

Introduction

TOWARD THE END of the reign of Louis XIV, the French emerged as the undisputed European leaders in the realm of domestic design. French elites and their architects abandoned the style of planning and decoration associated with Versailles and turned to the development of the private realm. Together they “invented” a “new art” of domestic design, or so French theorists would later claim.

That refined “new art” emerged, I argue in this book, from the specific nature of French society, with its hierarchy of social estates and ranks, and from the representational, ceremonial, and functional needs of its elites. I explore this refined new mode of domestic design as it evolved during the course of the eighteenth century at the houses of the principal royal square in Paris dedicated to Louis XIV, the Place de Louis-le-Grand (Vendôme). Several factors coalesce to render the Place Vendôme a particularly fruitful context for these explorations. Initially planned in 1685 with a public program, this royal square was reconceived as a residential ensemble at the turn of the new century, during the period when the French were “inventing” domestic design. From the outset, the most mobile elite in France, the financiers of Paris, claimed the square as the center of what would become a predominantly financial quarter, and they remained the dominant presence until the Revolution. The significance of that presence appears in the equivocal reception of the houses of Place Vendôme. Architects and other cultivated observers lauded the elegance and modernity of the plans and the refinement of the interior decor, but others condemned the houses for breaches of representational decorum.

The conviction that representational codes had been transgressed reveals widely held beliefs about the true social station of financial families. In fact, the status of the first families to reside at the Place Vendôme was ambiguous, their identities fundamentally in transition. The most prominent among them were recently ennobled or rapidly ascending to such status, but they were widely perceived to be bourgeois by those above and below them in the social hierarchy. Integral to the functioning of the state, financiers were nonetheless socially disdained, in part due to the sources of their wealth, but primarily because of their mobility. The majority were perceived to be “outsiders” in several respects. Major financiers in Paris at the turn of the eighteenth century had risen to prominence, by and large, since Colbert’s death in 1683. Most

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had been born in provincial cities, many to Protestant families that had converted to Catholicism during the years before or immediately following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Their identities were in flux. They were often “newly” rich, newly converted, and newly ennobled or on the most direct course to becoming so.

The high degree of social mobility among eighteenth-century financiers has attracted increasing attention during the last few decades from social, political, and economic historians who have produced subtle analyses of the status of financial families in French society.¹ Architectural historians, however, while usually conscientious in noting official titles and posts, have tended to employ a fairly generic notion of a French elite of wealth. This is understandable, finding support among some prominent historians who have stressed those aspects of social identity that the wealthiest members of sword, robe, and finance shared in common, arguing that a single elite of wealth dominated French society by the middle of the eighteenth century.² Leading financiers tended to be wealthier than all but the grandest seigneurs, and they hired the same architects, decorative artists, and craftsmen employed by members of court. Materially and representationally, they lived in dwellings akin to those of the upper ranks of the nobility.

So why do I insist on drawing distinctions, on questioning even subtle differences in social perceptions of members of different elites? I do so because other evidence – in memoirs, correspondence, comedies, and other texts – suggests that distinctions, most sharply drawn during the early decades of the century, continued to be made until the end of the Old Regime. Even in the eighties, as we shall see, when the comte d’Artois complained about the scale of the garden and villa that had been installed facing his own, at issue was not that *someone* had dared “compete” with him, but that a *financier* had done so. In penetrating the social meanings affixed to dwellings in Paris, it seems essential to delineate, with as much subtlety as possible, distinctions that never ceased to be made.

Among the principal arguments offered in this book is that houses of financiers were, for most of the century, *not* noble *hôtels*, in significant measure because they were *used* differently. This notion of use is broadly construed to refer to both function and representation. All eighteenth-century French dwellings were more than just residences. For each of the principal elites – the sword (with the court nobility at its summit), the robe (government officials and judges), and the top rungs of finance – houses were settings in which the social relations of a profoundly hierarchical society were represented and reenacted.

Two modes of social representation will be probed. The first is best considered strategic: the conscious manipulation of typologies, modes of planning, and decorative codes. The second is the ideological; through the workings of ideology, presuppositions and inchoate beliefs about the nature of society and relations among social groups – as well as those between men and women, parents and children, and servants and masters – were encoded into domestic

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design. Dwellings were complex signifying systems embodying both representational modes.

In analyzing these houses as complex organisms, I have selected certain families and dwellings to explore in depth, raising questions about the social and gendered meanings that adhered to specific spaces, locales, and decorative treatments. Most often, I limit my discussion of the household to family members, but at the end of Chapter 5, I examine the “*maison*” more broadly, considering all those who lived under a proprietor’s roof – including domestics, retainers, relations, and friends.

