

Build the Imaginary:

Urban Futures and New Towns in Post-war French Spatial Planning

Abstract

Post-war France was reshaped by a sustained period of spatial planning and modernization. This was particularly so during the presidency of Charles de Gaulle (1958-1969), as the country positioned itself as a modern European nation after decolonization. In its approach and execution, French spatial planning represented the sort of imperious state intervention critiqued by radical spatial theorists such as Henri Lefebvre. Yet it remained the case that the planners articulated a rich vision of France's future, filled with space and light. Not only that, but they had the means to bring their vision into being. During the mid-1960s, the building of New Towns became central to their thinking. This article revisits spatial planning as a realm of the imagination, and considers how the nation's future was portrayed in textual and visual forms. It explores how the translation of dreams into built realities became a source of political tension, and how those tensions found public expression in the visual media.

Keywords

State planning; France; DATAR; Cergy-Pontoise; Paul Delouvrier; Bernard Hirsch; Henri Lefebvre; Éric Rohmer; discourse; representation

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Post-war France was keen to get into the future and put the past behind it. That past was defined by the twin humiliations of occupation during the Second World War and the loss of imperial status and power. The speed and depth of France's post-war transformation was remarkable. The country was reconfigured, as Kristin Ross puts it, 'from a rural, empire-oriented, Catholic country into a fully industrialized, decolonized and urban one' (1995: 4). In effect, it lived through an experiment in how national renewal could be expressed through spatial planning and modernization (what the French call *aménagement du territoire*); and how modernization could find urban form in New Towns as symbols and drivers of France's futurity-in-the-making.

French spatial planning was a political programme as much as it was a technical and administrative one; but it was also fuelled by the dreams and imagination of the planners. As they set out to envision the nation's future, they produced an abundance of texts, plans, maps, scale models, photographs, brochures and other discursive and iconographic forms. The wealth of such material, as Rosemary Wakeman has argued in relation to planning activity more broadly, 'deserves to be treated in its own right as a creative endeavor' (2016: 15). Indeed, the French case reveals the extent to which spatial planning is predicated on practices of representation; and how those practices mediate between the planners' imaginary worlds and the built forms they produce.

Aligning itself with recent research highlighting the centrality of narrative, visualization and other representational practices in spatial planning, this article homes in on how France's planners used texts, images and other semiotic forms in their work, and how their activities were in turn mediated and staged for a national audience as the project of French modernization unfolded. It examines the shifting political fortunes of spatial planning and its outcomes, the most notable of which were

New Towns like Cergy-Pontoise, built on the outskirts of Paris, and the role played by representational forms in shaping their emergence as contested objects. Mobilizing the work of Bruno Latour on the politics of things, it argues that Cergy-Pontoise appeared in the landscape at once as a physical place and a thing in the political sense, around which people gathered in debate and disagreement, and about which conflicting stories were told. In a way that illustrated the rapid half-life of French modernization, what had appeared in the 1960s to encapsulate France's future-in-the-present began to seem, by the mid-1970s, like remnants of a dream of the future from the past.

Planning or Death

In 1965, France was in the midst of three decades of post-war growth that would become known as the *Trente Glorieuses* (thirty glorious years). For those in charge, it was a unique period of national renewal. The politician Olivier Guichard, an ally of president Charles de Gaulle, could make the bold claim that France's rate of growth made it comparable to other developing nations. Like them, its vigour gave France a youthful feel: 'l'évolution récente nous a donné à nouveau les dimensions d'un pays neuf' (1965: 27) (recent changes have given our country a new look).¹ It was seizing the opportunity to start afresh, and to reinvent itself as a modern nation.

For Guichard to position France alongside other developing countries was eye-catching, not least because they were emerging as independent nations from an era of colonial domination by the European powers, chief amongst which was France itself. Yet if his claim had a degree of accuracy, it was because France too was finding its way in the world as a post-colonial country. Given that he was writing in

¹ This and all subsequent translations are my own.

1965, it is hard not to hear, in his remarks about ‘recent changes’ and their effects on France’s ‘dimensions’, an oblique reference to the settlement with Algeria in 1962 after eight years of conflict.

In effect, France had found itself living through two ‘post-war’ moments in relatively quick succession. The first came with the country’s liberation from Nazi occupation in 1944 and the end of the Second World War. The second was marked by the conclusion of the Algerian War, which was the final phase of France’s protracted negotiation with decolonization. Algeria’s accession to independence marked the end of France’s imperial ambitions, and a folding back into the hexagonal frontiers of its metropolitan territory.

The conflict had already provoked major political change in France. A government crisis over Algeria in May 1958 led to the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the return to power of providential wartime leader Charles de Gaulle. His redrafted constitution for the Fifth Republic shifted the balance of power away from the legislature to the executive, and simultaneously concentrated it in the figure of the president. Not only did this give him the political means to resolve the situation in Algeria, but it also gave him the scope to initiate some profound domestic transformations (Dulong 1997).

De Gaulle made no secret of his belief in France’s grandeur and its special place in the world. His war memoirs begin with a famous declaration: ‘toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France’ (1954: 1) (all my life, I have had a certain sense of France). At one level, that sense was a relatively abstract one of a country ‘vouée à une destinée éminente et exceptionnelle’ (1954: 1) (blessed with a distinguished and exceptional destiny). During his presidency, it found more concrete expression through *aménagement du territoire* as the planned development of national

territory, and one of the most visible signs of the country's economic and national rebirth. Through modernization, France could reassert itself as a leading European nation, having been a signatory of the Treaty of Rome in 1957.

