

# Shopping Towns Europe



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**Commercial Collectivity  
and the Architecture  
of the Shopping Centre,  
1945–1975**

**Edited by Janina Gosseye and  
Tom Avermaete**

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# Chapter 1

## Shopping à l'américaine

*Kenny Cupers*

When Parly 2, a prestigious shopping centre at a major highway intersection on the western outskirts of Paris, opened its doors on 4 November 1969, it was the first of its kind in France. Both champions and critics saw the project as an unabashedly American import and a watershed in the development of suburban France. With over one hundred boutiques, a supermarket, a cinema, bars and restaurants and the first suburban outposts of the Parisian department stores Printemps and BHV, the project offered a second, interiorized city that competed directly with the existing city. In fact, its brand name was simply to be 'Paris 2', but due to political opposition over the use of the French capital's name it was amended



**Figure 1.1** Rendering of Parly 2, commercial brochure, late 1960s.

Source: Archives nationales, France, CAC199110585/011.

to 'Parly 2', in reference to the nearby forest of Marly.<sup>1</sup> Customers from all over the capital flocked to the gleaming temple of consumption, which was laid out over two floors around an interior street and surrounded by vast parking lots. Similar shopping centres emerged around Paris and across Europe in the early 1970s.

French architects and planners at this time were engaged in the country's largest state-led planning project: the construction of modern new towns (*villes nouvelles*) to decentralize Paris and spur regional economic development.<sup>2</sup> Since the Second World War, the capital had undergone rapid suburban growth, particularly in the form of large housing estates, called *grands ensembles*. Often located far from public transport connections, these estates were almost immediately criticized for their lack of urban amenities. The new towns – an ambitious national programme launched by Charles De Gaulle in 1965 and in full force during the 1970s – promised to remedy the suburban blues of these so-called 'dormitory estates' by creating new, vibrant urban centres in the periphery. These would be interconnected by a new regional express train network converging in downtown Paris. What seems to have kept these planners awake at night, perhaps more than anything else, was the threat of privately developed shopping centres such as Parly 2. The planning team of the new town of Évry, for example, emphasized that its new centre was to be 'an embryo of an Urban Heart' and would thus avoid, as if that was otherwise its natural fate, 'the American-style shopping centre, anti-urban by its very nature, with its desolate facades and sea of parking space'.<sup>3</sup> Defined against the pervasive influence of American culture in post-war France, their ambition was to recreate a 'Latin' form of urbanity. Planners at this time regularly used the term 'Latin' to refer to an urban imaginary constructed around urban density, social and functional mixing and an active street life during the day and at night.<sup>4</sup> Why then did the final result look exactly like the much-loathed American suburban dumb-bell malls – at least from the angle represented by this contemporary photograph? (see Figure 1.2).

This chapter examines how the development of suburban shopping shaped the design of France's new towns in the late 1960s and 1970s. Counter to contemporaneous impressions and dominant historical interpretation, suburban shopping in France, paradigmatic as it is of the country's explosive suburbanization in the post-war decades, was more than just an American import. In her landmark study, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Victoria de Grazia has cast the shopping mall as an example of the Americanization of post-war Europe.<sup>5</sup> More recent historical scholarship, however, suggests that particular national cultures of consumption and longer term historical change were as important as the so-called 'transfer' of American models and expertise in

<sup>1</sup>Camille Meyer-Léotard, *Si Parly m'était conté ....: Épopée d'une Ville à la Campagne* (Paris: Textuel, 2010), 26.

<sup>2</sup>See Pierre Merlin, *Les Villes Nouvelles en France* (Paris: PUF, 1991); Kenny Cupers, *The Social Project: Housing Postwar France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup>'... éviter le shopping-center à l'américaine, anti-urbain par nature avec ses façades désolantes et sa marée de parkings.' Source: 'Pour une expérience pilote d'action sur l'environnement urbain: La ville nouvelle d'Évry et la mise en œuvre d'une politique de l'environnement, 1970', III.1. Source: 19780319/001, Centre d'Archives Contemporaines, Archives Nationales, France.

<sup>4</sup>Cupers, *The Social Project*, 234.

<sup>5</sup>Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).





