

How Paris Became a Museum

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In *L'invention du vieux Paris* (“The Invention of Old Paris”) Ruth Fiori chronicles the rise of preservation societies in 19th century Paris that led to the patrimonialization of the capital. What does it mean to “preserve” a monument? The author highlights the ideological differences that spurred the construction of a patrimonial perspective of which we inherit today.

Reviewed: Ruth Fiori, *L'invention du vieux Paris. Naissance d'une conscience patrimoniale dans la capitale*. Preface by Dominique Poulot, Wavre, Mardaga, 2012.

Parisian modernity is a nostalgic modernity. The momentum of progress did not take hold of the capital without leaving in its wake a sense of loss, the loss of “old Paris”, a passionate attachment which became manifest when its ongoing existence seemed threatened with demolition. “*Le vieux Paris n'est plus,*” (“Old Paris is no more”) wrote Baudelaire (“The Swan”, *The Flowers of Evil*), and it seems that from the start it gave itself up for lost – so much so, indeed, that we might well wonder whether it ever really existed: Is it not rather the fruit of literary, but also historical, invention? This is the hypothesis Ruth Fiori explores in *L'invention du vieux Paris*.

It makes sense for starters to ask from what point in time that “old Paris” can be dated: i.e. not just what buildings, what physical state of the city and what period are meant in this context by the adjective “old”, which automatically changes referents over time, but also when the very notion of “old Paris” arose and how it has shaped our perceptions of Paris ever since.

Ruins of Paris

As the title suggests, *L'invention du vieux Paris* seeks first to reconstruct the genesis of the notion of “old Paris” and to trace the fluctuation of the historical markers framing it, the values underlying it and the actions which that notion consequently served to legitimize.

Ruth Fiori shows that the expression “*vieux Paris*”, which made its first appearance as a purely descriptive category at the close of the 17th century (when it meant pre-Renaissance Paris), first gained currency during the Enlightenment to serve as a foil: “old Paris” was that muddy chaotic mass decried by Voltaire, the “dark, narrow, hideous center of the city” (*Des embellissements de Paris*, 1749) bequeathed by barbarous centuries past. His description fuelled dreams of razing the city and building a new city in its place that would be at once clean, comfortable and, above all, grandiose, worthy of being – as it claimed to be – the capital of the civilized world. So to the hygienist and functionalist arguments were added aesthetic considerations – steeped, as it happens, in classical sobriety and regularity –, and this combination of arguments prefigured the terms in which Haussmannian discourse would be subsequently articulated.

A veritable reversal ensued with the emergence of the Romantic sensibility around Victor Hugo's oeuvre. Old Paris was still a "labyrinth", to be sure, but a dazzling one, a "*tricot inextricable de rues bizarrement brouillées*" ("an inextricable fabric of strangely scrambled streets" (*Notre-Dame-de-Paris*), the victim of a cold and calculating, tasteless and soulless modernity disfiguring the city in its purported attempts to beautify it. Specialized literature and albums of picturesque views of the city, such as those of Lancelot Turpin de Crissé (*Souvenirs du vieux Paris*, 1833) and Alexandre Pernot (*Le vieux Paris*, 1838), engendered and established an image of old Paris, defined this time around as pre-revolutionary, that would eventually preside over subsequent struggles against state-driven "vandalism": Haussmann's designs on Paris would be opposed by what were already firmly entrenched convictions and discourse.

But the radicalness of Haussmann's projects triggered a decisive shift, according to Ruth Fiori, from a Romantic, initially aesthetic, concern to a genuinely historical concern for the city's architectural heritage. The monotonous and rigidly regulated new city that was taking shape was not only ugly, but above all, in the eyes of its detractors, illegible and hopelessly mute. The extent of the destruction of whole neighborhoods, which threatened to strip Paris of its memory, called for "the constitution of a new history" (p. 72). Initially thought of as an antidote to forgetting, "a form of compensation", as Fiori puts it (p. 77), this new history gradually suffused the real city with a ghostly presence that was resuscitated in books – but also in Paris itself, whose façades began to be fitted out with memorial plaques and inscriptions, and its pavements marked with the traces where older edifices had once stood. This old Paris, which thus attained the dignity of a subject of scholarship, was not just a bunch of more or less aged buildings. It was gradually amplified into an atmosphere, a teeming profusion of past ways of life, the quondam cacophony and characters of the city's streets, of vanished trades and crafts, fairs and festivities. The chronicles and descriptions thereof, which became increasingly abundant, combined the historical exactitude of details with the whimsy of idealized fantasies in a manner sometimes impervious to any attempt to distinguish fact from fiction.

