasons, created something new. In this reviewer's opinion, Yaari's paradigm is useful, though one must keep in mind that most of the architects, urbanists, and scholars whom she examines would not identify themselves as *après-moderne.*

The theoretical part of Yaari's book has many strengths. Her mastery of the ideas of dozens of thinkers is truly impressive, and she teases out the complexities of the concepts with sophistication. However, poor presentation compromises the integrity of this section. Especially frustrating are hundreds–literally hundreds–of quotations, many quite lengthy, which Yaari provides in both the French original and English translation. For quotations set within paragraphs, Yaari places the English in parentheses. These long parenthetical expressions break the flow of the text and require the reader to constantly scan for the next thread. Yaari risks losing readers' attention and perhaps even their understanding of the points she is trying to convey.

In the remaining sections of her book, Yaari examines the material productions to which the *après-moderne* gave rise: the Antigone and Porte Marianne develop-

ments in Montpellier; the Euralille district in Lille; and three projects in Paris–the Pompidou Center at the heart of the capital, the Mare-Cascades Sector in Belleville, and the Parc de la Villette on the city's northeastern periphery. The chapter on Belleville provides a good example of Yaari's analysis. For the renovation of Mare-Cascades, architect Antoine Grumbach adopted an approach that Yaari describes as "soft urbanism." Working with a neighborhood association, Grumbach retained many of the area's existing buildings as sites of memory and conviviality. He replaced structures that could not be saved with modernist ones, but he successfully wove them into the neighborhood's fabric by conforming to traditional heights. The social structure also remained intact because of the inclusion of low-income housing, thus avoiding the gentrification that had displaced residents from other portions of eastern Paris. To facilitate social interaction, Grumbach included a number of gardens as well as an eleven-acre park. According to Yaari, Grumbach turned "away from an architecture of singular objects to an architecture of the city, to the city's fabric, to the modest accommodations it requires" (p. 284).

Completed in 1989, the renovation of the Mare-Cascades area appears to be a success. Yaari finds the buildings aesthetically rich, and she sees the life of the neighborhood as evidence of social cohesion. Yaari notes, though, that credit goes beyond Grumbach to state officials, who in 1977 decided to abandon development schemes calling for significant alteration of Paris's physical structure. Yaari sees this policy itself as an outcome of the post-1968 debates that produced the *après-moderne*. She argues, however, that sensitive development schemes are not simply the products of benevolent designers and policymakers informed by new concepts. Good plans are also the result of local contestation, as revealed by the struggle to preserve the neighborhood of Bas-Belleville. Despite the reorientation of city planning and the work of Grumbach in the nearby Mare-Cascades neighborhood, a semipublic company called SAEMAR Sainte-Blaise proposed demolition and reconstruction of Bas-Belleville in 1989.[1] In response, residents formed La Bellevilleuse, an association that lobbied officials and mounted protests in the streets. After four years of debate, the association won its fight. Yaari attributes this success both to the dedication of association leaders and to an evolving context in which politicians, architects, and urbanists were increasingly sympathetic to notions of the *après-moderne*. Thus, concludes Yaari, "this story should not be read as a simple case of David against Goliath, but rather as a complex situational web" (p. 298).

As the foregoing indicates, Yaari is cautiously optimistic about the possibilities of the *après-moderne*. She does highlight lingering sources of concern. In Belleville, for example, "soft urbanism" has not solved all of the area's social problems. Unemployment, narcotics, and vandalism remain significant issues. Yaari nonetheless sees the stories of Mare-Cascades and Bas-Belleville as "scenarios of hope," and her narrative technique reflects this optimism (p. 361). Eschewing the disruptive quotations of the first portion of the book, Yaari takes readers on a series of "strolls" through the districts she examines. The prose is light-hearted and engaging. In some ways, though, it presents too stark a contrast with the tone in the theoretical chapters. The almost joyful nature of Yaari's language leads one to question whether she might be too hopeful about the prospects of architecture and urbanism based on the *après-moderne*. This reviewer wonders, for example, about the ability of *après-moderne* planners to deal with the sprawling suburban communities of single-family homes, a subject that Yaari hardly touches but that is of considerable concern in France.[2]

Despite such issues, Yaari's achievement is considerable. She has constructed an intriguing interpretive paradigm, and her evaluation of the products and prospects of the *après-moderne* deserves serious consideration.

Notes

[1]. The full name of the SAEMAR Sainte-Blaise is the Société anonyme d'économie mixte d'aménagement et de rénovation du secteur Saint-Blaise.

[2]. See, for example, Guy Tapie, ed., *Maison individuelle, architecture, urbanité* (Paris: Éditions de l'Aube, 2005).

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