Poché Parisienne:
The Interior Urbanity of Nineteenth Century Paris

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"The dream of definition" is what Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson calls the Second Empire's rebuilding of Paris in her book, *Paris as Revolution.* The new planning was characterized as much by what it 'defined', as by what it excluded. This paper focuses on the apartment houses as an embodiment of those exclusions that were part of the process of Paris's modernization between 1852 and 1870, also known as its 'Haussmannization'. By analyzing the representations of the apartment house in architectural drawings, photographs and the literary novel, I suggest that *poché*, an architectural drawing technique of defining and excluding, was implicitly a part of that process.

In its contemporary use in architecture, the term *poché* refers to the representational technique of darkening or filling-in specific areas of an architectural drawing. Used consistently at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts since the 17th century, this technique derives its use from the verb *pocher*, meaning 'to put in a bag', 'to blacken an eye' or 'to sketch boldly and roughly'. Its use in the Beaux-Arts tradition refers to a practice of drawing that blackens in the structural solids of a plan in order to differentiate them from the rooms or open areas.

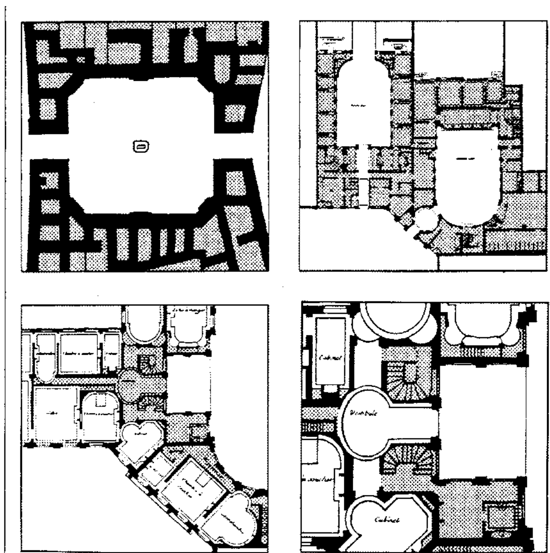

Fig. 1 Poché *as a drawing technique*

The act of blackening was subsequently used to differentiate not only structure from space but movement areas from main rooms, courtyards from covered spaces, buildings from the street, and so on. The act of *poché* is an act of **differentiation** that allows something to be read more clearly. *Poché*, in the French language, can also be used as an adjective, which qualifies something as hollow (*chose creuse*) or turgid (*chose enflée*). The term's reference to both a concave and a convex surface suggests that *poché* qualifies the space that is created within the pocket or swelling and not the nature of the surface that creates it. In order for us to identify it as either a cavity or a protrusion, we would need to be perceiving the space from a position outside it. The space itself is mysteriously enclosed like the insides of a glove or a pocket that cannot be objectified. Any effort to objectify the *poché* only results in the apprehension of the limits of the probing device (in the case of the gloves, our hands). In another connotation as 'something blackened or blotted while writing', *poché* has the sense of that which is intentionally covered-up, or that which spreads uncontrollably, exceeding the original intentions of the author. It is unpredictable and **mysterious**. In it s simplest sense, *poché* is a 'bag' or a 'pocket': an **interstitial** space within a larger construct. The various senses of the word imply a meaning that transcends its association merely with the architectural drawing to denote an act of differentiation, a mysterious and unpredictable space intentionally covered up, and a pocket of space housed within a larger construct.

The act of *differentiation* that is apparent from *poché* as a verb may be seen in Haussmann's planning of Paris. The city experienced a change not only through massive building and rebuilding work but also through stringent regulations and rules imposed by the Prefecture of Police aimed at returning order, morality and public health to the city. The State promoted notions of scientific and technological progress blended with representations of the aesthetic, the moral, and the way a civilized society should smell and its citizens' act. Haussmann's actions were a reaction to the revolutions of 1789 and 1830 and the cholera outbreak of 1832 that arose from sites of urban decay and poverty and scaled class barriers. His approach to the planning was an urge to rid the city of all private pockets of space that could harbor either revolutionaries or disease such as the narrow streets and back alleys, sewers, brothels, cemeteries, and the apartment houses of the lower classes. All of these were restricted, pushed to the periphery of the city or hidden behind 'aesthetically pleasing' facades. Haussmannization was an act of 'darkening' spaces that were identified as private, immoral, and insalubrious so that the public spaces of the city could be read more clearly as public, moral, and hygienic.