I begin with the venture that built the Place Vendôme and a discussion of the place of the financier in French society. I then consider issues of typology, focusing on the urban dwellings of the court nobility and assessing the ways in which their houses traditionally had differed from those of the robe. Within that context, I explore the peculiar functional needs and representational dilemmas of financial families, examining in depth dwellings built for two leading men of finance, Poisson de Bourvalais and Antoine Crozat. Typological concerns reappear in Chapter 3, where I discuss many of the extant plans, and in Chapter 4, in the context of the Regency and its aftermath, when the court nobility established a significant presence at the square and the last houses were constructed. Following further consideration of the representational stratagems and quandaries of members of the Crozat clan, I turn in the final chapter to the dwellings of a more confident generation of financiers at the end of the Old Regime. In concluding remarks, I assess shifting social meanings attached to the status of the square as a *place royale*.

When I refer throughout this book to “the sword,” “the court,” “the robe,” and “finance,” I am using eighteenth-century labels that tend to mask individual differences of power, rank, and wealth, as well as a range of values. There were factions among sword and court nobles; men of the robe who directly served the Crown (ministers, secretaries of state, intendants) had interests and often outlooks that differed from those of magistrates. Among leading financiers in Paris, few actually resembled the endlessly repeated caricatures of arrogant, rapacious usurers, comic in their quest to appear noble. Real men of finance were, of course, far more complex. Some were clearly arrogant and ruthless in certain contexts, but the same men might be major patrons of the arts and renowned in other situations for their charity. Most quite clearly pursued noble status for their families, but others built dynasties that remained engaged in finance long after it was necessary to do so, and some even left the dignity of the robe to pursue finance. Finance may have been inherently “parasitic,” but it is essential to remember that others in Old Regime France were *equally* “parasitic” (and, no doubt, as arrogant) – courtiers enjoying royal pensions spring first to mind.³ Within each category, individuals absorbed the ideological structures characteristic of their group to varying degrees. Familial goals might be similar, but they were not homogeneous. Nonetheless, within the corporate society of Old Regime France, our understanding seems fur-

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thered by such categories as “noble of the court,” “man of the robe,” and “financier.”

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My aim has not been to produce a *catalogue raisonné* of the dwellings of the Place Vendôme. I do not discuss every house, nor do I provide a comprehensive list of residents. The nature of the questions raised means that some inhabitants mentioned in this book will not have appeared in prior accounts, but readers should consult the works cited in the preface for a fuller enumeration. This study focuses on those dwellings and select moments that provide the best context for an exploration of social representation. It has been my intention, however, to illustrate and discuss a majority of the extant plans, as well as the most significant extant ensembles of interior decor.

Throughout this book, I employ the French measure of the *toise*, equivalent to six French *pieds* (each *pied* approximately equal to an English foot) and French usage in referring to stories in buildings (so that the first floor is one flight up). Unless otherwise specified, all numbers of houses refer to those that exist today.

I

Louis XIV's Parisian *place royale* Reconceived

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IN 1685, at the height of French power during the reign of Louis XIV, the Crown announced its intention to build a royal square in the capital – the Place de Nos Conquêtes. Larger than any other *place royale* in Paris, more magnificent and triumphal in its imagery, it was to accommodate and display the royal academies, the royal library, and the mint, and to provide a residence for special visits of foreign dignitaries. The square glorified French “conquests” in various realms – military, religious, and cultural.

The assembling of a suitable site near the city's western boundary had entailed considerable expense: the purchase and razing of the large Hôtel de Vendôme along the north side of the rue Saint-Honoré, as well as the demolition and reconstruction of a neighboring Capuchin convent (Fig. 1). By 1691, a continuous facade bearing a giant Ionic order and flat cornice had been built around three sides of the large rectangular space. In the center of its northern range, the facade projected to form a triumphal arch, which served as the backdrop for a colossal equestrian statue of the king when it was viewed from the main east–west artery of the quarter (Fig. 2).

