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Chicken Coops and Machines of Interminable Errors: A History of the *Grands Ensembles* in Parisian Suburbs

Marissa Ellis Plouin

Abstract

The *grands ensembles*, rows of high-rise public housing units constructed in and around major French cities following World War II, were anticipated as the “miracle solution” for a catastrophic housing shortage. Yet they have often been blamed for a range of social ills, and two times since their construction have been the backdrop of violent youth riots. This paper pieces together the history of the *grands ensembles* through an examination of the emergence of public housing in France, the transformation of the construction industry, and the philosophical and aesthetic influences of the Modernist movement.

Introduction

Today the *grands ensembles* house over five million residents in France. Credited with transforming the French urban landscape and the social relationships of an entire suburban population, the *grands ensembles* were the backdrop of violent riots that took place in the French suburbs, first in the 1980s and more recently in the fall of 2005. It is not as if no one had ever sounded the warning bells. As early as 1959, Pierre Sudreau, Minister of Construction and an avid supporter of the first *grands ensembles*, expressed his profound consternation with these “flagrant architectural errors” that “annihilate the human element of construction” (Prost 2001). He continued:

I never could have thought that in a country like ours, reputed for centuries for its taste, its sense of measure and of harmony, that the landscapes and habits could be ravaged by the excessive gigantism of certain constructions.... When technical concerns

take precedent over all others, when the life of men is conditioned for more than a century by the length of the crane's path, it is because at the origin there is an unhealthy technocracy. An insignificant error, repeated more than a thousand times, can engender catastrophes. The *grands ensembles* cannot become machines of interminable errors or horrors (Prost 2001).

The *grands ensembles* were the French government's belated response to an ongoing housing crisis that reached catastrophic proportions following the second World War. These high-rise towers were built in parallel rows and, early on, on cheap agricultural land, far from public transport and commercial or social services. They were developed largely as public housing units through a partnership between the State and developers in a rapidly transforming construction industry. In the early years, the *grands ensembles* systematically lacked any sort of recreational or open space. These conditions were said to result in severe cases of social isolation, alienation, and even the coinage of a social illness, "sarcellitis," named after one of the first and most emblematic *grands ensembles*, Sarcelles (Merlin 1998). Quickly labeled "chicken coops," "rabbit cages," "dorm-room cities" and "barracks," they even engendered the expression "hard French" to signify the brutality of their architecture and their embodiment of Le Corbusier's "collective machines for living" (Fourcaut 2004).

And yet—at the time of their inauguration in 1955, the *grands ensembles* were anticipated as the "miracle solution" that would simultaneously resolve the housing crisis, modernize the suburbs, and control demographic and urban growth (Fourcaut 2004). In 1981, Manuel Castells called the *grands ensembles* "an image as [P]arisian as the Eiffel Tower" (Castells 1981). They were a vast improvement upon the former residences of many of the first residents, as nearly all of the *grands ensembles* benefited from rather uncommon amenities in housing for the time: a private washroom and bathrooms and, in many of them, central heating (Merlin 1998). In fact, despite the immediate critiques of the general public, most of the residents interviewed in Paul Clerc's 1967 social survey of the *grands ensembles* were reportedly quite satisfied with their new homes (Clerc 1967). Some thirty years later, an advertisement for a community association in Sarcelles touted: "The great richness of Sarcelles is its spectacular diversity: some 90 ethnicities, speaking a hundred languages, peacefully coexisting for years, sharing and exchanging their cultures" (*Sarcelles Solidaire* advertisement 1994).

These structures represent a comprehensive model of French public housing strategy with explicit geographic targets, architectural forms, financing programs and social agendas. But how did the State settle on the *grands ensembles* as its "miracle solution?" Indeed, a series of policies, people, and aesthetic and philosophical influences shaped these structures.

But as we will see, the *grands ensembles* resulted from a wholly top-down approach to public housing, in which decisions were systematically made in a widespread – and highly publicized – state of emergency. The severe housing crisis following World War II had loomed for over half a century. Yet the State seldom reacted before a headline-grabbing catastrophe took place. Evicted mothers and children froze to death in the streets of Paris in 1953, resulting in the Courant Plan. Five African immigrants were asphyxiated in a slum of Aubervilliers outside Paris, leading to the 1970 Vivien Law. The State's delayed response determined the enormity as well as the urgency of the task at hand, and resulted, as Pierre Sudreau had warned, in “an insignificant error, repeated more than a thousand times” (Prost 2001). Were the *grands ensembles* indeed a “vast collective error” (Fourcaut 2004), as some historians have suggested?