So the first half of the 19th century saw old Paris become an "historical object worthy of study", which was the prerequisite for its gradual conversion into a "patrimonial object worthy of preservation and conservation" (p. 77) in its materiality: this heap of lamented ruins was ready to become a veritable battleground.

From lamentation to action

This conversion was the upshot of action by various preservationist "groups" (as the author refers to them generically). This is the central focus of Ruth Fiori's investigation, which seeks to show, using Paris as a case in point, the "importance of associative groups in the construction of patrimony" (p. 14). The shift from the theoretical work of scholarship to activism and organized pressure brought to bear on the City and the State, the shift from denunciation to prevention, commenced in the 1870s and culminated in 1884 with Charles Normand's founding of the *Société des Amis des Monuments Parisiens* (SAMP, "Society of Friends of Parisian Monuments"), whose members included Paul Marmottan, Charles Garnier, Albert Lenoir, Eugène Müntz *et al.* From the outset, the SAMP was intended to be a "permanent force, a jealous and intelligent guardian of various branches of art and scholarship" (Normand, p. 24). Seconded by a certain number of other organizations, by learned societies in various districts of Paris and by local committees, such as the *Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris* ("Municipal Commission of Old Paris"), it showed unflinching tenacity in its efforts to mobilize public opinion for the preservation of old Paris by means of

publications for the learned and layman alike, by organizing guided tours, conferences and banquets, and by launching direct appeals to elected officials and large-scale press campaigns, some of which were quite creative (such as the 1870 publication of an obituary for the Arènes de Lutèce¹). Ruth Fiori details some significant examples of these preservation campaigns, the twists and turns of which were to continue in some cases for over 20 years.

These groups did not always emerge victorious, and Ruth Fiori scrutinizes the causes of their defeat in each case. But in their deliberations and actions, one finds – and this is what makes her inquiry most interesting – the germ of the ideas of patrimony and monument on which we still rely to this day.

The invention of the patrimonial perspective

The *Société des Amis des Monuments Parisiens* was an example of a theoretical challenge to the establishment arising out of civil society that gradually gained a wider hearing and greater authority. From the very beginning, the SAMP sought to develop a “second opinion” challenging every step of the way the official expert opinion of the Commission for Historical Monuments set up in 1837. The Commission’s reputation was already tarnished by a “black legend” (p. 113), which was by and large well-founded, if only on the grounds of its powerlessness: it looked on, either helpless or conniving, as a number of buildings were torn down (e.g. Hôtel de la Trémoille and Eglise des Célestins in 1841) or mutilated (e.g. the Collège des Bernardins turned into a fire station in 1845), and was bitterly reviled for doing nothing about it.

But above and beyond these specific instances, the opposition between the Friends of Parisian Monuments and the Commission for Historical Monuments was of a theoretical nature. It stemmed from their radically divergent approaches to patrimony and their fundamentally different views of urban reality. Fiori shows that the defining aspect of the preservation groups was, in the manner of the Carnavalet Museum curators and in the auspicious context in which the history of art attained the dignity of a fully-fledged discipline, their having promoted a truly historical and documentary perspective committed to what they called the “value of art and history” (p. 128). This perspective set them apart from the essentially aesthetic or artistic point of view that the Historical Monuments Commission had inherited from Romanticism.

What is a monument?

This difference in perspective was most clearly manifest in defining the scope of the capital’s architectural heritage. A look at the Commission’s lists of historical monuments at the close of the 19th century shows that, proceeding chronologically, they excluded everything (or virtually everything) built after 1750. That can be explained by aesthetic preferences (the Commission was dominated by men of the Romantic generation with little appreciation for the styles of the Ancien Régime and the Empire) as well as ideological considerations (detractors often associated these styles with the regimes that nurtured them). In typological terms, the Commission favored official and religious architecture, in other words elaborate “monumental” architecture, in the ordinary sense of the word. For example, when excavation work on the Rue Monge unearthed the Arènes de Lutèce, for whose preservation the State would have had to buy up land owned by the public transport operator CGO (Compagnie Générale des Omnibus), the Commission came out against it, deeming the amphitheater “of very mediocre interest in terms of its construction and layout” (Viollet-le-Duc, p. 123), which

