Honors thesis

Master of Science Architecture Construction City

Abstract

The hôtel Biron in Paris
house, national monument, museum

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Originally conceived as luxurious houses in a urban context, the hôtels particuliers are peculiar Parisian architectures. Counter-intuitively, the French Revolution does not pursue the destruction of the hôtels in the historic capital, even if they were symbols of Ancien Regime aristocracy; Nevertheless, the break with the past is evident: in most cases the hôtels lose their original allure of luxury and new functions are installed in their spaces, ensuring (in a more or less conservative way, depending on the cases) their physical continuity. In many cases, the hôtels host administrative and political functions. In a minority of cases, the hôtels retain the original function of private mansion, though even in this case it rarely is a single family house, as in the origins. Finally, many hôtels particuliers are now museums.

The integration of the new museum function within the hôtels comes in different shades: in some cases, the hôtel is reused as a mere container, with drastic interventions on its spaces; in other cases, the museum plan is combined with the original spatial narrative, which is therefore put in evidence and somehow becomes part of the museography. The comparison of selected cases, an intermediate dimension between the house and the museum emerges: the world of private collecting. Many of the hôtels which have become museums were previously maisons de collectionneur. In other cases, the hôtels have more complex stories, passing through less linear reuse practices: it is extremely interesting to study how the use of these architectural spaces has changed over time and what historical and political circumstances have led to the choice of an adaptation as museum.

Among the several cases of Parisian mansions transformed and adapted over time, the hôtel Biron, today Rodin museum, is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and complex. Built during the first half of the XVIIIth century by Abraham Peyrenc de Moras, the hôtel is now considered one of the most beautiful in Paris. Passed from hand to hand during the XVIIIth century, the hôtel has rich interior decorations and a large garden. In the early XIXth century, we see a shift from luxury to austerity: the building and its annexes are sold by the widow Charost to the religious congregation of the Dames du Sacré Coeur, drastically changing function and appearance. With the law of 1904 on the separation of Church and State, the Dames left rue de Varenne: waiting for the liquidation of the property, the rooms are rented to a diverse group of artists and intellectuals, including, in 1908, Auguste Rodin. The artist's life will then be tied to the hôtel Biron, as it will become his studio and in a certain sense also his house; the sculptor loves this architecture and the garden to the point that, in order to avert the announced demolition, he donated all its collections to the State on the condition that the former hôtel should have become the Rodin museum.

In complex political circumstances, in 1919 Rodin's dream becomes reality. A century after the artist's death, the Rodin museum is now undergoing a major restoration and renovation campaign. At the dawn of the second century of life of the museum, this thesis proposes a critical view on the transformation of the prestigious hôtel Biron and on the adaptivity of the new function with respect to the historical architecture. The hôtel particulier and the studio of the artist coexist, harmoniously integrated into the new museum.

To put in evidence the different possible approaches and degrees of compatibility in the integration of new functions in historic buildings, a comparison with other relevant cases highlights the importance of maintaining the distributive and spatial narrative of the hôtels in
the transition from house to museum: this is, in fact, the very essence of these architectures and a precious museological asset.

The appearance of the hôtel Biron in 1907. Source: photographic dossier at Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, n° 1-EST-01816


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