Paris through the Streets

Examining the cultural, political, and social changes of Haussmannisation reflected through the streets of Paris

Jason Wei
3-15-2017
I. Thematic Essay

From 1853 to 1870, Emperor Napoléon III commissioned Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann to renovate Paris by demolishing its crowded medieval neighborhoods and replacing them with new districts, improved water works, and grand boulevards and parks.\(^1\) Though this renovation process, known as Haussmannisation\(^2\), was controversial at the time, it was necessary for the city to solve its problems of poverty, overcrowding, disease, crime, and filth.\(^3\) Through Haussmannisation, Paris underwent physical and social change to become the modernized, iconic city it is today. This renovation of Paris is best seen through its new wide avenues and boulevards; in fact, 19\(^{th}\) century writer Francisque Sarcey wrote, “in every great capital there is some spot...which is the centre of its moral activity. With [Paris,] that spot is the boulevard.”\(^4\) The transformation of the boulevards of Paris directly reflected Haussmann’s renovation of the city into a grand international capital characterized by cultural, political, and social progress.

The transformation of streets into boulevards is a reflection of Paris’ cultural shift towards leisure. Since the Revolution of 1830, the street has been a popular subject for depiction of Parisian culture and current events.\(^5\) Before Haussmannisation, the street was typically used to represent “a politically contested urban space,”\(^6\) where people could riot and the government addressed such riots. In fact, Victor Hugo described the street as one of the best representations of the people of Paris when he wrote that “the most excellent symbol of

\(^1\) Jordan 2004: 91, 100.
\(^2\) The term “Haussmannisation” was first coined in 1926. It is also used in other contexts to describe the creative destruction of something for the betterment of society.
\(^3\) Barnes 2006: 2, 57, 199.
\(^4\) Sarcey 1891: 663.
\(^5\) Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) is a popular example of the depiction of the wars that occurred on the streets in Paris.
\(^6\) Sagraves 1995: 90.
the people is the paving stone.”7 For instance, in Charles Marville’s *The Rue des Mar-
mousets*, the streets are narrow, irrigation is poor, and the living quarters are unrefined; that street represented the poverty of medieval Parisian neighborhoods. However, after the renovation of Paris, there was a shift away issues of poverty, uprisings, and instability onto leisure, art, and wealth. As sanitary conditions improved and gutters and pipes reduced rainwater on streets, boulevards became more convenient and comfortable.9 Avenues were widened and sidewalks were built, allowing for an increase in the amount of people on the street for purposes of business and leisure. Leisure activities such as shopping, looking at art,10 and going to the opera11 also made the culture of the street more relaxing and artistic. Well-dressed citizens walked down boulevards to Opera houses or art exhibitions, and large streets were built near department stores in order to accommodate for increased traffic.12 Gas lights, sidewalks, benches, kiosks, fountains, and parks were built to brighten the mood of boulevards.13 Rows of chestnut trees were planted to improve the aesthetic of the city.14 Moreover, shops, restaurants, cafés,15 hotels, and theatres made the street a more appealing social area, especially in wealthier areas of the city. As such, the culture of the street changed from a pragmatic infrastructural necessity to a central space for business and leisure. New Haussmann boulevards not only came to represent the wealth and diversified activities of new

---

8 See Figure 2 for further analysis.
10 The Salon des Refusés had over one-thousand visitors a day.
12 Tetart-Vittu 2012: 210. Also look at Les Grands Magasins du Louvre. Before the 19th century, Parisian shops were notable because of the quality of their products. However, with the advent of the department store and window shopping at the street level, buildings became highly decorated and contributed to the wealth and leisure evident in post-Haussmannisation culture.
13 Pissarro’s *Avenue de l’Opéra* (1898) is an excellent example of the gas lights, sidewalks, fountains, and trees that lined avenues in New Paris. Also see Figure 5.
14 Jordan 2014: 89. The chestnut tree is clearly featured in Renoir’s *The Grand Boulevards* (1875) and Lami’s *Boulevard des Italiens in Paris at night*.
Paris, but also reflected new leisure interests including department stores, artistic exhibitions, and the opera.