But military reversals and defeat during the long War of the League of Augsburg (1688–97) eroded the king's enthusiasm for a large public square dedicated to his conquests. Construction stopped in 1691 after the death of the marquis de Louvois, the Secretary of State for War and Superintendent of Royal Building Works who had promoted the project. By 1699, the king wanted to efface all memory of the square, to pave streets over the site and to store the statue permanently out of public view.¹ When leading ministers and city councilors lobbied to preserve the *place royale*, the king agreed that the statue might be displayed, but only if the square was reconceived. The new square was to be residential, like the two other royal squares in the capital: the Place Royale (des Vosges) (Fig. 3), built for Henri IV, and the diminutive Place des Victoires (Fig. 4), conceived in tandem with the Place de Nos Conquêtes.²

The Crown gave the Place de Nos Conquêtes to the city of Paris, on the condition that it be sold to a group of investors charged with constructing the new square according to a design by Louis's trusted new Superintendent of Royal Building Works Jules Hardouin-Mansart, architect of the Place de Nos Conquêtes and the Place des Victoires. In August 1699, the city councilors and the governor of Paris celebrated the installation of the colossal equestrian

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statue at the Place de Nos Conquêtes, but demolition began within weeks. On its site, the investors built a residential square with a new form, a new imagery, and a new name – the Place de Louis-le-Grand (more popularly known as the Place Vendôme).

Mansart and his collaborators, most importantly Robert de Cotte (who would succeed him as First Architect to the King in 1708), shaped a new square that withdrew from the urban fabric, canting the corners of the reduced public space to enhance its sense of enclosure and to provide gentler transitions that better accommodated the needs of residences (Figs. 5 to 8).³ The smaller public space freed more land for sale to individuals and shrank the area to be paved and maintained by the city. Retaining a giant order and an arcuated ground floor, Mansart replaced the public, open loggia with a blind arcade that marked new boundaries between public and private realms. Above the new cornice, Mansart added a tall French roof, suited both functionally and representationally to the residential program. He abandoned the triumphal arch, replacing it with one of two short “streets,” extensions of the square sharing its facade and linking the main public space with important urban arteries. Mansart punctuated the newly canted corners and central pa-

Figure 1

De Fer plan, 1690s, detail of northwest Paris [photo: after *Atlas des anciens plans de Paris*, eds. A. Alphand, Michaux, and L.-M. Tisserand (Paris, 1880)].



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Excerpt

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7**Figure 2**

Place de Nos Conquêtes, inauguration of François Girardon's statue of Louis XIV, August 1699, engraving, Almanac, 1700 [photo: Bibliothèque Nationale, Est., Va 234].

Figure 3

Place Royale (des Vosges) [photo: author].



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vilions with temple fronts bearing the king's arms, flanking the east and west pediments with reclining figures holding royal crowns aloft (Fig. 6). The square was still quite grand, but no longer imperial in its imagery; it had a more domestic character, akin to that of the Place des Victoires.

The public space of the reconceived square retreated from life along the streets that connected it with the rest of the city, its newly self-referential quality reinforced by the subsidiary axes. As recast, the form of the square served a domestic program at the expense of its public character. That reconception coincided with a less confident moment in the reign, when the focus of architectural interest turned inward toward the private realm.

Investors and Proprietors

A la place Royale, on a placé ton père
 Parmi les gens de qualité.
 On voit, sur le Pont-Neuf ton aïeul débonnaire,
 Près du peuple qui fut l'objet de sa bonté.
 Pour toi, des partisans le prince tutélaire,
 A la place Vendôme – entre eux – on t'a placé.⁴

Most of the investors and the heads of the first families to take up residence at the Place Vendôme were, as this epigram pointedly observed, financiers. General tax farmer Alexandre Luillier, who had begun negotiations with the Crown as early as May 1698, directed the partnership and assembled it weekly

Figure 4

Place des Victoires (nos. 4 bis – 12) [photo: courtesy of Christopher Mead].