There was a significant change in the perception of private space between the reign of Louis-Phillipe and the Second Empire. Walter Benjamin, in his essay, *"Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century"* of 1935, wrote,

> *"For the private person, living space becomes, for the first time, antithetical to the place of work. The former is constituted by the interior; the office is its complement. ... For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theater."*[1]

Benjamin's essay recalls the moment when the ruling classes, pursuing their business interests first made a distinction between work place and living space. The work place allowed people to look at their homes from outside, as a separate pocket of space suspended within the fabric of the city. Each allowed the other to be perceived and identified more clearly. The perceived difference between the two was a moment that heralded *poché* as a social attitude, one that emphasized distinctions between public and private, exterior and interior, moral and immoral, etc.

The multi-family, bourgeois apartment house that was encouraged during the renewal of Paris (as a result of the doubling of the population) makes an interesting case for the discourse of the public and private. Apartment houses existed long before Haussmann's intervention, but within his scheme they became much bigger. The new streets were wider and so allowed taller buildings on the frontages.[2] Balcony and floor lines had to be consistent in the design of facades of all buildings on a street and the façade wall was treated like a continuous and applied strip designed to be wrapped around the urban block. The regular arrangement of bays on the façades meant that it had no direct relation to the internal disposition of the rooms. Further, there is no indication of the inherent porosity of the block that is perceivable from a birds' eye view. Where the insides grew more fragmentary and porous as the number of apartments on a plot of land increased, the outsides emulated an imperial grandeur by depicting a façade that was opaque and continuous. The façade wall standing in for the *poché* of the architectural drawing made the interior more private while making the exterior more public.

The opacity of the facades could also be attributed to the explosion of scale after Haussmann that caused the apartment house façades to become higher and wider without its fenestrations growing in size proportionately. A certain opacity could also be ascribed to the use of draperies and blinds that concealed the fact that the external façades of the apartment houses were sometimes too lavish for the insides. Moreover, where it was acceptable for interiors to be more lavish than the exteriors, the reverse was not true. Architectural drawings from the period are revealing in this regard. Typical elevations in pattern books represent the openings on the façade as dark opaque panes that cannot be visually transgressed. In section drawings, the back wall of a sectioned room is rendered so that it appears flush with the façade wall. The section flattens the space of the room to make it part of the opaque façade.

The plan organization of the apartment houses displays an effort to create privacy. The primary movement within the house is linear.

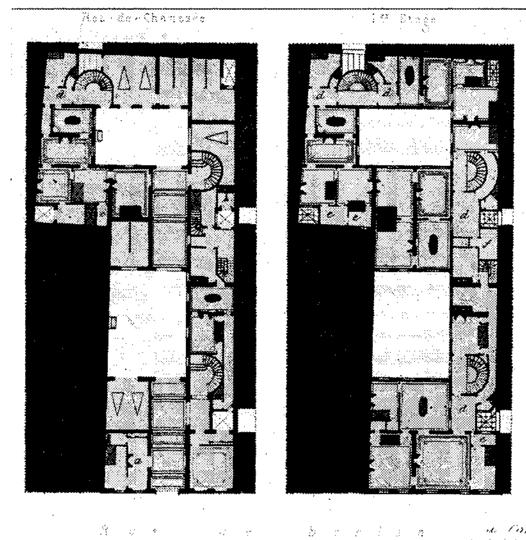

Fig.2 Plans of Apartment House, Paris, 1870

The typical organization of the movement in the apartments, the enfilade along a sequence of rooms, creates an experience of a series of mutually isolated scenes. There is no folding back upon a particular space or a transparency within spaces that is characteristic of modern architecture.

