

JACOB PASKINS

# Paris Under Construction

Building Sites and Urban  
Transformation in the 1960s



ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN PLANNING AND URBAN DESIGN



# Paris Under Construction

During the 1960s, building sites in Paris became spaces that expressed preoccupations about urban transformation, labour immigration and national identity. As new buildings and infrastructure changed the city, building sites revealed the substandard living and working conditions of migrant construction workers in France. Moreover, construction was the touchstone in debates about the dangers of urban life, and triggered action in communities whose districts faced demolition. *Paris Under Construction* explores the social, political and cultural responses to construction work and urban transformation in the Paris metropolitan region during the 1960s. This examination of a decade of intensive building work considers the ways in which the experience of construction was mediated, produced and reproduced through a range of complex and sometimes contradictory representations. The building sites that produced the new Paris are no longer visible, and were perhaps never intended to be seen, yet different groups closely observed and recorded construction, giving it meanings that went beyond specific building activities. The research draws extensively on French newspaper, television and radio archives, and delves into rarely examined trade union material. *Paris Under Construction* gives voice to the witnesses of—and participants in—urban transformation who are usually excluded from architectural and urban history.

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*Meredith L. Clausen, University of Washington*

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## Building Sites and Urban Transformation in the 1960s

Jacob Paskins

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# Abbreviations

CET	Consortium d'entreprises et de travaux
CFDT	Confédération française démocratique du travail
CFTC	Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens
CGT	Confédération générale du travail
CGT-FO	Force ouvrière
CNFMI	Comité national fédéral de main d'œuvre immigrée
CSA	Conseil supérieur de l'ordre des architectes
EEC	European Economic Community
EPA	Établissement public à caractère administrative
FLN	Front de libération nationale
FNB	Fédération nationale du bâtiment
FNTB	Fédération nationale des travailleurs du bâtiment
FPB	Fédération parisienne du bâtiment et des activités annexes
FTP	Fédération nationale des travaux publics
HBM	Habitations à bon marché
HLM	Habitations à loyer modéré
IAURP	Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région parisienne
INA	Institut national de l'audiovisuel
INS	Institut national de sécurité pour la prévention des accidents du travail et des maladies professionnelles
MRL	Ministère de la reconstruction et du logement
MRU	Ministère de la reconstruction et de l'urbanisme
OAS	Organisation armée secrète
ONI	Office national d'immigration
OPHLMVP	Office public d'habitations à loyer modéré de la ville de Paris
OPPBTP	Organisme professionnel de prévention du bâtiment et des travaux publics
ORTF	Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française
PADOG	Plan d'aménagement et d'organisation générale
PCF	Parti communiste français
RATP	Régie autonome des transports parisiens
RER	Réseau express régional
RTF	Radiodiffusion-télévision française

xvi *Abbreviations*

SDAURP	Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région de Paris
SGTP	Syndicat général des ouvriers des travaux publics
SNCF	Société nationale des chemins de fer français
UNSPAU	Union nationale des syndicats du personnel des cabinets d'architectes, des bureaux d'études d'architecture et d'urbanisme
URB	Union régionale du bâtiment, des travaux publics et des matériaux de construction de la région de Paris
ZAC	Zone d'aménagement concerté
ZAD	Zone d'aménagement différé
ZUP	Zone à urbaniser par priorité

# Introduction

“Diverted, penned in, channelled: the two-and-a-half-million Parisians that returned from holiday found themselves caught in a network of fences and barriers. Paris has become a kind of immense building site.” In September 1964, a newsreel informed cinemagoers in France of widespread congestion in the streets of Paris. The chaos was not just the result of overrunning road works that were always carried out during the quiet summer months in the capital. The once temporary mayhem of the *rentrée* season, when the city returned to work, had become a daily fixture. As the narrator of the newsreel chirpily declared, Paris had never seen so many cranes “stretching their steel arms into the skies” (“Des travaux un peu partout” 1964).<sup>1</sup> The appearance of building sites on what seemed like every other street corner presented the clearest evidence to Parisians of major construction projects in the city, which in terms of quantity and scale had not been matched in a century. The city was developing extensive new transport infrastructure, and building new offices, universities and housing. Building work spread unabated into the suburbs and across the Paris metropolitan region, with the construction of housing estates, schools, hospitals and sports facilities. Rarely did a month pass in the 1960s without the opening of another stretch of motorway. New bridges, factories and power stations contributed to the economic backbone of a future Paris that was emerging from the building sites.

