Exhibitions

L’Hôtel particulier, une ambition parisienne
Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, Palais de Chaillot, Paris
5 October 2011–19 February 2012

The Parisian hôtel (the French designation for what in English would be a mansion) appeared in the Middle Ages, and examples of the type continued to be built until the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the single-family house for the urban elites, including aristocrats, financiers, military officers, and cosmopolitans from abroad. Unlike its rural counterpart, the château, the hôtel was built between a courtyard and a garden. It was a place to host guests and entertain them. The word particulier (private) was added later in the nineteenth century in order to distinguish them from the new commercial hotels. These buildings were the subject of an exhibition mounted at the Palais de Chaillot, which was nonetheless documented.

The vast 5,000-square-foot space designed to attract a wide range of visitors was “wings of a sort without recessed inside space meant to install the bed: the alcove. Louis Le Vau introduced the alcove into the Parisian mansion. The room recreated in the exhibition featured walls covered in seventeenth-century tapestries representing the five senses. A painting from 1766 showed Prince de Conti’s supper at Hôtel du Temple, where men, women, dogs, and musicians playing instruments all ate altogether in the prince’s private chamber. There were two tables, one in the main room and another one placed in the alcove.

An eighteenth-century pierced chair, the ancestor of the toilet, was included in the exhibition. Between the salon and the private chamber, this commode stood here for all of the hidden spaces of the Parisian mansion. These were located in the middle of a suite of rooms or between rooms, and were “wings of a sort without which the social theater would not have
been possible,” as the panel put it. Apart from the lavatories, often called the “English corners,” there were small back stairways and mezzanine spaces, where the servants’ rooms were located, often close to their masters and mistresses. Corridors were rare; they became popular in Paris only with the emergence in the nineteenth century of the bourgeois apartment. Although the toilets were rarely described, by the middle of the seventeenth century they appeared frequently in plans, notably in those of the engraver Jean Marot.

The cabinet presented in the exhibition was decorated with eighteenth-century wood panels originally from Hôtel de Polignac. It was a small room connected to the chamber but more private, and used to store and display rare and precious objects. It could be the culminating point of a suite of rooms as in the seventeenth-century Hôtel de Lauzun, or a small pavilion facing the garden, even an overhang as in Hôtel de Retz. Larger cabinets also existed; they were used frequently in the eighteenth century to hold private meetings and to engage in business. The Enlightenment saw the development of scholars’ cabinets used as libraries or natural science collections.

The final room of the exhibition’s suite was the gallery. Paved in black-and-white tiles, its contents included a Franz-Xavier Winterhalter portrait of banker and art collector Édouard André. The gallery was the space to display paintings, statues, furniture, and other precious objects. After all but disappearing following the reign of Louis XIV, it was reintroduced on a much larger scale in the nineteenth century as a ballroom. The gallery usually faced the garden, which was simulated here by a space with a green carpeted floor with vases, mirrors, and a trellised wall.

The chronological section of the exhibition used large models, plans, sections, and elevations to present in considerable detail four emblematic Parisian hôtels: the medieval Hôtel de Cluny (1480–1510), the Baroque Hôtel Lambert (1639–44), designed by Le Vau; the Neoclassical Hôtel de Thelusson (1779–80), designed by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux; and finally the nineteenth-century Palais Rose (1896), designed by Ernest Sanson for the dandy Boni de Castellane on Avenue Foch, which was demolished in 1969.

The six thematic niches at the end of the exhibition were dedicated to the complex relationship between the hôtel and the city. If one aspect of the typical hôtel, situated between courtyard and garden, was protected from the burdens of street life, the sites chosen for these sometimes monumental structures, which often faced the Seine, also demonstrated a desire to make pleasurable use of the city’s scenery and the theater of everyday urban life in order to see without being seen. Carefully designed portals provide further evidence of the owners’ will to be noticed. Plans, engravings, and paintings presented here also explain architects’ difficult task slotting these mansions into the urban fabric that often presented them with extremely irregular blocks. Such a difficulty was overcome by buying adjacent lots, as in Henri IV’s Place Royale, or by trellises in the garden, which could impart a sense of depth to boundary walls. Parisian hôtels eventually suffered from the city’s social and economic transformations. Many, such as the Hôtel de Brienne and the Hôtel de la Vrillière, survive as foreign embassies and governmental offices, but these adaptations inevitably damaged the original design; others have been progressively occupied at ground level by shops, while their upper stories have been broken into apartments. Even artisans and small industry may find a place in their courtyards, as often happened in the Marais. Many were demolished altogether. The exhibition particularly stressed the idea of the mansion devoured by the city, with its new occupants erecting partition walls, and adding new stories or mezzanines.

Other niches focused upon the architectural façades, the splendors of interior decoration and the transformations of the pleasure garden, where one could stroll and gratify the senses. Even on these narrow plots, which were always enclosed and planted with trees, it proved possible to insert entire English gardens, as occurred in the Hôtel Beaumarchais.

Visitors wanting to know about the formal and artistic characteristics of this key Parisian architectural type across the last six centuries, as well as the social rituals staged within them and the tastes of the owners, were more than satisfied. Much work, however, remains to be done to understand the structure of the households that occupied these mansions. We know too little about the place accorded to children and the elderly and even less about how the spaces of work and service. These stories, although they would be accompanied by a less aesthetically stunning range of objects, should prove equally engaging.

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Related Publication

Architectures 80: Une chronique métropolitaine (Architecture of the 80s: A metropolitan chronology)
Pavillon de l’Arsenal, Paris
3 May–25 September 2011
Architectural postmodernism has become topical in recent years and it seems it will remain so for some time. On the one hand, the proliferation of publications and exhibitions reflects the recent research led by historians who were often themselves educated during the two last decades of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the public seems to enjoy rediscovering the architecture from a time near enough to evoke nostalgia, yet old enough for its worst failures to be forgotten. The blooming of postmodernism coincided in France with the political, economic, and cultural upheavals that followed the change of government of 1981. An exhibit on view the Pavillon de l’Arsenal in Paris during the summer of 2011 confirmed this growing interest in a recent architectural past, which still needs to be fully documented.

Architectures 80: Une chronique métropolitaine was curated by Lionel Engrand and Soline Nivet, two researchers of the ACS Lab of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Paris–Malaquais, and designed by architect Christian Biecher.