Of course, France was not alone in Europe in undergoing a substantial period of reconstruction, modernization and economic growth in the decades following the Second World War; nor in adopting the view – shaped, as Rosemary Wakeman (2016: 11) suggests, by the experience of the war as a massive exercise of planning, logistics and organization – that the state could mobilize the national territory and its resources in a systematic way according to rationalist principles. Moreover, the development of territory through planning expertise offered an antidote to the chaos, disease and impoverishment caused by unregulated urban growth in the industrial age. The conceptual roots of post-war spatial planning lay in the pre-war internationalist movements of urbanism and architectural modernism; but as Wakeman also makes clear in her history of the New Town movement, 'modernism and modernization were never truly international' (2016: 8). As planning ideas and practices crossed borders, they were refracted by local concerns, preoccupations and politics.

The distinctiveness of French modernization lay in how the government conceived of the national territory as a whole and set out to act on it as a total system. Olivier Guichard defined *aménagement du territoire* as 'la volonté précise d'une collectivité qui pense son organisation générale en fonction de ses ressources territoriales' (1965: 14) (the precise will of a community which thinks about its overall development in the light of the territorial resources at its disposal). His definition is doing some interesting political and ideological work. The Cartesian verb, 'pense', highlights the considered nature of spatial planning as an outcome of reason and logic; but it also assumes the agency and power of the subject of the verb.

Moreover, the politician in Guichard was quick to assert spatial planning as the expression of a collective (national) will, by implication delegated to the group of planners and administrators who would implement it.

Guichard was writing after his first two years as the director of the Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'action régionale (DATAR), which had been created by decree in 1963 to coordinate spatial planning and regional development across the national territory. In a sign of the strategic and political importance of *aménagement du territoire* for De Gaulle's government, Guichard reported directly to the prime minister. Meanwhile, 1965 also saw the publication of a development plan for the Paris region, the *Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région de Paris* (SDAURP), overseen by Paul Delouvrier. A senior civil servant who had spent two years as the French government's representative in Algeria, Delouvrier was appointed *délégué général* for the Paris region in 1961, and then prefect in 1966. Like his counterpart at the DATAR, Delouvrier reported directly to the prime minister (and also like Guichard, was a loyal Gaullist).

The broad aim of national spatial planning was to counteract what had come to be seen as the distorting influence of Paris over the rest of the country, by enhancing national infrastructure and stimulating relocation of economic activity to 'underdeveloped' areas of the country. In a similar way, the *Schéma directeur* emphasised the organisation and development of the broader Paris region; first, in order to ease pressure on central Paris caused by a growing population, poor infrastructure, and dilapidated housing stock; second, to ensure the region could play the role of economic motor in the context of a nascent European common market. Taking as its horizon the year 2000, it assumed a projected growth in population from

eight to fourteen million by the turn of the century (the actual population by 2000 would be around eleven million).

Along with motorways and the RER rapid transit rail network, the *Schéma directeur* proposed a major innovation in the form of a series of New Towns. Five would be built on greenfield sites, ringing central Paris at distance of around 30-40km. The DATAR initiated the construction of a further four New Towns around the country, from Lille (Villeneuve d'Ascq) in the north to Marseille (Étang de Berre) in the south. The location for the first of the Parisian New Towns was Cergy-Pontoise, to the north west of the capital, where construction began in 1969.

France came late to the idea of New Towns as instruments of spatial planning compared to other European countries like Sweden and Great Britain, where the New Towns Act was passed in 1946 and the development of Stevenage as the first New Town began soon afterwards. Delouvrier and his team undertook a 'grand tour' of European New Towns, to borrow Wakeman's phrase (2016: 221), as they prepared the *Schéma directeur*. They took the opportunity to learn from some of the mistakes made by their pioneering neighbours. On a visit to London, and much to the surprise of his hosts, Delouvrier asked to fly over the region in a helicopter, a habit he had acquired in his role as *délégué général* (Murard and Fourquet 2004: 107). The distance separating Stevenage from London became clear, and accounted for the complaints of the residents he met in the New Town, who found themselves forced to spend time travelling to the capital for work and leisure.

The Parisian New Towns would be positioned closer to central Paris, while being autonomous urban centres supporting large populations (the target was around 450,000 in the case of Cergy), major administrative functions, industry and commerce. In doing so, they would help to address some of the problems caused by

earlier and more hurried approaches to the capital's housing crisis (the most emblematic of which were the *grands ensembles*, large housing estates built on cheap land in the suburbs, often leaving their inhabitants cut off from transport links and town centres). Their design and construction would also serve to articulate the futurity-in-the-present of a modernised France, enabling the promotion of a new mode of living, between city and country, which seemed to embody the benefits of leisure and prosperity in an expanding consumer economy.

That Delouvrier's team was working with the year 2000 as its horizon is a measure at once of the scale and ambition of French spatial planning, and of its preoccupation with the future. The very nature of planning implies orientation and projection towards the future; but lurking within *aménagement* was a more complex sense of the relationship between planning and time. As Guichard put it, 'l'aménagement ne vit pas dans l'époque présent; il doit toujours la devancer, projeter sur l'avenir' (1965: 26) (spatial planning does not live in the present; it must always be one step ahead, projecting into the future). Guichard's claim carries an imprint of the so-called prospective thinking that emerged as a significant influence on post-war planning in France (Durance 2007, Andersson 2018). Proposed by the philosopher Gaston Berger in the 1950s, *la prospective* conceived of planning in an anticipatory mode. Rather than taking present realities as the starting point for future action, the prospective approach was to use projections about the future in order to inform action in the present; or, we might say, to bring anticipated futures forward into the present.

