PARISIAN PALIMPSEST – PARIS BEFORE AND AFTER HAUSSMANN'S 'REVOLUTIONS'

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PARYSKI PALIMPSEST - PARYŻ PRZED I PO „REWOLUCJACH" HAUSSMANNA
PALIMPSESTE DE PARIS – AVANT ET APRÈS LES 'RÉVOLUTIONS' D'HAUSSMANN

Abstract

Paris is one of those cities that arouse extreme emotions. From the Middle Ages it was an important centre of culture and art. The article presents two themes that show the city as a palimpsest. One concerns the description of the eighteenth-century city, a city of narrow dangerous streets, devoid of technical infrastructure, based on *Le Tableau de Paris* by Sebastien Mercier. The second theme is the 19th-century revolutionary reconstruction of the city, which was ordered by Emperor Napoleon III and carried out by Georges Eugène Haussmann. The implementation of the vision of an orderly spatial arrangement resulted in the demolition of entire quarters of buildings. The *new* Paris with its monumental buildings, tenement houses and new infrastructure was to become the true *capital of the world*. Great changes affected both the inhabitants and all areas of social life. Haussmann's plan was so prophetic that both the administrative division into districts as well as the communication system and recreational areas created at that time serve the city's residents to this day.

Streszczenie

Paryż jest jednym z tych miast, które wzbudzają skrajne emocje. Od średniowiecza był ważnym ośrodkiem kultury i sztuki. W artykule zaprezentowano dwa wątki dotyczące *nadpisywania się* tkanki miasta, ukazano miasto jako palimpsest. Pierwszy z wątków to opis XVIII-wiecznego Paryża, miasta wąskich i niebezpiecznych uliczek, pozbawionego infrastruktury technicznej, którego dokonano na podstawie *Le Tableau de Paris (Obraz Paryża)* autorstwa Louisa-Sébastiena Merciera. Drugi wątek to XIX-wieczna rewolucyjna przebudowa miasta, która odbyła się z polecenia cesarza Napoleona III, a którą wykonał Georges-Eugène Haussmann. Realizacja wizji uporządkowanego układu przestrzennego spowodowała wyburzenie całych kwartałów zabudowy. *Nowy* Paryż z monumentalnymi budynkami, kamienicami czynszowymi, nową infrastrukturą miał się stać prawdziwą *stolicą świata*. Wielkie zmiany dotknęły zarówno mieszkańców, jak i wszystkie dziedziny życia społecznego. Plan Haussmanna był na tyle profetyczny, że ówczesny podział administracyjny na dzielnice oraz powstałe wtedy układ komunikacyjny i tereny rekreacyjne służą mieszkańcom do dziś.

Résume

Paris fait partie de ces villes qui suscitent des émotions extrêmes. Depuis le Moyen Age, c'était un important centre de culture et d'art. L'article présente deux fils qui montrent la ville comme un palimpseste. L'une concerne la description de la ville du XVIIIème siècle, une ville aux rues étroites et dangereuses, dépourvue d'infrastructures techniques, d'après *Le Tableau de Paris* de Sébastien Mercier. Le deuxième thème est la reconstruction révolutionnaire de la ville au XIXème siècle, commandée par l'empereur Napoléon III et réalisée par Georges Eugène Haussmann. La mise en suvre de la vision d'un agencement spatial ordonné a entraîné la démolition de quartiers entiers de bâtiments. Le nouveau Paris avec ses immeubles monumentaux, ses immeubles locatifs et ses nouvelles infrastructures allait devenir la véritable *capitale du monde*. De grands changements affectent à la fois les habitants et tous les domaines de la vie sociale. Le plan d'Haussmann était si prophétique que tant le découpage administratif en quartiers que le système de communication et les espaces de loisirs créés à cette époque servent encore aujourd'hui les habitants.