Construction work and road closures added to the already choked streets of central Paris in the 1960s, resulting in “colossal traffic jams” (*PL* 1963a, 1963b). While clearly irritated by the “chaos” of vehicle congestion and increasing disruption for pedestrians, the Paris press would nevertheless, on occasions, urge readers to be patient and look forward to the results of the construction work that was taking over their city. A more modern city was just around the corner, promised *France-Soir* (1962): métro stations would be longer and congested streets would be cleared thanks to underground roads and car parks. *Le Parisien libéré* (1965d, 1965e), meanwhile, enthused that short-term disruption caused by work sites for the *métro-express*, the *voie express* and the *boulevard périphérique* would be a small cost to pay compared with the planned benefits of the new urban infrastructure. Digging up the streets to replace gas and electricity networks might cause disruption

## 2 Introduction



*Figure 0.1* The Arc de Triomphe surrounded by cranes during construction of the RER station beneath place de l'Étoile, January 1964.

Source: © RATP.

for shoppers, resulting in “trench warfare ... on the grands boulevards,” and “*le Paris-grimace*” (Paris frown), but growing consumption demanded more powerful and efficient sources of energy. Road works meant modernisation, which hailed the promise of a new Paris (PL 1964b, 1964c).

The construction work which occasionally threatened to grind Paris to a halt marked the flourishing of a state-driven urban development programme that would completely transform the capital region over a decade and a half. The French state had taken a firm hand in urban planning and construction since the creation of the Ministère de la reconstruction et de l'urbanisme (MRU, or Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism) in 1944, and its successor, the Ministère de la reconstruction et du logement (MRL, or Ministry of Reconstruction and Housing). Both departments had long provided loans and subsidies for construction, urban planning and research. Already at the start of the 1960s, one quarter of construction and civil engineering in France was financed by the state, providing, above all, a succession of ambitious housing programmes. In addition to extensive building construction, the 1960s saw the spectacular growth of infrastructure, with state spending on new roads increasing from just 5 million francs in 1954, to 100 million francs in 1960. By 1965, the national budget for road construction had reached 300 million francs. The ubiquitous building site announced the expansion of the construction and civil engineering sector in

France (*bâtiment et travaux publics*), which became the country's largest industry in the 1960s. Employment in the industry rose 27% in just six years, from 1,406,000 employees in 1962, to a workforce of 1,790,000 in 1968. In its scale and ambition, construction took on an unavoidable urban presence.

What would passers by have seen when peering through the barriers of a *chantier* (construction site) in Paris or its suburbs? Some scenes would have resembled traditional building work: buildings constructed by masons and craftsmen using conventional techniques. Other sites would be vast in scale, encompassing complete city blocks or vacant suburban land. These sites would be filled with machinery and industrial quantities of reinforced concrete or steel. Sometimes, experimental or innovative construction techniques would be deployed. Onlookers curious about the building site may have tried to understand the city in technical terms. Later, construction historians would analyse the organisation, forms and materials of the building site as a way to interpret the production of the built environment.<sup>2</sup> Observers in the 1960s would also have seen people on building sites: site managers, engineers, architects and workers. On occasions, sociologists and ethnographers might well be spotted on the building site, investigating the work and lives of labourers (Ghasarian 2001).<sup>3</sup> The Parisian building site was also filled with meanings created by a plethora of representations produced by politicians, the popular press, television and other mainstream outputs. This book returns to the moment when Paris was under construction to ask how the building site transcended the confines of the site barriers—and the specialist focus of trade professionals—to become the centre of political and media attention.

Historians and journalists commonly refer to the post-war years in France as *Les trente glorieuses* (thirty glorious years), a short-hand expression for the economic and social changes that took place between the Liberation and the oil crisis of the mid-1970s. This phrase has origins in the economist Jean Fourastié's book of a similar name, published in 1979, which set out to analyse the spectacular economic growth between 1946 and 1974, and the consequences of a rise in population from 40.5 million to 52.6 million people for French production and consumption. During these years, levels of education and wealth greatly increased. Average life expectancy rose by nearly 10 years and infant mortality rates plummeted. Manual labour was increasingly replaced by tertiary employment, and average working hours fell. In terms of construction, the number of housing units produced increased tenfold in this period (Fourastié 1979, 36–42). Use of the expression “*les trente glorieuses*” as a synonym for the post-war generation in France has persisted in a somewhat uncritical manner, yet Fourastié himself acknowledged that there had been a social price to pay for the nation's relentless pursuit of “progress.” He wrote that statistics about economic growth and the rise in quality of life masked social troubles and fears. Fourastié predicted that when historians turned to press archives of the period they would find “few accounts of the love of life or the joy of the



*Figure 0.2* Peering into the building site of the future “Méri­dien de Paris” housing development, rue Émile-Dubois, May 1964.  
Source: Coll. Pavillon de l’Arsenal, cliché DUVF.