Parisian Suburbs in the Mid-19th Century

At a time when the Parisian suburbs were first becoming inhabited by a bourgeois population, facilitated by the development of the railroad in the mid-1800s, the city of Paris was in the midst of growing social segregation. Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann collaborated with Napoleon III to create a cleaner, more hygienic and, importantly, more controllable urban space, leading to a massive make-over for the city. Among Haussmann's significant achievements were a more efficient circulation system; the extension of the wide, tree-lined boulevards that would become the symbol of modern Paris; and a stricter building code that included uniform building heights and façade specifications (Evenson 1979). Many of Haussmann's interventions called for the razing of entire neighborhoods. As a result, Paris became more geographically and socially divided: the bourgeois population concentrated in the west of Paris contrasted sharply with the working-class neighborhoods of eastern Paris (Soulignac 1993). Between 1850 and 1860, rents in Paris also rose by an incredible 75 percent (Soulignac 1993). Families and the working class were finding it more and more difficult to live in Paris.

France was nearly forty years behind Germany and the United Kingdom in recognizing and dealing with its emerging housing crisis. Consequently, France turned to the solution of large-scale public housing much later than its European neighbors. However, two collective housing projects did emerge in Paris around 1848 as a response to the growing housing crisis. The timing is significant: France was in the throes of a revolution, when an increasingly organized working class began to make demands for political, social, and economic reforms and succeeded in overthrowing King Louis Philippe. *Cité Napoléon*, in the ninth arrondissement, was the first development in Paris that constructed housing units sharing common

facilities (laundry, bath, and WC). *Village de Noisiel* was a collective housing complex built by the *chocolatier* Noisiel for his factory workers outside Paris. Nonetheless, it was not until 1890 and the inauguration of the HBM (*habitations à bon marché*, or affordable housing) that the first public housing units were created in France, mostly in the “zone” at the outskirts of Paris (Soullignac 1993).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the country continued to experience considerable social tensions. At the end of his reign, Napoleon III initiated a misguided war with Prussia, which ended in the seizure of Paris and a humiliating defeat for France that left the population starving. Growing discontent among the working class resulted in a rebellion that formed the Commune in 1871. The Commune would rule Paris for a few short months before being quashed by the former government. These recurring moments of social and political unrest were enough to convince the government to do something more for the working class, especially in relation to housing. The 1889 World Exposition in Paris unveiled not only the *Tour Eiffel*, but also produced the first International Congress of Public Housing and the creation of the Corporation of Affordable Housing (HBMs). Five years later, the Siegfried Law defined the role of the State in public housing policy and provided financing for developers, construction companies and creditors to incentivize investment in public housing development. Though the objectives of the Siegfried Law did not catch on at the time, the law did lay the groundwork for the legislative and regulatory public housing policy and the mobilization of public financing that would play a key role in the years to come (Soullignac 1993).

World War I Brings Massive In-migration to the Paris Region

During World War I, more and more people moved to the Parisian suburbs. Some families left their homes in the French countryside as German troops advanced or destroyed their property. Others headed to Île-de-France¹ as laborers to replace those who had gone to war. In addition, foreigners arrived in greater numbers – first from Belgium, Luxembourg and England, and later from Italy, Spain and North Africa (Soullignac 1993). Most of these new residents would remain in the region at the end of the war. While the population of Île-de-France skyrocketed, the population of Paris continued to decline, as families and working-class populations could no longer afford to live there. Between 1911 and 1936, Île-de-France gained 1.38 million residents, most of them in the suburbs (Soullignac 1993). Although this rapid influx of inhabitants strained the existing housing supply in Île-de-France, it would not be until the 1930s and, more severely, following World War II, that there would be a housing shortage of catastrophic proportions. Nonetheless,

a flurry of new housing construction did take place during this period, 97 percent of which occurred in the suburbs (Soulignac 1993). Most of the new housing consisted of single-family homes, developed far from Paris, and constructed by the residents themselves. By and large, the first half of the twentieth century can be characterized by an overall lack of organized governmental response to the growing housing crisis. Most new housing in the suburbs was constructed in chaotic patterns, lacking any coordination and built without permits or State or municipal consultation. The disorder inevitably led to relatively poor housing conditions, which would further aggravate problems resulting from the subsequent housing shortage.