In addition to reflecting cultural transformation, Haussmannisation also had political implications in terms of government reclaiming the streets from the working class. During Haussmann’s renovation, Napoleon III hoped to employ the potentially rebellious Parisian working class in order to gain their confidence and mitigate political turmoil. By hiring thousands of building and construction workers to build new streets, the imperial government intended to both provide jobs for the working class and prevent them from gathering for revolutionary activities. Wide and spacious boulevards were used as “anti-riot” streets, cutting through working class living areas that had previously been meeting areas for rebellions. Furthermore, their width hindered the construction of barricades and expedited the deployment of government soldiers. Even after Haussmannisation, the moderate Republicanism movement used boulevards politically for the dual purpose of dispelling the memories of revolution and demonstrating their commitment to infrastructure construction. In 1876, the government decided to complete Haussmann’s unfinished avenue de l’Opera, a grand project to be showcased in the 1878 Exposition Universelle. By finishing the avenue de l’Opera, the new Republican government provided jobs for building and construction workers in addition to creating public confidence in their commitment to social and technological progress. As described by Julia Sagraves, the political intentions behind Haussmannisation included

---

16 Caillebotte’s *The Floor Scrapers* (1875) is famous oil painting that demonstrates the working class renovating a building. However, it was rejected by the Paris Salon because jurors viewed his depiction as “vulgar.”
17 Sagraves 1995: 89.
18 See Camille Pissaro’s painting (Figure 4).
19 Wilson 2005: 48. The Third Republic wanted use the 1878 Exposition Universelle to reassert the supremacy of Paris and regain credibility in a world where France was regarded politically unstable and vulnerable to attack.
“pleasure now ostensibly substituted for conflict, and modernity for revolution.” Government may not have had the most good-willed or transparent political motivations, yet in the end they still completed construction of grand avenues and maintained stable Third Republic that lasted until 1940. Ultimately, the modernization raised living standards for the working class, but whether it was a net positive development for the people of Paris is up for debate. The clean, wide boulevards of Paris symbolized government power and stability following Haussmanisation.

Socially, the width and spaciousness of Haussmann’s new boulevards and parks were built to accommodate a growing bourgeois population that engaged in more outdoor leisure than they did before. With the developing notion of the flâneur, for which the street became “a dwelling as much as the home,” boulevards were portrayed by artists such as Caillebotte as social spaces for business and leisure. For instance, in the celebrations that followed the completion of boulevards, social diversity and harmony were emphasized as important virtues of new city. In addition, the converging nature of boulevards on a small number of symbolic monuments and squares such as the Paris Opera and the Place de la Concorde gave Parisians a sense of unity and togetherness. To some extent, the public role of boulevards and the accessibility of their amenities contributed to a broader definition of middle class, as well as an increased social emphasis on fashion. Furthermore, the wide streets created a class of leisured men-about-town, or boulevardiers, which upheld an image of elegance

---

20 Sagraves 1995: 89.
21 Middle class; city inhabitants.
23 Pissarro’s Avenue de l’Opéra depicts the converging nature of boulevards. The set of buildings on the left and set of buildings on the right converge in the distance; the lines formed by their rooftops are extraordinarily straight.
24 Lawrence 1998: 372. In addition to boulevards, trees also represented growth of the middle class. Tree-lined landscaping originated in Germany, where the middle class controlled civic government; the expanding power of the French middle class “paralleled and contributed to the growing role of trees as a landscape amenity.”
through the northwestern section of the grands boulevards. However, not all viewers saw Haussmann’s urban achievements through a positive lens of social progress. Architectural critics noted that the straight lines in Haussmann’s architecture represented the authoritarian regime, and the facades were criticized as “parade architecture.” In fact, many called for a more diverse cityscape that better reflected a regime that was built on the cooperation of a variety of classes. Though the width of Haussmann’s new boulevards were meant to accommodate and reflect social growth of the middle and working class, they also reminded Parisians of the authoritarian and oppressive governments that built them. If Haussmann had engineered the streets to meet the needs of the growing middle class instead of attempting to mold the middle class as a byproduct of architectural perfectionism, he may have been more successful in creating an organic cityscape that less resembled the authoritarian government.

