

BOOK REVIEW

Larry Busbea

Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970

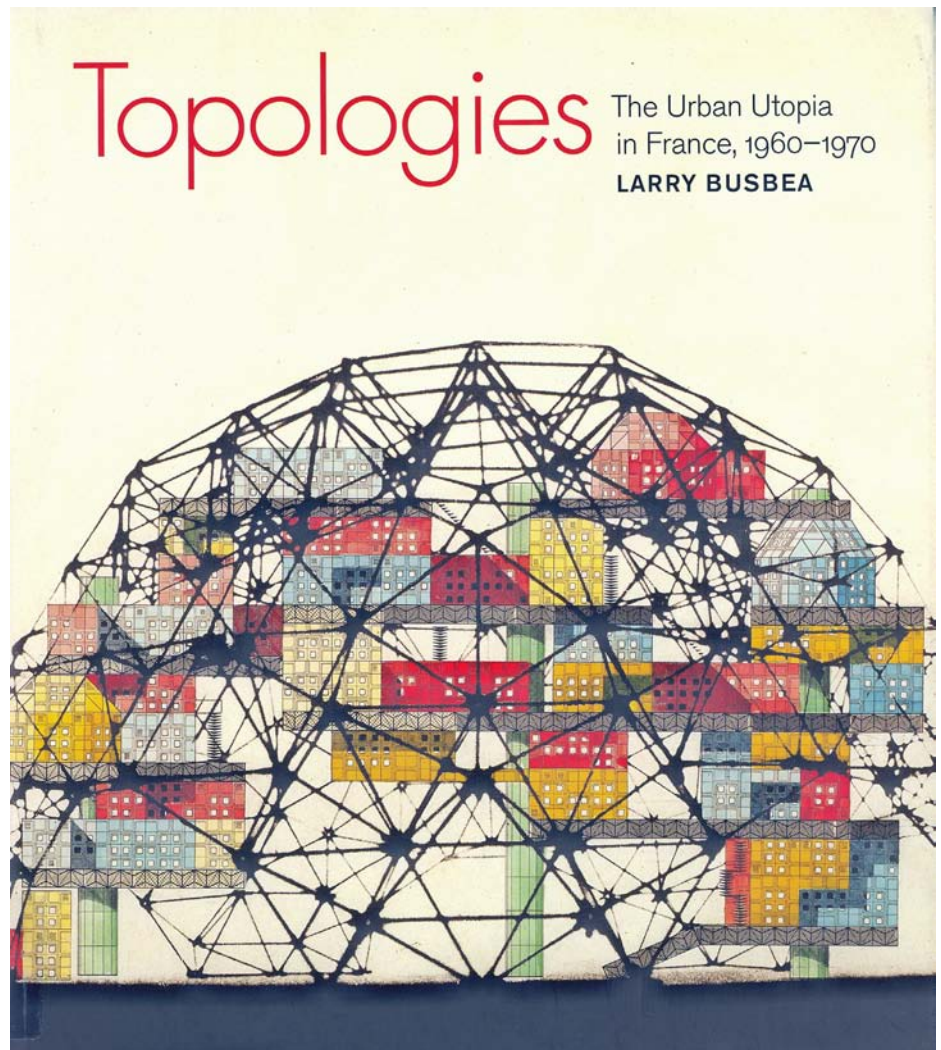
Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007, 320 pp., 137 illus. £15.95

ISBN-10: 0-262-02611-2, ISBN-13: 978-0-262-02611-6

Larry Busbea's account of the "spatial culture" of 1960s France makes a valuable contribution to the history of the architectural avant-garde in Europe and opens fascinating new territories for utopian studies in the sphere of architecture. Busbea is concerned with the emergence in France of an utopianist research culture convinced that radical urban infrastructure change would be needed to cope with the post-war population boom and the onset of a full-blown consumer society. For those with a more general interest in French cultural history the book offers a high level of detailed research into key individuals and groups contributing to the French urban planning and architectural debate in the post-World War II period.

Topologies engages with much primary source material. Indeed, reproductions of the covers of period books and pamphlets are frequently used as illustrations. The work of familiar figures such as Jean Baudrillard, Henri Lefebvre, Yona Friedman and Paul Virilio is usefully situated in the context of a wider body of ideas and network of peers. The critic and editor Michel Ragon, and the designers Nicolas Schöffer and David Georges Emmerich are among the less familiar voices represented in Busbea's study, as significant promoters and visionaries of what he terms the "spatial city."

The book reflects the fascination during the period for the potential of a technological utopia based on an adaptable, responsive, network model. The grid and the space-frame dominate the aesthetic and structural solutions for the "spatial city." One chapter focuses on the work of Friedman as the "ultimate expression" of these tendencies, and his establishing of the Groupe d'Études d'Architecture Mobile. Another looks at the efforts of Ragon to articulate from different visions and voices



a coherent program for future change. Despite Ragon's prolific output in books, articles, exhibitions and a utopian novel entitled *Les Quatre Murs*, Busbea ultimately deems his project a failure. Busbea states that his own object of study does not amount to a cohesive architectural movement, for the scene always remained factious.

The wealth of excellent research aside, there are certain methodological queries worth raising. Such is the book's early emphasis on the term "spatial city," the return of Busbea's titular term "topology" in the latter half of the book comes as something of a surprise. A full definition of Busbea's understanding of "topology" is not provided until the fifth chapter. At this point in the book the Architecture Principe group (which included Virilio and Claude Parent) emerges as a force of virulent opposition to the advocates of the space-frame network model. The use of "topology" as a comparative, critical term produces an intriguing chapter; however, its late introduction gives the impression that the book's role as both an architectural history of post-war French utopianism and a more specifically theorized work has not been fully resolved.

Topologies is extensively illustrated with many well-reproduced drawings, models and exhibition photographs, which are a great attribute of the book. Their use raises, however, another point regarding Busbea's analytic method: Busbea makes very little direct reference to the images in his text. They would thus seem to be valued as visual illustration for the history he recounts, but not as a resource for critical analysis in themselves. This replicates the usual approach to the relationship of image to text in architectural publishing. However, in the context of a book that invokes utopia in its title, the argument for thinking more rigorously about the value of the visual artifact becomes, I would argue, methodologically vital. As so many of the projects that Busbea mentions remained unrealized or, to follow a purist approach to utopian practice, were, by definition, unrealizable, then the drawing or model is the project. What remains to be done in relation to the book's body of visual material is an analysis of specific works through their deployment of particular material and compositional techniques, conveying ideological motivations both explicit and latent.

These methodological queries must be considered, however, in light of the problems inherent in the task of reducing the complexities of Busbea's subject matter to the scope and marketable identity of a single book. All told, Busbea deserves much credit for an authoritative portrait of this dynamic "spatial culture," a potent history of the futurology of France's recent past, which will no doubt provide insight and inspiration for current spatial practitioners and theorists alike.

Robin Wilson

The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London and
University of Bristol