



Louis-Michel Nourry. *Les jardins publics en province: Espace et politique au XIX^e me si^ecle*. Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1997. 265 pp. 145 FF (paper), ISBN 978-2-86847-224-3.

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French Provincial Public Parks

The advantage of typological studies is that they allow one to concentrate one's research, easily excluding irrelevant material and at the same time covering a relatively wide terrain—in some cases, whole continents, cultures, or “worlds.” Louis-Michel Nourry's *Les jardins publics en province* is good example of the potential strengths of the genre. The book covers about a fifth of the ninety-one public parks built or remodelled under the French Second Empire (1852-1870), and argues convincingly for these being distinct from other types of urban open space, promenades, etc. It also belongs to France's thriving tradition of historians of “mentalites” (the volume is prefaced by Alain Corbin, one of the movement's best known exponents), reading the Second-Empire public park as a sign of evolving bourgeois identity and the political power structure of provincial cities.

The disadvantage of typological studies is that, without careful structuring, they can be repetitive and narrow, too complete in some details and dramatically lacking in others. The trick, naturally, is to be able to look beyond signs of one case's identity to evidence of local specificity, and to bring this back into play in a general argument. In this, the urban park is an ideal choice, since it must at once reflect a complex set of received values—hygiene, class-attuned behaviors, aesthetic conventions—and take quite concrete account of its site. Indeed, one of the most interesting themes taken up here is that of the emergence of the landscape architect professional as one able to integrate the diverse skills necessary to realize such a project. In the case studies covered here, the distance of provincial realizations from Parisian models: the well-known Haussmannian Bois de Boulogne, the Buttes-Chaumont, etc., is inevitably marked through differences in site qualities or climate, economic constraints and political interests. However, the book is perhaps still a little too close to its roots as a historic inventory project (which was how the author initially became in-

involved with the subject): while clear and competent in exposing the general end of the argument, the specifics often degenerate into a series of unanalyzed lists, and the reader is finally unable to make the return trip to a level of deepened general understanding of a provincial “mentalite.” Its value as a single source for information on provincial public parks is unquestionable, though marred by the lack of an index; but it does not develop the sweeping and provocative insight of, say, Alain Corbin's *Le territoire du vide* (Paris: Aubier, 1988).

The volume is divided into three major sections. The first concerns the tradition and sources of the French urban promenade, in particular the transformation of an imported, aristocratic, or scientific curiosity into a reformist instrument. The Revolution had opened some aristocratic properties to public enjoyment, giving some municipalities an advance taste of the idea of a public park. Meanwhile, some of these same properties' exiled owners took advantage of their enforced leisure in the British Isles to develop an appreciation of John Loudon's and Humphrey Repton's new landscape gardening ideas. The future Emperor Louis-Napoleon (Napoleon III) was among these, and there formed the roots of an urbanization policy that would “associate the beautiful and the healthful” (p. 36).

The second section develops the core of the author's argument regarding the interaction between officials and landscape artists around a catalogue of elements that gradually came to represent an official, codified “style paysager” for provincial parks. The third provides a sort of gazetteer of provincial public gardens, with major sections on Lyon and Rennes and a series of shorter studies on a dozen or so towns from Angers to Tours. The text as a whole makes clear how such a varied cultural landscape could nonetheless produce an impression of uniformity, in part because of the long-standing Parisian hegemony.

The story told, centered as it is on the years sur-

rounding Napoleon III's famous transformation of Paris, is substantially one of "emulation," that watchword of nineteenth-century petty officials and notables. The Emperor's administration made it easy for ambitious locals to play by the rules, providing conspicuous and well-publicized Parisian models, and consecrating talent like the lionized Buehler brothers, a pair of landscape architects whose signature became *de rigueur* in the game of provincial oneupmanship. The book is rich with examples of eager officials running roughshod over local interests and talent in order to bring in the respected outsiders and gain Parisian approval.