J. C. ŻARNOWIECKA

To be born in Paris means being doubly French.[1]

Sebastien Mercier

...every great urban planner attempted – no matter what he paid for it – to create plans that could only be justified by the future.[2]

Sigfried Giedion

INTRODUCTION

There are cities in the world that fascinate and inspire once you have seen them, they are hard to forget. They evoke extreme emotions, you can love them, but you can also hate them. One such city is certainly Paris. However, the importance of Paris in French, European and world history goes far beyond the visual, emotional, political and economic. Since the Middle Ages, Paris has been an important centre of culture and the arts; it is where new artistic and intellectual currents met. In the context of this article, it is not time to deal with French history, but it should be mentioned that Paris has been the arena of many political and social conflicts since the Middle Ages, culminating in the Great French Revolution (1789-1799). In 1871, the Paris Commune broke out as a result of social discontent. All these devastating conflicts also led to civilizational changes, the Industrial Revolution and the development of the modern financial economy. It is important to be aware that these changes, although they caused social tensions, led to the rapid development of the city, the construction of its infrastructure and new facilities.

Emperor Napoleon III entrusted the realisation of his vision of a new Paris to one of his officials, whose name was Georges Eugène Haussmann.[3] The scope of the changes he proposed and planned was enormous. The *new* Paris was to become a true capital of the world. Great changes affected both the inhabitants and all areas of society.

PARIS BEFORE THE CHANGES

In describing the great changes in Paris during the years of the Second Empire, it is useful to get familiarized with the city as it existed before them.

A picture of social and urban life in the 18th century Paris appears in the work of Louis-Sebastien Mercier.[4] He was an Enlightenment writer and an author of a collection of essays entitled *Le Tableau de Paris* [S. Mercier 1959, p. 27], which were published in the years 1781-1788. They present a colourful and critical description of the French capital. The author published several volumes in which he presented the public and private customs, the wealth, the caprices, and the whole menagerie that created this specific Parisian microcosm of the late 18th century.[5] While reading *Le Tableau...*, it is impossible not to notice that Mercier is sensitive to all the manifestations of life taking place in Paris. In the preface he wrote: 'That in the midst of which I live has a special right to my attention' [S. Mercier 1959, p. 27].

In 160 short essays, Mercier depicted, among other things, different types of inhabitants of the capital, mostly poor, undernourished such as rubbish collec-

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tors, septic tank cleaners, beggars, but also bankers, censors, etc. He dedicated only a short text to Louis XV. Discussing other aspects of life, he blamed the king for being profligate, collecting taxes in order to get rich. He concluded that the state was disintegrating into two classes: 'the greedy and insensitive people and the discontented and murmuring' [S. Mercier 1959, p. 41].

Elsewhere in the preface, he discussed the state of the community living in Paris: 'In a word - in Paris you have no proportion or balance between the different types of life: here you either get dizzy from an excess of pleasure or flummoxed from despair' [S. Mercier 1959, p. 29].

And finally, leaving no illusions, Mercier warned the potential reader who wanted to live in the capital: '(…)whoever does not wish to feel acutely his privation and the cruel humiliation that accompanies it, whoever is wounded by the scornful glance of arrogant wealth, should retreat, should flee, should not approach the capital!' [S. Mercier 1959, p. 30].

Mercier exposed the weakness of the absolute monarchy, which was then bent on collapse, and feudal backwardness. But not only did he write about this, he also pointed out that a new order had arrived, a new dangerous force had emerged – the power of money.

He even stated that it was the bankers who had begun to rule France.

In a passage on the size of Paris, Mercier wrote that the city was too big. In doing so, he explained that such a situation is beneficial only for the absolute power that thus controls the inhabitants, but the life of simple people is very difficult and poor. Moreover, he believed that the city had developed at the expense of the whole of France. He wrote explicitly: 'I see the city flourishing, but it is flourishing at the expense of the whole country' [S. Mercier 1959, p. 36].

Describing the urban structure of the city, he notes that: 'the city is round like a pumpkin, (...). The river cutting through the city divides it into two almost equal parts' [S. Mercier 1959, p. 37]. The surroundings of the town are full of gardens, alleys and promenades. More than half a century later, the same features are visible on a plan of 1853 (Fig. 1). The engraving shows a dense and chaotic network of narrow streets, a river cutting through the town and clusters of natural greenery to the east and west.