**Figure 1.2** The commercial centre of Évry.  
 Source: Photograph by Kenny Cupers, 2008.

the modernization of European retail practices.<sup>6</sup> Following this line of inquiry, I argue that the architecture of suburban shopping is to be understood not as the transparent sign of an American-imposed modernity that spread to Europe across the networks of the Cold War, but as a form of transculturation. In other words, the types and forms of suburban shopping in France developed from specific routes of circulation, translation and appropriation, across the Atlantic and within Europe. European retail entrepreneurs and commercial distributors looked eagerly to the United States, and while some indeed attempted to implement American models, these were necessarily adapted to national regulatory and cultural conditions. The modernization of retail and distribution along these lines in France prompted architects and planners to not only imagine new experiences and forms of shopping, but also to forge new relationships between private commercial development and centralized state planning. The new towns offered an unparalleled terrain of experimentation in exactly this sense.

## Hypermarkets and dumb-bell malls

Until the 1960s, commercial retail in France was still predominantly located in the historic core of cities. For any suburban housewife in the Paris region, shopping, apart from everyday necessities, required a commute to the *grands boulevards* in the heart of the city. The first self-service supermarkets emerged in French suburbs during the 1950s, but they were relatively small in number and size. Some of these supermarkets were inserted in the neighbourhood centres of mass housing estates such

<sup>6</sup>Ralph Jessen and Lydia Langer, *Transformations of Retailing in Europe after 1945* (London: Ashgate, 2012).

as Sarcelles, while others were privately developed; but in any case, they remained small and, with only a few parking spaces and lack of public transport connections, catered to a very local clientele. During the 1960s then, a veritable revolution in suburban retail took place with the emergence of two particular types of development – each of which with a distinct pedigree, commercial rationale and architectural form.

The first is the *hypermarché* (hypermarket) or superstore, a suburban retail type first developed, at least in France, by Carrefour.<sup>7</sup> This pioneering company was the result of a collaboration between two families, represented by Marcel Fournier on the one hand and the brothers Denis and Jacques Defforey on the other. The former were owners of two dry goods stores (*magasins de nouveautés*), the latter food wholesalers, which explains the unique character of the hypermarket: the combination of food and non-food items, including textiles and home decoration, at discounted prices under one roof. The first Carrefour hypermarket opened in Saint-Geneviève-des-Bois, in the southern suburbs of Paris, on 15 June 1963. At 2,400 m<sup>2</sup>, the megastore was four times the size of the average French supermarket of its time. The building was designed and built by Francis Bouygues, a young entrepreneur. It was essentially a large hall, made with a prefab steel structure and organized in isles. Vegetables, meats and fish were organized in specialized sections at the outer walls of the hall. Customers could look into the meat preparation space from the store, a novelty at the time. Another novelty was the snack bar at the centre of the store.<sup>8</sup> The 'Carrefour grand magasin', as it was called, was open from 10 am to 10 pm, including Sunday morning and Monday afternoon, upsetting the regular opening hours of French retail at the time. The store was located at a considerable distance from Paris' inner city, in a municipality that counted just 18,000 inhabitants. But thanks to the store's 400 parking spaces and its own discount gas station, it was able to draw customers from a much larger area than commercial experts then deemed viable. Despite their scepticism, the store was immediately overrun by customers and was a huge financial success.

Carrefour's subsequent retail project at Vénissieux, in the suburbs of Lyon, was even more exemplary for the new hypermarket type. Opened in 1966, the vast store had a commercial surface of 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> and 2,000 parking spaces. With this second leap in size, the store was geared towards a customer catchment area of 200,000–300,000 inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> Compared to supermarkets, this signalled more than just a shift in scale. Filled with an unprecedented array of foods, clothing, household appliances and furniture at prices up to 20 or 30 per cent below usual retail offerings, the hypermarket was the first exclusively suburban 'machine for selling', for which customers drove considerable distance in order to buy in large quantities. The hypermarket was a motor of development in and of itself, fuelling the rapid suburbanization of post-war France.

<sup>7</sup>On the history of the hypermarket, see Jean-Marc Villermet, *Naissance de l'Hypermarché* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1991); Christian Lhermie, *Carrefour ou l'Invention de l'Hypermarché* (Paris: Vuibert, 2003); Jacques Marseille (ed.), *La Révolution Commerciale en France: Du 'Bon Marché' à l'Hypermarché* (Paris: Le Monde-Éditions, 1997); René Péron, *La Fin des Vitrines: Des Temples de la Consommation aux Usines à Vendre* (Paris: Cachan/Éditions de l'ENS, 1993); Solange Jungers, 'L'Invention de l'Hypermarché', in *Les Années ZUP: Architectures de la Croissance 1960–1973*, eds. Gérard Monnier and Richard Klein (Paris: Picard, 2002).

