

*Sovereigns and Speculators:  
Urbanism and Housing in the Eighteenth-Century Chaussée d'Antin*

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Introduction

In the late eighteenth century, La Chaussée d'Antin was synonymous with high-end housing. Among urban elites wishing to live in Paris, there was no more desirable quarter than this northwest section of the city, a site of booming real estate speculation and construction since the 1760s.

Historians of urban France, who are familiar with La Chaussée d'Antin, do not immediately make this association. Rather, they describe the nineteenth-century developments of this area, noting its emergence as an important commercial district, mentioning the department stores, office buildings, and banks that were built around the new opera house designed by Charles Garnier. They point to the work of several scholars who have examined the cafés, theatres, and *grands boulevards*. They discuss these significant transformations in the context of government-initiated urban planning and rezoning which they usually label as haussmannisation.

But decades before the emergence of this nineteenth-century business centre, this locale was simply known as an exclusive residential district. Looking more closely at La Chaussée d'Antin in the eighteenth-century offers the opportunity to examine an exceptional period of speculation and construction in Paris, one that challenges the view that the 'Old Regime' was an era of stagnant real estate activity, and which calls into question the traditional, but unhelpful, divide of the 1790s in French urban history. It also provides a useful case study for future comparative studies with other European cities.

Mapping La Chaussée d'Antin

La Chaussée d'Antin was an area that the mapmaker Edmé Verniquet knew well. On numerous occasions, he had made the crosstown coach ride to this neighborhood located beyond the long-established city boundaries. He had travelled from his office in the

center of the Sorbonne quarter to take geographic measurements and descriptive notes for the purposes of creating a complete atlas of Paris.

He had started the task in 1774, soon after investing 100,000 livres to purchase the office of General Commissioner of Street Engineering and Maintenance, a position that made him the official recorder of Parisian topography, and which formed the basis of his business for the next three decades. Verniquet's operation started as a three-man shop: he worked with two assistants in a small atelier in the Convent of the Cordeliers. Rapid expansion followed, and within a few years, Verniquet had assembled an *équipe* of fifty engineers, draftsmen, and assistants dedicated to the task of knowing inside-out (often literally) every *toise* of Paris. They visited every building, road, passageway, garden, square, and market in the city; at each stop, they recorded qualitative and quantitative judgments. Thousands of sheets were produced; completed pieces of the atlas were written and drawn in triplicate, forwarded to the King's Council, to the Parliament of Paris, and to the Bureau of Finances to keep them apprised of progress and to provide partial guides to the city. Long before the final and complete atlas was bound in 1799, these governmental bodies (and their later incarnations) received updated information about the physical transformation of their jurisdiction; new and transformed parishes, hospitals, libraries, theatres, courts, to name just a few, were recorded in great detail.

Had Verniquet simply focused on public structures and space, the task would not have been onerous. Many of these structures had already been recorded, and he could have simply relied upon earlier drawings. More than 130 maps had been registered with the City of Paris from the late seventeenth century; other publishers had made minor modifications and reprinted them. Two particular maps could have provided much that he needed. The first, produced under the direction of Jean Delagrive and completed in 1728, had been carried out using what was then the most sophisticated equipment. Delagrive, knowledgeable in topographical and trigonometric principles and credited with achieving the most precise map of the city of the time, had gone to great lengths to create his plan. He had gone beyond simply recording street lengths and distances and added accurate landscape representations. He had even produced a careful study of the distance and arrangement of trees along the large boulevards, outside the city boundaries,

and in the parks of the Champs Elysées and Tuileries. He had also recruited a Saint-Jacques engraver (Borde) and two artists (Duflos and Filloeuil) to produce drawings of major buildings. The Louvre, Tuileries, Observatoire, Sorbonne, Luxembourg, Soubise, and Notre Dame were all included.

The second, commissioned by city leader Michel Etienne Turgot in the 1730s, offered a different type of map, but one that had also achieved considerable success. The Academy-trained and published draftsman, Louis Bretez, supervised by the engineer Antoine Coquart, had also received full access to all buildings in Paris. Over a period of five years, he completed extensive preparatory sketches as a step toward completing one large detailed plan of Paris. He passed his drawings along to the engraver, Claude Lucas, who prepared the copper plates and also added appropriate ornamentation such as the royal insignia of the fleur de lys. Lettering was provided by Aubin and handcolouring completed by Saury. The final product was an elaborate artistic representation of Paris, displaying and promoting its urban accomplishments, the latest bridges, fountains, and other engineering feats of his capital. It was a document that Turgot sent to the provincial cities of France, the courts of Europe, and farther afield to China, and which he delivered personally and with pride to the ambassador of the Swiss court.

Both maps had something to offer Verniquet. The precise measurements taken by Jean Delagrive in the 1720s served as a starting point for Verniquet's team in the 1770s. The exquisite drawings of Louis Bretez provided a basis for flourishings in the Verniquet atlas. But neither had produced on the monumental scale that Verniquet sought to achieve. More significantly, neither had to contend with La Chaussée d'Antin. For Delagrive and Bretez, the urban boundaries had been marked roughly by the Place Vendome in the west and the Place Royale in the East. Beyond these sites were open fields and farmland, not changed for centuries.

