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Beyond the Façade: Haussmannization in Paris as a Transformation of Society

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The Paris that tourists know and love today conceals under its romantic, ordered, urban environment a façade of division and social change. Following Napoleon II’s commissioning of an urban overhaul, Haussmannization in the nineteenth century addressed problems of circulation and disorder, but also created problems of separation and division. Annexing several neighborhoods into a fortified new boundary, and subsequently removing the poor, working class to the outskirts, helped make this division permanent. While modern concepts and building materials significantly improved the inner city, they also forced a reduction in housing supply coupled with increased housing prices. Slums were cleared, in part because of the view that the poor were morally inferior to the wealthy. Also aiding in increasing the wealth of a certain class was the rise of capitalism and consumerism. New arcades and galéries lured shoppers into lives of consumerism and, to the conservative Catholic leaders, a life of sinful ostentation. Writers like Baudelaire integrated their private lives into a new public urbanism, while trends in apartment layout revealed tensions between rich and poor, public and private. Social tensions boiled over in conflicts like the Bloody Week of 1871, and monuments like Sacré Coeur were built with and incurred changing social symbolism. In sum, Haussmannization created, for better or worse, the Paris that we know today.

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Introduction

The Eiffel Tower glitters in the evening as tourists from all over the world step onto the bateaux mouches that line the Seine, ready to profit from the day’s tourism economy. The Boulevard des Champs-Élysées displays a soft glow that filters through the rustling shade trees lining the avenue, leading the eye to the massive, ornate, illuminated Arc de Triomphe. Paris has been the City of Light ever since an obsession with light, clarity and truth took hold in medieval times. From the tourist’s perspective, Paris is elegant, grand, inviting. Uniform, embellished buildings sit like women in lace petticoats in straight lines for miles, drawing the eye to a perspectival vanishing point studded with an imperial monument. Wide sidewalks permit pedestrians to stroll at their own pace — a leisurely one, as they are lured by the secret passageways in the form of galeries and arcades that beckon shoppers inside to buy upscale wares and fashions. Cafés serve as resting spots for the exhausted tourist, jutting out onto the sidewalks, their chalkboard easels describing the day’s fresh specialty, cups of café au lait resting casually on tables, even on the warmest of days. Croissants and baguettes enter the mouths of hungry Parisians and tourists alike as they navigate the diamond-gridded network of boulevards.

Paris is often thought of in terms of its architectural sophistication, yet this view only skims the surface of the city’s culture. Behind the glittering façade, Parisians have concealed a history wrought with tension and struggle. In the nineteenth century, Paris was a different city: filled with a tangle of narrow medieval streets, neighborhoods of slums, and politicians looking to turn a blemish on the continent into one of the world’s great modern jewels. During this quest for order, social, spatial, and architectural changes spanning the nineteenth century both enabled and accelerated each other’s ability to elevate Paris towards a new peak—as the world’s most modern city that ironically now seeks control through nostalgic rumination. Paris is seen as a city of great history. Its aging buildings are often romanticized and associated with a long, orderly, managed story of victorious modernity. Behind this façade, however, is another story. The real Paris tells a different story of segregation, class struggle, and violence. Haussmannization, which was once a symbol of modernity, has now become a nostalgic symbol of former glories, which still shelters behind its elegant exterior a legacy of division and separation.

Quest for an Imperial City

When Louis-Napoleon, nephew of the infamous emperor Napoleon I, took control of France in 1848, he sought to create a city worthy of empirical glory. For this task, he appointed Prefect of the Seine Baron Eugène-Georges Haussmann to bring his vision to life. His tasks were to bring light, air, order, cleanliness and safety to the French capital, and he was “charged with transforming the entire social and material makeup of Paris.” Louis-Napoleon desired massive monuments and wide boulevards along which to march military processions. This tall order resulted in one of the greatest urban transformations in recent history that is well documented—and still debated.