But like many political strategies, planning had become freighted with moral significance, which Georges Pompidou (prime minister at the time) articulated in dramatic terms during a debate on the *Schéma directeur* in the French National Assembly in June 1965:

Nous sommes engagés dans une évolution qui nous contraint, *sous peine de décadence, et même de mort*, de progresser. Mais nous voulons progresser les yeux ouverts, c'est-à-dire prévoir. Le schéma directeur pour la région parisienne témoignera de la volonté du Gouvernement de ne pas subir l'évolution, mais d'essayer de la contrôler afin qu'elle serve l'homme au lieu de l'écraser. (Pompidou 1965: 2252, my emphasis)

(We are undergoing an evolution which commits us to progress, and without progress, *entropy and even death await us*. But we want to move forward with our eyes open, that is to say, anticipate the future. The development plan for the Paris region reflects the government's determination to control evolution rather than be subjected to it, so it can serve mankind rather than crush it.)

Planning or death: as agents of progress, the planners were nothing less than France's defence against terminal national decline.

Berger defined *la prospective* as an attitude rather than a method or a discipline (1964: 270), a way of being and understanding in relation to the future that implied a certain confidence and agency. Precisely that sort of attitude was on display for the readers of *Paris Match*, France's most popular news magazine, on 1 July 1967. The front cover of the magazine, dominated by the usual full-colour image, offered an 'exclusive report from the future'. Under the headline 'Paris in twenty years' time', an artist's impression depicted wide, sunlit boulevards, expansive green spaces, and

helicopters shuttling between tall buildings. The nation's future, it suggested, would be expressed most obviously in urban form, but would be filled with space and light.²

On the inside pages, interspersed with further illustrations of the landscapes of modernity, were photographs showing the planners at work. In one, Paul Delouvrier sits at the head of a committee table, in front of a vast aerial photograph of the Paris region. In another, the reporters from *Paris Match* are gathered with the planners round a table covered with maps and plans of the *Schéma directeur*.

Figure 1: The planners at work. *Paris Match*, 1 July 1967, pp. 42-43, author's personal collection.

What catches the eye in both these images is the presence amongst the planners of different forms of representation, and visual material especially (photographic and iconographic). If representational forms acquire such a central role in planning, it is because of the role of mediation and abstraction they perform. Transforming the world into symbolic material was the first stage in enabling the planners to gain the measure of the world lying beyond the meeting room, and prepare their interventions in it.

That they also had the resources to carry out those interventions is illustrated by the story's closing photo: a full-page image shows Delouvrier in a police helicopter flying past an office block in the new business district at La Défense. Yet the image is also an uneasy reminder of the powers available to Delouvrier not simply as an agent of the nation-state, but as one who reported directly to the prime minister.

² As such, it provided a neat illustration of Raymond Williams' point that advancing nations tend to imagine their futures in primarily urban terms (Williams 1973). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of Williams' argument.

It demonstrates why the *Schéma directeur* and the work of the DATAR seemed to encapsulate the sort of imperious urbanism decried by radical spatial theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, for whom such activities manifested a form of state violence against its citizens: ‘il reste que l’État naît de la violence et que le pouvoir étatique ne persiste que par la violence exercée sur un espace’ (1974: 323) (it remains the case that the State is born from violence, and that state power is only sustained through the violence practiced on space). In making this claim, Lefebvre poses the question of modernity in whose name, and at what cost. For as Michel Foucault notes, given that the scope of sovereign power is ‘l’intrication perpétuelle d’un milieu géographique, climatique, physique avec l’espèce humaine’ (2004: 24) (the constant intermeshing of a geographical, climatic and physical milieu with the human race), a state’s interventions in its territory are not simply a matter of reshaping landscapes and creating built environments. Inevitably, they also involve interventions in the existing social fabric, and the way the nation’s citizens lead their lives.

As a conservative journal with one of France’s largest readerships (up to ten million people in the 1950s and 1960s), *Paris Match* wielded significant cultural and political influence, and was closely aligned with the country’s governing elite;³ but while the magazine’s multi-page spread might have been intended as a sympathetic presentation of the government’s plans for Paris, it in fact achieves the more interesting outcome of articulating the complex nature of the futures being created by the spatial planners. For if the article’s closing image supports Lefebvre’s analysis of *aménagement* as a manifestation of state power and violence (or, he might say, gives its game away), both the rich iconography and the enthusiasm displayed by the planners as they present their ideas simultaneously illustrate Guichard’s claim that

³ On the politics of *Paris Match* and its use of photography, see Welch (2020).

‘l’aménagement est inséparable de la création’ (1965: 25) (spatial planning is inseparable from creation). French spatial planning was a realm of the imagination. It was fed by hopes for, and dreams of, the nation’s future even as it required critique as an expression of symbolic state violence.

The *Paris Match* story demonstrates how spatial planners mobilized a range of discursive and iconographic forms to help formulate their ideas and communicate the urban futures they were proposing to France’s citizens. Put another way, those forms articulate what Sylvia Ostrowetsky terms ‘l’imaginaire bâtisseur’, an envisioning of the built future which takes shape through the work of the planners. Ostrowetsky uses the concept of the imaginary not in its psychoanalytic or phenomenological sense, but as the imagining and projection of a shared social reality. What counts in particular, she argues, is the *productive capacity* of the imaginary (Ostrowetsky 1983: 89). It is not just a question of transforming ideas into images, texts and other representational forms, but of the creative potential of those representations and how, in turn, they can shape the production of reality.

