

History and Theory Studies, First Year

A survey of Architecture and Urban History

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Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2020

*Stone, Stage, and City:
Cobblestones and Façades in Renaissance Paris*



Cooper engraving of Place Royale by Perelle family

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Prologue

1. In 1372 it became compulsory to shout “Gare à l'eau” three times before throwing your waste out the window. “Mind the water” This is what the housewives shouted before throwing out the contents of the bucket of used water from the window to the street.

« Gare à l'eau! Gare à l'eau! Gare à l'eau!¹ ». An agitation within the cramped space began. A lame, old, humpbacked man dropped his walk stick while trying to elude the mundane danger, the beggar who was seating on the ground put his arms on his head as if he wanted to protect himself from something that would fall from the sky, the large opulent carriage heading towards a master house in Ile Saint Louis increased its speed almost clashing someone who was running without any preconceived direction, and of course, the rats came just in time for the feast when all of a sudden a liquid full of excrement hit the unpaved street. The horrible smell coming from the ground invaded the space; and the fortunate passer byes – after having taken refuge themselves on the exterior sides of the street – continued their walk faster than before with the only will to escape this dirty and futile narrow space. Such was the Parisian street scenery during the Middle Ages : a no man's land dominated by filth and fear.

*“On dit que je suis chiche mais je fais trois choses bien éloignées de l'avarice, car
je fais la guerre, l'amour et
je bâtis”*

Writes the king to his friend Sully 1607²

2. "They say that I am stingy but I do three things far from greed, because I make war, love, and I build" wrote Henry IV to his friend Sully (1607)

During the so-called dark ages of ignorance, Paris was a chaotic gathering of people living in rudimentary conditions. The city itself was in the image of its inhabitants, developed organically. The reign of King Henry IV marked the turning point of the history of France; the endless

religious wars had impoverished the monarchy and Henry IV wanted to establish his power as the King of all French subjects in a unified and strong Kingdom. To consolidate his project, he decided to undertake major construction works by introducing a new architectural project for the city of Paris. The three decades of religious wars in France opened the way to the construction of a modern nation-state. The *architecture of reference*³ project was planned in order to establish a common framework concerning the façades of domestic buildings and the paving of streets to create a unified urban language that would give to the subject a new identity : citizenship. How could the *architecture of reference* paradigm enable subjects to become citizens⁴? The choice of artefacts were of capital importance as they would impose the power of the King by shaping, physically the city. *Specific Spaces*⁵ such as the Places Royales and main streets were conceived by the creation of empty spaces. The creation of a space supposes limits to it. Thus, the cornerstones of *architecture of reference project* were cobblestones and façades which formed these limits

3. This essay will refer to *architecture of reference* as the architectural fundamentals pre-established by Le Muet and supposed to be taken as a reference for the public spaces in the construction of a well-ordered and unified state.

4. Change of individuals' status; from Subject, person subject to sovereign authority to Citizen, individual enjoying civil and political rights as a member of a city or of a state.

5. In his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood", the critic Michael Fried bluntly opposed art and theatre to one another writing that art had the quality of being present whereas theatre did not exist without the spectator. From this perspective, the twentieth century three dimensional art which gains meaning only by the presence of a spectator is condemned to theatricality as discussed in Donald Judd's text, *Specific Objects*. In the same understanding, *Specific Spaces* is the term used by Maria Giudici in *The City as a Project* (2010,163) to define public spaces that cannot perform without people such as the Places Royales.

By analysing, in a small scale, the presence of cobblestones and widening the study to the creation of façades this essay will attempt to demonstrate their broader functions on the arrangement of Paris and therefore in the formation of subjects. After the Middle Ages, period of profound regression, a return to the values of Antiquity enabled a new period marked by social, economic, and cultural liberation, known as the Renaissance. This essay will draw parallels between Antiquity and the Renaissance. With the Renaissance, civil architecture, neglected during the previous centuries, saw a renewal with the return of the idea of the street and the square. Squares and streets were redesigned within the city of Paris to create a new lifestyle for its inhabitants, with the aim to reduce the domination of the Church and bring in a social life turned towards trade and art under the authority of the King. At the dawn of Renaissance, architecture set the tune of a modern society.

