

PAPER • OPEN ACCESS

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To cite this article: Clara Mosquera-Perez *et al* 2019 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Mater. Sci. Eng.* **603** 042088

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A museological approach of an urban project: Parisian cultural institutions as urban actors

Clara Mosquera-Perez¹, Eduardo Mosquera-Adell¹, Javier Navarro-dePablos²

¹History, Theory and Architectural Composition Department. Avenida Reina Mercedes, 2. 41012 Seville. Spain

²Urbanism and Territory Management Department. Avenida Reina Mercedes, 2. 41012 Seville. Spain

cmosquera@us.es

Abstract. Considering the most recent contemporary historical, geographical and social displacements of the places of power have been taken into consideration through the role of the culture and arts on them. The aim of this research is to examine, from the perspective of the urban historiography of Paris, an analyse of the trajectory and transformation of the city by the means of its museums' institutions. Paris has suffered from important processes of acceleration and changes to become the contemporary capital that it is nowadays. The city counts with the precedent of its great Haussmannian transformation into a modern city and the historical three concentric growth of its city walls perimeter and the later succession of up to six international exhibitions (between 1855 and 1937). However, after the impasse produced by the two war periods, a new urban and political project - still present in our days - was built up based on the cultural institutions. Great new cultural infrastructures were designed for expecting areas and terrain vagues, most of them with a proved level of change, at the Seine riverbanks. They follow the Louvre museum historic model of implantation. Meanwhile, the historical inner Marais district experimented a deep restoration and a reuse process, with cultural institutions as the main actors. Even more, Beaubourg void was pointed as an opportunity for a decisive change for the whole city. Cultural insertions of the opportunity spaces beside the river have definitely established Paris as a top rank cultural destination. Heading the cultural tourism rates at a global level, its historical heart - The City Island, nowadays being under research conducted by the French architect Dominique Perrault, with the horizon of a 25-years renovation project, the Right Bank (with the French Cinematheque, the Arsenal Pavilion, Louvre Museum, Decorative Arts Museum, The Orangerie, The Grand Palais, The Palais of Tokyo and the Palais of Chaillot) and the Left Bank (counting with the French National Library, The Arab World Institute, the Orsay Museum, the Invalids Hospital, Quay Branly Museum and the Eiffel Tower), sum up to the most relevant museums' institutions and exhibition spaces of the city. Thus, the research will deepen in the urban strategy for the choice of the museums and cultural institutions as the decisive architectural actors for the renewal of the Parisian urban landscape. The role of their architectures, intimately associated with their performing use, will be critically examined.

1. Introduction

The objectives of this contribution intend to develop a renewed urban reading of Paris as a cultural capital, with its contemporary evolution as the main chronological focus. They are as follows: Deepen in the role of the cultural institutions, in terms of architectural and urban scenery interventions, as



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qualified initiatives under the cultural politics. The analysis of the reshaping of Paris as a huge experience, with a strong and acknowledged impact over the busiest cultural tourism destination in the world, would be accomplished. Finally, to define a most accurate balance between both Parisian riversides as cultural sites receptors, beside a new heritage characterization.

The urban evolution of Paris is constantly under the scope of urban studies. The complexity of its development shows many exemplary achievements that provide significant highlights to worldwide urbanism, from the post-French Revolution remodelling of central Paris, or the Haussmanian plan devoted to a new functional city based in the boulevards, even the modern propagandistic proposal of Plan Voisin by Le Corbusier.

After the taking of Louvre Royal Palace by the revolutionaries, the concept of the public museum was established as an emblematic expression of change. With the Museum of Louvre started a long path for the binomial of cultural politics and the implementation of a relevant group of outstanding architectural and urban experiences. Long term projects and eventual initiatives, as the universal exhibitions, were combined with the aim to get a specific leadership among the world greatest capital cities. Only partial studies have been performed considering the relevance of cultural institutions as the main actors in the urban development. The need for a more structured vision can be detected, especially concerning the complementary role of the double landmarks, that is, the right and left banks, in which the city is clearly divided.

