ON THE WONDERS OF WAREHOUSES

CRITICAL URBAN STUDIES ZINE

THE HOLE EDITION

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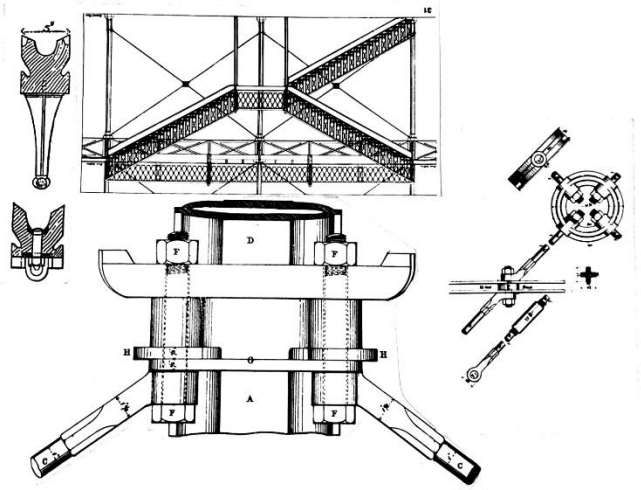
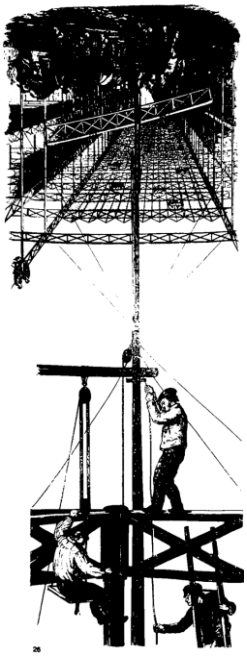
On the Wonders of Warehouses is a critical urban studies zine exploring the role of deindustrialization in developing artistic and counter-cultural movements. Based out of Queens, New York, it highlights the post-industrial landscape of America's most diverse county as it grapples with a regional housing crisis.

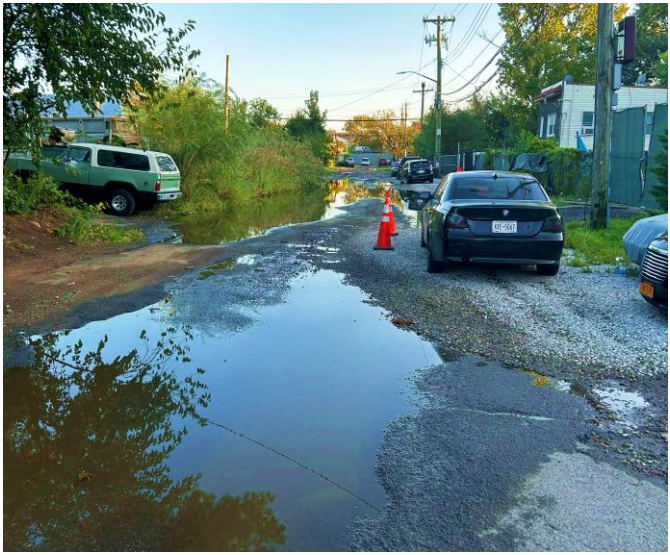
This project draws significant inspiration from the Situationist International, a movement of avant-garde artists and intellectuals established in 1957, whose works were foundational in establishing the field of critical urban studies. In addition to original writings, *On the Wonders of Warehouses* is supplemented by relevant works from the Situationists.





THE HOLE: NYC'S UNGENTRIFIABLE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Hole is a tiny neighborhood lying on the border of Brooklyn and Queens, sandwiched between Ozone Park and Howard Beach. Lying 30 feet below the surrounding area and lacking a proper drainage system, it suffers from frequent flooding. Considered a "lost neighborhood," The Hole is perhaps the most sparsely populated and obscure community in all of New York.



Between the 1970s and 1980s, The Hole served as the site of an old mafia graveyard, housing the bodies of Bonanno family capos Alphonse "Al" Indelicato, Philip "Philly Lucky" Glaccone, and Dominick "Big Trin" Trinchera. Authorities believe that six mafia murder victims were buried throughout The Hole, disposed of by the crew of John Gotti himself.

Nowadays, The Hole is home to an entirely different species of corpses, littered with abandoned vehicles, appliances, and other varieties of oversized junk. The only semblance of life that remains in this desolate neighborhood are a gang of stray cats, who feast upon food scraps left behind by the humans who treat The Hole as their secret dumping grounds.