A pair of laws passed in 1928 – the Sarraut Law, followed by the Loucheur Law – marked the beginning of a few notable changes in housing policy. The Sarraut Law aimed to improve the quality of housing through more regulation. The Loucheur Law laid out an ambitious program to construct 260,000 housing units in five years (the majority in the suburbs) and, importantly, favored programs leading to homeownership. Though neither of the enacted laws had a huge, immediate effect – the economic crisis of the 1930s halted much of the construction of the proposed HBMs – the Loucheur Law is significant in its articulation of the State's preference for homeownership, which inevitably put the lowest-income populations at a disadvantage. Much of the housing policy up to this point was designed to target the middle- and low-income populations, in hopes of “raising” the lower classes into an upper stratum. Few policies, if any, were directed at the poorest populations. To be sure, the ongoing housing crisis affected all three groups (middle-, low- and lowest-income populations). However, the poorest class was the hardest hit. Many lived in slums, squats, and shantytowns, while others were forced into overcrowded, shared units or *marchands de sommeil* (hotels renting out beds in shifts at outrageous prices).

Housing Construction as “A Question Of Life Or Death” Following World War II

The housing crisis that had been building up throughout Île-de-France – and which had been largely ignored by the French government – exploded as a veritable housing catastrophe following World War II. In 1952, Eugène Claudius-Petit, Minister of Reconstruction and Urbanism, declared: “Constructing 20,000 housing units per month is, for France, a question of life or death” (de Roux 1996). The causes were the same as those that had led to the crisis post-World War I: (1) a construction freeze during the war and during the economic crisis of the 1930s; (2) the destruction of housing during the war – around 500,000 units were

destroyed and 1.5 million units were damaged; (3) the hastening of the rural exodus that brought more and more people to the Paris region; (4) the Baby Boom that had begun during the war and continued until roughly 1965; and (5) the persistence of extremely low rents in Île-de-France, which had discouraged investment in real estate and maintenance of property throughout the region (Merlin 1998; Soullignac 1993). Focused on other pressing issues, the State was again slow to respond. Its first priority was to reconstruct dangerous areas, public transport, and other infrastructure, which had been more damaged by the war than housing, and to develop heavy industry in the country's quest for massive modernization. Further, following World War II, the country was involved in colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria. The domestic housing crisis remained, for a time, relatively low on the government's list of reconstruction priorities.

Rent Control as a First Response

In 1948, the government enacted a law establishing rent control (Law of September 1948). At about this time the HLMs (*habitations à loyer modéré* or rent-controlled housing) replaced the HBMs as the official public housing units. During this period, the majority of housing construction still took place in the suburbs and consisted primarily of the private construction of single-family homes. The 1948 law was no different from previous State measures in targeting the more stable classes and leaving the poorest populations behind. As a result, in many working class towns such as Gennevilliers, Courbevoie and Noisy-le-Grand, more and more shantytowns and squats developed in vacant apartments.

Abbé Pierre Pushes the Government to Action in 1953

Henri Grouès (better known as the late Abbé Pierre, founder of the *Compagnons d'Emmaüs*) is credited with pushing the government into more urgent, coordinated action to address the housing crisis (Fourcaut 2004). During the particularly harsh winter of 1953/54, several homeless people, including a baby, were found frozen to death in the street. One woman reportedly died with an eviction notice clutched in her hands. In an open letter to the Minister of Housing that appeared on the front page of *Le Figaro*, Abbé Pierre exposed the greater French population to the shocking consequences of the current housing crisis, demanded that temporary shelters be built in Paris and its suburbs, and urged the government to construct immediate, more permanent housing units for the working class (Fourcaut 2004).

The abbot's tireless, public efforts prompted the passage of the Courant Plan, which included several critical measures. First, all private businesses with over ten employees were obligated to contribute one percent of the wages they paid toward employee's housing costs, or toward a public housing fund (known as the 1% *patronal*). Second, the government and local municipalities gained the power of eminent domain. Third, the *Société Centrale Immobilière de la Caisse des dépôts* (SCIC), a new major para-public developer, and today the largest in France (now known as OSICA), was created to build public housing (Castells 1981). The SCIC would be the developer responsible for a number of the *grands ensembles*. Heeding Abbé Pierre's call, the Courant Plan also called for 1,000 *cités d'urgence*, or emergency housing units, to be built in the Parisian suburbs. The units were generally small, one-bedroom apartments, constructed as one- or two-story complexes in continuous bands at a low, fixed price. Essentially, these *cités d'urgence* authorized the State to construct cheap housing without amenities, imposing lower standards than the norms under the former HLM framework. Residents would suffer the consequences: from the very first winter, they experienced major problems with the poorly constructed *cités d'urgence*, and significant repairs took place between 1955 and 1957 (Fourcaut 2004).