Cobblestones

Cobblestone as Showcase of The Streets

Medieval Paris was alike an outgrown rural area with filthy earth ways as streets. These in between circulation lanes had formed organically during the unplanned erection of buildings, so that nobody was responsible for them and nobody took care of them. They were devoid of perceptible existence and thus of interest, in diametrical opposition to the Ancient *polis*, where the arrangement and the maintenance of streets were a primary concern because of political and military reasons. The most representative architectural infrastructure that gave the sense of political, religious and military domination of Rome, both to its inhabitants and to the foreigners was the Via Appia⁶. Unlike the streets of Medieval Paris, the presence of the Appian Way provided a stage for all public activities such as religious rituals or trade as well as the emperor and armies manifestations conveying to Roman citizens the importance of the streets⁷. In 1594, King Henry IV, aware of the civic order and architectural urban organisation system of ancient civilisations, perceived the importance of architectural elements in the establishment of his power. Therefore, the urbanisation project he undertook in Paris implied first to bring into existence the streets by paving them properly. The chosen material was cobblestones which can be considered as the most subtle element that implied order within the city.

Paris, early XVII.

Paris, new architectural project.

6. Refer to Maria Giudici, the Via Appia was an imperial way built in 312 B.C. with polygonal shaped mill-stones fastened together firmly using high engineering methods was the symbol of the city, Giudici. S. Maria. (2001,148). *The Street as a Project*. Delft

7. As Maria Giudici remarks, the Appian Way provided a stage for all public activities such as religious rituals or trade, Giudici. S. Maria. (2001,82). *The Street as a Project*. Delft

8. In Paris, cobblestones were made of two types of stone: sandstone or granite and came from the quarries of Versailles. Cobblestones had irregular shapes, uneven relief and natural patina. The sandstone cobblestones had shades of oxidised brown and grey, a very uneven relief of very variable dimensions, rather rectangular shape of 20 to 30 cm length, 18 to 20 cm width, and 17 to 20 cm height. The granite cobblestones had shades of grey and blue, a rectangular shape of 20 to 27 cm length, 14 to 15 cm width, and 14 cm height.

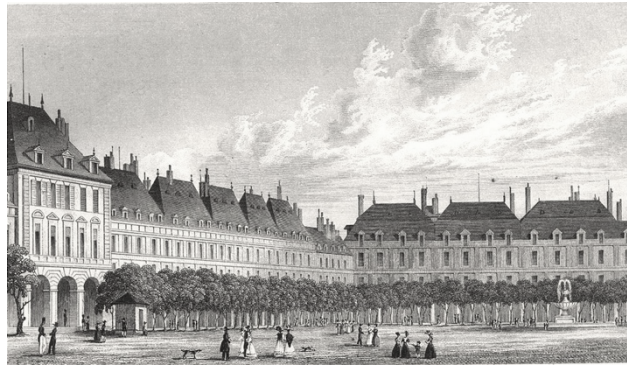
The use of cobblestones as an essential artefact of the new city paradigm gave an organised background to the streets, firstly because of the monotony of their shapes, colours⁸, measurements system, and secondly because of their predefined geometrical paving style. Moreover, the stone became a noble material because it required a know-how that gave a certain value to the streets and to the surrounding buildings. The cobblestone layed streets inspired a mutual sense of respect, not only the inhabitants began to discern the streets differently - as an elementary part of their life - and that they ought to take care of them, but also as a testimony of the attention the king pays to his subjects. A small object such as a cobblestone changed the relationship

Paving the streets.

between streets and subjects. The strength of Henry IV's architectural project relied on the principle that it was a reflection on the city as a whole. Consequently, the paving project of the street surface was prolonged in its continuity by the redesign of façades.

Façades

A Scenography for The Void



Drawing of the façades of Place Royale 1831 old print by Atiqua Print Gallery

In the Ancient Greek city, the architectural frame of the city itself formed the essence of social life. Public spaces such as the agora in ancient Greece generated performing stages; public spaces were specific places especially built to create a gathering and discussion stage for the citizen, whereas in the medieval city the concept of *public* did not exist⁹. For the Church, public life was a menace to its supremacy as the gathering of people outside the church could bring questioning and debate. The only gathering place was the church where the fear of god was distilled through religious dogmas. Hence, the Ancient Greek concept of public space did not exist during the Middle Ages. The

An understanding of the public through built squares.

9. Maria Giudici describes the public space as what is left between areas of private property, Giudici, S. Maria. (2001,148). *The City as a Project*. Berlin: Ruby Press.

10. Henry IV ordered the construction of a number of residential squares, bounded by row houses with uniform façades. The first urban square was the Place Royale, laid out from 1605 to 1612. It was a 460 foot square court surrounded by thirty-eight plots, two royal pavilions and thirty six plots sold to private landlords on condition that they construct the row houses in conformity to the architectural design of the royal architect Louis Metezeau. Moffet, Fazio, and Wodehouse. (2003,141) *A World History of Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing.

