

REVIEW ARTICLE

The ordinary dwellings of Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

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Jacques Fredet (2003) *Les maisons de Paris. Types courants de l'architecture mineure parisienne de la fin de l'époque médiévale à nos jours, avec l'anatomie de leur construction*, 3 vols (Editions de l'Encyclopédie des nuisances, Paris, France, 313 pp., 213 pp., 49 pp. ISBN 2-910386-19-8)

Jean-François Cabestan (2004) *La conquête du plain-pied. L'immeuble à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Editions Picard, Paris, France, 311pp. ISBN 2-7084-0726-0)

Youri Carbonnier (2006) *Maisons parisiennes des Lumières* (Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, France, 511pp. ISBN 2-84050-450-2)

Linnéa Rollenhagen Tilly (2006) *Maisons ordinaires à Paris, 1650-1790*, 3 vols, unpublished PhD dissertation, Université Paris IV, Paris, France

Between 2003 and 2006 the body of writings on Parisian morphology was enriched by three books and a thesis that deal with the development of Parisian housing during the period which, at its beginning, was still part of the medieval ethos and at its end portended the coming of the bourgeois apartment building of the nineteenth century. These studies follow in the footsteps of pioneering work that had already cleared some ground at least as far as the sources are concerned. It is appropriate, therefore, to set the scene for the review of these four works by reflecting first on earlier work.

At the end of the 1960s French historians and architects, inspired by Italian and English research, began studying Parisian morphology in a new way. The outcome of this activity was a number of contributions of which one book has become a classic: *Système de l'architecture urbaine: le quartier des Halles à Paris* (Boudon *et al.*, 1977). One particular chapter in this book stands out: Françoise Boudon's contribution on the evolution of the plot, which is still cited frequently today. Her remarkable study is based on plans for the period 1700-1970 and on a variety of written

sources: tax rolls for the whole of the city and various documents, including fees, terriers and rentals from the feudal archives of certain divisions of the Halles quarter. Using these sources as material for a complicated interpretative exercise Boudon drew up a series of eleven plot plans ranging from the end of the fourteenth to the middle of the twentieth century.

Far more user-friendly sources are treatises on architecture and architectural compendia. Paris has the privilege of being, on the one hand, the subject of a number of books, and on the other of having its remarkable buildings appear in many studies of French architecture. Among the many treatises dating from the period that concerns us here, the one that is used most by scholars today is by the architect Pierre le Muet (1623): *Manière de bastir pour toutes sortes de personnes*. Michel Gallet (1964, 1972) and Jean-Pierre Babelon (1965), for example, refer to it occasionally in their books, which remain works of reference today for anyone working on the history of Parisian housing. Monique Eleb-Vidal and Anne Debarre-Blanchard made good use of Le Muet's book as well as other treatises of that

period, as we can see from the title of their book: *Architecture domestique et mentalités: les traités et les pratiques, XVIe-XIXe siècles* (Eleb-Vidal and Debarre-Blanchard, 1984). These scholars have chosen to investigate the new ways of designing the residences of the privileged classes. These classes interest them because 'they had the means, both material and cultural, to be able to innovate, seek change and demand a greater degree of comfort' (Eleb-Vidal and Debarre-Blanchard, 1984, p. 14). And also because the treatises refer to their buildings. In the first part of their book, Eleb-Vidal and Debarre-Blanchard compare the plans published in various treatises and trace the evolution of the form of the residences. In the second part they explain this evolution with reference to the work of a number of scholars in the social sciences, thus situating architectural changes in the context of the general evolution of social attitudes (see, for example, Aries, 1960; Elias, 1974; Flandrin, 1976). For instance, they link new ways of organizing living space (for example, the tendency to divide up space using interior walls) to the new desire for privacy (for the family and the individual) and the fact that bodily functions were relegated from public to private space.