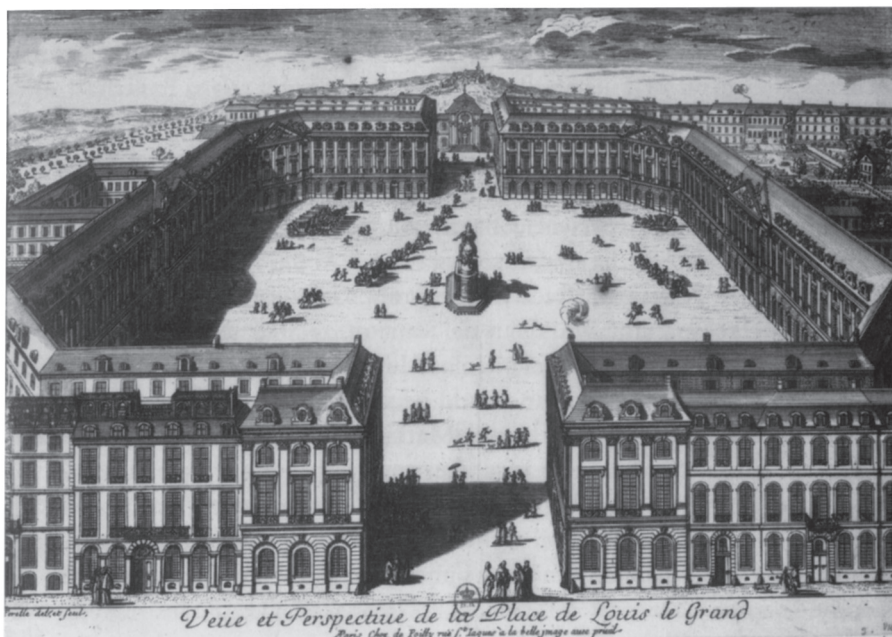


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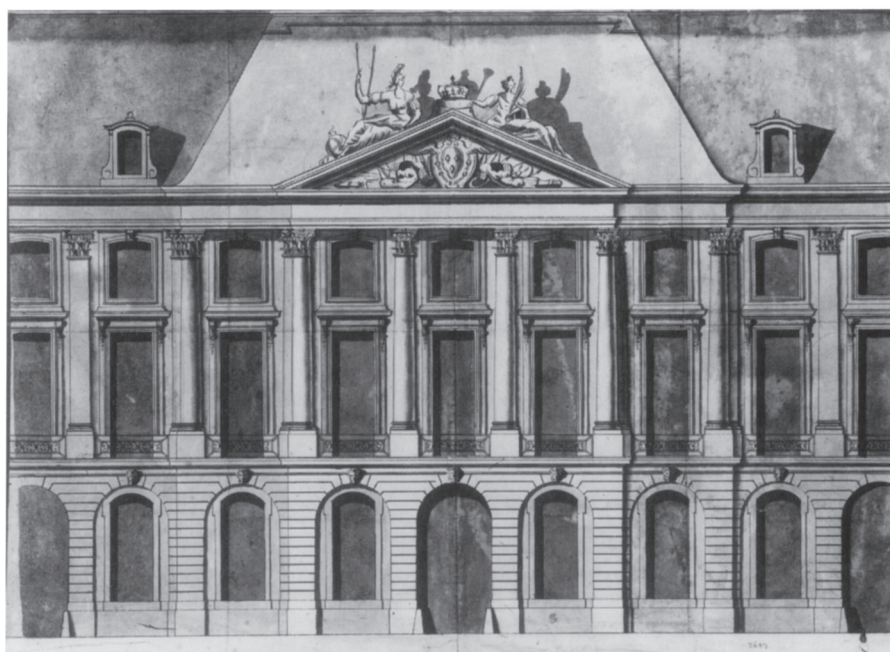
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Figure 5

Perelle, engraving, “View and perspective of the Place de Louis le Grand” [photo: Bibliothèque Nationale, Est., Va 234].

Figure 6

Place de Louis-le-Grand (Vendôme), study, central pavilion [photo: Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, THC 2683].



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in his house on the nearby rue Sainte-Anne.⁵ Several of the investors owed their fortunes to the sponsorship of Louis II Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain, Controller General of Finance from 1689 to 1699. In 1699, Pontchartrain's son Jérôme was Secretary of State in charge of the *Maison du Roi*, which carried with it responsibility for the capital city; like his father, he was anxious to see the project successfully completed.

Four investment partners held financial offices, and each committed one-sixth (16.7 percent) of the purchase price. They were, in addition to Lullier, Moïse-Augustin Fontanieu, Receiver General of Finance for La Rochelle;⁶ Extraordinary Treasurer of War Jean de Sauvion, related by marriage to both Mansart and Claude Bosc; and Nicolas-Hiérosme Herlaut, a receiver at the *siège présidial de Beauvais*, who would become Treasurer General of French and Swiss guards in 1702. The lawyer Mathurin Besnier, who invested heavily in extraordinary finance and was the new father-in-law of the architect Jacques V Gabriel (a member of Mansart's extended clan), had the largest interest – 21 percent.⁷ The royal architect Pierre Bullet took a 13 percent share. Profit motives and dynastic ambitions prompted a reshuffling of shares among

Figure 7

Air view toward east and north ranges of Place Vendôme [photo: Préfecture de Police de Paris].

