

# Cities

Karen Bowie, editor

## **La modernité avant Haussmann: Formes de l'espace urbain à Paris 1801–1853**

Paris: Éditions Recherches, 2001, 408 pp.,  
95 b/w illus. €92 (paper), ISBN 2-86222-  
036-1.

The claim that Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine from 1853 to 1870, deserves the lion's share of credit for transforming Paris into the nineteenth century's capital of modernity has been accepted as nearly incontrovertible fact ever since the publication of his *Mémoires* in 1890–1893 (see the new edition by Françoise Choay [Paris, 2000]). Confirming opinions already voiced at mid-century via newspapers and the specialized press, Haussmann attributed the modernization of Paris during the Second Empire to his plan for the city, which itself originated in a sketch that Napoleon III had put into his hands in 1853. The resulting Paris of tree-lined boulevards and regular limestone façades, supported by efficient systems of spatial and hygienic circulation, proved the prefect's mastery of the political and economic forces produced in this age of industry, as he wielded the twinned instruments of a disciplined municipal bureaucracy and a boldly speculative scheme of capitalist financing in order to turn the imperial sketch into the physical and social order of an urban master plan. Under Haussmann's administration, the critical idea of modernity and the critical practice of urbanism seemed at once to have been invented and coordinated in a theory of the industrial city that could be subjected to rational analysis and control. Artifact of modernity, Haussmann's Paris became the measure for all other modern cities, and the twentieth century's point of departure for writers like Walter Benjamin and architects like Le Corbusier, who saw in the city a transformative promise for the future through progressive ideological and formal change.

Haussmann has continued to dominate histories of nineteenth-century Paris, from the seminal studies by André Morizet (1932), Brian Chapman (1957), and David Pinkney (1958), to the recent works by Jean des Cars (1988), des Cars and Pierre Pinon (1991), David Jordan (1995), Michel Carmona (2000), and Georges Valence (2000). Yet significant differences of tone separate the earlier from the later group, where respect for Haussmann's originality as the planner of modernity has given way to skeptical inquiries into whether the prefect fully merits the reputation he asserted for himself in his *Mémoires*. Informing this skepticism is a growing body of literature that, without ignoring Haussmann, steps back from his dominating presence in the foreground of our understanding, to look more broadly at the conditions, patterns, and individuals responsible for shaping Paris in the nineteenth century.

Pierre Lavedan led the way with *La question du déplacement de Paris* (Paris, 1969), a short but important account of a debate about the city's growth in the 1840s, which revealed that modern theories and practices of urbanism were under development well before Haussmann's arrival on the scene in 1853. That Haussmann was only one figure in a complicated urban landscape, that he was at best the momentary agent of a process and a policy he neither invented, solely controlled, nor brought to completion has been confirmed in subsequent studies, among them: Pierre Lavedan, *Nouvelle histoire de Paris: Histoire de l'urbanisme à Paris* (Paris, 1975); Norma Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878–1978* (New Haven and London, 1979); Maurice Agulhon, ed., *La ville de l'âge industriel: Le cycle haussmannien*, vol. 4 in the series *Histoire de la France urbaine*, ed. George Duby (Paris, 1983); François Loyer, *Paris XIXe siècle: L'immeuble et la rue* (Paris, 1987); and David Van Zanten, *Building Paris: Architectural Institutions and the Transformation of the French Capital, 1830–1870* (Cambridge, 1994).

The book under review reflects this structural shift in thinking on nine-

teenth-century Paris. The outcome of an international colloquium on "Modernity before Haussmann," held in Paris in June 1999 and organized by Karen Bowie, Sharon Marcus, David Van Zanten, and François Loyer, this book gathers twenty-eight essays by historians of culture, society, urbanism, architecture, art, photography, and literature. These scholars argue that the city's modernization, practically and representationally, not only preceded Haussmann, but also proved in many ways to be more innovative and perceptive before the autocratic prefect tried to regularize its results. As Bowie explains in her introduction (18), the essays are organized by two leading questions: To what degree can one speak of "haussmannism" before Haussmann? and, To what degree can one speak of a "new Paris" before 1853? A generously eclectic range of topics is considered: urban theories of the city articulated in the 1830s and 1840s; the organization of and projects by the municipal administration before Haussmann; the development of new streets and new quarters of Paris, especially under the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy; systems of circulation in the city, including the Seine and canals along with the expected railroads and boulevards; the architecture and teaching of the *École des Beaux-Arts* as responses to the city; the uses and meanings of public and private spaces in the city; and the representational constructions of the city in modernity to be found in contemporary literature, theater, painting, sculpture, photography, and mass media.