The extremely important idea of privacy is mentioned in the title of a book published 4 years later by Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun (1988): *La naissance de l'intime: 3000 foyers parisiens, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles*. The basic material for this book comes from an extremely rich source of data, the posthumous inventories found in the notarial records of the National Archives. These documents supply data about the dead person, describe the nature of his or her accommodation in the minutest detail, including the number and nature of the rooms and the contents of each room (furniture and various other objects). These documents have already been used as source material for socio-economic studies and occasioned two important articles on housing (Jurgens and Couperie, 1962; Roux, 1969). Gallet, Babelon, Eleb-Vidal and Debarre-Blanchard have occasionally made use of them. Pardailhé-Galabrun's aim was far more

ambitious however, since in the period between 1978 and 1984, 40 of her students devoted their master's theses to the analysis of these inventories, each one examining about 70 inventories. Some followed the order of the archives of a particular notary; others chose a socio-professional category, and still others focused on a particular quarter (see, for example, Boudriot, 1981, 1982). Altogether there are 2783 inventories dating from the period between 1600 and 1790. The book which came out of this group effort deals with a large number of fascinating themes: for example, the status of inhabitants (landlords and tenants), the exteriors and interiors of the buildings, the use of space, the décor in each room and the occupants' possessions.

Recent research

Three of our authors, Cabestan, Carbonnier and Rollenhagen Tilly, have based their research on a supplementary source (which had already been used occasionally by Gallet and Babelon). This is the documents of the *sous-série Z^{1J}* kept in the *Centre historique des Archives nationales*. These come from the *Chambre des bâtiments* (Paris building court) a 'royal low judiciary' which heard 'all civil lawsuits involving people from the building trade ... as well as all cases involving dwellings and controlled by the police under the jurisdiction of the provostship and the viscounty of Paris' (for a discussion of this source, see Carvais, 2008). The documents consist of reports written by the juror-experts of this chamber. They give scholars the opportunity to study the state of the buildings in detail. Starting from a catalogue for the years 1763-1795, Cabestan finds there quite a few of the 100 buildings that make up the thread of his narrative (from the second half of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century). Carbonnier prefers to focus on the centre of Paris and on the period between 1760 and 1792. This enables him to study in great depth 3400 reports dealing with 2000 houses (40 per cent of those then existing in the centre of Paris), some new and some not.

Rollenhagen Tilly covers a wider period: 1 year in 10 during the period from 1650 to 1790. Her work was made particularly difficult by the fact that she had to work through bundles of papers that had not been indexed. She built up an initial corpus of 635 houses which had the advantage of including houses from earlier periods. At a later stage she narrowed her focus in order to concentrate on 65 houses which she studied in detail. All three scholars completed their work by consulting documents from the central notarial register.

Our fourth author, Fredet had a quite different approach and started a piece of work that took him 20 years to complete. His introduction explains this approach. 'In this field the best archives are not the documents attached to the legal texts drawn up by the notaries nor the posthumous inventories but rather they are the buildings themselves, whose inhabitants, by continually adapting them to their use, left traces that are still discernible today' (p. 11). He has produced a study based on the measurement and drawing of a great number of buildings covering the period from 1500 to today. For each type from before 1850, the drawings are based on the study of dozens of houses that were examined either partially or completely at the time of their demolition.

Carbonnier, Fredet and Rollenhagen Tilly see nothing wrong in referring to the treatises of the period. Cabestan refuses to do so in complete contrast to all his predecessors. He believes that 'these theoretical writings will shed no light' on the emergence of the apartment building (the main topic of his book) for 'the criteria put forward by these theoreticians are totally inadequate to the task of revealing the emergence of a phenomenon which, perhaps by the very fact of its obviousness, completely escaped their attention' (p. 22).