WOULD JOHN LOCKE DEFEND SQUATTING?

Secret Mall Apartment (2024)

Secret Mall Apartment (2024) is a hilarious and heartwarming documentary on the significance of squatting as a means of protesting gentrification and urban renewal. It follows a group of eight artists in Providence, Rhode Island, who initially challenge themselves to spend a week living in the bustling, 1.4 million sqft Providence Place mall as an act of détournement against the new development. A few days into the challenge, the group uncovers a hidden, unused space in the mall and embarks on a four-year long journey to repurpose the room into their own secret apartment.

The story begins in Eagle Square, a community of Providence artists who, throughout the 1990s, establish several venues for events and the arts in decommissioned industrial buildings. At the center of this movement is Fort Thunder, a warehouse that serves as an art studio, venue for underground music and events, and living space for its tenants (including the noise rock band Lightning Bolt.)

Eagle Square is situated in the neighborhood of Olneyville, a former industrial powerhouse that had undergone rapid economic decline and depopulation after the end of WWII. These issues were exacerbated with the construction of a highway connector in the 1950s, which geographically separated Olneyville and other lower-income neighborhoods from the rest of Providence.

While most Providence residents considered Olneyville to be nothing more than an economically depressed and deserted waste of space, artists capitalized on the neighborhood's many vacant mills and factories which provided vast spaces free from disturbances. Supported by its proximity to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where most of *Secret Mall Apartment's* characters first met, Eagle Square emerges as the new epicenter for Providence's burgeoning arts scene and counterculture.

Unfortunately, in the matter of only a few years, real estate developers also begin to recognize the immense potential in Olneyville. Lying a stone's throw from downtown Providence and the newly built Providence Place mall, Olneyville becomes ripe for urban renewal. By the early 2000s, developers begin sinking extensive financial and political capital into the construction of Providence Place and the redevelopment of the surrounding area, displacing the tenants of Eagle Square from both their artistic and living spaces simultaneously.

Fast forward to 2004, five years after Providence Place first opens to the public, and the mall has radically transformed the surrounding area. Frustrated with the destruction of Eagle Square and the changing urban landscape of Providence, the group of artists challenge themselves to live in the mall for a week. A few days into the endeavor, one of the artists recalls

a nondescript space in the mall that they had observed during its initial construction, thinking that it may still exist unused. Lo and behold, the team discovers a 750sqft room deep in the bowels of the building! Recognizing the incredible potential of this space, they proceed to lug couches, tables, and other items to furnish their newly established apartment.

Later, the mall apartment becomes a place for the group of artists to convene and plan out their greater mission: to travel across the country and spread the craft of "tape art," which entails creating murals using nothing more than rolls of painter's tape. A deep sense of humility and genuineness permeates the whole film, presenting a unique contrast to the pretentiousness typical of the DIY punk ethos.

Secret Mall Apartment is profound for many reasons. Not only does it tell a deeply inspirational story about how artists can create meaning and impact out of limited resources, but it also reflects on how those displaced by destructive real estate developers can fight to take back their spaces. Throughout the film, the squatters make it explicitly clear that this project is a commentary on gentrification. At one point, they explain that urban redevelopment projects in Providence are oftentimes framed as merely improving "underutilized spaces" in order to obfuscate their truly destructive nature. Using this same rhetoric, they are able to justify their own reclamation of "underutilized space" in the mall—if they can do it, then so can we!

What's particularly interesting is that the argument raised by these squatters is eerily reminiscent of John Locke's theory of property rights, which posits that people derive a natural right to property through the exertion of labor upon natural resources. Assuming that all land originates as part of the "public commons," Locke's theory states that anyone who

invests their own labor to improve that land and transform it into a productive form of capital thereby earns the right to claim the newly improved property as their own.

It goes without saying that Locke's theory of property rights provided an ideological basis and moral justification for the appropriation of indigenous peoples' land by English settler-colonists, who argued that since their territories were "unimproved" and part of the natural commons, that they therefore had the right to invest labor onto the land and claim it as their own property.