French people” (29, 239). If the phrase *les trente glorieuses* yearns for an era of rapid growth in the production and consumption of commodities, it risks overlooking how economic expansion did not always trickle down to the poorest categories of the population, whose living and working conditions often declined.<sup>4</sup>

The 1960s was certainly not a glorious time for all. Building sites and urban transformation directed by French state modernisation plans were fuelled by an abundant army of cheap and often foreign labour. Construction and civil engineering companies hired more migrant workers than any other industry, but these trades also held the longest working week and paid the lowest salaries. Work on a building site was dangerous, poorly paid and insecure. Housing stock was desperately short, especially for the lowest paid labourers who were sometimes working, paradoxically, on the most technically advanced construction projects. Immigrant workers who were building tens of thousands of homes each year struggled to find somewhere to live themselves, and often found no alternative but to share a hotel room or live in a *bidonville* (shanty town). Away from the immediate confines of the building site, this unprecedented period of urban transformation would reshape the built environment as much as the social identity of the city, resulting in the expropriation of inhabitants and the dismantling of neighbourhoods. Expressing his fears about the planned demolition of Les Halles, and his

feeling of powerlessness towards the scheme, a man told a reporter that “progress is a bit like a steamroller” (*Paris-Tel* 1964). The French economic and technological boom and the self-declared social democracy of the Fifth Republic was founded on a broken promise of wealth for all.

If historians analysing urban transformation in France have sometimes struggled to critique the social inequalities produced in cities during the post-war years, it is perhaps due in part to the often seductive grand narratives that were produced by political institutions and the mainstream media during the 1960s. Politicians and journalists framed construction work within discourses about modernisation, national grandeur and “progress.” This book interrogates these discourses to explore the social, political and cultural responses to urban construction in the Paris metropolitan region during the 1960s.

The building sites of 1960s Paris are no longer visible, and arguably were never intended to be seen; yet different groups closely observed and recorded construction, giving it meanings that went beyond specific building activities. *Paris Under Construction* asks, therefore, how was the experience of construction mediated, produced and reproduced through a range of complex and sometimes contradictory representations? How did the representations of building projects by different organisations and media inform conflicting visions of France’s urban life? How were the activities and representations of building sites implicated in debates about economic growth, labour immigration and national identity? What were the motivations behind the political narrative of constructing a modern nation, and how did the media contribute to the nationalist appropriation of the building site?

Narratives about economic growth and technological innovation risked eliminating the human roles in the production of the city. How did other building activity, therefore, challenge the notion of “French” construction? How did trade unions bring politics onto the building site by responding to changing tendencies in employment and construction technologies? How did urban transformation situate itself within debates about the demolition of working-class districts and about the dangers of modern urban life? Why did certain flash points in the French building industry, like the boulevard Lefebvre construction disaster, trigger wider social and political debates throughout the 1960s? Asking these questions, *Paris Under Construction* seeks to understand urban planning and design in terms of political, social and spatial practices. Implicit in this book’s investigation is an analysis of the ways in which urban territory is segregated, and a consideration of the ways in which urban centres began to be reconceived in the 1960s.

## Construction Sites, Urban Histories

In 1964, a market porter branded the many people and organisations responsible for the redevelopment of Les Halles with the singular label of “architect” (*Paris-Tel* 1964). Urban history written from the starting point

## 6 Introduction

of the building site certainly encounters the work of architects, but it asserts, primarily, that there are multiple “actors” involved in the production of the built environment. These actors include bureaucrats, engineers, planners, politicians and technicians. Workers of a vast range of skills and backgrounds played a central role in constructing the city. Non-design professionals, media organisations, trade-union militants and residential activists equally participated in urban development.