On the other hand, Hilary Ballon argues that the Place Royale was conceived not as an aristocratic residential square, but as the centrepiece of a royal campaign to stimulate French manufacturing. Ballon, H. *The Paris of Henry IV: Architecture and Urbanism*. 1994. Massachusetts: MIT Press

11. This theme has been perhaps most sharply discussed in Giudici, S. Maria. (2001,148). *The City as a Project*. Berlin: Ruby Press.

12. Henry IV is known to be the first French sovereign who attempted to establish a secular nation through political and architectural decisions, Giudici, S. Maria. (2001,141). *The City as a Project*. Berlin: Ruby Press.

13. *Manière de Bâtir pour Toutes Sortes de Personnes* (1669) presents drawings of 13 plots of different sizes, from 27 to 850 square meters. These drawings resume plans, sections but also façades where the regular horizontal compositions are the most important elements which gave to the city of Paris an urban character of shared architecture, from the places royales to Haussmann's boulevards.

architectural project of Henry IV brought back the idea of public space by the creation of squares. He ordered the architect Louis Metezeau to create public spaces by designing the Place Royale and the Place Dauphine. The Places Royales¹⁰ expressed the first endeavour to manage the city by using architecture as a political tool and introducing the notion of the state as the authority that plans and administers¹¹ - a shared scheme based on a common language - the public domain. In order to establish a powerful and stable authority through a secular modern state¹², Henry IV's architectural project was formed around a new framework that did not involve any religious features. Unlike the medieval squares that accommodated churches, the ambitious project of Place Royale did not contain any religious building, instead it was enclosed by residential architecture. The successor of Henri IV, Louis XIII, engaged the architect Le Muet to conceive a portfolio of façades for all residential buildings in Paris. Le Muet's *Manière de bâtir pour toutes sortes de personnes* (1669) shows a collection of façade types adaptable to any size of house¹³. Le Muet's work enabled to harmonize the urban scenery and went against the house-owner's desire for self-representation¹⁴ in order to create a wider urban harmony. By imposing predesigned styles, the façades lost their individuality, thus their private characteristic and became part of the public domain. These façades framing a void space were characterized by their monotony and uniformity¹⁵ that allowed a certain order within the city of Paris.

This architectural project reflected a shift from the object to the milieu by creating an empty public space with a framing of built mass instead of embellishing the built private space. It was the first time that architecture looked at the exterior appearance of domestic buildings. The architectural paradigm of the Places Royales relies on a negative architecture project which aims management by orienting citizens' public lives through the use of the premeditated monotone outlines of squares. The monotony and symmetry of the façades were the first features that rang the bell of Classicism with its peculiar sense of stability and order. This was even more accentuated by the decision of Henry IV to make of Paris the fixed stage of the royal capital when he moved to the castle of Louvre, a gesture that was the clear expression of his will to shape Paris as the siege of his authority. The architectural

Façades as a unified architectural language.

14. As noticed also by Maria Giudici, House-owners had to abandon their “architectural sovereignty” for the benefit of the city’s architectural harmony, Giudici. S. Maria. 82001,1609. *The City as a Project*. Berlin: Ruby Press. compositions are the most important elements which gave to the city of Paris an urban character of shared architecture, from the places royales to Haussmann's boulevards.

15. Each house was to be four bays wide and three storeys high. Each building was to have a stone ground floor, two levels of brick and stone, and then a slate roof. The proportions were also very precise: the height of the roofs had to be equal to their width, as well as to half that of the façade. Here is the secret in a way of the harmony of the Place Royale. The houses are linked with a continuous ground-level arcade. Originally, the central open space was used for festivals and tournaments. A description of the project can be found in Moffet. Fazio. and Wodehouse. (2003,141) *A World History of Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing.

16. In the *Contrat Social*, Rousseau seeks to answer the question: where can the legitimacy of political power come from? Rousseau affirms that neither force, family, nor God can serve as a foundation for the legitimacy of public power, and that only a freely agreed agreement, the social contract can constitute this foundation. In the *Contrat Social* published 1762, the sovereignty of the people, as citizen and no longer as subject of the king, is asserted.

project used as a common language in which the aim was the exterior uniformity of the buildings without having the concern of changing the interiors is a metaphoric image that reflects the need for unity to overcome the inner religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants within the monarchy.

