

## The Origins of the Landscape of Paris - review article

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Visitors to a new city, faced with a host of new sensations and sights, may find themselves wondering ‘How did this all get here?’ Pondering the origins of an established, yet amorphous entity like a city may overwhelm the average tourist, though it is an exercise familiar to historians.

Two recent works seek to explain the origins of the landscape of Paris, a city defined as much by its structures as by its inhabitants. *How Paris Became Paris: The Invention of the Modern City* (originally published in 2014, available in paperback in 2015), by Joan DeJean of the University of Pennsylvania, connects the modern magic of Paris to the urban template established by the Bourbon Monarchs of the 16th–18th centuries. In *Planning the Greenspaces of Nineteen Century Paris*, Widener University’s Richard S. Hopkins limits the scope of his study to a smaller time period than DeJean, but is able to draw an expansive perspective on how the public parks, squares, and gardens of Paris connected and defined urban society. Both works provide a greater commentary on how the origins of spatial relationships, especially in a city, can tell us more about the greater forces at work in creating ‘the modern’ – how the landscape of Paris became an emblem of ‘dynamism, creative energy, and potential for change’ (DeJean, p. 218).

The main thrust of DeJean’s work is that the groundwork for what became Paris in its current state predates the revitalization efforts of Baron Haussmann in the mid-to-late 19th century. Inspired and guided by the many maps and paintings of Paris from the 16th–18th centuries, DeJean breaks down the construction of many of the defining structures of Paris, placing them in the context of contemporary political, economic, and social concerns. Each chapter is dedicated to a particular structure or a related consequence of the evolution of the Parisian cityscape. The interplay of these structures and their effects contributed to an

emerging belief, amongst French and foreigners alive, that Paris was the *capital de la mode*: a city of innovation, style, wealth, and opportunity.

DeJean opens chapter one with a straightforward statement: ‘The invention of Paris began with a bridge’ (DeJean, p. 21). More than just a practical solution to traversing the Seine, the *Pont Neuf* (New Bridge) completely changed the way people *saw* Paris and how they interacted *within* it. Initiated by the last Valois king, Henri III, full completion of the bridge did not occur until 1606, during the reign of Henri IV. Structurally, everything about the bridge was new: it was made of stone, it possessed the first public statue in the history of Paris (*Le Vert-Galant*, Henri IV), it contained balconies, and it was wide and strong enough for all kinds of traffic. Soon it possessed the feature that would be standard in all cities, but was unknown in the early modern world: sidewalks. These novelties made the *Pont Neuf* more than a conduit for commerce between the Left and Right Banks – it became a new venue for interaction from which many others stemmed.

The way DeJean is able to effortlessly weave these development together is what makes this work so enriching. DeJean explains each step in the development of Paris as related to and resulting from the greater forces of French history. The *Place Royale* (now known as the *Place des Voges*), along with the *Pont Neuf*, was part of Henri IV’s desire to reconcile a previously divided France and to make Paris, and by extension France, competitive with the world at large. Initially created to jump start the French silk industry, the *Place Royale* redefined the use of public space and created a new, highly desirable neighborhood, the Marais. The success of the Marais as a moneyed enclave spurred the development of the *Île St-Louis*, increasing financial investments in the city and driving an increasing interest in public displays of wealth.

Structures like the *Pont Neuf*, the repurposing of the fortifications of Paris (rendered obsolete due to the military successes of Louis XIV) into *boulevards*, and the creation of new parks near the *Tuileries* and the *Champs-Élysée* turned Paris into an open city, one that invited both rapidity of movement and various social encounters. Carriages, previously few in number, soon became markers of distinction, and contributed to the most modern of problems – traffic congestion. Wealthy *bourgeoisie* and nobles took the opportunity to walk, not only to take in new sights, but also to show off their clothing. And where did they discover and purchase these new fashions? By partaking in the new practice of ‘shopping’, Parisians visited new shops and boutiques that catered to them in new indoor settings. These new enterprises (backed and encouraged by the policies of *Colbertisme*) promoted these products both at home and abroad, placing France at the vanguard of the luxury and style industry in the 17th and 18th centuries.