The Chronicling of Haussmannization

While Haussmann is now the most famous implementer of Louis-Napoleon’s charge to overhaul the city of Paris, his work was chronicled and described by many others during the seventeen-year period of renovation. This is especially crucial in the study of Haussmannization, since Haussmann himself did not theorize his own work, nor did he give indication in later interviews that he had any formal planning knowledge. César Daly is described by urban planning scholar Nicholas Papayanis as an important part of the urban renewal process in that he created “a theoretical reading of Haussmannization as a mid point [sic] in this process,” which served as
an important step in the creation of modern urban planning theory. Daly, an architect and editor of the Revue générale de l’architecture et des travaux publics (RGA) set out to explore the nature of cities. While his work was completed through the lens of Haussmannization (and therefore not purely abstract), the architect postulated that cities in general function as hubs of science and industry, religion, philosophy and the arts, and were determined by geographic position. Their relative success or failure was therefore determined by variations in the “order of buildings” and levels of circulation with regards to people, goods, and even ideas.

Daly approved of many of the changes to Paris’ public spaces, but also critiqued other aspects, even offering his own suggestions at meetings and in the RGA. He openly approved of the vast improvements to the water and sewer systems and applauded the focus on hygiene and cleanliness. Most important to Daly was the widening and straightening of streets, which had been so crowded that air and sunlight could not reach some of the densest neighborhoods. Circulation was critical for Daly in more than this aspect: he encouraged ramping up the railway system, which could transport the military quickly in wartime (which Harvey says for years clouded the city with a “sense of doom”), but could also prove to be a boost to the economy during peacetime.

One of the more important aspects of Papayanis’ work is the description of the decision to fortify Paris by building a wall enclosing the city. This fortification, which was criticized by Daly, was not economically helpful during peacetime (as he suggested in the case of railroads). The wall brought Paris to its present-day boundaries by annexing several neighborhoods that fell within its new circumference: Belleville, Grenelle, Charonne, Vaugirard, Montmartre, Bercy, Les Batignolles, Passy La Chapelle, Ivry, Auteuil, and Montrouge. It would prove to be fortuitous for these neighborhoods to be included in the new boundaries of the French capital, since the fate of the neighborhoods beyond the periphery would yield years of neglect and disconnect, while areas like Montmartre would flourish with the arrival of the art scene.

Les Halles was a significant ingredient of Haussmannization. What started out as the Hall de Blé (Wheat Hall) quickly became the marketplace that served not only a growing metropolitan region, but also the nation. It soon came to sell not only grain, but also meat, cheese, cloth, butter, fruits and vegetables. Its growth forced a move to an expanded, updated facility in the first arrondissement. Meredith TenHoor has shown in her work Architecture and Biopolitics at Les Halles that a concern with hygiene predates the Haussmann period, but it took a more significant role during that time. “Over the next ten years, first under Rambuteau and later under Baron Haussmann, Baltard [Les Halles’ chief architect] developed a series of plans intended to translate desires for a more hygienic market into spatial form.” In the case of Les Halles, circulation and policing were seen as vital improvements to crowded and often unsanitary food stalls which were crammed into a disorganized temple of abundance. Policing was perceived to be a necessary component of market regulation since “provisioning was not something that could be entrusted to private commerce alone... [and] a balance had to be struck between food merchants and the government” in order to ensure ample provisions at reasonable prices for Parisians. Bound up in the concepts of hygiene and cleanliness were the assumptions that women and the poverty-stricken perpetuated poor hygiene by their morally inferior values (perceived lack of initiative and prostitution). These groups were thus excluded from consideration in the renovations.

As a result, different plans were proposed for the relocation and expansion of Les Halles. One plan proposed moving the market adjacent to the Seine. This would provide easy access to water, improve circulation of provisions, and would also eliminate the slum neighborhood of Chevalier-du-Guet, which was seen as “an unhealthy blemish in the centre of Paris.” This plan was rejected, but elimination of slum neighborhoods by eviction and razing was still taking place elsewhere in the city.