The figural rooms, whose bilaterally symmetry proposes a sense of perfection, could also be seen as a way to create privacy and a self-enclosed universe with its own center and its own independent order within a larger universe that is the house. Strangely, this private, perfect universe is often breached by a number of entrances. These entrances, however, are never in the center of a wall but always on one side. The view of a mirror above the mantelpiece is the first sight of a visitor entering a room and is always at an angle that reflects another door or window.

Fig.3 Interior view of the apartment

One is literally "shown the door" or reminded of the possible exit path as soon as one enters. The exteriority of the visitor is maintained as he finds himself already on his way out of this pocket of private space. In the multiple reflections of doors and windows, the enfilade is extended endlessly within the house. Even the staircase, enclosed within a stairwell becomes part of the enfilade as a vertical corridor. Similar to the dichotomy of the continuous façade wall as against the fragmentary interiors, the enfilade is clarified and designed to be continuous and is opposed to the rooms that are individually isolated pockets of space. The movement is delineated and made public making the rooms themselves private and enclosed.

In the case of the Salon where one would enter the room axially, the mirror over the mantelpiece counters the gaze of the outside observer, both exposing him in the act of looking in a moment of self-consciousness, and simultaneously embodying the interior world of the inhabitants upon which he intrudes. Eugène Atget, a prominent French photographer and one of the first to record rooms without people in them photographed many apartment house interiors. The absence of people from these photographs makes them similar to the architectural sections of the apartment houses, opaque and lifeless, but with one

difference. Almost all of them have been taken by shifting slightly to the left or right of the axis in order for the camera to escape its own reflection in the mirror.

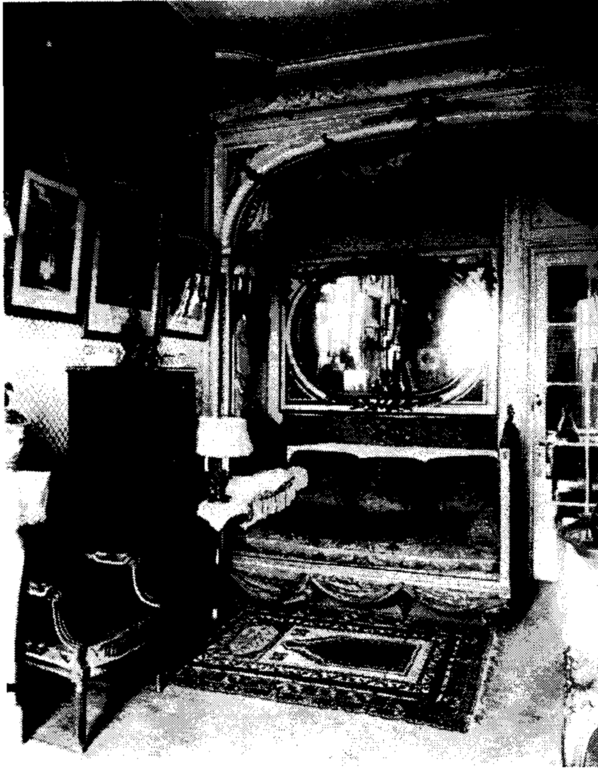

Fig.4 Photograph, Eugène Atget, 1910

With that move, the room reveals itself as an interior and a private space seen through the eyes of the inhabitant who may identify the various familiar pockets of space opened up in the reflection. Walter Benjamin comments about Atget's work and observes that his photographs appear to be "...the scenes of a crime: for the scene of a crime is deserted...and the pictures that are taken of it have but one purpose, to reveal clues."[4] The arrangement of objects around the room and the concealed meanings therein remind us of our own selves as both privy to an inhabitant's relationship with the room as well as an outsider to the setting.