<sup>8</sup>Lhermie, *Carrefour*, 28.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 4.

When the term 'hypermarché' was coined by Jacques Pictet in *Libre Service Actualité*, dated May 1968, the Carrefour stores had already become a formula, quickly emulated by competitors such as Auchan or Euromarché.<sup>10</sup> In 1970, there were already over fifty hypermarkets across France; and in 1973 more than 200.<sup>11</sup> During the following decades, hypermarkets continued to proliferate and they have continued to fundamentally reshape French retail and distribution systems. The suburban consumers of the baby-boom generation made them an immediate and long-lasting success. To limit investment and offer cut-throat prices, the hypermarkets were often not more than expediently built hangars. Their location, near existing and future highway infrastructure, was most crucial to their success; the hypermarket was a product of suburbia in that the highway was its mainspring.

Historians and commentators have alternately described the hypermarket as a European invention and a direct import from the United States. Most recently, research has shown that – contrary to the still dominant assumption that the hypermarket was invented by Carrefour in France – it was in fact first developed in Belgium by the company GB. Their first three 'discount department stores' as they were called, opened in 1961 in Bruges, Auderghem and Anderlecht, and were widely publicized.<sup>12</sup> Pictet even wrote an article in *Libre-Service Actualité* that year, and considering that business directors at the time were closely connected through international associations and networks, Fournier and the Defforeys were undoubtedly aware of GB's projects.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, both in France and Belgium at this time, the new superstores were not seen as inventions, but simply as American imports. The principle of self-service was indeed first launched in the United States, by Clarence Saunders in 1916. In France, the first self-service store, which was a mere 40 m<sup>2</sup> in size, opened only in 1948, after a group of leading French retailers made a study trip to the United States.<sup>14</sup> The supermarket, and its underlying idea of discount pricing – selling more at a lower profit margin – was also an American invention, picked up and further developed by Edouard Leclerc in France after the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Although GB's stores were more indebted to the department store and Carrefour's to the supermarket, both relied on similar sales methods, in particular as proselytized by Bernard Trujillo, then the world's leading retail guru.<sup>16</sup> During the 1950s, Trujillo, a Colombian from a wealthy background, had become famous for the seminars he organized at the National Cash Register in Dayton, Ohio – the number one producer of cash registering machines. His seminars were enthralling, and his predictions lauded as prophecies. Among his well-known slogans were 'shop windows are the stores' coffins', 'pile high, but sell low' and 'no parking, no business'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Jacques Pictet, article of 1 May 1968 in *Libre-Service Actualités*. Cited in: *ibid.*, 36.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>12</sup>Jean-Pierre Grimmeau, 'A Forgotten Anniversary: The First European Hypermarkets Open in Brussels in 1961', *Brussels Studies* 67 (10 June 2013): 1–10.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Lhermie, *Carrefour*, 6.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>16</sup>See Villermet, *Naissance de l'Hypermarché*, 125–129.

<sup>17</sup>Lhermie, *Carrefour*, 24.

Over the years, an entire generation of European businessmen attended Trujillo's seminars – signalling his formidable impact on European retail development. Fournier met Trujillo in 1962.<sup>18</sup> Yet the men behind Carrefour did not simply follow his dictums. Trujillo was highly sceptical of the idea to mix food and non-food items in discount stores, due to his understanding of American consumer behaviour and retail systems. Most supermarkets in the United States at this time sold only foods, and were distinct from chain stores specializing in particular products. Although Meijer's, a Midwestern supermarket chain, established a series of very large supermarkets that offered additional dry goods in the 1960s, the hypermarket idea became widely adopted in the United States only during the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> In short, Carrefour's novelty was in scaling up the supermarket idea while adding textiles, furniture and other non-food products and services. Yet rather than seeing innovation as either imported or located in a particular location – and therefore either foreign or autochthonous – it is better understood as a trans-local and transcultural phenomenon. The development of suburban shopping in France relied on American models and Belgian precedents as much as it did on existing national distribution systems and a particular entrepreneurial culture.

