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PELIN BOLCA

The *Agence Prost*
from Paris to İstanbul (1910s-1930s)

Preface by Rosa Tamborrino

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Summary

'Soft Haussmannism' beyond Europe at the turn of cultural decolonisation

by Rosa Tamborrino

This introduction aims to shape a premise highlighting some cultural roots of the Western approach to modernisation across various countries of Mediterranean area in the early decades of 20th Century. This approach emerged throughout the change that industrialisation and urbanisation had produced mostly in Western European cities. Paris, in particular, had established a turning point in this framework. By shaping the change within the ancient city, including its historic core and re-modelling it, the renewed Paris had been transformed beyond all expectation. But with many destructions and loss too.

At the end of the most disruptive period, a reflection around urban functions, infrastructures, urban aesthetics, historic monuments and development tried to produce some alternative visions. Some French architects were part of this. We could call this cultural turning point the 'post-Haussmann' period and 'soft Haussmannism' the related approach. The previous experience was never rejected. It was elaborated upon as a lesson learned, establishing a know-how capable of adapting to various conditions. Albeit with a variety of differences, this background fed their encounters in other countries and with other cultures. This said, their encounters with non-Western countries also created a need to reconsider their work from a non-European perspective[1]. With this in mind, a premise on 'soft Haussmannism' as a crosscutting approach exploited in diverse conditions with results that should be considered also in a broader perspective can help to read the cultural roots of specific developments in one of these countries and the role played by some of these architects and planners with an overall gaze. Detailed studies are necessary to identify individual stories with their various differences but also considering other focuses and cultural observing points.

Redefining the post-Haussmann period

The 'post-Haussmann' period identifies a cultural timeframe with a considerable impact also outside France where it first took place, following the transformation of

[1]   Tessa Hauswedell, Axel Körner, and Ulrich Tiedau, *Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery: Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts* (London: UCL Press, 2019).

Paris into a renewed, appealing city. The change was embodied by the prefect of the city, who was responsible for the direction of strategies and plans from the mid-19th century to the Second Empire. The sequence of events, the actors and the duration are rather complex. However, while framing more than just one event and extending beyond than the period under his direction, it was understood as a single operation and associated with Haussmann's actions. At the same time, it was so disruptive as to become meaningful for many stakeholders, and to shape a 'post-Haussman period'.

At the time, Haussmann represented (and is still seen now as), an undeniable town planning and architectural reference. Furthermore, above and beyond the technical aspects, the change created an image of the city that was an essential component of the myth surrounding the 19th century capital. From the Impressionists to Walter Benjamin, the renewed Paris was the perfect setting for the representation of modernity. At least of a certain idea of modernity.

Both the name and the approach circulated across fields and countries and amongst decisions makers too. The modern Paris produced a definition of modernity in terms of urban space, at physical and social level, and its management beyond its own urban identity.

The post-Haussmann period, on the other hand, encompasses notable differences. Despite the huge amount of literature available, the end of this period remains uncertain. In Paris, the 'post Haussmann' period opened a more conscious debate about the historic city and extensive demolitions, even if – beyond some municipal procedures – a real change in planning developments was achieved, albeit with a certain amount of difficulty, by taking into account new kind of issues. Outside of France, Haussmann became a point of reference in the post-Haussmann period.

The reception of a Haussmann model for urban renewal is a matter largely discussed. The historiography focused on the exporting the model as well as on case studies of individual cities[2]. However, another path can perhaps be recognised.

Both the western model of modernisation and a univocal understanding of modernisation have created a consequent interpretation. To move from frozen keys of interpretation that consider dynamics of 'core-periphery', 'backward-development', we could consider contributions from studies on global history that foster the re-thinking of certain notions, such as 'modernity' and 'identity'[3]. A comparative and transnational perspective could help to improve the understanding. At the same time, we should also take into account the need to decolonise our approach.

To this end, developments fostered by some French architects outside France could be better reconsidered. Literature has analysed developments and issues

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[2]   André Lortie, *Paris s'exporte: Architecture modèle ou modèles d'architecture* (Paris: Éditions du Pavillon de l'Arsenal, Picard Editeur, 1995).

[3]   Shmuel Eisenstadt, "Multiple modernities", *Daedalus*, vol. 129, no. 1 (2000), pp. 1-29.

related to some countries, also unveiling more hidden contributions (e.g. in Africa)[4]. These interventions in countries such Turkey, Morocco, Persian, if we remain within the Mediterranean area, were quantitatively and qualitatively important. They were more than individual operations by professionals, identifying identify a cultural phenomenon. If we consider their plural engagement in various countries over a period of several decades, another framework could be highlighted.