Typological approaches

All this research has considerably enriched our knowledge of ordinary housing in Paris in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period during which, according to available figures, the number of houses in Paris remained surprisingly stable – 23 300 in 1637 and 23 000 in 1779 (Fierro, 1996, p. 1019) – while the population increased considerably – from an estimated 150 000 in 1500 to 600 000 in 1779 (Fierro, 1996, p. 278). Certain aspects of the buildings are dealt with by nearly all the authors, each one adding to the sum of knowledge, either by studying an aspect that had not been discussed earlier or by adding information to aspects already examined by other scholars. Thus, at this stage we have good knowledge of the outside appearance of the buildings, materials used, styles of façades, height of buildings, structure, cellars, toilets, water supply, plot dimensions, relationship between buildings (including party walls), relationship of buildings to the street, inhabitants (tenants and landlords), and, of course, internal organization of buildings. We shall only consider this last aspect here.

In summary, at the beginning, in the seventeenth century, ordinary Parisian houses still resembled medieval urban houses derived from rural houses (Roux, 1976, pp. 156-8). Some of them were hosting a community made up of the proprietor or main tenant (artisan or shopkeeper), his journeymen, apprentices and servants (Topalov, 1987, p. 56). Others were composed of rooms rented by a variety of unrelated inhabitants (cf. Roux, 1969, p. 1207). At the end of the period, in the last 3 decades of the eighteenth century, there appeared a new type of building made up of the superposition of horizontal apartments inhabited by separate households; a type of building that would undergo more changes before becoming the bourgeois apartment building of the nineteenth century.

All our authors devote a considerable part of their books to this development. It is fundamental, as far as Fredet and Cabestan are concerned. The former has constructed his book using the idea of type, having found six types among the Parisian dwellings of the last 6 centuries. Three of them require mention as they belong to the periods we are discussing here: first, 'the late Gothic type (sixteenth

century)', secondly 'the last days of the one-family urban house (seventeenth century)'; and thirdly 'the rented house (eighteenth century)'. For each type, Fredet creates a synthetic example which purports to cover the main features common to all instances of the type. His descriptions are accompanied by ten or more large-format plates with often more than one drawing on each plate: these consisted of plans (including ground floor, first floor, cellars and attics), several very detailed cross-sections and a number of façades.

Cabestan describes in detail five building types for the century and a half that he is studying: house with shop, private house, *hôtel* (or aristocratic residence), suburban house and rented house. In the progressive changes to their configurations he sees the first stirrings of a new type: one composed of horizontal apartments. Among Cabestan's examples of changes are the twinning of houses with shops and the hybridization of the private house with the rented house. According to him, the different kinds of mixture of types engendered 'the blossoming of a first generation of collective buildings characterized by the superposition of a finite number of identical housing units [that is, apartments]' capable of satisfying the needs of a clientele of inhabitants who 'both lacked the financial means to be able to reside in a *hôtel* but wished to maintain their social status' (p. 290). Cabestan's approach should be of particular interest to those who study typological processes, even if the author is careful to mention that he is only 'formulating a hypothesis and identifying the stages of an imaginary process which may help shed light on the genesis of the rented building' (p. 291). Nevertheless, the structure of Cabestan's book makes it difficult for the reader to follow these stages as the body of the narrative touches on many other themes.

Carbonnier describes the organizational structure of houses without having recourse to the concept of the type. He compares the discussions in the various treatises with what went on in the aristocratic *hôtels* and the use of more modest residences. Rollenhagen Tilly, in a short chapter, provides a summary typology

in two parts. On the one hand there is the 'elementary house' made up of one or more *corps de logis* (building wings): it is subdivided into simple houses, twinned houses and fragmented houses. On the other hand, there is the large rented house, subdivided into groups of simple houses built together on the same plot, and *hôtels*, broken up into separate rental units (pp. 90-7).

Principles of spatial organization

These different typologies reflect the problematics, sources and methods of each individual scholar. Taken together they help delineate principles of spatial organization characteristic of Parisian dwellings at the time and which distinguish them from houses that came before and apartment buildings that came later.

