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**Citation:** Ferng, Jennifer. "Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970 (review) by Larry Busbea." *Leonardo* 42.1 (2009): 85-86. © 2009 International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology (ISAST).

**Publisher:** MIT Press

**Persistent URL:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/57485>

**Version:** Final published version: final published article, as it appeared in a journal, conference proceedings, or other formally published context

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## **Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960–1970**

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Leonardo, Volume 42, Number 1, February 2009, pp. 85-86 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press



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attitudes toward composition from the early Renaissance to the beginning of the 19th century. Another helpful resource is <[www.webexhibits.org/arrowintheeye/index.html](http://www.webexhibits.org/arrowintheeye/index.html)>, an on-line book by Michael Kubovy and Christopher Tyler adapted from *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, by Kubovy (originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1988), which offers an easy-to-follow overview. For more information on anamorphosis, I would further recommend visiting Thomas Weynants' *Early Visual Media* page at <[users.telenet.be/thomasweynants/history.html](http://users.telenet.be/thomasweynants/history.html)>. Weynants does a splendid job of discussing how these representations work, and he has uploaded images (including the visual reconstructions that result when the picture is viewed from the proper perspective).

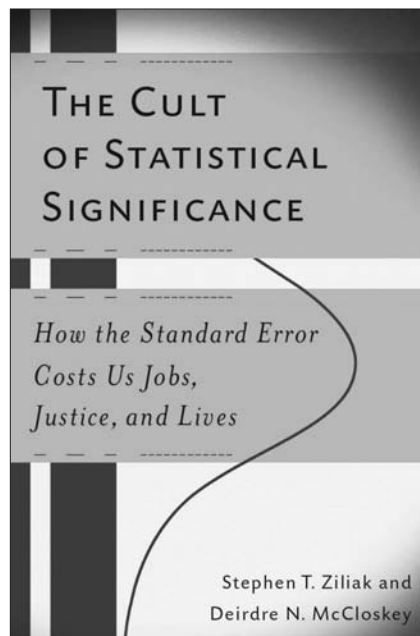
### THE CULT OF STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

by Stephen T. Ziliak and Deirdre N. McCloskey. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, U.S.A., 2008. 384 pp. Trade, paper. ISBN: 978-0-472-07007-7; ISBN: 978-0-472-05007-9.

*Reviewed by Wilfred Niels Arnold, University of Kansas Medical Center. E-mail: <[warnold@kumc.edu](mailto:warnold@kumc.edu)>.*

Consider an item that is available from five representative outlets south of the river at 93, 92, 94, 95 and 92 cents per item. The same thing is listed for 96, 97, 95, 96 and 98 at five different outlets on the north. The average (mean) price in the north is 96.40 cents, and it is 93.20 in the south—i.e. 3.20 cents (or 3.3%) lower south of the river. The difference is considered to be *very significant by a conventional statistical criterion* (Student's t-test). However, if we are talking about the price of a small glass of beer, it is probably not worth crossing the river for a drink. In other words, the difference is *statistically significant but of a magnitude that is of little consequence* (or interest). On the other hand, if you contemplate buying \$1 million worth of something and the unit price in the south is 3.3% lower on average, then you can save \$33,000. So size matters, and the t-test is not a reasonable basis for either decision.

*The Cult of Statistical Significance* has much to say about all of this. In fact, the authors' take-home message, that the evaluation of "oomph" is often more important than "precision," is repeated



over and over again until it shifts from titillating to slightly boring. The subtitle—*How the Standard Error Costs Us Jobs, Justice, and Lives*—indicates the scope of their mission. An early example about the manufacturer Merck and the drug Vioxx (an anti-inflammatory drug for osteoarthritis) starts with excitement on the theme, gets confusing because of the added criticism of management style and procedure (a separate problem) and unfortunately leaves the reader up in the air with respect to evaluating efficacy versus risk. The book does contain historical perspective, engaging biography and interesting anecdotes. The frontispiece is a 1908 photograph of William Sealy Gosset (1876–1937), who published under the nom de plume of Student; thus "Student's t-test" was born. Sadly, this turns out to be the only illustration.

The authors have academic careers in economics and are currently located in Chicago. A cover sheet from University of Michigan Press stated that the publication date was January 2008, but the paperback I was given last month for review warned on the front cover that it was an "advance reading copy." This was repeated on the back together with the statements, "These are uncorrected proofs of a book not yet published. Errors will be corrected and formats adjusted before the book appears in print." Many of the word errors (for example, "as" instead of "was") might be attributable to their escaping a computer spell-checker tool, but others are nonsense misspellings, sometimes even involving the names of key players in

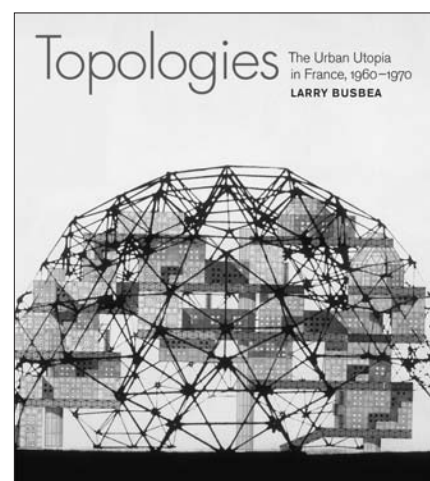
the narrative. Inexplicably, there is no index. One wonders about the wisdom of this curious production and promotion scheme for what promises to be an expensive book that may attract only a limited and special readership.

### TOPOLOGIES: THE URBAN UTOPIA IN FRANCE, 1960–1970

by Larry Busbea. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2007. 320 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-0-262-02611-6.

