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Alexia M. Yates, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-siècle Capital*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015. 353 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-6740-8821-4.

Review by H. Hazel Hahn, Seattle University.

Can real property “resist or escape the homogenizing tendencies of capitalism”? This is one of the key questions addressed in Alexia Yates’ stimulating book *Selling Paris*. To answer this and other related questions, Yates turns to Parisian urban development, especially the intensive construction boom of five-to-seven-story apartment buildings in the 1870s-1914 period, which shaped numerous new districts and significantly altered many old ones. In exploring this rich topic, Yates brings to light numerous important phenomena and longstanding issues: debates in political economy and law regarding real property; relations of public authority and private initiative; the question of the nature, meaning, and value of land; anxiety about rural depopulation; the difference between movable and immovable wealth; and policy debates in regards to public good and profit-making. Yates highlights the broad commercialization of the urban environment, one of the main trends contributing to this phenomenon being the expanding role played by limited liability joint stock companies (*sociétés anonymes*) in financing, constructing, selling, and managing buildings. Yates shows that the process through which property became a commercial product was anything but simple or straightforward, not least because throughout much of the nineteenth century, real estate was not considered as merchandise in the eyes of legal experts, economists, or property owners.

Apartment buildings were uniquely complicated in their status because people lived in them and thus were a “social product,” and, at the same time, the structures were objects of financial transaction, investment, and speculation. Drawing from a wide-ranging set of sources, Yates successfully re-casts the state-centric framework of the study of urban development—a framework frequently used in studies on the Second Empire—to make visible the many factors affecting urban modernization. Central actors include entrepreneurial architects, developers, investors, property owners, and estate agents (*agents d'affaires*), as well as other intermediaries between developers and consumers. Other, more minor actors featured are architectural critics, savants, city administrators, municipal councilors, real estate journalists, renters, notaries, lawyers, and tax assessors.

The first chapter focuses on the city government of Paris not only as the owner of a large array of urban assets, but also as an urban developer as well as regulator and manager of construction projects. For much of the nineteenth century, authorities continued to wrestle with urban growth’s desirability, concerned about migration from the countryside to Paris and the balancing of agriculture and industry. By the 1870s, increasing openness towards growth was reflected in a series of changes in law and financing. In the early phase of the Third Republic, following the Franco-Prussian War, occupation by the Prussian military, and the Commune and its brutal suppression, the relationship between the city authorities and the building industry was particularly tense. The municipal council, now elected rather than appointed, sought to forge a new set of priorities and was wary of seeming to continue Second Empire policies favoring public borrowing, under-the-table deals, and too many grand-scale projects. As a result, during

the 1870s and 1880s, the city tended to undertake direct management of projects. However, by the late 1870s, a sustained succession of building booms and busts began, propelled largely by private developers taking advantage of easy and new forms of financing. And something of a well-negotiated partnership between the city and private enterprise arose, so that large-scale private construction projects encompassing buildings and streets became routine. While the municipality sought to “distinguish between public interest and private profit,” ultimately, the private sector dominated real estate speculation.

Speculative builders, the subject of the second chapter, were a diverse group with a range of agendas. The limits of their models of urban growth as well as their encounters with challenges, Yates argues, increased the dissociation of ownership and development. Enterprising architects were often ambivalent about tensions between commercial success and commitment to professional and artistic standards. Architects also faced what they perceived as preference for the services of businessmen as construction projects aimed foremost at profit-making became popular and garnered increasing respect. A rapid expansion of development journals facilitated the publicity of builders’ projects. Developers’ belief in the perpetual growth of Paris, aided by the influx of wealthy foreigners, was reinforced by credit and lending policies. Speculative projects were driven by the demand of consumers, who had at their disposal a wide array of information about property choices. By emphasizing their dependence on demand, builders represented themselves as an indispensable agent of the realization of consumers and neighborhoods’ visions. Yet, priorities of the community were often not met. This revealed, Yates argues, a gap between the builders’ perceptions and representations of the city, on the one hand, and those of the neighborhoods or consumers, on the other.