DeJean’s claims on the transformative nature of Paris’ new urban composition are further enhanced through her analysis of literary and theatrical works, which incorporated new Parisian structures and the characters that inhabited them. Dramas focused on the rise and fall of *nouveau riche* financiers, and their obsession with asserting themselves on the urban stage through conspicuous displays of wealth. Comedies focused on the desire for both voyeuristic displays of fashion and the importance of going *incognito*. Operas and guidebooks alike warned against the fickle natures of *coquettes*, the original ‘fashion victims’ whose manipulation often broke hearts and budgets. (DeJean, p. 200)

The urban development of Paris, then, was a direct influence on the very character of France into the 18th century. DeJean describes this character as *la mode*; established in Paris, spread through France, and exported to the rest of the world, *la mode* embodied the dynamic, novel, rapid consumer-based innovations regarding fashion and lifestyle. This is what makes Paris the first ‘modern city’, with the urban planning of the 17th and 18th centuries, giving ‘the city an identity, an identity clear to both its inhabitants and to outside observers’ (DeJean, p. 224). Paris, well before its redesign and exalted role in the 19th century, set the pattern for the now ubiquitous characteristics of popular consumption, mass appeal and interconnectedness that define the modern world.

There were, however, limits on the scope of these characteristics, and the identity of Parisians. While public structures like the *Pont Neuf* and the *Place Royale*, combined with the increased availability of high fashion through the promotion and development of the luxury trade, gave ‘people from across the social spectrum’

the ability to ‘brush up against each other in close proximity,’ to walk on sidewalks that ‘functioned as a social leveler’, it was not until the mid-19th century that these meetings transitioned beyond mere novelty. This is where Hopkins’ work steps in, showing how public spaces became larger forums for the development of *communitas*, an inclusive way of organizing and mobilizing shared interests.(1) What separates DeJean’s Parisian from the Parisian of Hopkins is a much more dynamic notion of citizenship and republican-styled participation. No longer was the creation and management of urban spaces under the purview of a monarch and his chosen band of advisors and financiers. The reshaping of Paris in the mid-to-late 19th century was responsive to and responsible for its inhabitants, the residents of Paris who would be most affected by any type of change.

One can see this contrast between the two periods (and the two works) by looking at the growth of public transportation during the 17th century. A series of carriage lines, established by Blaise Pascal and Artus Gouffier, Duc de Roannez in January 1662, increased the availability of rapid movement throughout the city for all classes, since the fare of 5 *sous* was nearly 25 times less than the cost of a rental carriage. Many upper-class Parisians, in an attempt to limit their contact with strangers of a lesser sort, began to pay for all the seats in a carriage, thereby preventing the driver from picking up other passengers. While this practice was quickly outlawed by a city ordinance, wealthy Parisians still sought to avoid ‘mixing’ with the masses; soon a regulation forbade ‘soldiers, servants, and unskilled workers’ from riding on the carriage line, ‘so that the *bourgeois* can feel more at ease’ (DeJean, p. 130). When these excluded ‘commoners’ responded by attacking carriages, authorities further enhanced class separation – an edict made it a crime to even threaten drivers, with the punishment being a ‘public beating and a fine of 500 *livres*’, roughly the cost of 2000 carriage rides. (DeJean, p. 130) Thus a public transportation system, established as a monopoly by royal *lettres patentes*, remained in the control of the wealthy and noble.(2)

Hopkins describes a similar situation with a much different outcome, regarding the regulation of ice-skating in the Bois de Boulogne, a public park renovated in the 1850s. The conservator of the park, Auguste Pissot, hinted to his superior, Jean-Charles Adolphe Alphand (head of the *Service des Promenades et Plantations*), the possibility of creating a reserved, ‘well-managed’ section for wealthy skaters, writing ‘many skaters, belonging the elevated classes of society, find it inappropriate for them to be mixed in with everyone else’ (Hopkins, p. 141). Pissot even states that this contingent would be willing to pay for this exclusivity, and that the money could be used for other projects. Alphand’s response was to cross out this paragraph in Pissot’s report; subsequently the change was never made. Later, when another appeal for a special area for society women to receive assistance in lacing their ice skates was made, Pissot made the rejection, stating the presence of an ‘ostentatious tent for one class of park users would have the appearance of establishing a distinction and would disgruntle others’. (Hopkins, p. 141) This situation, taking place in 1863, shows the new vision of urban organization, especially when it came to public parks, one that rejected the exclusivity in favor of an openness for all.

This is just one example of how Parisians worked to define and contest the public spaces that were created and administered by the *Service des Promenades et Plantations*. By emphasizing a series of themes that influenced this interplay – positivism, public proprietorship, rights/liberty, human agency, and the aforementioned *communitas* –Hopkins goes beyond the ‘character’ created by the urban initiatives of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Paris of Napoleon III and the 3rd Republic was now more self-aware, more willing to negotiate spaces and structures with an eye towards egalitarian access and recognition. In short, Hopkins’ work exemplifies the increasingly accepted shift away from aristocratic privilege and top-down control towards a more inclusive, republican attitude of access and recognition.