The second type of development, the 'regional commercial centre' (*centre commercial régional*), was equally successful in the late 1960s, but its success was nevertheless short-lived.<sup>20</sup> Parly 2, one of the first such shopping centres in France, and the many similar developments that followed might seem at first glance more authentically 'American'. They followed a well-trodden architectural and retail model: the dumb-bell mall. This type of organization consisted of two department stores or supermarkets at the ends of an interior 'street' lined with a variety of smaller boutiques. In the American suburbs, the first generation of shopping centres were structured around open-air streets, but from the mid-1950s onwards, they were usually fully enclosed and came to be called 'malls'. The Austro-American architect and urban planner Victor Gruen was instrumental to this shift, and his designs, such as the Southdale Center near Minneapolis, were widely emulated across the United States and beyond.<sup>21</sup>

Parly 2's developers Robert de Balkany and Jean-Louis Solal, who had met while they were studying in the United States, explicitly engaged American-based design and commercial expertise. Solal was in fact directly inspired by Gruen's Southdale Center, whose organization over two floors corresponded to Solal's desire for an increased density in the face of limited available terrains.<sup>22</sup> As their economic consultant, the developers hired Larry Smith, co-author with Gruen of *Shopping Towns USA*, a bible for commercial developers.<sup>23</sup> Even the design of Parly 2 was by an American architect, Lathrop Douglass, who had by the late 1960s already designed more than seventy shopping centres in the United States

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>19</sup>Hervé Paturle, *Marcel Fournier l'Hyperman* (Paris: La Martinière, 2005), 240–241.

<sup>20</sup>Large shopping centres such as Parly 2 eventually lost against the hypermarkets in the following decades. See Péron, *La Fin des Vitrines*.

<sup>21</sup>See Jeffrey M. Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup>Meyer-Léotard, *Si Parly m'était conté*, 29.

<sup>23</sup>Victor Gruen and Larry Smith, *Shopping Towns USA: The Planning of Shopping Centers* (New York: Reinhold, 1960).

and Europe.<sup>24</sup> Despite this imported expertise, the architectural result differed significantly from the standard dumb-bell malls proliferating in American suburbia at the time. Parly 2 and many of the projects following it, including Vélizy 2 and Rosny 2, were multifunctional complexes that often also included housing, offices and a variety of other urban amenities, such a cinema or a hotel.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Parly 2 was first and foremost a large-scale housing development, a middle-class, private alternative to the *grands ensembles*.<sup>26</sup> In their combinations of functions and amenities therefore, they resembled not just American malls but also the new French urban centres that were being designed by new town planners at this time, such as Évry and Cergy-Pointoise.

Even though the hypermarket and the shopping mall emerged in France at about the same time, through mechanisms of transatlantic exchange, they were characterized not only by a different pedigree but also by a different commercial logic and target audience. Hypermarkets catered to the lower end of the market, attracting price-conscious suburban shoppers eager to buy at discounted prices in a rather bare-bones environment. Shopping centres were more capital-intensive and promised spectacle and diversity, including upscale fashion boutiques and department stores for customers who would otherwise shop in the city centre. Yet despite these different markets, they often entered into competition with one another; both required the same lots of land near highway exits in metropolitan suburbs promising a large mass of customers. And, perhaps most importantly, both constituted a formidable challenge for planners and policymakers in such a uniquely centralized state planning apparatus as that of France.

## A touch of soul

The success and proliferation of suburban shopping vexed new town planners and policymakers as much as it fascinated them. The hypermarkets and shopping centres popping up at the outskirts of Paris and other large cities during the 1960s generated exactly the kind of crowds they imagined for the new urban centres currently underway. Yet they had no control over these developments, their location or their architecture. Most new town planners were critical of hypermarkets and shopping malls, following the critiques of many French intellectuals who denounced them as tasteless American imports destroying the French way of life and as the emblems a new mode of capitalism. For the sociologist Jean Baudrillard, Parly 2's most famous commentator, the shopping centre signalled the advent of new society of mass consumption – so vehemently critiqued around and after May 1968. In his 1970 book *The Society of Consumption*, Baudrillard even included an image of one of Parly 2's luxuriously decorated atriums, captioned with the phrase: 'On these beaches without paving stones, the class A and non-class A people will come to get tanned in the sun of commodities.'<sup>27</sup> This was an ironic allusion to that famous catchphrase of 1968, 'Under the paving stones, the beach'.

<sup>24</sup>See Jean-Louis Solal, 'Le Centre Commercial Région de Parly 2', *Urbanisme* 108–109 (May–June 1968); 'Centre Commercial Régional de Parly 2,' *Urbanisme* 114 (June 1969).

<sup>25</sup>See 19910585/011, Centre d'Archives Contemporaines, Archives Nationales, France.