Performance

The Citizen: Actor of The Void

The project of creating space has had much more important repercussions than Henry IV’s original objective, a new architectural thinking that tried to change the city by parts through an overall attempt to define the mechanism of control by authority over the subjects. By this “Architectural Contract”, Henry IV gave the Street to the people. The creation of voids as public places has enabled inhabitants to realize they had a stage of living outside their homes and gave them the sense of belonging to an urban frame, the city of Paris. By sizing these public spaces, the inhabitants have developed a sense of attachment to the city and changed identity from subject of the king to citizen of the nation. The architectural contract led to the emergence of citizenship concept and changed the behaviour of citizens towards street life. Consequently, the architectural contract of Henry IV was the precursor of Rousseau’s *Le Contrat Social*¹⁶. In 1277, the Bishop of Paris in collaboration with the Pope and the Sorbonne issued a document that condemned any doctrine that limited the power of god, stating that the universe was infinite and homogeneous¹⁷. With his architectural project, Henry IV therefore abolished centuries of religious dogmas where people lived under the belief that the universe was infinite at the image of God. By experiencing the physical limits of the squares, people developed the conception of an anthropomorphic existence and they indulged in earthly matters that gave way to the modern *ethos*.

With an architectural contract the citizens found a stage where would develop a new way of life, creating the modern urban and its capitalist system.

The streets and the squares became the places where citizens would perform their daily activities, link social ties, and mediate conflicts

17. As stated in Giudici, S. Maria. (2001,156). *The Street as a Project*. Delft.

18. In IV B.C. Celebrations in the honour of Dionysus took place all year long. These celebration moments had an extreme degree of aggressivity under the effect of alcohol where people had sexual pleasures and even sacrificed each other.

between private interests. This represented the theatricality of the new bourgeois state-product, the specific places as stage provided by the authority in which citizens were performing. The idea to perform in a limited space comes from the formation of the antique theatre created to control the citizens while they devoted themselves to their wild entertainment¹⁸. In order to have these celebrations in a more orderly manner they organized a circular space of civic discourse where public attendance and engagement was fundamental and where people would entertain themselves by being in a specific regulated space. This understanding of a regulated space was reshaped with the Renaissance squares in Paris. In the new typology of the urban space, citizens found their own work field. Many activities emerged or developed at that period, the squares and streets started to fill with shops, citizens became both producers and consumers. The effervescent energy of the city attracted more people and Paris became a fast growing place of trade and finance, the roots of a capitalist society were planted.

Epilogue



A student hurling cobblesstones at the police in Paris during the events of May 1968.
Gamma-Keystone, via Getty Images

19. July 14, 1789: the taking of the Bastille symbolises the definitive end of the "absolute" monarchy and the acceleration of the popular revolutionary process. It is the first political insurrection because it is the taking of a symbol by which the people became aware of their physical and political power. Cobblestones from the Bastille were sent to the departments for the building of each public building, a symbolic gesture to signify that the people have taken the lead.

20. In the spring of 1968, France was marked by a formidable movement of popular protest against the Gaullist power and capitalist society. The demonstrators used the cobblestones as a projectile against the police but also to erect barricades. The Parisian cobblestone is a bit the emblem of May-68. After the "events" of May 68, the cobblestones were replaced by bitumen and Paris became a bourgeois city. The slogan of May 68 "under the cobblestones the beach" which refers to the technique of cobblestones installed on a layer of sand sums up the aspirations of May 68, the desire for freedom.

The relationship between authority and subject is the centre of the reflection; it is by introducing the concept of the authority that plans the city that Henry IV implemented the notion of public. Architecture was used as the instrument state-product apparatus to guarantee order in a secularized paradigm. The cobblestone as an architectural artefact that brings order was perceived as the emblem of authority and became a symbolic tool for Parisians to express their discontentment against the political power by dismantling them. The cobblestones were at the frontstage of the most well-known episodes of the 1789 Revolution¹⁹ and the events of May 68²⁰. The creation of public spaces was the product of the emergence of the secularized concept of state in France. The new architectural project made the space between buildings an actual concern of power - not anymore an "informal" no-man's land - by paving the streets and creating void spaces, enclosed by monotony and regularity that brought order to the city and consequently to its inhabitants. This symbiotic project gave the citizens a new lifestyle that involves life in the streets and at the same time provided to the authority the order it sought. While the city of Paris continued its architectural transformation over the centuries, multiplying squares and streets, it became a centre of attraction due to its fast growing and dynamic economy. The population boost brought about the rental system to meet the housing needs of a melting pot workforce who saw the city as a work source place rather than a living place to protect and embellish. As a result, citizens' needs led to the emergence of poor districts and suburbs where the priority was given to the housing regardless of aesthetic and order. Tough living and working conditions - in a chaotic architectural ensemble - deteriorated the perception of the city and once again citizens became alienated working subjects of the "system", with the Parisian motto "metro-boulot-dodo". The capitalist state-product produced its own subject which in turn developed a degenerated urban growth, altering the architectural ordered essence of the city.

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