2. The post-Revolutionary process of institutionalization of Parisian culture: the urban dimension

The aim of this research is to examine, from the perspective of the urban historiography of Paris, an analysis of the trajectory and transformation of the city by means of its museums' institutions. The modern transformation of the city of Paris began with the arrival of the Enlightenment and was soon accelerated by the events and declarations resulting from the French Revolution. These events and changes highlighted the need for a new definition for modern society's identity, which would break away from the Old Regime, in which the recognition of culture as inherent to the city itself and its society were defining. The concepts of citizen and citizenship assume a new social character, as culture and education where the foundations of the citizen freedom.

“The revolution in France led to the conditions of emergence of a new museological programme which radically transformed collecting practices and subject positions. In the place of intensely personal, private collections housed in the palaces of princes and the homes of scholars, public collections in spaces open to the whole population were established. An abrupt discontinuity can be identified, the invention of democratic culture. A further discontinuity can be identified in the theory of government. The public museum emerged as one of the campaigns of the state to direct the population into activities which would, without people being aware of it, transform the population into a useful resource for the state” [1].

From this context and the fruit of these dynamics were constituted what today make up the most important public spaces of most cities -disconnected or complementary to their historical precedents-, some of them, presided by museums, taking the witness of the traditional public and collective places of the city, understanding that they are not only formally public spaces, but also the building itself participates in its constitution.

Since then, Paris has suffered from important processes of acceleration and changes to become the contemporary capital that it is nowadays. By the second half of the 19th century, during the 3rd French Republic, the city would experiment its great Haussmannian transformation into a modern city and the historical three concentric growth of its city enclosure walls perimeter [2]. However, the

main discourse was elaborated around a strong ideological conception of showcasing the new political prominence, what was translated into urban terms in mostly the creation of great representative axes – boulevards and avenues–, sometimes complemented by monumental and sculptural elements.

2.1. The promotion of culture, the ephemeral as an engine of change

In parallel to this, the succession of up to six international exhibitions (between 1855 and 1937) definitely supposed a major conversion of the city embarked to the 20th century. Unfortunately, this growth would be abruptly interrupted by the two global wars.

The revolution of the paradigm *città in mostra* (the exhibitions and the self-exhibited city) turned into a set of opportunities for planning important urban operations [3]. The characteristics of some pavilions, designed for the temporary exhibition of modern machines and works of art, as the forward road of the modern times, also for exotic scenes associated with the Western supremacy, served easily to become a permanent exhibition place, related to specific collections. As we will furtherly examine (Table 1), some of the elements of the different international exhibitions would last to our days, after being transformed into cultural institutions. In addition to this, not only their architecture was the only legacy of these ephemeral events, but significantly, the urban reshaping renewal operations encouraged during these years. We can determine that this period supposed to be an opportunity to finally drive the Haussmann Plan to an accepted continuity, with the cultural vector as the main thread of the urban transformation.

2.2. Museums as urban actors

However, after the impasse produced by the two war periods, a new urban and political project -still present in our days- was built up based in cultural institutions. After the ruling discourse of French grandeur (greatness), as Colonial metropolis, the loss of Algeria and the birth of the new African states was followed by the counter cultural and left winged May 68 movement. The economic crack that followed the *Trente Glorieuses* (The Glorious Thirty, 1945-1975), after Yom Kippur War and the oil crisis (1973), ends with the socialist period of French Republic President François Mitterrand (1981-1995). In this context, the attention would soon be paid to cultural institutions, locating them in spaces considered as strategic for the urban renewal, with special emphasis on the historical centre –Marais district [4]- and the Seine waterfronts. It was the time to spread a new era for cultural politics and facts, where museums as the most relevant part of Mitterrand's *Grands Travaux* (Great Works), according to the spectacle society that used new architecture, new museography under a refurbished cultural discourse on Modernity. Considering the most recent contemporary history, geographical and social displacements of places of power have been taken into consideration through the role of culture and arts on them.

Great new cultural infrastructures were designed for expecting areas and *terrain vagues*, most of them with a proved level of change, at the Seine riverbanks. They follow the Louvre Museum historic model of implantation. Meanwhile, already in the second half of the 20th century, historical inner Marais district experimented a deep restoration and reuse process, with cultural institutions as the main actors. The Picasso Museum is the main reference, while Carnavalet Museum (the museum of the urban history of Paris) is now under restoration and deep remodelling. Even more, Beaubourg void was pointed as an opportunity for a decisive change for the whole city [5], as one of the most representative *Grands Travaux* during President François Mitterrand term [6].

