



# Nathalie Rozencwaig

The Imagined and  
the Imaginary

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# The Imagined and the Imaginary

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Outwardly, construction still boasts the old pathos; underneath, concealed behind facades, the basis of our present existence is taking shape.

***Walter Benjamin – the Arcades project***

Paris is both Imagined and Imaginary. Beyond touristic and cinematic romanticisms, the fantasized city has always surpassed itself through new futures - challenging a mist of announced doom. Eluding its makers, its authorities and its inhabitants alike, the deceptive museum-city has multiple and parallel lives.

Imagined, as one of the most planned cities, through Haussmann's 19th century vision for a modern metropolis, Paris is for all intents a postcard, an archivist's ideal. Its immaculate appearance has endured, but behind the scenes the city has adapted beyond its original narrative. Remote from what it was initially planned for, the city as we live it today is Imaginary. Paris is an urban unreal, a testimony of what happens when the planned is absorbed and exceeded into an un-planned new reality.

As an extraordinary attempt to regulate one of the first metropolises in the mid-19th century, Napoleon III appointed the Baron Georges Eugene Haussmann (1809-1891),

Prefect of the Seine<sup>2</sup> under the Second Empire<sup>3</sup>, to radically reconceive Paris into a modern capital. Through a method equally pragmatic, authoritarian and idealistic, an essentially medieval city was transformed over the course of two decades into a novel form of urban landscape, with wide streets, large parks and updated sewage systems, accommodating new modes of transportation. With this unprecedented attempt in size and speed, Haussmann created breakthroughs, razing entire neighbourhoods in the existing urban fabric to install large straight avenues edged with trees and stone buildings to visually connect the key points of the city.

Controversial as it was, his plan represented the first attempt of planning a large city by reorganizing its functional, technical, and administrative aspects. Beyond functionalities of hygiene and public control, the planning of the city contained aesthetic consideration generating its image. The overall urban picture, the streetscape, became more important than individual buildings in this system. Every element of the urban realm had to obey the regulated street plan.

From the outset, Haussmann required that the buildings conform to some architectural rules beyond simple massing. The regulations thus define the street alignment, the building heights, materials, cornices, and a lower and higher balcony at respectively 2nd and 5th floors<sup>4</sup>. The so-called “Haussmann style” buildings usually have from five to seven floors, and were designed to accommodate several families of varying social classes on the different levels behind the common facade, in line with the emergence of a new civil society – the urban *Bourgeoisie*. The perfectly planned Paris is a map to an epitomised modernity, a realized utopian model of the modern and eternal city to be.

Haussmann’s system and framework of regulations decisively determined the appearance of Paris for the centuries to come up to this day. Its rules were rigidly defined, to enable the

creation of the emblematic endless urban unity and continuity that characterises Paris. However adaptation to changes in societal modes of living and population growth were not inherently embedded in the model, which is often considered as the archetype of resistance to change. The streetscape and its vistas being preserved was and still are the *'raison d'être'* of the imagined system.

Two centuries later, on the surface, the city seems immutable. Paris today can still be said to reflect Haussmann's plans. Its strict regulations and predefined system seem to have locked it into the 19th century. This status is further reinforced today by conservation regulations and a dogmatic rejection of growth in height. What's more the city undertook a further 'enclosure' in the late 1950s with the creation of the *périphérique* – a concentric ring road forming an additional boundary, physically defining the borders of the city. All these 'pre-conceptions' of a system, translated into physical form are the expression of a historical reality but not always of its evolution, in fact rarely. The rigidity of the Parisian regulations, contrarily to other planning systems, creates a condition of apparent permanence. It is not based on a grid and volumes, but rather, as we have seen above, on aesthetic considerations of its face value – a system of connected facades. It aims to predefine the visual and aesthetic experience of the city dweller through the streetscape. Constrained by conservation policies there is no scope in Paris to demolish a building and replace it with a new, taller construction: the city needs to evolve from within, to cultivate the Imaginary. Most European cities, with their cultural and historical restrictions, have pursued their evolution despite evolving constraints conflicting with their physical restrictions – and nowhere is this more epitomized than in Paris. Beyond the appearances of entrenched scenery preserved by immutable facades, the city has developed into a fertile ground for

inventions. Designers have had to imagine space beyond reality and invent densification without growth.