Locke's theory of property rights continues to be applicable to our current understanding of political economy, as explored throughout *Secret Mall Apartment*, by providing a rational framework for capitalists to appropriate public lands for their own private gain. However, one peculiar aspect of Locke's theory is that it also quite explicitly advocates for squatting, as articulated in the following passage:

> "The same measures governed the possession of land too: whatsoever he tilled and reaped, laid up and made use of, before it spoiled, that was his peculiar right; whatsoever he enclosed, and could feed, and make use of, the cattle and product was also his. But if either the grass of his enclosure rotted on the ground, or the fruit of his planting perished without gathering, and laying up, this part of the earth, notwithstanding his enclosure, was still to be looked on as waste, and might be the possession of any other."
> -John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government (1689)

It turns out that Locke's reasoning not only advocates for re-appropriation (squatting) in the instance that privately-owned property is being squandered, but even presents it as a moral obligation!

Of course, the purpose of this rhetoric is not to defend Locke's dubious conception of property rights. His framework is deeply flawed for a multitude of reasons, most importantly because it makes a critical assumption that everyone is equally entitled to "the public commons" of Earth. It doesn't take much creativity to find morally intuitive counterexamples to this theory: would European settler-colonists be equally entitled to a land that they had just "discovered," compared to the indigenous communities who had resided there for their whole lives?

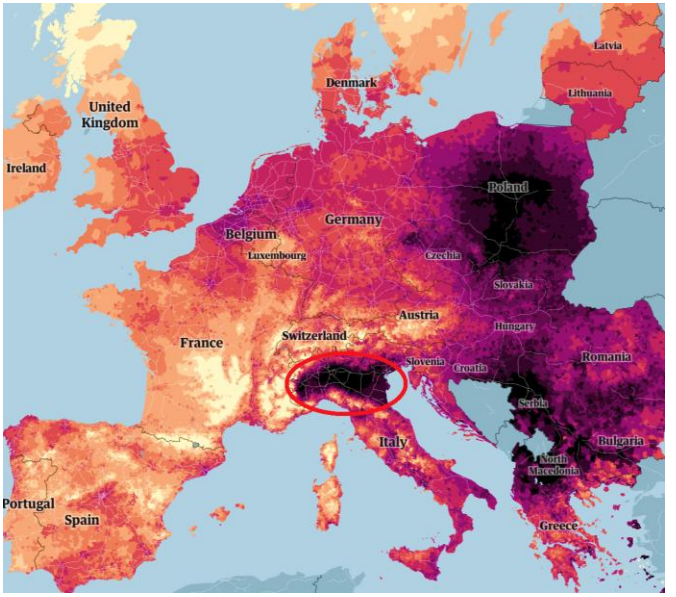
Locke also strangely uses God as a sort of stand-in for any social phenomenon that cannot be explained through natural causes, including the natural entitlement of all people to the commons. One might refer to Locke's divine rhetoric as a form of "proto-reification," where reification refers to the misattribution of social norms and practices as innate to human nature. This is a practice that is all too common throughout Enlightenment philosophy, a movement which preceded the emergence of the social sciences.

This is all to say that there is no inherent utility in a Lockean defense of squatting, due to the deeply flawed nature of his theory of property rights in the first place. Nonetheless, it's still fun to think about how this foundational principle of capitalism can be weaponized for its own undoing.

A HISTORY OF SQUATTING IN ITALY'S PO VALLEY

From the genesis of Italian unification in Turin to the founding of futurism and the hanging of Mussolini's corpse in Milan, the Po Valley has long served as the epicenter for modern Italian history. Each year, millions of tourists from around the world flock to this part of northern Italy to indulge in its wide array of historical, architectural, culinary, and artistic offerings.

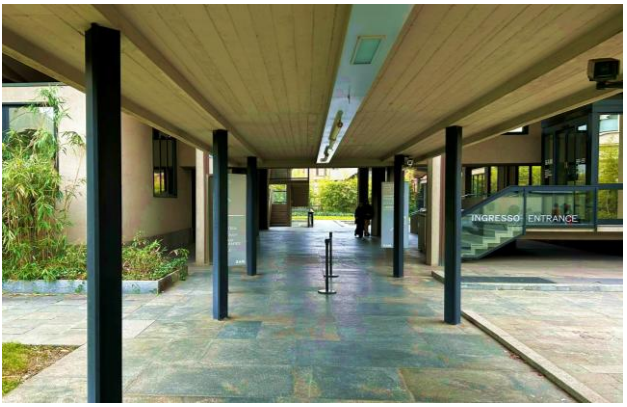
However, the moment that tourists step off the plane in Milan, they are immediately confronted with one lesser-known fact about the Po Valley: that it is the most deeply polluted region in all of Europe. In 2024, the European Environment Agency found that of the seven EU cities with the highest levels of air particulate matter, five belonged to the Po Valley.