This urban and architectonic dynamic would be increasingly intensified at the end of the millennium and was experimented not only in Paris but worldwide, through extensions and renovations of existing museums, as well as new foundations, undoubtedly linked to mass culture.

3. The Seine River as a cohesive factor for urban proposal and renewal.

With its historical central piece, the City Island, the two great halves in which Paris is divided, the Rive Droite (the Right Bank) and the Rive Gauche (the Left Bank) make up two conflicting visions of the city, developed in different times on either side of the river and with very different identities (Figure 1). This binomial, in which the border is the river, assumes its limit as an element of cohesion and meeting point for the city, incarnating the places of power, which, after the revolutionary stages, will turn towards the embodiment of an urban cultural focus, composed of the sum of multiple and successive museum and cultural institutions.



Figure 1. ‘Longchamp 2014 Collection: *Le Pliage Rive Droite et Rive Gauche*’. The imagery of the two banks in which the city is divided compose a strong and differentiated identity of Paris. This can be found in various manifestations such as this Longchamp bags

As we can see in the Parisian urban morphology, the base-scheme of implantation that most cultural institutions in the city are reproducing, that is, associated to the riverbanks (Figure 2), have the Louvre Museum piece as a reference. However, Louvre’s transcendence may not only be due to its historic significance – as the ‘eldest’ institution – or because of its vast collections – that, of course, is an important asset – but also regarding its urban disposition, along river Seine. In addition, its urban entity can’t be understood without considering it in relation to The City Island, the nuclear foundational core of Paris. With these two main central elements, in a cultural approach to the contemporary Parisian urban project, we can find that they have been taken as models - assumed as the key cultural centres of the city - and then exported and transformed among the rest of the city through the river waterfronts.

The city of Paris heads the cultural tourism rates at a global level. The City Island is currently in the phase of the study by the French architect Dominique Perrault, together with the Commission of National Monuments of France, with a plan of renewal to 25-years foreseen. This collaboration and research and design project reflects the importance of taking the heart of the city as an object of study, where heritage is the core of the urban project of the Paris of the future, updating and enhancing its heritage values. We could also refer to *à la carte* vision of the city, as we can project it as a result of some selected elements from our choice, in order to fulfil the idea of the city to which we aspire (Figure 3).

