Paris : Theater : Skene

MAMC, May 2013
by Allen Pierce

It is common in discussions of urban culture to talk about human behavior in public spaces as a kind of theater. Each urban-dweller moves about her life with an omnipresent awareness that the gazes of others perpetually fall upon her. What is less often discussed is the exact relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Certainly the design of cities, like the design of theaters themselves can radically shape this relationship. We can, in some cases even see the design of the later in the former.

Truly democratic societies and their cities, as characterized in the works of Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper, among others, subsist in part on a balance in which each individual is allowed to play equally the roles of viewer and viewed; audience and player. Likewise, deeply unequal societies demonstrate a skew in one direction or the other. We might understand the Ghettoisation and ultimately the placement in concentration camps of the Jewish population of Europe by Nazi forces as one form of a destabilized gaze in which the majority was placed overwhelmingly in the position of viewer while a key minority was systematically and aggressively watched, denied of any right to privacy and very often stripped naked before their own murderers.

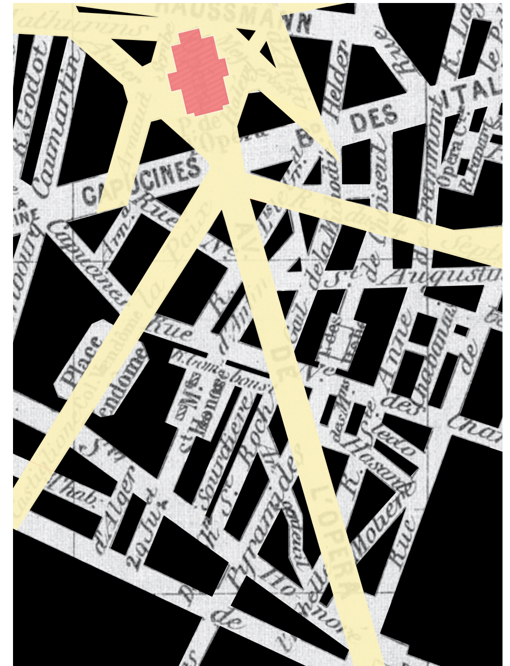
An examination of the redesign of Paris by Baron Haussmann, promoted by Napoleon III reveals a cityscape that generates precisely the opposite skew. Haussmann's plan has long been criticized as anti-democratic because of it's clear reaction to and prevention of traditional Parisian revolutionary tactics such as the barricading of streets and the strategic use of winding alleys. Adopting an understanding of the role of the gaze in urban society allows us to see that, even in peace time, Haussmann's Paris was perhaps even less democratic than that of the 18th c. Bourbons, due in some part to the central role of his newly planned system of boulevards.

Besides the Louvre, where Napoleon III held court, there would have been few buildings more emblematic of the still-entrenched wealth and nobility in post-revolutionary Paris than the newly constructed Palais Garnier, which served as a key anchor point in Haussmann's plan for the city. It alone stands as an object building among dense perimeter-block neighbors. It also sits, with its accompanying forecourt, the Place de l'Opera at the terminus of five major Boulevards, which radiate out over 180 degrees before it. Many critics have been tempted to read the building as something of a focal point in Haussmann's plan; a sculptural moment to be viewed at a distance from many places in the city. While this is certainly the case, a far more interesting pattern emerges when the gaze is reversed – out from the Opera's grand porch down the Boulevards and into the city.

From this position, we see the powerful position that the Opera holds in the cityscape. As an opera house, it is of course a space for viewing, but in this case it takes two views – one to the north, to the stage where hired players

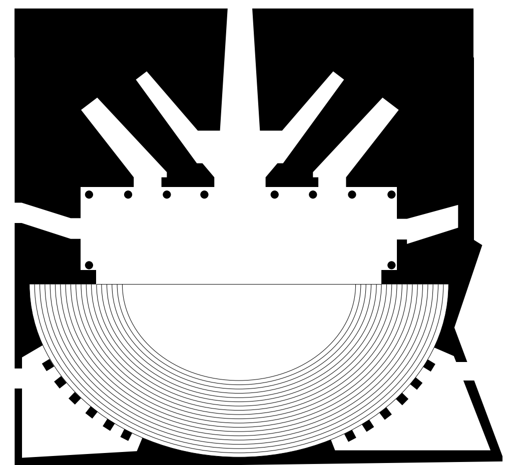
performed Verdi and Mozart, and one to the south, out to the stage where those who would likely never attend the opera played out their daily lives. In each case, the privileged audience, the wealthy and noble, remained veiled from the players, free from their returning gaze -- in one case by the lowered houselights and in the other by the height and density of the grand southern porch.

When the Opera was completed, Garnier was widely lauded for its groundbreaking fly system, which allowed for an unprecedented expansion of the role of set and backdrop in French opera. As modern critics, we might point to Haussmann, also, as a revolutionary designer of set-mechanism. Though Garnier's performance space was obviously influenced by contemporary proscenium typologies, Haussmann's Place de l'Opera and its five boulevards are clearly modern derivatives of the Greek model.



In Greek theater, the primary set piece is the skene, from which we inherit the words "scene" and "scenery". The skene is a permanent structure built behind the primary performance space (the proskene), which was often pierced by a series of arches through which actors could enter and leave and distant action could be seen. Nowhere is such a skene more dramatically played out than in Vincenzo Scamozzi's stage design for Paladio's Teatro Olimpico. Scamozzi extended the five archways of his skene into deep perspectives of streetscapes with elaborate trompe l'oeil scenery lit by oil lamps. Originally constructed for a performance of Oedipus Rex, Scamozzi's design intimates that the homes and lives of Thebes' citizenry, not merely that of the tragic king were of deep dramatic interest. Anywhere one sits in the theater's semicircular audience chamber, one is presented with a long view past the actors and into the life of the city.

An examination of Scamozzi's original plan alongside that of Haussmann's drawing of the Opera and its Boulevard reveals striking similarities. In Haussmann's scheme, the Place de l'Opera serves as a kind of proskene, laid out before the shielded gaze of opera-goers on their lofty porch, and the boulevards extend into the distance, presenting the scene of the daily lives of Parisians to those with the privileged central position just as Scamozzi had offered his audience Thebes.



The Opera building itself and it's surrounds form a striking analogue of the Teatro Olimpico, only the players upon the stage of Paris are neither paid to, nor give consent to be viewed by the Garnier's select audience. Haussmann has, in effect, created a theater of the unwilling and the unknowing through urban design. In so doing, he reinforces the power of the upper classes over the lower in peacetime as in crisis. By making a theater of the daily toil of the city's inhabitants, he trivializes their struggles, reducing their lives to mere masques that, for the audience, cease to continue as soon as they leave the theater.

From the point of view of the people of Paris, by contrast, the opera stands as a fortress, forbidding the return gaze. It's height and it's dense piers shield operagoers from the gaze of those below. Seen from many places around the city center, the Garnier is reduced to a figural mass, framed by long views. To the man on the street, it becomes iconic – not a building full of persons like himself but an institution. His gaze has no power over it or its inhabitants. The power to see lies with them, alone.

So, like the theater they have come to see within, Garnier visitors even today – those who can dress well enough and pay out enough – are treated to the theater of Hausmann's streets, to the ins and outs of the lives of others; others who cannot in turn see them; others who may never be able to afford to gaze out from the opera's lofty porch back into the world they know. This view, though initiated by Garnier's Opera House is made possible by Hausmann's urban design. The great set designer that he was, his work facilitates the transformation of city into stage by providing rich, deep backdrops projecting deep into the lives of the viewed.