The streets of Paris are not only a direct reflection of the cultural, political, and social development that occurred during Haussmannisation, but they also contributed to the Parisian interest in leisure, stable government, and the strength of the middle class. The changes in modernization are evident in comparisons of streets before and after Haussmann’s renovation, and are even more emphasized in artists’ depictions of the boulevards. By examining the paintings of Renoir, Pissaro, and Caillebotte in relation to Marville’s depictions of pre-Haussmannisation poverty, we are able to observe subjective aspects of the streets expressed by artists who lived through the renovation of Paris.

26 Sagraves 1995: 89.
II. Visual Analysis

1. Rue St. Nicola du Chardonnet (1853-1970), Charles Marville

This picture by Charles Marville is of a narrow street near the Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet Church, which off in the distance (far right). It represents the poverty and crowdedness of the residential streets of Paris before Haussmannisation.²⁷

In this picture, the four or five-story apartment buildings surround the empty street. The street is made from bricks, though bricks are missing on the ledge and in the middle of the street. The road itself is neither flat nor straight; it appears elevated in the middle and

²⁷ Not all areas of Paris were impoverished; some areas such as the Boulevard des Italiens, as painted by Eugene Lami, were wealthy and resembled the nicer areas of post-Haussmanisation Paris.
it curves to the left after the first set of buildings. There are sidewalks on both the left and right of the street, though they are narrow. However, people probably rarely used them for walking since barrels, bags, and woodpiles are placed on the sidewalk every few feet. As for the buildings, the rooftops are not aligned. Since the further set of buildings on the right of the street is taller than the closer set of buildings, it is likely that the further set is newer and wealthier, since they had the technology and money to build more stories. All the buildings have windows, though the windows on the closest buildings to the viewer are simply holes in the wall and do not have glass or frames, while the windows in the further set of buildings have railings and possibly glass. At the intersection, there is a cart which is made to be carried by man, suggesting that residents did not have money for horses and frequently engaged in manual labor.

The lighting, composition, spatial construction, and mood reflect the poverty prevalent in Parisian neighborhoods before Haussmann’s renovation. Marville took this picture when the sun was to his left, based on the shadows on the buildings to the right of the street. However, the narrowness of the street reduces the number of hours that sunlight can penetrate the actual ground, making the mood gloomy and sad. Though there are streetlights, they are not built off the ground but rather connected to the buildings, suggesting that they were lit manually and not as bright as the newer electric or gas lamps. As for spatial construction, the intersection of the rooftop lines causes the picture to feel crowded and messy. In addition, the buildings are poorly aligned, sharply contrasting the organized and rectilinear buildings built by Haussmann. Finally, the fact that Marville chooses to depict wood, carts, and barrels suggests that the working class engaged in tough manual labor and suffered constantly from poverty. These factors lend credence to the idea that Marville wanted to convey to the viewer: the streets of Paris were not glamorous.
2. *The Rue des Marmousets (1858), Charles Marville*

*Figure 2. Charles Marville (1813-1879). The Rue des Marmousets, 1858. Photograph. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Paris.*

This photograph by Charles Marville is of a street called Rue des Marmousets in the 13th arrondissement of Paris. It also represents the poverty of commercial areas of Paris before Haussmann’s renovation.

In this photograph, commercial buildings surround the empty street. The street is made from bricks, many of which are dirty. The road itself is neither flat nor straight; it has many indentations and continuously curves to the left. There are no sidewalks on this street,
suggesting that it was possibly only for pedestrians, though it would be wide enough to fit a carriage. As for the buildings, the rooftops are not aligned. The closest building on the left is much taller than the buildings in the distance, which have uniform windows and are likely to be residential; the windows in the commercial buildings have varying heights. These windows are indented and have frames, suggesting that this area was slightly nicer than the neighborhood depicted in the other Marville photograph. To the top right, there is a sign that says “Papiers” (Paper) and “Peints” (Paints) which indicates that the store sold newspapers or printing supplies. Below the sign, there are rags and miscellaneous bags of supplies, as well as advertisements at eye level on the wall.