These topics correspond generally to the subcategories into which Bowie has grouped the essays, though many of those resist strict classification. Essays frequently overlap, while similar topics can lead to different conclusions from one essay to another. Despite the editor's attempt to marshal the arguments into a coherent thesis, the book cannot escape its origins in a colloquium where experimental works-in-progress were being offered by many authors who do not always agree with each other. I read the

book monographically from front to back, yet ended up relating the format to a nineteenth-century steamer trunk, with its numerous drawers and cabinets of varying sizes for storing things away: if the final result is tidy, and can be closed into a compact object, the actual organization of the contents inside is largely arbitrary, more an expression of whim than of necessity.

My observation should be taken as praise, not criticism. As Bowie herself recognizes (25), the book's utility lies precisely in this possibility that readers might use its contents in multiple ways, dipping in and out of the essays according to one's interest: "It is left in fact to the reader to extricate from these 28 articles the various themes and questions that recur across such varied approaches to the history of Paris." François Loyer, in his incisive preface (9–13), and Marcel Royanolo, in an initial essay on "Modernity?" (27–38), both note that the collapse of the myth of Haussmann has had important methodological consequences: by calling into question Haussmann's claim to have been the singular author of the city's modernity, recent scholarship has more substantively called into question the discipline of urbanism itself, turning our attention from urbanism to urban history, from instrumental claims to scientific predictability, to more pragmatic and heterogeneous methods of analysis that cross disciplinary boundaries.

Rather than find neat answers to Karen Bowie's two questions, the essays tease out underlying contradictions to our conceptions and perceptions of the modern city. The tension observed by Royanolo between the theoretical and the actual city—between the legal and technocratic utopias posited by urban theory and the messy actualities of property rights, market values, and private interests—leads others to competing conclusions about urbanism's historical causes. The premise that Paris was a city in crisis brought on by economic dislocation and population growth (necessitating the solution of Haussmann's plan) is challenged by Barrie Ratcliffe (41–55),

who dismisses the crisis as a fiction of theorists and instead reconstructs the city as an ongoing process of self-correcting physical and social transformation. Conversely, Nicholas Papayanis accepts the crisis (82–94), arguing that it stimulated the urban theories developed in the 1840s by Victor Considérant, Perreymond, and Hippolyte Meynadier (and leading to Haussmann). Modernity itself turns out to be two-faced, what Bowie calls a “joker” (16) able to assume the value of its context: though coined by Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire in the 1850s to counter notions of progress with an absolutely transient sense of being in the present moment, “modernité” denotes in urban theory the very sort of teleological determinism in the city that Gautier and Baudelaire rejected (a point made by Ratcliffe [55]). Following Walter Benjamin, many scholars now equate modernity with publicity, and examine how new technologies of the Industrial Revolution were used to construct a common social identity for life in the city—though often with little agreement on the nature of that identity (see the essays by Jeannene Przyblyski on photography, Tim Farrant on Honoré de Balzac and *Le Diable à Paris*, Jennifer Terni on vaudeville, Madeleine Fidell-Beaufort on the illustrated press, and Margaret Cohen on Eugène Sue).

Haussmann remains the final joker in all of this. The irony of *La modernité avant Haussmann* is that the very person displaced by the methodological move from urbanism to urban history returns so insistently to center stage as the standard by which modernity continues to be gauged. The decision to bracket Paris chronologically, from c. 1800 to precisely 1853, inevitably (if unintentionally) reinforces the notion that Haussmann’s appointment as prefect in 1853 really did mark the defining moment between one history of the city and another. If, as this book so amply documents, modernity in Paris did not start with Haussmann, then perhaps it is time (taking a page from Lavedan, Loyer, Van Zanten, and others) to stop believing that 1853 was a particu-

larly significant year in the city’s history, or that “haussmannism” accurately describes the transformation of Paris in the nineteenth century.

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### **Richmond’s Monument Avenue**

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For many visitors, Monument Avenue in Richmond remains the symbolic heart of the Confederacy. Pilgrims carrying cameras still travel there to venerate the statues of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart, Jefferson Davis, and Matthew Maury that punctuate the tree-lined boulevard. In doing so, some come to honor the spirit of their own ancestors who served the losing side in the Civil War. They view the avenue as a Southern shrine, but others have called it a “street of shame.” These detractors say the sculptures stigmatize Richmond, calling to mind past institutions of slavery and patriarchy that a New South must transcend. After heated debate, a bronze statue of African American tennis champion Arthur Ashe, a Richmond native, was added to the avenue in 1996 to rupture its thematic harmony and provide a new role model for today’s population. Proposals to add more sculptures that diversify Monument Avenue and dilute its focus on Confederate valor are expected, and the street is likely again to be a site of contention in the twenty-first century.

*Richmond’s Monument Avenue* is a beautifully illustrated, meticulously researched, and well-written book that addresses but does not dwell on these angry battle lines of monumental memory. Rather, it normalizes and even celebrates Monument Avenue by making its sculptures the backdrop for a discussion of urban development in a local and