Elsewhere, he describes the city's climate – unfavourable to the health of the inhabitants, due to the dampness and heavy air polluted by smoke from countless chimneys. In addition, the narrow streets and
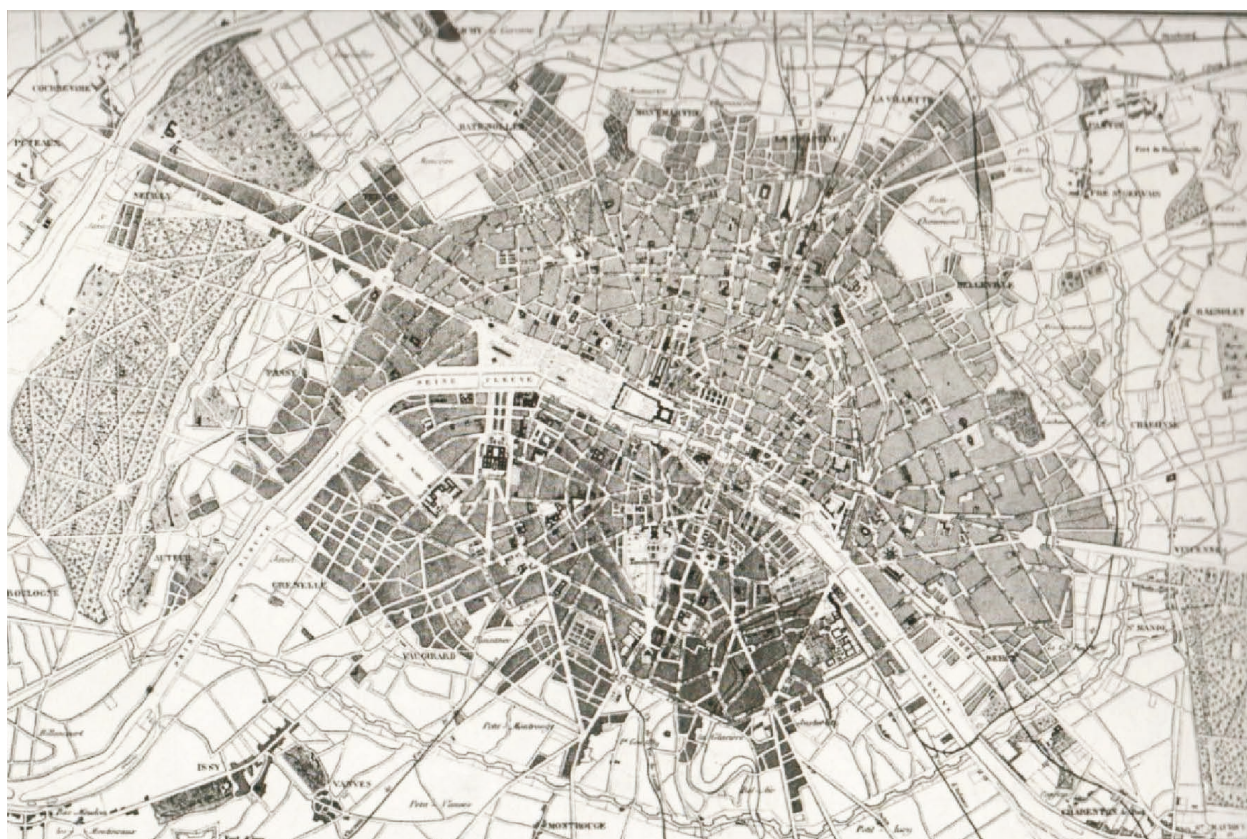