Access and recognition are points that surface regularly throughout the five chapters of Hopkins’ work, playing into each one of the themes mentioned above. His analysis of numerous municipal records, especially those of the *Service des Promenades et Plantations*, consistently reflect the notion that while the government oversaw the construction and maintenance of the greenspaces of Paris, if they restricted or ignored the desires and needs of locals, there would be resistance. Parisians had the ability to appeal to a number of municipal authorities, both formally and informally – they could petition a local politician or park

official, or complain directly to a park services employee. Hopkins creates a larger picture of Parisian life by breaking down the interactions between the people and the bureaucracy, vastly different than the Paris of the 17th and 18th centuries discussed by DeJean.

Complaints about access and recognition rose from a variety of concerns. It is this variety that contributes to *communitas* (2), by which people who previously had little or no connection increasingly find themselves bound together and organized over a shared interest or experience. Debates about the placing of gates to parks and the ease of traffic flow reflect the question of literal access to the park, which surfaced in the construction of Square Louis XIV, the Parc des Buttes Chaumont, and the Square Parmentier. The utility of a fountain and pond in Square Montholon fell into question, which resulted in the reorganization of the park that included a new play area for children. Park space 'was malleable' and many groups were not hesitant to request dramatic changes, reflecting a growing community concerned with practicality and ease of use (Hopkins, p. 115). Rather than being the anonymous, unconnected individuals often portrayed in modern cities, Parisians found common ground in defining the various uses of parks and defining access to them.

Employment also factored into the process of access and recognition. Members of the *Garde du Service*, directly employed by the park service, were in charge of the safety of park goers and the park itself. Its officers, 'subject to a military regimen', were retired soldiers whose age and service were to provide them with the respect of park-goers. This respect was often tested, as officers often found themselves as arbiters of social disagreements. Nonetheless it was the job of the officers to 'act as a bridge ----between city planners, reformers, and engineers and the city population' (Hopkins, p. 92). Concessionaires, independent contractors licensed by the Park Service and permitted to offer certain goods and services in certain areas of certain parks, likewise were part of this process. Contracts allowed neighborhood residents, especially women, an entrepreneurial outlet and the ability to provide for their families financially, while providing an array of goods (snacks, refreshments, even restaurants) and services (chair rentals, rides for children, photographs) for park goers. The workplace, for both park workers and concessionaires, was 'often fraught with tensions and social complexities', that 'their work environments presented unique challenges that involved class, gender, community, and occupational organization, social geography, and commerce' (Hopkins, p. 61). Parisian parks, as Hopkins shows again and again, became microcosms of the greater dynamics that came to define modern society – the negotiation of differences in a dense, amorphously defined space with an aim towards equal access and recognition.

There is one flaw that sticks out in both works. For two books concerning the spatial organization and development of Paris, there is a dearth of appropriate maps. *How Paris Became Paris* contains many of the paintings, engravings, and contemporary maps (some in full color), that guided DeJean's work, but there's not a single modern-day map of Paris with which to compare or to plot the changes she explores. Same case with *Planning the Greenspaces of Nineteenth Century Paris* – there's a number of maps plotting the changes of single parks, and an entire appendix of all the parks and squares of Paris with their corresponding dates of inauguration/redesign, but there's no map plotting them in relation to their respective neighborhoods. For those who are unfamiliar with Paris (or for those that are just obsessive in visualizing spatial relationships), the lack of a clear cartographic perspective can be a bit jarring.

Both DeJean and Hopkins do a commendable job in uncovering and analyzing new approaches to the ubiquity that is Paris. Their works show how Paris subsequently defined itself, both internally and externally, through the construction and negotiation of urban spaces. Read in tandem, they bring to light not only the greater development of Paris but also the changing nature of France in general. As stated earlier, the mostly exclusive luxury and privilege of the 17th and 18th centuries were soon replaced by the egalitarian, republican attitudes of the later 19th century. Either book would be appropriate in an undergraduate or graduate class, concerning either French history or urban history. They also have a lot to offer general readers, especially those who find themselves, before or after a trip to Paris, wondering 'how did this all get here?'

## Notes

1. Pascal and Roannez's carriage venture ceased operations in 1691, as financing dried up. It would not be until 1828 that Paris would once again have public transportation – twelve-passenger carriages known as 'omnibuses.' DeJean explanation of this delay, that 18th-century Europe was simply 'not ready for public transit' understates the perpetuation of privileged orders and their wealthy counterparts during the *ancien régime*. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Hopkins draws his view of *communitas* from the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, who divides it into two categories: experiential *communitas*, which brings individuals together through a shared experience, and normative *communitas*, which brings a greater organization of a group based on a shared experience. Both types of *communitas* are addressed throughout Hopkins' work, which is a major methodological and theoretical difference in comparison with DeJean. See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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