The lighting, spatial construction, and mood reflect lack of prosperity of Parisian commercial neighborhoods before Haussmann’s renovation. Marville took this picture probably close to noon when the sun was slightly to the right of the photographer, based on the shadow on the building on the left and the fact that the open street is lit. Though there is one streetlight, it is not built off the ground. As for spatial construction, the rooftop lines intersect at many different points, giving the impression that the construction of the area was unorganized. The buildings are also poorly aligned with respect to the street, further emphasizing a feeling of messiness. In terms of the mood, Marville chose a location that is typically filled with people during the day, but portrays it as if there is no business; all the doors are closed and there is no sign of commercial activity. Finally, the buildings themselves appear to be old and weathered, exposed clearly when Marville chose to depict a large area of the side of the building on the right. The sign is torn at the top, and water erosion has created visible creases in the side of the building. Clearly, Marville wanted to convey the poverty of the commercial areas of Paris.
3. *The Grand Boulevards (1875), Pierre Auguste Renoir*

*Figure 3. Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). The Grand Boulevards, 1875. Oil on canvas; 52.1 x 63.5 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art (The Henry P. McIlhenny Collection in memory of Frances P. McIlHenny).*

This oil painting by Renoir is of the post-Haussmannisation boulevards of Paris. It illustrates the prosperity and diverse lives of Parisians after the renovation, with an emphasis on the characteristics of the street.

In this painting, many people walk on a crowded boulevard. A person eating a sandwich sits on the street to the very left. This implies that boulevards were a popular and preferred location for Parisians of all classes. In the middle, two wealthy men dressed in suits and top hats are having a conversation, and to the right of them a woman is walking with her son and daughter. The amenability of the men and the leisure of the woman and her kids indicate that the street is an inviting place for leisure and activities. On the left of the road,
there is a horse-drawn carriage with a man and a woman. As carriages and horses were expensive, the couple is likely to have been high-class citizens in Paris. Finally, people are walking on the sidewalk browsing the stores on the very right of the picture. In the background, there appears to be many people down the street, though it is hard for the viewer to discern them individually.

Renoir uses the subject, color, lighting, spatial construction, and mood to convey the wealth and diversity of the post-Haussmannisation boulevard. Renoir chose to depict multiple subjects in the painting, all from different social classes. The man sitting eating his sandwich is likely from the working class since he is sitting on the floor, the woman and her children are middle class based on their attire, the men in suits are from the upper middle class, and the couple in the carriage is very wealthy. However, the individual identities of the Parisians are not revealed, as Renoir uses large brush strokes to create vague outlines of faces. As for the color, Renoir uses a mixed palette of colors: the buildings are a light shade of grey but the sky is a darker shade of blue-purple. Renoir uses shadows cleverly to highlight the buildings and the trees, rather than the closest subjects to the viewer. Renoir also chose to paint a copious number of chestnut trees along the sidewalk, covering many of the further buildings. The spatial construction of the painting feels very open. Renoir does not depict the presumed buildings on the left so they do not crowd the view, and the street is wide to accommodate for heavy traffic. There is a kiosk and gas streetlamp on the street of the viewer, and multiple shops in the buildings opposite the viewer. As such, Renoir depicts many of the street accessories characteristic of Haussmann’s construction. For the mood of the painting, Renoir’s thick brush strokes and ambiguity of the background give the painting the illusion of motion. The artistic effects evident in this painting reflect the new social space created by post-Haussmannisation boulevards.
4. Avenue de l’Opera (1898), Camille Pissarro

This painting by Camille Pissarro is of the Avenue de l’Opera, situated in the center of the city adjacent to the primary Opera house of Paris. It reflects the increasingly middle-class Parisian population that engaged in outdoor business and leisure.