Fig. 1. Paris – map of 1853; source: L. Benevolo, *The history of the city*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge 1988, p. 786.
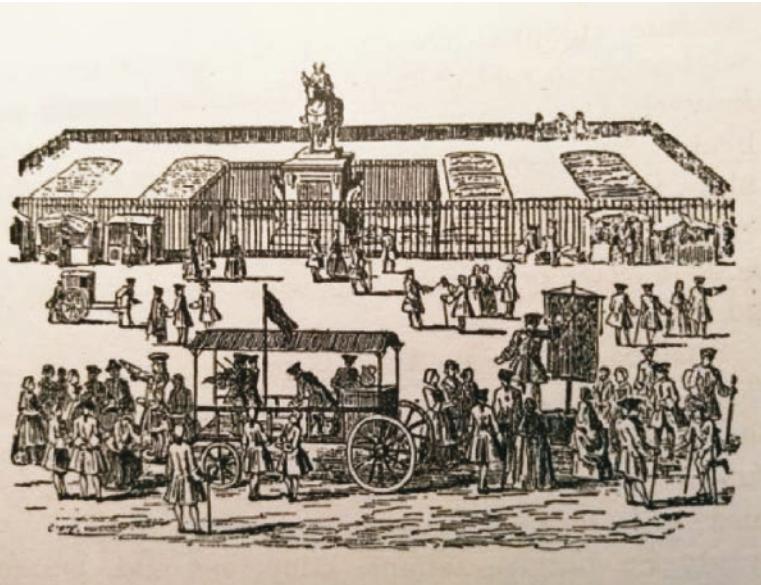
Fig. 2. Boulevard at the bridge Pont Nouveau (by: Hyacinthe Rigaud[6] – facsimile); source: S. Mercier, *Obraz Paryża*, PIW, Warsaw 1959, p. 133.

Fig. 3. Water-porter man (by: Edmé Bouchardon[8]); source: S. Mercier, *Obraz Paryża*, PIW, Warsaw 1959, p. 71.

excessively high houses make it difficult to ventilate the rooms well. Even at midday, the sun's rays do not reach the flats on the ground and first floors [S. Mercier 1959, p. 64].

In the paragraph entitled *Lanterns*, the author reports that streetlights with a candle inside had been replaced by oil lamps [S. Mercier 1959, p. 90].

At the same time, he reports that pedestrians have no rights here, there are no pavements, and many pedestrians are killed under the wheels of vehicles used by rich Parisians. Mercier cites figures, writing that: '... every year a hundred victims die under the wheels of carriages' [S. Mercier 1959, p. 44].

At the time, Paris used water from 55 fountains for living and drinking purposes, but as it was in insufficient quantities, water had to be pumped directly from the River Seine.[7] Water had to be paid for. It was delivered to the houses by an army of water-porters (Fig. 3), climbing the stairs of townhouses [S. Mercier 1959, p. 91]. This water was often contaminated by run-off from street gutters (especially during rains), as well as by excrement thrown into it by septic tank cleaners. On this account diseases were spreading throughout the city.

Mercier believes in the possibilities of progress, a bright future for man and humanity. It was the 18th century that brought the discoveries of, among others, such scientists as Antoine Laurent Lavoisier,[9] Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier brothers.[10] In 1769 Nicolas Joseph Cugnot[11] built a steam engine that was used as a propulsion system for vehicles.[12]

The last decade of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century saw great political changes in France. Despite armed conflicts, the country developed, but the stratification of society increased, resulting in discontent among the poorest. Demonstrations in Paris in 1848 ushered in the Spring of Nations, and the establishment of the Second Republic in France. After Napoleon III came to power and the Second Empire was declared, the rebuilding of Paris began on a huge scale. The city was to be residential and commercial, existing industries were to be relocated to the outskirts or periphery, and no new ones could be built in the city. In the end, only artisans remained in the old Paris.

THE NEW FACE OF PARIS – CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

During the Second Empire, the country's economy developed quite intensively, which was mainly attributed to the development of industry, especially textile and heavy industry. The construction of railway

lines across the country connected the remote corners of the country, hence moving people and goods became relatively easy. In 1870, the total length of railway lines was 24,000 kilometres. France's commercial power also became its strength, second only to England's [J. Baszkiewicz 2008, p. 563]. Agriculture, despite its fragmentation (1.5 million farms were counted in 1900), also experienced a slight increase in production. The application of technical innovations in agriculture led to a reduction in the need for labour and a gradual migration of the population from the countryside to the cities. In 1836, the population of Paris exceeded one million. After London, it was the second largest city in Europe [J. Baszkiewicz 2008, p. 563].