*Reviewed by Jennifer Ferng, Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. E-mail: <[jjferng@mit.edu](mailto:jjferng@mit.edu)>.*

Bobigny, La Courneuve and Sarcelles, as well as other planning projects such as Maine-Montparnasse and La Défense, constitute some of the *grand ensembles* constructed in Paris during the 1950s and 1960s that scholars have examined in order to understand the effects of national identity and political regionalism on the French urban landscape. Regulated by the administrative policies of Charles de Gaulle's return to power in 1958, these housing prototypes of the Fifth Republic transformed the Parisian periphery into a series of "dormitory cities" composed of *habitations à loyer modéré* (HLMS), plunging what was to be ordered reconstruction into contentious social and economic problems. *Topologies* is another notable volume that contributes to the widening body of literature on postwar architectural history that reinterprets the technological thinking of French utopian architects, along with those such as Archigram, Buckminster Fuller, the Metabolists, Cedric Price and Team 10, who collectively foresaw the dawning of



a new age, tempered not by revolution but by the scientific techniques gained from economics and the social sciences. The book provides detailed biographical information on the work of David Georges Emmerich, Yona Friedman, Claude Parent and Michel Ragon while contextualizing their building schemes of 3D space frames and networked agglomerations against the ideas of well-known theorists Jean Baudrillard, Henri Lefebvre, Johannes Huzinga and Paul Virilio, whose thoughts on consumer society, space, play and the body, respectively, inspired these architects' visions of the evolving city.

Despite other studies that have emphasized the polarizing events surrounding May 1968 or the widespread influence of the Situationists as indicative of the broader background underscoring postwar architecture, Busbea subtly proposes a more nuanced approach that targets the French architectural avant-garde's profound faith in technology, a flaw that blinded them to the changes implemented by mass culture and relegated their beliefs to symptoms of the greater historical moment. He cites Jean-Louis Cohen's assertion that French modernism's slowness and lack of progress compared to the social sciences developed into a sense of isolation from architectural developments in other countries as well as an interior isolation that defined architecture's distance from other intellectual enterprises [1]. Critic Reyner Banham proclaimed that the designs of the "urban spatialists" relied too much upon stylistic imperatives enforced through the simplification and flattening of the image. However, in denouncing a pronounced reliance upon visual formulations, Françoise Choay maintained that the designs of "technotopias" constituted an evocative field of interest for non-specialists. Busbea, in light of these critical perspectives, investigates the cybernetic and theoretical models that intrigued the French designers who privileged the forms of megastructures, attempting to re-connect architecture to the greater social meaning behind infrastructural systems; he carefully teases apart the political distinctions between seemingly similar architectural endeavors such as Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon and Friedman's Spatial City. Visual artists Nicolas Schöffer and Victor Vasarely, who collaborated with Ragon, formulated a new "plastic language" for the changing conditions of the city, producing ambient environments, murals and

paintings that addressed the phenomenology of perception and the semiotics of the urban landscape and collapsed the distinctions between art object and consumer object. This generation of architects and artists, born after Le Corbusier, sought to employ technology to eradicate the class struggle that characterized the ambience of France during this time period, balancing the ideals of Communist totalitarianism with the economic imperialism of the United States (p. 117). Utopia—a presumed interpretation that results from the images of Emmerich, Friedman, Parent and Ragon—is framed rather as an intellectual endeavor by Busbea and not merely as an aesthetic practice residing in the expression of formal structures that embodied leisure, mobility and spatial dynamics.

While the book's chapters incorporate factual details behind each architectural group, they alternate rapidly between images of fantasy and research-based models of abstraction that serve as the basis for most of the built urban schemes. What is somewhat problematic is Busbea's ubiquitous concept of topology, of which he offers several broad definitions, including the given area of a particular region, a specialty branch of mathematics and the way in which constituent parts are arranged together. Topology is also called upon to define artificial surfaces that cover the city. It is not clear how these definitions are tied together throughout the course of the book, which immerses the reader in a great deal of information. This minor point, however, should not detract from an otherwise enriching book with a generous amount of visual material provided in the form of numerous drawings, renderings, sketches and models. The images themselves may not bear any resemblance to the pragmatic urban solutions sought by French planners; their merit, nonetheless, lies in their existence as archival evidence of these architects' ideas, which reflected the historical and theoretical currents of the decade.

The rise of theory in France during these 10 years is given its fair share of attention. Lefebvre, Gaston Bachelard and directors Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Tati, for instance, each critiqued the state ideology behind these inhuman instances of modern planning in France's postindustrial society. The tensions between the laws posed by Roland Barthes and the experience of perception as emphasized by those such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty loom in the

book's background, but a more direct link between French structuralist theory and the designs of the architectural avant-garde could be better emphasized to assist the reader in perceiving how these urban forms became related to the tenets of structuralism, thus merging the social importance of ideas with the physical extension of infrastructure. If the decipherment of the city rested upon the "programmable expressions of a particular spatial culture" (p. 104), Paris as an "object virtually prepared," for example, is a particularly key image for the reader to hold in mind. If Barthes willingly encouraged spectators atop the Eiffel Tower to sort the urban landscape into its various guises and incarnation, Busbea likewise skillfully demonstrates that it was the responsibility of the utopian designer to conceive of the plausible postwar cities that could have been for a contemporary audience and for future generations.

## Reference

1. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

## FRAMEWORKS, ARTWORKS, PLACE: THE SPACE OF PERCEPTION IN THE MODERN WORLD

edited by Tim Mehigan. *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts Series No. 11*. Rodopi Press, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2008. 260 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-90-420-2362-8.