The past two decades or so have seen a growing recognition of the role of textual and visual representation in spatial planning amongst practitioners and theorists (Throgmorton 1996, Debarbieux and Lardon 2003, Sandercock 2003, Ameen 2017). Yet in many ways, it is striking that it has taken so long to acknowledge and reflect on the centrality of representational practices to the work of planning. For the photos in *Paris Match* – not least the one showing the aerial photo serving as a backdrop to Delouvrier’s meeting – made their role evident for all to see, hidden in plain sight like Poe’s purloined letter. The photos reveal the extent to which the planners worked with and through images, texts, scale models, maps and other representational forms as they brought their new urban worlds into being.

At the same time, as Ostrowetsky points out, the transformation of vision into reality is the tension at the heart of urban planning. Planning navigates back and forth between ‘l’espace utopique du désir et l’espace réaliste de la décision’ (1983: 144) (the utopian space of desire and the pragmatic space of decision-making). The move from desire and imagination to decisions on the ground is where difficulties begin to emerge. Discursive, iconographic and symbolic forms translate or mediate between the realms of imagination and action; the *Paris Match* story demonstrated that they also have a central role to play in shaping perceptions of the changes under way.

The birth of the New Towns illustrates these processes through the way their emergence and development are portrayed. In the first place, we see how the planners mobilized different modes of representation like photographs, maps and scale models, and the imaginative work performed by that material as it expressed their vision for France’s urban future. But as the planners were well aware in courting *Paris Match*, the activity of planning unfolds in the public eye, and the public becomes part of the gathering constituted by the things planning produces, to be persuaded of the realities of its vision as they appear in built form. The products of planning start to take on a political life, enmeshed in conflicting perceptions and understandings of the future. That is to say, they become things in the sense understood by philosopher Bruno Latour, whose notion of *Dingpolitik*, or a politics of things, mobilises the etymological meaning of ‘thing’ or ‘ding’ as a place for assembly and debate (Latour 2005: 22-23). Things are at once empirical and discursive, talked about and constituted by talking. People gather around them in disagreement, and they produce disagreement through their being-in-the-world.

To explore these questions further, I focus in the remainder of the article on the case of Cergy-Pontoise, whose status as the first of the Parisian New Towns to

begin construction meant that it was the subject of extensive discussion and reflection. If the New Towns were intended to make manifest the distinctive qualities of French modernity, they quickly became ambiguous signs of the modernizing project and objects of dispute. With the building project well under way, a documentary by journalist Jean-Paul Pigeat and filmmaker Éric Rohmer on the creation of Cergy would start with a question: ‘est-ce que, aujourd’hui, en 1975, on peut encore fabriquer une ville?’ (Pigeat and Rohmer 1975) (can one still make towns today, in 1975?). Their use of the interrogative signalled the scepticism and uncertainty surrounding Cergy as a New Town and the larger project it represented. Moreover, it did so even as the first inhabitants were moving in and Cergy covered, as Pigeat noted in his introduction to the film, a surface area larger than central Paris. I investigate how the construction of Cergy is reported by French television, and how planning and its outcomes emerge as objects of political dispute. In particular, I discuss how Pigeat and Rohmer’s film, *Enfance d’une ville*, captures the planners’ work of translation as they attempt to give material form to their dreams of the future, and the inevitable difficulties they negotiate in that process.

I begin the next section by returning to Henri Lefebvre’s critique of planning as a form of state violence, and place it in dialogue with the planners’ activities. What does it mean to take seriously the humanistic claims made for spatial planning, whose task, argued Delouvrier in the *Schéma directeur*, was to create the conditions of happiness for as many people as possible? How might happiness, hopes and dreams be expressed in the spatial transformations his planners set in motion, even as those transformations enact the violence of the state?

Planning and Violence

In an interview with the journal *Villes en parallèle* in 1983, Lefebvre pinpointed the DATAR's activities as the trigger for his work on the production of space, and the nature of the spaces produced by the technocratic interventions of the state. It would lead most notably to his book, *La Production de l'espace (The Production of Space)*, published in 1974. In the interview, Lefebvre acknowledged the distinctiveness, scale and ambition of French spatial planning, while criticizing its consequences:

La DATAR se proposait de réaménager la France, avec des perspectives tout-à-fait contestables, parfois catastrophiques. Certaines personnes, et j'en étais, émettaient des critiques. Mais c'est sans doute un phénomène français original. Je ne sais pas si dans beaucoup de pays on a dépassé le stade de la planification financière par les budgets, pour aller jusqu'à la planification de l'espace. Je crois que cela a été une création, une invention française.

(Lefebvre, Burgel, Burgel and Deneaux 1983: 51)

(The DATAR set out to redevelop France on the basis of assumptions that were debatable, and sometimes catastrophic. Some people like me were critical. But there's no doubt that it's a distinctively French phenomenon. There aren't many countries in the world which moved from financial planning via annual budgets to spatial planning. I think it was a French creation, a French invention.)

At stake in particular for Lefebvre were the *types* of space produced by spatial planning, and specifically the 'abstract space' which he saw as planning's chief and most problematic outcome.

Spatial planning is predicated on abstraction. It tends towards the production of spatial coherence and homogeneity in the aim of improved efficiency, organisation and circulation. It also mobilises abstracting techniques of representation like maps, plans, models and aerial photographs which make space more 'legible', to use Jeanne Haffner's term (2013: 112), by distilling information and affording a totalising perspective. What matters is not just the abstractions inherent within the planning perspective, but also the spaces produced by that perspective, which themselves have abstract qualities, and in turn produce the effect of spatial abstraction: grid systems, right angles, long avenues, tall buildings; materials whose qualities and textures evacuate traces of history, identity and difference, and result in a strange, two-dimensional feel. For Lefebvre, 'cet espace formel et quantifié nie les différences, celles en provenance de la nature et du temps (historique) comme celles qui viennent des corps, âges, sexes, ethnies' (1974: 61) (this formal and quantified space negates differences derived from nature and history, or from bodies, age, sex, ethnicity). In doing so, crucially for Lefebvre, abstract space has a deteriorating effect on the spontaneity of lived experience and the fabric of everyday life: 'le vécu s'écrase. Le conçu l'emporte' (1974: 63) (lived experience is crushed, the planned dominates).