French planners who worked in many cities during the post-Haussmann period shaped a sort of 'soft Haussmannism'. In lending their expertise to projects for modernisation in other countries, they also fostered an approach to urban renewal that aimed to complement an idea of modernity created via infrastructures such as arterial roads, street networks and improvements in hygiene, with a certain perception of traditional characterisation of those cities. The wide boulevards accompanied by new street fronts in the older quarters were trayed to harmonise with the traditional urban fabric.

We could mention, among others, Ernest Hébrard (1875-1933) in Thessaloniki, who combed French-style boulevards with porticoes and the Ottoman neighbourhoods with byzantine churches and mosques in a new development plan in 1917-1921[5]. Following a huge fire, in this Greek city 'soft Haussmannism' produced a 'modernisation' of the historical urban core, creating a neo-byzantine urban landscape. The new image was achieved by integrating a master plan representing the ambitions of western industrialisation of the port area while retaining basic elements of the ancient grid system of the historical city, and monuments that made up the local heritage. The result was the output of the collaboration between Hébrard – who was already in Thessaloniki as the head of the Archaeological Service of the French Army – and the Greek architects Aristotelis Zachos and Konstantinos Kitsikis. Hébrard subsequently took this experience to the French colonies of Indochina[6].

More parallel paths were undertaken in non-Western countries too. They similarly combined new planning with historic monuments and of the preservation local character. Among many others, we could look at Teheran and Iran, where André Godard and Yedda Reully Godard created some important 'modernisation'. André (1881-1965), a graduate of the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts* in Paris was an expert in architecture and archaeology. He travelled to the Middle East from 1910.

4 Jean-Pierre Frey, "Les valises du progrès urbanistique. Modèles, échanges et transferts de savoir entre la France et l'Algérie", *Les Cahiers d'Émam*, vol. 20 (2010), pp. 33-57.

5 Vilma Hastaoglou-Martinidis, "Urban aesthetics and national identity: the refashioning of Eastern Mediterranean cities between 1900 and 1940", *Planning perspectives* 26.2 (2011), pp. 153-182.

6 Alexandra Yerolympos, *Urban Transformations in the Balkans (1820-1920)* (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 1996); Cana Bilsel, *Alexandra Yerolympos Urban transformations in the Balkans (1820-1920), Aspects of Balkan town planning and the remaking of Thessaloniki, METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture*, vol. 2 (2005), pp. 91-101. The team was composed of Joseph Pleyber, French military engineer, Aristotle Zachos, the Greek architect, and eighteen young French architects.

After their marriage in 1919, Yedda complemented his know-how with her expertise from the *École du Louvre* and the *École spéciale des langues orientales.*

The couple succeeded in providing a comprehensive answer to the holistic demand of Mid-Eastern countries. They provided solutions to Reza Pahlavi's ambition to modernise Iran in the 1920s. In addition to a new agreement between France and Persia for the excavations, André Godard was in charge of the overall organisation of heritagisation process and national bureau policies, followed, later, by the creation of a national archaeological museum[7]. Godard aimed to design its architecture in harmony with Persian architecture and also conceived the city's urban plan, opening up new avenues to directly link some important urban areas.

The aim of the national strategy was twofold: using the past to modernise and produce a national identity. The French model was doubly effective for this purpose. It should be noted that, as a first step, André Godard worked for Reza Pahlavi under an official agreement between the French and Persian governments. It was the first initiative to protect the national heritage from spoliation by Western countries, first by France which had initially had an exclusive entitlement to take everything uncovered during the excavations back to France. He returned to Iran later to work on further creations in Teheran and some other cities in the country.

Hébrard and Godard represent a generation of architects who grew up in the post Haussmann period. Many of them played a similar role in shaping master plans for urban change. Most of them worked in other countries, particularly (but not only) the French colonies[8]. They were active in various cities in the Mediterranean basin and other overseas destinations. Their urban plans combined various aspects of modernisation of the cities: their projects created transversal avenues but using 'surgical' interventions to avoid massive demolition; new public and cultural buildings were included, but some historic monuments and some local characterisations were kept.

In a way, through their work we can identify an approach which was flexible and adapted to various situations and conditions. Together with new 'plans for modernisation', a new focus on cultural heritage was also fostered in countries where no initiatives had been undertaken before. In some cases, this preservation was conceived more as an exotic characterisation rather than a heritage preservation programme; in other cases, however, the projects promoted a kind of modernisation that went beyond the creation of new avenues with monumental landmarks. The consultation of these architects was extended to shaping new tools and procedures, and transmitting their know-how on techniques and cultural programmes.