Paris has evolved and accommodated to the immense changes brought upon it in the 20th century. It has absorbed population growth and immigration, sociological changes, infrastructural demands and the need for a vast increase in accommodation – all this from within. It has not seen high-rises<sup>5</sup> or expanded in size, neither has it demolished buildings to replace with a new modern typology. Instead Paris has nurtured creative limits as urban evolution. The city has long been in self-imposed overload and has mastered a constant need for reinvention. Today's Paris is Imaginary, because its reality has by far overcome that which it was imagined for. The city is at discrepancy between the imagined city of Haussmann and the reality. Its reality has surpassed the Imagined, displaying very few indices of transformations and yet completely reinvented. The physical XIX century city coexists with a modernity we know to be there but only tangibly exists in our minds. Dissociative, what you see is not what you get. Behind the pieces of unified landscape, the urban fabric has evolved into a complex assemblage of functions and spaces, which were not imagined by its planners, and are visually only present in our imagination, as they bear no traces on the homogeneous architectural fabric. This urban unreal, the reality surpassing that which it was planned for, is found today at numerous scales in the city. It is true at the scale of the city fabric, the need for increased density in a finite volume, as well as at the scale of buildings and their evolving functions.

Haussmannian Paris is composed of hundreds of urban blocks (îlots in French – meaning little islands) within the well-defined boundaries of the city. The triangulated grid, formed through an authoritarian tracing of boulevards, avenues, and streets generates these islands of dense built fabric – which present a continuous face to the streetscape while containing the

richness of urban living within.

The Parisian city block, an intrinsic part of the urban plan, defines the street through its volume. Its skin, the epitome Parisian façade, conceals an inner organisation of mass and courtyards. Over time, the outer face still presents the ideal of bourgeois life, while internally the city has undergone vast changes to accommodate new dwelling types and structures. The changes in societal organisation and modes of living have been absorbed in a continuous internal subdivision with no visible change in the city's historical envelope and structure. In Haussmann's Paris, the planned 'immeuble de rapport'<sup>6</sup>, the 19th century bourgeois apartment block, was envisioned to be developed by a single family owning the real estate, and inhabited at its various levels by different leases, while servants occupied the rooms under the roof tops. As famously depicted in George Perec's book 'Life a User's Manual'<sup>7</sup>, these various 'ménages' accommodate themselves under a common façade, where social hierarchies and narratives enter individual spaces. In current day Paris, many such typical buildings house two or three folds as many dwellers as originally designated, accommodated in inventive spatial carvings of the original volume. The idealised façade assumed as a transcription of the inner order has evolved into a disguised boundary to a broader inner life. A fabricated reality has replaced the intended purpose.

In a sense the rigidity of the regulations is balanced by the flexibility of the structural system, allowing for a constant cutting through and redistribution of space. The self-supporting façade acts like a curtain, preserving the face of the city, while creative subdivisions happen behind. Floors are redistributed to fit a smaller family nucleus, to accommodate office spaces or creative studios. The rooftop rooms, originally intended to lodge the servants of the families living below, are now the realms of Paris' student population. The Haussmannian façade

functions as a system capable of housing a variety of functional entities and a range of spatial distributions without changing the appearance of the city. The façade is the imagined, the reality behind it imaginary.

At the scale of buildings the Imagined equally leaves room for the manifestation of contemporariness in the form of accumulated conversions to Imaginaries. Edifices undergo functional changes, sometimes radical, with the view of preserving the aesthetic and architectural qualities while adapting to a new reality. Their facades preserved they now perform as make-believes of the envisaged project for Paris, while accommodating readapted programs.

Built in 1900 as a train station to route the huge crowds visiting the World Expo, the the Gare d'Orsay<sup>8</sup> was intended to illustrate the French expertise to impress visitors without visually distorting the prestigious neighbourhood of renaissance Palais du Louvre and neo-classical Bourbon palace<sup>9</sup>. Deceitful proposal for a city of masks, the dichotomy between the appearance and its un-reality was already present at the outset of the project. Conceived as a huge skylight, supported by a metallic structure concealed behind classical stone facades, the perceived reality overrules technological innovation. The Imagined city forced its image by fictitiously concealing new realities.

Its function was short-lived, the Gare d'Orsay became a mailing centre for sending packages to prisoners of war during the Second World War, then those same prisoners were welcomed there on their returning home after the Liberation. It was then used as a Film set for several productions, before remaining vacant for years but functional in preserving the city's face image. Put on the supplementary list of Historic Monuments<sup>10</sup> and finally listed in the late 1970s, when its conversion into a museum was decided<sup>11</sup>, the building planned for speed and transport is now one of quiet contemplation.

Elsewhere, at the foot of an elegant Parisian apartment

building from the mid 1930s, the facade of the Hermès<sup>12</sup> store is discreet, and blends into the streetscape. A grand Art Deco building from the 1930s that was home to Paris' oldest municipal swimming club is now a gallery-like shop. The glory of the original structure, with its mosaic tiling and wrought ironwork has been preserved, creating a beautiful canvas for the shop in this immense empty volume.