If Lefebvre sees the conception and production of abstract space as a violent process, it is because of the distortions it imposes, and the fundamental imbalances of power it manifests within society. Planned space (*l'espace conçu*) is the 'dominant' form of space in society (1974: 48), not necessarily because it is the most prevalent, but because it most acutely asserts authority, and is geared towards maintaining the established social and economic order. As such, it reminds its users that the conception and production of space remains the prerogative of the powerful, and especially of the state.

Lefebvre positions abstract space in opposition to ‘spaces of representation’, which are the setting and context for the expression of human life, activity, emotion and desire. Spaces of representation are places of passion, action and lived experience (1974: 52). They are the domain of the imaginary and the symbolic; of spontaneity, creativity and vitality rather than logic and abstraction. Where the conception of space tends to rely on language, spaces of representation encourage a proliferation of symbolic forms, and prefer non-verbal over verbal means of expression (1974: 49).

Lefebvre’s latter claims here do not necessarily stand up to scrutiny. Indeed, we have seen that spatial planning is in many respects a process of visualization above all. More to the point, perhaps, is his sense of the monologic nature of spatial planning. As it imposes its built forms on the landscape, planning evacuates the more playful, creative and dialogic realms of the imaginary and the symbolic. Techniques of representation are mobilized and instrumentalized with the single aim of mediating space and preparing it for transformation.

We gain an impression of this process at work in a news report on the development of Cergy-Pontoise broadcast on French television in December 1970, the year after work started on the New Town (Misrai 1970). The report opens with a rapid montage of exterior shots showing Cergy-Pontoise under construction, interrupted by a slow pan over a scale model of the New Town to give viewers a sense of the scale and scope of the project. The cut to the model and back to the construction sites establishes a relationship between the emergence of built space and its conception by the planners that becomes one of the report’s striking motifs.

Around a hundred seconds into the report, the camera zooms out from a close-up of a construction worker on scaffolding to reveal its location inside a building where the planners are busy with architects’ drawings, maps and plans. The camera

then moves past more offices, while the voiceover observes that ‘ils font sortir de leurs plans la ville nouvelle’ (the New Town emerges from their plans). The gesture of the zoom shot is significant in making explicit a causal link between the production of the built environments taking shape around the office, and their origins as designs on the planners’ drawing boards. In doing so, it demonstrates the powerful performative force of those designs, and their ability to bring about change in the world, a force spelled out by the narrative voiceover.

The item concludes with the reporter interviewing Bernard Hirsch, director of the Cergy-Pontoise development agency (*établissement public d’aménagement*), as they perch on a table next to a scale model of the New Town. The sequence is filmed using a low-angle shot, with the camera placed at the level of the scale model in the foreground as Hirsch looks down on it from above. Like the earlier scene in the planners’ office, the shot serves to establish a sense of the planners’ creative agency and volition in relation to the places they are creating, as well as their relationship with the different representational forms which help them envision and produce the worlds they want to bring into being.

At the same time, the news report is revealing for another reason. In paying close attention to the planners at work, and introducing its viewers to figures such as Bernard Hirsch, it helps to re-humanise the process of spatial planning, and give a sense of how it is lived by those involved. An irony of Lefebvre’s writing about abstract space is that it tends to abstract out human agency in the process. His analysis highlights its origins in the impersonal mechanics of capital and the state, with the latter working to maintain an effective and productive environment for the former (1974: 65). At one level, we can read Lefebvre’s emphasis on the dehumanised production of abstract space as itself a staging or effect of the violence he ascribes to

processes of spatial abstraction and representation; but on another, it means we lose sight of the fact that spatial planning remains a profoundly human activity, led by historically situated individuals filled with their own feelings, desires and beliefs. In other words, we should not underestimate the extent to which state-led planning, like the lived ‘spaces of representation’ favoured by Lefebvre, has its roots in imagination, passion and action, to use Lefebvre’s own terms.

Archival material affords a glimpse of the sort of affective investment made by the planners in their work. In October 1972, Bernard Hirsch sent a confidential memo to Paul Delouvrier, Maurice Doublet (Delouvrier’s replacement as Prefect of the region) and Jean-Eudes Roullier (in charge of the coordinating body for the New Towns, the *Groupe central des villes nouvelles*). Mired in disagreement with local councillors over the governance of the New Town, Hirsch set out his concerns over the increasingly fraught politics surrounding the development of Cergy-Pontoise. The nine-page typescript, entitled ‘À titre personnel...’ (A personal note), is lodged with his papers in the departmental archives of the Val d’Oise in Cergy-Pontoise. In it, Hirsch reflects on the progress made since his appointment as director of the New Town development authority seven years earlier, and the challenges (financial, administrative, infrastructural) that lay ahead.