¹ A 1st-century AD Gallo-Roman amphitheatre in the Latin Quarter (Translator’s note)

is undeniable if it is compared to the Roman amphitheaters in Nîmes and Arles. However, the Parisians groups did not seek to defend the Arènes as a work of art, but as an “historical memento and archaeological site” (p. 123). This idea of a “historical memento” was likewise deployed to legitimize petitions to protect non-monumental constructions, i.e. minor or vernacular buildings as the Mire du Nord [“Northern Lookout” in Montmartre], the Moulin de la Charité [“Charity Mill”, a former monastic windmill] in Montparnasse Cemetery or the Regards de Belleville [small buildings over underground water springs], whose retrospective value simply lay in the fact that they still bore witness to something that had disappeared. So it was the very idea of a “monument” that was redefined, explains Ruth Fiori (who owes much here to the work of Françoise Choay), by a return to its etymology: from the Latin *monere*, to warn, remind, “monument” originally meant “that which calls on memory”, which goes far beyond mere monumental edifices or works of art intended to serve as memorials.

In this sense, an edifice did not need to be beautiful, or so esteemed by a taste that began to be suspected of fickleness, in order to be regarded as a “monument”. As Georges Montorgueil puts it, the Bourse [Paris stock exchange], for example (threatened in 1899 by a plan to build an extension), “though not really a marvel, is nonetheless a page of Paris history”, since this edifice “symbolizes the Empire mentality imposing the architecture of the Caesars on the Old World” (p. 134). Likewise, there were efforts to defend the pavilions of the Barrière du Trône (now Place de la Nation), the demolition of which was demanded by several local officials on the grounds that they served no practical purpose and that their design was unattractively cumbersome. Lucien Lambeau, anticipating the subsequent rehabilitation of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s works, retorted: “Who can reply that this architecture [...] will not be described later as powerful and majestic architecture?” (p. 188)

Paradoxically, this historicist approach to patrimony as testimony to the past led little by little to extending “old Paris” to include parts of “modern Paris” against which the concept had been developed in the first place. In 1886, for instance, when plans for an elevated railway involved blocking the view of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette and Trinité, Charles Garnier pointed out that “these new churches will be old someday” (p. 199). Similarly, the regularity of the Rue de Rivoli, jeopardized by unsightly raised structures, was in 1906 adjudged “characteristic of its age, hence respectable” (Lucien Augé de Lassus, p. 232).

Ultimately, the preservationists’ new conception of a monument was not confined to the building proper, but included its surroundings, which “contribute in large measure to its aspect” (SAMP Bulletin, p. 200) since they determine the way in which it is seen – an idea, Fiori points out, that prefigured ideas of “site” and “urban landscape” that were to come much later. The conjunction, described by Eugène Hénard, of Sainte-Geneviève Library, the Panthéon, the Lycée Henri-IV and the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont has at least as much intrinsic value as each edifice taken separately. Just as the Hôtel des Invalides is inseparable from the esplanade in which it is set. Conversely, the void hollowed out around the Tour Saint-Jacques, which is all that remains of a 16th-century abbey, made the tower a sort of readymade before its time: “It’s an Eiffel Tower in the Gothic genre,” wrote Arthur Rhoné in 1889 (*“Réflexions sur l’enlaidissement progressif des villes qu’on embellit”*, p. 46). Consequently, as the Amis des Monuments Parisiens saw it, the boundaries of the city’s architectural patrimony ultimately all but coincided with those of the city itself, which, in the name of history, must remain untouched.

Preserve or restore

For this new standpoint also determined a new take on the respect owed to patrimony, i.e. on what it means to protect a monument. Under the dominant influence of Viollet-le-Duc, the Historical Monuments Commission undertook huge restoration projects that verged on reconstructing what were often largely imagined buildings. The City of Paris, for its part, prioritized practical ends, i.e. overhauling and converting buildings to serve new functions and, in so doing, saving them from the wrecking ball while altering them significantly. As for the Parisian scholars, who conceived of monuments as documents, or even relics, of the past, they could not see such undertakings as anything but adulteration, tantamount, in the final analysis, to despoliation and destruction. Since the value of a monument derived, in their eyes, from its value as a record of the past, it required authenticity, and therefore a preservation policy that confines itself to consolidating, as discreetly as possible, to avert collapse. That was what they had demanded for Saint-Pierre-de-Montmartre, which their strenuous efforts helped to save despite its dilapidation and the indifference of the archdiocese. During its restoration under the architect Louis Sauvageot, however, the old church was decked out with an anachronistic clock tower that disfigured it and was to remain in their eyes the epitome of the government's incompetence in these matters.