Despite the palpable thoroughness of the research and the freshness of the theme, the book is hard to read as the development of an argument. Other than an obvious chronological dimension exploited in introductory sections, the text is jumbled and numbing in its repetitive recall of the major themes, while making it difficult to assemble the details of individual towns, projects, and designers as these are scattered throughout. At fault, other than a perhaps hasty editing process (which also lets through numerous typographical and grammatical errors), is a thematic organization that obliges the author to make and re-make references to the same events and authors with slight variations on the details recounted. The subject is in any case complex and wide-ranging, but this organization renders it more so. For instance, the Buehler brothers and the work of one of them at Lyon's Tete de l'or park are clearly at the center of the study. And while there are sections devoted to each, these total about thirty pages out of 265. Meanwhile, although the lack of an index makes it laborious, I counted at least a dozen passages of extended analysis that would be necessary to complete one's understanding of the park. And instances of under- or unsupported praise of the Buehlers' skill, upper-class status and dedication to their work are truly uncountable, so that when documentary support arrives in the form of biographical sketches on pages 120-127, the reader has lost interest. The impression of repetition occasioned by this conceit is overwhelming. On the one hand, certain points are made endlessly using slightly different illustrations from the same handful of cases; on the other, in at least one case (pp. 90, 143), the same quotation of Denis Buehler is used to entirely different purposes (and in the first instance, incompletely footnoted). The reader's trust in the author does not come out unscathed.

At the same time, individual sections are so partial that major facts are lost or misstated in the accumulation of minutiae. For instance, in a discussion of the greenhouses at Lyon (pp 148-149), the opening sentence announces that the first built there was a wooden structure,

and is followed by a discussion implying that a combination of circumstances, including pragmatism and the Emperor's apparent disinterest in the subject, kept those in charge from choosing the increasingly fashionable metallic systems. This is an interesting point, running counter to what one would expect from an ambitious provincial city. A few lines later, however, the point is undercut by a quotation from the designer, who clearly speaks of the first structure as executed at least partly in iron. Though this one was apparently followed by wooden structures in another part of the site, which were in turn eventually replaced by iron, it is difficult to resolve the point based on the information given.

Landscape, urbanism and architecture in history all turn determinisms inside out: they are both under- and over-determined, in that any one factor may seem sufficient to "cause" a given project, but few manage to make it necessary. Hence a tendency to fall back on the strategy of taking first instances as origins and, in France, first instances are always royal and/or Parisian. In *Les jardins publics en provence*, Napoleon III's and Haussmann's Parisian parks are the proximate origin, and the local motive for park-building is bourgeois self-representation. The argument is credible, especially since it has been made before. However, we are left with the sense that other developments and pressures, including the evolving concepts of nature and the city, the ambient professionalization of the nineteenth century and a deeper, more ambiguous class rivalry are afoot (and are, moreover alluded to in tantalizingly short introductory and concluding passages); these would need to be addressed with more analysis and less raw data than is the case here.

For those interested in the urban history of the French provinces, this book provides a valuable complement to the work of such eminent synthesizers as Lavedan, Planhol, Lepetit and Merriman,[1] while attempting the challenge of blending concerns of social representation and the details of *metier*. The Presses Universitaires de Rennes are to be congratulated for making available this work, derived from a doctoral thesis that was clearly deep in interdisciplinary primary and secondary literatures. The book is blessed with interesting appendices, such as a lexicon based on primary citations, and a helpful, if heterogeneous, bibliography. They might in the future, however, be more attentive to such niceties as better binding and in-text references to illustrations. And it *would* be nice to have an index.

Note:

[1]. Pierre Lavedan, *Histoire de l'urbanisme*, Paris,

1959. Xavier de Planhol, *Geographie historique de la France*, Paris, 1988. Bernard Lepetit, *The Pre-Industrial Urban System: France, 1740-1840*, Cambridge (UK), 1994. John Merriman, *The Margins of City Life: Explorations On The French Urban Frontier, 1815-1851*, Oxford & New York, 1991.

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