Charles Marville also had a crucial role in chronicling the Haussmannization of Paris through his role as photographer. His images of Paris before, during and after construction have become invaluable tools to help visualize the medieval Paris that public officials wished to erase from history. Furthermore, Colette Wilson explains that
A close reading of these images reveals that while Marville’s collection of juxtaposed photographs conforms to the officially promoted view of the city as a modern, healthy and hygienic metropolis and, as such, constitutes an effective denial of the memory of Communard Paris, ... the ironies and ambiguities on the contrary, suggest that the memory of the recent past cannot be so easily erased.\(^{14}\)

The photographs, presenting before and after images of Paris, show how Haussmannization transformed cramped, dirty, and ‘morally depraved’ quartiers into triumphant manifestations of order, cleanliness and social control. Marville displayed his approximately 425 images in a “showpiece gallery” in 1878 designed to serve as justification for Haussmann’s bulldozing.\(^{15}\) By this time, the Second Empire had already ended along with the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, but construction continued in Paris well into the Third Republic in 1878. Wilson explains the care that Marville took in precisely achieving the goals laid out before him of portraying Paris as a putrid, unhygienic medieval dilemma before, and a glittery, organized, clean and truly modern world city after. His photographs of gas lamps and even public urinals contribute to Paris’ newly minted image of modernity, promoting the glittering façade that Paris would stand behind for generations to come.
Clearing the Slums

Slums carry a pejorative connotation, inciting thoughts of squalor and disease. Slums are defined as an area comprised of sub-standard housing and the absence of one or more urban services. Indeed, the ramshackle housing and lack of water, sewer, and toilet facilities in central Paris were key issues that Napoleon and Haussmann made a priority in addressing. Public safety and hygiene would be so addressed under Haussmann by bulldozing entire neighborhoods plagued by disease, fire, and social isolation. The problems were not immediately solved, however, since the displaced residents would simply move to a nearby area.

David Ward, in his highly influential work The Victorian Slum: An Enduring Myth? defines and characterizes perceptions of those in poverty. Because of an acceleration of urbanization during the nineteenth century, immigrants flocked to cities in search of opportunity and work. These immigrant poor were classified by the affluent based on their worthiness for charity by fitting into one of two categories: organized, working, and therefore worthy of charity; or disorganized, unemployed and therefore unworthy. Charity was inherent in the social system, as the poor were dependent on it for a minimum subsistence; moreover, the wealthy depended on charity to maintain this minimum as a basis of the new capitalist system, as well as charitable contributions as acts of penitence, or a way into heaven.

The depraved were also seen as at fault morally, and were assumed to live a “sordid and deviant life.” Politicians, falling into the morally superior upper classes, not only viewed the poor as morally inferior; the affluent feared their unknown, foreign, threatening traditions that ran idiosyncratic to mainstream society, and “even modest levels of organization aroused nervous murmurings about the creation of an insurgent state.” Those in the lower classes became an issue in terms of public policy reform and were a “reformable deviance” that needed to be ‘dealt with.’ As a result, to rid the center of Paris of the slums and all the problems attached to this complex sector of society, Napoleon and Haussmann erased entire neighborhoods from the map. The evicted residents were sent to a more utilitarian form of housing along the periphery of the city or removed to institutions which would supposedly rehabilitate the poor through instruction in ‘sobriety and self-discipline.’ However, many poor residents simply cycled in and out of institutionalization, as, like Ward points out, these changes to infrastructure did not solve the “more immediate predicament of the poor—their poverty.”

Ward stresses that while these attitudes toward the indigent in Victorian slums had changed somewhat by the time of his essay, it is still necessary to understand how these two warring factions of Parisian society, that is the affluent and the depraved, perceived each other. What may be seen by one side as a tendency toward organized crime, Ward claims is actually the poor developing alternative social ladders when more conventional forms of social mobility are blocked. The spatial separation of class by economic status that stemmed from the Haussmann period paradoxically relies on cheap labor to support its economic system; yet it “degrades those who struggle each day in search of work that does not exist” by labelling the unemployed lazy or as lacking motivation. By separating Parisians by socioeconomic status, Haussmannization has created a lasting, self-perpetuating spatial and psychological divide fueled by uneven capitalist development.

