

# Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Modernization and the Classical Dependency

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: As a Classics major, I am always eager to prove the economic, structural, and architectural superiority of Ancient Rome. When Dr. Sadler asked my Art History 168 class to write about modernization in 18th- and 19th-century city planning in London and Paris, I couldn't help but wonder if there was really anything so modern about the concept of efficient and accessible urbanization: hadn't the Romans already mastered it two thousand years earlier? Evaluating the themes of efficiency, circulation, and social functionality in London and Parisian city planning, I concluded that there was nothing inherently modern in their "modernization." Urban planners have grappled with the idea of a functional city for millennia, and ancient city planning techniques have virtually enslaved both Paris and London. My essay discusses these cities' dependency on the Roman model for appealing, accessible, and socially relevant urban planning in the 18th and 19th centuries. A bove maiore discit arare minor. (Roman proverb: "From the old ox, the young one learns to plow.")*

—Tess Fischer

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Tess's paper on the development of London and Paris, "18th-19th-century Modernization and the Classical Dependency," argued that "In sourcing antiquity, urban planners from Chambers to Haussmann created the ultimate irony: the most modern designs of the era are really the most ancient." In this Tess boldly tackled the hugely complicated topic of European urban development and went to the heart of the amazing historical ambiguities of modernization.*

—Simon Sadler, Art History

IN HER INTRODUCTION TO *VICTORIAN BABYLON*, Lynda Nead likens nineteenth-century London to Babylon, the awe-inspiring seat of an empire and a subsequent symbol of the dangers of hubris.<sup>1</sup> The ancient city analogy is appropriate, and seeing as the only remaining ancient manual related to urban planning to emerge during the era was the *De Architectura Libri Decem* (“Ten Books of Architecture”) of Vitruvius, the Roman city plan became a popular model for city developers during the Enlightenment. In fact, the most “modern” urban developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were actually the most ancient, as classical building principles infiltrated the popular imagination. Notable aspects include the grid plan, a new conception of the ceremonial square, and increased attention to the city’s function as a social sphere. Additionally, modern city dwellers were starting to recognize the Roman propensity toward rational and scientific inquiry as a priority, and this idea had a profound impact on the modernization of the city itself. As Vitruvius notes in his *De Architectura*, a city planner should be widely educated in arts and sciences from medicine to astronomy, as “it is by his judgment that all work done by other arts is put to test.”<sup>2</sup> Though not equally esteemed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Paris and London, the urban planning profession still held a great deal of power for planners like Paris’ Baron Haussmann and London’s Sir William Chambers, both of whom turned to Rome, “that lovely lake of time,”<sup>3</sup> as a model for their work. This essay will discuss London and Parisian modernization with respect to their classical source.

This classical source is most prevalent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London, where Roman ideals influenced virtually every aspect of urban design. Despite the Enlightenment era that continued throughout, mid-eighteenth century planners began to abandon some of their rationalist ideals in favor of the visceral experience of the Sublime. As Edmund Burke described in his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, “Whatever is any sort of terrible . . . is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”<sup>4</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds likewise opposed the empirical nature of the era, asserting the importance of “accident” in architecture in his *Discourse* (1786) and voicing his “disgust” at the uniformity of Christopher Wren’s unrealized plan for London.<sup>2</sup> Although this demotion of rational principles might seem blatantly un-Roman, city planners and theorists managed to pull Roman themes into

their own ideas of beauty and sublimity: in his 1712 essay, “The Pleasures of the Imagination,” Joseph Addison compares the experience of strolling through a Picturesque garden with the epic journey of Virgil’s *Aeneid*; Robert Castell’s *The Villas of the Ancients Illustrated* (1728) distinguishes three types of gardens and villas on the basis of Vitruvius and descriptions from Pliny the Younger.<sup>2</sup> Despite the stark contrast between the *ordo*, or order, of Roman city planning and London’s meandering qualities, the latter looked to the monuments of Rome as the epitome of the Sublime. Utilizing empirical tactics in the Locke tradition, London aimed to emulate the tried and tested methods of Roman city planners as codified by Vitruvius. The founding of London’s Society of Antiquaries in 1717 and the growing number of city planners and architects who toured Rome for inspiration during this time attest that ancient Rome played a central role in London’s modernization. In attempting to “modernize,” London was merely appropriating architectures of the past.

For instance, let us consider William Chambers’ Somerset House (1776). In addition to the obvious classical implications of its open piazza, the building housed the Society of Antiquaries and Chambers’ Royal Academy of Art as well as the Navy and Tax Administration. This unlikely combination of institutions indicates a commitment to artistic



**Central Courtyard, Somerset House**

Photograph by Jan van der Crabben, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Somerset\\_House.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Somerset_House.jpg)

and cultural expansion reminiscent of Roman antiquity. The building itself is also entirely neoclassical: a flat roof, a rusticated façade interrupted by a row of Corinthian columns, and a single dome underscored by a classically influenced pediment. The Somerset House’s Roman features, both political and architectural, are symbolic of the Picturesque’s demand for monumentality, though ironically Chambers opposed the Vitruvian theory of architectural development, which “ascribes almost every invention in that art to the Greeks.”<sup>5</sup> Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian architecture, Chambers argued, proved more significant than that of classical Greece, which was lacking in sheer magnitude; to Chambers and his contemporaries, size and scale defined monumentality.<sup>2</sup> Although this viewpoint contradicts Roman ideology, the classical elements of the building and function of the Somerset House nevertheless point to a dependency on Roman antiquity.

