The wrecker's pick. The rationales and hidden agendas of urban renewal in the 19th and 20th centuries

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Translated from the French by Christina Mitrakos

Alain Faure, a scholar of the social history of cities, puts urban renewal into perspective. He questions the concerns with security, the obsession with hygiene, the legal rationales, and the speculative plans of this era. His analysis sheds light on the history of the planning and construction of settlements for "rich and financially solvent clients—the only ones, in fact, who ever mattered for real-estate capitalism." He reminds us that urban renewal is a history of power relations between property owners and public authorities, and between owners and tenants.

> "In the Koishikawa neighborhood the 'Sunless Street' was detrimental to the appearance of the capital city. Indeed, is it acceptable for 'the harmony of a city' that trucks circulate in airy streets, that workers in uniform wait at the counters of big banks, that workers' feet tread on wooden dance floors, that department stores display uniforms and undergarments for working-class women in their windows?"
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> Tokounaga Sunao, *Le Quartier sans soleil*, Paris: Éditions ESI, 1933, p. 155.

Isn't it always the same old story? A part of the city, sometimes a very large part, sometimes just a neighborhood or a street, becomes the target of the powerful elite and speculators' greed and concern. They all think that this precious piece of land is poorly used: noisy workshops, narrows streets where air doesn't circulate, houses from a bygone era or without charm. Buyers are there, ready to pay the price to move into luxurious homes that would valorize this wasted land. In the meantime, it is thought that the people who live there don't really belong, especially if the seat of power is in shooting range and they pose a constant threat. A whole discourse develops around these slums perceived as hotbeds of crime and vice, the center of epidemics, and the epicenter of riots that could strike the city at any moment. In short, the experts are categorical: it needs to be demolished, or as journalists liked to say in the old days: "Long live the wrecker's pick!"

Mobilizing land and needs

Of course, this storyline has an infinite number of variations: security concerns and speculative plans are dispensed in very different proportions depending on the place and the era. Calling for the renewal of this or that neighborhood can be ineffective or even drag on for decades—many of Paris's major public-works projects had been on the agenda since 1750, a century before Haussmann—or on the contrary be quickly decided and efficiently executed. There is also the question of scale. Should the term "renewal" be reserved for planned mass-demolition projects,

such as Haussmann's public works (1853–1870),[1] the "*reconquête*" (action to "reconquer" Paris) undertaken from the 1960s to the 1980s,[2] and the current French policy of "urban renewal" (an official term[3]), conducted in countless municipalities since 2003 under the aegis of a national public authority?[4] Or could any operation affecting city streets, however small, be considered urban renewal if its has gentrification effects? Between 1871 and 1914, Paris City Council implemented a serious policy in favor of major public works following on from those of Baron Haussmann, albeit with fewer resources and spread over a longer period of time,[5] but which, in the end, profoundly changed the populations and settlement patterns of many Parisian neighborhoods.

Today in Paris, we are experiencing what urban studies call "gentrification." That is, the invasion of the city's remaining working-class neighborhoods by an "intellectual middle class," whose characteristics are, incidentally, not clearly defined, and who see an opportunity to buy an inexpensive home, adopting a false discourse about diversity and the "charm" of the neighborhood.[6] It would be a mistake to see this as an inoffensive, unaggressive sort of renewal, though, since in reality this change goes hand in hand with the destruction of homes, neither total nor spectacular, but real nevertheless.[7] The scenery is not demolished in one go, but removed piece by piece.

The act of demolition that makes renewal and its many facets possible is based solely on legal regulations and social needs. First of all, land needs to be made available—or, in other words, expropriated. Without a piece of land, a pick or wrecking ball is useless. The French state grudgingly made the decision to restrict the legal privilege of private ownership of land in order to make public works possible.[8] If the construction of major avenues and boulevards in Paris took nearly a century, it was first and foremost because of the land obstacle: expropriation was strictly limited to the land necessary for the width of the road, while the owner kept the remainder of the lot for himself along with the surplus value created by the new road. The deal was not profitable for anyone but the owner. The method used to overcome this obstacle will be discussed below. Only in the 20th century did the state dare tackle the problem of the amount of compensation provided in exchange for being expropriated. A study of the long history of expropriation could teach us a lot about the building of cities.