So from the outset, this “archeological” conception of built heritage and of the city came up against its own contradictions: a church, to remain a church, needs a bell tower; a building, a city, are made to be inhabited. But as Fiori points out, the recognition of their historical value paved the way for the “process – much later, of course – of the museification of urban space” (p. 254) and jeopardized not only their use, but, by the same token, their *raison d'être* in the city. What is more, the old art of building was now perceived and celebrated as an art of living: the revaluation of “old Paris” was largely due to a nostalgic yearning for its vivacity and festivities, in a word, for its *life*. And yet the preservation of old Paris, because it inevitably involved a form of embalming, a break with the immediacy of experience and detachment from it through (in this case, historical) consciousness, could only lead to the death that was supposed to be averted.

Is the “beauty of Paris” political?

So the history of “old Paris” is one of the gradual ascension of an outlook claiming to be axiologically neutral, both in aesthetic and political terms. The SAMP presented itself from the outset as nonpartisan, and it seems its members' party affiliations did indeed vary considerably. Protecting the patrimony was apparently not the sole preserve of conservatives advocating a return to the past. The nostalgic bent of the preservationists' struggle was not directly reactionary; in their discourse at least, they even described it as being open to the future. And of course, as Ruth Fiori emphasizes, the gigantic reconstruction of “Old Paris”, designed by Albert Robida, was offered up as an attraction for visitors to the World Fair in 1900, alongside the Eiffel Tower, the underground and the glorification of electricity. But is that enough to establish, as she argues, “its non-contradiction with the idea of modernity” (p. 99)? It is perhaps regrettable here that the author does not show more clearly how, and to what extent, beyond mere statements of intent, the faith in progress could be reconciled with a love of the past.

Be that as it may, beyond their ideological differences, it was the patrimonial outlook they invented that brought the “friends of old Paris” together. A case in point is the Chapelle Expiatoire³, whose “invisible” patrimonial value (p. 186) they sought to unveil, faced with

³ Dedicated to Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, who were formerly buried on the site (Translator's note)

republican elected officials upset at the prospect of preserving such a political symbol of the *Ancien Régime*: “The Chapelle Expiatoire is testimony to a state of mind that spurred on a literary renaissance steeped in an often intemperate admiration of the past; it is also the product of artistic methods that hold an ineradicable place in the succession of French architectures” (Jacques de Boisjoslin, p. 186).

To her credit, however, Ruth Fiori does qualify this assessment by suggesting, for example, that the attachment to or rediscovery of the grand *Ancien Régime* town houses was not wholly devoid of ulterior political motives. Above all, she shows how in the early 20th century the heated arguments over the “Americanization” of Paris were actually “on the borderline between urban imagination and the questioning of [national] identity” (p. 290). Defending “*la beauté de Paris*”, which at the time appeared essential to sustaining the international influence of this “capital of capitals” (Massart, p. 243), became a national policy issue. Behind the recurrent condemnation of the new so-called “skyscrapers”, as anxious observers called certain tall buildings that were actually quite modest compared to American high rises, lay the defense of an architectural, but also social and cultural, model embodied in a certain humanistic and artistic vision of the city. From then on, the already century-old idea of Paris split into two cities, distinct and inimical, became blurred: “old Paris” and “modern Paris” were reunited by the dread of leaving the city in the hands of the narrow materialism of engineers, which could be expected to produce every possible ill, starting with dullness and ugliness, qualities hitherto ascribed to modernity.

Charles Garnier summed up this struggle in a phrase that is, in hindsight, quite telling: “Paris must not be turned into a factory; it must remain a museum” (p. 240). In other words, a place where art is celebrated, though in an unresolved state that incessantly imperils the life it sought to glorify. Paris, the whole of which has now become “old Paris”, has gained the prestige of a halo of memories that only makes it admirable insofar as it evokes what no longer exists, and perhaps never existed. Voided of its reality, “Paris” always seems somewhere else, and that may be why it is so difficult today to know how to build and how to live there.

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