On the first page is a striking expression of faith in Cergy and the project it represents, couched in terms of the sacrifice required in order to ensure its success: ‘je crois aux villes nouvelles, je crois à Cergy-Pontoise, et j’ai toujours estimé que tout devait être sacrifié à la réussite de cette ambition’ (Hirsch 1972: 1) (I believe in the new towns, I believe in Cergy-Pontoise, and I have always felt that everything had to be sacrificed in order for their success to be achieved). In locating his actions on a moral plane, the vocabulary of faith and sacrifice echoes the broader idea of public

service as a form of devotion to the greater good of the nation which was central to the ethos (but also the auto-mythology) of those involved in the project of French spatial planning.⁴

Amongst Hirsch's papers as well is a photograph album from 1975, the year he stepped down as director of the Cergy-Pontoise development agency. Comprising 71 pages, the album has the look and feel of a personal possession, with photos of varying size (in black and white and colour) mounted haphazardly on ring-bound grey card. Many are annotated with names, dates, locations and other details.

Figure 2: Page from the personal photograph album of Bernard Hirsch, 1975. Fonds Bernard Hirsch, Archives départementales du Val d'Oise, 26 J 25. Courtesy of the Archives départementales du Val d'Oise.

A number of images capture the different stages of Cergy's development: views of agricultural landscapes taken as the site was being reconnoitred; photos of the maps and models being produced by the planners; images of the new slip roads and motorway junctions connecting Cergy to the region's expanding road network. But the album also includes informal photos of Hirsch's planning team, scenes from group outings, social gatherings and leaving parties; that is to say, all the facets of social life and social relations that constitute professional activity. The album certainly performs the function we might expect of such objects, gathering together material traces of memory to form the threads of a life story. At the same time, it displays the extent to which Hirsch's individual biography as a planner is part of a collective human adventure.

⁴ On planning as both an ethos and an opportunity for (typically heroic) narratives told by the actors involved, see Gaïti (2002), Vadelorge (2005) and Welch (2018).

Drawing out the human dimension of planning activity opens up alternative perspectives on scenes which at first seem to support Lefebvre's analysis of the state and the violence of its methods. The image of Hirsch sitting with a model he is turning into a place is the obvious prelude to scenes like that of Delouvrier in his helicopter, flying over his modernised landscapes. Techniques of scale modelling give the power of omniscience that enable totalising transformations to be made. Yet when we see Hirsch perched next to the scale model of Cergy, we also hear him express his hopes for the future of the New Town as a place where people are 'happy to live' and have 'everything they need for life'. As he looks over the model and gestures towards it, he does so in a way which suggests a relationship of care towards the place he is building, and the lives to be lived there. The image captures the ambivalence of planning as an expression simultaneously of state power, and of the state's sense of care towards the nation's citizens, insofar as the state sets out to create the conditions for progress and happiness within its dominion. This dialectic of violence and care is where the politics of spatial planning play out.

By the time Lefebvre published *La Production de l'espace* in 1974, Cergy-Pontoise had been taking shape on the ground for around five years; but it was also encountering a series of headwinds. From Lefebvre's point of view, perhaps, the damage had already been done, in terms of the spaces of abstraction (and therefore of alienation) which were being imposed on the landscape and the people living there. Yet taking shape was in fact a more complex scenario, as the presence of Cergy sparked political debate, and the project of national modernization which it symbolised began increasingly to be called into question.

Planning and Reality

Already in 1972, as we have seen, Bernard Hirsch sensed the politics of *aménagement* was getting increasingly complicated. Taking stock in his memo, he felt nervous about what the future might hold for the New Towns project: ‘cette politique a réussi jusqu’à présent. [...] *Je dis “jusqu’à présent” car je crains qu’à l’avenir il n’en soit plus de même*’ (1972: 3, emphasis in the original) (this policy has succeeded until now. [...] I say ‘until now’ because I fear the same will not be true in the future). An important part of the policy’s success to date, he felt, had been a media strategy designed to publicize Cergy-Pontoise: advertising campaigns, television interviews, public information sessions (1972: 2). In other words, he recognised the need to create the New Town as an object of public discourse, something visible to the public eye. Doing so involved mediating it and transforming it into symbolic form, giving it iconographic and discursive substance.

That he had success with his strategy is reflected in the television news coverage in 1970, or the glossy promotional supplement that *Paris Match* produced in 1971, which displayed life in Cergy as a hybrid of ultramodern urban living and pastoral calm (and implicitly as a middle-class haven). However, like anything given discursive and semiotic contours, the New Town’s meaning quickly slipped from his grasp and became subject to (therefore constituted by) conflicting perceptions, interpretations and narrative framings.

Cergy’s status as a contested object takes shape in another television news report, broadcast in February 1972. Where the report broadcast in 1970 gave Hirsch the space to present his vision for the New Town, and left it relatively unchallenged, the second (little over a year later), highlights a controversy over the expropriation of land for its next phase (Gallard 1972). The newscaster introduces the report by situating the New Towns as an emerging political problem:

Les villes nouvelles de la région parisienne ne s'étendent pas en ce moment sans problèmes, sans difficultés. Exemple, Cergy-Pontoise. Pour devenir la ville rêvée par les urbanistes, il lui faut gagner du terrain et réaliser quelques expropriations, qui est loin de plaire à tout le monde, bien sûr.

(The Parisian new towns are currently experiencing some growing pains and difficulties. Cergy-Pontoise is an example. To become the town dreamed of by the planners, it must acquire land and carry out expropriations, about which not everyone is pleased, of course.)

Moreover, he frames that problem specifically in terms of the cost of moving from planning dream ('la ville rêvée par les urbanistes') to the reality of spatial consumption and production ('il lui faut gagner du terrain').

The report opens with the camera located on the edge of a field and zooming in slowly on Cergy's administrative centre, under construction on the horizon and dominated by the new prefecture in the shape of an inverted pyramid. The way in which the prefecture gradually fills the screen seems to sum up the encroaching presence of the state, the excessive nature of its power, and the troubling nature of the futurity it is imposing on the nation. Not only are the New Town's buildings uncompromisingly modern, but they loom in the landscape, even from afar.