The ultimate mask however must be the extension of the Fouquet's hotel, which reverses the logic: a contemporary building hides itself behind a pastiche concrete-moulded haussmannian façade produced with advanced manufacturing process.

As one walks through the city each view into these islands is a chance to perceive the constant reinvention of the city. The potential of a building, and by extension of a city, to overcome that which it was initially conceived for embodies the Parisian principle: a need for the imaginary in order to acknowledge the relevance of the city today.

Through minute or large transformation, the city gradually became the unreality of a superseded reality. This inherent shift between the presumed outcomes of a projected system, and its un-reality is a condition intrinsic to many urban developments but few realise it within absolute boundaries. In a fast growing 19th century, at the eve of the industrial revolution, Haussmannian Paris was dreamed and deemed as futuristic. It too, in its time was fundamentally associated to technological and architectural novelties. This search of an ideal future is comparable on many levels to today's fast growing cities. The foreseen evolution of the contemporary metropolis is also mainly driven by infrastructural and economical attractiveness. The decisions made for the city today are convinced of their future appropriateness and stability.

In a world speeding up urbanization, Paris' rapid but planned development might be looked upon as an unachievable luxury. It questions the level of definition of urban planning. Its highly

defined regulations, surpassing modernist approaches to a city of flows, networks and speed, question the relevance of contrived and aesthetically driven enforcements. Rather than judging its slowness and constrictions we should see Paris as a platform. The success of the city is its definition, strong enough to master collaboration and free imagination. Everyone creates within the Haussmannian software, reinventing and offering new applications beyond its initial creators. The fascination for accident and unexpected situations runs deep in every designer. Often this fascination is distant and academic, turning towards the obvious submerged and dysfunctional cities. It is very difficult to grasp the reality of change in Paris, as it is hidden in the city's intricacies, but learning from Paris we might ask ourselves how we can anticipate an unreality. Where would unvoiced opportunities weave into the presently Imagined to produce the Imaginary?

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Belknap Press, March 2002

<sup>2</sup> In 1853 Haussmann was appointed as Prefect of the Seine - the leader of the administrative area of Paris. Haussmann held this post until 1870

<sup>3</sup> The Second Empire was the Imperial Bonapartist regime of Napoleon III from 1852 to 1870. All executive power was entrusted to the emperor, who, as head of state, was solely responsible to the people.

<sup>4</sup> Today « haussmannian style» stands for a broader architectural style reflecting the premises set by Haussmann, mostly in terms of the apartment blocks. Later developments preserved the principles of proportions and materials, but gradually added more ornamental features as the technology of stone cutting made progress.

<sup>5</sup> La Défense, the purpose-built business district created on the western outskirts of Paris, was created to offset the resistance to high-rise construction inside Paris while responding to the strong real-estate pressure.

<sup>A</sup> notable exception to this rule is the 210-metre (689 ft) tall Tour Montparnasse, built in the late 1960s in Paris. The criticism it generated resulted in the ban of buildings over seven stories high in the city center.

<sup>6</sup> A self contained apartment block, it is an architectural typology emerged in the 18th century but developed and expanded in the 19th century.

<sup>7</sup> George Perec, *Life a User's Manual*, David R Godine; Revised edition, September 2008

<sup>8</sup> Today's museum housed in the former Gare d'Orsay, houses the largest collection of impressionist and post-impressionist masterpieces in the world, after the building's transformation in the early 1980s by ACT architecture group and Gae Aulenti for the interiors.

<sup>9</sup> Palais du Louvre, the former residence of French monarchy in Paris, before becoming the Louvre Museum. The Palais Bourbon

originally built as a palace for the daughter of the French monarch Louis XIV and is today the seat of the French National Assembly.

<sup>10</sup> Historical building registry

<sup>11</sup> The Musée d'Orsay's transformations involved creating 20,000 sqm of new floorspace on four floors of the original building while preserving its architectural and structural essence. The project highlights the great hall's vaulted space, transforming it into the main artery both accommodating exhibition spaces and procuring a striking spatial experience to visitors.

<sup>12</sup> Hermes Rive Gauche store in Saint-Germain, housed in the former Hotel Lutetia's swimming pool. Designed by RDAI.

**Nathalie Rozencwajg**, is an architect, and co-founder and director of rare. The practice exercises an ethos of mixing their commissions with research and education to produce tailored work using new materials, innovative typologies and advanced modes of design and production. Nathalie graduated from the Architectural Association in London in 2001 and has worked with Erick van Egeraat and Architecture Studio on projects in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, including among others the Onassis Opera House in Athens. In addition to her practice she has been Unit Master at the Architectural Association since 2004 and co-ordinates their visiting school in Singapore. Nathalie's wide-ranging international experience and particular knowledge of sustainable and integrated design contribute to rare's innovative design strategies.