In this painting, many people walk through an intersection of the Avenue de l’Opera, with the opera house seen far in the background. There is no primary subject, but instead Pissarro depicts a crowd of people going about their daily business, indistinguishable by any
characteristics other than their clothing. There are a few wealthy citizens riding in carriages, but most of the people are walking by foot. The season is most likely winter, as none of the trees have leaves. The buildings on the left are perfectly aligned, with their rooftops forming a line pointing directly at the opera house. Though less apparent, the buildings on the right also do so in a similar fashion. Pissarro depicts a gas lamp in the right foreground, symbolizing a vibrant nightlife, and shows a large fountain in the right mid-ground, symbolizing wealth. In the background, people are walking down the sidewalks looking at the shops, suggesting that the economy is doing well and people are happy.

To emphasize his message about the street-based culture of post-Haussmannisation Paris, Pissarro applies artistic use of subject, color, lighting, spatial construction, and mood. Though there are many wealthy people in carriages, the majority of people who are walking on the street represent the growing middle class who worked in businesses surrounding the large boulevards of Paris. By using discernable brush strokes, Pissarro makes the shape of people vague, taking away from the individually of citizens and emphasizing the movement of Parisians as a whole. In addition, the street accessories painted by Pissarro complement the wealth of boulevards he conveys; there are fountains, street lights, kiosks, trees, and cafés. There are no shadows and the entire boulevard is well lit, creating an open and airy feel. As for spatial construction, there is a large open space between the viewer and the buildings opposite the viewer, making the boulevard feel spacious and grand. Finally, the mood of the painting is exciting and hurried, an effect of the style of visible brush strokes characteristic of impressionist painting. Pissarro’s interpretation of the boulevard emphasizes its role in post-Haussmannisation Paris as a space of business and leisure.
5. Rue Halvely seen from the Sixth Floor (1878) by Gustave Caillebotte

Figure 5. Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894). Rue Halvely Seen from the Sixth Floor, 1878. Oil on canvas: 73 x 60 cm. Private Collection.

This oil painting by Caillebotte is of Rue Halvely, seen from the sixth floor of a building adjacent to the street. It illustrates the grand feel of the boulevards and represents the wealth and prosperity of Paris following Haussmann’s renovation.

In this painting, the viewer looks down onto the street at Parisians attending their daily business. The buildings in the painting are closer to the viewer than in the other paintings, making them feel bigger and taller. Though the set of buildings on the right do not
converge to a focal point, the apartments on the left clearly converge at a point far in the distance. The buildings themselves are gold and finely decorated with railings and window accessories. The street is smooth and clean. The sidewalks are slightly elevated above the streets and are wide enough for multiple people to walk side by side. People in horse-drawn carriages were the primary users of the roads, suggesting that many people had them and were wealthy enough to afford such transportation.

Caillebotte uses color, lighting, spatial construction, and mood elements characteristic of impressionist art to depict grand boulevards and their reflection of wealth in Paris. Because the details of individual people are blurred due to the blending of color Caillebotte uses, their identities are unclear; in this case, even their clothing is not drawn clearly enough to infer social class. The lighting in this picture is bright, since the street is well lit and there are no shadows of the buildings on each other. In terms of spatial construction, Caillebotte makes an interesting choice in showing a diagonal piece of the building of the viewer, most likely part of an open window. This partially obstructs the view of the boulevard and actually makes the space feel more crowded despite the large width of the street. For the street specifically, the smooth coloring makes it seem wider and gives it a clean look. The buildings themselves are gold tinted, which creates a feeling of class. Streetlights imply a vibrant nightlife. The mood of the painting is neutral but exciting, since the blurred outlines of people on the street create a feeling of motion. Caillebotte’s Rue Halevy seen from the Sixth Floor is a prime example of the use of impressionist composition, light, and brush strokes to depict the boulevard as a reflection of the prosperity of Paris post-Haussmannisation.
Bibliography