Gas lighting appeared in cities[13] together with water supply, sewerage and horse-drawn buses.[14] The use of steel structures for railway stations, market halls and bridges became an important and significant step in the construction industry. It can be read that: 'Stone is only used to clad the steel structure.'[15]

Work on the plans for the restoration of Paris was initiated by a commission headed by Count Henri Siméon; the designs and works were continued by Haussmann (Fig. 5). In his publication *Space, Time and Architecture*, Siegfried Giedion writes of the latter's organisational talent [S. Giedion 1968, p. 727], and that: '… (Haussmann) was in fact the first man to look at a major city – a capital with millions of inhabitants – as a technical problem' [S. Giedion 1968, p. 743].

He adds that he put together a team of not architects but engineers,[16] specialists who graduated from the famous Parisian École Polytechnique. He underlines this fact by writing that: 'The first ever transformation of a great city, to adapt it to the changes brought by industrialisation, was carried out by engineers.'[17]

As shown on the city map referred to in figure (Fig.1), The streets of Paris formed a chaotic, tangled

Fig. 4. Poster placard puller (by: Edmé Bouchardon); source: S. Mercier, *Obraz Paryża*, PIW, Warsaw 1959, p. 259.

web. Haussmann proposed a perfect new plan (Fig. 5), in which wide streets and street intersections formed a clear and simple spatial arrangement. The planning

[6] Hyacinthe Rigaud (1659-1743), a French painter, one of the most famous portraitists of the reign of Louis XIV, see: *Hachette le Dictionnaire Couleurs*, Hachette, Paris 1991, p. 1317.

[7] 'Seine water has a cleansing effect on the stomach, which is not used to it [S. Mercier 1959, , p. 71].

[8] Edmé Bouchardon (1698-1762), a French sculptor and printmaker; see: *Encyclopćdia Universalis France*, Vol. 3, Paris 1973, p. 465.

[9] Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794), a French chemist, founder of modern chemistry; see: *Hachette le Dictionnaire* …, op. cit., p. 878.

[10] Joseph-Michel (1740-1810) and Jacques-Étienne (1745-1799) Montgolfier, French industrialists, inventors of the aerostat/balloon powered by heated air; see: *Hachette le Dictionnaire* …, op. cit., p. 1017.

[11] Nicolas Joseph Cugnot (1725-1804), a French engineer. According to his design, a two-cylinder steam engine was developed. For the needs of the military, he built a vehicle to carry cannons; see: *Hachette le Dictionnaire* …, op. cit., p. 392-393.

[12] *Documents & Civilisation de la Préhistoire* …, op. cit., p. 101.

[13] Starting in 1820, the lanterns were replaced with gas lanterns. Initially, they were used to illuminate monuments and light covered passageways. Forty years later, there were already 56,000 gas lanterns in Paris. Thanks to this increased illumination of streets and squares, Paris became known as the *city of light* (*la ville de la lumiére*); see: *Documents & Civilisation de la Préhistoire* …, op. cit., p. 127, s.129.

[14] The big changes involved France's largest cities. Paris, Lyon and Marseille were expanded [J. Baszkiewicz 2008, p. 564].

[15] See: *Documents & Civilisation de la Préhistoire* …, op. cit., p. 127.

[16] *Ibidem,* p. 732-733.

[17] *Ibidem,* p. 734.