Map of fine particulate matter levels (micrograms of PM2.5 per cubic meter) across Europe, with the Po Valley circled. Source: The Guardian

Air pollution in the Po Valley can be traced to three main causes. Firstly, its unique geography of being surrounded by two mountain ranges, with the Alps to the north and the Apennines to the south, acts as a natural basin and creates a microclimate that traps pollutants. Additionally, the region's massive livestock industry leads to vast amounts of animal waste production and methane emissions.

But most importantly, the Po Valley's immense pollution is due to its deep history of industrial production, with the regions of Lombardy, Piedmont and Liguria being the first to industrialize following Italian unification in 1861. Turin, home of the Italian automotive industry, forms the Italian industrial triangle together with Milan and Genoa. For better or worse, the Po Valley's industrial past and present is a characteristic that permeates every facet of daily life for its urban inhabitants.



Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (GAM), Turin

The Po Valley had long stood as the wealthiest part of modern Italy, but its industrial output reached new heights as the nation rebuilt following WWII. Unfortunately, the coinciding rise in wealth inequality meant that despite this period being one of significant economic growth for the region, it also led to

tensions building between the industrial elite and their working-class subordinates. In *The Autonomous City: A history of urban squatting* (2023), author Alexander Vasudevan explores how poor standards of living for the Italian proletariat in the late 20th century leads to the emergence of squatting and countercultural movements.

Although the post-war prosperity introduced millions of new jobs to the Po Valley, Vasudevan explains that the main beneficiaries of this rapid economic transformation were not the factory workers themselves, but rather the industrialists and small sections of the middle class. Inequality was driven by a slew of government policies that favored laissez-faire initiatives, a sharp deflationary environment and systemic wage repression, the consequences of which severely impacted the purchasing power of Italy's working class. However, in spite of the cost-of-living crisis, many southern Italians still chose to migrate towards the north in search of employment in the factories.

By the 1950s, most migrants in the Po Valley were forced to live in appalling conditions, either lodging in overcrowded basements and attics, or squatting in apartments slated for demolition and other vacant buildings. Some migrants were fortunate enough to purchase land and build their own housing on city outskirts; by 1965, these self-built neighborhoods would become home to over 100,000 residents in Milan alone.

As the housing crisis proliferated throughout northern Italy, the Italian government systematically failed to address the growing need for affordable housing. Rents doubled throughout the 1960s, with the construction of new housing units in Italy lower than any other country in Western Europe. The state housing authority soon became immersed in a deep web of corruption, further worsening the nationwide housing

crisis. One 1969 study found that 70% of all urban Italians were renters, with that number as high as 80% in Turin.

It did not take long for civil unrest to emerge from these abhorrent living conditions. In 1962, an uprising of factory workers in Turin unleashed a series of strikes around the city, eventually leading to the occupation of Piazza Statuto and the arrest of over 1,000 protestors. The Italian government responded by further devaluing workers' wages through artificially induced inflation and raising the cost of public housing, transportation, and utilities. These measures led to the emergence of a militant student movement by the late 1960s, which soon escalated into mass civil unrest and some of the largest strikes ever recorded in European history. Factories in Milan and other northern cities were thrown into complete disarray as strikes ensued for multiple months.

Pedestrian bridge in Porta Genova, Milan

Over the years, the movements launched by factory workers and students gained widespread support, leading to campaigns like "Let's Take Over the City" launching in Turin, Milan and Bologna in 1971, protesting a much broader scope of issues including rising grocery prices and transit fares. Most

importantly, squatting became an instrumental form of protest and resistance against the cost-of-living crisis across the Po Valley; between 1969 and 1975, a massive squatting campaign led to over 20,000 apartments being occupied across Italy.

Throughout the 1970s, numerous far-left movements began popping up around northern Italy, including Autonomia Operaia ("Workers' Autonomy"). Large-scale squats built by these organizations were supported by wider infrastructure including collectives, bookshops, and free radio stations. However, in the following years, these squatting movements would be met with brutal crackdowns by the state.