<sup>26</sup>See Meyer-Léotard, *Si Parly m'était conté*.

<sup>27</sup>'Sur ces plages sans pavés, les A et les non-A viendront bronzer au soleil de la marchandise.' Source: Jean Baudrillard, *La Société de Consommation: Ses Mythes, Ses Structures* (Paris: S.G.P.P., 1970), 27.

For new town planners, however, the solution was not to overturn mass consumer culture altogether but to channel it in a new direction. Their approach was perfectly summarized in the words of Prime Minister Chaban-Delmas, when he proclaimed that France needed 'to master the society of consumption by bestowing it with a touch of soul'.<sup>28</sup> As such, the new architecture of suburban shopping became a key source of inspiration for the new urban centres of the French new towns. In the country's post-war suburbs, which were increasingly criticized for their soullessness, the shopping centres and hypermarkets guaranteed the crowds and thus the kind of liveliness reminiscent of that of a traditional city. Yet instead of accepting the idea that such private commercial developments had their own logic and that this suburban car-oriented logic might actually befit a new generation of consumers, they set themselves the task of harnessing what they saw as 'wild' and 'anti-urban' private commercial developments in coordinated urban projects. Even though today we might call these 'public-private partnerships', their design and financing was still tightly controlled by state planning agencies.

The design for the centre of the new town of Évry, in the south-eastern suburbs of Paris, was exemplary of this ambition.<sup>29</sup> Together with Cergy-Pontoise, Évry was the first of Paris's new towns to be further developed after the launch of the national programme in 1965. After an initial working group was charged to develop the general outlines of the plan, the planning responsibilities were handed over in 1969 to a multidisciplinary team consisting of urbanists, engineers, sociologists, geographers and architects.<sup>30</sup> This planning team established a large-scale urban plan for the new town. From the outset, planners were acutely aware of development pressure in the suburban region surrounding the new town, and in particular of plans for hypermarkets and commercial centres. André Lalande, who led the planning team, has recounted that 'there were some good hypermarkets around, and we were certain there would be one at one or two kilometres from the [new] centre, hence the permanent worry we had to build [our] commercial centre as soon as possible'. The biggest perceived risk in his opinion was the construction of a 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> Carrefour, 'which would have been catastrophic'.<sup>31</sup>

But suburban shopping was not only a threat to Évry's planners; it was also a crucial opportunity. The Parisian department store Printemps had announced its plans to expand business by opening new suburban locations, firstly at Parly 2 and then across suburban Paris. The news was received as revolutionary in a country so uniquely focused on inner-city Paris.<sup>32</sup> For the planners of Évry, the department store was a perfect magnet to draw large crowds to the future urban centre. Since such a department store would constitute a unique pole of attraction to suburbanites otherwise forced to travel into Paris, they preferred it over a hypermarket. Yet this preference also demonstrates the class-bias of

<sup>28</sup>'Il s'agit de maîtriser la société de consommation en lui apportant un supplément d'âme!' Source: Jacques Chaban-Delmas quoted in: *ibid.*, 298.

<sup>29</sup>See Cupers, *The Social Project*, chapter 6.

<sup>30</sup>The Mission d'Étude, a multidisciplinary urbanism workshop to develop the basic plan for the new town, was created in 1966, the actual planning agency EPA (or *Etablissement Public d'Aménagement*) in 1969.

<sup>31</sup>'Il n'y avait plus qu'un risque, c'est qu'il se construise un Carrefour de 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> sur le terrain de M. Bouygues, ce qui aurait été la catastrophe. Il était donc grand temps que le centre commercial arrive.' André Lalande, cited in: 'Journée d'Études du 17 Octobre 1973 sur les Centres Urbains', 52. Source: 19840342/334, Centre d'Archives Contemporaines, Archives Nationales, France.

<sup>32</sup>Meyer-Léotard, *Si Parly m'était conté*.





**Figure 1.3** Aerial photograph of the new urban centre of Évry, circa 1975.

Source: Fonds Le Couteur. Service interministériel des Archives de France/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XXe siècle.

many planners, intent on attracting middle-class inhabitants to the new towns. For a shopping centre project such as Parly 2, economic studies had already shown that the nearby highway intersection at Grigny, about five miles away, would be an ideal location.<sup>33</sup> But having a privately developed shopping centre so close by would severely endanger the viability of Évry's new urban centre. In other words, shopping was not just an element in the programmatic mix for the project; it was quite literally a matter of life or death.