Fig. 5. Map of Paris according to Haussmann's designs; source: L. Benevolo, *The history of the city*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge 1988, p. 791. Legend: black thick lines – new streets, areas marked with a grid – new neighbourhoods, areas marked with parallel lines are two large parks: *La Forêt de Boulogne* (on the left) and *La Forêt de Vincennes* (on the right).
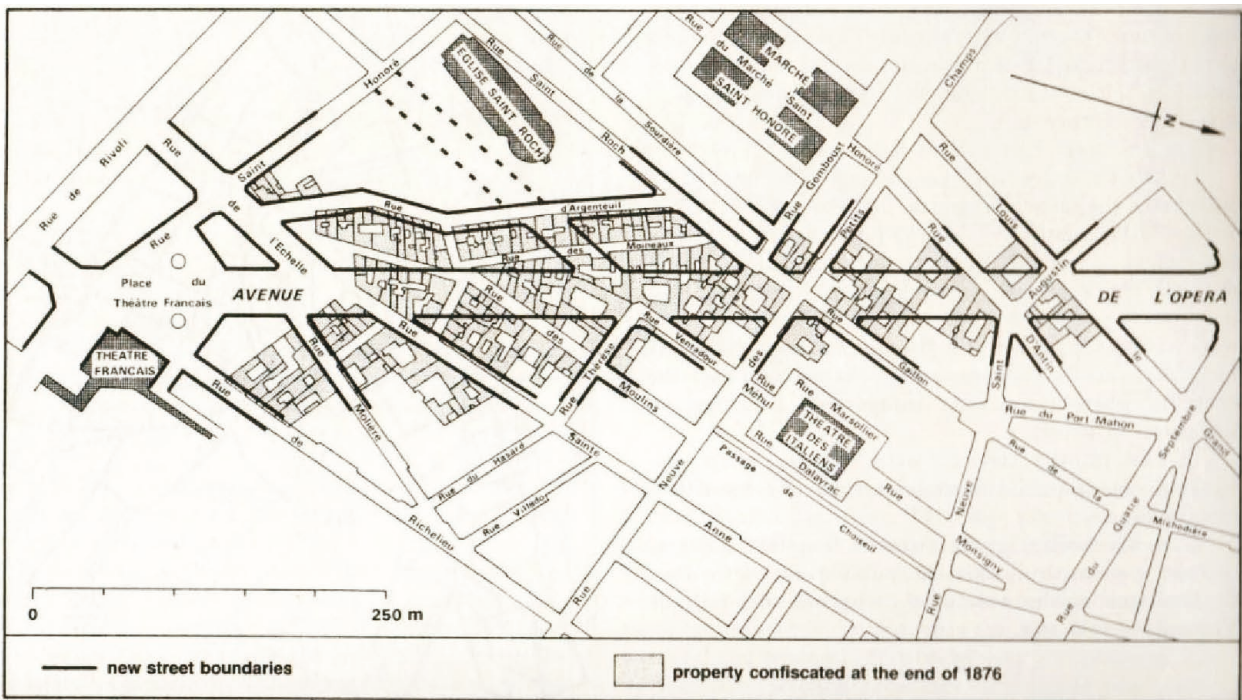

Fig. 6. Extract from one of Haussmann's plans – Avenue de l'Opera – a very large scale of planned demolitions visible; source: L. Benevolo, *The history of the city*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge 1988, p. 778.

of outdoor boulevards[18] increased the surface area of the city. Different from the original ones and intended for strolling, Haussmann's boulevards were designed for vehicular traffic. In 1894, Paris expanded to include many suburbs. Elegant green spaces were created:

Boulogne Forest (*La Forêt de Boulogne,* west of the city), Vincennes Forest (*La Forêt de Vincennes* in the east) and parks.

For the first time, the city was considered as a whole rather than as individual fragments, and so

Fig. 7. Paris – demolitions for new developments, source: L. Benevolo, *The history of the city*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge 1988, p. 789.

an orderly compositional structure emerged with a network of transport links that went far beyond the needs of the time. Care was taken to ensure efficient movement both within and on the periphery of the city, designed closures of view axes.[19]

To implement the new plan,[20] several quarters of buildings were demolished in Paris (Figs. 6-8), after which they were built up anew. The city was divided into 20 districts.[21] Haussmann laid out wide avenues, boulevards that formed major intersections and starred squares.[22] Giedion called the delineation of the Avenue de l'Opera (Fig. 6) a masterpiece of urban planning [S. Giedion 1968, p. 723].