What about needs? In our view, it has always been impossible for the authorities to undertake these costly and sometimes very risky mass-demolition operations unless they could count on there being buyers ready to inhabit the new homes built, regardless of whether they took care of construction themselves or sold the expropriated land to a builder, as was common in the 19th century. This was most obvious under Haussmann: the construction of new boulevards served to

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[1] For this time period, it is always advisable to start with Jeanne Gaillard's dissertation, defended in 1977 (reprinted in 1997). Over the last 25 years, studies of diverse quality have followed. The work of Jean des Cars and Pierre Pinon (1991) is important. David Harvey's very interesting work (2012) unfortunately does not contain any personal research.

[2] Henri Coing's (1966) classic book takes place at the very beginning of a renewal operation in the working-class 13th *arrondissement*, when the cadaver of the old neighborhood was still warm and towers did not yet block the horizon. Urban sociology would go on to develop various critical analyses (Godard *et al.* 1973; Castells 1973), and Marcel Cornu's (1972) book must not be forgotten either. But what about later works? To our knowledge, there are no other important studies. For a local and informed analysis of this time period, see Jean-Louis Robert's (2012) recent work (in particular, Chapter 6: "*Plaisance assassiné*").

[3] In French: *rénovation urbaine*.

[4] See Renaud Epstein's thorough book on the ideology, workings, and, ultimately, failure of this policy (2013).

[5] According to our data, the amount of money devoted to roadworks under the Second Empire, from 1853 to 1870, would have been 1,430 billion francs. From 1875 to 1914, the city borrowed 786 million francs for these works, but major construction was also financed by budget surpluses.

[6] See the recent work of Anne Clerval (2013). Sabine Chalvon-Demersay's study (1984) remains a must-read for its continued relevance and humor.

[7] When watching, with the attention it deserves, Cédric Klapisch's 1996 movie *When the Cat's Away* (1996), filmed in the "bobo" 11th *arrondissement*, cranes can be seen everywhere.

[8] See the works of Jean-Louis Harouel (1993, 2000) in particular.

clear space in the center of the city for what are now regarded as typical Haussmannian apartment buildings, designed to house bourgeois families. At that time, the price of land skyrocketed because of the competition between developers, enticed by the prospect of finally being able to build for rich and financially solvent clients—the only ones, in fact, who ever mattered for real-estate capitalism.[9] If expensive housing was being built, it was not because the land was expensive; the land was expensive because everyone wanted to build expensive housing.

The "*reconquête*" period, which could also be called the "*trente destructrices*" (the thirty destructive years, as opposed to the "*trente glorieuses*," the thirty postwar boom years between 1945 and 1975), is harder to make sense of. Social housing and luxury towers, modest two-room apartments and triplexes facing the Seine all sprouted up at the same time. The Îlot Bièvre and Maine–Montparnasse developments, for instance, were not aimed at the same populations. But developers have sometimes been wrong regarding the needs and tastes of rich clients, who did not exactly clamor for the opportunity to live in the towers of the 13th *arrondissement*,[10] for example. Perhaps the uncertainty surrounding the *reconquête*, which affected many different neighborhoods over time, and varied in its aims and its effects, is due to a lack of research, despite the vastness of the subject. Jean-Louis Robert's study on the Plaisance neighborhood (2012) remains an exception: the renovation of working-class neighborhoods in the 20th century awaits its historians.

Should today's "urban renewal," with the demolition of towers and slicing up of horizontal "slabs" in working-class neighborhoods, be seen as the biggest undertaking in favor of law and order ever conceived? Deep down, the intention may be to eradicate the plague from housing projects in order to better disperse the pockets of rioters and arsonists, but, for many observers, scattering the poor and replacing them with a more decent and financially solvent population remains a very limited phenomenon in the areas in question.[11] Is this "urban renewal" merely cosmetic surgery, then? All in all, much remains unclear.