The elementary unit of these dwellings is the non-specialized room: 'visiting these Parisian interiors with the notaries, we see that these rooms rarely had just one function, as we can tell both from their names and their contents' (Pardhailhé-Galabrun, 1988, p. 255). The use of each room depended on the number of rooms in each rented unit. When only one room was rented, this space 'was used as a sleeping place, a kitchen, a dining room and as a reception room all at once...and could also serve as business premises' (Pardhailhé-Galabrun, 1988, p. 256). But even in units that have several rooms these spaces were multifunctional. Any room with a fireplace could be used as a kitchen. There are various names given to these spaces: room, bedroom, cabinet, wardrobe, or occasionally antechamber or salon. It is evident from the notaries' inventories that the usage of terms to describe the various spaces was not precise.

According to Fredet, the multifunctional rooms were grouped in a house in different ways depending on the size and shape of the plot. In relatively narrow plots, two rooms would be built one behind the other. Together they formed a *corps de logis*, one room facing the street and the other facing the courtyard. The staircase was attached to the back of the

corps de logis (p. 43).

In larger plots the *corps de logis* was made up of four rooms: two facing the street and two facing the courtyard. The staircase sometimes ran along the party wall, but was more often found between two rooms at the back; in which case the landing would be a distributing platform, according to Fredet (p. 61) serving four doors (p. 50). In even wider plots, the building contained more rooms reached by a staircase which was more or less central. In these cases, since the corridor separating one room from another had not yet been invented, it was necessary to go directly from one room to the next.

A large number of houses contained only one *corps de logis*. In Carbonnier's collection, these comprise 59 per cent of the houses (p. 212); in Rollenhagen Tilly's, these comprise 44 per cent (p. 80). In long plots, one *corps de logis* followed the other lengthwise. Where there were galleries it was possible to have only a single staircase for two *corps de logis*. Thirty-six per cent of the houses in Carbonnier's collection (p. 212) and 35 per cent in Rollenhagen Tilly's (p. 80) had two *corps de logis*. *Corps de logis* that had a depth of only one room were built along the side boundary of large plots and, depending on the length of the plot, on the rear boundary.

Housing units

From the sixteenth century onward the demand for rented housing increased as a result of 'changes in methods of artisan production' (Topalov, 1987, p. 57). In Paris, in the eighteenth century, '90 per cent of wage-earners studied were tenants' (Roche, 1981, p. 145). However, 14 per cent of those studied by Pardailhé-Galabrun (1988, p. 195) owned property: some were both tenant and landlord, like the court painter, Jérôme Deltuel, who owned four houses, but preferred to live in better rented accommodation (Rollenhagen Tilly, p. 55). In the medieval and sixteenth-century house the proprietor or main tenant often occupied the ground floor where he also worked; but in the seventeenth century, the

architect Le Vau preferred to live on the first floor and let his ground floor (Rollenhagen Tilly, p. 61). Generally the ground floor was used for business – even in the case of some aristocratic *hôtels*. This is why 78 per cent of Rollenhagen Tilly's 635 houses contain one or more business premises on the ground floor, facing the street (Rollenhagen Tilly, p. 199). There were shops in 69 per cent of cases, as well as offices, legal offices, stores, workshops and a billiard hall. It is evident that in this period, most Parisian houses were houses 'with shops'.

Tenants often lived in one room. According to Roche (1981, p. 164), 57 per cent of the Parisian population in around 1700 consisted of tenants living in one room. This proportion rose to 63 per cent in 1780. In her sample of relatively well-off persons, Pardailhé-Galabrun found that 31 per cent of tenants lived in one room (Pardailhé-Galabrun, 1988, p. 236). Furthermore, 42 per cent of her 2268 housing units had 2 or 3 rooms, 20 per cent 4 to 7 rooms, and 7 per cent more than 7 rooms (p. 465). All our authors agree that often a household lived in rented rooms that were not contiguous. The tendency, inherited from the Middle Ages, was to group rented rooms vertically (Roux, 1976, p. 157). 'The home of the master mason Noël... was made up of the shop and the kitchen situated on the ground floor, a bedroom on the first floor and two bedrooms on the third floor' (Carbonnier, p. 330).