Postcards from 1900 (Figs. 14-15) depict increased traffic on the streets. Pedestrians dodging horse-drawn vehicles mingled with automobiles. It is not difficult to feel the noisy atmosphere of a big city centre here.[23]

It is noticeable that the plan is very impressive, but it also brought the author a wave of criticism. Haussmann understood the development needs of the industrial age city. His critics clung to a vision of a city aimed at the needs of passers-by (*pour les promeneurs*): 'they could not understand (...) projects, intended as they were for generations yet to be born' [S. Giedion 1968, p. 744].

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[18] *Boulevard* – the word comes from the German *Bollwerk* and means a defensive rampart. Boulevards were paths created on the crown of the city walls. They served as a strolling place for pedestrians. The first such boulevard was created in Paris in 1670; [S. Giedion, 1968, p. 726-727].

[19] Giedion doubted the quality of this compositional treatment because of the very long streets and the resulting difficulty in seeing the buildings enclosing the axes.

[20] Haussman worked on the redevelopment of Paris in the years 1852-1870.

[21] The administrative division established at that time is still in place today.

[22] This was also to allow for artillery fire from a greater distance and the introduction of columns of soldiers in case of riots and street fighting.

[23] The streets and passages become, as it were, the dwelling of the collective, it is here that the Parisian flâneur resides; [A. Pilecka 2012].

It was controversial that the narrow and dirty streets had to be demolished, as this also meant that the historic Medieval and Renaissance buildings disappeared forever. New houses were built on the freed space, some 75,000 of them [J. Baszkiewicz 2008, p. 564] according to new principles and aesthetics. The result was, as Giedion wrote, unobtrusive, neutral, unified façades.

In his publication *History of France,* Baszkiewicz gave the following assessment of them: '[...] the new rental houses were styleless, glaring in their false luxury, and in the poorer districts already completely shoddy imitations of bourgeois affluence' [J. Baszkiewicz 2008, p. 564].

One may accuse them of being monotonous, as the length of some of them reached several kilometres, but they formed the backdrop to the city life that went on in the ground floors of the townhouses. Giedion writes that Haussmann showed wisdom in anticipating the possible variety of forms in the street frontages:

'Simply and without discussion, he extended a unified façade throughout Paris. This façade included tall French windows accented by cast-iron balconies, similar to those introduced on the Rue de Rivoli in the time of Napoleon I' [S. Giedion 1968, p. 739].

Haussmann's tenement house depicted on postcards from 1900 (Fig. 14-15) was generally six storeys high. The ground floor (often with a mezzanine) housed services: shops, cafés, the three main floors were occupied by the upper middle class; the two attic floors (usually overcrowded) were used for servants' flats, and the flats of the lower social classes [J. Baszkiewicz 2008, p. 737].

The revolutionary redevelopment saw the construction of many significant public buildings, railway stations (Fig. 10), trade halls (Fig. 11) and the huge hall of the National Library.

In 1858, Emperor Napoleon III Bonaparte personally ordered the demolition of 12,000 square metres of medieval town buildings to free up space for a new opera house[24] (Fig. 12). This very realisation was to show the wealth of the Second Empire and become a symbol of the cultural patronage of Napoleon III.

Fig. 9. Using a steam engine on site to drive a crane;
source: *Documents & Civilisation de la Préhistoire à nos jour*, Hachette, Paris 1981, p. 126.

Fig. 10. Paris – Gare du Nord railway station (1861-1865); source: B. Fletcher, *A History of Architecture*, Architectural Press, London 1996, p. 1127.

An important part of the modernization changes associated with both the industrialization[25] as well as the resettlement of residents [A. Pilecka 2012, p. 139] of the demolished neighbourhoods was the social aspect: „The transformation of Paris is changing the social composition of the inhabitants of the different neighbourhoods. Only the rich have the means to live in the new neighbourhoods, while the lower classes are left behind in the old parts of the city and in the eastern suburbs".[26]

These huge changes and the remarkable improvements in the living conditions in the new neighbourhoods caused land prices in these areas to rise very rapidly. Within ten years, prices sometimes rose by as much as fifty times or even a hundred times of the original price.[27]

The *new* Paris of the time enthralled the painters of the new movement known as Impressionism. For some of them, the *new* Paris became one of their favourite subjects. Based on their works and surviving photographs, it is not difficult to see that the current appearance of the city centre is largely the result of Baron Haussmann's plans and actions (Fig. 13-16).[28] With the support of Napoleon III, he pursued his planning and architectural revolution with great energy for (only) 17 years. Without the former's support, and without the

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[24] Competition for the design of the opera house won by Charles Garnier; source: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opéra_Garnier (access: 30.10.2022).