The problem of hygiene

Demolition has always required justification in order to give the appearance that it is a necessary and legitimate action. For a long time, insalubrity was the most common argument, because it was the most effective. This is primarily how the real-estate obstacle mentioned earlier was overcome in the middle of the 19th century. The April 1850 law on insalubrious housing conditions contained an article—Article 13—that authorized the expropriation "of all properties" when "insalubrity is the result of outside permanent causes or when these causes can only be destroyed by work on the entire development."[12] This was what would later be called expropriation by zones. Better yet, a March 1852 decree—a true real estate coup after the military coup—gave the administration the power to include in a project for building a new street "the totality of buildings affected, when it judges that the remaining lands are not large enough or of a shape that allows to build salubrious constructions." On the one hand, a neighborhood renowned for being too poorly built to be restored —"rehabilitated" is what we would say today—could be razed in the name of public health. On the other hand, it had become possible, by hiding behind a pseudo-risk of insalubrious conditions, to trim off large parcels of land on each side of the new road to make way for luxury housing, killing two birds with one stone. Article 13 was immediately used to complete the section of Rue de Rivoli that now runs from the Palais-Royal, where the street's development was abandoned by the First Empire, to the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall): this was, in fact, the true beginning of the great public works, even before the arrival of Haussmann, who was not involved in these legal maneuverings. But the application of Article 13 remained very limited: instantly declaring a neighborhood

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[9]   Some have argued for the opposing thesis (Lescure 2001, for example) but never in a convincing manner.

[10]   The city of Paris is divided into 20 administrative districts called *arrondissements*, each of which has its own council and town hall, in addition to the city council that sits at the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall).

[11]   See the book edited by Jacques Donzelot (2011).

[12]   On other aspects of the law, see Florence Bourillon (2000).

insalubrious often perplexed regulatory authorities, not least the Conseil d'État (Council of State). Some projects never got off the ground because of its veto. In order to pass muster, the city administration had to resort to ludicrous, contorted arguments to convince the Councillors of State of the advanced deterioration of neighborhoods.[13] The decree of 1852, regarding expropriation by zones, was easier to apply. The city used it often during the Second Empire and the Third Republic. But the large sums needed to compensate owners limited the extent of many projects (Darin 1988) and put a strain on budgets. Financial obstacles compounded legal obstacles.

Through the trials and tribulations of Article 13, insalubrious conditions remained the main reason invoked to raze an area, or to justify demolition after the fact. Accordingly, in 1897, Pierre Baudin, then chairman of Paris City Council, declared in his inauguration speech that the opening of Rue Réaumur—an old project revived by the Third Republic—was utterly different from what the Second Empire had wanted, which was to level houses inhabited by a seditious population. No, insisted Baudin, this was quite simply an issue of traffic flow and, above all, a matter of health and hygiene: it was vital to get rid of breeding grounds for germs in the center of Paris because "science has discovered the origins of the scourges that devastate cities."[14] Hygiene was the last battleground. The argument of "insalubrious zones" used the exact same strategy. The statistics and the assumptions supporting them were, in fact, pure fantasy.[15] For example, how was it possible to calculate the tuberculosis mortality rate by house or for groups of houses, when in fact there was no department in charge of keeping track day-to-day of the number of tenants in each building, which was highly variable. Declaring houses to be "deadly" was only possible because the inhabitants forced to live in these old buildings were poor, exhausted by work and unable to resist bacteria.[16] This leads us to believe that, at least in the center of Paris, city blocks had been carved up in order to jump-start stalled street openings, with the ulterior motive of overcoming financial obstacles— for the idea of lowering the compensation amounts paid to owners of expropriated insalubrious houses was working its way through the Parliament at this time. It finally became law on June 17, 1915, admittedly quite late. The neighborhoods of central Paris served as a perfect test bed for this new law, just as the Rue de Rivoli project had done years before.