Chapter three delves into a fascinating topic, a set of Parisian streets classified as “private roadways,” 1,432 of which existed in 1898. The ambiguous place of private roadways in the city meant that many regulations only gradually came to apply to them. The heights of buildings on such streets were regulated for the first time in 1884. Yates skillfully analyzes this set of streets to get at the agency of private property owners in urban development and urban economy, as well as their interactions with city authorities. In particular by forming associations, property owners responded to their shifting social and economic status, while professionalized (full-time) property-owners came to be the dominant, bourgeois owner class in Paris. From the perspective of the municipality, owner associations could be useful in that they could undertake development projects, although the city authorities also tended to be skeptical of owners’ capacity to embrace the needs of localities. Also treated here are continued debates on the status of real property as immovable goods, in relation to movable goods. A significant legal change took place in 1893, when real estate development and investment firms were recognized as commercial, rather than civil, entities. Real estate investment opportunities through the purchase of shares in *sociétés anonymes* also blended movable and immovable wealth. In discussing the government proposal to compile a register of property titles in France, which met with widespread opposition based on the perceived danger of viewing land as a commodity and attendant moral dangers, Yates implies that the commercialization and “marketization” of real property were far from inevitable. Once underway, this process, Yates suggests, expanded owners’ role as participants in the property market, while limiting their role as civic actors.

Chapter four traces the expanding role of the estate agent (*agent d’affaire*), another great topic, in property transactions. Estate agents utilized legal and commercial knowledge to offer numerous services requiring both, benefiting from regulations banning officers of the court from partaking in commerce. In spite of the vast expansion of available material on properties, real estate markets in France were chronically inefficient, Yates argues. Estate agents represented themselves as “representatives, intermediaries, brokers, and advisors” and, in addition, often engaged in a number of shadier activities. The disorganized actions of such agents, Yates argues, reinforced the commercialization of property distribution.

Chapter five, on the marketing of apartments, treats some old and many new ways of representing and publicizing housing, particularly through the exploding print culture, including the real estate press,

rental directories, apartment plans, and posters. Throughout the book, Yates tends to use images simply as illustrations, with the result that images (including the several posters reproduced in this chapter) are, at times, under-analyzed. However, here her attentive visual analysis of apartment plans is very much to the point and yields rich insights including into the question of the interiorization of apartments and into the degree to which apartments were represented as separated from or connected to streets. Another fascinating section of this chapter is on property owning and renting trends, such as the tendency of people owning property outside Paris to remain renters within the city.

Chapter six treats corporate ownership, a widespread phenomenon in Paris. A central case study concerns the Compagnie foncière de France (CFF), which acquired land in desirable areas and rented it out to developers with an option to purchase. The pattern of designing each building in its entirety to target a particular class, all in the name of meeting the needs of neighborhoods, resulted in the reinforcement of long-term trends of “territorialization of social class” or the concentration of one class of residents in a particular district. Another result, Yates states, was a general lack of architectural innovation. This is a short section in the chapter with just three images of building exteriors. For a fuller, more convincing analysis, a more thorough investigation with a visual analysis of a much larger corpus of images of building exteriors would be necessary (which is beyond the scope of this book). In regards to this last topic, in this chapter and also elsewhere in the book Yates cites critics of “mass-produced” buildings constructed as part of large-scale projects; such constructions were seen as lacking individuality and banal in appearance. However, because we do not hear much from the voices of those purchasing or living in apartments in such buildings—which is understandable since it is much harder to find the sources for such assessments compared to sources written by critics and estate agents—it is ultimately not clear to what extent those living in the buildings enjoyed living there, or what the lived experience was like.

Apart from this lingering question, the only main, although minor, issue with this book is that it assumes a lot of prior knowledge on the reader’s part of the urban and economic history of Paris. For example, while Yates’ treatment of the municipal council of Paris is thoroughly sound, clear and concise information on the function of the municipal council—that it met four times a year for total of 60 days and was clearly distinct from the municipal administration staffed by career bureaucrats—even in a footnote would have made this section more accessible and avoided potential reader confusion between councilors and administrators.

It is the abstract realms of what enabled large building booms to manifest and the significance of such a phenomenon that are the core themes of this book, more so than architecture or aesthetics. What anchors this ambitious book is Yates’ deep and nuanced understanding of key issues in political economy concerning Parisian urban development, as well as finance, law, and urban culture. Incisive analyses of the amorphous groups of architects, developers, property owners, and estate agents are but a small part of the significant merits of the book, which makes a major and unique contribution in the fields of modern French history, economic history, urban history, and architectural history.

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