### Speculators

Beginning in the late 1760s, however, this land became the site of rapid transformation, one fostered by the City's decision to create favourable market conditions for private speculation. A series of legislative decrees eased restrictions on new buildings,

particularly in peripheral urban properties, and generous new bankruptcy laws favoured real estate developers. Each year that Verniquet worked on his atlas, multiple buildings were being added to the landscape of La Chaussée d'Antin, rendering his drawings obsolete. It was a situation of boon and bane. A never-ending project offered enormous commercial opportunity, but tedious redrafting kept completion unlikely. Even during the 1790s, a period in which some have claimed there was no private real estate construction, several new private buildings were added. This, in combination with the rapid shifts in ownership among existing buildings, kept Verniquet's team fully occupied. So significant was this change in real estate ownership during the era of nationalisation that in 1793 the Convention ordered an altogether new atlas. Verniquet accepted the commission, quickly producing nearly 5,000 new pages of his atlas, noting state-acquired properties in each quarter, and adding the symbols of the era – pyramids, phrygian bonnets – and slogans of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The appearance of La Chaussée d'Antin was far different in the 1760s, when much of the land was rapidly being purchased: a crumbling château, a couple of ateliers, and a few farmhouses. At that time, several prominent Parisians established a real estate consortium, mostly the financial leaders La Borde, Bouret, Bouret de Vézelay, Sainte-Croix, Marin de la Haye, Tessier, and Letellier. But a few architects and builders also purchased small stakes in the syndicate, including Bonnard, Le Bouteux, Bélanger, and Brongniart. As a group, they purchased land belonging to a Mathurins religious community and the Château du Coq. They funded the construction of necessary infrastructure and ultimately subdivided the land into lots that were larger than properties available in central Paris. Investors such as Laborde and Marin de La Haye built particularly spectacular buildings for themselves while overseeing the construction of buildings for others, then sold on to financiers and tax farmers such as Grimod de la Reynière, Haudry, Micault d'Harvelay, and Saint-Julien; as well as court figures such as the duc de Choiseul, the duc de Rohan, Brancas, the prince de Montmorency, and the Baudard de Saint James.

## Urbanism and Architecture

A full generation of architects sought commissions here; in a time of few government commissions, private housing projects were necessary to a fruitful career. Successful architects included Cherpitel who designed a house for the Neckers, Boullée who designed a house for the Baron de Thun, and Ledoux who won multiple commissions including houses for President Hocquart de Montfermeil, du Barry, and Guimard, a dancer at the Comédie Française, whose special request was a large private theatre in which she and her friends could perform.

Co-investors and architects Brongniart and Bélanger also took on several commissions, work that was publicised in prospectuses aimed at potential buyers, and published in later architectural guides. Brongniart completed hotels for such prominent Parisians as Epinay, Montesson (which included a much touted anglo-chinese garden), Valence-Timbrune, and Radix de Sainte-Foix. Bélanger also built a house for himself, one with an estimated value of 200,000 livres, exceedingly high for the time.

These two architects, and their competitors, designed houses unlike those previously built in Paris. The scale, of course, allowed these architects and their clients to create structures that were impossible in the dense city centre. The opportunity to build so much, in a relatively short period of time, bolstered innovations that architects had already been promoting: new types of rooms. Brongniart and others had already been calling for the reduction, and at times elimination, of the formal, gilded reception rooms of the Saint Germain, claiming they were out of step with contemporary sensibilities, and proposing to build specialised eating rooms, gambling rooms, and quiet rooms for contemplation. Several abstract treatises had already been published on the matter, but in La Chaussée d'Antin, with clients already breaking the patterns of the old guard, the designers could put their ideas into practice. It became a sort of a laboratory for their ideas of individualised spaces built with an owner's personality and pleasure in mind.

Numerous contemporary guidebooks and works of travel literature described and explained this new quarter to residents and visitors alike. The house of the comte

d'Artois, the king's young brother, and a major collector of real estate, attracted considerable attention for its novel design. For those curious to take a closer look at the latest innovations, there was even one compound – Thélusson – that opened at certain times of year for the price of a ticket. Mercier, never at a loss for words, described the new quarter as a site of immense new buildings rising magically out of the ground, an area overtaken by a furor of building. He wrote that speculators, who simply call themselves entrepreneurs, have a map in one hand, a plan and estimate in the other – they 'échauffe l'esprit des capitalistes'.

### Conclusion

Mercier was right: the speed, scale, and spirit of this speculation was remarkable. But there is one feature that he neglected to mention, one requiring further investigation: the mix of individuals who chose to live in the Chaussée d'Antin. Here one does not find the usual strict separation among different ranks of elites as in the more established upscale quarters of the Saint Germain and Saint Honoré. The demographics of this quarter do not conform to the reigning scholarly assumption of French elites living in largely separate spheres. This case counters the arguments of those who have claimed that clearly delineated boundaries existed at this time between social groups such as *noblesse d'épée* and *noblesse de robe*. A closer look at La Chaussée d'Antin also leads to a revision of our understanding of the interaction and exchange of elites in this era.

Note: The sources for this paper are drawn from the Archives Nationales Series F, H, N, S and Z, the *études* of the Minutier Centrale, and the manuscript collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale de la Ville de Paris.