On large plots there developed a flexible renting system: as the *corps de logis* contained several rooms at each level, it was feasible to rent a variable number of rooms according to the needs and the means of each tenant. On the landings, doors that could be locked opened on to different rental units (which often consisted of only one room); these landings could be extended by short passages formed by the adding of inner walls (Rollenhagen Tilly, pp. 248-51).

Thus over 2 centuries the Parisian dwelling developed from houses shaped for the medieval extended household to buildings housing nuclear households. This evolution is an integral part of the development of Parisian

society, which adapted its housing (and adapted itself) to the great social changes that were going on at the time. The forced cohabitation of changing households, in a period that was discovering the importance of privacy, led to the creation, through a complicated process of trial and error, of a new type of housing unit: the apartment. With it there came a new building which needed wider plots: the apartment building.

Typological transfers

So far not much has been said about aristocratic *hôtels*, which were studied in the 1960s by Gallet (1964) and Babelon (1965) and more recently by Natacha Coquery (1998). Nevertheless, on examining the more modest dwellings it is tempting to see them as miniature versions of the homes of the nobility. This idea is reinforced by the fact that in French the term *appartement* designated first a part of an aristocratic *hôtel*, consisting of the suite of rooms for the use of the master of the house and his wife, and only later did it refer to a distinct housing unit – the apartment or flat.

For Eleb-Vidal and Debarre-Blanchard the relationship is clear: in this case, the transfer of models was from the top to the bottom of the social scale: the transformation of the domestic arrangements that they have studied came ‘from a social class that could demand new lifestyles and was thus productive of models’ (Eleb-Vidal and Debarre-Blanchard, 1984, p. 148). Carbonnier follows the same line of thinking, at least this is what can be inferred from the structure of his chapter 4, on ‘interior distribution’, in which he first explains the principles of the layout of *hôtels* and then argues that these ideas were adapted to lower-class housing (pp. 279-379). He shows, for instance, how innovations in circulation patterns in the *hôtels* influenced ordinary houses. In both cases the building of secondary staircases sacrificed living space to the idea of privacy (p. 310). In one case, a servants’ staircase was added to separate the servants from the master and his guests

(p. 283); in the other case, the supplementary staircase allowed ‘people to move freely from one storey to the next in the same dwelling without using the main staircase’ and thus avoid ‘scrutiny by the neighbours’ (p. 310).

Cabestan, however, prefers the hypothesis that the bourgeois apartment building is based on a conception of living together that has no connection with the aristocratic residence. He believes that the bourgeois apartment, ‘far from representing a simple transposition of the earlier aristocratic apartment, is in actual fact a stage in the evolution of the minimum habitation cell (p. 20). In his view the bourgeois apartment building is not the social importation of an established type but rather ‘an original synthesis of different known Parisian ordinary housing types’ (p. 21). Several examples are given: the extension and the ‘stretching’ of the rented house (p. 278), and the addition of storeys to the private house (p. 259). In Carbonnier’s study we find another example of this kind of makeshift arrangement: the creation of ‘a living space forming a coherent whole’ by subdividing existing space using interior walls and, where height allowed, adding extra floors (p. 313).

Nevertheless, the *hôtel* itself was not immutable and some aristocratic houses were in fact broken up into separate units. It all began when some *hôtels*, some even bearing ‘the name of an illustrious family’ became available for rent (Chagniot, 1988, p. 321). In town, the nobility behaved differently from the way they behaved in the country where chateaux and manorial estates were ‘handed down from generation to generation’ (Coquery, 1998, p. 229). And in effect, in town, renting ‘was well suited to the needs of a capricious clientele that followed fashion or shaped it... Furthermore the aristocracy often showed itself unable to build because of a lack of disposable income: which is why renting allowed them to spread out their costs over time’ (Coquery, 1998, p. 213). Here we have a development with enormous consequences: it might happen that a landlord did not wish to let his *hôtel* to a single family; in which case he ‘leased his premises to a main tenant who sub-rented it or he himself [the landlord]