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[7]   Pooya Zargaran, *"History of Restoration in Iran: Origins and Developments from 1900 to 1978"* (Doctoral Dissertation) (University of Bologna, 2014).

[8]   Jean Royer, *L'urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux (Tome I)* (Paris: Éditions d'Urbanisme, 1932); Jean Royer, *L'urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux (Tome II)* (Paris: Éditions d'Urbanisme, 1935).

In this sense, we can also read the individual stories to find a shared cultural phe-
nomenon of reception of Haussmannism and of the further developments of the
debate on modernisation.

From this perspective and via these stories, we can recognise a sort of 'soft Hauss-
mannism': an approach that identifies a more complex and articulate reception, and
exportation, of the French model, including both Haussmann model and its criticism.

A step toward rethinking 'Haussmannisation' in a new perspective can be rec-
ognised in Paris around the turn of 20th century[9]. The establishment of the munic-
ipal Commission of Vieux Paris (Old City Committee) from 1898 formally marked
the integration of some specific heritage aims into municipal intervention. However,
the more complex aspects of the change were fed by the spirit and the activities of
the *Musée Social*. Established in 1894, at a time of societal and economic crisis, this
cultural foundation provided a multifaceted theoretical and physical framework for
meetings and research on the industrial city and its social reform[10]. It organised in-
quiries into various topics, questioning development by focusing on related aspects
and its cascade effects, promoting public debate, new ideas and pushing new rules.

As a result of its activities, the *Musée Social* acquired particular importance in
matters of town planning in Paris, highlighting various issues to be considered when
focusing on the matter of urban space and its change, and, finally, social aspects.
With its various sections (e.g., urban and rural hygiene, labour associations, coopera-
tives, etc.) and its open debate, it also 'educated', directly or indirectly, a new genera-
tion of future professionals who worked on the urban space. Architects and planners
were encouraged to discuss modernisation and urban changes, or pushed to rethink
them beyond aesthetic or mobility and transportation issues[11].

Scholars have discussed how it played an important role in defining new
open-minded directions that paved the way for town planning as the cradle of the
Société française des architectes urbanistes[12]. Further reflections also came from the
parallel development of urban history[13]. These developments can lead us to consid-
er that, as a result, the understanding of modernisation at the beginning of the
20th Century encompassed various aspects such as hygiene, public parks and boule-
vards, the rational of an infrastructural network, renewed housing and new public

[9]   Rosa Tamborrino, *Parigi nell'Ottocento. Cultura architettonica e città* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2005).
[10]   Colette Chambelland, "Le Musée Social: Un champ de recherches", *Le Mouvement Social*, 171
(1995), pp. 71-78.
[11]   Claire-Lise Debluë, "Exposer le social: musées et connaissances « utiles » au début du XXe
siècle", *Culture et Musées*, 39 (2022) pp. 59-84.
[12]   Jean-Louis Cohen, *L'architecture du XXe siècle en France: Modernité et continuité* (Paris: Editions
Hazan, 2014); Jean Louis Cohen, "Les architectes français et l'art urbain (1900-1914)", *Extenso*, no. 11 (1987),
pp. 71-88. On Morocco, see overall developments in Laurent Hodebert, "Henri Prost et le projet d'architec-
ture du sol urbain, 1910-1959" (Doctoral dissertation) (Université Grenoble Alpesi, 2018).
[13]   Donatella Calabi, *Parigi anni Venti: Marcel Poëte e le origini della storia urbana* (Venezia: Marsilio,
1997).

facilities but also economic crisis, the need for social housing, the preservation of old buildings, social movements, among other things. Many aspects of this period are still to be clarified.

It is supposed that, at least, a more articulate and transversal approach inspired French architects when they went to apply their expertise abroad. Many were successful in developing urban projects and also master plans, and were engaged for public works. However, they don't seem to have been equally successful in assessing and managing the social impact of their new avenues and change. They performed their professional activity for their clients, who were at the head of countries and were required to address the aims of political power. Were these aims understood by the architects as addressing the collective shared or sharable aims of modernisation? These clients possibly also asked the architects to emphasise specific identity-related aim in their new creations and in the preservation of the past. How did non-Western and Western cultures meet? Did the differences from country to country result in changes in their approach?