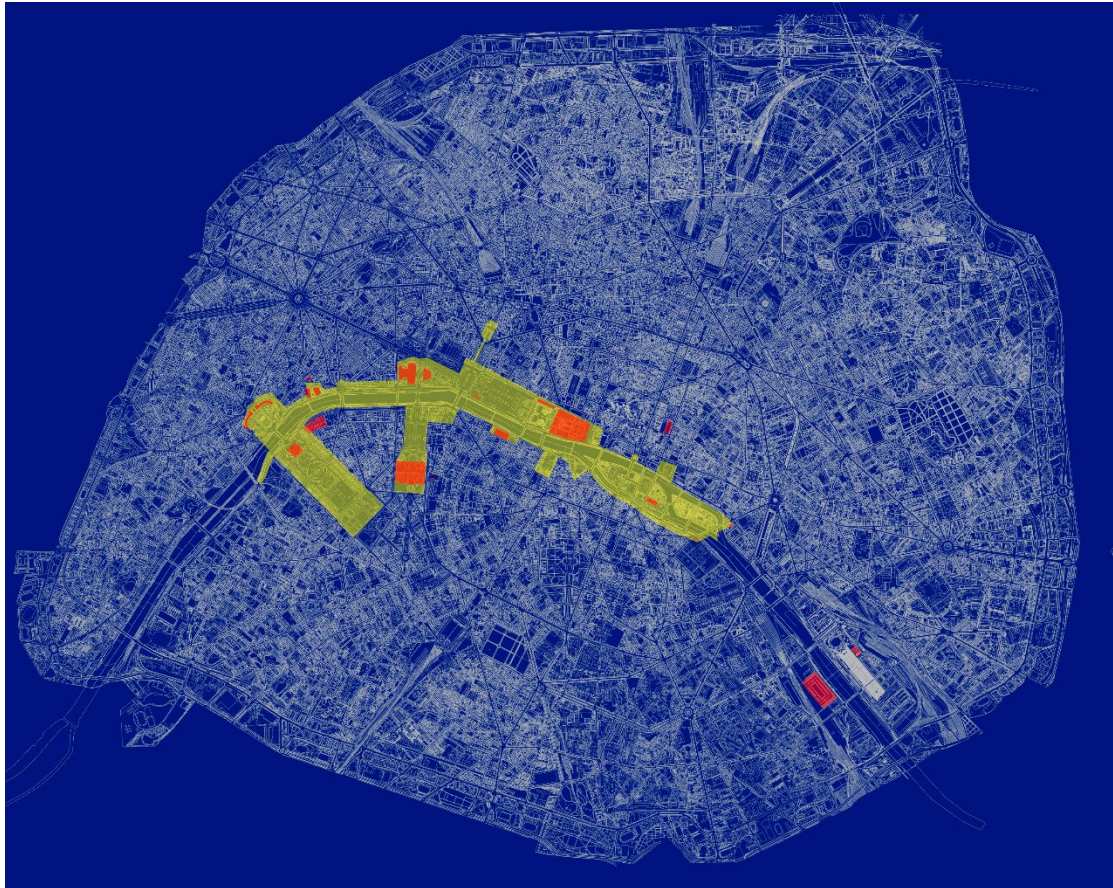


Figure 2. Cartography of Paris, 2018. Museums and cultural institutions marked in red; UNESCO inscription of Seine's Riverbanks in yellow



Sur un plateau.

Figure 3. L'île "sur un plateau" [7]

Regarding the city with this perspective, we can affirm that the two main 'layers' compose the urban morphology of Paris: the two riverbanks, linked by the Seine, as the most important 'public space' in the city and secondly, the cultural and museological institutions that are disposed along the waterfronts and their vicinities. At the Right Bank, (with the French Cinematheque, the Arsenal Pavilion, Louvre Museum -the most frequented museum in the World-, Decorative Arts Museum, The Orangerie, The Grand Palais, The Palais of Tokyo and the Palais of Chaillot) and at the Left Bank (counting with the French National Library, The Arab World Institute, the Orsay Museum, the Invalids Hospital, Quay Branly Museum and the Eiffel Tower), sum up to the most relevant museums' institutions and exhibition spaces of the city.

These two layers establish a rich interaction, articulated by the architecture as a support or infrastructure and with the cultural discourse as the main *leitmotiv* that makes possible different and complementary approaches (depending on the nature of the institutions). Considering the base-elements and the relationship between them –that are not permanent and constant at all, but continuously changing, we would arrive at the conception of the city as a whole, conceived as a great cultural metropolis, to whom other cultural districts may try to compete.

4. Great 'cultural districts'

The so-called cultural districts compose a complex typology of museums and cultural centres shaped as a combination of an urban solution within a common cultural strategy.

Within this classification, we can find examples in relevant European cities, such as the *Museumkwartier* of Amsterdam, the Museums Quartier of Vienna, the *Paseo del Prado* or *Paseo de las Artes* (Prado or Arts Walk) in Madrid [8], the Museum Mile in London or the Berliner *Museumsinsel* - distinguished from the other cases, as historically this set of museums have always be considered as a unitary group and institution. In the American side, the New York City Museum Mile, a section of Fifth Avenue on the Manhattan Upper East Side, or the Texan couple of Houston Museum

District and Fort Worth Cultural District, offer different models of cultural districts in terms of urban solutions.

The Parisian case has a common thread, running along the city, the Seine River. The relevance of this case arises from the close connection with the urban changes experienced during more than two centuries. It is also necessary to emphasize that Paris has the cultural district with more museums, where the 'district' properly acquires the scale of the whole city.