In tandem with the *cités d'urgence*, Logécos was formed in 1953 as a system of financial awards for developers of the *cités d'urgence*. The Logécos system was meant to simplify and expedite the financing procedures for developers (Fourcaut 2004). It also represents the central role of public financing that would characterize the construction industry – and spur its complete restructuring – in the next two decades. During the same period, the Ministry established the post of Commissioner of Construction and Urbanism (1954), signifying another key step toward more coordinated, official measures in public housing policy.

Opération Million and ZUP Give Rise to the Grands Ensembles

Recognizing the failure of the cheap, rapidly deteriorating *cités d'urgence*, the government determined that it could not construct decent housing for less than one million francs, prompting *Opération Million*. *Opération Million*, implemented in 1955, established minimum standards and a minimum cost of housing, in addition to introducing standardization and reproducibility regulations. It would be the mechanism that, combined with ZUP (*zones à urbaniser en priorité* or priority development zones), would facilitate the construction of the *grands ensembles* throughout France: *Opération Million* set the framework for the type of construction that could take place under the new housing norms, while ZUP established the locations in which most suburban construction, and the

vast majority of the *grands ensembles*, took place (Soulignac 1993). These priority development zones, formally created in 1958, were generally in empty urban or agricultural areas, which were easy and cheap to acquire (recalling that the government had granted itself the power of eminent domain in 1953). One hundred ten *grands ensembles* were built in and around Paris between 1956 and 1962 (de Roux 1996).

Opération Million not only signaled the failure of the *cités d'urgence* and the role of the State in the development of this cheap, flimsy public housing; it also succeeded in standardizing the mass-production of high-rise housing units. Recognizing that the construction of the individual, small operations of the *cités d'urgence* – even in bands – multiplied the costs of equipping the land as well as the types of expertise and companies required, the State built approximately 200,000 housing units between 1956 and 1958, most of which were *grands ensembles*. Many were 100 to 200 units, but some – Créteil, Epinay-sur-Seine, Poissy-Beauregard and Sarcelles – were composed of several thousands of units.

A Period of Massive Industrial Modernization: The Construction Industry Transformed

The transformation of the construction industry in the 1950s and 1960s was an integral part of the French government's massive industrialization and modernization project. Up through the 1940s, most construction companies were small, private operations that developed housing and commercial structures on a fairly modest scale. However, the law of June 15, 1943 was a first step toward expanding the industry. The law articulated the State's vision for building on a large scale and encouraged the maximum utilization of cranes (extremely useful in constructing the endless 18-story towers of the *grands ensembles*) (Soulignac 1993). The massive housing projects of the *grands ensembles* became a reality as the construction industry started to take advantage of economies of scale and prefabrication techniques. These technological advances were reinforced by governmental policies that increased financing to developers, streamlined bureaucratic processes and construction standards, and coordinated a State effort to partner with developers in these projects. In 1957, another key law was passed, the *Loi Cadre*, which defined a central role for the State in housing development, increased productivity in the construction sector, and brought improvements in urban planning. These actions helped to further transform the construction industry, which could henceforth be summarized in three words: "standardization, repetition and continuity" (Adawa 2001). One architect of the time, Paul Chemetov, recalls, "In the beginning of the 1960s, a serious architect did not work on fewer than 1,000 housing units at a time" (de Roux 1996).

The downside of the standardized, prefabricated construction methods was the decline in overall building quality and a rupture of the linkages between the units and the greater urban environment. Yet mass-production was easiest on an empty plot of land in the middle of nowhere. It was much more complicated and expensive to integrate large units into an already developed urban fabric that was well-connected to schools, shops, and public transport.

The Modernists Transform the Housing Aesthetic

As we have seen, the creation of the *grands ensembles* resulted from the confluence of several key moments in history: the severe housing shortage throughout France, but especially in Île-de-France; a series of governmental policies that responded to this growing housing crisis; a national modernization imperative that sought to increase productivity and maximize efficiency; and the industrialization of the construction industry, which coincided with advances in construction technology. Nonetheless, one cannot understand the genesis of the *grands ensembles* without considering the role of Le Corbusier and the Modernist Movement.

