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Fact and fiction: documents of the development of Parisian urban design history

Diana Periton

In 1903, historian/archivist Marcel Poëte became the new librarian of the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris (BHVP). In 1917, this history library became by municipal decree the Institut d'histoire, de géographie et d'économie urbaines de la ville de Paris. By 1919 it was the main base of the new Ecole des Hautes Etudes Urbaines, directed by Poëte. This paper explores the transformation of the library from passive receptacle of historical documents to active urban institute, not through external factors, such as the need to train those who might rebuild, develop and manage the modern French city after the First World War, but through the role Poëte gave to the documents themselves, and the way he sought to use them to create a particular urban narrative.

The extent to which Paris has continually documented its own existence is extraordinary.

“Few things in the history of humanity are as well known to us as the history of Paris,” wrote Benjamin in his Arcades Project. “Tens of thousands of volumes are dedicated solely to the investigation of this tiny spot on the earth’s surface. Authentic guides to the antiquities of the city appear as early as the 16th century. The catalogue [of Napoleon III’s] library contains nearly 100 pages under the rubric ‘Paris’, and this collection is far from complete.”¹

When he arrived at the BHVP, Poëte saw the cataloging of these volumes as one of his main tasks. The library contained (and still contains) histories and chronicles of Paris, guides, maps, monographs on neighborhoods or buildings, biographies of Parisian figures, architectural treatises, books of heraldry and genealogy, histories of art and literature, of theater and music, tableaux depicting Parisian fashions, morals and customs. It held local archives and private papers, photographs and postcards, newspapers, journals and fliers. Poëte was particularly concerned to accumulate such fleeting accounts of current events, since they would constitute the historical documents of the future.²

The library contained knowledge but hid it. The large tomes of the existing catalog, divided into 12 separate subject areas with 160 subdivisions, had not been maintained. Poëte proposed they should be gradually replaced with a card catalog recording items alphabetically by author and subject matter. Most importantly, each item would be given a bibliographical notice, an analytical summary of its contents recorded atomistically. The previous pre-ordained topical synthesis of Parisian history would be reformulated as a vast array. It would thus allow for endless “fusion[s] of record cards”³ in interdisciplinary crossreferencing in which, for example, geological facts might be connected to legal facts, or literary movements to historical events.

From 1895, Paul Otlet had posited the importance of the bibliographical catalog in his attempt to set up a ‘Universal Bibliographic Repertory’ in Brussels. It was intended to facilitate the advancement and propagation of knowledge. Otlet’s model for furthering knowledge was the natural sciences, in which carefully observed, analysed and catalogued facts have subsequently been integrated into sequences, the combination of [which] has naturally led to the enunciation of laws, partial at first, general later.⁴

The bibliographic record would systematically render all knowledge from any field into items of information and interpretation, separating substance and padding,⁵ so that areas with insufficient facts might be identified, and sequences, then laws, might be deduced.

For Poëte, the knowledge to be advanced and propagated was that of the history of Paris. Since 1898, the job of chief librarian had been combined with that of inspector of the Service historique de la ville de Paris; Poëte took this to mean that the library should no longer be simply a store of indexed information, but also a centre of historical research and history writing. Poëte hoped to turn it into a “living centre of Parisian history,”⁶ frequented by both amateurs and professionals. He instituted two courses, a series of public history lectures that began in 1904, and from 1906 a specialist seminar to train historiographers, librarians, and archivists of the future.

In both, he emphasized bibliography. To study Paris’ history scientifically, an analytical list of documents relating to the subject should be drawn up. As one of Poëte’s heroes of history writing, Fustel de Coulanges, put it:

history arrives at its goal only through the study of facts. But these facts do not present themselves directly. Because they are in the past . . . the historian is never truly in their presence; he can only grasp them through the documents that remain, the witnesses.⁷

Poëte places written documentary sources into different classes, ranging from archive pieces, the “solid foundation of history,”⁸ its basis of facts that have not been fashioned, through histories or chronicles from which facts must be extracted and verified, to literary sources, the “least profitable” of written documents, which are primarily a source of impressions.⁹ To these written sources are added objects—buildings, works of art, inscriptions, etc.—also sources that need to be decoded.

In 1906, Poëte introduced a third category of historical source, that of the “topographical document,” geological or archaeological, which provides information about the “ground” of a place. As contemporary historians and geographers were increasingly concerned to show, the history of a people could not be separated from that of a place’s concrete existence.¹⁰ To use Poëte’s words, “it is the earth which begets habitat.”¹¹ In trying to establish a modern historiography of Paris, Poëte began his account with the emergence of a series of islands from the Seine’s primeval waters; as the river found its course, “the earth of Paris was constituted, and man appeared.”¹²

The Ile de la Cité marked a defensible point at which a natural route between hills to north and south met the transverse flow of the river, and thus constituted the birthplace of the *cit  *, the collectivity, of Paris.

