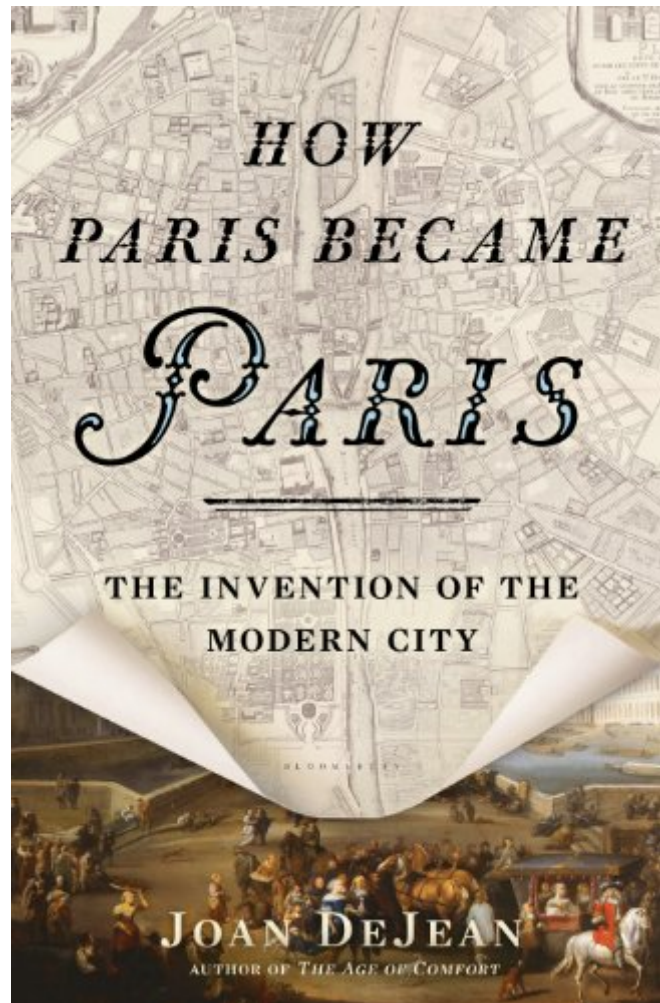


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How Paris Became Paris: The Invention Of The Modern City



Synopsis

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Paris was known for isolated monuments but had not yet put its brand on urban space. Like other European cities, it was still emerging from its medieval past. But in a mere century Paris would be transformed into the modern and mythic city we know today. Though most people associate the signature characteristics of Paris with the public works of the nineteenth century, Joan DeJean demonstrates that the Parisian model for urban space was in fact invented two centuries earlier, when the first complete design for the French capital was drawn up and implemented. As a result, Paris saw many changes. It became the first city to tear down its fortifications, inviting people in rather than keeping them out. Parisian urban planning showcased new kinds of streets, including the original boulevard, as well as public parks and the earliest sidewalks and bridges without houses. Venues opened for urban entertainment of all kinds, from opera and ballet to a pastime invented in Paris, recreational shopping. Parisians enjoyed the earliest public transportation and street lighting, and Paris became Europe's first great walking city. A century of planned development made Paris both beautiful and exciting. It gave people reasons to be out in public as never before and as nowhere else. And it gave Paris its modern identity as a place that people dreamed of seeing. By 1700, Paris had become the capital that would revolutionize our conception of the city and of urban life.

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Customer Reviews

I freely admit I will read/watch just about anything that has Paris as its subject, or even uses that city as a background, but this book took me ages to finish. (A highly unusual situation for me it must be said!) So constantly I got the feeling that I was just reading the same page over again. The author knows her material, and presents it in quite a conversational tone but repeats and repeats similar anecdotes and facts until you get this odd feeling of déjà vu. Yes Paris may have been innovative in so many ways but again and again we are told this and she lauds the praises of that particular city so constantly that even I became more than a little bored, ...and I hasten to add that Paris is my very favourite city in the world! Each chapter is devoted to another area or field where Paris apparently "led the way" in becoming "modern". Now there's next to nothing on the very extensive work carried out under the direction of Baron Haussmann at all, ...everything here takes place in the 16th/17th centuries and basically starts off with the removal of the surrounding defensive walls, the building of the Pont Neuf with footpaths, Place des Vosges, Place Vendome, and the development of the up until then barren Ile St. Louis. She charts the rise of shops and also what we would call "developers" and "financiers", but I think they were probably more like astute speculators than anything else. Oh, and she does harp on (and on!) about the streets being "lit", ...but as this was only by single candles, suspended one to a street so I don't think the "city of light" was all that bright for quite some time. Still I suppose it was an innovation, but the very dim effects of guttering candles would hardly have done much to stop street crime (and the cloak-stealing!) as she so often asserts. After that the author seems to consider Paris to be "modern", despite the fact that it was still largely composed of rat-infested medieval slums that had to be completely demolished and rebuilt before Paris began to look anything at all like what we see today. The large open square or parvis we now see directly in front of Notre Dame Cathedral being one of the very worst places for squalid overcrowded pest holes. Its current open appearance is entirely due to Haussmann. I enjoyed some of the information here but only up to a point. What the book needed was a firmer hand with the editing to remove so much of the repetition which I notice has also been remarked upon by most of the other reviews here. Yes there are quite a lot of very interesting facts if you happen to be into the detailed history of Paris, but if you are just an intending tourist looking for some light background in preparation for a forthcoming trip, then this is far too weighty and dry for

your purpose. I'm giving it three stars, which pains me a bit because it was a valiant attempt, (AND it's about Paris too), but the presentation is just a little too academic and the writing itself comes perilously close to appearing biased. And all too often it relies on re-hashing the same statements again and again.

We would rate this book 3.5 instead of 3, but the review process only allows for assigning whole stars. The story of How Paris Became Paris offers some fine observations, agreed, but I have several problems with it: (i) the small print and pale ink are difficult to read; (ii) there is far too much repetition in the text (I read this book aloud to my husband and grew so weary of all the padding that I simply summarized for him when it got to be too much); (iii) there was also too much repetition in the illustrations (many are details of pictures reproduced in varying degrees of fullness all over the book - for instance, three pictures on p 28, 36 and 192 are of the same original but appear with different captions, while on p 193 we see the same picture shown on p 149, only in a different size and with different captions); (iv) when the author refers to an illustration, she simply writes "this illustration," implying that the reader must search about for the one she means. To avoid this awkwardness, illustrations should have been numbered for ease of reference the way they are in art history books, with a separate numbering or lettering system for the color plates; (v) very disappointed that the author only fleetingly notes the changes made in Paris in the 19th c at the hands of Napoleon III and Baron Georges E. Haussmann; (vi) some Then & Now comparisons would have done wonders to liven the text, as many of the early constructs are still visible today, in good working order (as the Pont Neuf with its fine equestrian statue of Henri IV and the Place Royale, which is now called the Place des Vosges); (vii) the "urb" wasn't something entirely new that was invented by the French - the first world class city was ancient Rome - it is estimated that the population of Rome 2,000 years ago was roughly 1 million..I would suggest this book to others, but also urge them to look at (a) the small full color Skira art book from 1957 entitled "Paris in the Past" (b) see "Paris Then and Now" by Peter and Oriel Caine (Thunder Bay Press, 2003) and, (c) when in Paris, definitely visit the Musee Carnavalet which is, first of all, two splendid historic buildings now joined into one, with breathtaking paintings of Paris in former centuries - a museum not to be missed by the serious admirer of Paris.

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