Although the initial squatting movements of the 1970s would experience an unfortunate fate, this would not spell the end for squatting in Italy as we know it. Squatting continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this time targeting decommissioned industrial spaces, deconsecrated churches, unused schools, and movie theatres. By 1998, over 50% of these spaces entered some kind of arrangement with their owners, enjoying a prominent place in local neighborhoods and serving as a sort of community center for activists and artists. In fact, many of the squats from that period continue on to this very day, including Cox 18 and Leoncavallo in Milan.

Bulletin board in a record store, Bologna

INTRODUCTION TO A CRITIQUE OF URBAN GEOGRAPHY (1955)

(SHORTENED)

BY GUY DEBORD

Of all the affairs we participate in, with or without interest, the groping quest for a new way of life is the only thing that remains really exciting. Aesthetic and other disciplines have proved glaringly inadequate in this regard and merit the greatest indifference. We should therefore delineate some provisional terrains of observation, including the observation of certain processes of chance and predictability in the streets.

The word *psychogeography,* suggested by an illiterate Kabyle as a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate. It is not inconsistent with the materialist perspective that sees life and thought as conditioned by objective nature. Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.

It has long been said that the desert is monotheistic. Is it illogical or devoid of interest to observe that the district in Paris between Place de la Contrescarpe and Rue de l'Arbalète conduces rather to atheism, to oblivion, and to the disorientation of habitual reflexes?

Historical conditions determine what is considered "useful." Baron Haussmann's urban renewal of Paris under the Second Empire, for example, was motivated by the desire to open up broad thoroughfares enabling the rapid circulation of troops and the use of artillery against insurrections. But from any standpoint other than that of facilitating police control, Haussmann's Paris is a city built by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Present-day urbanism's main problem is ensuring the smooth circulation of a rapidly increasing number of motor vehicles. A future urbanism may well apply itself to no less utilitarian projects, but in the rather different context of psychogeographical possibilities.

We know with what blind fury so many unprivileged people are ready to defend their mediocre advantages. Such pathetic illusions of privilege are linked to a general idea of happiness prevalent among the bourgeoisie and maintained by a system of publicity that includes Malraux's aesthetics as well as Coca-Cola ads — an idea of happiness whose crisis must be provoked on every occasion by every means.

The first of these means is undoubtedly the systematic provocative dissemination of a host of proposals tending to turn the whole of life into an exciting game, combined with the constant depreciation of all current diversions (to the extent, of course, that these latter cannot be detourned to serve in constructions of more interesting ambiances). The greatest difficulty in such an undertaking is to convey through these apparently extravagant proposals a sufficient degree of *serious seduction*. To accomplish this we can envisage an adroit use of currently popular means of communication. But a disruptive sort of abstention, or demonstrations designed to radically frustrate the fans of these means of communication, can also easily promote an atmosphere of uneasiness extremely

favorable for the introduction of a few new conceptions of pleasure.

We need to flood the market — even if for the moment merely the intellectual market — with a mass of desires whose fulfillment is not beyond the capacity of humanity's present means of action on the material world, but only beyond the capacity of the old social organization. It is thus not without political interest to publicly counterpose such desires to the elementary desires that are endlessly rehashed by the film industry and in psychological novels like those of that old hack Mauriac. (As Marx explained to poor Proudhon, "In a society based on *poverty,* the *poorest* products are inevitably consumed by the greatest number.")

The revolutionary transformation of the world, of all aspects of the world, will confirm all the dreams of abundance.

The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing or repelling character of certain places — these phenomena all seem to be neglected. In any case they are never envisaged as depending on causes that can be uncovered by careful analysis and turned to account.

People are quite aware that some neighborhoods are gloomy and others pleasant. But they generally simply assume that elegant streets cause a feeling of satisfaction and that poor streets are depressing, and let it go at that. In fact, the variety of possible combinations of ambiences, analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite variety of mixtures, gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any other form of spectacle can evoke. The slightest demystified

investigation reveals that the qualitatively or quantitatively different influences of diverse urban decors cannot be determined solely on the basis of the historical period or architectural style, much less on the basis of housing conditions.

The research that we are thus led to undertake on the arrangement of the elements of the urban setting, in close relation with the sensations they provoke, entails bold hypotheses that must be constantly corrected in the light of experience, by critique and self-critique.

In fact, nothing really new can be expected until the masses in action awaken to the conditions that are imposed on them in all domains of life, and to the practical means of changing them.

“The imaginary is that which tends to become real,” wrote an author whose name, on account of his notorious intellectual degradation, I have since forgotten. The involuntary restrictiveness of such a statement could serve as a touchstone exposing various farcical literary revolutions: That which tends to remain unreal is empty babble.