Anticipating the economic and industrial modernization embraced by the government in the first half of the twentieth century, the Modernist movement emerged in the 1920s as an expression of a new rational, efficient, and technophile aesthetic (de Roux 1996). The high-rise towers of the *grands ensembles* were the result of influences of both Le Corbusier's geometric, functionalist architectural plans, such as his "*Ville Radieuse*," and the American sky-scraper – symbols of modernity and the society of consumption (Adawa 2001). Though Le Corbusier's ideas had received limited acceptance prior to World War II, they would become "the bible of the world of architects and planners" in the 1940s, 50s and 60s (Merlin 1998).

The first International Congress on Modern Architecture led to the creation of the Athens Charter, eventually published in 1943. The Charter served as a sort of "manual" for this new generation of modernist architects (Allix 2005). The movement called for a rupture with traditional architecture and urban patterns in favor of new cities located far from the old urban centers, made up of "machines for living" constructed out of rows and towers, surrounded by nature and linked to work and leisure by efficient motorways. Critics argued that the movement called for an unsettling, even dangerous, geographic and social isolation: "The buildings have no relationship to the street; the small city lives by itself, far from everything" (Allix 2005). Nonetheless, some of these ideals were

embodied in the design and construction of the *grands ensembles*. Recalling Pierre Sudreau's reference to the "unhealthy technocracy," the Modernist Movement also symbolized the birth of the technocrat, the new managers in the French political and corporate bureaucracy who relied on technical expertise to make decisions. This new rational, functionalist philosophy reflected the prevalent ideological streams of the Modernist Movement and played a key role in directing the form and function of the *grands ensembles*.

A Targeted, Evolving Social Composition

Throughout the life of the *grands ensembles*, the government was explicit in targeting the desired residents of public housing units with specific social purposes. At the outset, the *grands ensembles* were conceived as socially heterogeneous housing developments that would, in time, facilitate the social ascension of the lower classes. The population distribution of the *grands ensembles* mirrored that of the nation, composed of manual workers, clerks, and low-level professionals (Clerc 1967; Castells 1981). Several historians suggest that the different types of selection processes for living in the *grands ensembles* led to the recruitment of these diverse social groups (Chamboredon and Lemaire 1970). Clerc (1967) categorized the residents into two groups: young professionals, many of them mid-level managers at the beginning of their career, who viewed their stay in the grand ensemble as a mere step in the path toward social ascension, and older, forty-something manual laborers for whom the *grand ensemble* would likely be their ultimate residence. Many considered the structures to have an underlying normalizing mission, where middle-class values would prevail over the "suspect" behaviors of the lower classes and raise the lower-middle class into the upper stratum (Soulignac 1993; Merlin 1998).

Nonetheless, it is important to point out who was left out of the early *grands ensembles*. At first the poorest populations – including a large number of immigrants – were often placed on interminable waiting lists. In this way, argues urban historian Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard, the public housing movement looked to maintain an image of "quality housing provider" to the "meritorious working class" (Blanc-Chaléard 2006). In practice, an enduring boundary separated immigrants from public housing, so that when more than half a million immigrant laborers were regularized in France between 1962 and 1966, most of them crowded into shantytowns or strictly supervised hotels. With the exception of several shantytowns of extreme poverty, such as Noisy-le-Grand, the quasi-totality of the population of shantytowns was composed of foreigners (Blanc-Chaléard

2006). In 1966, Île-de-France still had 120 shantytowns, accounting for 50,000 people.

In 1970, the government passed the Vivien Law with an underlying ambition to eliminate shantytowns and the *marchands de sommeil* by giving Prefects² the power to declare buildings unsanitary and to expedite the expulsion process (Merlin 1998). The law was enacted after five African laborers were asphyxiated in a slum in Aubervilliers, outside Paris. A task force (the GIP) was set up to tackle the problem of the shantytowns. In most cases, before being relocated to the *grands ensembles*, immigrants were first housed in dormitories and *cités de transit*. The *cités de transit* were transitional housing that served, among other things, as observational quarters for social workers to evaluate the “Frenchness” of immigrant families (Blanc-Chaléard 2006). After an observation period that included home visits and particular scrutiny of the domestic skills and habits of immigrant women, social workers would make an official determination as to those families that “needed further social assistance” and those that were “evolved” enough to be placed in the *grands ensembles* with French residents. Still, the government imposed a 15 percent “tolerance threshold” for immigrants in each of the public housing units, hoping once again to encourage social heterogeneity and support the French *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission). But the 15 percent quota was seldom respected: more than half of the complexes housed over 15 percent immigrants, with some more than 50 percent (Blanc-Chaléard 2006).