divided it up between different tenants' (Coquery, 1998, p. 234). This happened mainly in districts that were no longer fashionable (Coquery, 1998, p. 234). This phenomenon has already been pointed out by John Summerson: 'as the aristocrats shifted out of the walled cities their palaces were taken over and demolished or subdivided to provide accommodation for humbler people whose rents brought an income to the new landlord' (Summerson, 1946, p. 38). Now there was a new 'product' on the Parisian market which Coquery calls an *hôtel de rapport* and Cabestan (p. 272) refers to as an *hôtel collectif*. This new kind of building is the result of generally 'brutal architectural changes that drastically misshape the buildings to adapt them to their new function as apartment buildings (Coquery, 1998, p. 233). It is clear that the transfer of practices, not to mention the models, did not happen in only one direction.

In fact, the invention of the Parisian apartment building belongs to a general phenomenon: each new type emerges from a *bricolage* making use of several earlier kinds of building. The collective process is complicated: under pressure from new social circumstances, the various agents involved in the construction of new buildings and the modification of old ones had to partially give up old, longstanding habits to forge new social conventions which allowed them to work together. This process is less like the genealogical dynamics of a single type of social agreement than a geological formation made up of several. Earlier habits do not contain the codes that will lead to the changes ahead. Co-operative *bricolage* works by the collage of several earlier procedures and new ones.

Like any creative process it is almost impossible to retrace it *a posteriori*, since not all its stages have been recorded. Even an individual creator is unaware of how his own creative process works – it often seems, as both artists and scientists have attested, to come to him from outside. And as far as the history of architecture is concerned, any research work must be limited by the available

source material. Paris has the advantage of being able to put a large quantity of source material at the disposal of a vast number of scholars. This is why we know so much about the evolution of ordinary dwellings of Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Still, even this knowledge is not enough as some links will always be missing. Furthermore, no city is a self-contained unit and the evolution of its building types is not just an internal process. Paris is a node in an immense network and its buildings take part in a larger typological evolution. The invention of the Parisian apartment building in a larger context still awaits its historians.

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Cutting into the substance of urban form

On the occasion of the 200th issue of the professional journal *Architecture Today* a number of noted architects were interviewed to give an assessment of the state of their profession. Richard Rogers, in his interview said, amongst other things,

Another major development in the last 20 years is a much greater consciousness of the morphology of cities – that buildings need to fit in, and even if they contrast, you have to be conscious of what they contrast with.

This served as a starting point for a talk delivered to the Urban Design Group by Karl Kropf of studio |REAL and the Urban Morphology Research Group, University of Birmingham. The general theme of the talk was urban morphology in practice and Kropf took it as an opportunity to present both a survey of recent work and a polemic on the role of urban morphology in urban design practice.

The survey of recent work illustrated the common use of the core morphological concept of urban tissue or character areas. Examples included conservation area appraisals, urban historic characterizations, as well as urban character studies, research into methods of assessing environmental performance of urban form, the French application

of urban morphological analysis to the *Plan Local d'Urbanisme* and the use of morphological analysis in design.

The examples were interwoven with an argument about the unrealized potential of urban morphology in design, by way of thoughts from the likes of Walter Benjamin, Kevin Lynch and Richard Sennett. It was Sennett's exploration of craftsmanship that provided the focus for Kropf's main argument. Sennett's thinking suggests an interpretation of 'urban grain' that has much more depth and substance than its common usage. Urban form is the material that urban designers must learn to master and understand in the way that a joiner understands wood: not just as a formal exercise but to serve life. Urban morphology is one of the best tools we have to improve our understanding.

A video of the lecture is included in the archive of previous talks recorded as part of the UrbanNous initiative that provides access to digital multimedia focusing on urbanism.

The lecture can be viewed in a browser at: <http://urbannous.org.uk/Karl-Kropf-Urban-Morphology.htm>

The full catalogue can be found at: <http://www.urbannous.org.uk/udgevents.htm>