Although new town planners were convinced they needed to attract upscale retail companies like those gathered at Parly 2, they strongly disapproved of the urban and architectural form such developments took. They were particularly critical of the enclosed nature of these 'cities within a city' and the sprawling parking lots that cut them off from the surrounding area.<sup>34</sup> From the beginning, the

<sup>33</sup>See 'Journée d'études du 17 octobre 1973 sur les centres urbains', 32–33. Source: 19840342/334, Centre d'Archives Contemporaines, Archives Nationales, France.

<sup>34</sup>See Presentation by Mottez about Évry, in: *ibid.*

new towns for Paris had been planned around a new express commuter rail network, the RER (*Réseau express régional*). For the new centre of Évry, this meant tying the urban plan directly to this new public transport link. The RER line was diverted several kilometres west from its existing path along the Seine in order to pass right through the middle of the new town. The question for planners then was how to combine this public planning strategy with a suburban shopping centre, since the latter was usually located near the highway.

Not surprisingly, the negotiations between state planners and the private developers they were attempting to engage were difficult and lengthy. Ultimately, it was a conflict between two different pools of expertise and hence, two different forms of rationality. The developers relied on economic and marketing studies such as those by Larry Smith & Co. Such studies were in part based on axioms like Trujillo's 'no parking no business' and in part on economic location theory, which allowed to calculate profitability through action radii and the demographic characteristics of target populations.<sup>35</sup> The result was a fixed model: an isolated, internally integrated shopping mall with easy car access and plenty of parking space. French state planners on the other hand held the fundamental belief that the state was the bearer of an overarching rationality and should thus guide the 'uncoordinated' actions of different actors in the market. Moreover, the planners had lofty social ambitions: they were intent on creating new urban environments that would integrate myriad urban activities and people from different classes in order to provide a much-needed sense of urbanity in the often-dreary suburbs around the capital. Whether or not they were aware of the discussions about the 'urban core' within CIAM two decades earlier is unclear. Their ambitions derived not from any dogmatic or theoretical position but rather from the critiques of France's state-led suburbanization that had been percolating inside the very institutions of the state during the late 1960s – in particular those revolving around Henri Lefebvre's idea of the 'right to the city'.<sup>36</sup>

The final design for Évry's urban centre embodies these conflicting approaches: developers' demand to incorporate American models of suburban shopping on the one hand, and planners' desire for intense urban integration on the other hand. For its design, the planning team of Évry had hired Jean Le Couteur, a Beaux-Arts trained architect who had a long-standing relationship with the centralized state apparatus. Le Couteur divided the urban centre into two distinct parts. One part was coined the 'regional commercial centre' – adapted from the model of the American-style dumb-bell mall, despite planners' aversion, with a department store and a hypermarket on each end. The other part contained all non-commercial or civic functions and was baptized the 'Agora'. Right underneath both parts would run the new RER line.

Despite this seemingly simple division, the design was an extraordinary hybrid. Three sides of the centre were surrounded by vast planes of asphalt despite planners' efforts to hide parking spaces underneath the complex or have it stacked in multi-storey structures. From one angle, Évry's new centre thus looked just like any suburban shopping centre. Yet, at the same time, Le Couteur's design facilitated