A second example of this classical dependency in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London is John Nash’s Trafalgar Square (1829–41). Coincidentally, a human burial dating back to Roman times was discovered at this very site during a 2006 excavation, symbolically linking Trafalgar Square with its classical precedent.<sup>6</sup> Although the Romans found the site insignificant enough to bury their dead, a custom performed far outside of city walls for sanitary reasons, Trafalgar Square remains an integral part of London’s cityscape both socially and architecturally. Similar to the Roman Forum, the Square intended to focus the restless, ever-



**Admiralty Arch, London, 1912**

Photograph by David Iliff, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Admiralty\\_Arch,\\_London,\\_England\\_-\\_June\\_2009.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Admiralty_Arch,_London,_England_-_June_2009.jpg)

growing urban population with its National Gallery designed by William Wilkins, St. Mark's Church, and, most significantly, its decorative Admiralty Arch leading to The Mall. Suffering from the same perils of overcrowding in the city, the ever-expanding Roman empire found the need to organize the public to be equally important, including in its Forum a wide variety of shops, temples, fountains, entertainment centers, and public functions.<sup>7</sup> Its triumphal Arch of Titus would set a precedent for Trafalgar Square's Admiralty Arch, which, though erected decades after Nash's original work, embodies the same classical aesthetic. The former combines defining features of the richest Greek orders, Ionic and Corinthian, representing the triumph of Rome over Greece;<sup>7</sup> the latter, though dually functional as an office building, draws on these themes with near-identical Roman Composite pilasters. Another monument located at the center of the Square, Nelson's Column, commemorates Admiral Horatio Nelson's death at the Battle of Trafalgar by displaying a sandstone statue of the Admiral on top of a Corinthian column, symbolic of the classical world's continuing prominence in nineteenth-century London.



**Arch of Titus, Rome, c. 82 A.D.**

Photograph by Alexander Z., courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ImageRomeArchofTitus02.jpg>

As prominently as London embodied these themes during this time, its contemporary Paris was equally interested in Roman, and more accurately Vitruvian, urban planning techniques. An appropriation of Vitruvius' thoughts on the orientation of an ideal city's streets ("with winds wisely excluded" from eight sides\*), whether calculated or

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\*This is a fragment of my personal translation of *De Architectura* VI:1, misidentified as I:6 in Hall. Vitruvius proposes an octagonal city plan to shield the "eight winds"; there is no mention of radial street networks, and from existing

naïve, led to the organization of boulevards into radial axes.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the standard Roman town plan, which consisted of the intersecting *cardo maximus* (north–south axis) and *decumanus maximus* (east–west axis)



**Radial boulevards branching outward from the Arc de Triomphe, another neoclassical reference to the Arch of Titus in Rome**

Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris\\_Arc\\_de\\_Triomphe\\_3b40740.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris_Arc_de_Triomphe_3b40740.jpg)

perpendiculars, the nineteenth-century Paris plan favored uninterrupted boulevards branching from central squares and roundabouts. This sort of large scale planning was possible because unlike the gradual urban developments of London, the redevelopment of Paris under the Second Empire happened all at once under Napoleon III.<sup>8</sup> The implementer of these urban developments was city planner Georges-Eugène “Baron” Haussmann, who abolished city fortifications and even entire neighborhoods in order to rebuild Paris with improved circulation and expediency in the 1850s and 60s. As “modern” as Haussmann’s scheme may seem, his work emulated traditional Roman values of city planning: sanitation, circulation, accessibility, and above all efficiency. Unlike the irregularly shaped streets of London, Haussmann’s Paris preserved the sense of uniformity inherent in Roman planning.

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Roman planning one could assume that the orientation of the streets would more or less follow a grid pattern in the Miletian tradition attributed to Hippodamus.<sup>8</sup>

What eighteenth- and nineteenth-century modernity in both Paris and London have in common is that they rely heavily on these sorts of ancient Roman ideals. In sourcing antiquity, urban planners from Chambers to Haussmann created the ultimate irony: the most modern designs of the era are really the most ancient. Returning to classical themes with movements like the Neoclassical and Picturesque, planners were able to justify a relative lack of novel architectural ideas while projecting the image of splendor and grandeur onto their own cities. Their fixation and even dependency on ancient design principles attest to the perceived superiority of the Roman model for urban planning, a tried and tested means of conveying magnificence on a large scale, the epitome of the modern city.

## Notes

1. Lynda Nead, introduction to *Victorian Babylon* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

2. Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory*, trans. Ronald Taylor, Elsie Callander, and Antony Wood (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994).

3. Eleanor Clark, *Rome and a Villa*, 2nd ed. (Salcombe, Devon, UK: Aidan Ellis Publishing, 1976).

4. Edmund Burke, “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757),” in *The Works of Edmund Burke*, Vol I (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), 74–5.

5. William Chambers, *A Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture* (1757) (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

6. Timothy Tye, “Trafalgar Square, London,” [http://www.streetdirectory.com/travel\\_guide/12952/united\\_kingdom/trafalgar\\_square\\_london.html](http://www.streetdirectory.com/travel_guide/12952/united_kingdom/trafalgar_square_london.html) (Accessed 15 Feb 2010).

7. David Watkin, *The Roman Forum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

8. Thomas Hall, *Planning Europe’s Capital Cities: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Urban Development*, 1st ed. (London and New York: E & FN Spon, 1997).