5. Results and Discussion

The sense of this research gives us a map of the cultural institutions of Paris. There could only be another Parisian parallel, just for the performing arts, with two references to the aforementioned urban changes. The Charles Garnier Opera in the context of Haussmanian renewal and Bastille Opera, for late 20th century urban processes, both in the Seine Right Bank. The criteria used in the research let us elaborate the chronological sequence of cultural events –such as museum foundations, reopenings/relocations and main occasions regarding culture or heritage- (Table 1), that were represented in the fore mentioned plan (Figure 2).

Crossing data, it can be observed that the new heritages live together with the renewal of cultural institutions [9], showing the common thread of the evolution of urban grid and that of the cultural institutions as qualified actors: “Museums, take on the colouring of the society in which their activity takes place. The fact that these institutions share a common generic title -museum- can be highly misleading. It can produce the wrong expectations, encourage absurd generalisations” [10].

Table 1. Sequence of most relevant cultural events in Paris (1793-2010)

	Key date	River bank	Type of institution	Nature of the building
Louvre Museum	1793	Right Bank	Art and Archaeology Museum	Conversion from Louvre Royal Palace
The Orangerie	1852	Right Bank	Art museum	Conversion from Tuileries Orange House
[International Exhibition]	1855			
Notre Dame	1862	Right Bank (The City Island)		Listed as Historic Monument
[International Exhibition]	1867			
[International Exhibition]	1878			
Carnavalet Museum	1880	Right Bank	Urban history museum	Conversion from Hôtel Carnavalet
[International Exhibition]	1889			
Eiffel Tower	1889	Left Bank		1889's Exhibition milestone
[International Exhibition]	1900			
Grand Palais	1900	Right Bank	Art museum & exhibition hall	Formerly pavilion
Petit Palais	1902	Right Bank	Art museum	Formerly pavilion
Decorative Arts Museum	1905	Right Bank	Modern art & Design museum	Conversion from Northwest Louvre wing
Army Museum	1905	Left Bank	History museum	Conversion from the Invalids Hospital
Rodin Museum	1916	Left Bank	Art museum	Conversion from Hôtel Peyrenc de Moras, also named Hôtel Biron
[International Exhibition]	1937			
Modern Art Museum	1937	Right Bank	Modern art museum	Formerly pavilion
Musée de l'Homme	1937	Right Bank	Anthropology and Natural History museum	Formerly pavilion 1937
Palais Galliera	1956	Right Bank	Fashion museum	Conversion from Duchess of Galliera collection of art gallery
Pompidou Centre (National Museum of Modern Art)	1977	Right Bank	Modern art museum	New building
Picasso Museum	1985	Right Bank	Modern art museum	Conversion from Hôtel Salé
Orsay Museum	1986	Left Bank	19 th Century art museum	Formerly railway station
Arab World Institute	1987	Left Bank	Cultural centre Exhibition	New building
Arsenal Pavilion	1988	Right Bank	centre of architecture and urbanism	Formerly Mr. Borniche collection of paintings gallery
Banks of the Seine	1991	Both		Listed in World Heritage List (UNESCO)
National French Library	1996	Left Bank	New headquarters for	New building

Palais Tokyo	2002	Right Bank	NFLibrary Contemporary art centre	Formerly pavilion 1937
French Cinematheque	2005	Right Bank	Film centre	New building
Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine	2007	Right Bank	Cultural centre for Architecture and Heritage	Formerly pavilion 1937
Quai Branly Museum	2010	Left Bank	Ethnology museum	New building

6. Conclusions

The urban strategy for the choice of the museums and cultural institutions as the decisive architectural actors for the renewal of the Parisian urban landscape represent a highlight for the progressive influence of a culture as a qualified urban actor. The role of their architectures, intimately associated with their performing use, can be critically examined as a determinant component of these processes.

The treatment of the opportunity spaces along the river with a cultural destination of the first level has produced today the consolidation of a museum offering around the Seine. This is an important aspect for a city that heads the levels of the tourism on the world scale.

Cultural institutions are currently the main players in the morphological and functional configuration of the important urban areas in Paris, with special emphasis on the public space of the proximity.

The cultural insertions at the opportunity spaces beside the river have definitely established Paris as a top rank cultural destination.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the Research Plan of the University of Seville (Spain), which has provided a financial support to accomplish a part of this research.

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