The movement of servants within the house is designed to be independent of the main movement of tenants and visitors, in order for them to service the rooms without being seen. In many cases, if the main movement of the house followed a clockwise rotation, the servants' movement would be counter-clockwise. This *degagement,* or servants' area of the house, with its own staircase and circulation passages, works almost like an independent house within the main house. In most cases, it is formed by the leftover space after the figural rooms have been carved out of the plan. One can almost imagine it as occurring within the *poché* of the walls of the apartment, intentionally covered up, and yet like the wall, the *degagement* is also "structural": structural to the society, to social rituals, and to the everyday life of the tenants.

The grander the city grew in scale, the more private its houses became. Sharon Marcus in her book *Apartment Stories* (1999) says, "The apartment house became the site where personal privacy, secrecy, intrigue, and personal experience were turned into the highest aims of life."[3] As pockets of private spaces within the city, the apartment houses were *poché* spaces, interior and mysterious to the outside observer. Moreover, like the architectural *poché* that differentiates several spatial dimensions (the hollow areas from the solid, the covered rooms from the open courtyard, the houses from the streets) the apartment house contained within itself various different levels of *poché* in the form of the apartments, the private rooms within the apartments, the servants' spaces, the walls, flues and niches within the wall and so on. With the Enlightenment ideals of the Second Empire, these spaces of the bourgeois apartment, in their varying degrees of visibility and enclosure, were also interpreted as unclean, immoral, and undesirable. This emerges clearly in Émile Zola's novels of the Rougon-Macquart (1871-1893): a series of twenty novels that map the history of two families during the Second Empire. *Pot Bouille* (1882), which is set in an apartment house, is the tenth novel of the series.5

Zola's narration of the apartment building conjures up images of the juxtaposed lives of its bourgeois tenants and their servants: a society's messy mishmash of moral and physical corruption concealed behind the veneer of bourgeois respectability. The novel begins with the arrival of Octave Mouret, a young salesman from the provinces, who comes to Paris with the hope of making a fortune. The cab that brought him from the *Gare de Lyon* is held-up in traffic in the *Rue Neuve-Augustine*. The '*neuve*' in the street name suggests that it is a new street and a product of the post 1852 planning. It is perhaps partially blocked due to the intense construction work that affected the city during this period. This initial movement through the city is one of the few moments in which the plot of the novel leaves the interiors of the apartment house. Not only the subject of the narration, but also its structure reinforces the spatiality of the apartment house as a profound interiority, with rooms that enclose and 'fold in' an entire world of layers and relationships. Each chapter in *Pot Bouille* is built around isolated, self-enclosed scenes. The author further accentuates the apartment building's inward orientation by commenting repeatedly on its enclosed, internal features: stairways and landings, the closed door of each apartment, and the interior courtyard.

Octave is shown into the building by its architect, who explains in great detail its splendid appearance and amenities. The tenants that the architect repeatedly points out as respectable and honorable seem only to complement the wholesome structure of society that the apartment building embodies. Zola further explores the house as a symbol of society in the social relations between the two types of occupants of the building: bourgeois tenants and working-class servants. The separation between the two is initially described as a set of clear distinctions in manners, etiquette, morality, education, language, hygiene, and wealth. The corresponding physical areas of the house that are inhabited by the two kinds of occupants are distinguished through a narrative of differentiation. Thus the main staircase is red-carpeted, heated, grand, and brightly lit, while the servant's stair is dirty, freezing-cold, narrow, and dark. The main courtyard is clean (almost sterile), paved, and has a fountain, as against the service courtyard which acts as a literal and figurative rubbish dump for the building and is compared more than once to a sewer. Octave is shown the kitchen and finds the servants exchanging raucous gossip from window to window across and to the courtyard below. "It was as if a sewer had brimmed over", Zola writes.[6] The courtyards between kitchens are compared to the basement (the underground). "She opened the window, and from the narrow courtyard separating the kitchens an icy dampness rose, a stale odor like that of a musty cellar."[7] The servants' rooms bear a similar difference to the tenants' rooms. The bourgeoisie, in Zola's novels, go to extreme lengths to maintain the difference. In fact, this segregation is created in day-to-day speech where associations are made that instantly relegate the spaces of servants and the servants themselves to an inferior status as dirty, immoral, promiscuous, and stupid. Zola's plot ultimately portrays the bourgeoisie as possessing the same promiscuity, lack of sanitation and disorder as is generally associated with the lower classes. Zola's technique relies on a meticulous building of differences between the two classes which are finally conflated to show that the two are, in fact, very similar. Octave later learns that the building is far from being structurally sound: it is poorly constructed, there are large cracks, and