The Rise of Industrial Capitalism

While Haussmann receives widespread credit for a massive overhaul of Paris in terms of infrastructure, exterior and public spaces, Paris had already been undergoing internal change socially and systemically. His predecessor, former Prefect of the Seine Rambuteau, had different plans to tackle problems in infrastructure, but only in the form of a “timid policy ... of modest scale.” Scholar Ralph Kingston says that it was only when Haussmann took office as Prefect of the
Seine that “things changed dramatically.” Kingston’s work, Capitalism in the Streets, however, places specific importance on the local geographies of gallery owners on shaping the spatial capitalism of Paris. Throughout the essay, the productivity of small-scale business is brought to light, literally and figuratively:

the Galerie Montesquieu’s claim to fame was its innovative use of gas lighting to illuminate its passageways. In its first month of operation, it attracted many curious visitors as well as a commission of scientists and businessmen ... [who] noted a lingering odor. Soon after, the city ordered the gallery to remove its furnaces and gas pipes.  

Agreements were struck between owner and tenant to improve buildings, both the interior as well as in terms of frontage. Beautiful finishes such as marble, copper, glass and iron lured shoppers into arcades where a variety of business owners—shoeshines, chefs, satirical newspapers, pharmacists, butchers, and the list goes on—enjoyed exclusivity within the gallery.  

Shopkeepers and galerie owners created elaborate windowscapes to encourage loitering, and eventually purchasing, and landlords rented out luxury apartments to famous individuals in the hopes of attracting the fanatic onlooker as they entered or exited. This spectactorship coincided with the explosion of advertising, which led to the creation and distribution of millions of posters across the city. Karen Carter explores the “heightened visuality of posters in the midst of Haussmannization,” in which posters were aimed at attracting the casual passerby and feeding the system of consumerism as part of the capitalist economy.  

Although the poster (affiche) enjoyed a long history, its emergence as a pictorial form with illustrations dominating its composition developed in the late nineteenth century under a specific set of historical and cultural conditions that were particularly exacerbated after the city’s modernization (and rationalization) as enacted under Emperor Napoleon III (1808-1873) and Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-1891).  

Thus, nineteenth century Paris became a city of spectacle and consumerism. The creation of a consumer culture on both a citywide level, as well as a neighborhood level led to fissures in societal values and norms, with conservative Catholics reeling from what they perceived as sins of ‘moral decadence’ and ostentation.

Political History, Political Blindness

Historical geographer David Harvey beautifully teases out the political strife that built up and exploded during the nineteenth century as Parisians saw the rise and fall of empires, republics and monarchies in succession as the capital city, and nation, struggled to define themselves. He uses the “strange and tortured history” of Sacré Coeur to illustrate the ephemerality of symbolic power in Monument and Myth. In response to the materialism that came along with the capitalist industrial age, vehement conservative Catholics desired a symbol of penitence for the sins of the Second Empire in the form of moral decadence. Sacré Coeur was to be placed atop the hill of Montmartre, which had been newly annexed into the metropole with the erection of the fortification wall. Because of the Pope’s link with the monarchist cause, Communards who had banded together against Bismarck during the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian war, and attached themselves to the libertine, anti-monarchist principles of 1789, hated the symbol. Despite bloodshed and the martyrdom of several Communards, the church was completed in 1914. Though its symbolism was rooted in a deeply religious, monarchist cause a generation earlier, Sacré Coeur took on a new, national symbolic meaning during its consecration after the end of World
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War I. Whatever the monument, selective political blindness can change the urban experience, rendering the symbolism of monuments and the urban landscape mutable.

Also during the nineteenth century, modernity took hold and innovations in glass and steel led to the creation of new railways with impressive stations inspired by Englishman Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace in London. New connections and improved circulation of people, goods, and ideas increased the wealth of the affluent—by making Paris a “hub of national spatial integration.” Opportunities in finance, real-estate speculation and commerce fed a growing bourgeoisie, while spatial segregation of residents by income and removal of the poor worsened the poverty of the lower classes. Haussmannization was seen by many as being carried out with bourgeoisie goals in mind. This ‘political blindness’ to wider Parisians’ needs, as a consequence, caused a widening rift in the social fabric followed by calls for a return to order, which was embodied in the changes in architectural—and cultural—values displayed by Parisian homes.