Life, for which we are responsible, presents powerful motives for discouragement and innumerable more or less paltry diversions and compensations. A year doesn’t go by when people we loved haven’t succumbed, for lack of having clearly grasped the present possibilities, to some glaring capitulation. But the enemy camp objectively condemns people to imbecility and already numbers millions of imbeciles; the addition of a few more makes no difference.

The primary moral deficiency remains indulgence, in all its forms.

LEVITTOWNS AND BANLIEUES: DIVERGENCES IN POST-WAR SUBURBANIZATION

Why is it that the suburbs of New York and Paris look so drastically different today? What were the key forces that drove New York to fill its suburbs with formulaic McMansions and oversized backyards, and why did Paris choose to optimize its suburban land with utilitarian and brutalist high-rises instead?

Surprisingly, suburbanization was initially employed in both cities for the same exact reason: as a creative and expedited solution to widespread post-WWII housing shortages. However, it was key cultural and socioeconomic differences between the two cities that led to a significant divergence in suburban development patterns. Ultimately, suburbanization in the two cities would grow to represent vastly different values, with New York's Levittowns emphasizing the distinctly American values of Fordism and socioeconomic mobility, and Parisian banlieues instead evoking themes of dystopian utilitarianism and urban alienation.

The story of suburbanization in New York begins with the entrepreneur Bill Levitt, who identified a great opportunity for market solutions in addressing the surge in demand for G.I. family housing, motivating him to begin developing the very first "Levittown." Inspired by Henry Ford's industrialism, Levitt employed an assembly line method to condense housing construction into 26 steps, with a dedicated team assigned to each. Coupled with the low cost of Long Island farmland, Levitt was able to sell his houses for just $7,000 with little to no down payment required. Furthermore, support from the federal government launched the new norm of 30-year mortgages,

making home ownership suddenly accessible to the burgeoning middle class.

W. D. Wetherell's *The Man Who Loved Levittown*, a short story that investigates the psychology of the typical early Levittowner, explores just how instrumental Levittowns were in promoting the American Dream. For the Greatest Generation, these suburban homes symbolized the triumphs of their era—at one point, the protagonist demands the youth to "find your own dream, pal, you're walking on mine. My generation survived the Depression, won the war, got Armstrong to the moon and back."

As Levittown homes are passed between generations, a growing sense of entitlement towards home ownership emerges. When a prospective buyer is priced out of a Levittown home, they exclaim "You old people think you can keep putting us down all the time! You think you can ask anything for a house we'll pay it on account of we're desperate! What's Janey supposed to do, live in Queens the rest of her life?" As Levittowns proliferated all around the country, they established a new standard of materialistic aspirations for the emerging middle class.

Mad Men (2007)

While suburbanization was perceived as an aspiration in post-war America, in Paris it was more akin to a nightmare. The economic devastation of WWII meant that the French housing shortage was far more severe than in America, prompting the construction of *banlieues*—highly dense outer suburbs, consisting mainly of low-income public housing projects. Inspired by the modernist teachings of architect Le Corbusier, these communities took the form of high-rise apartments stacked around green spaces, dubbed "towers in the park."

Model of Le Corbusier's planned redevelopment of Paris (1925)

Unfortunately, the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding these developments meant that banlieues inevitably became symbols of urban alienation and a utilitarian dystopia. Whereas New York's suburbs were built primarily for the rising middle class, thereby symbolizing prosperity and material abundance, the suburbs of Paris were intended for the working class instead, many of whom were immigrants.

The sheer urgency of the French housing crisis meant that these developments were generally overcrowded and in poor condition, and their distance from the city center crippled the

economic prospects of residents since most could not afford cars (unlike American suburbs). The banlieues would later become breeding grounds for gang activity and civil unrest.

The Intouchables (2011)

Of course, this is not to say that America never experimented with building brutalist high-rises as a form of public housing either. In fact, Le Corbusier's "towers in the park" were equally popular in North America as they were in Europe, being built around the same time in many American cities including New York.

However, while there are indeed many parallels between the Parisian banlieues and America's own public housing projects, there is one key differentiator: as America opted to destroy its inner cities through urban renewal and fill the void with public housing, Paris chose to place these complexes on the periphery instead. Perhaps this point of divergence partially explains why American cities also look so different to their European counterparts today.