In 1968, immigrants began to move into the *grands ensembles* and other public housing units. It was at this point that the HLM took the place of shantytowns in becoming “the stigmatized representation of immigrant housing” (Blanc-Chaléard 2006). As one might expect, the sudden, massive influx of immigrants and the very poor was met with great resistance. To make room for this new class of residents, the government initiated a program to provide financing to many of the *grands ensembles’* earliest, middle-class residents, which permitted them to move into single-family homes further out in the suburbs. Often, those who remained in the *grands ensembles* were those who could not afford to leave. While in 1976, a third of the residents of HLMs were immigrants, this number reached almost 50 percent in 1999. And the 1999 figure is deceiving: children of immigrants who are born in France and who obtain French nationality at age 18 are no longer counted in the “immigrant” category. This means that the progression of the immigrant population was due to the arrival of new immigrant families (Barou 2006). When a severe economic crisis hit the country in the 1970s and 1980s, this new generation of residents would find it harder than most to recover. Even today, an unbelievable 30 percent youth unemployment rate plagues certain suburbs, and in some places reaches 80 percent (Silverstein 2005).

The *Grands Ensembles* Blamed for Alienation, Social Unrest

Because the *grands ensembles* have always harbored a social mission, it should not come as a surprise that critics have been quick to link the social tensions of the suburbs to the failure of the structures themselves. In 1959, Pierre Sudreau warned of the impending crisis of this new form of housing. In the 1960s, many blamed the machine-like form and imposed isolation of the *grands ensembles* as the roots of growing social unease. One anonymous interviewee explained in Paul Delouvrier's 1965 survey: "our treeless *cités*³, when they are gray and cracked, will only summon certain hell" (Delouvrier 1965). As countless urban historians have demonstrated, the first *grands ensembles* lacked basic amenities, such as health services, daycare centers, cultural facilities, retail stores, schools, and public transit access, effectively reducing the experience of the urban settlement to "a state-provided concrete dormitory" (Castells 1981). This social and recreational void often led to severe alienation and isolation. Faced with little choice for recreation, adolescents formed gangs, which in no time attracted younger and younger members. The term "sarcellitis" (*sarcellite* in French), named after the first and one of the most emblematic *grands ensembles*, Sarcelles, was coined to signify "the psychological illness associated with urban alienation" (Castells 1981). As Manuel Castells explains for the case of the first residents of Sarcelles: "though their housing situation dramatically improved in relationship to what they had experienced in Paris, they were forced to live in the midst of a construction site, with no social or commercial equipment, poor transportation, and [a] total absence of urban life" (Castells 1981). Countless newspapers – *le Canard Enchaîné*, *le Figaro*, *l'Humanité*, *le Parisien Libéré* – documented the errors and horrors of the *grands ensembles* (Vieillard-Baron 1994). Further, studies in the late 1950s and early 1960s showed "a dramatic decrease in the extension of richness of social networks and human interaction in comparison with the residents' former experience. The isolation was [e]specially acute for women, many of whom had to give up their [P]arisian jobs to take care of children" (Castells 1981).

Youth in the Suburbs

If women were the focus of many of the first public debates, the younger, adolescent generation took center stage following the suburban riots in the 1980s (de Villanova and Bekkar 1994). In the early 1980s, a series of suburban uprisings resulted from the government's attempts to crack down on North African immigration. In 1982, when a policeman shot

and killed a young immigrant leader in the suburbs of Lyon, violence flared throughout France. A small group of suburban youth assembled in Marseilles in October 1983 in what would become known as the “March of the Beurs.”⁴ Calling for equality and an end to racism, the group marched peacefully all the way to Paris, arriving on December 3, 1983 – at which point they numbered 100,000 – and met with then-President Mitterand. In response, a number of civic associations were created, and greater access to the political process was promised to the disenfranchised of the suburbs (Wihtol de Wenden 2006). Later, in 1990, the *politique de la ville* would begin to localize public policies, including some planning efforts, particularly in the suburbs (Wihtol de Wenden 2006).