But the apologists for the pick weren't always hypocritical and calculating. The authorities truly believed—and this opinion was widespread—that an old house in the center of the city was by definition poorly constructed, poorly maintained, dark, foul, dilapidated and so on. In short, it was insalubrious. Pierre Sansot was quite wrong to write that, long ago, the "old neighborhoods, sometimes insalubrious, possessed the glory of the prodigal past" (Sansot 1971). Consider, for instance, what passed for a defect in the eyes of hygienists who were inspecting a house on Rue des Filles-Dieu[17] in 1884: "In most of the rooms, the joists and beams are exposed."[18] And in the numerous reports made by the architects-cum-highways officers called in to make assessments, we find this type of remark: "Very old house, but very well maintained"; "House in good condition, even though old!" Their surprise is surprising today because dominant tastes have changed and the

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[13]   The situation in the Marbeuf neighborhood (in the 8th *arrondissement*) in 1881 comes to mind. Here, the non-application of Article 13 ruined the financial balance of a huge project authorized by the city.

[14]   Source: City of Paris, *Compte rendu officiel de la cérémonie d'inauguration de la rue Réaumur*, February 7, 1897, Paris, 1898, 1516 pages, p. 24.

[15]   This becomes obvious if one takes the time to carefully read the documents produced to prepare or guide the design of new city blocks. Examples are the many publications with a scientific ambition by Paul Juillerat, head of the Bureau de l'Assainissement de l'Habitation (Bureau of Sanitation and Housing) created in 1893, reports from the *casier sanitaire* (housing salubrity records) from 1906 to 1912, and file 1342 at the Paris City Archives. As is well known, research abounds on this question (let us cite Levy-Vroelant 1999 and Fijalkow 1998), but these authors study insalubrious city blocks as a chapter in sanitation policy, whereas we consider this phenomenon to be part of the policy of major public works in Paris.

[16]   "Houses can only be terrible in appearance," wrote Gérard Jacquemet quite pertinently (1977, p. 36).

[17]   Today, Rue d'Alexandrie, in the Sentier neighborhood (in the 2nd *arrondissement*).

[18]   Paris City Archives, VO11 1223, real-estate assessment of May 26, 1884.

idea of architectural heritage is no longer reserved for monuments.[19] The "old stones of the people"[20] were thought of as too old, and defending them was as rare as defending the towers and slabs of housing projects today.

The reader may ask, then, did insalubrity exist at all? In arguing that hygiene was only a pretext, one risks giving the impression of defending the indefensible: rats running around houses, running water only on landings, toilets in squalid courtyards full of potholes that could easily twist one's ankle, and so forth. The first answer to this question is that insalubrity was never defined: the law of 1850 only specified that insalubrious housing was "housing with conditions detrimental to the life and health of its inhabitants." Who has ever proven that housing conditions alone were a factor in causing disease or death? At the beginning of the 19th century, hygiene specialists' only concern was that if the house was not well aired, "miasma" would decimate the inhabitants. Then, they were obsessed with light: a house that was too dark was a house where "bacillus"—the murderer in the dark—would take up residence… To respond accurately, therefore, we would need to write at great length about the truly important questions: how well equipped houses were in terms of utilities, how they were maintained by the owner, and how tenants inhabited them. Let us just say that insalubrity was the product of power relations between property owners and the authorities—the city and the state—and between landlords and tenants. Salubrity cannot be studied by looking at writings on hygiene alone.

This overview leaves out everything that happens once a construction project has started: evictions and the residential destinies of the evicted. Resettlement is a recent right. Resistance is also recent, though it is still difficult when the enemy is formidable, armed with lawyers, police officers, and judges. And what about reconstructed areas? Do the types and numbers of clients expected by planners and developers always show up? In any case, each phase of urban renewal should be studied as a whole, from the rationale behind the necessity of demolishing an old neighborhood to the social morphology of the neighborhood built on its ruins.

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[19] On this point, see Ruth Fiori (2012). Here, we are not addressing the question of preserved sites or perimeters, but the revaluing of ordinary architecture from the past. Today, beams are left visible in order to make apartments look older.

[20] The expression is Anthony Sutcliffe's (1964).

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