As Fustel de Coulanges had so succinctly put it, a fact in itself is not history; it is at best mere anecdote. History as a method requires that hypotheses should be made about relationships between empirically derived facts.¹³ The relationship between the geological and geographical facts of a place and the actions of its people leads to the transformation of both—topography is physically altered, and the possibilities and expectations of its occupants change. In his lectures, Po  te established topography first, then peopled it with those whose needs and desires involved it in persistent “urban transformation.”¹⁴ To geological surveys, archaeological digs and historical maps were added archives and chronicles that documented economic and artistic activity, resulting in new urban forms. These forms, captured in *m  moires*, engravings, buildings, etc. then became the topographical ground for the next mutation.

Po  te repeatedly referred to Paris, both place and people, as a “living being” whose different manifestations are like successive ages of a person.¹⁵ His continued concern to collect documentary witnesses, however incidental, of current events was necessary, he said, to link the past to the present of the “urban organism”¹⁶ that is Paris. The facts revealed by the documents would show a continuing evolution “which is the great historical law of our city, as of humanity.”¹⁷

In 1910, the role of the library and the historians of the Service historique was made more explicit. A departmental order described them as an “office of research and documentation” for the use of the administration.¹⁸ Increasingly, processes of transformation described by the new historiography were seen as useful to the future development of the city, not simply to record its past. Although Po  te’s synthesis of documented facts did not produce deterministic rules, it did suggest patterns or sequences of the way the past contains the germ of that which is to come. Pressure was mounting on the government to require all French towns to draw up plans for development and growth, resulting eventually in the *Loi Cornudet* of 1919; Paris’ office of research into and documentation of the city’s transformational processes was implicated in this program.

For Paris, plans for development and growth focused on the removal of its most recent fortifications, Thiers’ walls of the 1840s. Under the auspices of the Commission for the Extension of Paris, set up in 1911,¹⁹ Po  te assembled a *Historical Sketch*, not of Thiers’ fortifications themselves, but of how Paris’ successive walls repeatedly constrained and anticipated growth.²⁰ The report opened in Po  te’s customary way with the birth of Paris, then rapidly chronicled the city’s development, sometimes apparently natural or spontaneous, sometimes methodically willed. More than half of its 240 pages were dedicated to a study of the demographic and physiognomic effects of Haussmann’s annexation of the ring of territory between the eighteenth-century walls of the Fermiers G  n  raux and those of Thiers, based on municipally gathered statistics and records used to summarize the conditions of the *banlieues* turned *arrondissements*, before, during and after the process of extension, when new *banlieues* appeared.

With responsibilities such as these, it was a short step in 1917 to reconstitute the library and its Service historique as a teaching and research institute dedicated to the study of urban transformation, to the ingredients of the new science of urbanism: urban history, geography, and economics. In 1919, the first issue of the institute’s

journal, *La vie urbaine*, which replaced the library's bulletin, summed up its aims. It was to direct its program towards the urban agglomeration, seen as a living organism that evolves in both time and space. History allows us to account for the condition of this organism through its duration; geography shows its links with the earth from which it derives its existence, and the data of economics present it to us in its daily functions. . . . By linking these three sciences, the city, as it spreads out before us, can become aware of its meaning, and find its orientation towards the future.²¹

Poëte's *Historical Sketch* for the Extension Committee commented that the effects of Haussmannization on the Parisian "state of mind" had not been adequately studied.²² His own use of statistics as the documentary source to show population movements divulged little of the "social consequences"²³ of population change. He had once complained that the library he inherited held few literary works that might help a study of the material events of the past to become a fully narrative history, animated by its inhabitants' thoughts and feelings.²⁴ At the same time as his official report, he was writing on Paris's promenades and boulevards, both for the general public and for more specialist urban historians.²⁵ They gave physical articulation to the Parisian desire to stroll, to see and be seen; the city's walls, in their different manifestations, represented the promenade *par excellence*, whether as semi-rural idyll, or as décor for urban display. In these books, information from plans and chronicles is interspersed with paraphrased literary fragments and the direct description of images, in a series of verbal tableaux that give way one to the next as the reader moves through time and space. Poëte might have placed literature and visual art low on his list of sources of factual accuracy, but as descriptions of "feeling," "shedding light on the character" of Paris' collectivity and "bringing it to life," they were invaluable.²⁶

In Poëte's historiography of the city, the topography is the physical setting for the city's "life." That "life" transforms the physical framework, and is thus absorbed into the setting for the next mutation. In order for this continual synthesis to take place, Poëte gathers both topography and "life" as an array of facts to be ordered and juxtaposed. He presents them in a vast panoramic display, an infinite, receding dolly shot, in which foreground action, the exercise of free will, however "unthinkable"²⁷ or revolutionary, is always flattened into history's *déroulement*.