More recently, during the months of October and November 2005, a wave of violent suburban riots struck France once again. They began, this time, in Clichy-sous-Bois, a working-class suburb northeast of Paris, when two adolescents were electrocuted while hiding in an electric generator. The two boys – one of North African and the other of Sub-Saharan African descent – believed that they were being chased by the police (though the police have repeatedly denied these claims). Their accidental deaths sparked a series of riots in this working-class suburb before spreading to other Parisian suburbs and finally to other parts of France. Most of the rioters were under 16 years of age and a mix of races and ethnicities (Giblin 2006). They burned over 10,000 cars and vandalized more than 250 schools, in addition to police stations, post offices, shopping malls, and day care centers. Insurance companies estimated the damages at 200 million euros (Giblin 2006). The riots lasted for a full two weeks, and sparked the Prime Minister to invoke a limited “state of emergency” and national curfew, a measure that, ironically, had not been enacted since its inception in 1955 during the Algerian War.

In response to the riots, the government passed a series of laws, including a restructuring of youth labor laws that sent thousands of French people – this time, the largely middle-class students of the center cities – to the streets. While some measures were intended to foster the social advancement of the immigrant population of the suburbs, others were clearly meant to clear the country of the “immigrant problem” (Wihtol de Wendel 2005). Despite the fact that most of the young suburban “immigrants” who took to the streets were actually French citizens and that the father of the politician responsible for designing these tougher immigration policies – then Minister of the Interior and now President Nicolas Sarkozy – was an immigrant from Hungary, the insistence of both politicians and journalists on framing the problem in terms of immigration seems misguided given that a large number of the rioters were in fact working-class white youth.

Conclusions

In 1973, the French government outlawed further construction of the *grands ensembles*. And for decades, architects, mayors, journalists, and citizens have called for the demolition of these deteriorating structures built in the peripheries of major French cities. The *grands ensembles* have been blamed for generations of social ills and were twice the backdrop of violent youth-initiated riots. It was the indeed riots of 2005 that provided the impetus for the present historical narrative. As news accounts quickly pointed fingers at the *grands ensembles* in the poorest suburbs in France, one wonders if, in fact, a historical exploration of the suburban built environment could help to understand these recurrent moments of turbulence. Certainly, we have seen how explicit governmental policies led to the problematic form, function, location, and social composition of these structures, and demonstrated how these characteristics have in part contributed to the “problem” of the suburbs. Isolation, alienation, and juvenile delinquency were just a few of the issues in the HLMs early on. Forty years later, the structures are tied to images of angry youth burning cars and destroying schools, police stations, and hospitals.

Yet there are limits to framing the historical inquiry of the *grands ensembles* solely in the context of the recent riots. Many residents, especially youth, experience a debilitating unemployment rate that has plagued many of the poorer suburbs for decades. Suburban youth of color or immigrant descent suffer potent, often tacit, racial and ethnic discrimination in which they are denied jobs and housing because their names and their skin color are not French enough. Most of the tougher suburbs endure a constant, sometimes violent police presence, and state funding to numerous community-based programs operating in the suburbs has dwindled in recent years. Suburban youth took to the streets because more than the *grands ensembles* failed.

In fact, one must ask if they truly failed at all. Were the *grands ensembles* a “vast collective error”? At their inception, this new form of public housing succeeded in providing not only shelter but an unprecedented level of comfort to *millions* of people. Residents of the *grands ensembles* had private bathrooms. They had appliances. They had showers. Many of the small *chambres de bonne* (maid’s quarters) that remain in some of the most elegant parts of Paris lack these “basic” features, even today. The *grands ensembles* were not simply an improvement upon shantytowns and hotel rooms. They offered amenities that were altogether new, modern, and uncommon in older constructions. As one of the first residents of Sarcelles recalled upon seeing her future home for the very first time: “I thought to myself, ‘It’s just like in America!’” (Large 1994).

Endnotes

¹Île-de-France designates the administrative region in France that includes Paris and its surrounding suburbs.

²Prefects are high-level civil servants, appointed by the French President, who represent the State in smaller administrative units (such as departments or regions).

³A *cit * has multiple meanings: here it signifies the HLM, or suburban public housing complex.

⁴*Beur* is a slang term coined in the 1980s to signify French youth of North African descent.

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