In the end, beyond Haussmann's controversial legacy, the transformation of Paris provided an important contribution that the urban works developed in other countries in the post Haussmann period could help us to better understand if we look at them in form of lessons learnt. Solutions provided by urban plans and projects in French colonies and other countries under the French influence show a sort of 'soft' approach to the complexity and contradictions of modernisation. If the lessons learnt created the starting point for further development, they were especially useful when it came to designing solutions for a different and even more complex contradiction of modernisation in non-Western, non-industrialised countries.

The transversal avenues, with changes in plots and housing, indicated on the mid-19th century plan for Paris made it that of greatest success. The identification of know-how and experts capable of dealing with technological and infrastructural requirements and the organisation of municipal technical bureaus established by Haussmann was another important path for post-Haussmann developments.

However, 'soft Haussmannism' also transferred another aspect from the 19th Century French experience that was a new notion of the past conceived as a tool of national identity, with actions for the preservation of some historical monuments. This was the matching of the perspectives of modernisation and heritage, exporting a certain idea of "the urban". Whether or not this was a collective sharable project is matter of opinion.

Conclusions

Turkey was another perfect field for experiments, especially when Atatürk, the politician at the head of the country decided to modernise the nation. It is no mere coincidence that a visit to Istanbul in the 1930s also motivated Reza Pahlavi to

promote further modernisation, calling Godard back to Iran. Godard involved other French architects[14].

Henri Prost is widely considered to have been the architect who played the leading role in Turkey. His works in Istanbul have been variously analysed by literature[15]. But an in-depth analysis of the reception of Western planning culture, transcultural encounters and their understanding at the time the changes took place and also today, is still required. New research on a transnational scale and with a comparative approach was especially needed to create the framework for this aim[16].

From this perspective, Bolca's research discusses and builds on the results of previous research but considering a new focus and especially addressing new questions. Recent changes in the historic areas and monuments in Istanbul and other Turkish cities due to political decisions, together with changes in the shaping of collective memories and local heritage, have encouraged the need to rethink 'soft Haussmannism' in Turkey together to its local legacy.

The investigation highlighted new important sources, shaped a new research scale, and not only identified the connections among a range of French architects involved but also defined their relevance as a network with plural interactions and combined actions. A framework totally new has emerged where to contextualise plan, events, relationships, and understandings. A new glaze on this matter allows mapping extended geographical connections by including other cities in the enquiry. The identification of an architectural firm as main leading actor, beyond a single designer, fosters a new kind of approach more appropriate to consider the work developed by architects and planners in the post Haussmann to deal with the new scale and the diverse complexity of non-Western cities.

All these considerations can strongly motivate the reasons of coming back to Prost and Istanbul with a new research and new reading and novel fundings as a result. In this aim, this book tries to go beyond an update of the state of the art, to answer also to a recent societal and cultural development. Can we read this history throughout a post-colonial approach? For this purpose, questions that will follow have to consider developments that created and continue to create conflicts too. The debate around the Taksim square and the park, the only existing portion of the plan designed by Prost, is among the issues revealing them.

To deal with this matter beyond the events, the research question needs to frame a more complex historical prospective in order to consider this story in relation

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[14]   Sarah Piram, "S'approprier un modèle français en Iran? L'architecte André Godard (1881-1965) et la conception des musées iraniens", *Les Cahiers de l'École du Louvre*, 11 (2017), pp. 1-18.

[15]   Cana Bilsel, Pierre Pinon, *From the Imperial Capital to the Republican Modern city: Henri Prost's planning of Istanbul (1936-1951)* (İstanbul: Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation İstanbul Research Institute, 2010).

[16]   Edmund Burke, "Toward a comparative history of the modern Mediterranean, 1750-1919", *Journal of World History*, 23 (2012), pp. 907-939.

to some understandings in which urban plans were understood as the key for a change. The cities' transformation was understood as a social and aesthetic step towards the (Western-model) modern society. If this was a collective sharable project too is matter of reflection.

Prost with some other Western architects also directly engaged with other issues for fostering a real cultural change through a technical know-how transfer and cultural programs for preserving heritage. How to decolonise this legacy?

By reformulating the main question, we could try to verify how the role played by the western culture met ideas and ideals of modernisation outside Europe. For these aims, the book identifies a rich and complex path across modernisation and what we consider now urban heritage.

We can assume Turkey and the Henri Prost *Agence* as the relevant pilot.

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Pubblicazioni recenti

5. Pelin Bolca, *The Agence Prost from Paris to İstanbul (1910s-1930s)*, pp. 180, 2023.
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