This study is indebted to the interdisciplinary turn in architectural and urban history during the last 20 years. My methodological approach to the history of urban transformation draws implicitly on the intersection of critical theory and the interpretation of urban phenomena and experience. The lead of gender theory and postcolonial analysis within the spatio-urban disciplines complicates the definition of architecture, and asks: who are the actors involved in the production of the built environment?<sup>5</sup> Taking my cue from Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (2000), my research emphasises the collaborative nature of design and construction, acknowledging that non-design professionals are as much involved in shaping cities as architects and planners. Rendell sees conventional architectural history to be problematic because it so often remains restricted to the analysis of buildings’ form and typology. Architectural history has long defined architecture as prestigious buildings financed by important patrons. A feminist understanding of architecture encompasses all the spaces—and activities—of everyday life, redefining architecture as “a space of related social interactions rather than as a series of isolated and static objects” (2002, 6). Architectural and urban history that disregards construction and workers risks upholding the idea that buildings and cities are the creation of individual heroes. Architecture and urbanism are complex, social processes, and the result of collaboration between many people and organisations, from financiers and engineers, to manufacturers and labourers. This book therefore seeks an antidote to the dominance of the architect in architectural history—not to dismiss architects’ multiple roles, but to help reconfigure the architect as a collaborative enabler rather than as an individual genius. Architectural and urban history should not be restricted to the analysis of words and ideas of architects, but should interpret multiple spatial phenomena (Hill 2001).

Implicit also in my historical understanding of the production of the built environment is the work of Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre’s notion of the “production of space” can quite literally mean the construction of buildings and cities, but it can also refer to the everyday experience of the city, which continually produces and reproduces space through use (1991). Lefebvre asserts that consumption rather than production dominates modernity. Even the analysis of the processes of production becomes a form of resistance to the forces of consumption. For architectural and urban history, this analysis need not simply critique capitalism—it can challenge the traditional “consumption” of the city that is often restricted to the formal interpretation of buildings. The proliferation

of state urbanism in France was central to Lefebvre's extensive theorisation of the production of space during the 1960s and 1970s. Lefebvre asserted that urban planning saw itself as a scientific discipline that understood space as "objective and neutral." Lefebvre argues that rather than being a work of art, or a technical process, the production of space is "political and strategic" (2009a, 170). Lefebvre points out the irony that state power in French society is labelled "social" or "collective," and yet in the 1960s urbanism often ignored the interests of people (175). My understanding of "production" is therefore centred as much on the processes of building, as the everyday experience of the changing city.

Lefebvre was well aware that numerous "agents" produce space, including "politicians, technocrats, and planners, military and financial officials, local authorities, construction workers, 'users' and 'urban struggles'" (2009b, 202). Rosemary Wakeman has similarly emphasised that "cities are complex entities; a maelstrom of turbulent forces, ambiguities and counter-currents in which whole sets of prejudices and irreconcilable concepts overlap and compete" (1997, 265). Following Lefebvre and Wakeman, *Paris Under Construction* understands the production of architecture and the city as historically and spatially specific processes of social, cultural and political interaction. The city is never fixed or complete.

The field of construction history has similarly begun to expand its scope of analysis, while still retaining at its core the interpretation of the material constituents of buildings. This book contributes to construction history's consideration of professional, political and economic changes in the building industry. It builds on an important tendency in the discipline to foreground the social consequences of construction that go beyond the immediate realms of architectural and building industries (Lorenz 2005–6; Picon 2005–6). My focus on the processes and social meaning of urban production follows Linda Clarke's (1992) influential research. Clarke emphasises that architecture and cities are not passive creations, but are historically produced through social organisation, the flow of capital and networks of immigration. Clarke implicates labour in the history of architecture and urbanism, disrupting the formal interpretation of urban planning through an analysis of the segregation of space according to class, wealth and race. Brian Finnimore (1989) similarly turns away from traditional architectural narratives of style and form to emphasise the different participants in post-war British construction—the client, architect, contractors and labourers. Informed by these historical studies of construction and urban development, I interpret the Parisian building site as a micro city undergoing continual negotiation and change. Construction reveals the city to be in a constant "state of becoming" (Merriman 2007, 3).

Architectural and urban histories of Paris tend to concentrate on the formal analysis of one-off masterpieces in the city centre rather than consider the extensive urban realm.<sup>6</sup> This approach does not analyse in detail the social consequences—and political fallout—of urban transformation. Some