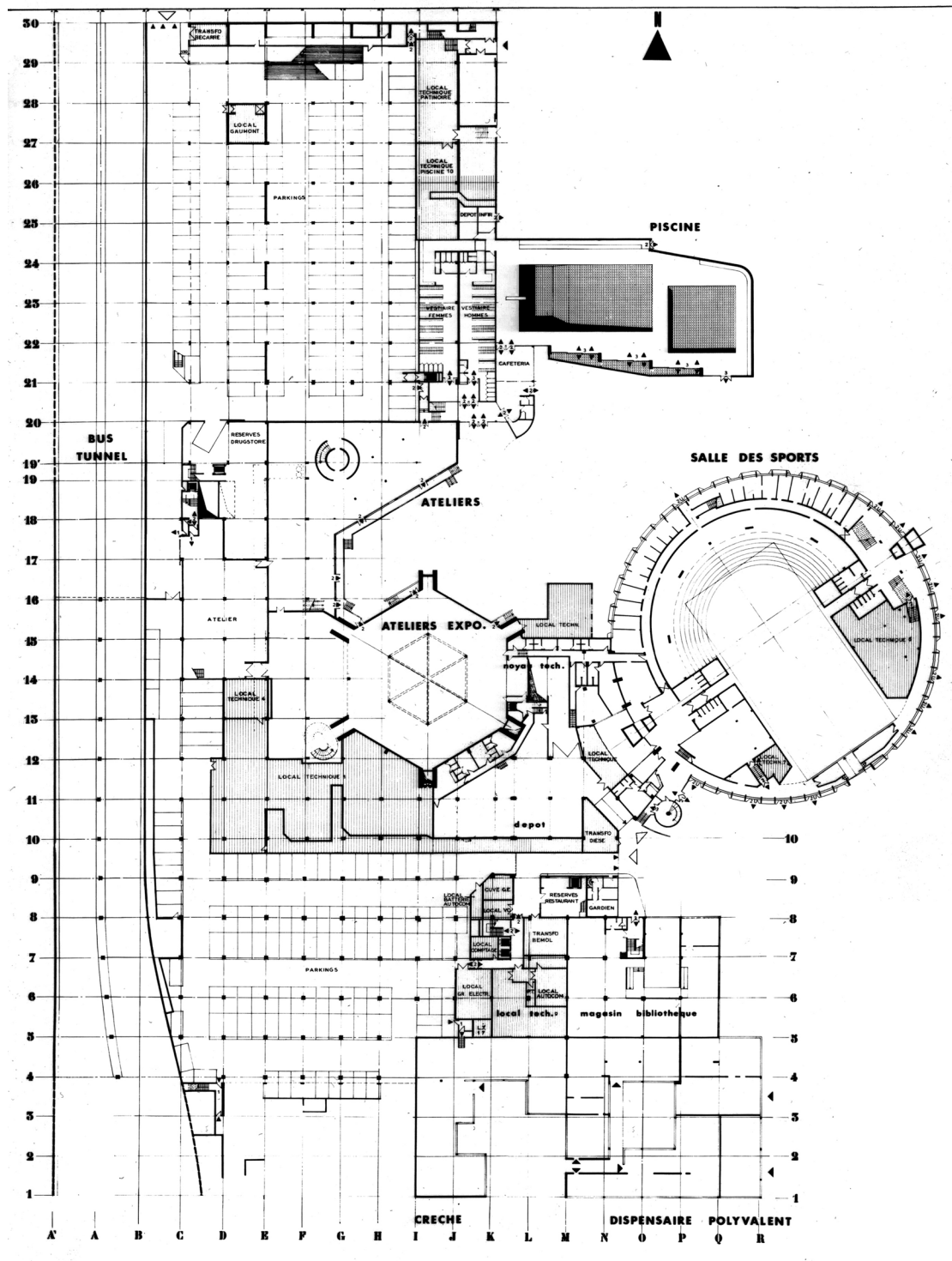
<sup>35</sup>Paul Claval and R.J. Johnston, *Geography since the Second World War: An International Survey* (London: Croon Helm, 1984).

