



POLITECNICO
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Honors thesis

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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.

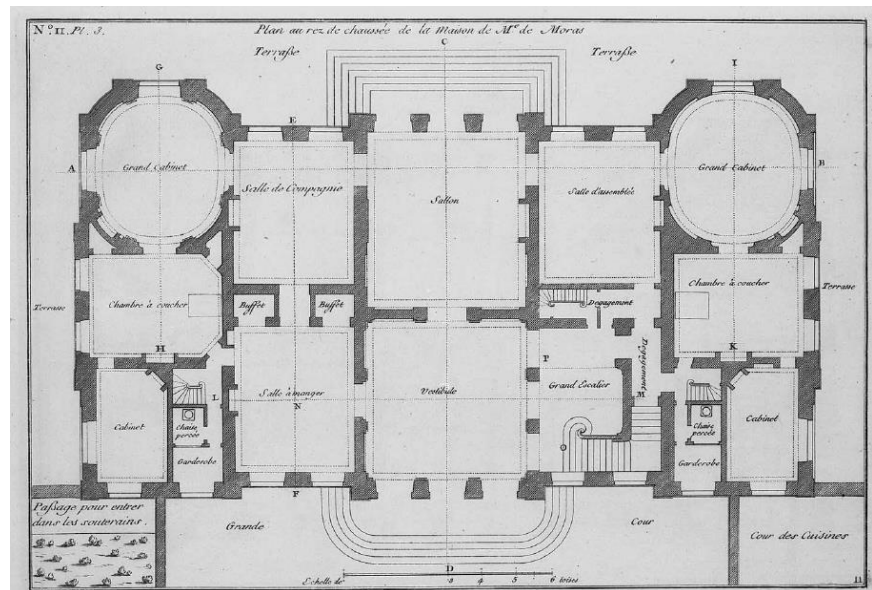
To put in evidence the different possible approaches and degrees of compatibility in the integration of new functions in historic buildings, a comparison with other relevant cases highlights the importance of maintaining the distributive and spatial narrative of the *hôtels* in

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



From Jacques-François BLONDEL, *Architecture française, ou Recueil des plans, élévations, coupes et profils des églises, maisons royales, palais, hôtels & édifices les plus considérables de Paris*, Parigi, chez Charles-Antoine Jombert, 1752-1756. Source: Kyoto University Library. Graphic scale.



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