the paint has begun to peel. These discoveries are analogous to his acquaintance with his neighbors whose own defects become ever more evident. The secret and hidden spaces of the servants, the reader eventually discovers, are the most public of the apartments' spaces. Not only are the secret lives of the tenants discovered in these spaces but also the secrets of individual families leaked to the outside world through the gossip of the servants. The servants areas refuse to be blackened-in as enclosed and hidden pockets. They flow out uncontrollably and unpredictably.

Zola's *Pot Bouille* allows the emergence of two contrasting spaces: in this case, the respectable, moral, and hygienic apartments of the bourgeoisie and the promiscuous, immoral, and filthy areas of the servants. In the first part of the novel, the two spaces are contrasted to each other like the *poché* of the architectural drawing, where parts of the drawing were filled-in for other parts to emerge more clearly. Thus, the servants' spaces in the apartments allow the spaces of the bourgeoisie to appear as structures of transparency, morality, and hygiene; and the apartment house, in turn, as a structure of privacy and opacity, allows the city to be read more clearly as public and transparent. In the second part this supposition is reversed as the spaces of the bourgeoisie as well as the city are portrayed as complex, immoral, and unhygienic.

For Haussmann and Napoleon III, the image of progress was built upon the elimination of all that could not be observed, decoded, or homogenized. In attacking the *poché* as disorderly, unhygienic and immoral, the State promoted notions of progress as scientific, hygienic and moral. Zola's novels of the *Rougon Macquart* series, particularly *Pot Bouille* and *La Curée* (1874), have been regarded as an attack on Haussmannization. Zola deconstructs those very characteristics that seem to constitute 'progress' for the modern city and society. Critics have claimed that Zola's writings demystify the image of the modern and progressive city by exposing the literal and moral filth that lay behind the new structures of the city and their deceptively imposing facades. Zola's primary theme in *Pot Bouille* is no doubt the opposition of contrasts that he brings into play throughout the novel: he not only acknowledges the difficulty of identifying these oppositions as clear and distinct but also demonstrates the inversion of signs of the contrasted pair. However, in demonstrating that the bourgeoisie were as immoral and unhygienic as their servants, Zola does not undermine distinctions of morality or immorality, he merely does a figure-ground reversal, which presents the conceptual pair even more strongly.

The *poché* is an act of differentiation, an act of putting in a bag and covering up all that is mysterious and unpredictable. Well beyond the scope of the architectural drawing, *poché* emerges as a general human tendency that perceives the world in terms of conceptual pairs: black and white, interior and exterior, solid and void, public and private, clean and dirty, moral and immoral, and so on. These conceptual pairs have come to be understood as natural and self-evident. However, realizing that the act of differentiation is only a technique or a method, opens up possibilities in architectural thinking which may reach outside its restrictions.

NOTES

[1]Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, (1935) in Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p.154

[2]See Anthony Sutcliffe, *Paris: an Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)

[3]Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth Century Paris and London* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p.146

[4]Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, trans. Phil Patton, *Artforum* 15(1977) Feb., p. 51

[5]Émile Zola, *Pot Luck (Pot Bouille)*, tr. Brian Nelson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

[6]Ibid., p. 9

[7]Ibid., p. 25

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[15]Sutcliffe, Anthony, *The Autumn of Central Paris- The Defeat of Town Planning 1850-1970.* London: Edward Arnold Press, 1970.

[16]Zola, Émile, *L'Assomoir,* tr. Atwood H. Townsend. New York: New American Library,1962 (1877).

[17]Zola, Émile, *Pot Luck (Pot Bouille),* tr. Brian Nelson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1881).

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