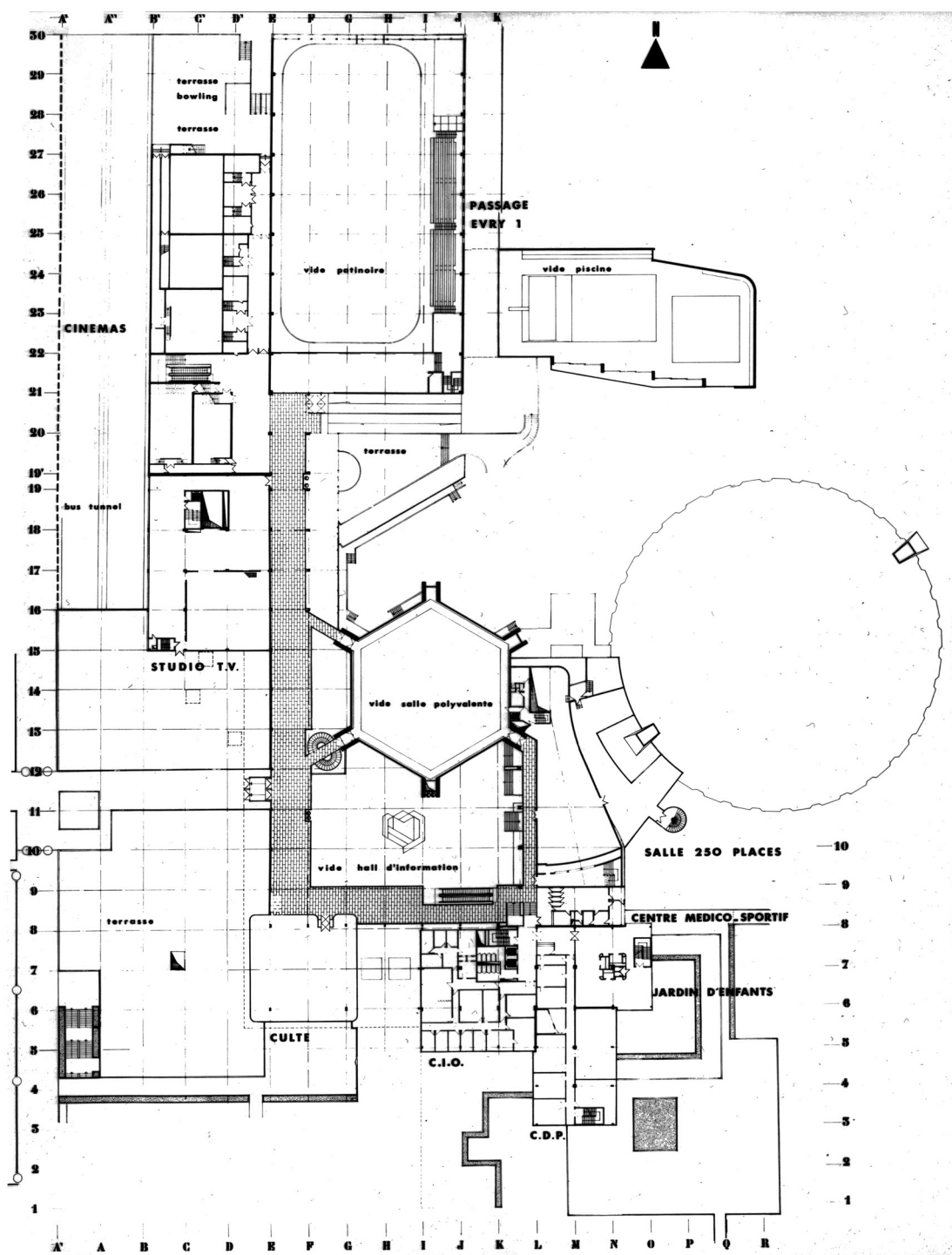
<sup>36</sup>Cupers, *The Social Project*, 204–210.



an astounding degree of integration of functions and activities that made it a truly urban centre. This included cafés, bars and restaurants, a bowling hall, a nightclub, a cinema, a skating ring, a sports hall and a swimming pool, a theatre, a library, an information centre, a family care centre, a centre for maternal and child protection, a kindergarten, a meeting centre, an ecumenical church, a broadcasting studio, a national employment agency, creative workshop spaces, a police station and of course a panoply of shops and department stores. These programmatic elements were aggregated over several floors, unified by massive plinth, underneath which parking and public transport was organized. When the centre opened in 1975, the new inhabitants of Évry and its surrounding suburbs were treated to the most unlikely combination of commercial functions, public activities and social programmes. These were not literally found under one roof, but were nevertheless all connected via interior walkways that came together in a double-height central atrium, which was meant to serve as the main public square of the complex. Despite the functional imbrication, some elements of the programme (the swimming pool, the skating rink and the sports hall most expressively) were formally articulated as distinct sculptural volumes.

The significance of this project is difficult to grasp without adjusting the lens we usually employ to evaluate the historical role of architecture in the transformation of the built environment at large. The design of Évry's urban centre was not the result of individual genius or architectural 'influence', but of negotiation and compromise. Its unique complexity was the result of exterior forces, such as the rise and popularity of privately developed suburban shopping centres, as much as the ambitions of modern architects and planners. Designs such as these should not be read as signs of an architectural avant-garde influencing daily building practice, but rather as creative attempts to marry private commercial development with modernist state-led planning. The resulting forms and spaces speak of an architectural agency embedded in a complex mix of private and public interests and a multitude of actors and ideas. They embody a transcultural modernity, influenced by American practices that were translated, appropriated and sometimes misunderstood, but in any case creatively transformed in their adaptation to French suburban conditions.





**Figure 1.4** Plans of the Agora of Évry. The shopping centre is attached to the left of this complex.

Source: Fonds Le Coureur. Service interministériel des Archives de France/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XXe siècle.