In figuring the New Town as monolithic and remote, the image also suggests the unequal relationship of power between the state and the residents who are at risk from expropriation. Our impression of this is sharpened when the reporter interviews M. Lainé, deputy mayor of a local *commune* (the smallest administrative division in France), and as such, representative and defender of local interests against higher

authority. Lainé is interviewed amongst fields on the plateau where the next phase of Cergy will be built. As he talks, the camera pans round to reveal the New Town in the distance. In many respects, the relationship established between Lainé and the New Town through this shot is the inverse of that between Hirsch and the scale model of Cergy on display in the news report a year or so previously. It becomes clear, out in the fields, how the scale of the New Town is starting to impinge on those who are watching it take shape in their midst.

The report concludes by introducing a further layer of political antagonism. It notes that the concerns at a local level intersect with anger amongst provincial industry leaders, for whom the development of the New Towns means reinforcing the economic dominance of Paris to the detriment of the regions. Its closing seconds stage these political tensions visually by zooming out from a long-range shot of the New Town's construction cranes, and panning round to position a local church in the foreground. Far from being seen as a totem of the brighter future awaiting the nation as a whole, Cergy-Pontoise was becoming bogged down in France's entrenched political antagonisms, which pitted local against national, Paris against the provinces, tradition against modernity.

The patronage of De Gaulle had neutralized political opposition to the *Schéma directeur* during its initial phases. However, his resignation from the presidency in April 1969 left it increasingly exposed to challenges from those whose antagonism had been kept in check during its early years: regional politicians disgruntled at the state's interference in their local area, or new government ministers positioning themselves in opposition to the New Towns as they advanced their political careers. Delouvrier left his post two months before De Gaulle's resignation, having endured an increasingly difficult relationship with the prime minister, Georges Pompidou (due

in part to mounting pressure from members of the Gaullist ruling party), and the new minister for infrastructure, Albin Chalandon. With Pompidou succeeding De Gaulle as president, suggests Loïc Vadelorge (2014: 245), ‘l’avenir des villes nouvelles semble bien incertain’ (the future of the New Towns seemed very much in doubt).⁵ Hence the nervousness to which Bernard Hirsch confessed in 1972.

When they came to make *Enfance d’une ville* in 1975, Jean-Paul Pigeat and Éric Rohmer took as a given Cergy’s existence as an object of dispute. The film was the first in a four-part series on contemporary urban theory and planning for French television. The reason for beginning the series with Cergy is encapsulated by the question posed by Pigeat at the start of the film: what does it mean to create a town from scratch, and is it possible to do so? Having positioned Cergy as a question rather than a solution, they begin their film by picking up the theme of expropriation as a political bone of contention. After an opening interview with Bernard Hirsch in an interior location, the film introduces a local farmer, M. L’Echaudé, whose land had been expropriated to make way for the New Town’s administrative centre. While Hirsch suggests neutrally that the displaced farmers were relocated to a ‘horticultural zone’, L’Echaudé points out, gesturing towards the prefecture in the distance, that the land he has been given is not as good as that from which he has been expropriated.

The confrontation of these two perspectives establishes Cergy as a source of political disagreement, and draws out how politics emerges inevitably as part of its creation; but as the camera pans with the farmer’s gesture to pick out the distinctive outline of the prefecture, it also situates the New Town as a physical presence in the

⁵ On the politics behind Delouvrier’s demise, see Murard and Fourquet (2004: 167-175). The political challenges faced by the planners are another indication that Lefebvre’s more monolithic sense of the state as an all-powerful agent does not necessarily reflect the realities of shifting political allegiances and orthodoxies amongst the actors occupying positions within the field of power.

landscape. Cergy takes shape as a thing in the Latourian sense, making people gravitate towards it, and requiring them to negotiate with and around it. Moreover, the move from Hirsch to L'Echaudé, from planner to expropriated citizen, draws attention to the broader dynamic of planning activity and how it produces the friction of politics. In many respects, *Enfance d'une ville* is a film about the process of translation between plans and reality, about what happens when the places imagined by the planners are turned into material locations. To use Ostrowetsky's terms, it examines the extent to which the imaginary survives contact with the real, as well as the consequences of that encounter, intended or otherwise. It establishes a constant dialogue between the two, moving back and forth between the realm of the planners' imaginary and the reality of the worlds they create.

Key to doing so is the film's alternating use of interior and exterior locations. Most notably, the interview with Hirsch takes place in a room whose walls are covered with maps and plans showing the New Town development area, but where no windows are visible. The room seems entirely cut off from the outside world. Hirsch sits at a table, and behind him, the frame is filled with a large-scale map showing the location of the New Town. The map is overlaid with colour-coded areas marking zones under construction or projected for development. The iconography of the plan articulates the ambition and vision for the site through its use of strong colours and clear lines. Especially prominent is the thick blue line marking the meander of the river Oise, its visibility reflecting its intended role as the site's main anchor point. Likewise, the large block of green in the lower left-hand corner designates a forest on the edge of the New Town development, whose size reinforces an impression of Cergy as a hybrid of urban and rural living.

It is only after the initial exchange with Hirsch that the film cuts to location shots showing the expropriated farmer, the greenfield site around the river, and the New Town taking shape, with the inverted pyramid of its prefecture and the Trois Fontaines shopping mall. Our first encounter with Cergy in the film is thus with its symbolic rather than material form, with the New Town as it has been envisaged, imagined and planned by Hirsch and his team. When Hirsch stands next to the map and explains the vision it portrays, his pose and gestural repertoire (hands sweeping over the map and pausing at particular locations) express the embodied agency which drive the project and enact his command over the territory before him.