Inside The Parisian Apartment

After the demolition of slums in central Paris, new buildings of uniform height were constructed along axes leading the eye not to the front door, but along a straight line ending with a monument at a perspectival vanishing point. This removed emphasis from entrances to homes and promoted a more stark separation of interior and exterior. Since the number of new homes was limited by height restrictions that were designed to maintain uniformity, the supply of housing in central Paris was drastically reduced compared with the previous overcrowding of the slums. As a result, rents in central arrondissements doubled from 1851-1857, creating a competitive housing market that paid off handsomely for speculators. Sharon Marcus, in her work Haussmannization as Anti-Modernity, says that commercial spaces, consumerism, and materialism provoked a nostalgic reaction to the increasingly public life of show and spectacle. The Parisian apartment became a domestic haven separate from the overbearing commerciality of the city. Interestingly, she points toward several examples of ways that Haussmannization promoted an ‘interiorization’ of public, exterior space. Les Halles, which started out as an open market, gradually became more covered, compartmentalized and interiorized through the additions of roofing and ironwork designed to separate the space visually.

Most significantly, however, is Marcus’ careful analysis of the interior of the new Paris apartment, which included ‘public’ areas such as main stairwells, and gradually became more private, with reception halls and salons being the most public, and the bedroom and toilette being the most private. This separation of public and private, interior and exterior is mirrored by the wider societal dichotomous separation of clean from dirty, rich from poor, and the seen from the unseen. As trends in architecture and design shifted from the classical Beaux Arts style to new, hygienic construction, many criticized the new buildings as “banal” and as having lost individuality. Reacting to the modernity sweeping across Paris, many lamented the disruption of patrilineage that had kept homes within families for generations and feared the loss of heritage and history. It is this same fear that fuels contemporary apprehension of redevelopment, despite a grave need for policy reform because of the lasting effects of Haussmannization.

Modernity and the flâneur

In the wake of the revolution of 1848, several changes in political establishment, and divisions of class, “history was experienced as uncannily contemporary, with the past and present blurred to such an extent that, as is well-known, the generation of Flaubert and Baudelaire could only see itself as the undeserving heirs of a long struggle which seemed inimical to closure.” This perspective comes from Françoise Meltzer, who explored the effects of the ever-changing
political and social environment on literature during the mid-nineteenth century. She points out that in such chaotic times as the revolution of 1848, (and subsequently, I would add, the Franco-Prussian wars, and the switch from monarchy to empire, to republic) there was a longing for order which was managed through nostalgia for a more orderly time. Baudelaire became well-known for his idea of the flâneur, who grappled with his place in society through his interactions with the urban environment. Meltzer states that “Baudelaire is willfully caught between two contradictory sentiments: the nostalgia for the pre-capitalist, pre-Haussmann life in Paris ... on the one hand, and a hatred of the bourgeoisie which ... makes him identify with the poor.”

As in Marcus’ description of the separations made between public and private, Baudelaire willfully places his private self within the public, promoting the melancholic ideas of ‘solitude in the multitude’ and losing oneself in a crowd. Although ironically nostalgic, Baudelaire’s flâneur is often linked with modernity, since the urban experience basic to flânerie is dependent upon the new capitalist economy—an economy which Haussmannization fostered.

In spite of the waves of reactionary social nostalgia occurring in fits and starts over the course of Haussmannization, modernization was a key characteristic of the physical renovations. New buildings were constructed out of modern materials; glass domes topped public buildings such as rail stations, and lacy ironwork embellished the new buildings of the city center. In due time, the urban landscape would come to resemble the moral and social characteristics that Parisians assigned themselves spatially, leading to psychogeographic notions of belonging or exclusion.