This flattening recalls Benjamin's vividly bombastic image of the "Angel of History," who faces the past while a storm blowing from Paradise holds his wings open and drags him backwards, as history's wreckage piles up before him.²⁸ For Poëte, such wreckage is the carefully layered, fertile sediment of traces of urban form that generate the future. Benjamin, though, used the bibliographical card catalog and his own *jeu de fiches* of the *Arcades Project* to try to break through the dream-like continuum of informational history, by provoking material facts to "crack open natural teleology."²⁹ A particular piece of wreckage, unexpectedly seen in focus, might jolt one into contact not with traces of the past, but with a moment of universal experience.³⁰

Despite commissioning Eugène Atget to take systematic photographs of Paris's topography³¹, Poëte only once used one in his own publications. Perhaps Atget's careful mode of documentary analysis³² too often brought things into focus in such a way that they refused to sink quietly into the ever-evolving background, and threatened instead to crack open the continuum of history.

NOTES DE FIN

1. Walter BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Belknap Press, 1999, pp. 82–3.
 2. *Bulletin de la bibliothèque et des travaux historique de la ville de Paris* I (1906), XIV.
 3. *Ibid.*, X.
 4. Paul OTLET, “Something about bibliography,” 1891, in *International Organisation and Dissemination of Knowledge: Selected Essays of Paul Otlet*, trans. W. Boyd Rayward, Amsterdam, New York, Tokyo, Elsevier, 1990, p. 11.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
 6. *Bulletin*, VII.
 7. Fustel de COULANGES, “Fragments sur la méthode historique,” c. 1860, in *Revue de synthèse historique*, vol. 2, 1901, p. 254.
 8. Marcel POËTE, “Les sources de l’histoire de Paris et les historiens de Paris,” in *Revue Bleue : revue politique et littéraire* (November 18, 1905), p. 657.
 9. *Ibid.*, also *Une vie de cité*, vol. I, Paris, Auguste Picard, 1924, XVI.
 10. See Donatella CALABI, *Marcel Poëte et le Paris des Années Vingt*, Paris, Montreal, L’Harmattan, 1997.
 11. *Bulletin* II (1907), XXXII.
 12. POËTE, *L’Enfance de Paris*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1908, p. 12.
 13. *Revue de synthèse historique*, p. 242.
 14. POËTE, *Formation et évolution de Paris*, Paris, Félix Juven, 1910, p. 13.
 15. *L’enfance de Paris*, p. 31.
 16. See, e.g., *Une vie de cité*, IV.
 17. *Bulletin* I, XXVIII.
 18. *Bulletin* VII (1913), v.
 19. See *Bulletin* VII (1913), VIII.
 20. Préfecture du département de la Seine, Commission d’extension de Paris, *Aperçu historique*, Paris, Chaix, 1913.
 21. “Avertissement,” *La vie urbaine*, Paris, Ernest Leroux, nos. 1–2, 1919, p. 1. The journal was set up by Poëte with Louis Bonnier, Inspecteur des services techniques d’architecture et d’esthétique de la préfecture de la Seine.
 22. *Aperçu historique*, p. 118.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. *Bulletin* I (1906), XV.
 25. *Les Boulevards Madeleine-Bastille*, catalog for an exhibition at the BHVP, 1912; *Promenades et Jardins de Paris*, catalog for an exhibition at the BHVP, 1913; *La Promenade à Paris au XVII^e siècle*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1913.
 26. See *Une Vie de cité: Album*, Paris, Picard, 1925, XVI–XXV.
 27. *Une Vie de Cité*, vol. 1, II.
 28. “Theses on the philosophy of history” in *Illuminations*, Bungay, Fontana, 1982, pp. 259–260.
 29. T. J. CLARKE quoting Benjamin, *London Review of Books* (June 22, 2000), p. 9.
 30. As Benjamin would have it, Poëte’s version of history does not “remember”—see “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in *Illuminations*.
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31. Maria M. HAMBOURG, *The Work of Atget, vol. 2: The Art of Old Paris*, London, Gordon Fraser, 1982, p. 19.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

RÉSUMÉS

“Few things in the history of humanity are as well known to us as the history of Paris. Tens of thousands of volumes are dedicated solely to the investigation of this tiny spot on the earth’s surface” (Walter Benjamin). Marcel Poëte, when he became librarian of the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris in 1903, saw cataloging this literature as one of his main tasks. This paper investigates how, by analyzing the contents of each cataloged work, Poëte sought to give the study of the city’s history the status of a science, a discipline with its own methods that would allow its facts to be verified and classified, and generalizations to be drawn from them. The Bibliothèque historique, and its associated Service historique would make historical data available to Paris’ municipality, as well as identify patterns or laws of transformation. In this way, it would be fully implicated in the study of the development of cities, i.e., the nascent science of urbanism.

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Index chronologique : XX^e siècle, époque contemporaine

Mots-clés : historiographie, urbanisme, historiography, urbanism, archives, library, librairie, Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, Commission for the Extension of Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes Urbaines, Institut d’histoire, de géographie et d’économie urbaines de la ville de Paris

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