The interview with Hirsch is threaded through the film, which means that we see him only in the meeting room, accompanied by the plan which articulates Cergy as an idea. Subsequent interviews with Hirsch's colleagues, meanwhile, situate them in relation to the environments they have helped to produce. While one takes place outside, on a pedestrian walkway connecting two neighbourhoods, others happen in the planning offices, situating the interviewees simultaneously with the apparatus they use to produce space (drawing boards, maps, plans, scale models) and as a backdrop, visible through their office window, the built environments emerging around them, and for which they are responsible.

As it positions the agents of spatial production in relation to their creations, the film makes clear the interplay between vision, action and material reality. At the same time, it captures the magnitude of a process of translation that is not just about built form, but about the lived experience and everyday life of many thousands of people. What also surfaces is an acknowledgement of the friction and resistance that must be negotiated as the translation from vision to reality takes place.

A central cause of this friction is time, and the complex relationship between planning and time. As Marion Schmid notes (2015: 354), time and memory in the New Towns are key themes to emerge in Pigeat and Rohmer's series as a whole. The question of time is doubly important in relation to Cergy-Pontoise. First, in terms of its own duration as a project; and second, in terms of its relationship not so much to the future, as to the past. Oliver Guichard himself observed that 'l'aménagement du territoire dialogue constamment avec le temps' (1965: 26) (spatial planning is in constant dialogue with time). We have seen that from Guichard's perspective, it was a matter of spatial planning being one step ahead of the present as it sought to anticipate the future; but development and construction take time, so that what start out as visions of the future can come to be seen as relics from the past. Indeed, *Enfance d'une ville* captures shifts in opinion within the planning team itself about the aims and principles of the project.

Bernard Hirsch, perhaps unsurprisingly, argues most forcefully that the vision for Cergy has survived the move from scale model to construction site more or less intact: 'c'est quand même assez vertigineux de voir que ce qui a été d'abord étudié sur des maquettes, bien se réalise grandeur nature comme cela a été prévu' (it's really quite something to see what started as a scale model take shape in real life in the way it had been conceived). However, others begin to frame the idea of creating new modes of urban life as something of an outmoded dream. M. Roulet, one of the more outspoken of the younger planners, suggests that pragmatism rather than idealism in urbanism is now the more enlightened approach: 'je pense que ce serait déjà pas mal de faire une bonne ville traditionnelle plutôt que d'espérer de faire une ville futuriste, même nouvelle' (I think it would already be an achievement to produce a traditional town well, rather than try to create a futuristic, or even a new town). Yet even as the

planners reflect on shifts in consensus and offer critiques of established orthodoxies, the worlds they designed according to those orthodoxies are taking shape around them, and the New Town exists as a presence in the landscape.

The closing minutes of *Enfance d'une ville* are devoted to an interview with M. Fournier, the deputy mayor of Éragny, one of the seven local *communes* on whose land Cergy was built. Fournier's starting point is precisely to acknowledge the reality of the New Town as a physical, political and administrative fact with which he must negotiate: 'elle est là, la ville, vous comprenez?' (the town is there, if you see what I mean). For Fournier, Cergy's most pressing concern is that it is a place without a past; and this matters when what constitutes urban and civic life above all is time accumulated as history:

La difficulté dans cette affaire, c'est que, une ville nouvelle n'a pas d'histoire. [...] Il faut faire en sorte que... peut-être pas de créer une histoire de la ville, mais de faire en sorte que vient s'intercaler entre le technicien et l'urbaniste et ce manque d'histoire [...] ce qui fait l'histoire, c'est-à-dire la vie des gens. (The difficulty we have is that a new town has no history. [...] We need to... not necessarily give the town a history, but make sure that what fills the gap between the technicians and the planners and this absence of history [...] is what makes history, that is to say, people's lives.)

Fournier's remarks are the last in the film, made in the moments before the end credits. As such, they can be inferred as the answer to the question asked by Pigeat at the start. Is it still possible to create a town? Hirsch's answer is clear, but Fournier's is more circumspect. Without the anchor of history, the next best thing for the New

Town is the narratives emerging from the lives people establish there; but just as the film starts with a question, so it ends with one. Given that the residents of Cergy were only just moving in, the New Town's future looked uncertain. The confident prospect of national renewal expressed by Guichard a few years previously, and figured in *Paris Match's* sunny renderings of modern landscapes, seemed to have dissipated by the time Pigeat and Rohmer arrived in Cergy to make their film.⁶

New Towns, Fading Dreams

The making of the French New Towns offers a compelling story of a nation setting out to imagine and achieve its future through the creation of new urban worlds. That the outcome was equivocal can be traced to the complex life of spatial planning, whose temporality, modality and duration produce places which exist simultaneously in the past, present and future. On the one hand, the building of Cergy-Pontoise demonstrates how the planners' vision and imagination could survive their transformation into built realities on the ground, thanks to the motive force of state power and political will. On the other, it shows how attempts to display national advancement through urban futurity are quickly overtaken by time, become ensnared in political conflict, and begin to appear as fossils from a bygone era. Yet even then, as Fournier the deputy mayor makes plain, the places that have been envisioned and created persist in the world, defining and shaping everyday life as it unfolds for generations to come. With Cergy-Pontoise and other French New Towns now more than fifty years old, it is perhaps in the peculiarity of their invention, and their presence as reminders of how a nation once dreamt of its future in urban terms, that their relevance and the foundations of their history can most obviously be found.

⁶ On the shifting contexts affecting the development of the New Towns during the 1970s, see Welch (2018).

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