“Peripheries of inequality”

During the annexation of neighborhoods coinciding with the building of the fortification wall, the fates of the peripheral Parisian neighborhoods were sealed. Since the city center was now designated for the affluent elite, the neighborhoods beyond the wall became zones of class-based prejudice and segregation. Angélil and Siress refer to the nineteenth century as a time of “uneven geographical development,” in which the core neighborhoods were “péticoated” with embellishment and favor, while the banlieues occupying the outskirts of Paris languished in a utilitarian existence. The former takes a maternal, sheltering and nurturing association, while the latter conveys a hard, paternal existence that ironically is exiled from its patrie, or homeland. Tensions came to a head several times since the debut of the Second Empire, but most notably during the Semaine sanglante (the Bloody Week) of 1871. Architecturally, the city was created during Haussmannization as a self-fulfilling prophecy of internal socioeconomic divide that has persisted through the years. Angélil and Siress state that “urban planning in France has caused differences between the city center and the banlieue so great that the relationship between the two areas has been reduced to a standoff of good versus evil—a divide between the orderly center and its dangerous exterior.” This separation of core and periphery, which was once a physical separation in the form of the fortifications, was in post-World War II years torn down and replaced with the Boulevard Périphérique, a ring of highway which facilitates connection within the inner city—while still segregating those living in the banlieues.

Conclusions

The city of Paris underwent massive changes to its physical form as well as its social structure following Haussmannization. By erasing old neighborhoods and creating a neatly organized and embellished urban environment, people were separated and categorized. In this way, wealth began to determine Parisians’ morality. Haussmannization came and went in a flash and sizzle beginning with the Second Empire and ending with the turn of the twentieth century. It had finally constructed a façade of orderliness through its nostalgic compartmentalization, segregation, and
symbolic power. The chronicling of Haussmannization in Paris points to the assertion of dominance over the poor by the affluent; a chaotic political landscape inciting a quest for order and control; and the hidden, private Parisian apartment and its anti-modern reaction to change. New building materials and new capitalist ideas permeated the social fabric and created a reputation for modernity. They point to the city’s tentative acceptance of modernity on its own terms, with each monument and cathedral and building holding a symbolism that is carried on today. Paris’ defensive fortifications still maintain the psychogeography of a legacy of division, and ‘protect’ the city from change. Adoring tourists flock to Paris to see a city preserved in amber—monuments still looming large, baguettes hardly hinting at a long legacy of Paris’ economic prowess that began with the Seine and grain sales at Les Halles. But what do the monuments symbolize now, generations after their conception? Like Sacré Coeur, perhaps they invoke the struggle between capitalist consumerism and religious conservatism. As long lines form early in the day in front of the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe, visitors are eager to pay to ascend to the top and glimpse the City of Light from its most romantic perspective. The city conceals its changing symbolic power under its façade of Haussmannian order and elegance. But for those willing to become a flâneur, glimpses of the rich and complex story that led to this façade can perhaps be uncovered. Glimpses of the narrow, medieval streets that still remain on Île-de-la-Cité evoke a past life; a bus ride on the Périphérique displays the border of exclusionary strife; and a stroll through Montmartre awakens the long-slumbering story of political struggles that occurred during a century of chaos. Perhaps, rather, we are witnessing the decline of the monument as a political symbol, and the emerging dominance of urban form as the basis of commerce. Perhaps in this way, Paris will give yet new meaning to the symbolism of its elegant façades.
Notes

2. Papayanis, César Daly, Paris, and the Emergence of Modern Urban Planning.
3. Ibid., 325.
4. Ibid., 333.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 330-331, and Harvey, Monument and Myth, 366.
7. TenHoor, 78.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 74
10. Ibid.
11. Papayanis, 331.
13. Wilson, Memory and the politics of forgetting.
14. Ibid.
15. Wilson, 57.
16. Davis, Planet of Slums, 11.
17. Ward, The Victorian Slum.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., Harvey, Monument and Myth.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 325.
25. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Kingston, Capitalism, 45.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Carter, 12.
35. Harvey, Monument and Myth.
36. Papayanis, 330-1
37. Harvey, Monument and Myth.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Carter, 12; Kingston; Harvey.
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42. Marcus, Haussmannization as anti-modernity.
43. Marcus; TenHoor.
44. Marcus.
45. Ibid.
46. Meltzer, The Rupture of Reading, 58.
47. Ibid.
49. Angélil and Siress.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 58.

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