[25] Particularly after 1866, strikes and workers' protests broke out against the government's economic policies [J. Baszkiewicz 2008, p. 568].

[26] *Documents & Civilisation de la Préhistoire …*, op. cit., p. 127 (translation by the author).

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 127.

[28] The Paris Halls were one of the great Haussmann realizations and occupied 70,000 m². It was Paris' largest indoor market. It opened at two o'clock in the morning together with the first lorries bringing in produce from all corners of France. Emil Zola described it very evocatively in *The Belly of Paris* (*Le ventre de Paris*). In 1976, pavilion number eight (where eggs and poultry were traded) was reconstructed into a Nogent-sur-Marne. Pavillon Baltard (after the designer) now serves as a cultural venue (concerts), etc.

Fig. 11. Paris, la Villette – a cattle market and slaughterhouses (1863-1867) ; source: P. Chemetov, B. Marrey, *Architecture à Paris 1848-1914*, Bordas, Paris 1984, p. 45.

Fig. 12. National Opera in Paris (Palais Garnier) – front view from 1890; source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=24692369 (access: 31.10.2022)

Fig. 13. National Opera in Paris (Palais Garnier) –
front view from 2009; source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Palais_Garnier (access: 31.10.2022).

Fig. 14. Paris – Boulevard des Capucines and Grand Hotel (old postcard from 1900); source: http://association-manoirducrime.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/paris-1900-partie-3-L-kux1f9.jpeg [access: 31.10.2022].

Fig. 15. Paris – Avenue de l'Opera (old postcard from 1909); source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris_L%27Avenue_de-_l%27Op%C3%A9ra_LL.jpg [access: 31.10.2022].

Fig. 16. Paris – Avenue de l'Opera (2009); source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%E2%80%99Op%C3%A9ra_Garnier_vu_depuis_l%E2%80%99avenue_de_l%E2%80%99Op%C3%A9ra,_Paris_2009.jpg [access: 31.10.2022].

latter's vision and persistence, there would be no Paris as the inhabitants and tourists know it today. What is clear is that the eponymous rewriting of the city is still going on, and it also applies to the buildings that were built during the era of the Great Reconstruction. One of these is the Paris Halls (*Les Halles de Paris* – 1857). Despite being a historic structure with a large span, bold for their time, they were demolished in 1971.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of France in the 18th and 19th centuries was a period of upheaval, a time of socio-economic change, the development of industry and the emergence of inventions. Paris of the 18th century was a city of narrow, dangerous – for various reasons – streets, a city in which the modern conveniences of technical infrastructure were unknown. It was also a city in which great social stratification was evident. The most complete description of the situation at the time can be found in the publication *Le Tableau de Paris* (*The Picture of Paris*) by Sebastien Mercier. The 19th century, on the other hand, marked the time of gigantic rebuilding of Paris. Initiated by Napoleon III, this undertaking was carried out under the supervision and according to the plans of Baron Haussmann. It was an unprecedented plan, for without hostilities, whole quarters of buildings were demolished on the Emperor's orders. This was required by the vision of realizing an orderly spatial layout of promenades, streets and squares. Napoleon III, wishing to be known as a patron of culture, allowed as much as twelve thousand square metres of medieval buildings to be demolished only to make the Opera House built on the site. The monumental buildings were intended to showcase the power and splendour of the French capital, which was aspiring to become the 'capital of the world'. It must be said that Haussmann's plan was so prophetic that the administrative division into districts, the permanent removal of industry from the city as well as the transport system and recreational areas created at the time, are still used by the inhabitants today.

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